

Teachers' Practical Theory: Personal articulation and implications for teachers and teacher education in the Pacific

Jeremy Dorovolomo

Introduction

Teachers never experience the same classroom twice; teaching conditions change from day to day. The students, who reacted positively to a set of pedagogical strategies yesterday, respond differently today. A myriad of factors continually bombard teachers and their practices. With their unique experiences, encounters and locations, teachers develop their own 'practical theories'.

Practical theory was defined by Handal and Louvas (1987: 9) as "a person's private, integrated but ever-changing system of knowledge, experience and values which is relevant to practice at any particular time". Moreover, Sanders and McCutcheon (1986: 54-55) explain that "practical theories of teaching are the conceptual structures and visions that provide teachers with reasons for acting as they do, and for choosing the teaching activities and curriculum materials they choose in order to be effective". Every teacher is unique, even if they graduate from the same university class and are placed in the same school. They develop a practical theory depending on how they are positioned, and position themselves, in the professional landscape. Practical theory is an idiosyncratic, situated phenomenon, made powerful by the contexts in which it is acquired and used.

Embracing, potent protagonists Connelly, Clandinin and He's (1997) collection of methods, i.e. teacher stories, journals, and annals, the author unpacks elements of his personal theory and then offers thoughts about practical theories for teachers and teacher educators in the Pacific Islands. It is pivotal for teachers to see the relationship between

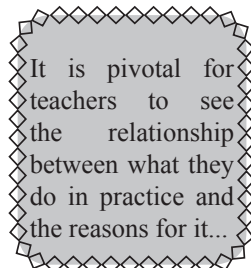
what they do in practice and the reasons for it, in order to become increasingly aware of their own theories and be able to judge alternatives in a way which makes both rejection of them as well as revision of them possible. Teachers should take the time to peel back the layers and see what has made them do the things the way they did. This is salient to improving teachers' pedagogy and student learning.

Practical theory characteristics

Practical theories are personal and individualistic because each teacher develops and adheres to his or her own practical theory. Teachers are not overwhelmed by whether their theories are true or not, but "care about whether their theories are effective and true here, with these children in this situation" (Sanders & McCutcheon, 1986:63).

Practical theory is also contextual. Everyone pertains to and works in a context, not in isolation—no person is an island. It is practice that works **here, now, in this context** (Connelly, Clandinin & He, 1997; Sanders & McCutcheon, 1986). Moreover, practical theories of teaching occur in the terrain of lived experiences. They are based on (reflection on) experience, indicating that they originate from, and develop through experiences in teaching.

Another feature is the ever-changing nature of personal theories. Personal and formal knowledge, lived experiences and context inform the work of teachers and provide for perceptual and conceptual change and, concomitantly, changes in practice also. These changes depict teachers as theory generators, which is integral in the knowledge



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construction process (Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1996; Keiny, 1994). Practices in teaching are implemented by individual practitioners under varying contextual climates that differ over time. Given the fact that the context of practice changes, a teacher's practical theory needs to be continually reformulated, discarded and developed (Handal & Louvas, 1987).

Further, practical theories guide teachers' practice; they "are guidelines or rules-of-thumb used to guide behaviour and provide reasons for actions in response to practical problems" (Fieldman, 1994: 8). Thus, practical theories are in fact a bundle of claims a teacher embraces that shapes his or her pedagogical practices.

Practical theory components

Teachers' practical theories consist of components or elements that are linked by relationships, giving the theory its structure or framework (Marland, 1997). This theoretical framework operates as a set of filters through which teachers view information, select facts, study social reality and define problems (Giroux & Penna, 1988).

An important and integral component of teachers' practical theories is their **values** because, together with beliefs, they levy a pervasive interaction with the other elements (Marland, 1997). Values are "ideas of what is good and bad in education as well as in life generally" (Handal & Louvas, 1987: 11). Teaching is value-laden and the terms and conceptualisations teachers take on board carry value-loadings.

Emphasising that the values teachers embrace are a result of teacher education would not be totally correct because the espoused values emanate also from various other sources, such as family background, ethnicity, class—all have an effect on teachers' values and practice (Cornell, 1985). There is growing acknowledgement that many aspects of being a teacher are rooted in childhood experiences and culture. Cultural images and

childhood experiences linger in the pedagogical notions and orientations of people who choose to become teachers, permeating and shaping in unacknowledged ways teachers' values, and thus their professional identity and work (Weber & Mitchell, 1996). All teachers were once young children, engaged consciously or unconsciously in observing and constructing knowledge of teaching, both at home and at school. Ways in which teachers are socialised, to a very large extent, influence their behaviour, their ways of thinking and their practice (Thaman, 1993).

Beliefs, the fundamental assumptions on which we base our actions, thinking and living, are self-fulfilling prophecies that come into operation when we opt to act, think, prioritise and so forth, in one way, rather than the other (Beare & Slaughter, 1993). Just like other components, beliefs are not fixed or invariant among teachers because what counts as good teaching will vary among teachers (Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1996; Clark & Peterson, 1986).

Metaphors play a central role in teachers' personal practical knowledge and practice. Metaphors use words to indicate teachers' knowledge and practice detached from their literal meanings. A plethora of metaphors prevail in teachers' operations, depicting teaching as being like gardening, coaching, cooking (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), a fragile ecosystem (Thomas, 1992), the classroom as a castle (Kosunen, 1994), or as baking a cake (Goddard & Clinton, 1994).

Teachers possess **principles** formulated and adopted from experiences that can be recruited to direct action and explain the reasons for those actions (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Teachers as human beings are complex and, depending on their uniquely situated experiences and life in classrooms, they form their own principles, which influence and direct practice.

Pedagogical content knowledge, as a component of practical theories, is a form of teacher

understanding that combines content, pedagogy and learner characteristics in a unique way (Gudmundsdottir & Shulman, 1987). It is the amalgam of content, pedagogy and knowledge of students that is uniquely the province of teachers, showing their own special form of professional understanding.

Finding one's own practical theory

In order to uncover your own practical theory I will give examples of what I did in order to find my own. This exercise will give teachers some understanding of what makes them tick as teachers, which can be the basis for improvement. In my own case, my 'critical friend' (who lived right next door) and I examined my journals and annals and we discussed them.

- Journals

The biggest source of uncovering my personal practical theory was from a month's worth of lesson plans and evaluations of them. This particular month's lesson plans were chosen because every single lesson was evaluated, usually succinctly.

- Annals

My personal diaries were useful in outlining my life divided into segments by events, years, places or significant events, using diaries of 2000 – 2003.

- Teacher stories

I had a 'critical friend', a person who is a work colleague and to whom we tell stories of our own teaching. The 'critical friend' has the role of being prepared to provide alternative ways of interpreting situations and evidence and to make us think more deeply about our perceptions and ideas (Francis, 1995), especially about one's personal practical theory.

Results

The analysis of my journals (lesson evaluations), annals (personal diary) and conversations with

my 'critical friend' unveiled a number of aspects of my personal practical theory. I will give a few examples only.

Foremost, we said that my **belief** is that education is not confined to the classroom but extends beyond. My professional relationships outside should be consciously maintained and educative, permeated by dialogue and reflection. The essence is that my professional development is related to the way I connect myself within and outside my classroom. A practitioner's knowledge derives from the sum total of his or her experiences in and out of the professional landscape (Connelly, Clandinin & He, 1997).

We concluded that I **value** thorough preparation so that the objectives of a lesson are met. An extract from lesson evaluations stressed:

"Once more, I think I was well prepared for the lesson. I've put a lot of thinking into what to do" (05/10/95).

Thorough preparation is valued because it provides students' with positive learning situations and thus vigorously meets objectives. Such values are salient because, closely related to beliefs, they amount to powerful forces that enable a teacher to ascribe particular meaning and significance to events (Smyth, 1991).

We also concluded that my **principle** of teaching was pedagogy that is student-oriented, enabling full student participation with relevantly varied activities. I really did not think about it until we delved more into it and it is quite true:

"I prepared the lesson well taking into account that the lesson should be student-oriented..." (11/10/95).

"My use of resources, e.g. the balls, was good. I made sure that balls are used during practice sessions" (10/10/95).

Another element of my practical theory evident from records was my recognition of the importance of pedagogical content knowledge.

“My knowledge of subject matter was good and I did further readings and research into the topic” (17/1095).

With regard to **metaphors** as a component, my critical friend and I found it hard to gauge what mine is, but we used Francis’ (1995: 238) metaphor task with pre-service teachers who were asked to write a paragraph beginning: “Teaching is like”. As we went through this task it illuminated my metaphorical stand in teaching. That teaching is like being a ‘tour guide’ taking tourists to various locations, sites and activities. The onus is on me to guide students into appropriate sites and challenging activities, but it is up to students’ deliberations to process the experiences individually.

A good thing about going through this exercise was that it gave me a sense of ownership of my work. The task made me integrate components of my practical theory that I had thought were just taken-for-granted ways of doing things. But the way I was running my lessons and doing things the way I did were given impetus by underlying values, beliefs, goals and principles that I had formulated over the past years of teaching.

Implications for teachers/teacher educators in the Pacific

The author would like to stress that students coming into our classrooms as student teachers already have a robust theory of teaching and learning, carved by their family upbringing, cultural background, location, religion, school experiences, and the society they belong to. Implicit as it may be, student teachers have their own practical theory, shaped by their values and beliefs. Teacher education is just one of the many elements that intermingle to create who the teacher becomes. Thaman (1988) emphasised systematically examining Pacific

Island culture, language, technology, knowledge, beliefs and values to better determine what needs to be transmitted to the next generation. These elements have interacted to create the teachers the way they are; what they put emphasis on, their justification for behaviour, and their relationship with others. Thus, contextualising learning is crucial, not only to facilitate student learning and relevance, but to minimise teachers occupying “a culturally ambiguous position” (Thaman, 2001).

In order to contextualise learning, teachers’ personal practical theory advocates that teachers continually peel back the layers to uncover what makes them teach the way they do.

Sanders (1988), who studied learning styles in Melanesia, stressed that as teachers become more aware of their own learning style preferences, this can become the basis for discussions about how their own learning style affects how they teach; how their learning style affects their interaction with each other and with students; and the ways in which their learning styles correlate with commonly used teaching strategies. Furthermore, Gay (2002) stressed that these learning styles derive directly from cultural values, characteristics, and socialisation. They do not occur in a vacuum. It is, therefore, pertinent to delve into your own practice and make what appears to be implicit become explicit. This self-critique will in turn assist in the better understanding of yourself and the students in your classroom.

This is noteworthy because there is no such thing as a culturally neutral or culturally free teaching or classroom activity. Teaching activities operate on assumptions that are embedded in cultural values, attitudes and beliefs. As a result, “what students learn and what teachers teach are ultimately filtered and strained through their cultural sieves” (Garcia, 1991; cited in Gay, 2002: 618). A Pacific Islands classroom teacher who ignores this demeans the cultural context in which he or she is teaching. Students are formed by their socio-cultural context. Ninnes (1998) studied the epistemological

and cultural context of informal learning in the Western Province of Solomon Islands, where observation, passive and active imitation, partial and full participation, listening, and asking were prevalent strategies. This has implications for the teachers' practical knowledge. The social, cultural, and contextual peculiarity of the region cannot be overlooked.

Practical theories have implications for teachers operating in the postmodern world and Handal and Louvas (1987) correctly maintain that in the field of education, the practitioners in it should be able to change and adjust their theory and practice to the classroom, school and societal milieu where they teach. Burnett (2005), arguing in a Pacific Islands context, reinforced the notion that as we move from context to context, there can be multi-dimensionality and fluidity of our experiences and practices. This has implications in the way we teach. Practical theories are always enmeshed in the everyday world of teaching and are ever-prepared for reinterpretation when confronted with changing conditions. With a shifting cultural, social and contextual landscape in the Pacific, it is imperative to continually reinterpret our personal practical theory. The recent political and social upheavals in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands in the last couple of decades, for example, require teachers to rethink their personal practical theories.

Teachers' practical theory is personal and so is exposing it, using it for classroom advancement, and reinterpretation. However, this personal interpretation can also be enhanced via professional communities. Strong professional communities should be encouraged to bolster collaboration, mutual support, reciprocal help-giving and continuous learning. Teachers need to discuss and exchange ideas. One of the greatest struggles in the future of teaching is the amount of time teachers have away from classes to undertake planning, reflection and observation with colleagues (Hargreaves, 1997). Craig (1995a) calls them "knowledge communities",

connecting teachers' personal practical theory with their landscape and creating new knowledge through their conversations. This enables teachers to see themselves as reflective practitioners (Craig, 1995b). Regionally, leading academics such as Konai Thaman, Kabini Sanga, and 'Ana Taufe'ulungaki, have been vibrant in bolstering the Pacific Islands knowledge communities. Formalised in 2001, the Re-thinking Pacific Education Initiative for and by Pacific Peoples (RPEIPP), has networked positively among Pacific Islands educators in Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia (Thaman, 2004).

On the individual Pacific Islands teachers' colleges and universities, there needs to be strong professional communities or knowledge communities to continually discuss, evaluate and reinterpret our peculiar situations and professional issues. Through multiple and ongoing interactions in the educational landscape, teachers need to realise that their lives take certain shapes. (The use of landscape as metaphor here is congruent to the theoretical field used in the paper.) Teachers' personal practical theories are shaped by how they are positioned on the landscape and the sorts of mundane activities the landscape allows. Moreover, the everyday personal life of the teacher **off** the professional landscape influences the life **in** the landscape. Conversely, teachers' professional life in the landscape influences their personal life **off** the landscape. It is imperative to note that the landscape has life, so that teachers who live their lives in the landscape shape the landscape over time and the landscape shapes them (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995), providing learning experiences that are life-amplifying and inclusive of Pacific Islands students.

Conclusion

Practical theories of teaching are the conceptual structures and visions that provide teachers with reasons for acting as they choose in order to be effective. They are propositions that undergird and guide teachers' appreciation, decisions and actions.

Such theories are crucial to the success of teaching because educational problems are practical problems. The components of values, beliefs, metaphors, principles, rules and pedagogical content knowledge were stressed, but noteworthy is that these elements intermingle uniquely from practitioner to practitioner and implication of this for Pacific teachers/teacher educators in the postmodern society cannot be understated. Pacific teachers need to be more aware of their practical theory, influenced by their values and beliefs, to not only better understand their own practice, but also the way their students learn. Pacific Island countries are ethnically and culturally unique, requiring diligent self, institutional and regional awareness to push the education of students.

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