

**“Welcome to this one hour lecture on . . . Constructivism . . . (!)”:  
Rhetoric Or Reality? A Consideration of the Theory/Practice Nexus and its  
Implications for Approaches to Teacher Education.**

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Most initial teacher education (ITE) courses comprise three components: ‘Foundations’ / Education Studies modules (Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, History); Pedagogy (Curriculum / Methods) modules; and School-based experience. However, as has been well documented, these courses have been undermined by the perennial issue of a disconnect between their college- and field-based elements (Dewey, 1904; Zeichner and Tabachnick, 1981; Veenman, 1984; Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998; Ethell and McMeniman, 2000; Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005; Zeichner, 2010). Student- and beginning teachers are often challenged to see the relevance of theory / course work to the practice of teaching.

The debate as to the merits of acquiring theoretical versus practical knowledge as a basis for learning to teach has recently been re-ignited with a ‘turn once again toward practice-based teacher education’ (Zeichner, 2012). There is renewed focus on introducing beginning teachers to core or ‘high leverage’ instructional practices such as posing problems and leading discussions (Ball and Forzani, 2009; Grossman, 2011; Kazemi, Franke, & Lampert, 2009; Lampert and Graziani, 2009; Windschitl, Thompson & Braaten, 2011). This has concomitantly seen theoretical and in particular ‘Foundations’ modules marginalised and sometimes removed from ITE courses (Walsh and Jacobs, 2007; Whitty, Furlong, Barton, Miles and Whiting, 2007).

While practical experience in classrooms is undoubtedly necessary in ITE, it is arguably an insufficient means of preparing future teachers. As Olson and Bruner (1996) point out, practice is never “innocent” or devoid of theory. In the first instance, ‘lay theories’ about teaching which student teachers have inevitably developed during the ‘apprenticeship of observation’ of their own schooling must be uncovered, examined and as necessary informed with reference to the well established disciplines of Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy and History of Education. Further exposure to these formal theories should then serve to counter any narrow technical emphasis in the preparation of future teachers, by enabling them to develop skills associated with a broader professional vision. This should ideally reflect a deep psychological knowledge of their pupils, together with an understanding of the historical, cultural, political, economic and social contexts in which their work with these pupils is embedded (Greene, 1978).

Therefore, rather than debating the merits of theory versus practice in ITE, the question becomes one of how best to incorporate both elements in this education. While calls to ‘reconfigure’ / ‘reorientate’ / ‘reformulate’ the ‘Foundations’ / Education Studies modules with respect to considerations of practice regularly emerge in the teacher education literature, with some notable exceptions (Korthagen, 2010), specific approaches in this respect are far less evident. The persistent and erroneous notion that student teachers

'transfer' and apply principles, concepts and theories acquired in course work to the practical classroom situation is the key issue (Anderson, 1995). As Schon (1983) so cogently explains, the essence of effective professional practice is centred less on the application of theories to 'given' problems and situations, than on the manner of constructing and defining those invariably complex, indeterminate situations in the first instance. On the basis therefore that the important knowledge needed for teaching is ultimately 'situated' in specific teaching contexts (Sawyer, 2006; Collins, 2006; Greeno et al., 1996), and that the integration of course work with practical school experience is a key principle of quality teacher education (Conway et al., 2009, xix, xx), what is needed is that student teachers are enabled to develop a broad and above all *integrated* repertoire of theoretical / practical "perspectives" (Anderson, 1995). With these perspectives appropriately informing their interpretations and responses as professional practitioners, they will more effectively advance teaching and learning in their classrooms.

The workshop presented by the authors at the SCoTENS Conference in Enniskillen (21-22 October 2014) explored the approaches used in Marino Institute of Education (An Associated College of Trinity College, Dublin) and in Stranmillis University College (A College of Queen's University, Belfast) to address these important concerns for Teacher Education, and invited participants to reflect on how they could potentially address them in the contexts of their own work.

### Case Study 1

Until 2010, students of Marino Institute of Education attended lectures in the 'Foundation' studies in Trinity College, Dublin, so that the theoretical disciplines were, in the minds of students, not only conceptually but even geographically separate from the 'real' practice of teaching. In that academic year, the 'Foundation' studies began to be taught on-campus, and when the recommendations of the Lecturers with regards to integration were featured in the Teaching Council report on the college's Higher Diploma in Education (Primary) in 2011, the impetus was in place for a new approach to the teaching and assessment of Psychology and Sociology.

Since then, students have experienced integrated Psychology and Sociology courses based around two themes; 'concepts of ability, intelligence and learning' and 'the teacher as an agent of change'. Central to the success of the model is a new and innovative method of assessment through group-based presentations related to the guiding themes. Students are encouraged to demonstrate if / how theoretical learning is related to developing practical knowledge and experience, and assessments are strongly guided by the literature on theory in practice, with a focus on (Anderson et al., 1995)

1. Going beyond '*mere knowledge about concepts, principles and theories... [to tie] them together as coherent frames that suggest when and how the ideas can be used*' (p 145)
2. The idea that '*knowledge should be connected and integrated, not learned as isolated bits and pieces*' (p 148)
3. Awareness that student teachers need to be '*provoked into examining and transforming their assumptions about ability*' and building '*their own frameworks for evaluating knowledge and the evidence that bears on knowledge claims*' (p 150)

4. The use of 'rich cases' emphasising the 'multi-dimensionality of practice [by analysing] the same example from many points of view with different conceptual tools' (p 149)

Also central to the development of the approach was the literature on cooperative learning, which generally identifies extensive benefits of collaborative approaches, including more high-level reasoning, greater creativity and most importantly in this context, greater linkage of what is learned within one situation (on-campus lectures) to another (the practice of teaching in schools (O'Toole, 2014). The 'Johnson's five basic elements' (Johnson and Johnson (1994) are used in structuring the group-work, with support in-built for:

- Clearly perceived positive interdependence
- Considerable promotive interaction
- Clearly perceived individual accountability and personal responsibility to achieve the group's goals
- Frequent use of the relevant interpersonal and small-group skills
- Group processing

Research conducted by the Lecturers with the first cohort of students to be taught and assessed in this way yielded overwhelmingly positive responses, identifying increased theory-practice integration, active engagement with the material, interdisciplinary thinking, increased reflection and critical thinking and support for the literature on the benefits of cooperative learning. Since the initial cohort, this approach has influenced the development of Psychology and Sociology courses within the newly reconfigured B.Ed and P.M.E courses. The disciplines are now fully integrated as one course in B.Ed2 (Psychology and Sociology of Education), one course in B.Ed3 (Sociology, Curriculum and Assessment) and one course in P.M.E2 (Psychology and Sociology of Education), with additional supports provided for ongoing group-work built into the course structure (seminars, physical space provided etc).

## Case Study 2

At Stranmillis University College, Belfast the Education Studies / "Foundations" disciplines of history, sociology, psychology and philosophy have for the past decade been taught in an infused rather than discrete manner. This means that year 1 students, for instance, take a module entitled "Introduction to Education Studies" during which they study introductory elements of all four disciplines and for which the assessment encourages them to draw important connections between these elements.

In this infused model every effort is now made to integrate practical and theoretical perspectives. Following Lave and Wenger's model (1991) of apprenticeship and increasing legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice, students are made aware from the outset of the practical outworking and contextual realities of the course content being studied. In designing the course content and teaching methodologies there has also been a welcome shift away from mere indoctrination or transmission of knowledge to more active learning strategies which in turn allows students to reflect more soundly about their own teaching and learning (Fenstermacher, 1978, 1986; General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, 2006; CCEA, 2007). Prior to the recent changes to the degree programme at Stranmillis, one student had commented on the dissonance between the "Revised

Curriculum” (which promotes active learning methods and thinking skills) and the theoretical approach taken by lecturing staff as follows:

“...the new curriculum is all more hands on coz that’s the way you learn, but yet a lot of what we’re doing, is all theory and you don’t get the practice”

The example of the final year optional module on pastoral care reflects the new integrated model, where students have to produce a classroom resource (e.g. a video using puppets on the theme of bereavement, or a big story book on the theme of bullying) but are also required to produce a rationale with detailed reference to relevant research theorists such as Kübler-Ross, Worden, Olweus and Rigby.

This year the primary programme also launched its inaugural student research conference where newly qualified teachers presented their completed undergraduate dissertation research to an audience which included fellow students but also over thirty primary principals and teaching union representatives. The event was a tremendous success, with very positive feedback from school principals. In this way Stranmillis is working hard to promote the integrated theory/practice model both within the College and beyond.

## Conclusion

These approaches go some significant way towards addressing long-standing concerns within ITE, and hence impacting for the better on the practice of future teachers and their transformative potential in education.

Feedback from participants in the workshop was very positive, with colleagues identifying strongly with the theory / practice issue raised which they too saw as highly relevant and often challenging. Participants valued the insights gained from the two case studies, and also appreciated the opportunity given at the end of the session to share their own experiences and learn from each other.

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