Lessons learned – towards a framework for integration of theory and practice at student, teacher and institutional level in academic development

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I describe an approach to the integration of theory and practice at three levels: intrapersonal, inter-personal and organisational level. I use the results of the research projects I have been involved in in order to illustrate how the three levels that have emerged over the years have facilitated in identifying three tensions. My purpose in presenting these levels is to create a framework that can help other people, dedicated to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) to understand how they can approach challenges of advocating SoTL to those I have encountered, in their own environments, and how their performance is linked to existing university teaching literature. Moreover, the framework is a system to help researchers, educators and leaders address some of the specific challenges associated with the integration of theory and practice in academic development.

1   INTRODUCTION

The university's role in society as a generator of new ways of thinking about and manage practical and abstract problems, but also as an opportunity to have a basis to actually carry out a practice is, after all, still relatively strong. But in line with the pressure of accountability, quality, and economical constraints, academics and students need to find new ways to carry out the activities of teaching and learning. As a means to support the development of teaching and learning, many universities have today employed individuals who work as academic developers. In some universities these positions are full time, as part of university administration, positioned close to the university management, but they may as well be part-time positions, distributed as part of academic departments, and without any clear link to the managerial level of the university. In other words, the conditions for working with academic development differ and hence provide different challenges of how to support and explore teaching and learning as theory and as practice.

My understanding and my approach to researching the relationship between theory and practice for different groups of students, teachers and leaders, has changed over my time as a researcher and academic developer. It is my hope that by writing this text I am able to clarify what I had wished that I knew when I started as academic developer, that which I know that I at least have a better overall understanding of today and how I see this part of the research in higher education would be developed. As my research has been conducted in collaboration with several research teams, I will in this text refer to research that I have led or participated in together with research colleagues and practitioners and introduce three dimensions of tension that cut through the levels of teachers, students and mid-level managers; directors of studies, programme directors or individuals with a responsibility of more or less administrative character in relation to teaching in higher education.

2   THEORY AND PRACTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Before I start explaining each part of the framework, let me clarify what I mean by the concepts of theory and practice.

2.1 Theory

A general description of theory is that it is a system of ideas that seeks to explain a phenomenon. This perspective of theory is in line with a view on theory often applied in natural scientific and medical research, in which theory is related to something that can be tested repeatedly, and provide advise as to how to act at any given time in relation to that specific phenomenon. Theory in (university) education, on the other hand, needs to be viewed in a different way. Rather than pressing to find evidence (Brosnan, 2010) theory is the starting point for participating in a scientific dialogue on different possible explanations for the phenomenon. This is done by means of a special lens or a particular

perspective by which the exploration takes place, and that can lead to theory (Reeves, Albert, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008) . One way to define theory driven by Reeves et al and as 'an organised, full systematic articulation of a plurality of factors communicated as a whole meningsful'.

Educational theory can historically be said to have evolved from a high level of abstraction in the early 1900s, via the so-called middle range theories in the 1960s into personal practice theory in the late 1900s. Theory of high abstraction level formulates the fundamental variables of a system, such as Marxist theory, and is independent of the phenomenon it tries to explain (social injustice). This, to the extent that these theories do not come from empirical research or leads directly through the hypothesis testing to empirical research, but can provide guidance for empirical studies.

Already in the 1960s Merton (Merton, 1968) introduced the the idea of "middle range theories" - theories that lies between the small but necessary working hypotheses developed in the daily research or explorations, and inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that can explain all observed expression of behavior, social organizations and social change (p. 39). Bordage said that in the educational research domain programmatic theory leads to mid range theory. This is an iterative process in which observations raise to (or refine) a theory that guides further empirical research and which further refines the theory (Bordage, 2007).

At the most detailed individual level, personal theories guide our daily activities. Our choice of how to provide feedback on students' work, for example, is often a consequence of an individual's theory of how to communicate and support achievement (Handal & Lauvas, 1987). It is a personal theory, which is in a two-way relationship with empirical observation, even if it only tells us what to say and how in relation to the student. In education Donald Schön's research has focused on these theories-in-use. Theories which teachers use every day in their work, and how they relate to their underlying theory, that could be a mid-range theory of feedback and communication patterns together with theories on course design, which might have been learned at a university teaching course.

What I mean by theory in this paper is at the two latter levels, mid-range and personal theories, as I believe that these are central for the promotion of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: as we engage in practice as teachers – we need to relate both to our personal theories, extending our personal understanding, but also we need to link onto theory as the result of small and large scale studies of the teaching and learning in higher education.

2.2 Practice

Practice can be described from several perspectives. From a theoretical perspective, practice has been theorised by several philosophers and sociologists since the 1970s, e.g. Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens and Certeau. The aim of these theories is to "explain the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we call 'the system' on the other" (Ortner, 2006). Later these theories have been extended by other theorists.

In higher education literature Wenger's notion of the Community of Practice (CoP) has become influential (1998), here referring to a group of people sharing a craft or a profession. In the sharing of this profession, the members of the community are mutually engaged in different activities, and develop a shared repertoire of tools in striving for a common goal, called enterprize. The way practice is viewed here is in many ways not that different from Bourdieu's sense of the word 'field' (e.g. Bourdieu, 1996). Fields are specialist domains of practice (e.g. medicine, art, teaching) with their own 'logic' constituted by a unique combination of capital; symbolic, social and financial. Although Wenger's theory is a learning theory, as in Wenger's Community of practice, where peripheral members learn through participation and become more central to the community of practice, players of a specific field have specific know-how to play the game. Bourdieu's agents thus develop 'habitus', which could be compared to social habits and know-how of how things are carried out in a CoP, and which enables them to choose successful strategies in navigating the field.

In higher education, as an academic developer, you are constantly navigating several fields or communities of practice: disciplinary, organisational, teaching, research and administration practices. Each practice has its own logic, and hence, provides different opportunities and challenges for communication, for collaboration, and for working with development work. The challenge of how these practices should be linked to, generated or infomed by theory from an academic development perspective is what I try to eplore in this paper.

When trying to establish scholarship of teaching and learning (Boyer, 1990) at a university I have interpreted this as a striving to bridge practice with theory at both personal and mid-range level, to stimulate reflection, sharing and critical inquiry.

3   TENSIONS ACROSS THREE LEVELS OF INTEGRATION

The three tensions attended to in the paper are based in previous work on how integration of theory and practice was conceptualised by students. In this study (K. B. Laksov, McGrath, & Josephson, 2014), the analysis showed a pattern where integration could be seen as something happening within an individual, referred to as 'intrapersonal integration'; the next level concerned integration as something happening in the interaction between people, referred to as 'interpersonal integration'; finally there were conceptions that viewed integration as a concern of the organisation of education, by teachers, in courses etc. I have adopted this framework as a lense through which I re-explored the research I have been involved in to draw new conclusions from the work.

Through the exploration of the research I have engaged in at the levels of intrapersonal, interpersonal and organisational perspectives of integration three challenges or tensions can be identified. These are discussed below.

3.1   Obtaining legitimacy from practice

The first field of tension that I can see in the research is about receiving legitimacy from members of the practice. Although theoretical understanding creates opportunities to identify issues which could be explored and lead to improved practice, there is a risk that as a non-member of the practice and its communities of practice, the conditions for promoting change processes in practice do not actually exist. As I have identified in the three levels of integration, this aspect is clear both on the level of students, teachers and (mid)management. I have chosen to exemplify this by two studies on the level of students.

The studies focus on medical and nursing students' experiences the clinical training environment (Liljedahl, Björck, Kalén, Ponzer, & Laksov, 2016; Liljedahl, Boman, Fält, & Laksov, 2015). What emerges in these studies in relation to the issue of intrapersonal integration is that the relationship between theory and practice is different for the two student groups. For nursing students theory contributes to creating expectations on the clinical practice:

> Well, I guess that the aim is that we get to practice what we have learnt in theory, that we can try... see how it is... is it working in the way we have learnt? (Nursing student no. 6)

Moreover, it appears that students find it challenging to manage the different levels of theory, specifically with regard to the use of general concepts such as they are expressed in the curricula and study guides for the practical, everyday clinical practice:

> Because they [the intended learning outcomes] are extremely abstract and many in my class interpret them as they should learn how they are doing things on this ward or this primary care unit. (Nursing student no. 3)

When it comes to medical students they portrayed other challenges related to the theory and practice. Medical students saw the clinical practice as an opportunity to establish their theoretical knowledge and instead of abstract learning outcomes which they were expected to relate to as for the nurses, different activities that students would conduct were listed.

> They had this checklist that we were supposed to use. It was like 'this is what you should do during this rotation'.... (Medical student no. 3)

A challenge associated with integration seems to be how and if the theory is useful in practice, and if this (application to practice) is what theory will be used for. Without a recognition of the fact that the knowledge you have (of theory alt anchored in theory) is legitimate, it is difficult for higher education leaders, teachers and students to get the space to use it. Obtaining legitimacy from practice is therefore a challenge that needs to be addressed both at the student, teacher and leadership level.

For academic development, there is a need to create legitimacy in a way that is valued by members of the practice that is to be involved in academic development no matter if it concerns individuals' learning through courses, participation in partnerships around academic development, or

implementation of new ways of working through policy. However, adapting to the values of the practice, necessitates that you adopt a specific perspective based on the position that you have (had), which may be at the expense of other perspectives.

3.2 Balancing the degree of commitment and ownership

The second field of tension that was identified concerns the level of engagement and ownership of individuals. By enabling engagement in learning and development, individual teachers, leaders and students are faced with a choice that in itself creates tension. Should you engage fully, and thus possibly compromise the previous values and approaches to practice, or should you maintain a critical, more distanced perspective? This dilemma I have chosen to exemplify with a study on the development of teaching and learning at a research intensive department (Bolander Laksov, Mann, & Dahlgren, 2008).

The study explored action research as a way to facilitate educational change in an institution, where myself as academic developer collaborated with the director of studies at a research-intensive department to investigate and develop the educational culture at that same department. Together we designed a survey, developed a seminar series for PhD students who were in the role as teaching assistants or tutors, and issued a 'future workshop'. In addition, we documented the changes that occurred during the year that the project was on-going. Wenger's theoretical framework on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) provided the analytical lens applied to understand what happened in practice during the project, thus contributing to the integration of theory and practice in the analysis of the collected data. The study results showed that the cooperation, which we called 'the broker-pair' to use Wenger's terminology, was at core for the project to succeed. We could also show that the introduction of a very good coffee machine was an opportunity to establish an educational dialogue for the director of studies. Indeed it created a focal point for educational conversations in general, but these educational talks were still dependent on and initiated by the Director of Studies. The idea of creating arenas for dialogue using various tools, such as the coffee machine, was something that I took with me to future projects, as well as the format to cooperate across organizational borders within action research projects.

Overall, it can be said about this strand of my research, that a clear challenge is the degree to which participants in communities of practice are willing to engage and negotiate their own values or theoretical perspective that they have 'learned' with the environment or the community where you work or will be working as a professional in the future. By engaging fully, there is a risk of losing the ability to distance oneself to where the theoretical perspective can be more easily applied, and often even provide an important space for reflection. By getting involved in the details and its development, it is likely that you have more and more difficult to see things from an overarching perspective.

3.3 New thinking about academic development and courses

The third field of tension regards competency development of academic teachers, leaders and possibly also students, as a means to achieve academic development. Based in the work of eg Trigwell & Prosser's research (1999), it is generally believed that the conceptualizations that university teachers make about their teaching practice are closely linked with how they actually teach.

In Sweden, teacher training courses and workshops have been organized since the 1960s for university teachers as a way to contribute to their educational qualification (Åkesson & Nilsson, 2010). In a study of what happened when university teachers tried to discuss their educational ideas resulting from participating in such courses with colleagues at their own institution, it turned out, however, that the new (teaching) 'language' which they had learned, in some cases, rather than facilitated, hindered communication with colleagues (McGrath & Bolander Laksov, 2014). This mismatch in communication was referred to as 'crosstalk'. The results from the cross talk study were in line with the results of my thesis, which showed there is a need to adapt not only language, but arguments and ways of working, to the prevailing paradigm within the University organization that you want to support in academic development (Bolander Laksov, 2007).

Another example of how integration of theory and practice among educational leaders (Bolander Laksov & Tomson, 2016) can be achieved is presented in an intervention study where leadership groups of 6-12 people from different institutions instead of going to a leadership program as individuals, went there as a group (Söderhjelm, Björklund, Sandahl, & Bolander-Laksov, 2016). The

results of the study showed that the groups participating, had established teams with clear roles and increased trust towards the end of the course. These findings advocates for more team oriented academic development activities both for academic teachers and academic leaders.

The challenge that emerges from these studies are questions about how the training or education programs are supposed to be organized to achieve its objective: the integration of theory and practice. Traditional forms of education seems to have both strengths and weaknesses, but if one is looking for development and change at an organisational level, our research indicate a need to work closer to practice, for example through action research and more team-oriented. An important question is thus how courses and educational programs may be organized with a focus on inclusiveness rather than the building of walls between different groups in academia e.g. through language?

Although it cannot be denied that higher education courses may lead to better quality education, questions regarding the format, the content and who should participate in these courses are relevant questions to ask. One recurrent strength of the courses is that they create space for reflection and may enable an overall view of the university as a whole, which is an aspect that could lead to the identification of areas for development.

4   CONCLUSIONS

One of my objectives in presenting this research and the framework that resulted from it, is to facilitate for future research and practice in the area of integration of theory and practice in higher education.

A conclusion of the review of the scholarly work I have engaged in is that usefulness of theory for practice is important but not enough. Theory, and not the least the language used when talking about theory, needs to be legitimate, and this legitimatisation is achieved through dialogue with practice, and this can only happen if there is space in practice to allow for a link to theory. In other words, to achieve integration of theory and practice academic developers need to attend to the values, tools and logic of a certain field. This is a complex process, as there is a need to navigate the boarders of several fields at the same time as getting to know the habitus of these fields. In Wenger's terminology the close collaboration with members of the different communities of practice become crucial, not only to establish legitimacy, but also to create space for reflection on theory and practice in these different CoP.

When it comes to courses for teachers I suggest that although discourse could be developed for individuals in courses, there is a clear need for working with teams and at collective level, this could be done via educational leaders or 'ambassadors' who are members of the academic CoP and hence can work as 'brokers' or translators of theory and practice, in and between different practices. This is, however, an area that needs more research. We need to better understand the outcomes of such partnerships both at individual and organisational level. We also need to better understand in what ways teachers are transforming what they learn in pedagogical courses into practice – not necessarily based on a theoretical discourse, but based on scholarship of teaching and learning.

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