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The Beneficial Relationship between Theorizing, Philosophizing, and Practicing

In researching the term “theory,” there is no shortage of definitions or interpretations of the word’s meaning.  Three examples that nicely represent these interpretations begin with The American Heritage Dictionary defining this word as, “…a system of assumptions, accepted principles, and rules of procedure devised to analyze, predict, or otherwise explain the nature or behavior of a specified set of phenomena, or such knowledge or such a system distinguished from experiment or practice” (1978).   The definition in the infamous Merriam Webster Dictionary states that a theory is “a belief, policy or procedure proposed or followed as the basis of action”  (2003). Another example is given by the popular website, Dictionary.com, as “a particular conception or view of something to be done or of the method of doing it; a system of rules or principles” (2010).

Though the definitions vary slightly, they all agree that a theory is some kind of idea or application that validates itself through analysis and regular practice.  It is not necessarily supported by concrete facts and evidence, rather, by successful ability to repeat consistent results.  One way to think of 'a theory' is that it is a technique derived from speculation and hypothesis that has been proven effective through trial and error.  However, as time progresses, cultures and values evolve, and new knowledge is discovered.  Therefore, theories can and should be periodically challenged by philosophy and conjecture in order to verify their applicability to ever-changing circumstances, and to ensure their soundness.

Behind every theory is a type of philosophy, such as an axiom, a hypothesis, or an assumption.   Every type of philosophy “raises questions about what we do and why we do it, and goes beyond individual cases and phenomena to treat questions of a general nature” (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 5).  Philosophy continually confronts current practices and theories with challenge.  It is an invitation for new thought to be applied to commonly accepted theories of practice, which serves to prevent them from becoming irrelevant and outdated.  The great benefit of this constant questioning and pondering is the continual sagacity of standard practices and beliefs.

The differences between theorizing and philosophizing are very subtle and often overlooked.  Sometimes these two terms are even used interchangeably.  However, although they have a close relationship, they are not identical.  Philosophizing is an abstract activity involving the examination of our principles, theories, and attitudes.  Theorizing is more functional in that it prescribes a practical set of techniques, principles, and methodologies for action.  Herein lies the clearest difference between philosophy and theory.  While a theory provides foundation for our observations and practices, a philosophy examines the underlying concepts behind this foundation.  Theories cannot exist without philosophies; however the opposite is not always true.

An example of the functions of philosophy and theory can be illustrated by looking at John Dewey’s introduction of the field of philosophy to the field of education in the 1920’s.  Originating his career as a highly educated philosopher, “Dewey believed that philosophy had failed at reconciling science with values, which he saw as philosophy's main purpose. Dewey argued that this failure was due to philosophy being completely disconnected from practical activity…Dewey thought that we could use the scientific method to save philosophy” (as cited by Wales, 2008).

Recall that the traditional process of scientific method begins in the conceptual arena of philosophy with the creation of a question or supposition.  This is where current practices, beliefs, or situations are challenged.  Prior to Dewey’s time, this is where educational thought and conversation were contained.  Philosophy was for philosophers, and education was for educators.  Following this ruminative first step is the formation of a hypothesis.  This is where a tentative ideology is iterated in address to the philosophical questioning.  The hypothesis is customarily tested by trial and error techniques.  Dewey pioneered the formation and experimentation of functional hypotheses about teaching and learning techniques based on psychological philosophies. Based on the results, mindsets are challenged and theories are originated.  This is the framework of the scheme of events, led by Dewey, which incited the infamous progressive education movement of the 1920’s.

The beginnings of this movement are rooted in the philosophies of pragmatism and experientialism.  The philosophy of pragmatism has been in existence since the mid-1800’s and centers around the practicality and usefulness of ideas, practices, and theories  (Burch, 2009).  Experientialism is a philosophy which purports that humans learn best through the act of experiencing.  Dewey hypothesized about applying these schools of thought to the field of education.  He tested his theories at his pilot program, The Dewey School.  His techniques were very successful, and generated much interest among educators throughout the country.  New educational techniques were formed, and practices were revised.  This was the start of the progressive education movement.  Dewey’s ability “to translate these new perspectives into concrete educational goals and programs”  (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p.35) inspired other educators to apply their own philosophies to the field of education.  Since then, a wonderful assortment of educational theories have been created, practiced, and revised over the years.  In observation of educational practices carried out under the direction of various theoretical mindsets, it is certain that philosophizers will continue to challenge these customs and routines with new thinking.

In the realm of education, philosophical debates are often heated.  This is due to the honest integrity of educators to determine the most optimal learning situation possible.  Regardless of the variety of philosophical stances held by educators, most would unanimously agree that this field has greatly benefited from intellectualizing standard practices through the philosophy-theory-practice cycle.

If one were to draw a diagram to represent the concepts of philosophy, theory, and practice, it would be circular in shape to represent the cyclical relationship between these three entities.  None of these comes first, and all are equally significant.  New philosophy gives birth to insightful theory.  New theory instigates new practice.  These practices continually inspire challenge and analysis.  The cycle continues.  In short, philosophizing, theorizing and practice all have important roles to play in most any arena of life.  They all play hand-in-hand, and mutually fuel each other’s purposes.

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