‘What works’ does not work! Researching lifelong learning in the culture of audit

Phil Hodkinson
Emeritus Professor of Lifelong Learning
University of Leeds

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Dedicated to:

Heather Hodkinson
Andrew Sparkes
Martin Bloomer
John Smith
Helen Colley
Miriam Zukas

Of all the very many people who have helped shape and influence my academic career, I owe you the most.

The School of Continuing Education
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Of all the happy and supportive places where I have worked, this became and remains my spiritual home.

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‘What works’ does not work! Researching lifelong learning in the culture of audit

Abstract

Especially in the second half of my academic career, both education and research have increasingly operated within a zeitgeist of audit, measurable outcomes, technical accountability and transparent precision. Research was increasingly tasked to find out ‘what works’ – on the assumption that policy and practice would thereby be improved. I didn’t and don’t really fit within this way of working and understanding the world. The more research I did into lifelong learning, in its many forms, and the more I engaged with and thought about the research process, the more it became apparent that the times were out of joint – or I was! For a short period in the early 1990s, the type of qualitative research I did was under intense attack, from a reborn positivism. At the same time, my research work combined with that of others to show that learning, in workplaces, colleges, universities and local communities was predominantly what is often termed informal and much of that learning was unvalued and ignored in the target-driven culture of qualifications and league tables. These audit approaches strongly influence the conduct of research, policies towards education and guidance provision, and the practices of guidance and teaching, in ways that for many practitioners seemed oppressive, yet at the same time were often ineffectual, in the sense that they rarely achieved what they were supposed to achieve. Despite these pressures, much good qualitative research, much good teaching and guidance and much valuable learning continued, and much of that learning remained uncaptured by the increasingly pervasive targets and measures. ‘What works’ did not work. In this talk I will look back upon my research practices and upon the evidence from my research studies, to examine the nature of these pressures and paradoxes, and to identify some concerns and hopes for the future.

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To all complex problems there is a simple solution – and it’s wrong

Introduction

In this valedictory lecture, my argument centres upon the problems associated with a currently dominant way of understanding learning, education, career development and research. Though the detail of this dominant approach varies from context to context and issue to issue, I will argue that there is a central common core – and that it is mistaken. As a shorthand label for this broad approach I use a term derived from Habermas – *technical rationality.* However, this approach can also be understood as a series of linked folk theories – theories that implicitly underpin many approaches to education, learning and career progression in contemporary policy and management. I will also argue that there is a closely linked folk theory of research and of the relationship between research, policy and practice. However, unlike the other folk theories, that for research is explicitly argued for by a vociferous and influential minority within the academic research community.

All this matters, because the folk theories are wrong, leading to serious misunderstandings and inappropriate policies and practice. During this lecture I will draw attention to several paradoxes associated with these issues. The first is that policy approaches intended to improve upon the reality of educational provision often fail, partly because they are based upon a deep misunderstanding of the reality they are trying to change.

Throughout my academic life, I have been resisting these increasingly dominant technically rational approaches. I will use the valedictory status of this lecture to indulge in a reflection on key moments in my research career to explain why I feel that these approaches are fundamentally and damagingly mistaken.

Training Credits: technically rational assumptions about career development

My first major research project was an investigation of Training Credits, a short-lived government scheme to train young people. This scheme was introduced in a pilot form in 1991. Drawing upon the then dominant market thinking, the central idea was that each trainee would be given a credit, which was to be used

to pay for their training. This was supposed to give the trainee customer power over training providers. Central to the operation of Training Credits in the pilot scheme we studied was a folk theory about career decision-making and career development. Each trainee would first draw up a Careers Guidance Action Plan, jointly with a professional careers adviser. This action plan would set out their training needs to achieve the desired career goal. The folk theory of career guidance and development that implicitly underpinned this official process runs like this:

- Career decisions can and should be made by evaluating the self, evaluating the employment opportunities, and making a rational decision about what to do
- Career decisions entail matching a person with an employment opportunity
- Career progression can and should be planned and stable over time
- Career progression is primarily determined by the decisions made by the individuals following that career
- 'Good' career decisions will lead to more employment and less dropping out of education, training or work
- Career progression is normally linear.

I researched Training Credits with two people who have been very influential in my own academic development – Andrew Sparkes and Heather Hodkinson. The research was a small longitudinal case study, following 12 trainees for 18 months, from school and through their training. As well as repeatedly interviewing the trainees, we also interviewed networks of stakeholders involved with them. These included parents, careers teachers, careers advisers, training providers and employers.

Perhaps the most important finding was that the career decision-making and career progression of these young people was very different from the expected official version, and from the folk theory that implicitly underpinned it (Hodkinson, et al., 1996). In making sense of this mismatch between assumptions and reality, we argued that the official assumptions were technically rational. The concept of technical or instrumental rationality comes from Habermas. Rex Gibson (1986, p7), an influential tutor of mine at the Cambridge Institute in the 1970s, gives a good definition:

> 'Instrumental rationality represents the preoccupation with means in preference to *ends.* It is concerned with method and efficiency rather than with *purposes*. … It is the divorce of fact from value, and the preference, in that divorce, for fact.' (Emphasis in the original)

Though a good definition, one part requires amplification. When Gibson argues that technical rationality is less concerned with ends, what he means is that ends are taken as given and to be unproblematic. The issue is how best to achieve

them. The 'unproblematic' end for the Training Credits scheme was employed young people contributing to 'UK Limited'. What we termed technically rational career decision-making and progression were the intended means to achieve this end.

Our research pointed to two key problems with the technically rational folk theory, which were confirmed in subsequent research (Hodkinson, 1998; Ball et al., 2000; Bowman et al., 2005). They are:

1) Actual career decision-making was pragmatically rational. By this I mean that it was based upon partial information, drew on emotions and self perceptions as well as evidence, and was strongly influenced by others. This embodied decision-making process was an integral part of personal development, not a separate technical set of procedures to be utilised. However, it was not irrational. Young people had good reasons for what they chose to do.
2) Career progression was often non-linear and strongly influenced by actions, events and circumstances that lay beyond the control of the young person. For example, employers had more say about training and career progression than did most of the young people, one of whom was made redundant and forced to change career.

Behind these two problems lies a more fundamental critique of technical rationality, which I will develop through this lecture. Career decision-making and progression:

- are *complex* and *relational*. By relational, I mean that when one of the many factors influencing career progression changes, this may in turn have knock-on effects on others. I will explain this more fully later.
- entail both *social structures* and individual *agency.* This contradicts most of the existing ways in which career decision making were then theorised, which either focussed too much on the thought and actions of the individuals (agency) (for example, Super, 1990), or on the dominating influence of external social structures, including employment or opportunity structures (for example, Roberts, 1975).

I can give one brief illustration of where the false folk theory of career decision-making and progression leads. In the late 1990s, the newly independent Careers Services were paid according to the number of career action plans the advisers produced. The implication was that guidance was of no worth unless it led directly to a technically rational output. Skilled advisers had to complete the guidance interview doing what they judged to be what the client needed, then devote a few minutes at the end, filling in a form that was often irrelevant. The risk was that the form distorted the earlier guidance process and/or undermined the value of the guidance session to the client.

Technically rational approaches to education

In developing my research on career progression I became equally interested in education and learning, post-16. Bereiter (2002) writes about what he terms a folk theory of learning. He describes this as the view that learning is about putting content into minds. This is a grossly over-simplified version of what Sfard (1996) called the acquisition metaphor for learning. From this folk theory point of view, learning consisted of deciding what the content was that should be learned (knowledge, skills, etc); and putting this content into the minds of the learners, for example through effective tuition. The success of the learning could be unproblematically determined by testing whether the learner knew or could do what they were supposed to have learned. It then followed that the effectiveness of teaching could be judged by the assessment results of the learners. At its most basic, it is this assumption that lies behind the on-going drive to formally assess school, college and university students at every turn. Thus, the dominant policy view of learning at school and college is that there is no valuable learning without passing an external assessment – that is, without getting a qualification.

One of the earliest and most influential places where this technically rational view of learning was explicitly set out is the Audit Commission Report of 1993. This Report argued that money was being wasted because of student non-completion of courses. To answer the question 'How Effective is 16-19 Education?' the Audit Commission listed six performance indicators. They were:

- participation rates, because they indicate young people's views of the worth of 16-19 education;
- numbers of qualifications in the general population, because a key purpose of 16-19 education is to increase these;
- proportions of students who succeed on 16-19 courses;
- 'value-added' by A-level and GCSE courses, because value-added evaluations take account of the progress which students make;
- interested parties' views on the quality of the 16-19 curriculum;
- the quality of students' work as evaluated through inspection.
  (Audit Commission, 1993, p21)

The first four items in this list demonstrate a fundamentally technically rational view of education and learning. As in all technically rational processes, the ends (staying on to the end of the course and achieving the qualification) are seen as unproblematic, whilst the effort is directed at ways of increasing their achievement. Thus, efficiency became a key performance issue for colleges and other education institutions. Over the following years, some of these performance indicators became direct measures of success, especially in Further Education (FE), with funding determined by them. Having used these indicators to show that there was much wasted money because of high levels of failure to complete, the Audit Commission drew on the folk theory of career decision-making and progression, by arguing that one way to reduce waste was to ensure

that fewer students were enrolled on the wrong courses. The folk theory of learning and education which underpins the Audit Commission Report and much English government policy goes like this:

- learning is the acquisition of content;
- successful acquisition is measured by qualification achievement;
- teaching, curriculum and correct choice of courses are the main influences on the success of learning;
- measurement of learning can be used to judge the effectiveness of education;
- successful educational/learning progression entails rising along a linear hierarchy of qualifications (as is shown by the value-added performance indicator).
- learning is always a good thing – more of it, efficiently provided, equals better.

Following James Callaghan's famous speech at Ruskin College, in 1976, a further policy assumption has been that the prime purpose of learning is instrumental, and that the most important instrumental reason for learning is to gain employment and help improve economic performance. When this instrumentalism is combined with content acquisition, the result is an archetypally technically rational view of education. The purpose is known and taken as unproblematic, whilst vast efforts are devoted to achieving that purpose with greater efficiency.

With others, I have conducted three major research projects into learning in FE and Higher Education (HE). Martin Bloomer and I followed a sample of young people through FE for two years. This work provided a significant challenge to the technically rational folk theory of education. Most importantly, we showed that the young people themselves constructed their own learning careers from the opportunities they encountered in college. This studentship (Bloomer, 1997) meant that, despite policy assumptions, the prescribed curriculum and the work of the teacher were only partial influences on learning. It follows that using assessment results to judge teacher and college (or school) effectiveness is seriously flawed. Furthermore, many of the young people we interviewed claimed to have learned a lot from college, even if they failed to complete the course, or did so but did not take the qualification. Thus, not only do assessments fail to adequately measure the success of the teachers, they also fail to identify much important learning. That is, the assumptions that underpinned the selection of many of the Audit Commission's performance indicators were false.

Following the influence of the Audit Commission Report (1993), a significant issue for policy makers, their quangos and for college management has been retention rates. These have been seen as a major performance measure for the FE sector, with a direct influence on inspection grades and funding. Our

research showed clearly that the reasons why students dropped out of college involved issues in their wider lives, sometimes, but not always, interacting with experiences in college (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001). For example, better teaching would not have stopped Amanda Ball from dropping out to care for her male partner, who was seriously ill. The parallel with career progression is exact, and for the same reasons. Learning is part the student, not a separate technical process with which they engage. As Beckett and Hager (2002) argue, learning is embodied. Martin Bloomer's main interest was in the ways in which students influenced and took control of their own learning – their agency. Our research produced plentiful evidence that this was important. However, we also found plenty of evidence that social structures mattered too. We evidenced some of the ways in which gender and social class influenced student agency and also the opportunities that students had for learning. For example, we showed how cultural capital influenced the relative success and progression of students (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2002).

In a later study, with Helen Bowman and Helen Colley, I followed much more middle class students through and beyond a fulltime HE Masters degree programme (Bowman, et al., 2005). This study confirmed much of the earlier work on career decision-making and development. It also further demonstrated the significance of gender and social class in educational experience and success. Cultural capital was important, but so were economic and social capital, as Bourdieu would have predicted.

Thus, just like the folk theory of career decision-making and progression, the equally technically rational theory of learning in education fails, partly because it falsely separates out learning from the agency of the learners, and from the social structures in which they live and learn, and in which schools and colleges are located. For the technical rationalists, the problem with agency is that people will persist in not doing what is expected. Structural inequalities further distort expected behaviours and outcomes, through the (re)production of inequalities.

My third project looking at learning was the Transforming Learning in FE (TLC) project. This project was part of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). It was a very large project, looking at learning in 16/17 learning sites in four different FE colleges, over three years of fieldwork. There was a large team of fellow researchers:

Martin Bloomer	Jenny Davies	Mike Tedder
Gert Biesta		
Denis Gleeson	Madeleine Walhberg	Graham Anderson
David James	Kim Diment	Eunice Wheeler
Phil Hodkinson	Helen Colley	Tony Scaife
Keith Postlethwaite	Wendy Maull	

Though he died before the TLC project was a year old, it was my collaboration with Martin Bloomer that gave rise to the basic idea, and Martin led the bid writing and the early days of the fieldwork. For me, the interest was to balance our learning careers research, by turning the spotlight on the place where educational learning supposedly took place. Put differently, I wanted to look at the two sides of a person's *horizons for learning.* One part is the self – the student's life, positions and dispositions, which had been the focus of the learning careers research. The second is the context in which that learning took place: for the TLC, a college learning site. I do not have time or space to fully explain the TLC methods or its findings (see James and Biesta, 2007). Instead, I want to focus on one key part of those findings, which was that learning in college is directly influenced by all the following:

- The positions, dispositions and actions of the students;
- The positions, dispositions and actions of the tutors;
- The location and resources of the learning site which are not neutral, but enable some approaches and attitudes, and constrain or prevent others;
- The syllabus or course specification, the assessment and qualification specifications;
- The time tutors and students spend together, their interrelationships, and the range of other learning sites students are engaged with;
- Issues of college management and procedures, together with funding and inspection body procedures and regulations, and government policy;
- Wider vocational and academic cultures, of which any learning site is part;
- Wider social and cultural values and practices, for example around issues of social class, gender and ethnicity, the nature of employment opportunities, social and family life, and the perceived status of Further Education as a sector.

This list is indicative and not complete and, in particular situations, other factors may come into play. The list helps make clear what I mean by *relational*. For all these influences are important, but no one of them was dominant. Rather, they all interacted in different ways in different sites or for different students or tutors. To make things even more complicated, when any one influence changed, this often had knock-on effects for others. Because these complex relations varied from college site to college site, what worked well in one site or for one group of students did not work in another site or for another group of students. This relational complexity provides the most important challenge to technically rational thinking, for it explains why the search for universal mechanisms and solutions is doomed to fail. The folk theory of learning and education resembles real learning experiences rather less closely than the phlogiston theory resembles the realities of fire.

Overlooking informal learning

It was research into learning at work that first drew my attention to what is often termed informal learning. The first TLRP project I completed, with Heather Hodkinson, was part of a network of five projects, focussed on improving learning at work. The Network members were:

Helen Rainbird	Ann Munro
Karen Evans	Natasha Kersh
Lorna Unwin	Alison Fuller
Phil Hodkinson	Heather Hodkinson
Peter Senker	

Within this Network, Heather and I were researching the ways in which secondary schoolteachers learned at work. As other workplace learning literature had already made clear (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Eraut et al., 1998; Billett, 2001), the most important influence on learning at work was the everyday working practices of the firm. Thus, Lave and Wenger (1991, p35) argued,

> '…learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of the generative social practice of the lived in world.'

The schoolteachers we studied learned in largely tacit ways, simply by being teachers – by doing the job. Heather observed such learning in classrooms and laboratories, but also, interestingly, in coffee breaks and lunchtimes. The nature of the working practices, including learning, was influenced by the cultures of the subject departments where the teachers worked, and by the national regulatory frameworks which governed many aspects of school practice. The dispositions of the individual teachers influenced those cultural practices, including learning. These findings resonated with those of the other studies in the Network (Evans, et al., 2006).

Whilst we were doing this research, the then DfES introduced a national scheme to force teachers to learn how to use computers in their classrooms. This initiative consisted of compulsory training packages, to be used by all schools and all teachers. It conformed to the technically rational folk theory model. Using computers in classrooms was assumed to entail the acquisition of the knowledge and skills to do it, and the training materials and programmes would achieve that. The programme largely failed, for a number of reasons that we have identified (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005). One of them concerns us here. The DfES programme fundamentally misunderstood that learning at work is 'informal'. Instead of enhancing and modifying existing working practices in the schools, the training was a technically rational bolt-on package. Many of the teachers we were studying did not even have computers in their classrooms,

upon which they could use and develop some of the skills they had been introduced to.

As policy makers became aware of the significance of informal learning in relation to work, an obvious move was to categorise learning as formal or informal, and treat the two as different. The European Union actually uses three categories: formal, non-formal and informal (European Commission, 2001). With Helen Colley and Janice Malcolm, I conducted a literature review about what was known about non-formal and informal learning (Colley et al., 2003). We rapidly discovered that though the terms were widely used, the definitions of them varied considerably. Our conclusion was that there is no clear difference between formal and informal learning. Furthermore, work that Helen and I did on the TLC project showed that much of the learning within college was also what many authors would categorise as informal (Hodkinson and Colley, 2005). That is, much learning in college is of what Jackson (1961) memorably termed the hidden curriculum. Trainee nursery nurses were learning much more than the prescribed and assessed course provision, and they learned through participating in the cultural practices of the college course, just as teachers learned through participating in the cultural practices of their workplace. The research also showed that whether or not learning is seen as good is a value judgement. For example, Colley et al. (2003) describe learning that reinforced the female gendered and working class nature of nursery nursing, including an acceptance of high levels of emotional labour, and of relatively low status and pay for a difficult and demanding job. This directly relates to one of Habermas's (1972) main critiques of technical rationality: that it stops us considering important issues of value. How can the Audit Commission evaluate the effectiveness of learning, without first identifying what learning is of value and why? They could not do that, because these are not technical questions, and the answers are inherently contestable. Colley was clear that she thought the learning that reinforced gender and class inequality in relation to nursery nursing was harmful. Many employers of nursery nurses might disagree, seeing these conditions as necessary for running a successful business.

As an aside, the existing academic theories of learning that we read were also inadequate in explaining the complexity of learning that we were finding. Some theories were quite good at explaining learning as a social and cultural process (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991; Engeström, 1999, 2001), but in those theories, individual learners disappeared. Consequently, I worked with Gert Biesta and David James on a new theoretical approach, which integrated a cultural theory of learning, with a theory of learning cultures (Hodkinson, et al., 2008).

My final major research project, Learning Lives, extended this work. This was also a TLRP project, with another large team:

Gert Biesta	Mike Tedder
John Field	Irene Malcom, Heather Lynch
Ivor Goodson	Norma Adair
Phil Hodkinson	Heather Hodkinson, Geoff Ford, Ruth Hawthorn
Flora McCloud	Paul Lambe

Our aim was to understand learning in all its forms in relation to the lives of people. By adding life history research and the analysis of British Household Panel Survey data to longitudinal qualitative research in real time, we were able to study learning in all facets of a person's life, and across the whole life course to date. This research has confirmed that learning is ubiquitous in people's lives, and that most of it does not even remotely conform to the technically rational folk theory. The only bits of learning where this folk view may hold even a fraction of credibility are short bolt-on training courses. However, our research shows that such courses are only really effective if they become part of much wider informal learning: that is, if and when they cease to resemble the folk theory - another paradox.

The research shows another problem with the technically rational folk theory of learning. Based upon the part of this theory that sees learning as climbing a linear hierarchical qualifications ladder, the Higher Education Funding Council for England has recently decided only to fund university courses for adults, when they are at a higher level than the student's previous highest qualification. However, the quantitative Learning Lives research done by Flora Macleod and Paul Lambe shows that most of the courses adults take are either not aimed at a recognised part of the qualification framework, so that the progression rule cannot be applied; or, if they are aimed at recognised qualifications, most are at a level the same as or below those already achieved. There are very good reasons for this. The need for and interest in learning varies over the life course, and addressing new needs often requires studying at a simple starting level. Furthermore, we can understand people's learning in two ways. Either it is relatively trivial, in which case simple levels are often all that is needed, or it concerns significant personal change or development. If it is the latter, 'progression' is more like personal growth and transformation. It is often non-linear, bearing little resemblance to externally imposed qualification hierarchies. The Learning Lives research adds significant support for traditional forms of adult and community education, where students often did not want, need or take a qualification at all. This broadly relates to another policy paradox. The dominant aims of educational policy entail personal change (for example in becoming employable, or becoming socially included). Yet learning that might achieve such personal change least resembles the folk theory of learning that underpins those same policy initiatives.

Based upon all this research, the folk theories of learning, education and career progression remind me strongly of the tale of the Emperor's new clothes. There is no credible research evidence that learning in real life bears anything other

than a very pale resemblance to learning in this theory. Yet, as in the classic tale, almost everyone, except a few researchers, accepts, goes along with or even celebrates the folk theories. Unlike the tale, no matter how frequently researchers like myself and my colleagues or Frank Coffield and his colleagues (Coffield, 2000; Edward et al., 2007; Spours et al., 2007) say that the Emperor has no clothes, those in power are unable or unwilling to reject the illusion. This strikes me as the social science equivalent of using flat earth theories to get a space ship to the moon, or solving Britain's current financial problems, by insisting that chemists turn base metal into gold. Why we do not reject the folk theories is a question I will address later. Before that, I next want to consider the technically rational folk theories of research.

Technically rational approaches to educational research: evidence-based policy and practice

For about the last ten years, there has been a resurgence of an inherently technically rational view about what makes good educational research. The commonest label for this approach is evidence-based practice (or sometimes policy). Thus, in 2000, David Blunkett, whilst Secretary of State for Education, instructed the ESRC that:

> Social science should be at the heart of policy-making. We need a revolution in relations between government and the social research community – we need social scientists to help to determine *what works and why*, and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective (Blunkett, 2000, cited in Evans et al., 2000, p1, emphasis added by them).

This government pressure for research to determine what works coincided with a drive from within the academic research community for a scientific approach to educational research, with the explicit purpose of providing robust evidence to improve policy and practice (Hammersley, 2002). As Thomas (2004) points out, central to this approach is a need to produce robust syntheses of the findings of many research projects, in order to produce safe generalisable guides to action. In 2001, the United States federal government followed a similar path to that in Britain, but in a more draconian form. The No Child Left Behind Act legally required all researchers using government funding for educational research to adopt the methodological principles of evidence-based practice. This was an unprecedentedly direct macro-political intervention into the existing struggles over what should count as good research. This government intervention went much further than exhortation, involving a direct legal control over one of the major sources of research funding. This intervention provided a direct and substantial threat to the careers of American educational researchers who were committed to work in ways that lie outside these legally enforced principles.

I have once been subjected to pressure to conform to this approach. When we submitted the TLRP Network bid on improving workplace learning, the funding was conditional, because the TLRP steering group felt that we had only partly met their evidence-based practice methodological standards. The research team responded to the conditions, and then had an informal meeting with the then Programme Director, Charles Desforges. After this, my project was instructed to do some more methodological work, to establish ways to measure learning outcomes in the workplace, so as to establish the extent to which learning at work could be improved. This challenge resulted in a publication about the dangers of focusing research on learning at work on measured outcomes (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004). Long before that happened, Heather and I had a meeting with Professor Desforges, and were informed that, unless we toed the required line, he would fund the rest of the Network, but without our project. There followed substantial micro-political activity before the Network was eventually allowed to proceed in its entirety.

The strength of the evidence-based practice movement derives from the blending of two powerful political and intellectual forces. One was the governmental striving for research solutions to policy problems, exemplified in the Blunkett quote. The second was the intellectual tradition of positivism, reborn and rearticulated, for example by Oakley (2000), Feuer et al. (2002), and the National Research Council, (2002). The epistemological and ontological arguments for and against positivism, post-postivism or empiricism have been lengthy and prolific. (In addition to those already cited, see also: Phillips and Burbules, 2000; Smith, 1989, 1993; Gallagher, 2006: Hammersley, 1992; Pring, 2000; Sparkes, 1992; Flyvberg, 2001; Stronach and MacLure, 1997.) To many, such debates appear complex, largely incomprehensible, and of dubious relevance - resembling medieval arguments about how many angels can be fitted on the point of a pin. I prefer Pring's (2000, p89) view that

> 'Without the explicit formulation of the philosophical background [to different dominant ways of thinking] – with the implications for verification, explanation, knowledge of reality – *researchers may remain innocently unaware of the deeper meaning and commitments of what they say or how they conduct their research*.' [emphasis added.]

My own position has been explained elsewhere (Hodkinson, 2004; Smith and Hodkinson, 2005), where I have argued that positivism and evidence-based policy approaches are both inherently technically rational. The evidence-based practice position can be summarised as a folk theory of educational research, as follows:

- all research must be objective;
- the findings of that research must be valid, reliable and generalisable;
- good research will identify and measure clearly isolatable causes for educational problems;

- good educational research will accurately measure educational and learning success;
- good research will provide universally applicable solutions to educational problems: in Blunkett's words, find out what works;
- the prime determinant of research quality is the transparency and objectivity of the methodology;
- Appropriate use of suitable method will lead to single, correct, factual findings.

My guess is that some of the audience find much of this 'folk theory' broadly acceptable and unproblematic. One way of explaining why I disagree is by uncovering its technical rationality. Thus, the folk theory of research has nothing to say about the ends of research. These are simply seen as the unproblematic solution to known problems, and under the evidence-based practice approach, the problems are identified and prioritised by those in power. In the current climate, this entails asking researchers to produce solutions to policy problems, which in turn derive from the false folk theories of education, learning and career progression already identified. The second technically rational assumption is that research is primarily concerned with means. The assumption is that for any research question or problem there is a correct methodology which will provide the only correct answers. Methods that are assumed to maximise objectivity, such as randomised controlled trials, are best. Second comes quantified research based upon tested and therefore reliable and supposedly valid scales. Third come more general questionnaires and a long way fourth come the various forms of qualitative research (National Commission, 2002).

There are three fundamental problems with this folk theory, which have been more fully explored in the literature already cited. They are:

1) Much intellectual argument, not so far successfully refuted, shows that complete research objectivity is impossible.
2) The folk theory assumes that the educational world works like a technical or engineering system, where all forces can be known and their effects predicted. Flyvbjerg, (2001) argues that this is wrong, suggesting, therefore, that the case study should be the prime social science research approach, as it best addresses the relational complexity of social life. My own research reaches the same conclusions.
3) Critical researchers argue that such supposedly neutral and objective research approaches fail to challenge fundamental social inequalities, by seeing educational problems as technical, not social and complex. Thus, failing schools are a result of poor management and teaching, not the social disadvantages faced by the communities from which they draw their students.

Behind these three challenges lies another paradox. For the folk theory of research prioritises facts, yet cannot deal with some important 'facts' about educational research:

- Not everything of importance can be measured, isolated or quantified.
- Significant numbers of academics cannot and do not accept this folk theory. Feuer et al. (2002), for example, call for all researchers to unite behind a position that many of those they seek to convince fundamentally oppose. They may as well ask committed socialists to become right wing free market thinkers, overnight.
- Most British educational research is qualitative, yet even the best of this fails to meet many of the methodological requirements of the folk theory. This results, for example, in the routine exclusion of such research from Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI) research reviews, which in turn, renders those reviews largely valueless (MacLure, 2005).

There is no sign yet of a generally agreed resolution to these conceptual and factual problems in relation to research methodology. Instead, backed by government funding, influence and, in the USA, legislation, the researchers who do believe in many aspects of this folk theory seek to force their deeply held research beliefs on the rest of the field (Oakley, 2000; Feuer et al., 2002; National Commission, 2002). Those who disagree strive with equal zeal to undermine and limit this evidence-based practice drive, as I am doing here. None of my research projects has fulfilled the criteria that typically derive from the folk theory of research. Therefore, either the folk theory is wrong, or all my research has been poor and inadequate, and all our findings lack validity and usefulness.

Technical rationality, audit and league tables

Power (1997) argues that we are increasingly operating within an audit society, arising from a lack of trust of professionals, and a need to demonstrate quality and value for money. As he shows, audit does not work, even from his own perspective of accountancy. Too much cannot be accurately measured, and as the measures of quality are used to influence practice, they result in serious feedback distortions. This is because of what I believe to be a universal educational truth: *for any measure of performance, the best way to improve your rating is NOT to work on the features that are supposed to be measured.* Thus, if you want to improve test results, teach to the test and recruit different students. If you want higher retention rates, change the course intake and give fewer students a second chance in education. Those in power have to keep changing the measures, to stay one jump ahead of institutional and professional game playing, and to refocus on issues that were sidelined or damaged by the last lot of measures. Theirs is a constant search for the 'right' measures, but it is futile and the effects of any set of measures are far from transparent – rather, they become gradually apparent, over time. This leads to what Stronach and Morris (1994) termed 'policy hysteria' and, I would add, its close relation, management

hysteria. The frequent changes entailed in such hysteria increase stress for staff, add much what seems to me to be unprofitable but expensive extra work and administration, and undermine even medium term strategic planning.

Audit measures feed league tables. When I was at university in the mid-1960s, friends of mine told me about their time in Huddersfield Grammar School. In that school, the then headmaster drew up annual league tables of the subject departments' examination results. Woe betide any head of department whose subject dropped down this internal ranking. It seemed bizarre then, but almost normal now. Perhaps that head was a visionary, thirty years ahead of his time. We now have league tables for schools and for universities, which are seen as increasingly important in the strategies of educational managers and policy makers. One argument is that league tables will promote competition, so that teachers and researchers, schools, colleges and universities, will constantly strive to do better, thus raising standards across the board. Anyone who follows a team sport knows why this does not work. League tables construct and ensure permanent failure, for some are ranked at or towards the bottom, and for every rise there must be compensating falls. This nil-sum leads to another policy paradox: we strive to increase educational quality across the board, and especially for those schools at the bottom, through devising and using a system that makes such universal improvement impossible. League tables work well for those that are succeeding. Their success brings status, financial rewards and the enthusiasm to preserve their position. For those deemed to be failing, they bring stress, disillusion and decreasing resources.

So why are we in this ludicrous situation? Because technically rational audit and league tables, based upon what I have termed the folk theories of career progression, education, learning and research actually work very well, in four ways. Firstly, they give policy makers and managers an illusion of the possibility of control. They appear to open up possibilities of quick and simple solutions to complex problems. As the aphorism with which I opened the paper suggests and my research makes clear, these are false hopes, but they remain highly seductive. Secondly, technically rational audit and league tables reinforce and legitimate hierarchical views of success, further reinforcing structural inequalities based on class, gender and ethnicity. In other words, they work to protect and preserve privilege. Thirdly, they legitimate privilege and the unequal sharing out of scarce resources, giving most to the successful, and least to those with greatest problems. All this deflects attention away from issues of structural inequality, and redefines disadvantage as caused by poor teaching and /or individual student failures. Fourthly, technically rational audit and league tables enable governments to deflect responsibility for the educational failures which their polices reinforce and amplify. The blame is neatly passed down to the practitioners and the students. Simultaneously, the audit-based league tables reinforce the self-worth of those who are succeeding, by encouraging them to claim professional credit for their structural advantages. Consequently, the successes of technical rationality are actually ideological. My final paradox is

that supremely technical, transparent and objective approaches turn out to be anything but. Is this what Bourdieu termed misrecognition, or Marxist false consciousness? I prefer the former, but you can take your choice.

So where do we go from here? This is increasingly your problem not mine, but I can offer four partial answers.

1) As Power (1997) and Stronach et al. (2002) argued, audit approaches ultimately fail, even in their own terms. They are increasingly expensive to administer, and problems of too many targets that frequently change and associated worker stress will lead to an eventual rethink.

2) So resistance is not futile. It is important to continue the fight, to oppose and undermine the technically rational procedures and the belief systems (the folk theories) upon which they depend. Fight to change or remove stupid procedures, and if you have to comply, work hard to avoid the creeping acceptance that they are somehow appropriate.

3) Continue to do the best and most professional job you can, as teacher, careers adviser, manager or researcher, despite rampant technical rationality. All my research shows much excellent teaching and much valuable learning, despite everything. I have seen and continue to see much high quality research of many different types, quantitative and qualitative, and I have worked for some far-sighted and humane managers.

4). For those deeply concerned about issues of deprivation, social inequalities and social justice, the fight goes on. Technically rational approaches did not create an unequal society, and whatever educational policy fashion replaces them is unlikely to remove it. English schooling remains roughly as unequal now as it was just after World War II. We have tried the 11+ and tripartism, comprehensive education, the national curriculum, and now testing to destruction and league tables. We raised the leaving age to 16, and now to 18. We have tried practitioner independence, competition, partnership and obsessive top-down micro-management. Guess what – throughout all those differing approaches, very many young people, predominantly from working class backgrounds, continue to find school alienating and to get poor results. Solving deep problems of structural inequality requires paying direct attention to changing those unequal structures. From this point of view, much educational policy making in my lifetime resembles moving the deck chairs on the Titanic. So keep up the political fight for a fairer society, and do the best you can for those you work for and with.

5). As a valued ex-colleague, John Robinson, once said to me, ‘keep taking the sod-it pills’, and don’t let the system grind you down.

In recent years I have found the Audit Culture in which we work increasingly stressful and oppressive, and I have not had space here to address the technically rational ways in which University research and researchers are being managed. (See Sparkes, 2007, for a vivid account of some of the problems with the Research Assessment Exercise.) Despite all this, I've had a privileged and largely enjoyable time as a researcher and teacher in HE. Now I have formally retired, I want to pay tribute to very many colleagues who have helped, supported, challenged and taught me, and I look on my career with happiness, and much satisfaction. A quote from Douglas Adams, in the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, springs to mind:

So long, and thanks for all the fish.

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