Rumours of Theory's Death and Resurrection Greatly Exaggerated: Response to Perla & Carifio

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I want to thank Rocco J. Perla and James Carifio for their review (2006) of my book *Undead Theories: Constructivism, eclecticism and research in education* in this journal. They have raised a number of interesting points and ideas, and brought in a number of perspectives and resources that complement and extend my project. I also want to take up a number of the points they raised, however, and continue a dialogue that I hope is useful for readers of the book and of their review.

Paul Feyerabend, who inspired much of the thinking and many of the commitments that went into writing *Undead Theories*, wrote some stinging (and often funny) responses to his critics, notably in the second half of his book *Science In A Free Society* (1978). In his later autobiography, *Killing Time* (1995), however, Feyerabend speaks of his regret at having spent years battling with critics, and particularly at being drawn into playing their games, by their rules.

In writing a rejoinder to Perla and Carifio's strongly critical review of my book, I'm aware of the temptation to do the same thing: to fall into the same modes of argumentation, and the same confronting language—to put on my armour and ride forth to battle. It would be ironic if I were to do that, since it would be in a sense a betrayal of the commitments that underlie my work and my project in the book itself.

Undead Theories is an invitation to researchers to dance, to play. To the extent that I make claims and advance positions in the book, I do so with the intention of provoking a response, of inviting readers into a dialogue about the things that are important to us as we seek to understand and improve education. The intention is

explicitly **not** to construct watertight, unassailable arguments or to persuade readers to a particular methodology—or worse, an ideology.

Let me make two further points in relation to this issue. First, Perla and Carifio note a number of theorists and sources that I have not included or addressed in the book. I'm grateful to them for pointing out these potential sources of enrichment of, and challenge to, the points I make. I've already extended my own reading (though the fact that I did not cite a particular author should not be taken as evidence that I was unaware of him/her when writing the book) and I commend many of these sources to readers. But my intention in *Undead Theories* was not to be exhaustive and comprehensive, so criticism on the basis that I have not been so is interesting but not particularly relevant. Perspectives were chosen for rhetorical purposes and to make particular points.

I'm quite upfront, too, in acknowledging that there are logical holes in the 'argument' of the book that would easily accommodate a large truck. That is, if the book were conceived as a single 'argument', there would be… but I did not conceive of it in that way when I was writing it and do not now. The book is a series of linked meditations on research in education, linked by a commitment to problematising and exploring the role of theory and of particular methodologies. In classical terms, *Undead Theories* is an exercise in rhetoric, but Perla and Carifio have addressed it as though it were an exercise in logic.

Second, when I talk of an invitation to dance, or to play, that does not mean I am being unserious. Real, skilled dancing is enjoyable and exhilarating, sexy, exciting… and also hard aerobic work, an exhibition of great skill and the result of serious practice. It is also the result of a very complex series of on-going, in-the-moment 'negotiations' of space and time by the partners. And anyone who thinks of play as unserious has never sat quietly and watched young children play. But in play, the rules are open to negotiation… in fact this is one of the key characteristics of play.

It seems to me that the great majority of Perla and Carifio's criticisms arise from a mismatch of goals and paradigms: my purposes and commitments are as I've described them in this response, but they have addressed the book *as though* what I was attempting to do was make watertight arguments and to persuade. This is ironic, since one of the key ideas in *Undead Theories* is a warning about the challenges and dangers inherent in judging one piece of research (or in this case, one set of portraits of research) under the standards of another paradigm. To many of their criticisms, then, I would simply say 'Agreed'. *Judged from the perspective that they bring to the discussion,* it is true that, for example, my arguments are not completely internally consistent, and that my reviews of the literatures of science education and educational research methodology are not exhaustive. Readers who are looking for that mode of representation and argumentation will find my book unsatisfying and even annoying, and Perla and Carifio's review serves the purpose of warning such readers of their probable reactions.

Let me, then, respond to some of the points they raise in my own way, as an invitation to dance rather than as a rhetorical battle.

It seems to me that despite the explicit discussion in the introduction, which indicates that the notion of 'the death of theory' that is advanced in Chapter One was intended as a provocation and as play and is not sustained throughout the book, and of the

rather obvious hint in the title of the book itself, Perla and Carifio have taken away the impression that the purpose of the book is to argue for the irrelevance of theory in educational research. This is such a fundamental misunderstanding of the project I was undertaking in the book that it renders many of the critical points these authors make almost irrelevant to the book itself. A minor point worth attending to here is Perla and Carifio's fairly obvious aversion to constructivism as an epistemological theory, which may have predisposed them, after reading Chapter Five, to make certain unfounded assumptions about my commitments and approach.

I have been very explicit: I see theory as essential in education, but want to problematise and challenge our commonplace notions of the origins and role of theory. Perla and Carifio's repeated call for tight specification of precisely *which* theories I am addressing is one two which it is impossible to accede, since what I am addressing is the set of conceptions of theory within the educational research community – a multifarious, complex and no doubt internally inconsistent set of paradigms and epistemological commitments.

This on-going exploration of theory generation and theory testing has been an underlying theme of all my academic work, and one of the reasons for bringing together this collection of papers on diverse topics was to explore that theme in some detail. The mode of presenting the ideas, however, was not the construction of a single, unitary, argumentative wall. That's a book I could probably have written, but it's not this book. Rather, in an attempt to model the kinds of approaches to understanding the complex realities of classrooms that I was describing in the book, I chose to layer a variety of different (and possibly inconsistent or even incommensurable) perspectives on theory to create a more dynamic, provisional, ambiguous portrait.

The following long quote from Perla and Carifio's (2006) review illustrates their misunderstanding of both my stance and my project:

> Geelan clearly makes the case that he is an educational practitioner with primary concerns for practical situations encountered in the classroom and with "serving the field" of education in the most direct and practical sense. Geelan notes that this emphasis and commitment to education *in practice* also defined much of his graduate studies and early career. Despite this *practical* (practitioner-based) focus and interest, Geelan feels comfortable and qualified to appraise the status of educational research and theory and to possibly redefine both. However, he is more a practitioner than researcher by his own accounts in this book, and he has unsuccessfully and only trivially attempted to redefine with slogans research from the perspective of practice and to close the theory-practice gap. The theory-practice gap is real (and not necessarily a "bad" thing), and addressing this gap and other related issues by suggesting the elimination of traditional educational theory (however Geelan defines it) and practice is tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. (p. 7)

The implicit notion that the roles of practitioner and researcher are necessarily mutually exclusive, and that by describing my commitment to practice I have somehow reduced my right to be 'comfortable and qualified' to talk about research is part of the set of attitudes and assumptions that I chose to challenge. I am a researcher and a teacher of research methods courses, and am well qualified to talk about theory and research in education. But I continue to believe that research work in education is essentially worthless to the extent that it does not serve practice in education. This commitment in itself does not yield any prescriptions for the type of research to be conducted, and I completely agree with Perla and Carifio's contention that well conducted experimental and quasi-experimental studies in education have the potential to serve practice. Indeed, they can do things for practitioners that some of the other modes of research that I explore (such as narrative methods) cannot, and form an essential component of the 'disciplined eclecticism' I champion.

I also agree with Perla and Carifio when they say that "Geelan's view and thesis that we consider rejecting science-based theory and research in education is misguided and ultimately confused." (p. 7) Or rather, I agree that, if that were my 'view and thesis', it would be 'misguided and ultimately confused'. But it's not: I am serious when I talk about the idea that we need to add more tools to our toolbox, songs to our repertoire, toys to our toybox. At no stage do I advocate a 'conversion' from scientific and experimental modes of research to qualitative or practitioner research as the sole modes of research in education.

Rather, I note some of the strengths and weaknesses of experimental research, and suggest that we should use it for its strengths and complement it with other methods to mitigate its weaknesses. I agree with Perla and Carifio's contention that some of the modes of research I have described in more detail in my work are more appropriate to the context of discovery and that experimental and quasi-experimental studies may serve education better in the context of justification.

There is considerable vitriol in Perla and Carifio's review, but it doesn't really 'stick' as an attack on my work simply because it is directed, not at what I wrote, but at a set of their assumptions and notions – the review seems to comprise a chance to take some favourite hobbyhorses out for a gallop. They say "Geelan's book provides some interesting ideas and concepts; however, its main thesis never materializes substantively." (p.8) Given that the authors' identification of my 'main thesis' is mistaken throughout their review, it is true but unsurprising that it never materializes.

Their claim throughout is that I am advocating the complete destruction of experimental research in education, but this is simply not the case: what I am advocating is 'disciplined eclecticism'. That is, I suggest that researchers in education should choose, in thoughtful, educated ways, from the broadest possible repertoire of approaches to educational research in order to improve research and education. In fact I quite explicitly state that experimental research is a very important part of that repertoire and is not to be underestimated. The point that I do make is that 'when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail', and that sometimes experimental approaches have been abused by

applying them in educational contexts that expose their weaknesses rather than their strengths.

The claim that "…it is written with an appeal to the antiscientific "left wing," who do not appear to have a theory to stand on let alone an intellectual leg." (p. 8), while it has some rhetorical 'zing', is also simply mistaken. The book is written as an appeal to all those who are concerned with education and its improvement.

The point that the difficulties of conducting scientific research in classrooms are well known and have a long history is a good one, and I enjoyed very much reading Campbell and Stanley's (1966) thoughtful discussion of the very real difficulties of conducting experimental research in educational contexts, and their careful description of methods that will work despite those difficulties. (I will note, however, that they rely quite heavily on random assignment of students to experimental and control groups as a strategy for generalisability, and this is often impossible in real school contexts.) I do appreciate that there are thoughtful approaches to research methodology in education, and that many of the issues I raise are capable of being dealt with. (In fact, I am currently involved in a quasi-experimental (crossover design) quantitative research study in science education.)

What I was reacting against in *Undead Theories* though (and perhaps rhetorically over-stating the case, which is a danger in all forms of discussion where we aim to advocate a particular approach by pointing to flaws of its competitors), is not the kind of thoughtful, theoretically based discussion conducted by Campbell and Stanley (1966), but the actual educational research that I was reading in journals and that was being used in educational 'reform' movements to generate prescriptions for teachers' practice. In many of these studies experimental approaches had been applied uncritically, and the flaws Campbell and Stanley outline so clearly were very evident. I agree with Perla and Carifio that noting that there exist flawed scientific studies does not constitute grounds for eliminating scientific studies, but rather for addressing those flaws and for conducting *better* scientific studies.

Given that my work is essentially a plea against 'epistemological fundamentalism' in all its forms, it would be ironic if I had, as Perla and Carifio suggest, taken up arms in a crusade against scientific research in education and against theory more broadly. I have not done so, but rather advocated a disciplined (the word is intended both in the sense of a respect for the appropriate 'disciplines' of psychology, education, philosophy and so on and in the sense of an approach that is not simply subjective and personal and *ad hoc*) eclecticism that draws thoughtfully from a broad repertoire of tools and skills.

I have considered theory more extensively elsewhere (Geelan, 2004) and strongly recommend Heinrich Bauersfeld's (1988) thoughtful discussion, so I won't repeat that discussion here, but will simply reiterate my commitment to the importance of generating and testing high quality theories in education. Exploration of Griffiths and Tann's (1992) 'personal theories' in addition to the 'public theories' generated by researchers, and of the ways in which the two sets of theories interact, is complementary rather than antithetical to that commitment.

Perla and Carifio have responded strongly to my work in defense against a perceived threat to one of their key commitments: to scientific research, to science and to theory. I share that commitment, and the fact that the book and my work more broadly is

concerned to a very large extent with theory illustrates that commitment. But *Undead Theories* grows out of the intersection of that commitment with three other ethical commitments that also motivate my work:

> **Accessibility**—if research is to serve practice it must at a minimum be accessible to practitioners. This does not mean that all research need always be reported in 'teacher language', but it does mean we need to do the hard but crucial work of translating our findings and presenting them to practitioners, showing them the relevance to their practice.
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> **Utility**—I would argue that research in education that does not in some way serve practice in education is masturbatory. It might be fun but it's not generative or productive. One important test of research findings is their utility. Of course validity and reliability or their qualitative equivalents are important facets of utility.
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> **Humility**—researchers are in a very real sense the servants of practitioners, rather than their masters, and it behooves us to come to them with humility and respect.

Let me conclude, then, with a quotation from Paul Feyerabend, who in a sense started it all. I think he's indulging in a little rhetorical overstatement of his own, at least for my purposes, but the underlying commitment to humility is something I aspire to incorporate in my own research but by no means always attain.

> ... my concern is neither rationality, nor science, nor freedom—abstractions such as these have done more harm than good—but the quality of the lives of individuals. This quality must be known by personal experience before any suggestions for change can be made. In other words: suggestions for change should come from friends, not from distant 'thinkers'. It is time to stop ratiocinating about the lives of people one has never seen, it is time to give up the belief that humanity ... can be saved by groups of people shooting the breeze in well-heated offices, it is time to become modest and to approach those who are supposed to profit from one's ideas as an ignoramus in need of instruction.... (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 17)

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