

### CRITICAL ISSUES

- *What do we want a theory of professional learning to do for us?*
- *What are some of the key differences between professional learning theories?*

## Introduction

Theories of professional learning are like lenses that we hope will help us be more effective in supporting the professional learning of our students. We hope that a professional learning theory will give us a more detailed or insightful view of how learning takes place. Part of this more insightful view is identifying what it is that needs to be learned when developing professional abilities. This is because what we need to learn will determine the most effective ways of learning.

In this book, my intention is to set out a critical overview of some different theories of professional learning that have had some influence on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in recent years. This critical overview is intended as an introduction to the key points of the theories and to some of the main shortcomings, objections to, and developments of each. Each chapter includes suggestions for further reading so that the ideas and arguments can be explored in more detail.

## Description or a prescription?

It is worth noting at this stage that providing an insightful account of how professional learning takes place does not lead automatically to providing a prescription for designing professional learning experiences and contexts. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is communities of practice (Chapter 5). In early formulations of communities of practice it seems clear that we are being offered a theory of how professional learning takes place but not a recipe for creating professional learning opportunities or environments. This is because communities of practice were seen as a naturally developing phenomenon rather than one that could be deliberately manufactured.

This can be seen as the first key difference in professional learning theories: are they descriptions, prescriptions, or descriptions that give rise to prescriptions? We might assume

that prescriptions are more useful than descriptions, given what we want a theory for, but both have their limitations. Prescriptions, by their very nature, need to simplify what they represent. If they do not they might not be useful. However, this simplification can under-represent what might be important aspects or variables in real life situations. Descriptions may be better able to represent these, and we can reflect ourselves on how we use these descriptions to inform what we do.

## Learning theories: a (very) brief history

For learning theories in general, rather than professional learning theories in particular, several related broad historical trajectories can be seen:

- » from a focus on learners as individuals to learning as an irreducibly social process;
- » a broadening of focus from considering conscious knowledge and reasoning to including other aspects of learning such as tacit knowledge and identity;
- » from a concern with generalising about learning processes in all learners to considering specific learners in specific times and places;
- » from a focus on schooling and formal education to other types of everyday contexts.

The professional learning theories in this book are mostly characterised by features from the latter part of these trajectories. They are concerned with the social learning of a variety of forms of knowledge and practice among specific groups in specific contexts that might not be formal education. The one possible exception is the reflective practice models considered in Chapter 2. In application, these models can lead to an emphasis on learning as an individual process without sufficient consideration of how social context and other shared forms of knowledge might influence, or be needed, in that learning. In addition, although Schön is interested in knowing-in-action, which can be a form of tacit knowledge, theories such as Kolb's experiential learning can be used to put too much emphasis on learning as explicit rational consideration of propositional knowledge and ignore tacit aspects of learning a professional practice.

It is worth noting that the move towards a concern with the social contexts of learning rather than individualistic, universal 'information processing' models can have contradictory expressions. For example, humanist theories of learning (such as Malcolm Knowles' work on andragogy) can emphasise the importance of individual learners' personal identities and biographies in what is learned, why and how. However, a sociocultural theory like Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Chapter 6) has been accused of ignoring personal differences and constructing all learners, in a specific cultural and historical context, as undifferentiated. Although humanist theories are not explicitly considered in this book, Hodkinson and Hodkinson's suggested revisions of communities of practice, reported in Chapter 5, are informed by similar concerns about individual learner biographies and their effects on what is learned rather than treating all learners as the same.

## Individual or social context?

This difference between an emphasis on individual learners and an emphasis on social context is another key difference in the professional learning theories in this book. This has at least three related elements. To what extent do theories consider:

- » how experiences and knowledge need to be mentally worked on by individual learners in order for learning to happen?
- » the effects of social interactions or social organisation on learning?
- » how learners' personal differences affect what is learned, why and how?

Some theories focus on the mental work that individual learners are (or should be) doing in order to learn. Others focus on how the social context in which learning takes place influences learning. Eraut (Chapter 4) use a wave/particle analogy to try to avoid this dichotomy and to argue that learning is simultaneously individual and social. Eraut focuses both on the mental work individual learners need to develop professional competence and on how social conditions influence learning. However, other theories tend to foreground one over the other. CHAT and communities of practice emphasise social and community organisation and practices over either how individual learners 'process' their experiences or how individual learners' personal differences affect learning. Kolb and Schön seem to emphasise learning as individual 'information processing' without attention to the effects of specific contexts or to learner's personal differences (with the exception of Kolb's wider concern with different learning styles resulting from preferences for different stages of the learning cycle). Hodkinson and Hodkinson attempt to insert learners' personal differences into communities of practice but still focus mainly on social interaction and organisation rather than the work individual learners need to do with their experiences to learn.

## How we learn or what we need to learn?

Another key difference in the professional learning theories in this book is between those that foreground how learning takes place (with either an individual or social focus) and those that foreground what it is that we need to learn. Experiential/reflective learning, CHAT and communities of practice foreground how learning takes place with little detailed consideration of the specifics of what we need to learn. Communities of practice argues that, as well as learning explicit knowledge, we also need to develop tacit knowledge and the identity, values and practices of the community. CHAT argues for expansive learning. Schön writes about knowledge-in-use and reflection-in-action. However, these are still relatively generic, which is not surprising given that these theories are not specific to particular professions. Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Chapter 3), clinical practice (Chapter 7) and craft knowledge (Chapter 8) all foreground in specific detail what it is that needs to be learned in order to be a teacher. The best processes for learning this then follow from the nature of the knowledge, skills and dispositions that are needed. Eraut also gives some detailed consideration to what needs to be learned in professional (but not teaching-specific) learning as well as to the social organisation and experiences that best foster this.

## Theory driven or empirically derived?

The final key difference that I am going to identify in this chapter, is the extent to which theories are built from empirical evidence or driven by the extension of theoretical models. This is a simplification of the relationship between these two things but, for heuristic purposes, it is a useful distinction. Perhaps the extreme ends of a continuum are CHAT and Eraut's research into workplace learning. The fundamental suppositions of CHAT are derived from an extension of Vygotsky's psychology, which in itself was influenced by Marx's theories. Although CHAT academic literature includes empirical data, this is mostly an exemplification or application of CHAT rather than data that gives rise to the theory. On the other hand, Eraut's models of the nature of professional knowledge and practice and the social interactions and organisation that support their development are generated (in part) from detailed empirical studies of actual workers/learners in actual organisations. So with CHAT (to simplify again) theory comes first and data comes afterwards, whereas for Eraut data comes first and theory comes afterwards. PCK and craft knowledge research centres on detailed empirical attempts to identify PCK and teacher's craft knowledge. However, Shulman's original postulation of PCK was not based on explicitly cited empirical evidence and, I would argue, that different models of PCK are based as much on normative judgments about what teachers should be doing as on evidence of actual teachers' professional knowledge. While early formulations of communities of practice give examples of communities of practice, these seem to have been gathered as much after the theory as before it.

It might seem that theories based on 'evidence' are preferable to those based on the elaboration or synthesis of other theories. However, in this context, theories derived from empirical observations could be accused of paying too much attention to the appearance of surface details and not enough to less visible factors that might be influential. As Marx wrote in *Capital*, if appearance and essence were the same thing there would be no need for any form of science.

### IN A NUTSHELL

There are a number of 'dimensions' along which professional learning theories can differ. These include whether they:

- » foreground individual learning processes or social interactions and social organisation;
- » take account of personal differences in learners;
- » foreground how learning happens or what needs to be learned;
- » are generated from empirical evidence or from the elaboration or synthesis of other theories.

## REFLECTIONS ON **CRITICAL ISSUES**

*How valuable we find particular theories will depend on what it is we are trying to understand or improve when facilitating professional learning. In relation to communities of practice, Eraut questions whether the theory adds anything to our understanding of professional learning beyond what we could understand by empirical observation and research (see Chapter 5). On the other hand, Hughes, Jewson and Unwin (see Chapter 5) call communities of practice a paradigm shift, which suggests, in their view, that it certainly does add something, although they are also critical of some aspects of the theory.*

*In the introduction to this chapter I called theories of professional learning lenses that we could use to gain insights into the learning processes we want to facilitate. Perhaps this is the way to answer Eraut's question and to understand Hughes, Jewson and Unwin's idea of paradigm shift in relation to all of the theories of professional learning in this book. If they draw our attention to aspects of professional learning that we had not previously considered, and if acting on the insights we gain from this produces demonstrable improvements in our practice or outcomes, then they have proved useful. Even if we identify limitations with these theories, the questions they make us ask about those limitations might be different from the ones we would have asked before we encountered them.*