think piece

Why Theory?: It's not rocket surgery!

Like the proverbial elephant in the room it's an open secret that educational research can be theoretically inadequate. That's not to say there are no theories. In fact, there's a fair-sized menu for students to choose from. And it's not that these approaches aren't valuable in sensitising us to key issues. Rather, it's to say many are less useful than they should be in enabling research to go beyond endless descriptions of classroom activity or 'best practice'. We often get thick description but thin explanation, and the kind of theory enabling thicker explanations has been misunderstood, mislabelled and maligned. Thus the need for this new series of brief introductions to different theories in education. But before such theories can be discussed there is a prior question: why bother with theory at all?

The question must be broached because theory is often painted as intellectual gymnastics divorced from empirical reality, and contrasted to the practical, 'socially responsible' research urgently needed to improve education. Theory can be denigrated as a luxury or an arrogant intellectual imposition on the complexities of reality. Such beliefs are nonsense. There is no such thing as having no theory. As Goethe put it, with every attentive look at the world we are theorising. Moreover, without theory there is no data. Without some means of judging what is important, we encounter an infinite seamless flux. It would take eternity to describe every possible detail of even a specific incident in a classroom. As Karl Popper argued, 'the belief that we can start with pure observations alone, without anything in the nature of a theory, is absurd ... Observation is always selective'. The question is thus not whether you have a theory but rather how explicit your theory is and what it is capable of doing. The more explicit the theory, the more contestable it will be. Using a systematic conceptual framework is anything but arrogance - it's making public the intellectual basis of your arguments. If your theory remains tacit, then others cannot engage in rational critical debate with your arguments - there can be little beyond ideological posturing and name-calling.

Intellectual and practical progress depends on rational, intersubjective criticism, and the critical method is best served by being theoretically explicit.

Though nonsense, arguments against theory have that attractiveness of action common to anti-intellectualism. One strength of educational research is that it attracts people eager to change the world for the better. However, our virtues easily become our vices. All too often people have tried to change education in various ways. The point, however, is to understand it, so we know what is possible to change, how to change it, and with what effects for whom. Good intentions and commitment are not enough. Progressive pedagogy, for example, has often been advanced by well-meaning educationalists as helping working-class pupils, but over thirty years of extensive, theoretically-informed research reveals its often deleterious effects for these students. To make good our intentions, then, requires a degree of agnosticism about potential solutions to educational problems and a decent theory on which to base our arguments. To this extent, calls for 'evidence-based' policy and practice are not misplaced. Sadly, though, such calls are currently in the service of attempts to impose approaches from medicine (such as randomised controlled trials) without sufficient understanding of education as a distinctive object of study. Evidence is required, but without theory that offers ontological and epistemological foundations for such evidence, then what is being evidenced remains unclear. Theory, then, is not an antonym for engagement. As the linguist Michael Halliday said, there's nothing as practical as a good theory.

Theories are not, however, equally good. Many have what Basil Bernstein describes as a strong 'internal language of description': their concepts relate strongly to each other and combine to tell a convincing story. But when one tries to use them in research one can quickly run into trouble because their 'external language of description' - how their concepts relate to empirical phenomena - is far weaker. Ideas like 'habitus' or 'communities of practice' highlight important issues of concern. They open our eyes, offering us things to think about and reminding us of important issues.

But they often stop short of providing the tools for getting to grips with empirical objects of study by enabling us to explore their underlying structuring principles or show similarity, change and variation between and within contexts. Rather than being set aside, they need development from being ways of seeing the world to become genuine exploratory frameworks. Without such conceptual development, results tend to be restricted to endless description or shopping lists of requisites for educational success (invariably such motherhood statements as more resources and professional development).

A second problem resides in choosing theories. They are not universally valuable. Without a sound realist basis for choosing specific theories for addressing specific problems, it is easy to become the child who, upon being given a hammer, believes everything must be hit with it. There is a broad menu of theories to choose from, but the menu is often abstracted from the kitchen - students do not always learn why they should choose particular theories. As the PhD becomes more of a driving licence than a licence to explore, theoretical decisions become based more on serendipity and socialisation than on epistemological grounds. This leads to allegiance to an approach rather than to a problem, and relations between approaches become reduced to critique rather than representing competing attempts at offering better explanations of problems.

In short, the need for good theory is simple. If we don't have adequate conceptual tools, then we can describe much but explain little; but if we have theory that cannot be put to use, we've got little to explain. Empirical research without theory is blind; theory without research is deaf and dumb. Why theory? To coin a phrase, it's not exactly rocket surgery: without good theory we cannot understand let alone improve education.

Karl Maton
Senior Research Fellow in Sociology & Education
Faculties of Education & Arts, University of Wollongong