

## **Theory and Practice: Expressing a Seamless Assumption in Teacher Education**

**By J. Gary Knowles**

I am provoked by Alan H. Jones' article, "Ten Points of Debate in Teacher Education," as presented in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*. Important dichotomies are raised and laid out for debate. The issues and their resolutions influence tens of millions of pupils, millions of teachers, and thousands of teacher educators. These are crucial issues for the future of society. In my response I discuss generally the points of debate before focusing on the centrality of the theory-practice dichotomy.

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### **Categories of Points of Debate**

When I read these points of debate I acknowledged the complexity of the range of issues and their universal quality. As I reread the article I notice three categories of dichotomies. First, there are dichotomies which are temporal and contextual. They are connected to particular time- and context-specific circumstances associated with education across the United States of America. Under this category are the

dichotomies of Quality Versus Quantity and Majority Versus Minority. These are matters which are, at one level, well beyond the reach of teacher educators. Each reflects societal and demographic circumstances and needs. Each changes over time as society and schools address and redress fundamental elements associated with these debates. These are not inconsequential matters. How each is played out in theory, policy, and practice has a profound effect on the future of America's children and their education.

Second, there are points of debate which rest in and are subservient to the fundamental assumptions held by individual teacher educators, collectives of teacher educators, or programs, institutions, or state departments of education or other "governing or mandating bodies." These are understandings about the nature and practice of teaching held by those with decision-making powers. Each stakeholder—be they teacher educators, program administrators, deans of education, superintendents and principals of schools, school classroom teachers, state education bureaucrats, and elected legislative policymakers—expresses particular views about theory and practice in teacher education. They do this through the conceptualization, debate, creation, and articulation of teacher education policy; through the design and implementation of programs and their processes; through the administration of programs and processes; through the manipulation of organizational structures; and through the conceptualization and implementation of curriculum associated with programs. How one thinks about the place of theory in teacher education, and how one thinks about the location of practice, and the relation between the two, is decisive, crucial, and paramount to how one thinks about virtually everything else in preservice and inservice teacher education. Falling clearly into this category, then, are the dichotomies of Preservice Versus Inservice, Campus Versus School Site, Specialization Versus Generalization, Professional Versus Public, and, of course, Theory Versus Practice. The decisions teacher educators make about each dichotomy are, conversely, reflections of their views about theory and practice. I am vitally concerned about the conceptualization of the theory-practice relationship and will return to this later in this article.

The third category of points for debate are those dichotomies which overlap the above two groups. These issues are at once temporal or contextual as well as connected to matters of theory and practice. I refer to the points of Time Versus Money, Information Versus Myth, and Long-Range Versus Short-Range. Here, the temporal-contextual elements intersect with theory-practice elements so that the weight of particular circumstances influences the emphasis given to issues and the manner in which those same issues are defined and conceptualized. The Time/Money point is only a temporal and contextual issue when particular societal conditions dictate (such as a massive shortage of teachers or an unexpected swelling in demographics, perhaps due to changed immigration policies for instance, or the effect of unpredictable, fickle legislative changes pertaining to the curriculum or administration of schools). Other times it may reflect values associated with the

theory-practice relationship.

The Information/Myth point is really more about politics than the development of innovative and enlightened general education and teacher education practice. All practice is indeed political and thus much articulation of theory hovers around being political (it may be explicitly so, or it may not). While my use of "the political" may be overly broad, the point I want to underscore is that there is *no* absolute Truth in teacher education; there are only fragments of small truths. Teacher educators know this. What both educational analysts and legislative policy makers tend to do, or do explicitly, is to selectively access those "objective" studies or theories which confirm their own perspectives. We know this but often pretend otherwise. There will always be myths associated with teaching and teacher education. The role of sound formal and informal research is to break down the possibilities that these myths rule the day and figuratively and literally govern the way schools are and the way teachers are prepared. Nevertheless, it is essential that groups of progressive, reform-minded teacher educators come together around solidly conceptualized, research-informed points of view about teaching and the development of teachers, and that they articulate and implement programs and curriculum with integrity, internal consistency, congruity, and authenticity.

The Long-range/Short-range issue is also as much a political matter as it is a practical one. Many of the pressures felt by teacher educators may be a result of the laggard responses of teacher preparation institutions to the changing dynamics of schools and teaching. Nevertheless, as long as public education (and, by extension, teacher education) remains a political football there will continue to be expedient, opportunistic plays and moves made to win the game of the day. The long-term health and well-being of education, and of students and teachers, will continue to be at risk of being trampled in the rush to the immediate goal post.

I resisted placing the Majority/Minority debate in this third category because, in my mind, there was no issue apart from one about handling demographics and context. I take as a given that teacher education and teacher educators must do everything possible to reflect the demography of society in its teachers (and that the perspectives of all citizens are reflected in the substance of curriculum and the intentions of those who work and learn in schools). Efforts towards this end are essential for a wholesome, healthy society.

### **The Position of Theory and Practice**

The provocation for writing this response comes from being personally and professionally located in a figurative and literal place where there is no separation between theory and practice.<sup>1</sup> When one espouses a pedagogy that explicitly blends the two—not in some artificial way but in a way which reflects the complex autobiographical nature of teaching and being a teacher—an explicit theory-practice separation (inferred by Jones' articulation of the Theory/Practice di-

chotomy) jars the soul and heart. It tugs at the soul of one's fundamental assumptions, it tears at the heart of the matter, the fusion of espoused and practiced pedagogy. Clearly I take a particular position in this debate; the dichotomous points raised by Jones are encompassed within a Theory/Practice discussion and it is to that topic I now focus. I begin with two questions.

What do teachers know? What do teachers need to know? These fundamental questions form the basis of teacher educators', educational researchers', theorists', and educational policymakers' work. Efforts to answer them are numerous and varied, resulting in wide-ranging responses and reactions; they reflect sets of underlying assumptions about what knowledge is, how it is developed, defined—and by whom—and how it is understood; they also reflect fundamental assumptions about what it means to teach and be a teacher. Responses to these questions, however inadequate, have informed the curriculum, design, structure, administration, presentation, delivery, and resource base of initial and ongoing teacher education and development programs.

The existence of a theory-practice gap which separates the "real" world of classroom practice from the "ivory tower" of the university is a prevalent notion long held by school- and university-based practitioners alike. It is a potentially destructive notion. This dichotomous conceptualization of theory and practice locates theory generation and the study of educational theories (and, by extension, knowledge) within the context of the university, and recognizes the field as the site of practice and practical action which is neither informed nor guided by theory.

The position that theory and practice are distinct entities which bear little relationship to one another reflects problematic assumptions about the two dimensions of knowledge, and these need to be examined and challenged. Such a view sets up misguided and inappropriate frameworks for understanding teaching and guiding ongoing career-long teacher development.

To challenge traditional notions of theory and practice is to reconsider traditional notions of knowledge. When practice and practical action are recognized as an embodiment and expression of theory, teachers are, by extension, recognized as theory builders. Theory, then, becomes redefined to reflect the multidimensional, personal, and complex nature of teaching and teacher knowledge. As such, the autobiographical nature of teaching is recognized; theory and practice are acknowledged as being inextricably linked and mutually dependent.

One way to redefine theory and its relationship to practice is to think about two kinds of theory: that which might be termed global, macro, general, or abstracted theory; and, that which could be called local, micro, particular, or idiosyncratic theory. In the former category are those theories typically generated by academic researchers and studied in teacher education programs and which are intended to have more generalizable applications. These theories, supposedly, may guide the overall conception of teacher education programs and processes. In the latter category are those theories that emerge from focused inquiry into individual beliefs,

values, perspectives, attitudes, ideas, and practices, and which are more particularistic or personal in nature. These theories may inform the localized or contextualized implementation of programs of teacher preparation. They also may guide particular programmatic elements requiring fine-grained, personal responses to learners. Abstracted theory generated by researchers studying classroom practices, contexts, and phenomena and idiosyncratic theory developed mainly by teachers (or other practitioners) through the examination of their own experiences of and ideas about practice are different but complementary knowledge bases. Macro theory developed at a distance through the use of systems of externally-derived constructs or frameworks for understanding (and which may be developed from formal observation of collective contexts and phenomena), and micro theory, which is an explication of individual's implicit understandings, can influence one another in important ways.

By melding the two kinds of theory and processes of theory generation—that is, by considering elements of formal theories in the context of one's personal practice theories—reflects the importance of “self,” the autobiographical nature of teaching and of reflexive practice. Teachers are at once both theory generators and theory users. When theory is redefined in this way the gap between theory and practice is also redefined. There is no longer the concern about the relationship between educational theory and practical professional action. Instead, the theory-practice gap describes incongruities between teachers' local theories (which might also be informed by general theories) and their practical action.

### **The Challenge**

Understanding and closing the theory-practice gap is a focus and intention of my own pedagogical and curricular practices, and my ongoing reflexive inquiry. I challenge other teacher educators to do the same. Acknowledgment of the autobiographical nature of teaching and of the value of reflexive teaching practices are expressions of both theory and practice. Such stances are expressed within some teacher preparation programs and their presence is strong evidence of programmatic intentions to embrace the union of theory with practice.

The challenge to teacher educators is to clearly, consistently, and coherently express in their practice and programs a well-defined theory-practice relationship. I, of course, hope for expressions which are seamless. But, depending on the articulation of theory and practice, programs will differ and will reflect the diversity of the nation, region, locality, and the individuals participating in and guiding such programs. The task then is to make harmonious the various structural, administrative, programmatic, and experienced-based elements of preservice and inservice teacher education programs within a philosophical framework that is appropriate for the context and the personnel involved. This does not mean adherence to a particular set of assumptions associated with an overarching ideological orienta-

tion<sup>2</sup> (which overlays the theory-practice relationship) to which I or others subscribe. It means that the spirit and intentions of a particular program are solidly expressed through the pedagogy, curriculum, and processes that make up theory-practice. In so doing programs will become authentic, internally consistent, congruent models of pedagogical design and practice which, through their very coherence, challenge the status quo. They are not eclectic, watered-down versions of ideological visions with conflicting positions regarding the theory-practice link. Instead, they are empowering sites for the preparation and practice of new teachers able to consistently challenge the myriad elements that comprise the systemic status quo through their seamless "practice-theory-practice."

### **Notes**

1. See Cole & Knowles (in press, anticipated 1998) for an articulation of my position, especially with regard to the autobiographical, reflexive nature of teaching.
2. I refer to those conceptual orientations as articulated, for example, by Feiman-Nemser (1990).

### **References**

- Cole, A.L., & Knowles, J.G. (in press, anticipated 1998). *Researching teaching: Exploring teacher development through reflexive inquiry*. New York: Allyn & Bacon.
- Feiman-Nemser, S. (1990). Teacher preparation: Structural and conceptual alternatives. In W.R. Houston, *Handbook of research on teacher education* (pp. 212-133). New York: Macmillan.