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This presentation considers some of the key theoretical resources that have informed research on professional development over the past six decades. The bodies of literature surveyed are loosely categorised as: early approaches or atheoretical; phenomenographic; the practice-based and socio-material; and critical and social realist. Each body of literature has advantages and disadvantages and each has the potential to generate useful suggestions for professional development, even the so-called a-theoretical early approaches. However when considering more substantial change-oriented analyses or strategies, it is the case that the social realist or practice-based approaches will have more to offer.

Both social realist and practice-based approaches allow for or call for the attention to context in the consideration of professional development strategies. Trowler (2005) made a call for attention to context, and in my own work I used social realism in order to demonstrate the influence of especially institutional contexts in South Africa (Leibowitz, 2014; Leibowitz, Bozalek, Winberg and van Schalkwyk, 2015). It is interesting that in both approaches there is space for attention to physical resources and materials or matter, including technology, space and time. These are treated differently, where in the socio-material, practice-based literature more attention is given to how matter, space, time and technology are co-constituted.

A key difference between the writing of social realists such as Archer and socio-materialists such as Fenwick is on personal properties. Archer would see agency as exercised by individuals or groups, whereas Fenwick and others in the socio-materialist fold, would see it as distributed amongst all the intra-acting aspects of a practice or a situation. This has implications for whether a professional development strategy targets individuals and groups, or whether it targets entire practices. With regard to personal identity and sense of self, within a practice-based approach individuals are viewed as changing in relation to the contexts in which they find themselves and how they participate in these contexts (Dreier, 1999) – hence the stress on creating opportunities to participate. In contrast, Archer maintains that our personal identity - that we acquire at maturity - is the outcome of a “continuous sense of self” (2000:91) – hence the stress on the engagement of policies and strategies with individuals’ own concerns and commitments (Crawford, 2010). Despite the divergences, both approaches stress the importance of ethics, responsibility and accountability.

A key tension between the realist and practice-based approaches might have to do with the significance of ‘texts’. Within a social realist approach texts are significant, as they record the dominant ideas in a culture. This contrasts fairly sharply with a practice-based approach, where there is more significance accorded to practice and to tacit thinking than to text and codified knowledge. Writing from a practice-based perspective, Swidler (2001) argues against the significance of culture, demonstrating how ideas and schemas are developed and transmitted through practice, which, she maintains, allows for a more agentic approach. The implications of choosing one or the other theoretical approach are various, including whether one studies policy documents at universities, and what power one attributes to them, or to how one views culture and text within learning. This could be one of the reasons for the divergences of views regarding the importance of learning overt rules and precepts that is expressed by social realists (Maton and Moore 2010; Wheelahan 2012) versus the assumption

that professionals learn primarily through practice and participation in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Wheelahan (2012) argues that social constructivism (along with technical-instrumentalism) tends to emphasize the contextual, situated and problem-based approaches to knowledge at the expense of depth and disciplinary knowledge. Furthermore, she maintains that this is a question of ‘distributional justice’ (2012:37). However many writing in the practice-based fold call for a mix of formal knowledge and experiential learning. For instance according to Boud and Brew a focus on practice “does not deny knowledge and skills, but also it does not privilege them” (2013:214). In distinguishing between a cognitivist and connectionist approach to learning, Taylor (2001) suggests that the processes differ amongst individuals, according to the kind of knowledge and the purpose for which knowledge is acquired.

The question arises, are these differences, for example on the role of tacit and overt knowledge, or the role of agency, so great that professional developers or academics learning to teach, cannot converse with each other? Or is it the case that it would be difficult to combine the approaches in one research project or paper, but that it would be possible for individuals or even groups to converse across theoretical boundaries? A simple proposition might be that there should be some common ground in order for dialogue to occur, for example that professional developers would need to share common values or beliefs in the purpose of higher education. Another might be that it depends on the level of dogmatism of the people involved. And yet, if it is true that these or similar approaches should be resources on which to build valuable approaches to teaching and learning, we must find ways of being able to using these resources productively.

A more scholarly turn to the field of professional academic development provides depth to discussions and strategizing about professional development, and a groundedness to the languages that professional developers can use with each other. It could provide both stature and credibility for academic developers. However, caution should be taken not to use the somewhat dense vocabularies of most of these conceptual frameworks in such a manner that this creates divisions between advocates of different view points, or divisions between those more steeped in the scholarship of academic development and those still new to the field. One should always bear in mind that academics who are the subject of professional development strategies might be immersed in the theories of their disciplines, but not necessarily be immersed in the dense conceptual language of particular educational or social theories.

How to make our theories work for us, as researchers and practitioners on professional academic development, and how to work our theories so that they remain accessible, useful, challengeable and sources for dialogue rather than division – this is a valuable area for further research and deliberation.

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