What I learned from supervising education doctorates

Why do practice-theoretical PhD students choose the most difficult and controversial theoretical frameworks?

By "practice-theoretical PhD", I mean doctoral research by practitioners of professions and crafts like education, art and design. These are research projects in which someone who has done something—teaching, making art, designing things—for a long time tries to write up some of the insight that they have gained. It would already be a difficult task to write down what they have learned, because their wisdom has been gained through doing and is likely to be largely tacit or only articulable through anecdotes, jokes, images or metaphors. Practice-theoretical PhD students give themselves an even harder task. They undertake to write up their experiential insights, that is, to raise them to the level of science. This requires them to express their wisdom in literal language and to supply it with some evidence and argument beyond simply saying, "You can trust me on this, I've been doing it for twenty years."

Part of the process of raising tacit practical knowledge to the level of PhD-type research is the selection of the theoretical framework. All reflections on practice make some assumptions about what knowledge is, how it is gained and secured, what sort of thing, process or phenomenon the practice is, how the phenomena and the enquiry relate to each other and to the enquirer, etc.. I have known doctoral students who were natural-born logical positivists and distrusted everything except sound statistical analysis of quantitative data and others for whom the judgment of the Still Small Voice Within is decisive. Part of the PhD process is to bring these convictions into view, name them, criticise them and eventually ensure that the theoretical framework of the research is a conscious choice made for good methodological reasons.

For philosophers and logicians, the chief desideratum for this framework seems obvious. It should make as few controversial commitments as possible. If a thesis-writer adopts the philosophy of Hegel (say) as the theoretical framework, then the argument of the thesis depends logically on Hegel's system and has no hold on someone who rejects Hegelianism, or rejects the thesis-writer's interpretation of Hegel. Since everyone who understands Hegelianism rejects some or all of it, or rejects other people's

reading of it, this means that hardly anyone will accept the premises of the thesis. Moreover, taking Hegelianism (for example) as a premise imposes the considerable burden of answering Croce's question: *What is Living and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel?* If we try to reduce the premise-set by adopting just part of Hegel's outlook, we then have to show that it is possible to separate that part from the whole without doing it deadly violence. These problems are not specific to Hegel; they arise whenever the philosophy of some big name is adopted as the theoretical framework of a doctoral thesis. These are large and difficult philosophical tasks that new doctoral students could do without, especially if they have not yet had much training in philosophy. Some students multiply their theoretical sources— but then they face the task of showing that the ideas they have adopted from different theoreticians are consistent. Again, this is hard work of an unfamiliar sort.

For these reasons, it seems obvious that if you can say what you have to say without grounding it in the dense and contentious philosophy of Hegel, Foucault, Deleuze, Wittgenstein, Hildegard of Bingen or whoever, so much the better.

Yet, it is common for practice-oriented PhDs to use the densest, most difficult and expansive philosophy as their theoretical frameworks. What is even stranger, to a philosopher, is that they seem to have a way of using philosophy without bothering with Croce's question. Time and again, I read sentences like, "I shall use the work of X…" and find that X is quoted uncritically, with no effort to examine X's arguments to check whether and in what parts they support X's conclusions. To a philosopher, this is very odd. What else does one do with a philosopher's writing than pick over the arguments? If practice-oriented PhDs don't do that, what are they doing?

One of the things happening here may be a failure to distinguish between citing a scientific paper (where the fact of publication is supposed to indicate that the conclusions are reliable) and citing philosophical work, where publication indicates at most a minimal internal coherence. Quoting a philosopher does no more than establish what he or she said. When philosophers quote each other, it's usually to show that Prof. Blockhead really did commit in print to the view that Dr Thinne-Wedge is currently lowering into his logical acid-bath. In other words, citation among philosophers usually has the very opposite intention from citation of philosophers by practice-based doctoral students. In philosophy, the mere fact that a professor published a paper arguing that P does very little to

increase the plausibility of P, because it's a moral certainty that someone else has published or will soon publish a paper arguing that not-P.

Indeed, it's often impossible to know what a philosopher means without examining the arguments offered. This is certainly true of the dense and difficult philosophy that's often chosen as the theoretical framework of a practice-theoretical PhD. Philosophers often have to use old words in new ways, so a summary quotation of the conclusion of a long argument will be misleading or baffling. For example, Kant thought that arithmetic is based on a pure intuition of time. What does that even mean? You have to read the *Critique of Pure Reason* to find out. He used the word "Anschauung" in a new way, and a grasp of the ordinary meaning of "intuition" will not do. This kind of semantic innovation is normal in philosophy.

I think this point about semantic innovation is a clue to something else. I've been discussing these frameworks as premises, and from that point of view, choosing the most dense and difficult seems unwise. This choice makes more sense if we suppose that students think of these frameworks not as premises but as languages.[1] If you are struggling to put into words something that you know in your fingers and your tripes, then it is reasonable to look for the most richly expressive resources that the library has to offer. From this angle, the dense and difficult philosophers look promising. They seem to be in the business of articulating aspects of experience that ordinary language can't get to. They do more semantic innovation than just about anyone else apart from poets, so if you're looking for language to express things that you're struggling to say, it's reasonable to look at what they have to offer. Like all of us, research students are willing to sacrifice the long term to the short, and at the start of a doctorate the short-term task is to state your claim. Proving it is a job for some later date. Viewed this way, it's understandable that the most richly expressive frameworks are the most attractive, because the cost of using them comes

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[1] Note from 2023: here is a benefit of training in formal logic. Formal systems consist of two parts: a language and some rules of inference. Some of the deepest results in formal logic are about the relation between the expressive power of a system's language and the inferential power of its proving machinery. If a system's language can express logical truths that its proving machinery cannot prove, it is said to be incomplete. Separating these two questions (What can this system say? What can this system prove?) is a useful start for evaluating philosophical frameworks.

later (when you have to argue for your thesis from premises that few people understand and hardly anyone accepts).

This also helps to explain why practice-theoretical research students often see little point in asking which parts of their framework are true and whether the whole thing is plausible. If the framework's value for the student is as a language rather than as a set of premises, then questions about truth and evidence don't seem pressing.

Supposing that new doctoral students view these theoretical frameworks as languages rather than as premises solves another mystery: why do research students use them when they say things that are clearly false when read literally? For example, post-human theories that claim to see no distinction between the biological human body and its tools and prostheses cannot be literally true. Certainly, a blind man's stick is part of his perceptual apparatus and the rest of the world starts for him at the far end of it. However, sticks can be given as gifts, bought and sold, lent and borrowed, lost without loss, and the coupling between man and stick has to be achieved and sustained by daily use. It's true that human kidneys are donated and traded for transplant, but they don't circulate freely or pass down generations, and the stick user does not need immunosuppressant drugs. His stick is, ultimately, not part of his body. (I think Gregory Bateson knew this, as he uses his example strictly within communication theory, but some recent writers want to go the whole cyber-hog by removing this qualification.[2]) Here is a simple case where reflection on the argument tells you what is valuable in the philosophy and shows you that the exciting philosophical claim, (that the distinction between biology and artefacts is merely an ancient prejudice) is, when read strictly and literally, false.

Manifest falsehoods like this find roles in educational research, in the hands of sober, serious people. How? Partly simply because they are there in the literature and some students are insufficiently suspicious of what they find

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[2] Note from 2013: I'm not sure, but I may have been thinking of Andrew Pickering's dance of agency between human scientists and inanimate objects (Pickering 2006). Bateson uses the blind man's stick example three times (Bateson 1972, 256, 324, 466). In each case, the point is that for the purpose of tracking communication there is no sense in distinguishing between the stick and the hand that holds it. In each case, there is a contrast with the 'Newtonian' or 'hard science' viewpoint. Even for Bateman, the cybernetic perspective is just one way of looking at things. In addition, there is the blind man's standpoint. For many of his purposes (such as avoiding injury), the stick and the hand are very different.

in books. But there may be a more subtle point too. Suppose that a practice-theoretical PhD student is trying to articulate something that cannot be said except with stories, metaphors, analogies—in short, with talk in which literal truth is beside the point. If they were not enrolled on PhD programmes, practitioners might use novels, poems and any other kind of non-literal communication to express their experientially gathered wisdom. But in order to meet the requirements of academic work, they need to draw on a kind of writing where literal falsehoods gesture towards deeper truths, that is also a respectable academic genre, with footnotes, references and all the rest of the apparatus. For this purpose, the sort of philosophy that cannot be taken literally may be just the ticket. Indeed, some of the post-human current comes from science-fiction. Donna Haraway starts her Cyborg Manifesto with an elaborate warning against reading it literally.[3] Maybe we (philosophers and users of philosophy alike) should approach the big serious metaphysicians like that, too.

The Maximally Unhelpful Citation

I read more educational research than most philosophers. Much of it is interesting, rich in ideas and shows philosophy put to work. However, there is one feature of this literature that needs calling out. Educational research tolerates shockingly bad citation practices. Not that all educational researchers use quotations and references badly, but edited books and articles make it into print with practices that would not be tolerated in undergraduate essays in philosophy.

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[3] "This chapter is an effort to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism. Perhaps more faithful as blasphemy is faithful, than as reverent worship and identification. Blasphemy has always seemed to require taking things very seriously. I know no better stance to adopt from within the secular-religious, evangelical traditions of United States politics, including the politics of socialist-feminism. Blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community. Blasphemy is not apostasy. Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method, one I would like to see more honoured within socialist-feminism. At the center of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg." (Haraway 1985)

The education research students I meet seem to have learned from the literature they read that even the most banal observation needs a supporting reference. Thus:

> When investigating complex interactions in the classroom, it's important to use the right methods (Buttery & Biscuit-Base, 1974).

This made up example is no exaggeration. At the same time, I see students casually mention big names without seeming to understand what they're invoking. Thus:

> I'm interested in understanding the inner experiences of student nurses (Heidegger).

Really? Exactly what part of Heidegger's thought do you have in mind? Surely not all of it, so help your reader out here. Tell us what exactly you're taking from him and why you think you can have that bit without buying into the whole package. How exactly are you going to use a bit of Heidegger, who was not a social scientist, to inform your empirical study? Turning a slice of Heidegger into an empirical method is quite a transformation. And you know he was a nazi, right? Will you deal with that, or just float on to the next thought? Given a free hand, I would urge education research students to quote or mention other works only when they really add something, to explain what is being added, why it is reliable, what reservations they might have and generally to take a critical attitude towards sources. Quote sparsely and do all the expository and critical work that a quotation entails.

I don't blame the research students. They're only copying what they see in print. Recently, in a paper by professor published in a book[4] edited by two other professors and a senior lecturer, I found the maximally unhelpful citation. The author wrote,

> In the classical, constructivist approach, empirical concepts are derived from experience by means of abstraction (Kant, 1956).

I'm not sure that Kant said exactly that. My own reading of Kant makes me want to check. Which page of Kant's extensive writing did our author have in mind? In common with scientific practice, there is no page number (which is another bugbear, but let it pass). Maybe I can find it anyway, if I can identify which of Kant's books or essays includes this commitment to classical constructivism.

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[4] (de Freitas, Sinclair and Coles, 2017).

Turning to the list of references, I read:

Kant, I. (1956). *Werke* [works]. Wiesbaden, Germany: Insel.

This is maximally unhelpful. I was braced to be told that Kant's expression of classical constructivism is buried in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. I did not expect this.

What is going on here? Why would someone bother including the maximally unhelpful reference? I imagine that the author of this paper needed a foil against which to develop his own account of concept-formation. He wants to offer an improvement on classical constructivism, which he sees around him in the educational literature and in the air at conferences. But he didn't want to spend time articulating it, because his real interest is in his own theory, and besides, everyone in the business knows what classical constructivism is. He might have simply described it without pinning it on anyone, but this would have violated the education research norm that every thought must come with a reference. So he did the next best thing to not pinning it on anyone: he pinned it on a figure from the historical past whom no-one in his business reads: Kant. This got him into describing his own theory very quickly without violating the every-thought-must-have-a-reference norm, but at the cost of shabby scholarship.

I suspect that what has happened here is that Kant has been tagged with a view that did not even exist in his day, just as Plato is tagged with "Platonism" and Adam Smith is tagged with the ideological programme of the Adam Smith Institute. But I can't check, because classical constructivism is described in a single phrase (which incidentally makes for a very easy victory), and the reference to Kant's works is maximally unhelpful. That is a bad model for students.