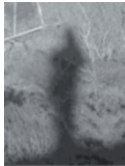


JOY HIGGS



8. PRACTICE WISDOM AND WISE PRACTICE

*Dancing between the Core and the Margins
of Practice Discourse and Lived Practice*

Professional practice is grounded and realised in being, doing, knowing and becoming, for individual practitioners and for communities of practice. Practice is released and enacted through metaphor, interpretation and narrative. Using dialogue and discourse we share our practices and our practice understandings. In all these things we pursue and gain practice wisdom and use this wisdom within wise practice; these two inhabit the deep and high spaces that lie at the invisible and seamless juncture of practice and discourse wherein the gap between espoused theory and theory in action is minimal. They are, in essence, living one's chosen discourse. Yet they are also being open to growth and re-invention by stepping into the practice-discourse core for grounding or to challenge taken-for-granted practices and theories and embracing the margins to seek and question one's truth in the turbulence of uncertainty and quiet spaces of realisation.

The space between the core and the margins of professional practice discourse is a space that allows dynamic reflection, critique and re-creation of knowledge and practice. This chapter explores the employment and generation of practice wisdom in this space. The core of discourse is typically stable, orthodox, grounded in evidence of hegemonic research and scholarship, acknowledged practice traditions and received knowledge. The margins of practice and practice discourse are spaces of imagination and risk, of individual experimentations, of daily expected and unexpected experiences, and spaces for reflection on individual and non-traditional practices. They are spaces where innovation is born.

In this chapter the notion of dancing in this space between the core and margins of discourse and practice is used to envisage creativity, advance practice artistry, provide freedom for practice-discourse re-formation, and give choice to practice paths and style. As with many art forms, dancing takes many forms or genres. This allows for many responses by the dancer and the audience, ranging from rich appreciation to lack of acceptance. So too, dancers' performances can attract diverse reviews and produce a range of impacts. What makes the difference between success and failure, appreciation and rejection is the combination of skill, insights, understanding of audience and context, initiative and performance finesse of the dancer. These capacities are encompassed in **practice wisdom** defined here as *an embodied state of being, comprising self-knowledge, action capacity, deep understanding of practice and an appreciation of others, that imbues and guides insightful and quality practice.*

*Practice wisdom is self-knowledge – that serves
as lodestone and benchmark for quality practice.*

J. Higgs and F. Tredre (Eds.), *Professional Practice Discourse Marginalia*, 65-72.
© 2016 Sense Publishers. All rights reserved.

In your thoughts, the silent universe seeks echo. An unknown world aspires towards reflection. (O'Donofue, 1997, p. 14)

INSIGHTS ON WISDOM

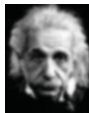
Wisdom holds a fascinating place in practice and in a wide range of literature; it is:

- capability and preparedness that guides thinking, action and practice: understanding, good judgement, body of knowledge, accepted principles, phronesis (practical wisdom)
- a state being or disposition: tolerance for life’s uncertainties, a sense of balance, optimism, a belief in problem solutions, calmness in facing difficult decisions, serenity, having a sense of proportion
- a form of knowledge related to: intelligence, sense, erudition
- appreciation: sagacity, judgement, discernment, shrewdness, astuteness, insight, perception, recognising optimal actions and situations
- concerned with self-regulation and self-knowledge: judiciousness, prudence, circumspection, control of our emotional reactions, introspection
- the capacity to predict, understanding for the future course of things; it involves a sense of visioning
- an attitude or approach to knowing: disposition, continually seeking deeper understanding
- a sense of rightness: soundness, standing the test of time
- understanding and knowings that are contextualised within a profession’s practice, society, culture, era.

Wisdom is embodied both in the physical and experiential domains, circling between both. To understand human experience requires this double sense of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty, 1965; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1997). “Bodies are always thoroughly implicated in the practice of practice in ways both complex and complicated” (Green & Hopwood, 2015, p. 28). The body could be thought of as the context of cognitive mechanisms.

Different discourses and ways of knowing have particular characteristics and contextual parameters. Wisdom, for instance, is born of experience, reflection, exploration, self-critique, shared use and critique, scholarship, readiness, emotional intelligence, particularity, subjectivity, contextualisation and understanding of the consequences of actions. These terms relate to the living world. By comparison in the natural sciences we know through processes like deduction, logic, method, objectivity, generalisation, de-contextualisation and reliability.

An interesting perspective on science is provided by McLeish (2014, p. 4) who argues that one way to deal with the problems of science is to explore its older name: “natural philosophy”. The term science (derived from the Latin verb *scio* “I know”) was introduced around 1830 probably by William Whewell, the polymathematical master at Cambridge. Before that, the collective term to identify those who studied the heavens, chemicals, flora and fauna was derived from the Greek words *philia* (love) and *sophia* (wisdom); such people loved wisdom about nature, in contrast to the triumphal knowledge claims of science.



The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead — his eyes are closed. ... To know what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms.
Einstein. <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/4681597-living-philosophies>

Science is so sure that it is the only truth that it has become incapable of accepting other ways of learning about reality. ... Such arrogant insistence has eradicated much knowledge and wisdom in the world. (Wolff, 2001, p. 5.)

PRACTICE WISDOM AND WISE PRACTICE

Has science (the physical sciences) lost something precious in this evolution? Or does wisdom exist in science as well as beyond it, in other philosophical paradigms? Another lens for viewing various ways of knowing is to take a cultural perspective.

We in the West know our world from seeing, hearing, and measuring what we assume to be a complex thing with many parts. We rarely use any of the other five senses we recognize to know reality.

In other areas of the world people know from experiencing their world as a living, organic whole, where everything relates to everything and where we blend in as but another part of that whole. That experience is not seeing, or hearing, or measuring – it is a direct experiencing of all that we are. (Wolff, 2001, p. 195)

Cooper (2012) also challenges readers and thinkers and those trying to reflectively shape their practices by asking us: what does it mean to live a philosophy? He explores how taking a philosophy (such as Socratic, Aristotelian, Platonic) and making it a way of life, presents many challenges. His arguments generate several fundamental questions. How should we challenge our current moral philosophies? What is the wisdom underpinning our practices? Are modern ways of knowing superior to ancient wisdoms?

PRACTICE WISDOM AND WISE PRACTICE

Aristotle's teacher, Plato, shared the view that wisdom was theoretical and abstract, and the gift of only a few. But Aristotle disagreed. He thought that our fundamental social practices constantly demanded choices ... and that making the right choices demanded wisdom. ... the central question for Aristotle ... was not the abstract question ... It was the particular circumstance. ... The wisdom to act rightly was distinctly practical, not theoretical. It depended on our ability to *perceive* the situation, to have the appropriate *feelings* or desires about it, to deliberate about what was appropriate in these circumstances, and to *act*. ... It was about performing a particular social practice well ... figuring out the right way to do the right thing in a particular circumstance with a particular person, at a particular time. This ... took practical wisdom. (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010, pp. 5-6)

The need for wisdom in practice, including professional practice, is recognised by McLeish (2013). A professor of physics, he provides a critique of the cultural separation of the sciences and humanities. He contends that the arguments of wisdom resonate strongly with scientists since wisdom deals honestly with the disorderly, unpredictable and chaotic phenomena of our world and provides a means of investigating these complex matters rather than simply finding answers.

Despite differences between ways of knowing in the physical and social sciences, it is essential to recognise that practice involves a complexity of engagements and

HIGGS

contexts and an array of knowledge. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015, p. 13) remind us that the body of knowledge of a profession “is best understood as a ‘landscape of practice’ consisting of a complex system of communities of practice and the boundaries between them”.

Practice wisdom (Higgs, Titchen, & Neville, 2001) is the possession of practice experiences and knowledge together with the ability to use them critically, intuitively and practically. Practice wisdom is a component of professional artistry. This artistry is the meaningful expression of a uniquely individual view within a shared practice tradition and involves a blend of:

- practitioner qualities (e.g. connoisseurship, cultural fluency, attunement to self and others, emotional intelligence)
- practice capabilities (e.g. critical appreciation, communication abilities, metacognition, decision making and judgement)
- creative imagination (including personalisation and imagining outcomes) as the basis for creative strategies.

What is word knowledge but a shadow of wordless knowledge? (Gibran, 1994)

In his work on the wisdom of practice, Shulman (2004) talks of the practice wisdom that grows in the minds of practitioners (in his case teachers) who learn from the experience of helping their students learn and from experimenting with teaching. He provides two pieces of profound wisdom to his readers. The first derives from a Hebrew proverb that encourages those studying texts to “turn over” (re-immense oneself in) the text repeatedly, recognising that there is so much within them. Shulman advocates that teachers “turn over” their teaching repeatedly through reflective evaluation, in pursuit of understanding and flexibility. Second, he argues that curriculum change can only succeed if we pay attention to the education of teachers so they are well prepared to cope with and action changes.

“Unless we create the conditions for teacher learning, every single reform that we initiate, even if it looks like it is working at the beginning, will eventually erode and disappear” (ibid, p. 519). Building on the work of Bruner, Shulman contends that both for teachers and learners, we should adopt five teaching principles: activity, reflection, collaboration, passion and community or culture. In each of our professions and disciplines we can explore the truth and applicability of these notions of practice wisdom.

Another consideration around practice wisdom is intergenerational knowing. There is much to consider both in terms of handing on learning and practice wisdom to new generations of practitioners as well as more experienced practitioners. We need to think beyond age and experience when we are trying to understand experience-based practice knowledge and wisdom. Instead, these ideas need to transcend and be shared across generations. This includes opening the minds and practices of experienced practitioners to the wisdom of novices and allowing them to bring their fresh insights and questions to practice. And, it includes helping novices to see the value of the wisdom of experienced practitioners and recognising that such wisdom complements their studies.

Biggs (2007, p. 696) argues “generation, then, is a concept that is the subject of large social discourses, constructed with public labels, designations and expectations.

PRACTICE WISDOM AND WISE PRACTICE

It also evokes intensely private experiences protected from the public gaze and formative one's sense of self'. There is much that can be learned from the social sciences to expand our understanding of wise practices within the practices of the professions.

Acting wisely demands that we be guided by the proper aims or goals of a particular activity. Aristotle's word for the proper purpose or aim of a practice was *telos*. The telos of teaching is to educate students; the telos of doctoring is to promote health and relieve sufferings; the telos of lawyering is to pursue justice. Every profession ... has a telos, and those who excel are those who are able to locate and pursue it. So a good practitioner is motivated to aim at the telos of practice. But it takes wisdom – practical wisdom – to translate the very general aims of a practice to concrete actions. (Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010, p. 7)

PRACTICE WISDOM, PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND JUDGEMENT

(Practice) wisdom is the capacity to understand and practice medicine in a common-sense manner that is scientifically based, sensitive to ... (client) needs, ethically grounded and professionally satisfying. (Taylor, 2010, p. 6)

The space of professional practice is a highly contested one. It is, historically, about service to society and to people, yet it is also a key arena for privileging professionals. It is driven in many respects by neo-liberalism and globalisation expectations such as accountability, and scientific evidence-based practice. It is a space where human interests and humanity run headlong into empirical science standards and fiscal efficiencies. What is the place of wisdom in this arena?

Many would argue (e.g. Carr, Bondi, Clark, & Clegg, 2011 p. 2) that professionals must face the complexities of practice with practical reasoning and reflection in action. They contend that "it is far from clear that either social or natural science is well placed to determine the goals of human welfare and flourishing". Such decisions require value considerations and ethical and moral decisions. A key issue that faces the caring professions "concerns the extent to which any morally ... defensible professional judgement may be expressed in the form of well-defined rules or principles of the kind found ... in much official professional policy or regulation" (ibid, p. 3). In such professional contexts decision making and judgement require ways of knowing that go beyond rule-based decisions and encompass decisions that are particularised, contextualised and grounded in advanced professional knowledge and wisdom. This is particularly the case in situations of high levels of practice complexity and the absence of certainty.

Without practical wisdom (complex choices) ... would be a purely theoretical and intellectual exercise and have no place in the field of discourse let alone the field of action. (Fish and Coles, 1998, p. 284)

Practical wisdom is the ability to draw upon knowledge selectively and apply it in fitting ways within practical situations that arise during professional work. (Dalton, 2002)

HIGGS

Great weight is attached to professional judgment, the wise decision made in the light of limited evidence by an experienced professional. (Eraut, 1994, p. 17). (They need the) wisdom to make the optimal set of decisions (p. 235). Practical wisdom is when the professional sees the particularities of a situation within the light of their ethical significance and acts accordingly in order to achieve the greatest benefit for the given client (Carr et al., 1995; de Cossart and Fish, 2005). Wise practice requires “a judicious balancing of the general and the particular, of science and art, and of fact and interpretation” (Fish and de Cossart, 2007, p. 185).

According to Fish and de Cossart (2007, p. 186) wise practitioners bring the following to every practice event:

- recognition of the tradition in which they work and of the salient elements of the given work context
- the ability to articulate their thought processes and actions and the beliefs and assumptions that underpin them
- awareness of their professional values (espoused and values in use)
- a refined understanding of the forms of knowledge they can draw upon, plus the ability to choose salient knowledge
- the use of rigour in professional thinking and the capacity to explicate this
- the facility to make wise judgements that can be defended articulately
- the ability to establish a sound professional relationship with each client, regardless of circumstances.

WISDOM AND EDUCATION

Learning for an unknown future cannot be accomplished by the acquisition of either knowledge or skills. There is always an epistemological gap between what is known and the exigencies of the moment as it invites responses, and this is particularly so in a changing world. Analogously, skills cannot be expected to carry one far in a changing environment: there can be no assurance that skills – even generic skills – appropriate to situations of the past or even the present will help one to engage with the future world in a meaningful way. Indeed, in a changing world, it may be that nonengagement is a proper stance, at least in some situations. A more positive term, to encapsulate right relationships between persons and the changing world in which they are placed, might be ‘wisdom’. (Barnett, 2004, p. 259)

Barnett’s argument asks teachers, learners and practitioners to realise the distinction between “getting the right answers” (as though practice realities can be addressed through predictable and exact strategies) and “doing right”. The latter is about ethics, particularity (for the client, situation), credibility of action choices and good practice. We are perhaps too ready in current times to focus on accountability and risk management and not sufficiently appreciative of the value and range of acceptable and desirably wise practices.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the phenomenon of practice wisdom can be thought of as:

- a state of being – it is in the here and now not an endpoint
- potential – that is, an evolution of self in, and through, practice
- a rich action capacity – that can insightfully guide practice
- a lived, embodied approach bringing the whole of self and being into practice
- deep understanding – of what practice is and can be
- appreciation of others – to allow for mutually respectful engagement
- self-knowledge – that serves as lodestone and benchmark for quality practice.

We are left to reflect on the fascinations and the scope of ideas around wisdom presented above by addressing three questions: Does wise practice have a place in professional practice? *Well of course it does! We can make it so.* Where does wisdom fit in professional practice discourse? *The chapter places wisdom as a critical element and a place of reference and refinement in the core of discourse and as a means of creativity, of individual belonging, of distancing oneself from accepted core practices and of awareness raising, in the discourse margins.* What have either of these two phenomena got to do with professional practice discourse marginalia? *Marginalia are the artefacts of dancing across and between the core and the margins. Through this dancing we are alive – we are enjoying a heightened sense of being and challenging self and practice, we are Being There with vigour, creativity and self-deliberation.*

Practice wisdom is knowing how to dance and *being* the dance.

REFERENCES

- Barnett, R. (2004). Learning for an unknown future. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 23(3), 247-260.
- Biggs, S. (2007). Thinking about generations: Conceptual positions and policy implications. *Journal of Social Issues*, 63(4), 695-711.
- Carr, D., Bondi, L., Clark, C., & Clegg, C. (2011). Introduction: Towards professional wisdom. In L. Bondi, D. Carr, C. Clark & C. Clegg (Eds.), *Towards professional wisdom: Practical deliberation in the people professions* (pp. 1-9). Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Cooper, J. M. (2012). *Pursuits of wisdom: Six ways of life in ancient philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- de Cossart, L., & Fish, D. (2005). *Cultivating a thinking surgeon: New perspectives on clinical teaching, learning and assessment*. Shrewsbury, UK: tfm Publishing Ltd.
- Eraut, M. (1994). *Developing professional knowledge and competence*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Fish, D., & Coles, C. (1998). The centrality of professional judgement in understanding professional practice. In D. Fish & C. Coles (Eds.), *Developing professional judgement in health care: Learning through the critical appreciation of practice* (pp. 254-286).
- Fish, D., & de Cossart. (2007). *Developing the wise doctor: A resource for trainers and trainees in MMC*. London: Royal Society of Medicine Press Ltd.
- Gibran, K. (1994). *The prophet*. London: Bracken Books.

HIGGS

- Green, B & Hopwood, N. (2015). The body in professional practice, learning and education: A question of corporeality. In B. Green & N. Hopwood (Eds.), *The body in professional practice, learning and education* (pp. 15-33). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Higgs, J., Titchen, A., & Neville, V. (2001). Professional practice and knowledge. In J. Higgs & A. Titchen, (Eds.). (2001). *Practice knowledge and expertise in the health professions* (pp. 3-9). Oxford: Reed Educational and Professional Publishing Ltd.
- McLeish, T. (2014). *Faith and wisdom in science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1965). *The structure of behaviour* (A. L. Fisher, Trans.). London: Methuen.
- O'Donohue, J. (1997). *Anam cara: Spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world*. London: Bantam Press.
- Schwartz, B., & Sharpe, K. (2010). *Practical wisdom: The right way to do the right thing*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Shulman, L. S. (2004). *The wisdom of practice: Essays on teaching, learning, and learning to teach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Taylor, R. B. (2010). *Medical wisdom and doctoring: The art of 21st century practice*. New York: Springer.
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1997). *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience* (6th ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015). Learning in a landscape of practice: A framework. In E. Wenger-Trayner, M. Fenton-O'Creevy, S. Hutchinson, C. Kubiak & B. Wenger-Trayner (Eds.), *Learning in landscapes of practice: Boundaries, identity and knowledgeability in practice-based learning* (pp. 13-29). Oxon: Routledge.
- Wolff, R. (2001). *Original wisdom: Stories of an ancient way of knowing*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International.

Joy Higgs AM PhD PFHEA
The Education For Practice Institute
Charles Sturt University, Australia

