Theory and Practice in Education (O.F. Bollnow 1989)

Translated by norm.friesen@boisestate.edu

NOTE: This is a DRAFT translation of a lecture given by Otto Friedrich Bollnow on September 20, 1988 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the State Academy for Teacher Education. It appeared in the 1989 edition of Teaching and Learning (5), *20-32. The page breaks of this original printing are noted; all footnotes as well as words in square brackets "[ ]" have been added by the translator for clarification. Anyone wishing to quote from this translation should double-check using the German original available at: http://wernerloch.de/doc/ThPrErz.pdf*

The discipline of teacher education has long been controversial. Some complain about its inadequate academic status and believe it urgently needs reform. Others, however, find that teacher training has already become too theoretical, alienating teachers from their practical responsibilities. This issue can only be solved by first understanding what it means to be a discipline or a "science."[1] Just to be clear: I am not speaking here about how individual sciences might correspond to teaching subjects, to linguistics or to the natural sciences. I am also not speaking of the psychological and sociological knowledge that is made available to educators teaching these subjects. I am instead speaking of *pedagogy*[2] as a specifically *educational* science.[3]

I begin with a statement of fundamental importance by Friedrich Schleiermacher: "In every field that is called art, practice is much older than theory." Art is meant here in the sense taken from the Middle Ages, as one speaks of a healing art, the art of statecraft, etc. This means that there has always been—indeed since the beginning of humankind—a kind of education which is manifest in certain practices and [later] in certain institutions such as schools. This all existed before any disciplinary or scientific theory of education had been formed. Schleiermacher continues: "The dignity of practice is independent of theory; practice becomes more conscious only through theory." The task of such a theory, in other words, is to make us aware of what is already given to us. [20/21] One can put this succinctly: Being a part of an educational science, pedagogy is the theory of a practice, a practice that builds on a previously existing practice, and that is then related back to theory.

But what is this "building on" relationship between theory and practice? It is in fact a relationship *sui generis*, one completely different than that between science and technology. On the one hand, we have natural science, physics and chemistry, for example, with technology understood [in these fields] as being the application of science. Technology is something that comes second, and which may someday contribute to "pure" science. Education, however, is not a technology in this sense. It is not simply the application or implementation of pre-existing educational theories. Indeed, one

---

[1] Here and later, the term *Wissenschaft* is either translated as science or as discipline. "Wissenschaft" includes the *natural* sciences, but also refers to any area of academic study and/or practice.
[2] Pedagogy here refers to reflection and theorizing of direct relation to educating. A theory or theorem in this context is not something objective and replicable but is pragmatically aimed at the best interests of the individual child or young person being educated.
[3] The author here is calling for is "a distinctively *educational* perspective on education" rather than one that is predominantly psychological or sociological (Biesta, 2015, p. 15).

would need to ask whether the term of "implementation" is at all appropriate to education. As mentioned, education designates a practice that long pre-existed theory. In fact, [given the ways that many parents continue to "educate" their children], this pre-existing practice still exists today—for better or worse. This then raises the question: Why does education need a theory at all?

This question must be seen in a general context, namely the context of a "hermeneutic philosophy of life" (*Lebensphilosophie*), in the sense in which it developed around 1900 by Wilhelm Dilthey.[4] Dilthey assumes that life is "just as original" as any understanding that might be ascribed to it. Starting from childhood we *understand* the world in which we live, with its order and arrangements, and we know how to make sense of it. We understand our life through the events that we encounter and the responsibilities that we have to fulfill within it. This understanding of life and of the world is the original condition from which we must start our efforts to secure further knowledge. Among other things, education and the upbringing of children also belongs to this always-already existing understanding of life that is obvious to everyone. Theory always has a certain understanding of education in this broadest sense, of its meaning and purpose, of the practices and the arrangements through which education happens—be it at the home, acquiring various skills in the course of growing up, or at school or university.

But if education always takes place in a certain way and fulfills a certain function in the coexistence of human beings—and also in the relationship of the generations—then again the question arises: Why do it need a theory of its own? Here again, we can build on [practical] hermeneutically understood *Lebensphilosophie*.

Our always-already existing understanding is constantly affected by (sometimes accidental) external influences. In order to continue to exist, this understanding must deal with such disturbances and overcome the difficulties which have arisen from them. Through these challenges, this same understanding of life expands; the new is incorporated into the old. Only through these constant challenges does life become productive in this way.

This also applies to education. Education, too, does not always happen smoothly and in accordance with expectations. Instead, as every educator knows from painful personal experience, life is interrupted and disrupted in the most varied ways. And this happens to such an extent that any successes of education can be called into question. Even the most well-intentioned education suffers disappointments and failures, be it in the form of a child's [or teacher's] failure, in lagging behind expectations, or in the form of open rebellion against being educated and brought up. This is true in the family, just as it is in school. Classrooms frequently confront us with such disruptions

---

[4] This practical philosophy also known as vitalism: Its "central claim is . . . that life can only be understood from within. [It] asks after the meaning, value and purpose of life, turning away from purely theoretical knowledge towards the undistorted fullness of lived experience… [S]ome of its principal insights were taken up in a methodologically more rigorous and productive way in Husserlian phenomenology and Heidegger's 'philosophy of existence'" (Routledge 1998, p. 487).

and disappointments. One can take this to the extreme: The possibility of a student failing in his efforts implies that there is also a dark side of being a teacher. If one takes these difficulties seriously, [personal] reflection on the possibilities of coping with such difficulties then arises, and this necessarily extends to a general reflection on the nature of education. *This* reflection is the origin of educational theory. To put it another way, such theory does not spring from an uninterested "pure" desire to know. It arises from the needs of the practice, because the emerging difficulties force the educator to reflect, and to reflect in the original sense of the word.[5]

Development of the Theory

To clarify, I now try to divide the schema connected with our emerging theory into several stages.

1. Description

Every theory begins with *description*, the careful and detailed description of the thing to be theorized. The necessity, but also the difficulty, of such a description is often misunderstood. Why should one painstakingly describe that which one already plainly sees? Also, such a description, if it is necessary at all, seems to be quite simple and requires little special methodical preparation. But this appearance is deceptive; for, as we usually live in our familiar world, we deal with the things that surround us as a matter of course; we know how to use these things without ever taking a closer look. Of course, this applies to the things of the visible world. In the realm of mind and spirit, it is not different. Only the conditions here are a bit harder to grasp. We do not see things as they present themselves in the fullness of their qualities, but in order to use them, very few characteristics suffice for us to recognize them and to grasp them as if with one's hand. Martin Heidegger has impressively analyzed this as "readiness-to-hand."[6]

We can recognize the vagueness of our notions of things in this sense when we ask a person to draw an object that they deal with on a daily basis [e.g. one's computer keyboard]. If the result is an embarrassing failure, it is not so much due to poor draftsmanship, but more likely because we do not "know" what this think looks like. We are in a sense "blinded" to the real appearance of this and other things. A clearer example is provided by the drawings of children—so long as they have not yet been exposed to drawing lessons. Children do not draw the objects as they appear

---

[5] Bollnow is likely referring to the definition of reflection simply as "throwing back light or heat," which in the case of thought and language can refer to that which arises "after turning back one's thought on some subject" (https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=reflection)

[6] Under its entry for Heidegger, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains this as follows: "Readiness-to-hand has a distinctive phenomenological signature. While engaged in hitch-free skilled activity, Dasein has [or we have] no conscious experience of the items of equipment in use *as independent objects* (i.e., as the bearers of determinate properties that exist independently of the Dasein-centered context of action in which the equipmental entity is involved). Thus, while engaged in trouble-free hammering, the skilled carpenter has no conscious recognition of the hammer, the nails, or the work-bench, *in the way that one would if one simply stood back and thought about them*. Tools-in-use become phenomenologically transparent." (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/)

visually, but according to what they know about them, the table with its four legs, though in reality only three may actually be visible. This is also true of adults. We live with our ideas of things [based on our use of them], not with the things in themselves.

Only when we are asked to give a detailed description do we notice the difficulty this entails. One first has to step out of one's usual way of dealing with things—to take a step back, so to speak, to be able to look at things in their "real" appearance. And only when we begin to describe what we have in front of us do we penetrate the fog of our imagined ideas. Only exact description opens our eyes to things as they really are. As this closer "seeing" develops for us, we begin to grasp things through their description.

Such description thus stands at the beginning of all theory. It opens the eye to a full reality. It makes that in which we have so far moved naturally tangible and comprehensible for theory. It is not for nothing that the word "theory" in its original sense simply refers to "viewing" or "a looking at."[7]

But such a description is by no means easy to accomplish. Instead, it requires great exertion. Even with things plainly visible, [23/24] it depends on the choice of the "apt word" that really captures what is being seen. And it gets much more difficult when we leave the realm of visible things and enter the mental realm. Mental phenomena and processes, as well as their qualities and virtues such as diligence or perseverance, anxiety or fear, impudence, anger or hatred, love or trust, are especially challenging to capture descriptively. This requires a special training in descriptive method.

Edmund Husserl's phenomenology has developed such an art of description, of phenomenological description, with particular virtuosity. Husserl has taken great care to ensure that [in theory] no elements of interpretation and explanation are included in the "pure" description.[8]

But such a description can only be taught and learned to a limited degree. It always retains an aspect of art, and like any art, it only has to be practiced with renewed patience in order to gradually bring it towards perfection. But if a description of what was previously blurred is truly successful, then it grants a great spiritual enjoyment that can be deeply fulfilling. The art of description as a kind of "great school of seeing" is a necessary component of all theoretical work, and it is unfortunately is much neglected today. It therefore deserves special care in the education of teachers who want to be clear about the tasks of their profession.

---

[7] See: https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=theory

[8] Bollnow adds: "Above all, Hans Lipps has convincingly developed the outcome of the understanding of spoken language, and I have often followed him." Hans Lipps is an early phenomenologist whose work remains untranslated in English.

2. Interpretation

Secondly, that which is gained in description also requires interpretation. To interpret something means: to grasp something initially incomprehensible as a meaningful part of a larger whole. If such an integration has succeeded, we say: "We understand it."[9] To interpret means to make something initially incomprehensible understandable. Understanding is thus possible insofar—and only insofar—as meaning can be recognized in that which has been examined. To interpret means to lead to an understanding, to enable an understanding. Interpretation is in this sense a necessary second stage in the formation of theory.

But here we have to resort again to what is pre-theoretical in our lives. In everyday life we move in a world that is always-already understood. We understand the things that surround us as things that we can use. We understand the domains to which these things belong [e.g. a fork in the domain of eating, a document in the domain of work] and the processes that take place in these domains. We also know how to move sensibly in [these domains and] this understood world. Understanding is co-original with life itself. But where everything is always-already understood, no interpretation is required. Rather, interpretation becomes necessary only where our usual understanding of life is disrupted by something new, something that does not fit. It is here that reflection becomes necessary. The task of interpretation in these cases springs from life necessities.

Such an artfully undertaken reading of what is given to us in the present is known as "interpretation." The concept of interpretation was first developed in literary studies in the task of making intelligible an initially incomprehensible [historical] text. But we can apply the notion of interpretation in a more general sense wherever it is necessary to grasp a given fact as meaningful. This is what we mean by interpretation here.

Recently, however, the notion of hermeneutics, which also derives from studies of texts, has become established for such a [more general] method of interpretation. Hermeneutics in this broad sense is the *art of understanding*. Thus we generally speak of the *hermeneutic* sciences[10] as the meaning-making and meaning-understanding sciences—as the *human* sciences [or humanities] in a general sense. And so far, the educational theory we have been constructing is a hermeneutic one.[11]

---

[9] This account of hermeneutics comes from Wilhelm Dilthey, who uses the example of words (parts) within a sentence (a whole) as "the simplest case in which meaning arises. In understanding [a given] sentence, each individual word has a meaning, and we derive the sense of the sentence by combining them. We proceed so that the intelligibility of the sentence comes from the meaning of individual words. (Dilthey 2002, pp. 254-255). Dilthey sees this same dynamic as in play in understanding a life—either one's own or another's: "The individual moment [in one's life] has meaning through its connection with a whole, through the relation of past and future [even through the relation of] individual existence and [all of] humanity" (p. 253).

[10] Bollnow is referring to humanities subjects like history, literature and philosophy.

[11] In other words, it is to be seen as a humanities discipline, rather than one of the psychological or sociological sciences.

3. [Philosophically] Anthropological Observation

And now for the third step. What I have developed so far applies to all hermeneutic sciences. In the case of education, we can make the question a little more concrete by reminding ourselves here that the definite "whole" to which all individual phenomena are to be connected as meaningful is the *human being*; more precisely, it is *the person to be educated*.[12] [In doing so, we] refer to a discipline that relates to human beings as "anthropology," and to that extent the theory we seek is an anthropological one.

[…] On the one hand, the term anthropology refers to the various empirical sciences that deal with human beings, their biology, psychology, sociology, etc.... All these sciences are also important for pedagogy, but they cannot determine the meaning of education on their own. We, on the other hand, understand anthropology as knowledge that inquires into the nature of what it is to be human and thus one that inquires into education [given that what a human both is and should be is indispensable in any education]. In contrast to the empirical sciences, this inquiry is a philosophical one, and to that extent we speak of a philosophical anthropology—or in our case, of a philosophical-anthropological pedagogy, or in short, an anthropological pedagogy.[13]

The methodological approach of philosophical anthropology can best be understood as an extension of Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's interpretation of *Angst*. They give this term a positive meaning by conceiving of it as the "dizziness of freedom" that arises when every finite gives way and one [is forced to] confront one's true self. Similarly, philosophical anthropology proceeds from the specific [and the most basic or ultimate] phenomena of human life. These phenomena come to attention, for example, when there is work that we find oppressive or an enjoyable game [in which we become immersed]. They also come to light in the boring school exercise, or in warnings or advice that are given in vain.[14] And after having worked out the phenomenon in question as thoroughly as possible, this type of anthropology asks: How should the phenomenon in question be understood so that it can be seen as a meaningful and necessary part of the overall context of human life?

We can illustrate this with a simple example: An admonition, a piece of advice that comes with a warning, is something is often perceived as annoying and unsuccessful. Parents and educators complain that warning or admonishing their children simply does not help, because the children

---

[12] Bollnow is not only making the point that anthropology is here understood as the study (-ology) of the human (anthro-), but also that is closely tied to hermeneutics, as a study of the meaningful interconnection of parts and organic whole.

[13] Anthropological Pedagogy (or Pedagogical Anthropology) forms an entire sub-discipline or specialization on its own in Germany, Austria and some of the Scandinavian nations. E.g. see: Wulf, C. & Zirfas, J. (2013). *Handbuch Pädagogische Anthropologie*. Chem: Springer.

[14] Angst as well as these last two examples are anthropological phenomena relevant to pedagogy that Bollnow studied in some depth; e.g. see: *Existenzphilosophie und Pädagogik: Versuch über unstetige Formen der Erziehung* (1959) and *Vom Geist des Übens* (1991).

immediately fall back into their old mistakes. From an anthropological point of view, however, the question is reversed, and one asks oneself whether admonition is necessary, because human beings do not simply develop steadily, but repeatedly regress in their development, so that new prompting is needed to wrest them from their own inertia. And conversely, one recognizes from the fact of the necessary admonition that we are beings who advance only through relapses and ever new attempts. I do not need to go into further detail here. Suffice it to say: This perspective shows that there is a general need for a pedagogy of "appeal" or "appellation" as Karl Jaspers pointed out—a pedagogy which has since been largely ignored.

Because these last remarks may have been somewhat abstract, I would like to explain them further through two examples in order to make clear the fruitfulness of the anthropological approach.

First Example: The Crisis

There are crises in human life of all kinds: crises in the course of a [life-threatening] illness, crises in physical and mental development, crises at work, in marriage, in the economy, in the coexistence of nations, etc. These crises follow a characteristic pattern: Emerging difficulties become ever more urgent, requiring a decision to be made. In the case of a [life-threatening] illness, this might be a decision between death and healing—with analogous decisions required in the other forms of crisis. A crisis is a painful event, which, if it develops slowly, suddenly breaks into human life. And one experiences with horror that things are not going on as before. One has to either pass through the crisis or fail.

As a rule, we see crises as regrettable events that unfortunately must occur occasionally in life, but which in principle could be avoided with greater caution. In contrast, anthropological considerations reverse the question and ask whether crisis does not have a potentially positive meaning, a necessary function in human life. It asks whether such crises might in the end be regarded as a necessary component in the process of maturation, since for humans, unlike plants and animals, a new stage of development cannot be achieved through steady "organic" growth. [Philosophical anthropology teaches us that we] do not develop as an apple ripens on the tree, but only by undergoing decisive crises.

But this is not about a more detailed analysis of crises, but about what follows from a deeper anthropological understanding of pedagogy. First, it is important that the educator should not arbitrarily induce a crisis in the young person entrusted to her—simply because it might be important in a given educational process. The danger that it might lead to a catastrophe is simply too great. The educator would have to possess divine powers to take this approach. But at the same time, the educator needs to know what a crisis means when a young person is affected by one. The educator thus must not try to appease someone thus affected but must help them understand what

the crisis means to them, and thus to honestly help them endure the crisis in order to reach maturity.[15] [27/28]

Even this simple example shows that the range of what teachers must learn in their training goes far beyond what they can "do" in conscious sense in education. It must instead also include the whole domain of personal and interpersonal relations in which human development, and thus also the education that support it, takes place.

Second Example: Trust

As a second example I take the role of trust in education. It is obviously important for a young child to grow up in a familiar environment, especially in relation to a trustworthy person, usually to the mother […]. My late friend Alfred Nitschke has beautifully described how, from a pediatrician's perspective, the power of this trust opens the world up for the child. Here I would like to speak about something slightly different about the trust given to the older child, such as the school student, by his educators. It is not only important that a general atmosphere of trust be seen as the necessary precondition for healthy development, but that the particular expectations which one has of the child, for better or worse, play a role in their development. I can only intimate how this works: A child whom one trusts will dare to do something for themselves. On the other hand, a child whom one does *not* trust soon despairs and does not develop.

The philosopher Nicolai Hartmann once said that belief has a generative power: "That a belief [in another] brings forth precisely what one believes." If the educator considers the child to be courageous, honest, punctual and orderly, the child will, through this confidence, also develop these qualities in themselves. But the converse of this can be dangerous: if the educator considers the child to be lazy, untrustworthy, or untalented, they will soon become lazy and untrustworthy, remaining behind in their development, just as the educator expects. This is the great danger of mistrust: that it destroys all healthy development like a consuming poison.

This burdens the educator with a tremendous responsibility: For the judgment that the educator might easily arrive at for a young person, and which they make evident in their behavior even if it is unspoken, is not just something that is personal and private to the educator. It has an effect on the child's development that the educator must answer for. The task of pedagogical theory [28/29], however, is to make the educator aware of this responsibility by understanding these connections

---

[15] Elsewhere, Bollnow writes that in such a situation, a teacher should rely neither on "concrete advice nor on ready-made programs, but rather on the increased awareness of one's actions and the broadening of one's perspectives. [In this context, the teacher is to be] freed from capriciousness and [made] aware of the deeper connections within educational practice. Through this awareness, he learns to understand his actions better and how to see them through in specific situations. (1969, p. 48)

such as the ones between trust, mistrust and development. The theory thus becomes immediately practical.

4.   Summary of the Construction of Pedagogical Theory

In the educational theory that we are developing, there are three tasks that are partly complementary and build one another:

a)   A phenomenological one. This is the as the art of allowing oneself to see things as they present themselves independently of human prejudice. This is done with care through one's own developing "art of description."

b)   A hermeneutic one. This is the art of understanding through the interpretation of described phenomena as more meaningful parts of a larger whole

c)   An educational-anthropological one. [This arises through] the concretization of hermeneutic [interpretation] in the form one's particular relationship with the person to be educated and through a deeper understanding of education that is opened up through this process. In this sense, I would like to call the theory required here a "hermeneutic educational science."

5.   The Uses of Pedagogical Theory

If we finally ask about the value of such an educational theory for teacher education (and of course for the teacher as a whole), I am taken back to a situation arising after the first lecture I gave when called to Tübingen in 1953, before the Association of Teachers (the "Union of Education and Science"). Here, I had to justify myself as a representative of "theory" to an audience of practitioners. In this post-war situation, I was discussing the implications that Existentialism—with its strong emotional associations for the time—could have for education. And given that we then all felt ourselves to be a part of a tremendous crisis, I explained (among other things) the importance of crises.

In the ensuing discussion, one of the teachers spontaneously objected: "Yes, but what should we *do* with this theory in our practice?" At the time, [29/30] I was unable to answer the question to my satisfaction; and I have not been able to do so since. This, then, is the question which I now seek to address.

So: What should a practitioner *do*? It seems to me that this question might be formulated in the wrong way. This is because from the very start the word "do" misses the relationship between theory and practice [that have outlined above]. This theory cannot simply give directions like an instruction manual would—or provide recipes for proper educational intervention. But this is not a defect. One could reproach this theory on this count, but I argue that the opposite is the case: That [this relation of theory to practice] is grounded in the nature of theory itself and gives it a particular advantage.

This is something I need to explain. The explanation can be found in the meaning of the word "apply"—a meaning already suggested in the question of about what to "do." From the very beginning, notions like "do" and "apply" take us into the realm of "making," of producing, of techniques for production. We are in the realm, in which, as I said earlier, of technology as the *application* of [natural] science. In this realm, it is quite clear what an engineer can *do* in *applying* mathematics as one of his key tools of the trade. In pedagogy, however, this procedure is transferable only insofar as one can regard educating as a "making" also in the productive technical sense. This is certainly the case in certain contexts, especially ones found in the classroom, and we should not refuse these from the outset. But the very core of education, and also of teaching, is not found in this technical element. If this were the case, then an educator would be only a kind of educational engineer [applying laws and rules to their teaching]. Such tendencies indeed exist. But a clearer understanding [of theory and practice in education] means they should be decisively rejected.

So, in the light of what I've been saying, I now ask: What is the essential task of pedagogical theory? An answer can be found in the examples considered above: In order to have an adequate understanding of what is happening in education, one must go well beyond the conscious knowledge of the subject matter of education. One must also go beyond the laws of organic development over which educators have not influence—but which they must take into account in order to wait patiently for its effects. At the same time, educators must be aware of developmental matters if related problems arise. They must also be aware of events like illness, crises or decisive encounters that suddenly break into life, and of the meaning of the danger that these can represent. They need such awareness in order to [31/32] properly protect the child or young person. Such awareness, moreover, must also extend to the general emotional conditions, conditions in which education happens, which can promote but also inhibit it. All of these concerns represent a vast expanse that the educator must have in view and also understand in order act meaningfully within it.

Here is a summary of the results of my reflections on pedagogical theory, reduced to five points. This theory:

1. Represents a [type of] reflection. The educator withdraws from their habitual actions and gains some distance so that the circumstances in which they live can become objects which are available to reflection.
2. Frees the educator from biased belief in widely accepted by unconfirmed ideas. It shows the multiplicity of possible aspects of an issue that was once seen as straightforward, and it sheds light on previous oversimplifications.
3. It awakens educators to take full responsibility for their actions by offering them alternatives. It also forces the educator to decide between these alternatives.
4. It develops and expands the horizon in which the educator understands his actions. It gives the educator a more liberated perspective and greater sense of security in teaching.

5. Only through such a theory does education rise above the level of technical "production" to attain the dignity of the creative engagement of the whole person.

To awaken this human understanding of education is the ultimate meaning of educational theory. In this sense, such theory is to be cultivated and also directed away from the tendency [for all theory] to become something merely technical in nature. This is the central task of all teacher education.

References (cited in translator's footnotes):

Biesta, G. (2015). On the two cultures of educational research, and how we might move ahead: Reconsidering the ontology, axiology and praxeology of education. *European Educational Research Journal 14*(1) 11-22. DOI: 10.1177/1474904114565162

Bollnow, O.F. (1969). Der Wissenschaftscharakter der Pädagogik. In O. F. Bollnow (Ed.), Erziehung in anthropologischer Sicht (pp. 15–50). Zürich: Mortgarten.

Dilthey, W. (2002). *The formation of the historical world in the human sciences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lebensphilosophie. (1998). *Routledge encyclopedia of philosophy*. New York: Routledge.