

Against Theoretical Evangelism: Imagining the possibilities of a critical approach to theorising in Professional Academic Development

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Abstract

This article contributes to dialogue on theorising in higher education with particular reference to professional academic development. It provides a critique of the evangelical adherence to dominant theories and argues that the uncritical use of dominant theories cannot contribute to addressing social injustices in higher education. In so doing it argues for theorisation in professional academic development that is more sensitive to context. Drawing on insights from C. Wright Mills (2000) the article suggests that by employing a sociological imagination to theorisation it is possible to critically engage with dominant discourses and come up with imaginative and creative solutions that are aligned with a social justice stance on professional academic development as well as address social inequities and injustices in higher education.

Key Words: professional academic development, social justice, sociological imagination, context-sensitive theory, theorisation

Introduction

*Everyone who can think, can ultimately also theorise; and the project of theorizing therefore is inherently democratic
(Kant, [1784] 1970)*

The idea of theorising as inherently democratic is an appealing one, as is the idea that it is possible for everyone to theorise. Yet, in academia theory can be very intimidating and is often a space fraught with anxiety rather than one that engenders

hope and creativity. It is also ironic that given the potential for everyone to theorise very little of this theorisation appears to be recognised as legitimate theory in academic circles and it is often only theory that is understood by a small cadre of academics that is valued. A consequence of this is that theory has an authority that can exclude and silence. The need for and the importance of engagement with theory in professional academic development research and practice is not being questioned in this paper. I do not believe that we can address social problems and be effective professional academic practitioners without theorising. What is being questioned in this paper is the uncritical, almost evangelical use of theory which can prevent professional academic developers from thinking of creative solutions to address social injustices that are prevalent in higher education. It is not within the scope of this article to explore the role of theory in higher education in any depth as this has been discussed previously. The 2012 special edition of *Higher Education Research and Development* is a case in point. This paper, located in on-going discussion on the role of theory in higher education (see for example Trowler 2012, McArthur 2012 and Clegg 2012), argues for greater consideration of context in theorising in professional academic development. The article draws on Wright Mills (2000) idea of the sociological imagination because it provides a useful way of exploring the interplay of private troubles and public issues and related concerns for theory and practice. In the article, I explore the possibilities of developing an approach to theorising that allows for the development of an imagination (sociological) in professional academic development – one that has the characteristics of a critical approach. I begin by examining theory and theorisation in professional academic development. Thereafter key ideas relating to the sociological imagination are explored and the ways in which these can be applied to enhance theorisation are illustrated by drawing on examples in education and the social sciences. The article ends by extending the idea of the sociological imagination to develop some key considerations to help us theorise in professional academic development.

Theory in academic development

There is no doubt that professional academic developers have to engage with theory. As Scott (2009) rightly points out the ‘craft knowledge’ approaches to solving problems in higher education that are still prevalent in many higher education

institutions are not sufficient. Instead, he maintains that what is required is more 'systematic knowledge' of teaching and learning and of theory and practice.

The key limitation of craft knowledge is that, lacking a systematic or theoretical base, it does not provide conceptual or analytical tools for dealing with 'non-traditional situations...The new educational challenges in higher education call for research-based and scholarly approaches to be brought to bear on teaching and learning practices... (Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007, 61)

It must be acknowledged that academic development internationally and in South Africa is shifting from being primarily 'atheoretical, based on common sense or intuition' (Leibowitz, in press). A review of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) conference proceedings over the last few years reveals that more academic developers in South Africa are engaging in research and drawing on a range of theories which inform their practice. For, example many professional academic developers are drawing on critical realism as a meta-theory and Margaret Archer's social realism to explore the interplay of structure, culture and agency in professional academic development. Others working in the realm of curriculum development use the sociology of education and the work of Bernstein to frame their research and practice. The work of Tinto on persistence to explore factors that contribute to student development in institutions is also evident. Whilst these are positive shifts in academic development, the predominance of approaches and theories from the global north (Liebowitz, 2012) is troubling as these theories and approaches tend to be applied in an uncritical and unproblematised way. It is important to be critical because theories and approaches that originate in the global north often do not adequately account for the multifaceted socio-political contexts and related pedagogical and curriculum challenges. This raises questions about the relevance and appropriateness of approaches and theories that have been developed in other contexts to solving local problems. Similar questions have been raised in recent student protests in South African higher education around the relevance of knowledge that emanates from the global north for students in the south and the extent to which this knowledge could alienate particular groups of students. These events have served to stimulate important debate and discussion on curriculum

transformation. Amidst calls to fight against ‘epistemic coloniality’ which refers to the endless production and appropriation of theories that are based on European tradition (Mbembe, 2015), it is timeous that the editors of this issue of the journal have called for articles that pay greater attention to context. Paradoxically the fact that many of the authors referred to in this article are from the global north could be seen to exacerbate the domination discussed above. In response, I contend that the argument against the uncritical use of dominant theories and the importance of theories that are sensitive and relevant to context does not preclude me from drawing on perspectives from the global north. Furthermore, the article does attempt to engage critically with *all* literature and theories cited in the article – those emanating from both the global north as well as from the global south.

It is important to acknowledge that there are exceptions and that some academic developers have drawn on perspectives from both the global north and south in order to both confront questions relating to the relevance of knowledge as well as to ensure that disciplinary knowledge and discourses are accessible to students. Reeler’s (2015) work on Epistemic Disobedience presents an interesting illustration of this. Reeler (2015) is an academic developer who works in a research- intensive university in South Africa. In her practice, she sought to deliberately

...interrupt the traditional knowledge hierarchies present in South African universities. Such content was defined as that which consciously aimed to engage with African epistemologies, be it through teaching postcolonial theory, deconstructing dominant canons or worldviews; using African examples, texts and contexts; correspondent examples or theories from other parts of the so-called third world or a pedagogy that used African languages as learning resources (Reeler 2015:1)

She uses a Bernsteinian lens of knowledge structure and Mignolo’s (2011) decolonial thinking to inform her practice and develop curricula that are more relevant to the student experience and context. Bernstein provides a useful lens for examining the ways in which knowledge is structured in disciplines (in Reeler, 2015). Mignolo’s

work (2011) on decolonial thinking provides a useful way of examining the importance and value of local knowledge. He advocates changing the terms of the conversation and the content and going back to the reservoir of ways of life and thinking that is often dismissed by western theories. Reeler's (2015) article is interesting in that it elucidates the usefulness of drawing on multiple perspectives. In addition, decolonial thinking provides her with an appropriate theory to help her explain and justify her practice and explicitly address questions of relevance of knowledge. Reeler's (2015) work also raises important questions about the possibilities of decolonial thinking as a theoretical lens to help academics address the challenge raised in the recent student protests on the need for curriculum transformation in South African higher education. At the heart of this challenge, is the need for academics to consider the political nature of their work and the ways in which their practices and related theories include or exclude individuals or groups. While there is value in exploring multiple perspectives and drawing on a number of different theories that originate in different contexts, it is important to interrogate these theories in terms of their applicability to practice and context.

The call for some researchers to draw on southern theories (Connell, 2007) to address questions of relevance of theory to context is not a new one. Connell (2007, 244), for example, who has been critical of approaches that originate from the north, provides an argument for theories from the south or periphery. She points out that theories and contribution from the south are valuable and have something unique to offer. To quote Connell (2007, 244) 'social science in the periphery also... injects themes that are relatively uncommon in metropolitan thought'. While southern theories could contribute to theory enrichment there are problems with this argument as it is based on the assumption that all knowledge from the north is dominant and all southern knowledge is powerless. Whilst it is important to challenge northern hegemonic theories and knowledge systems, the emphasis on southern theories could result in the dismissal of excellent research as being irrelevant by virtue of where it comes from. Theories are not automatically relevant because they emerge from a particular context and one has to caution against the replacing of dominant theories from the north with those from the south.

Fashionable theory

When a version of this paper was presented at the Professional Development Colloquium in July this year a colleague expressed concern that over the years professional development practices and research have been informed by a series of approaches and theories and because these approaches were adopted by those who were considered experts in the field, there was an expectation that practitioners become familiar with and follow these dominant trends. As I have said above, it is important for academic developers to engage with theory and to engage with what is emerging to become powerful knowledge in the field. But appropriation without engaging with the knowledge critically and with little concern for the actualities of context is of limited value both in terms of finding solutions as well as in terms of enriching theory in academic development. Ashwin (2012) expresses a similar view in relation to research in higher education in general when he said research seems to move through a succession of theoretical lenses, the use of which appears to be a matter of fashion and not necessarily of extending theories.

Ball (2006a, 64) also cautions against the uncritical use of theory, arguing that ‘theory can, and often does, function to provide comforting and apparently stable identities for beleaguered academics in an increasingly slippery world’. He goes on to argue that

[T]heory can serve to conjure up its own anterior norms and lay its dead hand upon the creativity of the mind. Too often in educational studies, theory becomes no more than a mantric reaffirmation of beliefs rather than a tool for exploration and for thinking otherwise.

This mantric use of theory or theoretical evangelism as I refer to it does not offer the possibilities of seeing things in new ways and for stimulating the imagination. Cynically, at best the evangelical use of theory offers words by which to describe structures and situations.

Dimitriadis in the series introduction to Anyon’s (2009) book *Theory and Educational Research: Towards critical social explanations*, attributes the uncritical engagement with theory in higher education internationally to economic needs and neo-liberal

thought. He suggests that we have recently witnessed a full-scale assault on the 'research imaginary' in many academic disciplines, especially education (Dimitriadis in Anyon 2009). Economic-driven and ranking demands on higher education have effectively diminished thoughtful engagement with and between theory and research and between theory and practice. Higher education research agendas have been driven by the need to find quick solutions and practices that work, which can be easily replicated. This is exacerbated by an increased focus on throughput rates and quantifiable performance management criteria in South Africa and internationally. The latter often results in the evaluation of staff against predetermined criteria which obscures crucial aspects like developmental and innovative educational and pedagogical practices (Clarence-Fincham and Naidoo 2014); precisely the spaces within which many professional academic developers work. In response to this researchers resort to imposing theory on to a problem in order to find quick, easy-to-implement solutions rather than exploring the problem in depth and examining the structures, processes and social relations that contribute to the problem (Dimitriadis in Anyon 2009).

Theory as a tool for thinking otherwise

Theory, in professional academic development which is aimed at addressing social injustice, should serve not only to describe and explain practice but also change it. In this sense, the process of theorizing is both creative and emancipatory (Trowler 2012). An approach to theory that aims to transform the status quo and address social injustices has the potential to critique dominant discourses, ensure that silent voices are heard and become more inclusive. According to Ball (1995 265-266) theory is a vehicle for 'thinking otherwise', it is a platform for 'outrageous hypotheses' and for 'unleashing criticism'. He further argues that it is theory that can provide a 'language for challenge, and modes of thought, other than those articulated for us by dominant others' (Ball 1995, 265-266).

Theory is also political. Not only because it carries a point of view but also because the employment of theory can be used to promote particular agendas. As Britzman (2012,44) points out 'the audacity of theory contains a kernel of aggression and seeks to either destroy old views or protect them from changing, theory is not benign'. Theory can be used in both conservative and transformative ways and can result in

either maintaining the status quo or in transformation which could address social inequities. In this sense, theories do not have a fixed political meaning. Said (1983) argued that when theory moves from one context to another their meanings can be transformed in a radical or conservative direction. Theories can take on different implications depending on where, when and how they are being used. For example, conservative theories can be used in more transformative ways when translated into a different context (Burawoy 2015). Burawoy (2015) cites the example of the ways in which academics in South Africa use theory associated with the functions of conflict (conservative theories) against the apartheid state to illustrate this point. Thus, theories can be used in ways that are counter to their original intention. Given the fluidity of theory and the importance and fluidity of the context within which theory is applied perhaps more emphasis should be placed on theorising as an active process rather than on theory as a lens through which to view the world.

Theory use versus theorising

When we engage with theory we need to remember that we do not do so for its own sake and that we do not revere theory to the extent that we feel it cannot be criticised or used in more innovative ways. Some theorists encourage their readers to engage more critically and interactively with their work. Ball (2006b) cites the example of Bourdieu who wanted readers to read his works as ‘exercise books’ rather than as theories. In other words, he wanted readers to participate in his work, not merely to appropriate it. In this sense, the process of engaging theory is an active and a deeply reflective scholarly process. hooks (1994,70) is more explicit in her endeavour to invite readers to engage with and critically reflect on her work on feminist theory:

Reflecting on my own work in feminist theory, I find writing –
theoretical talk- to be most meaningful when it invites the reader to
engage in critical reflection and to engage in the practice of
feminism.

Swedberg (2014) also contends that in order to end up with better theory, we need to shift our main concern to theorising. For him, theorising is a creative yet practical process of producing theory. In terms of engaging theory Clegg (2012) also suggests that rather than an emphasis on theory we need to think about theorising as a process.

But she does not explicitly unpack how we can theorise and what the process of theorising might entail. In her discussion of her own work, it becomes apparent that for her (Clegg 2012) the process of drawing on different theorists in order to explain emergent themes in the data, themes that were not evident in the theory that she had began her research with, constitutes theorising. Drawing on Wright Mills' notion of intellectual craftsmanship Clegg (2012) explicates how she goes about assembling the theoretical tools that helped her think through research problems. In relation to this paper, however, the notion of theorising needs to be extended to include the ways in which it can contribute to transformative practice which in turn could extend and result in theory that is more sensitive to the socio-historical and political context within which practice is located. Like Clegg (2012) I also return to my sociological roots and draw, more broadly on the sociological imagination as a heuristic to help think about theory in professional academic development.

The sociological imagination and theorising in professional academic development

....the sociological imagination is not merely fashion. It is a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves connected with larger social realities. (C Wright Mills 2000:15)

The sociological imagination is a scholarly project and offers a way of being for academics working in the social sciences and education. Even though this was written more than 50 years ago, much of C Wright Mills' critique of developments in the society and in the social sciences holds true today.

There are three important inter-related ideas inherent in the sociological imagination that I see as being important for this article. The first is the notion of the sociological imagination as being a state of mind that turns personal problems into public issues. Second and related to this is the importance of moving from personal and familiar cultural experiences, stepping back and viewing one's own society as an outsider would. Third is his consideration of values which inform both sociology and society.

From personal problems to public issues

C Wright Mills (2000) was critical of both grand theory and abstracted empiricism that began to dominate the social sciences and sociology, in particular. His criticism of grand theory, in particular, the work of functionalists like Talcott Parson, is that 'it outruns any specific and empirical problem. It is not used to state more precisely or more adequately any new problem of recognizable significance' (Wright Mills 2000, 48). He argues that the problem with grand theory is that it is so general that its reference to and connection with actual observation (data) and practice is obscure. He suggests that instead of grand theory one needs theory that is located more firmly in the historical and structural milieu. Given the constantly changing nature of this context, such theory is inevitably tentative, fallible and dynamic. Wright Mills (2000) proposed the idea of the sociological imagination as a way of examining the relationship between the personal troubles of individuals (what we might refer to as agents) and the public issue of social structure. This interplay of personal troubles and public issues is conveyed in his conception of the sociological imagination as 'the vivid awareness of the relationship between experience and the wider society'. This is a key idea in developing context-specific social theory aimed at transforming individuals and society.

Its usefulness for professional academic development is that it speaks to the value of relating personal challenges that individual practitioners encounter to the micro as well as to the macro structural, cultural and historical context. Theorising for Wright Mills (2000) will involve a process whereby individual (or collective) practices are understood in terms of the intersection between personal troubles or biographies and histories and public issues or structures. Theorising occurs in different contexts and for different purposes (Trowler, 2012). In order to theorise with a redress and transformation agenda, it is imperative that professional academic developers examine the ways in which private troubles/biography intersect with public issues and history to produce desired outcomes.

As academic developers, we are often asked to provide 'quick solutions' to help teachers 'do things better' so that students can pass. This is reminiscent of the neoliberal, managerialist project discussed earlier where academic developers are expected to get the most done, for the least amount of money, in the shortest time. Very often these are 'tips for teachers' that work in one context and are expected to be

equally successful when transferred to other contexts. There are a number of problems with this approach. Those of us working in academic development know that the problems that we encounter and are asked to fix are complex and that the quick fix, decontextualised ‘tips-for-teachers’ approach is not the solution to the problem. The fact that this does not account for the specificities of the context and the interplay of individual efforts and structural enablements that contribute to this success is perhaps one of the biggest problems. These approaches often do not contribute to transformative practice. An approach that is more aligned with the sociological imagination is one suggested by Sfard (2013). She proposes discursive research where researchers and practitioners dig deep under the familiar and the obvious, looking for unsuspected, but highly consequential differences; and rather than trying to tell teachers what is going to work in their classrooms, the researcher should help them craft tailor-made solutions for their specific problems. Theorising in this approach involves engaging with and accounting for the complexities of the political, historical, social and political contexts. Rather than conform to the demands of institutional leaders and politicians this approach could be considered radical in that it seeks to transform practice through participative processes.

As professional developers who work with academic staff we are often asked by academic staff, who are discipline specialists, for references to the dominant theories to help them craft their teaching philosophies. In these instances, academics were not questioning that theory was important to demonstrate scholarly engagement in teaching and learning. They did however, fail to see theorising practice as a process of learning to become scholars of teaching and learning in their discipline or fields of practice which in turn informs practice. I want to suggest that our practices are never atheoretical. We may not start with a well-articulated theoretical approach but we all approach practice with a set of values or beliefs that inform the approach that we take. It is crucial that academics and academic developers enter into dialogue with their practice context before imposing a definitive theoretical lens on it. This includes both the actual experience of the participants, disciplinary as well as the socio-cultural and historical contexts. The dialogue between biography or personal experience and socio-historical context has to be ongoing, as should the dialogue between theory and practice. Dialogue between theory and practice or context is important for the enrichment of theory.

Along similar lines Smith's (2005) critiques mainstream Sociology because it does not pay sufficient attention to the actual lived experience of the research participants. In her work on institutional ethnography, she attempted to address this. She suggests starting with the actualities of people's lives and argues that research be viewed as discovery rather than explication of theory as analysis of empirical. She argues for the importance of expanding on peoples' knowledge rather than narrowing it down by framing it within a particular theoretical lens. This limits the possibilities of imaginative solutions. When academics begin with a theory, then use interview quotes and observations as illustrations of the categories and concepts the problem is viewed through a lens which restricts possibilities. The experiences and actualities of the lives of people are selectively explored. This does raise the question of whether research data or practices would look different if we did not start with theory? Theorising as described here is more emergent and tentative. It also, importantly, brings the actualities of peoples' experiences into dialogue with theories. As academic developers, it is important to embrace the tentativeness of our understanding of the world.

Viewing daily practices anew

In order to think about and develop novel and innovative practices, it is imperative that the social, political and cultural contexts are taken into consideration. This requires that we take a step back from our daily practices, look at them anew and ask questions of them. Wright Mills suggests that in order to address social problems, people need a way of thinking that will help them to use information and 'to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves' (Wright Mills 2000:5). They need to ask questions like: How are daily practices shaped by and shape the policy and institutional context in which they occur?

While Wright Mills does propose a process of distancing in order to see problems more clearly and there is value in that, he is not suggesting that academics are not engaged. We do need to caution that in stepping away from individual experience to broader society and in exploring the relationship between the individual and society

we do not forget, as Sayer (2011) points out, that which matters to people. Sayer (2011, 6) cautions

‘it seems that becoming a social scientist involves learning to adopt this distanced relation to social life, perhaps so as to be more objective, as if we could become more objective by ignoring part of the object. It therefore often tends to produce bland accounts of social life, in which it is difficult to assess the import of things for people’.

The challenge for professional academic developers is to be immersed in the messiness of real life context without being so bogged down in the quagmire of the messiness that we cannot open ourselves to alternative possibilities and be imaginative. Thus, the importance of thinking ourselves away from the familiar does not imply disengagement but provides space to broaden the lens to enable it to be more imaginative. This stepping back provides a catalyst for change by being acutely aware of the dynamic social contexts within which our practices are located. This is particularly important in professional academic development where we can sometimes become complacent and our practices become routine. There is comfort and safety in this. But the dynamic nature of professional development work requires that we embrace this work with the discomfort and interruption that comes with this dynamism. If we do not our practices become mantric or routine and our discourses become evangelic – uncritical and unchanging. Furthermore, critique of theory has to be linked to practice, if not critique remains rhetorical and does not result in transformation of structures and practices.

It is important to point out that even though Wright Mills (2000) acknowledged that criticism is not only the responsibility of public intellectuals (Giroux, 2015), he has been criticized because of the emphasis he placed on the role of academics who work in an insular way from the rest of society (Burawoy, 2008). Following Burawoy, I (2008) believe that academic developers and social scientists in general, have to engage in dialogue with both the academic as well as the broader community. This is important for understanding the ways in which both individual and collective actions can contribute to change. In addition, crucial aspect of this is dialogue with the theories that inform our research and practice.

Dialogue is difficult because knowledge is not equally valued. Soudien, 2014 raised this concern when he asked:

How do we begin dialogue which is able to engage with the best that is known in this context and which does not by definition position knowledge either favourably or negatively simply by virtue of where it comes from? (Soudien 2014)

I argue that rather than dismissing theories that originate from another context an important element of dialogue is critical engagement. We ought to step back and ask questions about the theories that we are using, about the links between power and the production of the theories we are reading and about their relevance. We also need to consider the possibilities that these theories do not provide an adequate explanation of what is actually happening and consequently cannot help in addressing social problems.

Values

Wright Mills (2000, 130) argued that in the formulation of problems it is important to clearly articulate 'the values that are threatened in the troubles and issues involved, who accepts them as values, and by whom or by what they are threatened'. He believed that the research questions that social scientists address should go beyond understanding what is to a concern for what ought to be. For him what ought to be is entrenched in the values that inform social science - those of freedom and reason, which in my reading of Wright Mills involves critique. He believed that bureaucratic social science, which is similar to the audit culture that we see in higher education, where the 'social science endeavor has been pinned down to the services of prevailing authorities' (Wright Mills 2000, 129), threatens these values. In addition to grand theory what he referred to as abstract empiricism, the large survey-type research was a key feature of bureaucratic social science. This type of research was driven by profit and did not aim to advance learning. He argues that the problem with this was its focus on individual opinion and did not include consideration of the structural, political and historical context which influences opinion. A further criticism related to the fact that this type of research did not necessarily address real social problems and tended to be atheoretical. He concedes that when reference is made to theory in large-

scale empirical research its role is merely to justify the study. He argues that literature is often consulted independently of the actual empirical study and conducted by an assistant who produces a literature review memorandum which 'is reshaped in an effort to surround the empirical study with theory ...to get a better story out of it' (Wright Mills 2000, 69). This was contrary to the values of reason and freedom. These values were important in the prevailing socio-political context at the time Wright Mills (2000) wrote. However, in light of the higher education context outlined earlier in this paper, I think that in addition to reason and freedom, another value that ought to inform our practice as activist professional developers should be social justice encompassing notions of access and equality. This is aligned with Wright Mills' (2000) belief that research questions that social scientists analyse must not only be concerned with what is, but with what ought to be.

Theorising is not merely about finding solutions to problems. More crucially it is about stepping back and asking questions of the theoretical lenses that we use. Wenger-Trayner (2013) with regards to practice based research in education argues that all researchers (and practitioners) must ask themselves the following questions: which theory is most appropriate given my data (or problem), my methodology and the story I am telling and does one theory adequately tell this story? Further questions would be to what extent are the theoretical lenses aligned with the values of reason, freedom and justice and am I in the process of theorising, engaging dialogically?

In the next section of this paper, I build on Wright Mills ideas by translating them into broad ideas that we may be useful in thinking about professional academic development in the South African higher education context.

Applying a Sociological Imagination

From the idea of the sociological imagination, I have developed three key considerations relating to theorising in professional development. The first principle is to critically explore the practice and/or research context in order to develop an understanding and critique of the dynamic interplay between private troubles we face our classrooms or units and public issues, the structural constraints and enablements. Second, we do need to step back and ask questions of the theoretical lenses we use in

our practice and avoid unquestioning strict adherence to one theory. In other words, we need to enter into dialogue with theories, not just the fashionable ones. We ought to bring theories into dialogue with the practice or research context and use practice as our craft to engage more critically with theory. This may contribute to enriching theory and sparking debate. Third and perhaps most importantly the values of social justice, critique and freedom should inform theory and practice.

Conclusion

I began this article with a quote from Kant who suggests that theorising is an inherently democratic process in that anyone can theorise. For academic developers, their practice provides an exciting space for theorising. In this context theorising ideally means connecting theory and practice whereby experience/practice becomes our intellectual work in higher education. I suggested that the idea of the sociological imagination, which is quality of mind that turns personal troubles into public issues, speaks powerfully to the importance of context in theorising professional academic development. This is crucial for critique and emancipatory practice. I argued that rather than feeling compelled to engage with fashionable theories we need to ensure that we bring theory into dialogue with context, challenge or question theories with the lived realities of our context and the extent to which they can help us solve problems in our context. We also need to problematise things that are taken for granted – that originate from another context which we normally uncritically engage with because of their dominance. And importantly should avoid closure and acknowledge the tentativeness and temporality in our theories and that as our context changes so too will our practice and of necessity so too will our theories. This will help us extend theories and, more importantly, develop more socially just practices.

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