RESEARCHING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE: 
THE CASE FOR “DIRTY THEORY”

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Abstract. In this essay, Ian Hardy argues that a research process involving generalizing from professional educational practice can and should inform the work of educators, including academic researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, but that these generalizations need to be derived from, and in dialogue with, the complexity and specificity of actual practice, the myriad ways such practice might be understood, and a conception of practice as historically informed. In making this case, Hardy draws upon social theorist Raewyn Connell’s concept of “dirty theory,” and he uses an example of teacher professional learning in a rural community in southeast Queensland, Australia, to show how Connell’s notion of dirty theory might be applied to research professional educational practice. Hardy maintains that such an approach has the benefit of making historically informed, context-aware, and epistemologically sensitive generalizations available as resources for informing the work of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. He concludes by providing examples of such generalizations as evidence of the potential of Connell’s theory.

Introduction

How educators theorize research on professional educational practice to help inform policy, research, and practice is heavily contested terrain. In an effort to challenge more hegemonic and scientistic conceptions of research on practice, critical philosophical and theoretical traditions in educational research foreground context-responsive approaches to professional educational practice and adopt a cautious approach to more general theorizing. This is entirely understandable, given the increasing emphasis upon reductionist “scientific” approaches, which seek to deliver general “solutions” that can then be applied regardless of context. Under such circumstances, efforts to conceptualize educational research differently, to “re-imagine” educational research, are essential. However, and at the same time, I argue in this essay that educational research involving a form of general theory development should not be overlooked and is a useful and important resource for informing professional educational practice, as well as research on such practice.

In this article, I begin with a brief overview of key efforts by educational theorists and philosophers to conceptualize professional educational practice, and research on practice, as a precursor to arguing that attempts to generalize from practice are important and useful for informing both practice itself and research on practice. These generalizations need to be developed as part of a simultaneous process of ongoing, historically informed engagement with actual data, that is, specific instances of professional practice, taking into account practitioners’ conceptions of

practice. In making this case, I draw upon social theorist Raewyn Connell’s concept of “dirty theory,” theory that (1) seeks to generalize but always in light of the specificity of practice, (2) avoids privileging existing dominant conceptions of practice, (3) is in active dialogue with more marginalized local epistemologies, and (4) takes the history of current practices into account. Such theory is a useful resource to ensure a necessary and robust reflexivity on the part of all educators-as-researchers. I provide an example of a specific instance of teacher professional learning in a small rural community in southeast Queensland, Australia, to exemplify how such “dirty” theorizing might be employed to develop theoretical resources to critique and inform professional educational practice and research on such practice.

From the outset, it should be noted that while my argument draws heavily upon a body of literature by established theorists, philosophers, and researchers, typically located within the academy, and the extended example is analyzed by a researcher who is also similarly located, the position presented should not be construed as precluding practitioners-as-researchers from employing these same concepts to interrogate their own practice. That is, practitioners can and should be encouraged to employ these same tools to research and theorize their practice, so as to inform their practice and their theories of practice. This is similarly the case for educational policymakers. Such a stance is in keeping with Gert Biesta’s call for a more democratic conception of research practice.2

CONCEPTUALIZING AND RESEARCHING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

There is a long history of efforts to make sense of both professional educational practice and research on such practice. A brief overview of the work of some of the most significant approaches reveals how key philosophers, theorists, and researchers of professional educational practice have conceptualized such practice, as well as research on professional educational practice, over time.

In “The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education,” his contribution to The Third Yearbook of the National Society for the Scientific Study of Education, John Dewey’s efforts to conceptualize professional education in the context of teacher education led to the identification of tensions between what he described as the “apprenticeship” model to inquiry and the more theoretically informed “laboratory” model. This was apparent in the contrasting ways in which Dewey referred to how to adequately prepare teachers for the work they would undertake throughout their careers:

On one hand, we may carry on the practical work with the object of giving teachers in training working command of the necessary tools of their profession; control of the technique

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of class instruction and management; skill and proficiency in the work of teaching. With this aim in view, practice work, is as far as it goes, of the nature of apprenticeship. On the other hand, we may propose to use practice work as an instrument in making real and vital theoretical instruction; the knowledge of subject-matter and of principles of education. This is the laboratory point of view.³

Dewey went on to outline an elaborate progression and approach to teacher education involving the consideration of theory in the actual practice of teaching. A deep knowledge of psychological and theoretical concepts, as part of any “practical experience,” was seen as the best means of encouraging a more thoughtful practitioner.

While Dewey was writing at a time when education was only just beginning to be recognized as a distinct and substantive body of knowledge in its own right, over subsequent decades, professional education more generally came to be seen as increasingly important. Kenneth Lynn’s introduction to the 1963 special issue of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences journal, *Daedalus*, devoted to the professions, proclaimed the success of professional practice: “Everywhere in American life, the professions are triumphant.”⁴ The conception of professional education seen as effecting this success involved the identification of a body of knowledge that was then put into practice; subsequent action was “determined by esoteric knowledge systematically formulated and applied to problems of a client.”⁵ Effective practice was seen to “rest upon some branch of knowledge to which the professionals are privy by virtue of long study and by initiation and apprenticeship under masters already members of the profession.”⁶ A linear relation between theory and practice seemed evident, dominated by a conception of practice as dependent upon more general theorizing, as well as research on practice, made available to members of their profession as part of their initial and continuing training.

A decade later, Edgar Schein argued that the application of new knowledge and technology in professional education would address significant societal problems. Already at that point, however, the challenges confronting professional education were clearly evident. Increased specialization, technologization, lack of coordination, bureaucratization, and standardization were all seen as contributing to problematic outcomes. More detailed consideration of the nature and effects of professional educational practice were considered necessary. In speaking about education in professional schools in colleges and universities, Schein argued against standardization and in favor of a process of ongoing inquiry into the educational practices within such schools: “the school should deliberately avoid the search for standardized solutions to curriculum questions, engaging instead in a

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6. Ibid., 656.
perpetual process of self-diagnosis and research on the outcomes of its educational efforts.\textsuperscript{7} A more active approach to research on the part of professionals was construed as increasingly important for informing their practice.

Donald Schö\-n\'s critique of professional educational practice in the face of the seemingly institutionalized failure of professionals to fulfill their responsibilities to their constituencies led to more explicit calls for sustained inquiry into actual practice. Schö\-n\'s passionate advocacy for a more “reflective practitioner” stood in stark contrast to the “technical rationality” and reasoning that he argued characterized the dominant epistemology of practice and guided the decision making of professionals.\textsuperscript{8} The “solution,” according to Schö\-n, was a new epistemology of learning, what he described as “a kind of action research, with norms of its own, which will conflict with the norms of technical rationality.”\textsuperscript{9}

Reflecting this emphasis upon learning-in-action, Michael Eraut\’s efforts to make sense of professional educational practice entailed the appropriation of a body of knowledge to then be used in specific settings and circumstances.\textsuperscript{10} Eraut pointed to a theory-practice binary in his critique of the tendency to front-load initial educational programs for professionals and in debates over how best to incorporate knowledge into practice. In outlining different kinds of knowledge and different modes of knowledge use, Eraut construed professional knowledge as something that professionals made sense of as part of a process of research-in-context.

For later commentators, such as Lee Shulman,\textsuperscript{11} who focused specifically upon teachers’ practices,\textsuperscript{12} professional education involved identifying what teachers should know and be able to do. Such an approach initially emphasized individual

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12. In the context of teaching, teaching practitioners [and some researchers of teaching practice] may refer to “practices” rather than “practice.” Relatedly, in clarifying different meanings of the term “practice” in the context of teaching, Terence McLaughlin argues that it is possible to identify “a rough distinction between conceptions of ‘practice’ which specify a coherent, overall, holistic vision of teaching, on the one hand, and conceptions of ‘practice’ which include, on the other hand, activities which constitute lower level, specific and subordinate elements of teaching detachable from such a vision.” See Terence McLaughlin, “Teaching as a Practice and a Community of Practice: The Limits of Commonality and the Demands of Diversity,” in Education and Practice: Upholding the Integrity of Teaching and Learning, ed. Joseph Dunne and Pádraig Hogan (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2004), 54. In this essay, I use the term “practice” in ways more akin to McLaughlin’s holistic meaning of the term. The term “practices” is generally employed to refer to the plural of this more holistic meaning, although it is also used (particularly in the example in the latter half of the essay) to refer to the specific activities that constitute a broader teaching practice. This more flexible application of
This type of learning involved individual understanding of content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, knowledge of learners, knowledge of educational contexts, and pedagogical content knowledge. In later work, Shulman placed much more emphasis upon how teachers developed knowledge in specific communities and contexts — that is, the interplay between the individual and the social was given considerably more emphasis than in his earlier work.\textsuperscript{13}

More recently, in the introductory chapter to his 2010 edited volume \textit{Elaborating Professionalism: Studies in Practice and Theory}, Clive Kanes uses the example of the 2008 global financial crisis to argue for the need to challenge forms of education that have led to problematic practices, such as that evinced by various banking and financial figures.\textsuperscript{14} Kanes contends that this crisis has highlighted not only the uncertainty surrounding what can be expected of professionals and public trust, but also the extent to which education programs for the professions are adequate to the task. A much more context-responsive, or what Kanes describes as a “more contextually informed and shared sense of professionalism,” is advocated.\textsuperscript{15}

In his contribution to Kanes’s volume, and continuing the focus upon context, Stephen Kemmis argues that educational practice as a form of professional practice can be better understood through research that overtly considers the range of “extra-individual” features that influence any form of practice.\textsuperscript{16} Kemmis categorizes these extra-individual features of practice — described variously as “mediating preconditions” and “practice architectures”\textsuperscript{17} — in terms of cultural discursive arrangements (which shape and structure practice through language and other forms of communication), social arrangements (which shape and structure practice through power relations within social settings), and material-economic arrangements (which shape and structure practice through work and general means of production). Similarly, Theodore Schatzki, a more general philosopher of practice upon whom Kemmis draws in part, argues that practices are not simply the product of individual action and reflection, but are “prefigured” by the way


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 4.


in which the world is always already organized. Professional practice does not reside within the individual, but is instead evident under specific social conditions. Research on such practice needs to be cognizant of these broader conditions.

Kemmis also seeks to emphasize practice as not only a social entity, but one that should be oriented toward social change. He draws upon the neo-Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy to put forward a case for educational practice as \textit{praxis}, that is, as morally informed and committed action informed by traditions within a field — in this case, the field of education. This work grows out of earlier advocacy for educational action research and its variants, construed as an active process of engagement among participants working together in a specific context and seeking to improve the rationality of their work together and in the interests of emancipation from injustice, irrationality, and error.

In his quest to “re-imagine educational research” using a worldview beyond more dominant, modernist epistemological traditions, Richard Smith argues that any research into education must grapple with the complexity and messiness of actual practice, acknowledge the inherently constructed nature of social scientific research, and advance a position that is not fixated on a singular conception of “knowingness.” Bill Green is similarly interested in the way in which understandings of practice may be conceptualized as constructed, arguing any understandings of professional educational practice arising from theoretical or empirical inquiry need to be cognizant of this complexity. However, Green also goes one step further, arguing that these inquiry-based attempts to make sense of practice can serve as tools and resources that may also “enable” actual practices themselves. Consequently, various efforts to represent practice, or “representations,” can be seen as an integral part of practices rather than being construed as “knowledge” that somehow exists apart from, or that is seen as superior to, actual practice.

\section*{The Case for “Dirty Theory”}

While individually and collectively useful, these articulations of professional educational practice may be fruitfully augmented by an approach to researching

\begin{itemize}
\item[19.] Kemmis, “What Is Professional Practice?”
\item[22.] Smith, “Proteus Rising.”
\end{itemize}
social practice that not only remains cognizant of the context-specific nature of practice — a key theme of many of these theorists’ and researchers’ efforts to conceptualize and research practice (albeit from varying epistemological standpoints) — but also explicitly values attempts to generalize from particular instances of practice. Such generalizations should simultaneously acknowledge the epistemological standpoint from which this work is undertaken, engage with issues as perceived locally, and acknowledge the role of history in influencing current practices. Such themes may be individually evident within some current and earlier efforts to research and theorize professional educational practice, but few seek to work across these multiple perspectives simultaneously. It is these efforts to engage with the specificity of practice, but without relinquishing potential insights arising from efforts to generalize from practice, to which I seek to contribute with this essay.

Such an approach helps to avoid glossing over the messiness, specificity, and complexity of actual practice, while also working to develop more general understandings that are simultaneously informed by a history of events associated with any given practice. In an effort to acknowledge the peculiarity of actual practice, to be more reflexive in efforts to conceptualize practice, as well as to develop more general, historically infused knowledge to inform practice and research on practice, I draw upon recent work by sociologist Raewyn Connell. Connell argues in favor of taking into account both locally generated data (“actual” practice) and theoretical constructs (“understandings” of practice) in context, and for doing so in a way that acknowledges past practices and multiple ways of “knowing.”

In *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*, Connell reflects upon the hegemonic role of theories generated in northern metropolitan centers and the way in which such theorizing disenfranchises and dominates attempts to develop alternative epistemologies more sensitive to the lived conditions of those beyond the metropole, or what she calls “Southern theory.” Critiquing the work of theorists such as James Coleman, Anthony Giddens, and Pierre Bourdieu, Connell argues that the “northerness of general theory” is evident in what she describes as “the claim of universality; reading from the centre; gestures of exclusion; and grand erasure” (*ST*, 44).

Claims of universality imply that it is possible to “know” any given practice on the basis of generalizations from previous research. What is most important is that the specificity of research not be acknowledged as such, as this would bring claims of application across all contexts into question. The emphasis upon specificity and the local is anathema to more traditional, dominant approaches to researching social practices:

Social science usually prefers context-free generalisation. Special prestige accrues to theory which is so abstracted that its statements seem universally true — the indifference curves

24. Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2007). This work will be cited in the text as *ST* for all subsequent references.
of consumption economics, the structural models of Levi-Strauss, the practice models of Bourdieu and Giddens ... (ST, 196)

“Reading from the center” implies framing issues from the perspective of already identified conceptual issues or problems to be investigated or solved rather than seriously addressing how issues arising from or relating to more peripheral or marginal locations could be construed differently. Examining how issues are framed in the sites in which they play out is central to better comprehending the nature of those issues. Limiting understandings to already existing or dominant knowledge categories inhibits the potential for alternative perspectives and viewpoints. Relatedly, “gestures of exclusion” involve focusing upon established texts and authorities as interlocutors rather than upon those actually enacting a practice or more marginal authorities. Engaging with alternative sources enables a dialogical encounter that actively seeks to include, respect, and acknowledge the perspectives of individuals and groups overtly or covertly ignored in official and already sanctioned accounts. “Grand erasure” involves theorizing from empirical research without accounting for the peculiar histories that invariably inform and influence current practices. Rather than assuming that current practices begin “from scratch, in a blank space” (ST, 47), there needs to be acknowledgment that current practices have a history over time, in particular places and spaces, and that this history can usefully inform established practices. To ignore this temporal dimension is to inadequately engage with or comprehend current practices. Highly selective accounts that only partially explain prior experiences also fail to adequately address the complexity of lived realities.

As an alternative, Connell mounts an argument in favor of a more historically informed, iterative, epistemologically reflexive, empirically focused approach to researching and theorizing — or what she describes as “dirty theory” — as a vehicle for better understanding and informing actual practices. She does so in the context of challenging a broader global research context in which social theory is typically generated in the geopolitical “North,” often on the basis of data extracted from the “South,” revealing that like so many north–south relations, the process of theory development is typically an exploitative one.25 The way around such exploitation is to ensure a sustained focus upon, and genuine engagement with, the specific sites and places in which empirical research is undertaken as sites in which practices are historically informed and within which knowledge is actively generated.

This does not imply, however, that it is impossible or unworthy to generalize from this data. Generalizations can be developed but universal generalizations should be avoided, as “only the weak ones are universals” (ST, 207). Indeed, Connell cautions against a suspicion of generalization in itself. She argues against

25. For Connell, the “North” refers to the relatively wealthy Anglo-American and Eurocentric countries, typically located in the northern hemisphere, in which theories are often “developed,” while the “South” refers to dominated countries or sites that have often served as places in which data collection occurs for the development of such theories. The result is an imbalance in acknowledgment, understanding, and respect for different epistemological stances and positions.
those iterations of postmodernism that construe the local as the only site of intervention and that deny any form of generalization:

This line of thought is damaging if it leads to a rejection of generalisation — the lifeblood of social science as a cultural formation. Generalisation is involved in communication, in the testing of claims, in scientific imagination and the search for new data, in the application and use of knowledge, in the capacity of knowledge to grow. To reject generalisation in social science would immobilise us. But that does not mean that we are committed to generalize in abstract universals. \(ST, 207\)

For Connell, generalization and theory development are interwoven research processes, enabling what she describes as “the search for patterns, the critique of data” \(ST, 225\). Generalization is an essential part of all aspects of the development of knowledge and understanding that then serve as resources to help inform practice and further research on practice.

To avoid both processes of abstract universalizing and a conception of generalization as innately problematic, Connell advocates \(1\) situating any form of theory development within the specific contexts in which data are collected and developed, \(2\) theorizing that is in genuine dialogue with local rather than remote issues, \(3\) theorizing that accounts for more marginal perspectives, and \(4\) theorizing that is historically informed. Such a position seeks to draw upon and develop theorizing that is relevant to particular situations, and to do so in ways that enable generalization but always in light of the historically informed context in which any form of research and theory development is undertaken. “The power of the social science generalizations,” Connell asserts, “is multiplied if they can be linked to the characteristics of the context within which they apply” \(ST, 207\,\text{emphasis in original}\).

This focus on the particular, the specific, is crucial but the learning that results is not limited to those particular settings. Generalizations can be made on the basis of specific instances of practice.\(^{26}\) Such generalizations require a different conception of knowledge than that which informs more traditional, abstract-universal approaches:

Theorizing grounded in specific landscapes is not trapped in those landscapes. But it certainly needs another criterion of significance from the criterion that abstract-universal theorizing has used, where the more cases that are covered the stronger the argument is supposed to be. \(ST, 207\)

This criterion, Connell argues, lies within the relation between theory and locally generated data. Theory and data need to be recognized as existing in a constant interrogative relation with one another. The generalizations subsequently produced are significant because they are reflected in the characteristics of the specific locations within which they apply. In other words, generalizations are possible but these need to build on the foundation of a constant iterative relation

with specific situations, inquiry into the peculiar histories of practices at these sites, the perspectives of those involved in their derivation, and the standpoint of local rather than remote issues. This involves a research process characterized not by abstract theory generation, but a constant process of theory development in context. The generalizations produced then become resources for consideration in future research undertaken at original and subsequent sites.

Consequently, dirty theory is:

theorizing that is mixed up with specific situations. The goal of dirty theory is not to subsume, but to clarify; not to classify from outside, but to illuminate a situation in its concreteness. And for that purpose — to change the metaphor — all is grist to the mill. ([ST], 207)

The emphasis upon a historically informed conception of practice that is based in local issues and that draws upon the perspectives of those involved, I maintain, is pivotal to any attempts to develop a conception of professional educational practice that seeks to develop more general knowledge to help inform the work of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners at and beyond these specific sites. Following Connell’s lead, then, the ideas I present in this essay are an attempt to be true to the call to consider dirty theory as a means of engaging more fully with the social world and with particular understandings of this world — in this case, as they pertain to professional educational practice.

THE “FUTURE SCHOOLS CLUSTER” AS A SITE OF PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

To exemplify how the notion of dirty theory might be employed to both better understand and inform research on professional educational practice, I use the remainder of this essay to develop an analysis of a particular instance of such practice in action.

CONTEXTUALIZING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

The particular case involves a cross-school group of teachers from four primary schools, one secondary school, and an environmental education center working together to understand and implement curriculum reform in their respective schools in Queensland, Australia, during the early 2000s — a period of substantial education reform in that state. Research on the teaching, curriculum-development, and assessment practices of teachers in Queensland at this time revealed limited pedagogical quality in public schools in the state, with particularly adverse educational outcomes among students in the middle years of schooling (upper elementary through lower secondary).[^27]

Under these circumstances, the principals from the six school sites serving a local regional community decided it would be beneficial to encourage collaborative curriculum reform, with a particular focus upon educational reform in the middle years. Because the primary schools served as feeder schools to the secondary school, and because prior personal and professional relationships existed among some of the

teachers, the principals encouraged a core group of teachers from the respective schools to meet together over an eighteen-month period to explore how best to facilitate curriculum reform within their respective sites. The reform involved the introduction of a new, project-based curriculum, called the “New Basics,” which was being used on a trial basis in several schools across the state, including the secondary school. The group of teachers who met together came to be known as the “Curriculum Board,” and the six schools in the local region from which they were drawn were collectively known as the “Future Schools Cluster.”

While the full research project pertaining to this case drew upon a range of meetings and interviews with members of the Curriculum Board, the research that I present here draws on the transcript of a single meeting of members of the group, and my aim in including it is to suggest how Connell’s concept of dirty theory might help inform research on professional educational practice.28 The meeting involved select members of the Curriculum Board investigating how the New Basics was being employed in the secondary school with a view to informing curriculum renewal in the primary schools, particularly the primary school in which the meeting was being held. Since the meeting involved the group seeking to understand the nature of the new curriculum prior to facilitating curriculum reform within their respective schools, I have construed it as an instance of professional educational practice for the teachers involved.

Enacting Professional Educational Practice

The meeting was held at a small rural primary school (with an enrollment of approximately 200 students) and attended by three representatives from this school, one representative from another primary school, and the chair of the Curriculum Board (a teacher at the secondary school). During the meeting, the chair, Lisa,29 outlined the nature of four projects — described as “rich tasks” in the New Basics framework — that had been designed by teachers at the secondary school. The chair also explained how these tasks related to two official rich tasks mandated by the state public educational authority, Education Queensland. The meeting reveals deliberations between the chair and other teachers about how teachers from the respective schools might engage with the New Basics. While the New Basics was compulsory for the secondary school, teachers in all schools were expected to engage in curriculum renewal as part of the broader reform effort

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29. Here, pseudonyms are used for the participants in the Curriculum Board meeting.
occurring across the state. This included improving the curriculum connections between primary and secondary schools.

At the outset of the meeting, a teacher from one of the primary schools asked for an explanation about what was occurring at the secondary school:

Michael: [Could you provide] an overview, a bit of detail about what each of those four things does [pointing to the school-designed rich tasks to be introduced in the secondary school], and that will give us an idea about what we’ve got to do.

Lisa: Sure, okay. So “Destination Down Under” — I’m just seeing if I have — for some of them, I have a written plan that you can take a copy of.

At this point, the learning process entailed a question-answer sequence in which a primary teacher questioned a secondary colleague about the nature of several rich task units of work to be implemented as part of the New Basics curriculum. This teacher's comments indicate that he wanted to know what he had to do and the way to elicit this information was to ask the chair of the Curriculum Board for an account of the nature of the rich tasks about to be implemented in the secondary school. The chair’s response indicates a willingness to acquiesce to this request.

At the same time, there is also evidence of a more iterative process of knowledge development about the curriculum reform process. This is evident in teachers’ willingness to share information and learn from one another about how the existing curriculum in Year 7 at one of the primary schools related to one of the mandatory tasks to be undertaken with Year 8 students at the high school:

Lisa: So, next year in Year 8, our Year 8s are going to do four school-designed rich tasks and two of the actual rich tasks. They’re going to do “International Trade” and “Built Environments.”

Michael: So they’re not familiar to them?

Lisa: Because they’re the ‘real’ rich tasks. Like, they’re the suite that they must do. They’re the mandatory tasks, whereas these four are the ones we’ve designed as a school. So they’ll assist the students to lead into the other tasks.

Beth: Okay, so we need to get a starting point for how the 7s might dovetail into the 8 program.

Lisa: Yeah, so I’ll explain some of that a little bit more…

Michael: Well, [International Trade is] a fairly big unit in Year 7. I was just going to say: this is the new [Studies of Society and Environment] syllabus and the whole thing is around Australian industry and exports and global business, so we’ve just done a big unit on this.30

Beth: Good stuff.

Michael: And we’re doing a major assignment now on international trade, so they’re going to come with a little bit of background already.

Beth: Yeah.

30. The Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) is the principal social studies curriculum offered to primary and junior secondary school students in Queensland.
At the same time as seeking to “dovetail” with the secondary curriculum, the way in which the primary members of the Curriculum Board sought to understand the new curriculum, and how it related to existing syllabus objectives, also reveals a willingness to inquire into and reflect upon their work collectively as a vehicle for curriculum renewal.

The nature of the discussion also demonstrates a significant level of deliberation on the part of teachers as a means of making sense of the new curriculum and apparent inconsistencies within it, including various “repertoires” — specific knowledge and skill objectives promoted in the curriculum:

Lisa: We were having a discussion the other day when we were putting together that “repertoires” list. And we were actually a little disappointed. And the more you look at these repertoires, the less happy we are with them, because some of them are so discrete. I mean the one that said “Understanding the Earth’s rotation on its axis and the revolution around the sun” —

Beth: Bit subject specific isn’t it?

Lisa: Yeah! Well, some of the others — the more we came across them, there was —

Beth: “Evaluation and Problem Solving” [reading from one of the mandatory rich tasks].

Lisa: Yeah, that’s okay, you know. But then, we were looking, “Focused Research and Analytical Skills” as opposed to “Specialised Researching” [reading from rich task sheet] — you tell me what the difference is! One’s in Rich Task 1, and one’s in Rich Task 4, and apart from that, we can’t work out why there would be “Focused Research” as opposed to “Specialised Researching.”

Beth: I don’t know? Is it [a matter of] degree?

Lisa: Yeah — you know there are some [repertoires] that are quite definite: “Apply mathematical techniques and procedures related to measurement, estimation of scale, drawing and costing.” Well, you know, that fits maths, doesn’t it?

Beth: Uh huh [in agreement].

Lisa: And there’s some that you go, well, that’s science, whereas some others are skills that the kids have to do all the time. We thought “Developing and Implementing Action Plans” — isn’t that what you do all the time? …

Cecily: Yeah, that’s right.

Beth: So maybe we need to look at the heavy duty skills, which would be already embedded in our [syllabus] outcomes?

Lisa: That’s right.

Beth: … and expressed slightly differently …

Lisa: Ummm [in agreement].

Beth: … from our sort of stuff.

This extended deliberation reveals efforts by these teachers to inquire into the educational reform agenda in light of existing practices, including in relation to existing discipline areas and the overall veracity of the reform agenda in terms of student learning.

At the same time, there is also evidence in the discussion of a desire to secure an endpoint rapidly and without too much fuss:
Lisa: I don’t know where that leaves us for the moment, but my suggestion definitely for your Year 7s next term: “Built Environment” or “International Trade” would be where I’d start my looking or thinking, in terms of repertoires. And whether you want to design something that is quite similar to, that feeds into that, and that the kids could see this immediate connection [with the rich task to be implemented in the secondary school], or whether you just want to look at them [in less detail].

The desire to seek an endpoint exerts influence simultaneously with the contrary desire to foster understanding and engage more deeply with the concepts and ideas associated with the new curriculum.

There were also instances when critique of the curriculum reform appeared to be influenced by teachers’ prior experiences of such work. This is evident in the impassioned way the primary teachers insisted that any curriculum documentation arising from their work within the Curriculum Board needed to be personalized in relation to their schools’ needs:

Michael: Beth’s just saying it’s too “all over the place.” There needs to be some sort of structure to get from there to here, in a more specific way, rather than arrows going all over the place [pointing to unit-of-work planning documents].

Lisa: Well, like I said, that’s why you could use — you could have a couple of different formats . . .

Beth: Well, I mean, we can work with something like that, but you need to personalize it.

The educative work being undertaken seemed to involve drawing upon co-constructed knowledge about the peculiarities of curriculum reform within the cluster, as well as prior experiences, even as there were also efforts to reconcile various tensions and to come up with a new curriculum relatively quickly.

**Dirty Theory in Action**

The type of careful inquiry into the nature of the professional learning practices evident during the meeting of members of the Curriculum Board reveals a historically contingent set of practices deeply informed by participants’ work with one another and understandings of this work in relation to the challenges of promoting educational reform in a specific locality. In seeking to make sense of such professional practice, issues of universality, reading from the center, gestures of exclusion, and grand erasure are all called into question.

While more universal tendencies may encourage some theorists, philosophers, and researchers of practice to construe concepts as universally applicable across settings, the interactions of practitioners within the Future Schools Cluster reveal specific practices that are not so readily contained. Rather than conforming to existing conceptions of how practice is “knowable,” teachers’ practices seemed to be simultaneously characterized by a spectrum of specific, complex, and conflict- ing tendencies in response to their circumstances. This is evident, for example, in the way the same primary teacher who sought immediate answers to the nature of the curriculum the primary teachers should enact was also prepared to engage in a much more dialogical process of actively listening, participating, and proffering suggestions about how to improve school curriculum offerings. More sustained
consideration of practice occurred in conjunction with efforts to secure more immediate answers to complex questions. Generalizations about this complexity can be made, including about the sporadic, interactive nature of teachers’ associations, while remaining cognizant of the richness and variety that characterize actual practice in context. However, such generalizations are not universal.

The complexity of the lived realities of teachers’ learning about the curriculum renewal process is also not something that can be understood in light of some aspect or weakness associated with previous theorizing about professional educational practice — a “reading from the center” approach. In the case presented, teachers engaged in active dialogue to make sense of the formal rich tasks implemented in the secondary school and to consider how the primary curriculum might be organized to assist students in engaging with these tasks; in addition, this dialogue took place in the context of significant educational reform within the state. Such practices are far removed from purely conceptual dilemmas about how these professional practitioners enact educational reform and from particular conceptions of professional practice. For the teachers involved, learning seemed to be a more situated, often co-productive process, which was exemplified by how the chair of the Curriculum Board shared interpretations of the New Basics from the secondary school perspective and by how primary teachers shared the ways in which existing work in the primary school already resonated with some of the mandatory New Basics rich tasks. The messy, co-productive, iterative nature of teachers’ interactions also seemed remote from the more neatly bounded or broad accounts of the nature of research on professional educational practice, including within more “scientific” conceptual literature. 31

By focusing upon the specific and detailed efforts of teachers to learn about a particular educational reform initiative, the research presented is also an attempt to treat seriously, to actively incorporate, the voice of agents and actors who occupy more peripheral or marginal locations in relation to the established traditions of knowledge development. Teachers’ extended deliberations and the interlocutory agreement making they employed in an effort to learn about the reform agenda should be recognized as important elements of the learning process, even if these are not always acknowledged in some established traditions of research on professional educational practice. Endeavoring to flag the perspectives of practitioners challenges broader “gestures of exclusion” that seek meaning making in relation to already established authorities. At a more macro level, the very act of drawing upon Connell’s concept of dirty theory to make sense of professional educational practice is itself an example of engaging with a more marginal authority to research such practice. The concept of dirty theory has not been applied previously to research on the field of professional educational practice.

These teachers’ learning practices also gesture toward the influence of previous practices — of a history of engagement with and inquiry into educational reform. The insistence of the primary teachers on personalizing the rich tasks to be employed reveals a perspective on educational reform influenced by past inquiry experiences; the assertion that “you need to personalize [the reform agenda]” implies a history of experience in this regard. The effort to link the New Basics repertoires to existing subject disciplines is another example of situating the reform agenda within a broader history of inquiry into educational practices. Such experiences should inform, rather than be “written out” or erased, efforts to comprehend professional practice and research on such practice. That the primary teachers actively sought to understand how the New Basics was being conceived within the secondary school, and the chair of the Curriculum Board kept framing the new curriculum in relation to existing discipline areas, gestures toward rich prior experiences that could be usefully explored to inform current practices as well as research on such practices. These teachers sought to make sense of a reform agenda in relation to their specific inquiries into particular school settings — their specific histories. To tease out and give voice to such experiences is one means of avoiding the grand erasure of the lived experiences of practitioners and their replacement by more impoverished, ahistorical research accounts.

**Conclusion: For Dirty Theory**

This extended example provides insights into how the concept of dirty theory can inform research on, and understandings of, professional educational practice. By focusing upon the details of a specific instance of teachers’ inquiries into professional learning, I challenge claims of the universality of knowledge production. By endeavoring to avoid analyzing specific experiences in light of existing dominant approaches to professional educational practice alone — “reading from the center” — I seek to critique the privileging of established authorities. By foregrounding the stance of groups typically marginalized in the research process and a theoretical approach that validates these perspectives, the analysis I provide in this essay stands as an alternative to the “gestures of exclusion” that often disenfranchise those involved. By arguing for educational practices as historically situated, the ideas I present here also challenge the “grand erasure” promulgated by neater, more dominant, established theories of practice and research on practice.

At the same time, and as part of this process, generalization is deemed not only possible but important in helping to inform research on practice as well as understandings of practice itself. Any generalizations need to be firmly grounded within, and developed from, specific practices. Close scrutiny of specific practices within the data presented provides insight into the nature of professional educational practice, making it possible, in Connell’s words, “to illuminate a situation in its concreteness” ([ST, 207]). Such illuminations then become resources that can be brought to bear dialogically in future research on practice. In relation to the specific case presented in this essay, more general theorizing from the given data includes evidence of professional educational practice as a sporadic, interactive undertaking, an iterative activity involving co-production of
knowledge development; an interlocutory process of agreement making; and a process possessing a history that influences approaches to educational reform. While different concepts to help inform learning may be available within existing articulations of research on professional educational practice, such articulations may reify or eschew generalization altogether. Empirically grounded generalizations can and should be developed and employed as part of a process of researching specific practices within and across settings, but in the knowledge that the efficacy of such generalizations needs to remain open to critique in light of local issues, the standpoint of those involved, and the histories that inform such practices. Complexity and contradiction are not easily contained within broad general theories of practice but need to be taken into account, nonetheless. The "messiness" of actual practice calls into question efforts that seem to foreclose too neatly on this complexity.

This is not to imply that existing conceptions of professional educational practice are not useful in continued efforts to research such practice. Theorists’, philosophers’, and researchers’ previous efforts to develop articulations of practice do contribute to researching and understanding practice. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that my analysis here is itself framed by concerns about professional educational practice as an identifiable concept or field within existing literature on educational theory and philosophy. However, in keeping with the fluid nature of theorizing advocated by Connell, a sustained focus on generalizing from multi-faceted specific, local practices as historically informed and in dialogue with local concerns seems instructive. By drawing upon a theoretical perspective supportive of research involving a recursive process of both use and critique of generalizations in light of specific practices, it is also surely possible to enable a more open dialogue among academics, policymakers, and practitioners about the nature of the work in which each is engaging. Such a stance can only be productive for enabling a cross-fertilization of ideas across institutional boundaries both to better understand and inform professional educational practice and to challenge more regressive conceptions of research on practice. This entails a process in which theory and research are understood as co-constitutive; academic researchers, theorists, and philosophers remain open to the contingency of practice; and policymakers and practitioners come to see their own work as research-intensive — not involving “applying” research to policy and practice but “us[ing] research findings to make one’s problem-solving more intelligent.” A concern to generalize from the local as historically informed, in dialogue with those involved, and in a way that values the local without seeking to universalize from the local or particular ultimately adds up to a call for a situated, messy theoretical compact — for dirty theory.


THANK YOU to Richard Niesche, Stephen Hymans, and Liz Mackinlay for their comments on a later draft of this essay. Thank you also to Stephen Kemmis and Bill Green for their considered thoughts on an earlier version.