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5. A PRAXIS PERSPECTIVE

Musings on the Works of Kemmis and Wilkinson

SETTING THE SCENE

One of the strong and enduring themes in the discourse on professional practice is praxis. At the core of professional practice lies the ethical aim of achieving optimal outcomes for clients in their unique situations. In this chapter the contribution of praxis to the professional practice discourse is explored through the work of two key writers in this field: Stephen Kemmis and Jane Wilkinson. In keeping with the purpose of the book to explore professional practice through the contributions and creativities afforded by marginalia, the chapter will adopt a dialogue approach whereby the author has written through the margins of existing work of Jane and Stephen to highlight, appraise and build on these prior writings.

PRAXIS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Chapter 1 presented professional practice as a complex human phenomenon that lends itself to multiple perspectives. It could be argued that praxis is a perspective on practice. If so, what added value does the perspective of praxis bring and how does it enrich our understanding of practice? Alternatively it could be argued that beyond providing a perspective on practice, praxis is an inherent part of professional practice without which professional practice is not genuinely realised. If so, what implications does praxis have for practitioners, managers, academics and researchers?

Today we want professional practitioners to have qualities that extend beyond professional practice knowledge in the form of a disposition toward wisdom and prudence that Aristotle called *phronēsis* (Kemmis, 2012). We not only want good professional practitioners, but we want professional practitioners who will do good (ibid). This call for professional practitioners “who will do good” underpins the importance of recognising praxis as an inherent part of professional practice and the value of facilitating dispositions towards praxis during professional education programs both before and after entry into professional practice. The development of dispositions towards praxis will further contribute to the development of career-ready graduates who are able to positively contribute to the organisations in which they work through innovative and ethical practices.

Doing good through practice

PRAXIS

Over time, Stephen Kemmis and Jane Wilkinson, along with other scholars have explored and extended the concept of praxis. The writings of Kemmis, Wilkinson and colleagues (Kemmis & Smith, 2008a; Kemmis, 2010) portray praxis through two lenses: a neo-Aristotelian view of praxis as “right conduct” and a post-Marxian view of praxis as “socially responsible, history-making action”. Viewing praxis through these lenses, Kemmis and Wilkinson have embraced individual, situated, socio-cultural and discursive dimensions of praxis. This understanding of praxis was largely guided in the first instance by the classical account of praxis put forward by Aristotle and extended by the more critical perspectives of Habermas (1972), Gadamer (1983), MacIntyre (1983) and Dunne (1993). In short, the Aristotelean sense of praxis finds its locus in the one who acts, while the post-Marxian sense finds its locus within the world and in the unceasing flow of history made by human social action (Kemmis, 2012). Building on Aristotelean and Marxist philosophy and their own research and scholarship, Kemmis and Wilkinson have developed a view of praxis as individual morally-committed actions undertaken in the world, that are shaped by, and in turn shape, the world.

Action is core to praxis. Praxis is action (Kemmis 2012). Further, praxis is a particular kind of action, one that is morally committed and informed by traditions in a field and seeks the best outcome for particular individuals in given circumstances (Kemmis & Smith, 2008b). Praxis occurs when people, after taking a broad view of current circumstances and consequences, determine what it is best to do, and then act (Kemmis & Smith, 2008b). Aristotle (2003) underlined an important distinction between praxis as a form of conscious, self-aware action and technical action (*poiēsis*) and theoretical contemplation (*theoria*) (Kemmis & Smith, 2008c). Underpinning Aristotle’s conception of praxis as action is *phronēsis*, a disposition that constitutes practical reasoning and philosophy, develops through experience and reflective thought, and guides praxis (Kemmis, 2012). Praxis is the morally committed action and *phronēsis* is the disposition that orients individuals towards particular kinds of actions.

Marx (1852) presented praxis as “history-making” action. Marx argued that social structures, ideas, theories and consciousness emerge from individual and collective social action (praxis) (Kemmis, 2010). Praxis is realised in the world through the actions (sayings, doings and relatings) of people, individually and collectively (Kemmis, 2012). The immediate and long-term effects of these actions change not only individual practices but also worlds of practice (Kemmis, 2012). Thus praxis is transformative for the practitioner, the practice tradition and the people with whom the practitioner works. Professional practitioners are accountable for their actions. Through experiencing the irreversible consequences of their actions, professional practitioners become wiser about making action choices when they encounter uncertain practical situations (Kemmis, 2012). The practice knowledge and wisdom developed in this manner are pragmatic, variable, context dependent, and oriented toward action (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012). Thus praxis can be considered as wise action(s) aimed at achieving optimum outcomes for others in varied circumstances.

Praxis, viewed as action, is grounded; it is embodied and embedded (Kemmis & Smith, 2008b). *Praxis* recognises that the person who is acting is doing so in response to the practicalities and particularities of a given situation – they do the best they can do on the day, the best they could do under the circumstances (Kemmis, 2012). This highlights the important contribution of individual dispositions (such as courage and integrity) to the enactment of praxis. This embodied and embedded nature of praxis underscores the importance of understanding contextual and individual influences as well as the interdependent relationship between practice contexts and individuals within praxis development and enactment.

Contemporary professional practices are largely enacted in workplace contexts. The juxtaposition of professional and workplace practice draws attention to a critical tension in the development of praxis in workplaces. This tension arises from the identification of dual identities for professional practitioners (as professionals and organisational employees) in workplaces. This dual identity involves the potential for tension between achievement of professional and organisational goals. The effectiveness of institutions in which professionals practise is increasingly being evaluated on the basis of output measures linked to concepts of productivity (Pitman, 2012). As an example, physiotherapists work in healthcare environments with increasing fiscal restraints and demands for accountability, that also require the establishment of collaborative partnerships with clients, caregivers, colleagues and other health professionals (Ajjawi & Patton, 2009). These increasing requirements for productivity and accountability placed on professional practitioners by contemporary workplaces create the potential for a complex and conflicting set of professional and organisational interactions. The manner in which individual practitioners resolve these tensions is likely to be strongly influenced by individual dispositions in combination with the strength of workplace hierarchies and these factors will shape the character of professional practice performances and consequently praxis enactment.

Accepting the complementarity between individuals and their environments, Saltmarsh (2009) proposed that an understanding of the work of professional practitioners, as constituent parts of their environments, offers an important contextual tool for understanding the complexity of the enactment of professional practices (praxis). Bourdieu (1977) laid the groundwork for later theorising on the relationship between individuals' dispositions and the nature of workplace action. Importantly Bourdieu asserted that individuals' different dispositions translated to different amounts of capital with which to "play the game" which in turn, directly influences the nature of workplace actions. In relation to praxis, professional practitioners require appropriate amounts of capital to undertake the best action possible (especially if this action requires challenging taken-for-granted practices) in a given situation. It might be further argued that the ability to challenge taken-for-granted traditions in a field requires practitioners to have confidence in the appropriateness of their decisions as well as the courage to question, and if appropriate act, outside hegemonic practices. For example in hierarchical healthcare contexts, physiotherapists require confidence in their clinical decisions and courage

Recognising personal integrity!

wisdom + courage = right action

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to question those in positions of greater power such as medical practitioners to achieve the best outcomes for their clients.

transcending hegemony
This discussion of praxis as morally committed actions embedded in practice contexts has drawn attention to core capabilities that enable ethical professional practice actions and praxis development. Capability, understood broadly as abilities, personal qualities (e.g. integrity, empathy and ethical courage), judgement and potential to act beyond current competence, is central to the development of individuals who are ready to act ethically in uncertain, unfamiliar and dynamic contexts. These core capabilities encompass creative thinking, care, compassion, critical consciousness (Kemmis & Smith, 2008b), sound decision-making, including the ability to select relevant and credible actions for the circumstances at hand and the ethical courage to undertake such actions even in the face of pressure to conform to hegemonic practices.

RESEARCHING PRAXIS

The aim of research then, is to unsettle and change the way things are.
Stephen Kemmis (2010), through an exploration of the concept of researching praxis, has illuminated ways in which authentic and meaningful praxis research can be achieved. Stephen contends that at the core of praxis research is the aim to change praxis for the better and that authentic praxis research might be best undertaken from within particular practice traditions. Thus the “happening-ness” of praxis and consequently praxis research is privileged and the centrality of action and not just contribution to discourse, to praxis research is highlighted.

At the heart of praxis research is positive action. Praxis research is oriented towards change in praxis rather than contributing to the development of knowledge and theory alone (Kemmis, 2010). Praxis research aims to change praxis by developing an inquiry culture in practice settings, nurturing a critical approach amongst participants and empowering participants to take action (ibid). Praxis research privileges and develop practitioners’ life experiences. As such, action and critical hermeneutic research frameworks are congruent with praxis research aims. Action research aims to change practices and transform the individuals performing the practices plus their circumstances from within (ibid).

Approaches to researching praxis that regard practice, and especially praxis, as both internal to practice traditions and inseparable from the persons whose practice it is, highlight the importance of researching praxis from within (Kemmis, 2010). These approaches to praxis research are congruent with Gadamer’s (1975) view on the important role of tradition in shaping our perceptions and interpretations. Gadamer maintained that membership of a tradition or discipline does not present a barrier to the development of understanding, it makes it possible. It is thus a researcher’s position with regard to a practice tradition or discipline that shapes the final outcome of praxis research.

To stand within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible. Gadamer (1975, p. 324)

A PRAXIS PERSPECTIVE

This understanding of praxis research allows us to embrace the possibility that praxis-related research can be undertaken by both practitioners themselves and also by academic researchers (Kemmis, 2010). It also opens up possibilities for considering the different kinds of outcomes praxis research can achieve for practitioners on one hand and for researchers and the academy on the other (ibid). Praxis research can guide both the development of practice itself as well as education for practice. Praxis research undertaken by researchers and practitioners (within the field) in genuine partnership and using a critical-emancipatory approach may provide a way to enhance praxis and better connect theory and practice in order to bridge the often talked about theory practice gap.

DEMOCRATISING RESEARCH

PRAXIS AND EDUCATION

The viewing of education as a type of praxis is consistent with both Aristotelian and post-Marxian senses of praxis (Kemmis, 2010). In an Aristotelian sense, education involves the morally informed and committed actions of individual practitioners who practise education. In a post-Marxian sense, education helps to shape social formations and conditions as well as people and their consciousness, ideas and commitments (Kemmis, 2010). Viewing education as praxis also offers a response to the atomistic individualism and self-absorption of neo-liberalism that sees progress in an abstract notion of organisational improvement rather than in the relief of suffering and in attainment of the good life for human kind (Kemmis, 2012). If we think of education as being to prepare people to live well in a world worth living in,¹ then we might think about preparing our students in higher education for living well – as citizens and as professionals – in a contemporary world worth living in.

Contemporary universities are increasingly being challenged to produce individuals capable of changing society for the better. This challenge is reflected in many universities' vision and mission statements and lists of graduate attributes. Increasingly, universities are focusing on holistic development of students who will be "career ready" and will be able to make positive contributions to society. This aim of the holistic development of persons able to act as global citizens and change agents demands more than the formation of competent graduates. It requires development of a broad range of attributes, qualities and skills. It requires development of individuals able to act for the good of others. In short, it requires the development of praxis. Praxis should therefore be an educational goal for all universities who have the public good at the heart of their manifestos.

An exploration of education for praxis requires an exploration of *phronēsis*, the disposition that Aristotle described as informing and guiding praxis. *Phronēsis* as a form of practical reasoning and practical wisdom comes to life in practice and develops through experience as a capacity to approach the inevitable uncertainties of practice in a thoughtful and reflective way (Kemmis, 2012). The centrality of *phronēsis* to praxis raises two important questions: Can *phronēsis* and consequently praxis be developed in initial professional education? If so, by what means can they be developed?

So people are separate from consciousness

Great value from workplace learning!

Kemmis (2012) argues that phronēsis cannot be directly taught, rather it is developed through experience and reflection on experience. This is in part due to the fact that phronēsis does not and cannot escape uncertainty; it acknowledges uncertainty and aims to act constructively within it (ibid). Phronēsis is a commitment to do our best under uncertain and unpredictable circumstances in order to act for the best for all of those involved and affected (ibid). People are prepared for professional practice by experiencing the irreversibility of their actions (and perhaps the actions of others, and the consequences of their actions) and becoming open to experience and becoming wiser about what is going on when they encounter uncertain practical situations (Kemmis, 2012). This understanding of phronēsis as developed in and through practice underscores the criticality of professional placement or workplace learning experiences in professional education programs. It is only during workplace learning experiences that students can experience the realities of professional practice and have opportunities to apply theories and facts learned in academic study as well as experience real consequences of their chosen actions. Through encouragement to reflect on these experiences and their consequences, students may be assisted to develop a disposition towards phronēsis.

Further, Kemmis (2012) leaves open the possibility for the development of phronēsis through consideration of the practices of others. This possibility highlights the potential pedagogical value of workplace learning debriefing sessions where students are encouraged to share their experiences with an emphasis on describing actual consequences of their selected actions. It also underscores the importance of academics in professional education programs sharing their practice experiences with students in academic environments. For example, academics in teacher education programs can share real life classroom experiences and dilemmas with students during lectures and tutorial sessions. In these ways, students may increase their knowledge of useful (and not so useful) strategies for when they encounter uncertain practice situations in the future.

Kemmis (2012) also describes phronēsis as a kind of negative space for knowledge, a preparedness to understand a given situation in different ways, in short as a general openness to experience. A rich disposition for phronēsis engenders a willingness to try to see things from another's point of view and an openness to the experience itself – to simply experience the world in new ways (ibid). The person who wants to develop phronēsis as wisdom wants to understand the variety and richness of different ways of being in the world and to be formed by those experiences (ibid). This openness to others and different ways of being in the world underpins the centrality of cultural competence development in professional education programs. The centrality of experience to phronēsis development draws attention to service learning as a powerful pedagogical tool to nurture students' empathy and capability towards praxis. Experiential learning provides a way of learning through experience and assists students to link academic studies and knowledge to real life problems in their communities. Service learning offers a learning environment that promotes critical thinking and problem solving and requires students to remain open to others and practise ethical decision making (Houseman, Meaney, Wilcox, & Cavazos, 2012).

Professional practice, or praxis understood as complex, dynamic and transformative is necessarily underpinned by a broad range of capabilities. In order to develop these capabilities, the expansion of contemporary competence and skills focused academic and workplace-learning curricula is required. Academics responsible for professional curriculum development are challenged to rejuvenate contemporary curricula to encompass, besides technical and cognitive skills and abilities, student qualities such as ethical courage, adaptability, confidence, integrity and empathy, to facilitate the development of graduates capable of flourishing in 21st century societal contexts.

PRAXIS AND LEADERSHIP

Praxis leadership requires an ability to create conditions that enable morally-committed actions to take place, that is, actions that allow praxis to thrive (Wilkinson et al., 2010). In this section the conditions that foster development of praxis leadership are viewed through two lenses, practice architectures and individual capabilities. Practice architectures are viewed as those contextual features that prefigure practice by enabling or constraining particular kinds of sayings, doings, and relating among people (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008). Capability is understood broadly as abilities, personal qualities (e.g. integrity, empathy and ethical courage), judgement and potential to act beyond current competence. Thus praxis leadership is presented as a complex, embedded and embodied concept with a critical fluid dimension as it changes to meet the demands of different individuals in their unique circumstances.

Praxis and consequently praxis leadership is always situated. Professional practices are materially, economically, historically and socially formed and structured (Kemmis, 2009). Therefore practice architectures are critical to understanding both praxis and praxis leadership. The broader bureaucratic structures and processes in which school principals and university academics work are an example of practice architectures (Wilkinson, Olin, Lund, Ahlberg, & Nyvaller, 2010). These structures and processes encompass demands for increased productivity and efficiency; they stress accountability at the expense of substantive ethical and social responsibility (ibid). These structures mediate practice and prefigure what is doable and sayable in leadership (ibid). Many contemporary professional practices are also firmly positioned in workplaces. Each workplace represents a unique, dynamic and contested context with its own physical architectures, activities and relationships that are central to workplace performance and leadership.

Praxis leadership can be achieved by identifying the need to change often taken-for-granted sayings and relating between people including the language used by practitioners, clients and management. Leading praxis therefore can involve creation of alternative spaces for communication, which allow for the exchange of different standpoints (Wilkinson et al., 2010). Potentially, through communication, new meanings of practice (sayings) can transform practice (doings). If the communication is characterised by sense making processes, such processes may in

turn constitute the doings of a transformed way of leading praxis (ibid). Additionally, construction of dialogical spaces to enable critical reflection upon individuals' own practice as leaders provide an opportunity to reflect collaboratively and develop new ideas for re-forming their practices (ibid).

Practice architectures of leadership have been found to be quite different for different people and thus provide quite different perspectives in relation to leading praxis (Wilkinson, forthcoming). What practice architectures enable and constrain in specific settings, depends upon the various kinds of social, economic and symbolic capital which leaders bring to their leadership work (Wilkinson et al., 2010). For example, a praxis leader may gain credibility because she is one of the team and is able to exert influence and lead praxis by acting with integrity, humanity and morality within leadership roles (Wilkinson, 2013). On the other hand a hierarchical leadership role brings with it institutional authority that may contribute to the effectiveness of praxis leadership. These varied relations make leading praxis a delicate balancing act (Wilkinson et al., 2010).

An ability to engage holistically with praxis leadership is linked both to individual capability and disposition as well as to the possibilities for leadership that are made available to individuals within a field (Wilkinson, 2008). Hence any discussion of leadership praxis needs to take into account the broader socio-political contexts which inform the institutional discourses and practices of leadership; the specific local contexts that may optimise or subvert praxis; and the particularity of experiences, which each person brings to their work as leaders (ibid). Self-reflexivity combined with a position of power can be a powerful brew in terms of leadership praxis (ibid). Developing capability for praxis leadership requires an ongoing process of self-formation (Kemmis, 2007) with a broad range of abilities, dispositions and qualities underpinning an ability to lead praxis. These capabilities include:

- A critically reflexive practitioner stance (Wilkinson et al., 2010)
- An awareness of how sayings, doings and relating shape current practice (ibid)
- Cultivation of personal praxis and sense of collective responsibility (ibid)
- Self-efficacy and
- Ethical courage.

While formal leadership can play a significant role in influencing praxis leadership, in contemporary education settings there is a move toward a more collaborative approach to leadership practice which engenders a notion of shared responsibility for leading professional learning and teaching amongst executive, teachers, students and communities (Wilkinson, forthcoming). Importantly, this model of shared praxis leadership privileges relationships and connections between different educational practices, that is practices of leading, professional learning, teaching, student learning and researching and reflecting (ibid). It also moves responsibility for the creation of conditions that allow praxis to flourish arising from the actions of individual leaders alone to leaders, practitioners and stakeholders. This model of leading praxis is congruent with the notion of praxis as morally committed action, informed by practice and societal traditions that aims to achieve the best outcomes

for individuals in their unique circumstances. It also opens up possibilities for flexible and responsive praxis leadership that is better able to respond to the complex and dynamic demands of 21st century society.

*Morally committed action
- the core of professionalism*

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the work of Kemmis and Wilkinson has been used as a core space of discourse around praxis and Patton has written in the margins of this discourse to explore their previous work. The concept of praxis has been portrayed through two lenses: that of individual right conduct and that of socially responsible history making action. Praxis has been envisioned as a central tenet of professional practice, one that is embodied (in individual actions) and embedded (in physical and socio-cultural contexts). This view of praxis underscores the centrality of individual capabilities and context to the enactment of both praxis and praxis leadership.

Praxis has been revealed as a complex and dynamic phenomenon grounded in physical and social contexts. Therefore, praxis requires the development of a broad range of capabilities including abilities, qualities and skills. Importantly the inclusive character of praxis across several dimensions, research, education and leadership has been highlighted. All practitioners, including managers, researchers and academics are challenged to take responsibility for ongoing praxis development, through consideration and enhancement of both practice contexts and individual capabilities.

NOTES

- ⁱ This notion of knowing how to live well in a world worth living in comes from the Wiradjuri phrase used to encapsulate the ethos of Charles Sturt University (CSU) in the University Strategy 2012-2015 statement:

*“yindyamarra winhanga-nha”
 (“the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in”).*

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