Reflective piece

## Theory as a verb: working with dilemmas in educational development

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We meet on and off over the years. It's usually a dark café in Cape Town's historically white suburbia. It's usually on a Friday after work, prompted by coded messages, such as "feel like a pink?" that signal the need for a particular kind of meeting. We talk a lot – always about our work as educational developers, sometimes straying beyond into ill parents, shaky partnerships, the broader political situation and how it positions us both. Our work-related topics almost always revolve around a dilemma or conflict we are grappling with. "I didn't know whether to cancel my class because of the protests. I was dumbstruck when my workshop participants glorified corporal punishment. I'm sick of teaching these 'pop-up', 'soundbite' workshops on writing but I don't have a choice." Something important is wanting to come through from our late Friday afternoon 'meetings'; our café conversations. Amongst the personal and political throat-clearing, we talk, we make notes, we plan. It feels as if there is real substance in our conversations, and we begin to wonder what would happen if this breaks through the crust of our working lives. Our conversations raise questions for us about how we make sense of, and engage with, the theory and practice of educational development – the field in which we work. The dilemmas we discuss so richly in our café meetings seem to have little place in our departments where, particularly when it comes to research, we are forced to take positions and stick to them. There is little room for hesitations and ambiguity. Perhaps because of our own disciplinary 'outsider' status on the margins of the 'real work' in the disciplines, educational developers feel a need to 'school build' and commit to theoretical orientations and enlist others to share these, rather than holding the complexity, uncertainty and contradictions.

We are very aware that the spatial inequality of apartheid has shaped us, but the idea of the university, and our common purpose as educational developers albeit in profoundly different institutions, has given us proximity and opportunities to be situated sense-makers in a time of profound questioning and contestation in the post-apartheid university. Lynn works at a vocational university with a strong teaching orientation and low research uptake. Her professional work has a more traditional educational development profile, as she works directly with lecturers around teaching, learning and curriculum interventions. Lucia works at one of the sectors' more prestigious research-intensive

universities, where she engages mainly with students, pursuing her current interest in alternative postgraduate writing pedagogies. Despite these key contextual factors that signal our differences, we also share some similarities that are intertwined with our professional and intellectual histories. The university has also given us a common theoretical orientation through the frame of literacy as social practices, understood through the ethnographic method and its insistence on complexity and human sense-making in context.

## Making sense of our café conversations

### Lynn

In recent years the café conversations with Lucia have come to express the most tangible manifestation of being able to 'work' on the edges of educational development, especially in its spatial and temporal construction and accommodation of my embodied self. As this space has evolved organically over time, I've seen my relationship with Lucia shift from that of tentative student and mentee to one of colleague and friend, although increasingly I easily slip between these two positionalities during any given engagement. Within this 'edge-space' our café conversations hold and amplify the multiple, often intersectional identities that intimately give shape to my roles and identities as educational development practitioner (albeit one fairly new to the field) in ways that other more formal, professional environments do not seem to accommodate. While our theoretical and methodological homes overlap, we also share an unwillingness to paper over the continued inequalities that shape the South African higher education sector. In this space we come to recognise and embrace an understanding that in both our personal and professional spheres our identities are both implicated in and resistant to these inequities. Who we are is a central part of the dilemmas we attempt to address; instead of ignoring these identities, we often subject them to interrogation, without allowing guilt or shame to overshadow the process. Lucia and I have found ways, even if somewhat imperfect at times, to ensure we do not remove ourselves and our histories from the theoretical positions we take, the opinions we offer, the empathy we express, or the standpoints we defend.

### Lucia

Sometimes I begin a workshop on research writing by saying, 'Don't leave yourselves at the door. Bring your bodies, histories, hopes and ambitions, in to this space with you'. My confidence to say this is strengthened by conversations with Lynn, where that is exactly what we do. This invitation to students, and what we do in our conversations, is deeply theoretical, raising the issue of the relationship between the situated, thinking, feeling subject and knowledge-making. In 1986, I started teaching academic literacy at an elite, historically white institution that differentiates itself from other institutions in our small HE sector. It was during a State of Emergency imposed by the apartheid state. I (naively) saw my work as a form of activism to 'open the doors of learning and culture'. Repression and protest made it clear that the very idea of the university in such an abnormal society is fraught. Now I am at the end of my working life in a different state – a state of emergence – prompted by the student-led protests since 2015. Our café conversations have strengthened me to reckon with my privilege. I met Lynn as her lecturer where I was drawn to her politics and her way of talking truth to power. Later I became her supervisor, and then her friend. Perhaps neither of us thought hard enough about the bigger history. Beyond the decades of apartheid are the centuries of colonialism that force us to question the very compass on which our knowledge is built. The questioning continues and we often disagree. But it is safe, and healing, to explore.

In this piece we boldly reconfigure these café dialogues as 'research conversations' and illuminate the possibilities they represent for opening up a window for reflection on how we do educational development. Later we will think of these research conversations as literacy events and ask how these events may impact on our literacy practices as researchers in educational development. We reflect on what these conversations say about the way we theorise in the written article. Is it inevitable that in these conversations, our accents, life experiences – and the sense of trust we have built up, and what that allows us to say, work with and resolve – gets flattened by the daunting surface of the written word and dominant academic literacy practices that define the academy? We hope to shine a light on our practices as educational developers working in the current complexity of South African higher education. As a relatively new, hybrid field of practice with a complex history mired in the politics of development, educational development can be re-energised and transformed by honouring the dilemmas of practice that we live daily, rather than sweeping them under the carpet.

## Foregrounding dilemmas of practice in educational development work

One moment stands out where we foregrounded theory at the cost of dilemmas of practice. At a local colloquium, we experienced how theory was enacted as a vehicle for differentiation, othering and separation. The intentions for the event were good – to bring specialists together in conversation to see what we had to offer collectively to curriculum design at a critical juncture in South African higher education. The specialists represented two schools of thought; curriculum studies presented as 'knowledge-rich' and academic literacies said to be 'knowledge-blind'. While the presentations on day one helped to provide a platform to engage and interrogate these two positions, the workshop session on day two, initially billed as a space for dialogue, quickly morphed into a duel with participants required to stake their claim to physical and theoretical territories within the room. This territorial marking was further coated with the politics of race which then amplified positions of theoretical superiority. Thus instead of providing a space for authentic consideration of how theory might offer insight or allow participants to work through dilemmas and concerns, what we experienced was the reification of theoretical positions, and the creation and enforcement of hierarchies of importance and dominance using theoretical languages of description.

It's important to locate how we work with dilemmas in a much bigger historical context – the postcolonial university. The term postcolonial refers in a narrow sense to historical time and place and, more importantly, to a theoretical stance on the world, to an eye that looks in multiple directions at the same time. We look backwards towards the colonial past and how its education system has shaped us. As academics, we have succeeded in it and imbibed much of the value system of the colonial project, including its project of knowledge production, which proceeds from a familiar given point. "For those who did the classifying and ordering of everything around the world, the reference point was the West" (Mamdani 2017), and we know that this has created many blind spots that prevent us from seeing and valuing what is silenced. (Ironically, at the local colloquium, we set up theoretical camps pegged around the big names (mainly from the anglophone 'western' academy). For postcolonial writers such as Achille Mbembe, the challenge is to avoid "the dogmas of developmentalism" (Mbembe & Hofmeyer 2008:249): on the one hand, imperial discourse, which sees the Other as incapable of agency, and on the other, resistance and refusal of much of what has shaped us. This notion of development is a key term in our field of practice, which has been critiqued for the way it constructs students as in need of rescue. This deficit view has been the focus of researchers

internationally and locally in several traditions of higher education research (Boughey & McKenna 2015; Clegg 2011; Haggis 2003; Lea & Street 2006; Lillis & Turner 2001; Smit 2012).

Our lived experiences of the postcolonial university have made us confront profound dilemmas which we discuss in our café conversations. For example, as a student, how do you march for the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall causes, and then accept an offer of a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford University? As an academic literacy teacher, how do you teach academic writing while reinforcing anglonormativity through the vehicle of the coloniser's language? To begin to do justice to these dilemmas we need not one lens, but a compound eye that has peripheral vision, that can see backward, forwards and sideways. It is a both-and, not an either-or perspective. As we note above we have experienced several critical moments within our local and shared educational development professional space that have forced us to revisit and problematise what theory does in our community of practice.

### Dilemmas of theory: disrupting dominant practices in educational development work

Generally educational development is understood to involve a range of research and professional practices directed at and committed to improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (Clegg 2009; Boughey 2007b). As a significant role player in the higher education sector, educational development has over the past few decades sought to professionalise and differentiate itself from other forms of academic practice (Clegg 2009; Shay 2012). A defining attribute of the field and its practitioners is its 'self-researching' and reflexive nature, which has resulted in research that has attended primarily to issues of identity, values and internal organisation (Clegg 2009). These efforts have largely been committed to securing what Clegg refers to as "intellectual and moral legitimacy" within the broader higher education domain. This is seen as beneficial as a stronger, more coherent, theory and theoretical identity would assist in this legitimation project. Strengthening the theoretical spine of our work was also regarded as an essential means to free the work and its practitioners from the somewhat disparaging characterisation of "academic housework" (Grant & Knowles cited in Boughey 2007a:20). Boughey (2007a:20) also reminds us that, historically, much of our work focused on the "unrecorded and unrecognised pastoral care within universities". Thus some compelling arguments have been raised, particularly by Shay (2012), in a bid to build and solidify the professional legitimacy of the educational developer but also to employ theory to more effectively and systematically address the many problems and challenges facing the sector. Shay (2012:312) notes that

> The key premise is that the stronger our knowledge foundations – the conceptual and theoretical basis underpinning our practice – the more likely we are to understand and resolve the seemingly intractable problems facing us in higher education. To put it more bluntly, without the strengthening of our knowledge base we will not emerge as a professional field able to engage rigorously and systematically with these problems.

We take Shay's point seriously, but would like to raise questions about how we do this. Making knowledge is not a matter of opting for a position and sticking to it. We argue that the way in which we do educational development and especially how we enact theory as part of this work, can learn from the idea of theory-making as a process, which we believe we have embraced in our research conversations.

One of the invisible aspects of theory building is the semiotic activity that underlies it. We encounter theory through reading – mainly through journal articles, which are typically expressed through text that has to be in the 'right place'. Our notions of genre are still largely derived from the colonial version, ratified by the Royal Society, now fused to a methodology and style – the empirical research article with its conventional IMRaD (introduction, methods, results and discussion) shape. In the arts and social sciences, the default is to identify a problem, ask a question, choose a theory and commit to it, and then straighten the line so your findings can be read through the classificatory lens of this theory. There is little room for anything outside of this. The grammar of the research article is subject-verb-object: the subject is the theory, the verb is the methodology, and the object is some chosen aspect of higher education – often the student. No wonder we recycle deficit notions of the student; with students always in the object position, they are pinned down and held back, as we attempt to honour the integrity of the theory, rather than the lived lives – contradictions, dilemmas, false starts and all – of the people in these spaces. Is there another way to 'do' theory, to take it out of its reified, school-building boxes, to make it more processual, relational and convivial?

We have touched on a critical moment at a local colloquium at which we became aware that the way we were thinking about and using theory was creating obstacles to moving forward. It was blocking our ability to bring a range of different kinds of experience and engagement together. As a result, we take a different view, that rather than fixing, strengthening or codifying theory so that it sits as a solid, reified 'thing' – theory as a noun – we think of it as a verb; a process, responsive, in flux and in the life of individuals as they make sense over time. The colonial project of classifying theories and genres is not a productive way to proceed; it is not equal to the complexity of these times.

## Theory as a verb: drawing on the literacies traditions

Our thinking is guided by the contribution of Literacies scholar Brian Street who encouraged literacies and educational scholars and practitioners to focus on what culture *does* rather than what it *is* (Street 1999; Heath & Street 2008). Transposing Street's (1993) notion of "culture as a verb" to theory in educational development, we can ask questions such as 'How do we take hold of theory to make sense of the dilemmas we encounter as academic developers?' Thus, instead of foregrounding the theory, we want to foreground the dilemma and be critical and aware of the ways in which we define and constitute the dilemma. In our research conversations we were able to grapple with our concerns in a processual space where we were able to explore the dilemma through multiple theoretical tools, with theory emerging as we journeyed. Returning to the tension and fallout of the colloquium that we described earlier: perhaps if we had foregrounded the dilemma, rather than the theory, we would have arrived at a different point.

A further insight from the literacies tradition is the relationship between literacy event and literacy practices (Barton 1994; Barton & Hamilton 1998). In some ways our café conversations that we described at the beginning are literacy events – at least, in our lives. Our events are in an uneasy, unsettling relationship to the dominant literacy practices in educational development. Even as the knowledge economy is getting us to churn out these articles, there are exciting shifts in research literacy practices. We cannot continue to put new wine in old skins: the skins will crack and stretch. The forms must change. There are exciting examples all around us, for example, Brenda Leibowitz's

(2000; 2017) use of autobiographical and narrative forms to draw attention to her contested engagement with both theory and practice and its implication for her role as educational developer.

## Concluding thoughts

We see this reflective piece as an expression of the richer and wider textual practices enveloping our research conversations. Our piece unapologetically bears witness to and celebrates its sociohistorical roots and showcases the multiple and invariably contested spaces of knowledge and meaning-making and the range of practice settings in higher education (Lea cited in Lillis, Harrington, Lea & Mitchell 2015). We thus raise questions about the possibilities that new kinds of events or activities can have on our work and how these might help to redefine our practices. How can the shape and texture of our activities as educational developers create openings for the ongoing review of the very practices that define us and, significantly, in what new ways can or should theory and theoretical frameworks be appropriated (co-opted) and enacted in our work? Casting a literacies gaze on our research conversations has enabled us to problematise the dominant ways in which theory has been appropriated in our sector. Central to our research conversations are the dilemmas that define and propel the educational development work we do and the practices that give our work meaning. However, the dominant practices in our sector, in particular how we are required to enact our theoretical position in writing, do not allow us to engage with these dilemmas. We therefore argue for a different way. Too often we talk of theory as a commodity – we talk of 'using' theory, or 'producing' or 'importing', 'owning'. One way to develop this complex lens without necessarily foregoing the need to 'strengthen our knowledge base' is to decolonise theory, and to do so through thinking about the literacy practices in which theory is materialised in academic writing. It's not enough to shift our citation practices by referring to scholars from the global South. We have to do more, to ask *what theory does*.

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