Languages of/for description of/for practice.

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The field of education thrives on a spurious distinction between theory and practice, but typically pays little attention to how 'practice' might be conceptualised. In commonsense terms, 'practice' can ironically refer to both repetition to perfect ('practice makes perfect'), or to the slippage between the prescribed and the enacted ('in theory .. but in practice …'). In this presentation I explore how different theories of practice similarly orient us to different meanings, insights and lines of enquiry. To this end I explore the difference between Bourdieu's (1990) idea of practice as temporal response generated by the subconscious work of habitus, and de Certeau's (1984) idea of practice as generative, improvised and tactical. What might each of these theories offer the researcher? Could their combination offer a form of hybrid vigour?

I am also interested in how we use theory to re-describe empirical observations or experiences in a way that allows us to equate seemingly disparate moments or phenomena. This effort demands attention to how we move between expressions of empirical data and expressions of theory in our enquiries. Bernstein offers the concept of 'languages of description' to distinguish between 'the descriptions generated by a model' and 'the potential enactments of the described' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 131). A process of translation allows the researcher to move between these languages and introduces a degree of freedom in the 'discursive gap' it creates. In this way, Bernstein was determined that the craft of researchers allowed the empirical world to disrupt and muddy the theoretical project.

Could hybrid theory play in that discursive gap? Could hybridity help us account for what is gained and lost when one or other theory is applied? How might hybrid theory orient us to different elements at the empirical surface?

Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity* (revised ed.). Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity.

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

introduction

The field of education thrives on a spurious distinction between theory and practice, but typically pays little attention to how 'practice' might be conceptualised.

In **commonsense terms**, 'practice' can ironically refer to both repetition to perfect something ('practice makes perfect'), or to the slippage between the prescribed and the enacted ('in theory ... but in practice …') thus in opposition to the idea of theory. So the championing of 'good' or 'best' practice becomes theoretically interesting.

Meanwhile, some theorists have proclaimed **'the practice turn'** in social theory, arguing that practice should be understood as the 'primary generic social thing' (Schatzki, 2001, p. 1). My reading of this argument is that we will best understand the social by attending to the doings of humans. These doings will be embodied as skills, mediated by artefacts, and orchestrated through shared understandings. The social order is thus created around and through the activities that bring people together in common or intersecting purposes. The social fabric is knitted in the nexus between 'arrays of activity' (p.2) that deny both the rigid determinism of structuralism, and the plastic individualism of agency accounts. Lynch et al. (2017, p. 3) highlight this characteristic tension 'between the productive and reproductive flows of the social' and how 'the social is constituted via manifestations that are both singular in their materiality yet recognizable in a formal sense as practices.' In other words, practice turn theorists argue that we should pay attention to the verbs of human activities, rather than the nouns of structures and discourses.

Under this gaze doing research becomes a practice of interest as much as teaching or schooling.

In this presentation I explore how **different theories of practice** orient us to quite different meanings, insights and lines of enquiry. By doing so, I'm looking for opportunities for research to surprise, to break rules, to stretch, trouble and mix models. I would argue that such troubling is important in these days to counter the growing appetite to measure, know and thus control what teachers practise in the search for quick fixes and a misplaced faith in methodological rigour.

My title plays with Moore's (1996) distinction between sociology **of** education and sociology **for** education … but I'll leave that to your imagination.

As another introductory comment, I'd like to confess that I claim no particular expertise in the theories I discuss here … rather my research wanderings and wonderings have led me to their doors looking for theories to fit my changing purposes. I do not pretend to speak from an authoritative position but rather I'm speaking from my own reading and work-in-progress. For the postgraduates in the audience, I'd like to stress that the theory you use for your phd may not fit the next research question you work on. We all need to go off piste, take the risk of working with new ideas and becoming novices again.

I'll firstly look at Bourdieu's theory of practice, then I'll take a look at de Certeau's approach to everyday practice. Borrowing Gee's good idea, I'm going to call Bourdieu's big P Practice, and de certeau's little p practice. I'll illustrate how they each help me think about teachers' doings differently. Then I'll process them through the translation device of Bernstein's languages of

description to see what might count as empirical expressions of each type of practice, and how a mashup of big P Practice and little p practice might give us some hybrid vigour in our enquiries.

Practice 1 – Bourdieu's Big P practice

Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice highlights a temporal sense of the past underpinning the subconscious work of habitus to act in the present, and in turn produce the future.

Alongside his anthropological work, Bourdieu pursued a meta-theoretical project of trying to understand how the social scientist draws a theoretical understanding from the social practices he observed, such as weaving, marriage, gift-giving. He interrogated what it means to build theoretical accounts of the generative principles underpinning a wide variety of practices, where those that practise the practice do so unconsciously, just doing 'things that one does because they are "the done thing"' (1990, p. 18). In this case the theory is understood to be a very different beast to the practice, serving quite different purposes and audiences. In this way Bourdieu juggles two 'logics of practice' – the actors' everyday frame for why and how, and the scientific observer's frame that seeks some coherence across and between practices. In his early book '*Outline of a theory of practice'* (1977), he was writing 'as a blissful structuralist' (1990, p. 9) trying to satisfy the grand theory demands of the contemporary paradigm of structuralism. In his later book, '*The logic of practice'* (1990) he is more sensitive to, and critical of, the role of colonial mindsets and their shortcomings which made certain things thinkable or unthinkable at the time, thus becoming doubly reflexive about his practice of research.

In Bourdieu's theory of practice, the concept of *habitus* is central. Habitus refers to the deep-seated, embodied and durable dispositions, instilled and naturalised through primary and secondary socialization. One's habitus leverages any available cultural capitals to inform and generate one's practice within a certain field of activity within its network of relations and the rules of the field's 'game'. In *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101), this is expressed as a formula in the effort to distil the theorised principle. Rowlands and Gale (2017, p. 93) helpfully gloss this: 'practice as the outcome of internalised knowledge that is borne from history but which manifests as an agent's skills, proficiencies and competencies, enabling them to understand what is transpiring and what might transpire so as to achieve a particular goal or purpose.' So it is the habitus accreted across one's history that predisposes one to particular practices. In later work Bourdieu rewords it:

> The theory of practice as practice insists … that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the *habitus,* which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions. (1990, p. 52)

If we were to think about teachers' practice, this attention to the history of the present resonates with the well documented tendency to teach how one was taught. In other words, our sense of what teaching is and how it should be done was laid down during our years of 'apprenticeship of observation' as school students (Lortie, 1975). Habitus became Bourdieu's ordering principle, 'capable of orienting practices in a way that is at once unconscious and systematic' (1990, p. 10). As the generative principle of social action it explained everything. It is a form of knowing that is embodied, rather than conscious: 'The *habitus* - embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history - is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product' (1990, p. 56). As a critical realist, I uwould map habitus to the level of the real, as immanent

potentials that generate forces that are ultimately expressed, or emerge, at the level of the empirical. Given this principle, practice becomes relatively predictable and coherent with one's other actions and dispositions:

> In short, being the product of a particular class of objective regularities, the *habitus* tends to generate all the 'reasonable', 'common-sense', behaviours … which are possible with the limits of these regularities, and which are likely to be positively sanctioned because they are objectively adjusted to the logic characteristic of a particular field, whose objective future they anticipate' (1990, pp. 55-56).

in the same way Gee helpfully talked about 'big' and 'little' d discourse, I'll term Bourdieu's a theory of 'big P' Practice.

Big P practice would thus account for the routines and rhythms of the school day, the expected, unremarkable and taken-for-granted doings of teachers and students alike. This is the accrued muscle memory of practice in terms of practice-makes-perfect. This is what and we recognise teaching and schooling when we visit schools in different settings with different people. Big P practices of western schooling have been rolled out across the globe with colonisation. Baker (2014) would argue that these practices increasingly define and mediate post-industrial society.

In my own research (Doherty, 2015b, 2015c; Doherty, Berwick, & McGregor, 2018), I have conducted classroom ethnographies, looking for repetitions or Big P practices that typified extended schooling for a particular type of student, showing the consistent patterning of behavioural incidents and their correction across five different settings.

Bourdieu's theory has been revised and elaborated over time, to allow more wiggle room, more conscious strategy in response to new or dissonant conditions, less determinism, and some adaptability into his conceptualisation of habitus. Nevertheless, critics such as Margaret Archer (2007) accuse Bourdieu of over-stretching the concept in an attempt to keep it relevant despite rapid social change that robs habitus and thus practice of a stable history. As a deep generative force, habitus also becomes a difficult concept to grasp empirically – a problem I will turn to later.

Practice 2 – de Certeau's little p practice

For the second theory of practice, I turn to de Certeau's book, '*The practice of everyday life'* (de Certeau, 1984) in which he offers 'a science of singularity' (p. ix) that attends **not** to the predictable, repetitive or habitual, but rather to the invention, improvisations and creative ruses that bubble up around these. I'll call these little p practices. His argument purposefully responds to treatments of social action in which users are 'commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules'. Rather, for de Certeau, everyday practices, 'ways of operating' (p. xi) or doings by people assumed to be subject to rules and imposed constraint, offer a space for invention, improvisation and 'making do' in unpredictable ways:

> The presence and circulation of a representation (taught by preachers, educators, and popularizers as the key to socioeconomic advancement) tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyse its manipulation by users who are not its makers' (p. xiii)

de Certeau's (1984) idea of practice as generative, improvised and tactical makes us ask what the actors in the moment 'make' of the arrangements and affordances of any context. In this way, de Certeau orients to exactly that which is extraneous and erased in Bourdieu's theory of practice. He uses the example of a speech act to privilege what is termed *parole* as opposed to *langue* -

> It establishes a *present* relative to a time and place; and it posits a *contract with the other* (the interlocutor) in a network of places and relations. … users make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules.

In this way, the researcher is called to pay attention to what makes the moment untypical, 'the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals' (p. xiv).

De Certeau does not deny the presence of rules and constraints on practice i.e. the weight of Big P practice, but he argues this is not the whole story – there are 'ways of using the constraining order … a degree of plurality and creativity .. .an art of being in between (which) draws unexpected results' (p. 30).

In my same research project (Doherty, 2019), I found this theory really helpful to highlight how teachers knowingly broke rules themselves (Doherty, 2015a), and to understand differences between teachers' little p practices amid their common larger Big P practice.

So the two theories combined allow me to have my cake and eat it too. I can zoom out to see both the historical continuities of the social institution and then zoom in to momentary particularities and improvisational ruses. Small p practice by definition is ephemeral – it crops up opportunistically, then evaporates: 'characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of the circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility' (p. 31). This makes little p practice elusive for the empirical researcher who has to keep one eye open to such protean possibilities.

So Bourdieu's big P practice asks the researcher to understand an invisible, subconscious habitus, and de Certeau's little p practice asks the researcher to be alert to momentary flashes. They each highlight what the other puts aside, suggesting that together they achieve a better understanding of the social and how it unfolds. In this way, hybrid theory offers the janus-faced possibility of facing both ways – to the general and the particular – the ethnography and the case study.

In my last section I want to consider how such theoretical opposites might be put to work to in empirical studies. This effort demands attention to how we move between expressions of empirical data and expressions of theory in our enquiries.

Languages of/for description

Bernstein offers the concept of 'languages of description' which act as 'a translation device whereby one language is transformed into another'. Those of you with a social science background might recognise this as an elaboration of the process of 'operationalisation'. The translation answers the question, 'how do I recognise my theoretical concepts in my empirical data?'.

Bernstein (2000) makes the distinctions between an **Internal** and an **external** language of description.

The internal language of description (L1) refers to the conceptual language, which speaks of/for itself. So for example, for Marx, social class is first and foremost one's relation to the means of production.

The External language (L2) of description allows the conceptual language to describes something else, so it articulates the relationship between the concept and 'what counts as a realisation' such that the 'principles of description construct what is to count as empirical relations and translate those relations into conceptual relations' (p. 133).

So the concept of social class could be re-described as occupational status across layers demarcated by income, education, autonomy and/or capacity to draw profit. In this way, the L2 acts as **a reading device** for looking at the empirical world through a theoretical lens. Explicit consideration of what counts as the empirical expression of a concept allows analysis to proceed with unambiguous reading rules of what is to count as a relevant empirical relation. In this way, Bernstein distinguishes between 'the descriptions generated by a model' and 'the potential enactments of the described' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 131). In a perfect world, such work of translation should inform the research design not just the analysis, so pertinent data is thoughtfully generated. Of course, that's not always the case and it is often data that doesn't fit one's model that sends one looking for more or different theory.

The process of translation allows the researcher to move between these languages and introduces a degree of freedom in the 'discursive gap' it creates, that is, some degree of freedom in the fit between the two languages of description. In this way, Bernstein was determined that the craft of researchers allowed the empirical world to disrupt and muddy the theoretical project:

> I believe we must struggle to keep L2 as free as possible. This struggle is for pragmatic and ethical reasons. It is pragmatic, because unless there is some freedom, description 1 (the internal) will never change. It is ethical, for without some freedom the researched can never re-describe the descriptions made of them. (Bernstein, 2000, p.135)

I think we all recognise the temptation to highlight only the data which fits the theoretical model that informs our studies. This is where hybrid theory might create more value, depth and candour in research. Servicing and privileging one theoretical model allows that which doesn't fit the model fall off the table. Hybrid theory might be able to balance one L2 with another, so data which doesn't serve the first can be dignified and interrogated in the second.

To turn to the two theories of practice, the concept of habitus has attracted discussion about the difficulty if not impossibility of recognising subconscious dispositions empirically: 'putting Bourdieu's theoretical concepts to work as part of methodological decisions and development of data collection instruments is still regarded by many – especially those new to research – as a 'black-box' of social inquiry' (Costa, Burke, & Murphy, 2019, p. 20). In the everyday operation of habitus in familiar fields, the model of the subconscious 'fish in water' makes this outcome difficult to unambiguously evidence. Rather, the outcomes and working of habitus are easier to identify when it is at odds with the field producing the emotions and discomfort of the 'fish out of water'. Similarly, the acquisition of a professional habitus (learning one's trade, internalizing external instruction) might offer more empirical traces as pedagogic work turns conscious learning into naturalized practice (Rowlands & Gale, 2017). In the case of teachers, this might be possible through tracking neophytes as they acquire experience and learning sediments into new habits and dispositions.

De Certeau's conceptualisation of practice offers more empirical access, perhaps, suggesting a external language of description that can identify moments when actors, teachers in this case, depart from the usual script, and knowlingly undermine, sidestep or disrupt routines or rules. The trick is that the research would have to be able to recognise the routine, to be able to recognise its disruption. In this way, I have used classroom ethnography to warrant extended time in classrooms, but kept an eye for disruptive moments ... in other words, I tend to use a hybrid design, so I'm open to being surprised by the data.

Bernstein was critical of methodological purism and its quick fixes. Rather he argued research should 'alert us to new possibilities, new assemblies, new ways of seeing relationships' (2000, p. 133) in the discursive gap between languages of description. Hybridity helps us capture what is gained, and recapture what is lost when one or other theory is applied. Each explores beyond the limits of the other. In this way, hybridity could help ferment 'a culture which encourages either theoretical innovation or methodological disturbances' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 132)

Conclusion

So to recap, I have highlighted the ubiquitous binary between theory and practice in education scholarship, and the field's insufficient thinking about how practice might be conceptualised. I situated my wondering in the growing interest in practice as the site of the social. I looked at two quite different treatments of practice – Bourdieu's theory of practice that pivots on the generative principle of habitus, and de Certeau's theory of everyday practice which orients to the minutiae of ways of operating in and around rules and routines. Both offer interesting and complementary lines of enquiry when we think of teachers and their practice. While this makes an argument for hybrid theory, I also briefly argued for hybrid methodologies that can flirt with more than one theoretical framing. I like the idea of hybrid theory for its refusal of neatness and its fertile contradictions. I think that hybridity is going to be more productive when it comes to understanding complex social settings and practices such as education with its multiple parties and politics.

I also think that hybridity is also a useful check to avoid committing grand theory:

- To at least some of those who claim to understand it, and who like it, it is one of the greatest advances in the entire history of social science;
- To many of those who claim to understand it, but who do not like it, it is a clumsy piece of irrelevant ponderosity. (These are rare, if only because dislike and impatience prevent many from trying to puzzle it out.)
- To those who do not claim to understand it, but who like it very much – and there are many of these – it is a wondrous maze, fascinating precisely because of its often splendid lack of intelligibility.
- Those who do not claim to understand it and who do not like it – if they retain the courage of their convictions – will feel that indeed the emperor has no clothes.

(C. Wright Mills, 1959/2000, p. 26

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