



## 2. CO-WRITING DISCOURSE THROUGH PRACTICE AND THEORY

In this chapter we write from a stance that acknowledges the primacy of practice and at the same time we seek harmony between practice and theory so that each can inform and enhance the other in the pursuit of exemplary practice and rich, informed practice discourse. The primacy of practice is a concept that contends that practice comes first in the development of knowledge and that theory is developed from practice (Eisner, 1988). Theory without practice has limited purpose. This understanding of practice-based knowledge, as primarily developed through practice, privileges practice in the process of knowledge development.

Through theory and theorisation, practitioners and scholars alike can explore practice as a general concept to more deeply understand what practice is like. From this deeper understanding we present, in this chapter, a dialogue between theoretical knowledge generated by scholarship and knowledge generated within practice. Such dialogues serve to identify challenge points where practice and theory can enhance and inform each other. Realisations in practice can thus become catalysts for the generation of the next practice theory and for that theory to inform, underpin and enhance the next realisations in practice. Illuminating the connections between theory and practice makes practice theory relevant to everyday practitioners with the ultimate aim of achieving improved outcomes for practitioners and service users.

Professional practice is a lived phenomenon and that professional practitioners may be required to challenge current practices, to act ethically in uncertain and dynamic contexts and to have the courage to change both themselves and their practice worlds for the better. We argue that a coalescence of practice knowledge developed in practice and theoretical knowledge developed by research and scholarship is needed to bring this inspirational professional practice to life. We propose a model of practice-theory harmonisation. We place practice at the core of this model and contend that it is through authentic and respectful relationships between forms of knowledge and knowledge generators (scholars, researchers and practitioners) that theory and practice harmony can be established and sustained.

### WRITING DISCOURSE THROUGH PRACTICE THEORISATION

Practice theories are important for the support and enrichment of practice because they provide a lens through which to illuminate important aspects of practice and human life that would otherwise remain hidden. Importantly, practice theories provide a vehicle to develop thinking about what might be involved in the notion of practice (Green, 2009) and therefore to understand more deeply what practice is like.

*How can practice theory enhance everyday practice? Understanding theory might identify opportunities to improve practice.*

Practice as a concept and a lived experience has been the subject of a considerable range of literature and theorisation. Within this body of literature, practice has been described in general terms as a broad range of doings or patterns of activities (Rouse, 2007). These patterns of activities include the use of relevant equipment and material culture, as well as vocabulary and other linguistic forms of performances (ibid). In an exploration of contemporary theories of practice, Rouse interpreted three core domains of practice: embedded, quality embodied and transformative domains. In combination, these three domains of practice, or ways of understanding practice, provide a useful framework for the development of broad and deep understandings of practice and of the practices of specific professions.

Contemporary practices are embedded in traditions or practice contexts, which exert a powerful influence over both the enactment of current practices and the formation of future practices. All practices are products of prior practices, shaped by contemporary circumstances and past histories (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008). Although it may be argued that practices comprise individual performances, these performances only become intelligible when viewed as belonging to, or embedded within, a practice tradition (Rouse, 2007). Practices may therefore be viewed as purposeful, situated and flexible engagements with the world, embedded in traditions and interactions with other individuals (Schwandt, 2005). Social practices exist and evolve in a context - a nexus characterised by an intimate weave of activity and objects, with a person's position in the nexus determined by the relationships among things in that nexus (Schatzki, 2002). Practices are also intrinsically connected to and interwoven with objects. Physical contexts shape practices through their ability to enable and constrain particular practice actions (ibid). Distinctive artefacts (such as the doctor's stethoscope) also play an important part in the implementation of any profession's practice and often hold a significant symbolic meaning (of role, place and power) in the practice. *Improve practice by questioning "how things are done here"*

Practices are dynamic and transformative, as a result of changing patterns of collective performances of practice within and across cultures and individual practice performances enacted in response to particular social contexts. Human practices, by occurring under different conditions and in different places, generally occur with adaptive variations (Kemmis & Trede, 2010). The particularity of practice performances and individual responses to practice contexts creates conditions for practice transformation (Schwandt, 2005). The transformative potential of practice performances shape both practices and the individuals performing them. This understanding of the dynamic and transformative nature of practice draws attention to the significant influence of practice contexts on practice performances and the need to explore the manner in which these contexts shape particular professional practices. *Practitioners have freedom to transform their practice.*

In this section, practice has been illuminated as a complex phenomenon encompassing a dynamic and broad range of activities embedded in particular traditions and embodied in human performances. Practice traditions or contexts include both material (relevant equipment) and relational (individuals' interactions with current practices) dimensions. Practices embodied in practitioners' performances and embedded in practice traditions are continually evolving and are

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transformative for both individuals and practices. Practice theory, therefore provides a useful tool to facilitate fine-grained examination of how both individual and contextual factors shape the development of specific practices enacted by individuals in unique contexts.

*Practice knowledge can arise from reflecting on practice experience.*

## WRITING DISCOURSE FROM PRACTICE

In this section we explore how professional practice knowledge is developed in practice contexts. Individual practice contexts are united by their fragility, temporary nature, vulnerability and inclination to constant change (Bauman, 2000). Work life is undergoing rapid, profound and ubiquitous change, influenced by both technological development and the global economy (Lehtinen, 2008). These professional practice work contexts can exert powerful and often tacit influences on the development of practice knowledge, with the potential to either inspire the next generation of professional leaders or to perpetuate the weaknesses of the previous generation (Eraut, 1994). Thus, the development of professional knowledge in practice requires the critical use of concepts and ideas embedded in well-established professional traditions. This criticality demands intellectual effort, an encouraging work context (ibid) and ethical courage (Patton, 2014).

Professional practice is built upon a solid foundation of specific practice knowledge that comes to life through practice performances (Kemmis, 2012). Professional practice involves creation of new understandings during practice (Higgs, 2012), with professional knowledge constantly generated and transformed in the service of others (Pitman, 2012). Professional practitioners are not bound by a rigid set of rules and performance directives; rather they take justifiable and considered action in given circumstances, even if that action challenges taken-for-granted traditions in a field. Professional practice is therefore inherently particular, relating to a specific individual in a specific circumstance, and (as best practice) seeks to achieve the best outcome for each individual. Practice-based knowledge is developed through practitioners' actions and is transformative for the practitioner, the people with whom the practitioner works and eventually, the practice tradition.

Knowledge generated in practice is developed through and from practice experiences and is therefore contextualised, authentic and dynamic. This knowledge constantly evolves as practitioners seek optimal solutions for often complex and unique problems. This knowledge is embedded in practice contexts and embodied in practitioners "doings" and "sayings". As such, some, or even much, of this rich, relevant and authentic practice knowledge may never enter written practice discourses. For example, individual practitioners' realisations from practice are rarely reported in peer-reviewed professional journals and textbooks. This knowledge is more often shared via verbal discourses between practitioners and sometimes during professional development sessions.

*We need to develop strategies for sharing practice knowledge.*

## A MODEL OF PRACTICE-THEORY HARMONISATION

In previous sections we have discussed important contributions of research and scholarship as well as practice performance to the development of rigorous, credible and authentic practices and theories about practice. Building on previous sections, we now propose a broader model of practice-theory harmonisation. This model aims to bridge these two knowledge development spaces and harness the strengths of both in order to develop practice theory and knowledge that is credible, useful and most importantly enables practices that improve outcomes for those people with whom professional practitioners work.

We have placed practice at the centre of this model (Figure 2.1) and have identified socio-cultural or relational spaces as crucial to the harmonisation of practice-generated knowledge and practice theories. People are key elements of the success of this process. Relationships formed between scholars and practitioners are important because knowledge development in practice is largely an embodied and oral discourse while knowledge development through scholarship and research is largely a written discourse. Relationships between academics and practitioners provide a conduit for idea generation and for knowledge transfer between academic and practice environments. It is through this knowledge transfer, that propositional knowledge or practice theory can be enriched by practice experience and practitioners' knowledge can be extended by research and theorisation. We propose that people, through the relationships they form, provide a bridge between these two important discourses.

*What can we learn from practice colleagues?*

Practice-theory harmonisation requires the development of sustained relationships between academics, researchers, theorists, students and practitioners. These relationships are best built on a solid platform of trust and respect. They should be mutually beneficial with each partner acknowledging the benefits of the relationship. Through these relationships academics are able to embed current practices in theory, and practitioners are able to combine current practices with theory. The end result is enriched, authentic and critical practice.

Practitioners who transition from practice to academia, often referred to as "pracademics", are able to provide a bridge between practice-based knowledge and professional discourse. Practitioners entering academia bring authentic and rich practice knowledge, informed by theory and forged by daily practice in authentic practice contexts. As pracademics engage with university curriculum they refresh and extend their theoretical understandings of practice and this allows them to harmonise practice knowledge developed through practice with practice theory developed through research and scholarship. However, as time passes, pracademics (unless continuing to work in practice) may lose contact with practice and become more deeply steeped in academia and their ability to harmonise practice and theoretical knowledge will diminish. This highlights the importance of sustained relationships between academics and practitioners to enable continued harmonisation of practice and theoretical knowledge. Workplace learning educators, practitioners who teach pre-entry students in the workplace, provide a valuable link for academics, practitioners and students in this harmonisation and dialogue space.

Research relationships between academics and practitioners open up another important space for practice-theory harmonisation. When academics and researchers have strong relationships with practitioners, opportunities for authentic research projects can be explored. Importantly, practitioners are able to identify meaningful areas of practice to research and in so doing, shape research direction. Research partnerships between practitioners and academics, where practitioners contribute practice knowledge and academics contribute research knowledge and skills, open up powerful spaces to shape current and future professional practice discourses.



*Figure 2.1. A model of practice-theory harmonisation*

#### CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have argued that coalescence of practice theories, developed through research and scholarship and knowledge generated in practice, is central to the development and enactment of exemplary professional practice and the dynamic generation and shaping of professional practice discourse. Understanding practice as a lived phenomenon and practice theory as its interpretation in professional practice discourse is an important foundation for this process. Theories provide ways of thinking about inspirational practices while practice incorporates embodied knowledge or “ways of doing” to achieve best outcomes for professional practice clients and communities in uncertain and dynamic contexts. We have introduced a model of practice-theory harmonisation to assist practitioners and academics to coalesce theoretical and practical knowledge in the development of inspirational practice. Practice is at the centre of this model. Practitioners and academics are

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encouraged to purposefully seek and develop positive relationships with each other in order to develop exemplary practices that will meet the complex and fluid demands of 21st century society.

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