Where does theory come from in HE?

Drawing inspiration about theory from its practice in doctoral and post-doctoral projects.

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The Project:
Nine narratives of practice
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Individual autobiographical accounts of how practitioners in HE developed their doctoral or post-doctoral projects, in response to the question:

Where does theory come from...?
Predominant emphasis on ‘transmigration’ (Perselli, ibid.)(themes / people / places):

- *Education* + Engineering / Jamison [Denmark]
- *Theatre* + Business studies [UK]
- *Academic development* + Visual arts / Foucault [UK]
- *Physiotherapy* + *Education* / Judith Butler [UK]
- *Early childhood education* + *Te Whariki* / Barbara Rogoff [UK & New Zealand]
- *Foundations of education* + Foucault [USA]
- *Women in academia* + Luz Irigaray [Malta]
- *Autobiography* + *Bricolage* [China/N. America]
- *English in Education* + *Policy sociology* / Stephen Ball [UK]
A ‘diversity of domains’ (Perselli, ibid.)

held in tension with each other:

- Curricular, disciplinary or professional knowledge [from participants] + educational (or other) theories and practices [of self],

or alternatively

- Educational knowledge and practice [from self] + new theoretical premise/methodology [to participants]
Via theory and method ‘creatively conjoined’ (Perselli, ibid.):

**Poststructural:**
- e.g. Irigaray, Foucault, Judith Butler, Homi Bhabha
  (broadly deconstructive methods)

**Structural:**
- e.g. Vygotsky, Freire, Stephen Ball, Steinberg
  (broadly social constructionist methods)

**Post-positivist underpinning:**
- Truth is not ‘out there’ to be discovered;
- Truths are predominantly tentative, provisional and contestable
Using the familiar tropes of the doctorate:

- Journey
- Transition
- Gateway
- Threshold
- Change
- Transformation
But differentiated and problematised:

‘The moment doors are open, a practice becomes amenable to Commodification’ (Camillieri 2009 p.32) ‘when a new technique is discovered, it is only a question of time before it is incorporated within the ideological circle of educational institutions, publishing industries and funding agencies. The challenge is to find a way of working within the institution that acknowledges the esoteric dimension of exoteric practice’ (ibid. p.34).(B.A. in Perselli, ibid.)

‘The other term for culture in the Chinese language is hua. The most important connotation of this word is to change, and to be more accurate, to transform. Hua always comes in the form of jiao hua. Jiao means to teach, to persuade, and the term jiao hua has three layers of implications’ (L.X. in Perselli, ibid.)
Contextualised within a counter-discourse to neoliberalism and consumerism:

- Theory ‘put to work’ (Lather)
- Theory defined, differentiated, problematised, transported
- Dialogic, non-exclusive and non-hierarchical approach
- Non-parochial, outward looking, forward thinking, participatory (‘third space’)

Towards pedagogies of change (Perselli, ibid.):

- Educative relations (Lomax; Gitlin): self - participants; presenter - audience; writer - readership

- Reciprocity (‘resourceful peers’ in Perselli & Moehrke-Rasul, 2013): what is brought to the study by its participants/observers?

- The greater good; cultural and social contribution

- ‘Emancipatory’ i.e. theory neither obfuscated nor confined within the academy (exclusivity); neither simplified nor over-claiming (commodification)

- Transformation through transmigration in naturalistic settings.
Notwithstanding the issue of representation:

• P1: The doctoral text is a representation of the project, not ‘the thing itself’

• P2: The ‘thing itself’ cannot be known; project (and teaching act) is transient, ephemeral, elusive and possibly enigmatic (‘reserved knowledge(s)’?)

• S/P3: All texts may be deconstructed; but doctoral texts demand high levels of educational literacy in order to do this.
‘So why is my study important?’ [Candidate, participants]
‘Who cares anyway?’ [Examiner, wider readership]

• S: The doctoral text/project can facilitate higher levels of educational literacy, expanding our vocabularies and lexicons of practice/theory/method

• S: Creative readings (e.g. project/thesis as a ‘prismatic’ cultural artifact) can generate multiple new ways of doing and making, thinking and being...
Bibliography

