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Commentary

Bricolage and Teachers' Theorizing

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Tightly reasoned though it is, Elizabeth Hatton's thoughtful examination of teachers' work as *bricolage* (AEQ 20(2):74–96) contains a few loose threads that I would like to unravel and then tie back together.

One of these has to do with Hatton's concentration on only two categories—the scientist and the *bricoleur*—in positioning the work of contemporary teachers. In some respects, teachers' work also looks a lot like a third category that Lévi-Strauss describes in "The Science of the Concrete," the artist, who is "both something of a scientist and of a 'bricoleur' " (1966:22). In other respects, it corresponds all too well to deskilled production work of postindustrialized society (Apple 1985:34). *Bricolage* may be more conservative in function than art or science. But when compared to deskilled labor processes—as, for example, in Harper's detailed study of a modern-day metal-worker (1987)—it seems extraordinarily innovative indeed.

Another loose thread is the one by which Hatton ties the creative potential of pedagogic knowledge to the science of the abstract. This is an attractive connection, especially for educational researchers, many of whom view their own efforts as steps toward the construction of a body of pedagogic propositions from which effective—or more effective—teaching strategies can be deduced. But it is also a peculiar notion, for two reasons.

First, it neglects forms of knowledge other than the abstract that may be of equal or greater value to teachers in creating new or more effective forms of instruction. For example, knowledge of workplace materials (e.g., computers, texts, or particular children) can engage the teacher-cum-*bricoleur* in extended inquiries leading to designs and products similar to those of the artist or engineer (Lévi-Strauss equates the engineer with the scientist). Or, knowledge of a particular community—developed perhaps through participation in community discourse—can transform the relatively conservative task of conducting lessons appropriate to a school or classroom into the more transforming pedagogic task of assisting the academic and intellectual development of individuals and communities (e.g., Lipka 1989; Heath 1983).

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Identifying pedagogic knowledge with abstract science alone also forms one-half of an equation that generates continuing, unfulfilled expectations for the usefulness of pedagogic knowledge to teachers. Hatton's analysis takes an important step toward changing that equation, but only in one direction. That is, comments about the shortcomings of teachers in acquiring and using such knowledge, however sympathetic they may be—and Hatton's are very sympathetic—unfairly demand more of teachers than of educational researchers, most of whom are quite content to discuss pedagogic knowledge and seek new strategies for generating or extending it while continuing to ignore its direct implications for their own actions.

A more realistic model of potentially transformative pedagogic knowledge would include both abstract and concrete elements, and a more realistic expectation of the abstract elements would be for teachers to use them much as they are used by educational researchers: as heuristic devices for examining instruction and for posing questions that require further inquiry.

Taken together, the loose threads noted above are bound to each other within the implicit contrast between teachers and scientists that infuses Hatton's analysis. This contrast exhibits great fidelity to Lévi-Strauss's distinctions between concrete and abstract knowledge, but it also overlooks questions about the relationship of educational theory and practice within the contexts of individual action and about cultural models for describing that relationship.

Consider, for example, the anthropologist who also teaches. While abstract powers of explanation may characterize some of his or her endeavors, the science of the concrete characterizes others. And the concrete is hardly restricted to teaching, nor the abstract to research. Regardless of how abstractly they theorize about culture, anthropologists' work is organized around concrete categories such as "refereed journals," "field notes," "curricula vitae," and "department meetings."

How do individuals conceptualize their own engagement in concrete *and* abstract modes of thinking within the same or related domains? What cultural models are most useful in describing these matters, and what explanatory power do they have within the field of education?

While these questions are central to Hatton's concern about the capacity of teachers' work to be refined and renewed through pedagogic knowledge, they are not addressed in her essay. On the other hand, her argument can address these questions if we consider institutional circumstances themselves—for example, grouping practices, communication networks, scheduling of activities—not so much as constraints but as "materials" available to teachers in practicing *bricolage* on the speculative plane.

For example, the institutional segregation of students into relatively homogeneous, graded subpopulations; the large number of such stu-

dents that teachers see daily for relatively brief periods of time; and the formal separation of school from community provide the "materials" necessary for teachers to identify their technical work with the task of presenting lessons to groups (as opposed to assisting learning among individuals). Engagement in this narrowly defined technical task in turn provides "material" necessary for teachers to focus their *intellectual* attention on pedagogic knowledge bounded by classrooms in general. Isolation from other teachers can further narrow this focus to a single classroom.

All this suggests that at least some conservative contributions of teachers' work to educational processes are less a result of *bricolage* per se than of the impoverished institutional contexts in which it is practiced. And, even there, *bricolage*—as an activity akin to the "secondary adjustments" noted by Goffman (1961:189) among inmates in total institutions—may make manifest teachers' resistance to even more conservative forces of occupational bureaucratization and deskilling.

These observations stimulated by Hatton's argument hopefully help confirm the heuristic value of her work, but they also point to three potentially valuable reforms, each of which could enhance teachers' capacity to pursue what Hatton calls "genuine educational goals." First, to increase the robustness of their pedagogic knowledge, teachers' assignments could be deepened and broadened to include more time spent with fewer, more heterogeneous groups of students in more varied social and cultural contexts. Second, through participation in classroom research of their own design, teachers could be stimulated and encouraged to construct *abstract* pedagogic knowledge for themselves. And third, teachers' understanding of the relationship between their work and pedagogic knowledge could be enriched through opportunities for ongoing discourse with other teachers and educational researchers.

Hatton notes that teachers fail to "acquire" pedagogic knowledge, but it is also the case that the situations in which teachers work dramatically limit the scope of pedagogic knowledge they can *construct*.

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