Understanding and researching professional practice is crucial both to enhancing the quality of professional learning and to improving professional education more generally. Yet professional practice remains something that is little known, theoretically and philosophically, despite a longstanding interest in what might be called the meta-field of professional practice, learning and education.

The contributors to this book, drawn from fields such as education, allied health, psychology and business, explore different aspects of practice in the professions, professionalism, and research. This includes engaging with the burgeoning literature on practice theory and philosophy, including the increasingly influential neo-Aristotelian tradition, and taking account of growing interest in practice thinking across contemporary scholarship. It considers issues such as the primacy of practice, the nature of professional judgement, the role of ‘experience’, ethics, context, and the practitioner standpoint. As such, it raises important and timely questions about practice ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies, and also praxis and politics. This is especially needed in a context otherwise increasingly organised by neoliberalism, economic rationality, anxious managerialism, and what some see as a general drive towards de-professionalisation and new nuances and intensities of regulation.

The book will likely speak, across education, health and professional studies more generally, to all who remain committed, in increasingly stringent and difficult times, to finding ways of thinking anew about their work as practitioners and researchers. A richly informed resource for those engaged in researching practice and practising research, it will inform praxis and inquiry alike.
Understanding and Researching Professional Practice
Understanding and Researching Professional Practice

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Like all such ventures, this book is the culmination of much work and nearly three years of discussion and debate. It began as a community- and knowledge-building initiative among a group of us in what was originally a cross-Faculty, multi-disciplinary Research Centre and is now a fully-fledged Research Institute at Charles Sturt University—the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education, or RIPPLE, as it is more familiarly and succinctly known. Our aim was to articulate and elaborate a new research program, one that was organised around and addressed to professional practice, but from a deliberately and explicitly comparative (“inter-professional”) perspective. The book itself is a statement along the way: a staging-point in what we hope will continue to be a productive and enjoyable journey.

A number of people have been very helpful in this undertaking. I want to note firstly the RIPPLE office staff: specifically Linda Beverly, who started off with us, and more recently Jo St John and Janet Wilks. I also need to acknowledge the support and encouragement of Gail Whiteford, formerly Director of RIPPLE in its earlier manifestation, and especially of Tom Lowrie, who is the current Director of the Institute. Closer to home, Lisa McLean and more recently Kim Booby have provided invaluable assistance in preparing the manuscript, and I thank them both for their diligence and their patience. Kim’s assistance with the Index was particularly invaluable. I must also acknowledge the feedback and advice I received regarding the Introduction from Jo-Anne Reid and Ben Bradley, and also Stephen Kemmis. Finally I thank all the contributors, again for their patience but also, especially, for their contributions to what I sincerely believe is an important intervention in an ongoing intellectual and scholarly project.

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1. INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING AND RESEARCHING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Our focus here is on practice—more specifically, the concept of professional practice. That is, the primary concern is with how best to understand and research practice in and of itself, and hence in generating a rich account of practice, as a distinctive social phenomenon. Secondly, but no less importantly, we are concerned to address the complex issue of professional practice—what it is, or what it is constituted as, and why and how it matters. This is to be set in direct and specific relation to a rich (re)conceptualisation of professional learning and also, more broadly, professional education, as these are realised in what is increasingly acknowledged to be a now thoroughly globalised (“risk”) society. How should one conceive of and conduct oneself in such circumstances? What associations, agreements and solidarities need to be framed and forged? What new understandings are to be negotiated and articulated, and what challenges confront us all in our forms and practices of scholarly inquiry, our research? Crucially, it is professional practice that is at the heart of all these concerns and questions, and yet this is something that is arguably still in need of clarification and elaboration, as is indeed the concept of practice itself.

In this Introduction, therefore, I want to lay out, somewhat tentatively, the territory that this book is conceived as mapping, and to outline a number of issues and aspects that warrant ongoing investigation, hopefully building on the work that is presented in the chapters that follow. It is appropriate, too, to indicate something of the context for the book, and more generally its purpose and history. This is because it was originally devised as a forum for conversation among a particular group of scholars, largely based at an inland Australian university, or otherwise associated with it, in its strategic research engagement with professional practice, learning and education. That is now increasingly acknowledged as being of much wider interest and relevance.

“Professional practice” is itself, of course, a construct linking two concepts. On the one hand, what might simply be seen as an adjective, a qualifying term (“professional”) contains with it the notion of “profession”, and also that of “the professional”, or of being or becoming “a professional”. This latter sense is commonly understood as referring to membership of a profession, but that leaves open the issue what constitutes or counts as a profession, which is something still much contested. I will return to this issue briefly in a moment. The other key term (“practice”) is of course similarly fraught with difficulty, and is equally and perhaps inescapably contested, if not essentially contestable. To begin with,
however, it is important to say what it is not—what is not being meant by deploying “practice” in this present context.

Van Manen (1999) has observed that practice is one of the least theorised concepts that circulate in professional discourse, such as characterises fields like Health or Education: “… in education the term practice is rarely systematically theorized” (van Manen, 1999, p. 2). Nonetheless, it is a term that circulates incessantly, and seems constantly and sometimes even compulsively in use, without always meaning much at all. Rather, it seems to float across the surface of our conversations and our debates, never really thematised and indeed basically unproblematised, a “stop-word” par excellence. So it is important to be clear at the outset that practice is not simply the Other of terms and concepts such as “theory” or “policy”, as conventional usage would have it, though it might well be linked in interesting ways to them, and to the equally problematical notions of “discourse” and “representation”—and indeed the relationship (semantic and otherwise) between “practice” and “knowledge” needs to be better understood. Rather, practice is arguably something to be understood in its own right, as a distinctive feature of social life, and hence a concept warranting careful attention and close scrutiny. That said, I will now turn to a discussion of why such matters are of particular interest and concern today.

KNOWLEDGE, PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONALITY

It is important to indicate that our primary focus here is what might be called the new and emerging professions, or those professional practice fields that have been traditionally distinguished from the so-called élite professions, such as medicine, law and (perhaps) engineering. Hence we are less concerned with entering into a debate which is addressed to questions of identity and status, largely built around particular notions of knowledge, as with what is arguably the superordinate issue of practice, as a distinctive rationale. This means that our focus here is largely (though not necessarily exclusively) on fields that may have relatively recently moved into the university context (e.g., teaching, nursing) or otherwise are understood as having been only quite recently professionalised, or formalised—described sometimes, in fact, as “semi-professions” and the like (Krejsler, 2005). Indeed the larger concept is, perhaps, “professionality”—a term I use analogously to “disciplinarity” (Messer-Davidow, Shumway & Sylvan, 1993), to refer to the historico-discursive conditions of possibility and intelligibility with regard to professions and professionalism.

Even so, the whole range of fields in question, more broadly, must be seen as increasingly under challenge of various kinds. As Beck and Young (2005, p. 183) write:

In recent decades, professions and professionals have faced unprecedented challenges: to their autonomy, to the validity of any ethical view of their calling, to their relatively privileged status and economic position, and to the legitimacy of their claims to expertise based on exclusive possession of specialized knowledge.
Notwithstanding the need to differentiate within the category of “professions and professionals” on precisely these terms, there is clearly a general sense of crisis and change, of economic restructuring and cultural engineering, and moreover what they describe, powerfully, as “[b]oth within the universities and in many of the professions, a generation of practitioners” who are experiencing “what is, to some, a sense” not only of “crisis” but also of loss—“an assault on their professionalism” (Beck & Young, 2005, p. 184). They go on to highlight that what this constitutes is “a restructuring not merely of the external conditions of academic and professional practice, but even more fundamentally of the core elements of academic and professional identity” (Beck & Young, 2005, p. 184).

This is a useful and relevant formulation. Its focus is however on what Beck and Young describe as a particular form of “knowledge-based professionalism”, with close links to more or less traditionally conceived university structures and cultures, and their concern ultimately is with questions of knowledge. They note accordingly “the emergence of a new kind of professionalism with much weaker ties to the acquisition and production of knowledge in universities and much stronger links to practice in the ‘real world’” (Beck & Young, 2005, p. 192). There are two points to make here. The first is the emphatic counter-posing of “knowledge” to “practice”, which is symptomatic of what we would argue is an important problematic. The other is that such an argument, in postulating and critiquing a new phase in professionality, obscures the manner in which for quite some time now there has been a more or less parallel emergence of distinctive fields of professional practice which differently engage this problematic. The relationship between knowledge and practice is indeed crucial. But it needs to be understood outside current-traditional frames of reference, predicated on quasi-essentialist notions of rationality, epistemology and representation.

Schwandt (2005) provides guidance in this regard. He observes that the university sector is currently struggling with “how to frame teaching, learning and inquiry in the professional practice fields”, which he describes usefully as “those organised human endeavours such as teaching, business management, public planning and administration, social work, counselling, nursing, allied-health endeavours, and so on” (Schwandt, 2005, p. 313). He contextualises this struggle within new forms and intensities of managerialism, or what he identifies as the “New Public Management” movement, and also the rise into prominence of what is variously called “science-based” or “evidence-based” practice and policy. This needs to be also linked to, and realised within, the logics and politics of neoliberalism (Davies & Bansel, 2007), and new pressures of accountability, performativity, regulation and risk-management. In Kostogriz’s (2007, p. 23) terms, specifically apropos teaching and related fields: “To understand the current changes and their implications for teaching professions and teacher education, the new politics of teacher professionalism needs to be placed in a broader context, notably in the context of neo-liberal and neo-conservative economic and political reforms”. “Taken collectively”, Schwandt (2005, p. 314) writes, “these developments are shaping conceptions of the nature and role of professional practice and spurring new concerns about what it means to be adequately prepared to be a practitioner of one sort or the other”—that is, a re-shaping of the very notion of professionalism,
and of the social and operational meaning of both professional practice and professional education. This has meant, among other things, new dynamics of de- and re-professionalisation, and the emergence of what can be called bureaucratic professionalism, certainly in the public sector although by no means exclusively so. This is an attempt by governments and bureaucracies to increasingly regulate the very idea of what it means to be (a) professional, especially in times and contexts of fiscal stringency and programmatic distrust.

Schwandt posits “two different frameworks, or mental models”, as he describes them, which I understand as discursive fields, one that is dominant and which he identifies with “the scientific knowledge tradition”. The other is at best emergent and to be associated, contrastingly, with what he calls “the practical knowledge tradition” (Schwandt, 2005, p. 320)—a distinction therefore, admittedly heuristic, between a classical and somewhat caricatured “scientific” worldview and one characterised more by “a praxis-oriented approach to inquiry” (Schwandt, 2005, p. 328). Whereas the former understands knowledge and practice within a structured hierarchy, and knowledge itself within “a hierarchy of intellectual activities” (Schwandt, 2005, p. 319), the latter is organised by a sense of what is discussed elsewhere in this volume as the primacy of practice, and by the notion that practice can be conceived as itself a form of knowledge, or “knowing”. Moreover, there is a sense, and there are circumstances, in which practice-as-knowledge competes with and is even superior to or more valuable than knowledge per se, in its traditional formulation. Yet such arguments are at odds with the prevailing climate in both universities and professional practice fields, and in policy more generally, where a scientific (“technical”) rationality clearly dominates. Hence, as Schwandt (2005, p. 329) concludes, “[w]e are witnessing mounting political pressure on practices of public administration, social work, teaching, counselling and so on to reconfigure [professional] practice in terms of the evidence of effective and efficient services to their clients”— “an undifferentiated insistence on ‘what works’”, within a new, overarching global-governmental logic.

TWO META-TRADITIONS

It is in this context, then, that it becomes important and timely to explore other perspectives, other languages. For Schwandt, the answer lies in what he identifies with a distinctive “practice knowledge tradition” and with exploring the implications and challenges of a view of practice as “a purposeful, variably engagement with the world” (Schwandt, 2005, p. 321). For scholars such as Wilf Carr and John Elliot, it is a matter of re-assessing and re-valuing the project of “practical philosophy”; and Donald Schön and others argue for “practice epistemology” as a new (supplementary) organising idea in and for research and education. “Practice” has become a new rallying-cry, in fact, for a range of initiatives right across the cultural and intellectual landscape, with talk of a “practice turn” (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina & von Savigny [eds.], 2001) in the human sciences (e.g., Polkinghorne, 2004). While there is no single understanding or operationalisation of the term, there would seem enough in common across this range of uses and applications to accept that there is at least a “family resemblance” to be observed here. This is
usefully captured in the notion of “practice theory and philosophy”, which I shall use. This seems to provide a distinctive lexicon for thinking productively about what might be involved in the notion of professional practice, and for researching it accordingly, and the chapters gathered together in this book offer a range of perspectives (“essays”) within it.

I want to distinguish two distinct philosophical “traditions”—or perhaps better, “meta-traditions”—in the work that is emerging in this regard. These (meta)traditions are, respectively, neo-Aristotelianism and post-Cartesianism. The first of these is perhaps better known, and constitutes a particularly rich strand of philosophical thinking, stemming from and referring back to Aristotle and the Greeks and ranging through such notable 20th century figures such as Alisdair MacIntyre, Stephen Toulmin, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Joseph Dunne. An excellent introduction to the work of this line of thinking is to be found in the “Knowing Practice” Special Issue (Vol. 13, No. 3, 2005) of the journal *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* (see also Dunne & Hogan [eds.], 2004). The hallmark of this work is the notion of integrity—that is, that authentic practices contain within themselves their own integrity, which is perhaps most clearly expressed in MacIntyre’s argument about their “internal goods”, or the sense of the “good” that is internal to them. Hence Dunne (2005, p. 367) can speak of practice as “the notion of something that can succeed or fail in being true to its own proper purpose”. In this sense, practice as such may be seen as possessing and bespeaking a moral-ethical quality, and it is notable that Schwandt (2005, p. 330) for one renders this explicitly as “moral-political” in character. This neo-Aristotelian orientation also runs through a number of chapters in this volume, notably those by Kemmis, Carr and Macklin, although it is at least implicit in several of the others.

The other (meta-)tradition that I want to consider here is what I call, not without some trepidation, the “post-Cartesian”. By this I mean a line of thinking that traces (critically) back to Descartes, or rather that embraces the critique of Cartesianism in Western philosophy and culture. At issue here, as well, is modernity itself, as a distinctive historical period, and relatedly, the Enlightenment. Figures such as Newton and Bacon, and also Kant and Husserl, are important reference-points here. Working against this, however, is an alternative and even oppositional line of thinking which seeks to problematise the sovereignty of the subject, and all that involves in terms of prevailing concepts of mind, consciousness and knowledge. Perhaps the key organising issue here is what has been called the problem of subjectivity, within the philosophy of the Subject (McGushin, 2005). This critique is most commonly associated today with poststructuralism, and more broadly with so-called “postmodernism”, but it has a long lineage, certainly reaching back to the early 20th to mid century. Heidegger (“Being and Time”) and Wittgenstein (“Philosophical Investigations”) are central in this regard, firmly putting on the agenda a practice(s) perspective, although the struggle to realise such an agenda is still very much in evidence almost a century later (Reckwitz, 2002; Taylor, 1995). What is becoming clearer however, and increasingly accepted, is that subjectivity is constituted in and through the practices (and discourses) of available cultures and traditions—of “forms of life”. Post-Cartesian arguments are important and necessary, then, because they throw a different light
on the composition and constitution of the “self” (the “self-subject”), and relatedly, on the role and significance of the body, and on notions such as “habit(us)” and “capacity” (Burkitt, 2002). These matters have quite critical implications for professional education.

It is worth noting that these “(meta-)traditions” are by no means mutually exclusive. Aristotle is, in fact, a common point of philosophical reference, figuring heavily for instance in Heidegger’s work, and indeed that of Bourdieu. Hence, although distinct, these lines of thinking are best conceived as interrelated and even interwoven, and offering at the very least slightly differing perspectives and possibilities on practice and the Lifeworld. The point is that, taken together, these strands provide a map of the territory that is encompassed in projects such as this book, and the work that hopefully ensues. I certainly do not claim that this is a full account, because clearly it isn’t. Polkinghorne (2004) for one reminds us of the continuing significance of Dewey, and presumably there would be further value in exploring the possibilities of American pragmatism in this regard.

UNDERSTANDING (PROFESSIONAL) PRACTICE

Understanding and researching professional practice presumes that there is at least a working formulation of the concept itself, in the sense of settling upon an object of analysis. That in turn implies agreement with regard to unit of analysis and also—particularly apposite in this context, I suggest—scale of analysis. Object, unit and scale of analysis, then. Where does one begin? What are the boundaries of inquiry? How do we avoid falling into the praxis-trap of working simply with, and within, the “pre-constructed” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002)? With this in mind, I want at this point to briefly outline some terms of reference for this present undertaking, noting that these did not necessarily pre-date the project but, rather, tended to emerge or to be articulated as it unfolded—that is, in and through its “practice”.

There are at least four senses in which the term “professional practice” might be understood and operationalised here. Firstly, it can be taken as referring to the notion of practising a profession, as in the familiar expression “practising medicine” or “practising law”. Hence one might similarly refer to “practising education” or “practising teaching”, or “practising nursing” and the like, although these latter usages are admittedly awkward formulations, for reasons that perhaps bear some thinking about. Secondly, it could refer to the notion of practising professionalism—that is, the fact that one enacts professionalism, one practises what it is to be professional, or to be a professional. In this case, professionalism is itself to be understood as a practice phenomenon, a matter therefore of practice and identity. Thirdly, and relatedly, it can be understood as referring to, or evoking, a moral-ethical quality: a distinctive quality of being-in-the-world, an attitude or disposition towards the objects of one’s practice, whether they be persons or not. It is in this sense that one can speak of an organic relationship between practice and ethics—the ethics of practice and the practice of ethics. Finally, a practice might be described as “professional”—in contrast, then,
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to what might be seen as the sphere of the “amateur”—analogously to what happens in sport and other arenas (e.g., dancing), where one is paid a fee for the service that one provides and enacts, often on an explicit, formally constructed scale. In our case, all of these senses might be seen as being relevant, to differing degrees. Professional practice fields are distributed across the private and public sectors. They feature various schemes of employment and remuneration and involve extensive programmes of pre-service education and training (and also, in some case, renewal and re-accreditation). Moreover, all require a certain disposition to be instilled in their members, an appropriate (“professional”) attitude regarding conduct and relationships.

With regard to practice itself, it might be useful to think in terms of three distinct but interrelated categories, namely, “activity”, “experience” and “context”. These are of course relatively familiar and even commonsensical terms that can be kept in mind as the concept is itself (re)formulated across the chapters comprising this book, and beyond. Rather than thinking of them in linear or sequential terms, it is perhaps more appropriate and generative to conceive of them and their inter-relations as layering and unfoldings. Nonetheless, I want to say that the primary term here clearly is activity—what might be expressed, following Marx, as “sensuous human activity”, but is also potentially open to being understood more broadly as organised activity per se. Consistent with the view of practice generally espoused in the book, this is to be distinguished however from just any kind of natural or material activity, or from what might be deemed “brute” activity. In Polkinghorne’s (2004, p. 6) terms, “practice” refers “primarily to engaged action or activity”, and to “activity aimed at accomplishing a variety of tasks”. He later describes practice as “activity directed towards accomplishing a goal” (Polkinghorne, 2004, p. 71).

Rich conceptualisations of activity might be drawn from cultural-historical activity theory (or CHAT), with its language of “activity systems” and the like. Engeström (1999, p. 21) for instance describes “activity” as “an object-oriented and cultural formation that has its own structure”. He later points to the Russian Leont’ev’s “famous three level-scheme”, comprising (in descending order) “activity”, “action” and “operation”. To work with such a formulation, and its elaborated program, is certainly to open up the field of possibilities, conceptually and analytically. For some working in this area, indeed, activity is a more generative concept than practice, and certainly there needs to be further investigation of the relationship between these concepts as well as between their associated bodies of theory and argument. Whatever the outcome of that, it seems inescapable that they both point to a common emphasis on “doing(-ness)”, in accordance with the idea of a world in motion. Activity is to be regarded then as a primary category, and hence as necessary for understanding practice—but in and of itself it is arguably insufficient.

The second category to consider—“experience”—is one that is, admittedly, fraught with difficulty. Long a foundational category in Western thinking and also in commonsense, it has been challenged in recent times by work associated with the so-called linguistic turn, and by (post)structuralist and post-empiricist accounts and interventions in philosophy and social theory (e.g., Scott, 1992; de Lauretis, 1984). Common formulations in professional education such as referring to someone as “experienced” and hence as possessing certain usually desirable qualities, and as
having on this basis various forms and degrees of authority, indicate the relevance
of the notion of “experience”. The term “professional experience” is often
capitalised now and mobilised as a replacement for “practicum”, in some circles at
least. Here again there is sometimes a certain overlap, with “professional experience”
used to refer to engagement in pre-service practice of the profession at issue—
before being immersed in the “real world”, as it were.

In her fascinating account of “how learning a profession occurs”, Deborah
Britzman (2003, p. 1) makes much of the relationship between “experience” and
“practice”. Indeed she deliberately blurs the difference, noting that “experience
itself—what is called in this present study, “practice”—is a paradox, an unanticipated
social relation, and a problem of interpretation“ (Britzman, 2003, p. 3; my added
emphasis). “Experience” is in this account a problem, and so too is “practice”,
needing to be explained, but also—and this is important—interpreted. It is not self-
evident, or transparent, nor innocent. As she writes: “Practice here falls somewhere
between dress rehearsal and a daily performance. It is sometimes a real event, or
only its anticipation. But it also reaches into thinking about what has happened or
what did not happen.” She goes on: “The practice of teaching, because it is
concocted from relations with others and occurs in structures that are not of one’s
own making[,] is, first and foremost, an uncertain experience that one must learn to
interpret and make significant” (Britzman, 2003, p. 3). It is pertinent to note that
Britzman’s focus here is on initial teacher education, but her argument has bearing
on thinking about professional practice more generally. This is because
(professional) practice is undeniable experiential, at least part of the time, and
perhaps different ways and senses. One “experiences” practice, one lives through it,
aware that it is happening; one remembers it, afterwards; one looks forward to it,
or not. It is an object of fear, of fantasy, and always of imagination. It is therefore,
as well as being undeniable material, a matter of consciousness, however defined
(and also, of course, of unconsciousness …), and of thought. It is also a site, and an
incitement, of emotionality, of affect, of feeling, of sensuous and sensory
awareness. Bradley’s chapter is directly addressed to the issue of “experience” in
practice, and once again it is something that is raised in various ways across the
volume.

Finally, practice is always contextualised; it cannot be thought outside of some
notion of “context”. There are always, unavoidably, contextual considerations and
challenges in understanding and research professional practice. All too commonly,
however, (professional) practice is conceived far too narrowly, as referring more or
less simply to what it is that practitioners do, with “context” (when and if it is
considered at all) somehow added on. We see this institutionalised in professional
education programmes—in teacher education, for instance—with “practice” (or
“methods”) courses characteristically separated from “foundations” courses, and
with “practicum” organised differently again. So it is important to assert that “context”
needs to be thought of as part of practice, as inscribed in it, as part of its larger and
more adequate conceptualisation. Yet “context” also needs to be problematised. It
cannot simply be taken for granted, or assumed. Indeed, as with “experience”, it
must be used with caution, and always under erasure, as it were. This is because
the distinction between what is “context” and “text” (this latter term referring here
at least analogously to the unit of activity) is blurred, indistinct, shifting. Schatzki (2002) captures this somewhat in his account of what he calls “nominalism”, which he contrasts with “contextualism”. His formulation is worth citing here:

Nominalism contends that the character and transformation of sociality can be explained solely through the properties of and relations among the particular entities that compose social life. It therefore opposes contextualism, which argues that these matters must be referred to a context, different from those entities, in which the latter exist. (Schatzki, 2002, p. xiv)

Schatzki comes down on the side of “contextualism”, although I would suggest there is a risk here of falling into a more or less sophisticated “container” view of the phenomenon at issue. If one holds, as I do, that practice theory and philosophy constitutes what might be called a “family”, or perhaps an “affinity set”, then it might usefully be seen as including such approaches and perspectives as fall ostensibly into the “nominalist” camp—for instance, actor-network theory (Gherardi, 2000). Kemmis’s argument, here, concerning what he calls “practice architectures” and, elsewhere (Kemmis, 2005), what he identifies as the “extra-individual dimension of practice” is clearly pertinent to this issue, as is the chapter by Saltmarsh in this volume, which draws from sociology and cultural studies. Undertakings such as the history and sociology of professional practice, learning and education, predicated as they are on particular, albeit often received notions of “context”, are integral aspects of an adequate research program in this regard, reconceptualised, as indeed is programmatic provision more generally.

SOME GUIDING PRINCIPLES

A further set of considerations is mobilised in this book and in part specifically realised through various of the chapters. These concern particular formulations of knowledge, judgement, politics, timeliness, and decision, and reach to the very heart of professional practice, learning and education. These guiding principles, as it were, are to be identified as phronesis, praxis and aporia, respectively—although they might be best represented diagrammatically, thus:

Figure 1. Relationship of the guiding principles of professional practice
This representation is intended to highlight the necessary interrelationships of these principles. That is important because no single term in the set is of superordinate significance, or is prior, and all are necessary in grasping the nature of professional practice.

As noted, a number of the chapters here take up the notion of *phronesis* in various ways, some more explicitly and formally than others. This concept, drawn directly from Aristotle, encapsulates what Polkinghorne (2004, p. 69) describes as “an expanded view of rationality as an embodied process”. There is indeed growing interest in the notion of *phronesis*, across a range of writers concerned with challenging the dominant forms of rationality and knowledge in Western society, and how indeed these might be “reformulated and extended”. Flyvberg (2002, p. 54) for instance points to the particular importance of Aristotle’s concern with the “intellectual virtues dealing with context, practice, experience, common sense, intuition, and practical wisdom”, emphasising especially “the intellectual virtue named *phronesis*”. Flyvberg’s work is important and relevant here not just for his notion of a “phronetic social science”, which is usefully considered as a resource for building an appropriate knowledge base for the professional practice fields, but also for what he has to say regarding (what he calls) “arationality”, the body and expertise, and more generally practice and power. As he notes, *phronesis* is associated with “practical knowledge and practical ethics”, and with “practical wisdom”, as a form of wise and prudent judgement (Flyvberg, 2001, pp. 56–57). This is what Dunne (2005, p. 375; my emphasis) calls “an alternative form of practical rationality”, contrasting it with “technical rationality” and scientific knowledge. It is helpful to cite his summary characterisation of some of the key features of *phronesis*, namely:

- its role as an action-orientated form of knowledge, its irreducibly experiential nature, its non-confinement to generalised propositional knowledge, its entanglement (beyond mere knowledge) with character, its need to embrace the particulars of relevant action-situations within its grasp of universals, and its ability to engage in the kind of deliberative process that can yield concrete, context-sensitive judgements. (Dunne, 2005, pp. 375–376)

As Dunne notes, further, it is perhaps best understood in terms of “judgement”, as referring more generally to “the cultivated capacity to make [particular judgement ‘calls’] resourcefully and reliably in all the complex situations that they address” (Dunne, 2005, p. 376).

The second organising principle (“praxis”) is commonly associated with *phronesis*, as it happens, and indeed Aristotle explicitly links the two, in the realisation of what might be called “good action”, or human activity oriented expressly towards that which is good. Various writers have taken up this notion, and it has been mobilised in much recent practice-theoretical inquiry, including that addressed specifically to professional practice, learning and education (e.g., Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & Smith [eds.], 2008). It is also taken up, commonly, as investing practice *per se* with an explicit moral dimension, and as such can be readily extended to include the “moral-political”, as in Schwandt’s
(2005) usage, cited previously. It tends to refer to theoretically informed, committed action, with this commitment ranging from the personal (as in being engaged, or passionate about) to the more overtly political, as in the notion of being socially committed, or oriented towards social justice. Marx and others have mobilised another inflection on this latter sense, which might be described as expressing an explicitly critical and emancipatory interest, through work such as that of Freire and Gramsci, and also Habermas. Hence a distinction might be made strategically and rhetorically between the italicised form of the term (praxis) and its non-italicised usage, with “praxis” being the general term used to register its worldliness. Lather (2007, p. 15) observes that “[c]lassically, praxis is the self-creative activity through which we make the world, the central concept of a Marxist philosophy that did not want to remain a philosophy, philosophy becoming practical”. Her earlier formulation of “research as praxis” is one that arguably remains powerful and persuasive with regard to researching professional practice and in professional education more generally, even though, as she notes herself, its original formulation must now be seen as “full of unproblematised assumptions” (Lather, 2007, p. 15), consistent with the challenges of postmodern(ist) theory and politics. Evans (2007) argues expressly that practice must be understood in terms that go beyond mere activity, as “a richer and fuller concept than can be represented by its doing, that is, by being equated with what even the most capable practitioners do”, which would be to “make the mistake of equating practice with its performativity rather than its praxis”. He specifically invokes Freire with regard to this latter term, that is, “the Freirian notion of praxis as action-full-of-thought and thought-full-of-action” (Evans, 2007, p. 554). Taking these various usages together, it seems to me that praxis is clearly an important organising principle for understanding and researching professional practice, as bespeaking engaged work in and on the world.

The notion of “aporia” is, again, originally drawn from Ancient Greek philosophy, but has become known, and indeed notorious, more recently through the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It refers to the confrontation in one’s practice with unresolvable problematics, or paradoxes—“perplexities and impossibilities”, as Macklin writes in his chapter here. Aporia links directly to issues of ethics and politics, and to particular notions of “responsibility” and “decision”. Derrida is worth directly citing here:

Morality, politics, responsibility, if there are any, will only ever have begun with the experience of the aporia. When the path is given … the decision is already made … The condition of possibility of this thing, responsibility, is a certain experience of the possibility of the impossible: the trial of the aporia from which one may invent the only possible invention: the impossible invention. (Derrida, 1992; cited in Lather, 2007, p. 15)

In such a view, all decision-making—even that which is, properly speaking, mundane, or “practical”—is “haunted” by the aporia, by aporias. The link to what is, in some quarters, called “clinical judgement” and perhaps more generally “practical judgement” is important. In professional practice there are always
moments of undecidability and decision, moments when one must act, even if the way forward is not clear, or—more radically—is uncertain. Writing in the context of medical education and a fascinating study of “how doctors think”, Montgomery (2006, p. 3) observes that physicians characteristically work in “situations of inescapable uncertainty”, arguing that medical practice calls for and evokes a distinctive (“practical”) rationality. This she expressly links with Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis*, and also with what she calls “an epistemology of practice” (Montgomery, 2006, p. 201). It is that condition of radical uncertainty that marks the work of (organic) professionals, overall, who always operate in particular circumstances, at the point of practising their professionalism. Further observing that “[p]hysicians must act – or decide not to act”, Montgomery (2006, p. 203) writes that “[i]ntellectual knowledge, including a thorough grasp of clinical thinking, is always trumped by the ethics of practice”. A political philosopher, Laclau (1996, p. 54) offers by analogy an extension on this line of thinking and argument: “The moment of the decision, the moment of madness, is this jump from the experience of undecidability to a creative act, a fiat which requires its passage through that experience”. This “madness” here is, of course, the movement beyond rationality, in the received sense, that is thematised so centrally and consistently in practice theory and philosophy, and addressed in various ways in the chapters that follow.

These three key notions, then, or guiding principles, are thoroughly imbricated in the nature of professional practice. They are not to be understood in a linear, sequential sense, however, or as installing an algorithm that might then be used to organise understanding and research. Rather, they are complex matters for further inquiry, which hopefully will yield insight into what it is that professional practitioners do, characteristically and yet creatively, time and time again, re-making themselves, their practice *and* the world, each time anew.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This book is not about methodology as such, in the sense that it does not set out to provide accounts of particular, distinctive research strategies and techniques (“methods”). It is intended more as a conceptual and philosophical engagement with the challenges of understanding and researching professional practice. I do want, however, to make some observations in this regard.

To begin with, it is appropriate to argue here that research is itself best understood as a *practice*, one which occurs in time and space and is thus necessarily situated, and that always involves both (re)production and renewal, or transformation. Moreover, research is also to be understood as a *professional* practice—that is, a practice undertaken in a certain distinctive way, by one or more agents who are appropriately trained and credentialled, and both experienced and ethical. Central to such an argument is what might well be presented as a refusal of the conventional notion of “methodology”, as an organising principle for research practice, learning and education. This may particularly be the case with regard to the challenges associated with researching professional practice. Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology is an important point of reference here, in his critique of “methodologism”—that is, “the inclination to separate reflection on methods from
their actual use in science work and to cultivate method for its own sake” (Wacquant, 1992, p. 28). His concerns with what Wacquant (1992, p. 28) describes as “methodological fetishism” and “methodological imperialism”, and more generally his “disciplined methodological pluralism” (Wacquant, 1992, p. 33), are also important considerations.

Hamilton (2005) suggests such an understanding of research as practice, in the course of critiquing the notion of “method” and what he calls “[m]eans/end, goal-oriented reasoning” in normative forms of (“scientific”) research. Using a recent methodology text as his example, he observes that not only do the authors separate out means and ends, but also that they work with the assumption that “researchers know what they are doing” from the outset—hence the familiar injunction to formulate a research question, and as fully as possible, prior to actually doing the research (Hamilton, 2005, p. 288). As he writes: “In practice, I suggest, research is always a fumbling act of discovery, where researchers know what they are doing when they have done it; and only know what they are looking for when they have found it” (Hamilton, 2005, p. 288). That is to say, a different rationality is being realised in research understood as itself practice: a practical rationality, as contrasted with a scientific rationality, or a “technical rationality”. Part of the issue at hand here is surely what counts as and constitutes “science”, which suggests the interdependence of many of these terms and concepts. This is, further, an invitation, in itself, to a reflexive engagement with language, both that which we ourselves use, as researchers and practitioners alike, and that which uses us.

What Hamilton’s formulation suggests, further, is that there is always an emergent quality to research-as-practice. This involves combining discovery with speculation, and approaching the practice of research as a probe into the unknown. After all, what might be the use of engaging in research if one already knew what its outcome was? In this regard, there are definite links to be considered between research and writing, particularly as articulated in the work of Laurel Richardson (1994) and others, who work with a notion of writing-as-research, or through writing practice and compositional research more generally (something of which is captured in aphorisms such as “How do I know what I mean until I see what I say?”). The researching disposition is accordingly one that encourages attending to what arises in and through practice, or what is emergent, and learning in a very particular way how to go on, and what to do next. Somerville (2007) describes this in terms of “postmodern emergence”, referring to a “postmodern reconceptualisation” of such things as “grounded theory” and the writing-as-research movement, usefully drawing in Elizabeth Grosz’s (1999) work on time and emergence and a new poetics (and politics) of “becoming”. Elsewhere she writes of such an alternative practice that it begins with “waiting in the chaotic place of unknowing”, and hence “a very different place from research that aims to prove a hypothesis, for which the answer is known or predicted, or than can be channelled through the forms and regulations” of more conventional work (Somerville, 2008, p. 212)—a different kind of research-and-writing practice that I have described elsewhere, apropos of doctoral studies, in terms of “‘non-instrumental’, ‘speculative research’, as a legitimate form of inquiry” (Green, 2008, p. 241). Not that all work in researching professional practice needs to be of this particular “postmodern” orientation,
deploying alternative representational means. Rather, what becomes possible is an engagement with different ways of writing and inquiry, as research and rhetorical possibilities.

This line of argument can be linked, in turn, to Polkinghorne’s (1992) account of what he calls a “postmodern epistemology of practice”, referring specifically to psychology (as a practice profession), and also to his work on qualitative research in terms of practice and narrative (Polkinghorne, 1997). Two points are immediately relevant here. One is the distinction he makes, in referring to “two psychologies”, between “practical rationality” and what has been described already as “scientific rationality”, respectively, and the case he makes for the value of the latter in understanding professional practice qua practice. The other is the use he makes of Bourdieu in conceiving of research as practice—emphasising such things as a learnt “feel for the game”, and also the importance of notions of time and strategy, and of improvisation. As he writes, following and citing Bourdieu: “Practice is characteristically fluid and indeterminate. It is “the ‘art’ of the necessary improvisation which defines excellence”…” (Polkinghorne, 1997). In this context, he refers explicitly to the importance of narrative, and the close and productive association between practice and narrative. He suggests that narrative is an appropriate form of both expression and realisation for qualitative research, which indicates that there would be particular value in further exploring narrative possibilities in and for researching professional practice.3

A further consideration here is the concept of the case, and its particular significance in terms of practice epistemologies and methodologies. Writers in the field such as Montgomery, Polkinghorne, Elliott and Flyvberg all assert the value of the case as a resource for inquiry into practice. “Cases are narratives created to organise, record and think about practical experience”, writes Montgomery (2006, p. 47), and as such, “case narrative is the primary, vicarious means of shaping clinical judgement for new learners and experienced practitioners alike” (Montgomery, 2006, p. 49). Dunne (2005, p. 386) refers to the need for “thickly descriptive studies” to supplement generalised empirical research, studies “embrac[ing] a variety of narrative modes” and be[ing] strongly hermeneutical in character”. Of course case-study research has long been with us. However, recent work in practice theory and philosophy, of the kind mobilised here, suggests the importance of revisiting the notion of “case study” (and so-called case-study methods). This is partly to think again about the nature and value of “the case” as such, the single bounded instance of attention to professional practice, bearing in the mind that case-study, as with other similar practices (ethnography, qualitative research, etc.), may well have become, somewhat ironically, too familiar. But it is also important because in some quarters at least such perspectives have become discredited, especially in the era of “evidence-based practice and policy” and the hegemony of so-called scientific research. Crucially this is an issue not just of “writing” (i.e. doing) case-studies, but also of “reading” (or “viewing”, etc.) them—on understanding more what they are and how they work, and focusing not simply on production but on consumption as well, and hence on interpretation and reading, on hermeneutics. This would involve not just the proliferation of more and more case accounts as such (which, as some suggest, are rarely really read …) but
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of their re-reading, their use, their re-circulation, their accumulation, in what might be called a qualitative, practice-theoretical mode of meta-analysis. It might even be that the notion of (professional) practice as still largely undocumented, as was noted specifically of education some time ago now, needs now to be brought back to the foreground of our attention, as researchers and as practitioners. This would not simply a matter of ethnography, either, since it is clear that there is an important role here for historical inquiry, and other explorations and engagements of “context”.

THE ORGANISATION OF THIS BOOK

Comprising eleven chapters in all, the book is organised broadly into a sequence moving from understanding to researching professional practice, and falls effectively into three sections following on from this Introduction. The first comprises Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5, by Kemmis, Green, Carr and Bradley respectively. It focuses specifically on the nature of (professional) practice as such, and ranges from Kemmis’s ongoing articulation of a theory of practice drawing on Aristotle, Habermas and also Schatzki, through Green’s attempt to bring together debates and theories concerning practice and representation, in a more explicitly “postmodern(ist)” frame, and Carr’s reformulation of educational practice within what he calls “a postmodern manifestation of the premodern Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy”, to Bradley’s focus on “experience” as a necessary category within practice theory and philosophy, albeit one that is in urgent need for reconceptualisation.

The next section, comprising Chapters 6, 7 and 8, by Macklin, Higgs, McAllister and Whiteford, and Lowrie, respectively, is organised by a common concern with decision-making and professional judgement. Where Macklin’s account is motivated more by the question of ethics, and of the ethical dimensions and challenges of professional practice, that by Higgs, McAllister and Whiteford, addressed specifically to the Health professions, focuses more on expertise and on the nature of expert practice. Among other things, they evoke the notion of “praxis artistry” and more generally a movement “from practice to decision-making, from practice to praxis, and from praxis to praxis artistry and graceful care”, thereby generating a richly evocative picture of professional practice. Lowrie’s arguments concerning the value of mathematical thinking in and for professional practice provide a useful counterpoint and complement to the qualitative research emphasis of the volume as a whole, reminding us among other things that practice also has its own forms of regularity, and hence is susceptible to quantification in various ways. His account also opens up the issue of what constitutes research literacy, across the board, for professional practitioners, particularly in the current regime of scientifically-oriented, evidence-based practice and policy.

The final section turns more directly to issues of what might be called (meta)methodology. Chapter 9, by Fish, draws on research addressed specifically to the professional practice of surgeons, and presents a fascinating account of the pragmatics of research practice. Research in such a perspective, as well as being collaborative and co-productive, is presented in its concern with discovery as
deliberately and joyfully embracing the novel(istic), in a manner that is quite striking. Drawing from “a poststructuralist philosophical milieu”, Saltmarsh works with Michel de Certeau and others to question the concept of “context”, while nonetheless arguing for its necessity in seeking to understand and research professional practice. The chapter usefully argues for a view of the relationship between “professional practice and contexts as fluid and contested”, and hence a matter of shifting or blurred demarcations. Finally, Reid and Green present an account of practitioner research in terms of standpoint theory, arguing both for further work on the specific standpoint of the practitioner—essentially an epistemological inquiry—and for ongoing support for substantive work expressly from that perspective, as a much-needed contribution to the knowledge base of the professional practice fields.

NOTES

1 Contributors are mainly members of the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE) at Charles Sturt University in New South Wales, Australia, with two external contributions being by formal Adjuncts of the Institute (Carr, Fish).

2 It has been put to me that this would refer also to prostitution, as what has been described as the world’s oldest profession.

3 There are of course various initiatives of this kind already in the research and scholarship of fields such as education and medicine. On the latter, see Greenhalgh and Hurwitz (eds.) (1998).

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2. UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: A SYNOPTIC FRAMEWORK

This chapter aims to give a broad, synoptic view of the notion of practice. First, it outlines five ways of looking at practice, each of which seems to be adopted in a characteristic tradition of research into practice, and lists a number of features of practice. Second, it offers a view of practice as constituted in “sayings”, “doings” and “relatings”. Third, it suggests that practices are shaped by mediating pre-conditions that shape and prefigure possibilities for action by practitioners, and that changing professional practices therefore requires not only changing professional practitioners’ “professional practice knowledge” but also the mediating preconditions that compose the “practice architectures” within which practices are practised.

FIVE TRADITIONS IN THE STUDY OF PRACTICE

Despite its ubiquity and familiarity, what the term “practice” means is by no means self-explanatory. In theory and research, it turns out to mean very different things to different people. Perhaps one reason for this is that researchers into practice from different intellectual traditions tend to focus on different aspects of practice when they investigate it. The result is confusion. On the basis of their different views about how practice itself should be understood, different theorists take different views on how it can and should be improved.

Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) distinguished five different aspects of practice emphasised in different traditions of research into practice:

– the individual performances, events and effects which constitute practice as it is viewed from the “objective”, external perspective of an outsider; that is, the way the practitioner’s individual behaviour appears to an outside observer;

– the wider social and material conditions and interactions which constitute practice as it is viewed from the “objective”, external perspective of an outsider; that is, the way the patterns of social interaction among those involved in the practice appear to an outside observer;

– the intentions, meanings and values which constitute practice as it is viewed from the “subjective”, internal perspective of individual practitioners themselves; that is, the way individual practitioners’ intentional actions appear to them as individual cognitive subjects;

– the language, discourses and traditions which constitute practice as it is viewed from the “subjective”, internal social perspective of members of the participants’ own discourse community who must represent (describe, interpret, evaluate)
practices in order to talk about and develop them, as happens, for example, in the discourse communities of professions; that is, the way the language, discourses and traditions of practice appear to communities of practitioners as they represent their practices to themselves and others; and

– in the historical dimension, the change and evolution of practice—taking into account all four of the aspects of practice just mentioned—which comes into view when a practice is understood as an evolving social form which is reflexively restructured and transformed over time.

Different approaches to the study of practice have tended to focus on one or another of these different aspects of practice, with the result that, over time, different traditions in the study of practice have emerged.

It might be possible to think of these different traditions as mutually exclusive and competing, on the view that just one of them is the “correct” way to view practice. On the other hand, it might also be possible to think of these different traditions pluralistically, seeing them as different but not necessarily in competition with one another, on the view that each will simply go its own way in the research literature. Another possibility is to regard these different traditions as talking past one another—as failing to engage with one another in reciprocal critique and debate that could permit the exploration of complementarities and points of connection between them. Finally, it might be possible to take the view that these different perspectives can be interrelated within some broader, synthetic framework of theory and practice. There is merit in exploring the possibilities of complementarity and connection between these different approaches, even if for the time being it seems premature to say how a broad and unifying synthesis of the different perspectives can be achieved.

Epistemological Perspectives

Though different schools of thought in theorising and research about practice in different fields are very diverse in terms of the problems and phenomena they study, and the methods they employ, it is possible to bring some of their presuppositions about problems, phenomena and methods to the fore by making some distinctions around which these differences can be arrayed. Generally speaking, these are regarded as epistemological questions—questions about the nature of the “truth” in the human and social sciences—in the case we are considering here, the “truth” about practice. Two of the false dichotomies which have divided approaches to the human and social sciences are, firstly, the division between (a) those approaches which see human and social life largely in individualistic terms, and (b) those which see human and social life largely in terms of the social realm; and, secondly, the division between (a) those approaches which conceive of their problems, phenomena and methods largely in “objective” terms (that is, from an “external” or observer perspective), and (b) those which conceive their problems, phenomena and methods largely in “subjective” terms (that is, from an “internal” or participant perspective). To escape from the partiality of view imposed by these two false dichotomies, it is necessary to see the
terms in each of these pairs (individual-social, objective-subjective) not as opposites, only one of which can be true, but as dialectically-related—that is, as mutually-constitutive aspects of one another, both of which are necessary to achieve a more comprehensive perspective on practice.

The move from thinking in terms of dichotomies to thinking in dialectical terms might be characterised as a move from “either-or” thinking to “never either, always both” thinking. The aim of thinking in dialectical terms is to think relationally—for example, to think how the individual is made by the social, and how the social is made by individuals, and how things seen from the inside appear from the outside and vice versa. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) used these two distinctions (individual-social and objective-subjective) as a basis for a making a small taxonomy of different approaches to the study of practice—see Table 1.

Table 1. Relationships between different traditions in the study of practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus: The individual</th>
<th>The social</th>
<th>Both: Reflective-dialectical view of individual-social relations and connections</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perspective:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1) Practice as individual behaviour, seen in terms of performances, events &amp; effects: behaviourist and most cognitivist approaches in psychology</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) Practice as social interaction - e.g., ritual, system-structured: structure-functionalist and social systems approaches</td>
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<td>Subjective</td>
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<td>(3) Practice as intentional action, shaped by meaning and values: psychological verstehen (empathetic understanding) and most constructivist approaches</td>
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<td>(4) Practice as socially-structured, shaped by discourses, tradition: interpretive, aesthetic-historical verstehen &amp; post-structuralist approaches</td>
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<td>Both:</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) Practice as socially-and historically-constituted, and as reconstituted by human agency and social action: critical theory, critical social science</td>
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**Key Features of Social Practices**

The notion of “social practice”—and “professional practice” as a specialised subset of social practice—is highly contested in the literature. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre (1983) is a representative of the neo-Aristotelian tradition of theorists of practice (which would sit in the fourth or fifth of the traditions presented in Table 1) and gives the following careful definition of practice:
By a “practice” I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially-established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that activity are realized, in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (p. 175).

MacIntyre gives some examples of practices, and distinguishes “practices” and “institutions”:

Practices must not be confused with institutions. Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions. Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with ... external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are bearers. For no practices can survive any length of time unsustained by institutions ... institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the co-operative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution. (MacIntyre, 1983, p. 181)

Louis Althusser (1969), by contrast, sees practice in much more materialist terms:

By practice in general I shall mean any process of transformation of a determinate raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by determinate human labour, using a determinate means of production. In any practice thus conceived, the determinate moment (or element) is neither the raw material nor the product, but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the labour of transformation itself, which sets to work in a specific structure men, means and a technical method of utilizing the means. (Althusser, 1969, pp.166–167)

In each case, however, we see practices as embedded in sets of social relationships, as meaningful activities that bear on particular parts of the world to produce products and transformed states of affairs.

In my recent writing on practice and professional practice (for example, Kemmis, 2005a, 2005b, forthcoming; Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008), I have identified fourteen key features that I believe are distinctive of social practices, especially professional practices. The following list summarises these key features:

- Practice is not just “raw” activity—it is always shaped and oriented in its course by ideas, meanings and intentions.
- Practice always involves values—it is always value-laden and it always raises moral questions about the responsibility of practitioners for their own actions and for the consequences of their actions for others.
- Practice is not just what individuals do—it has aspects that are “extra-individual”, in the sense that the actions and interactions that make up the practice are
always shaped by *mediating preconditions* that structure how it unfolds in words and discourses ("sayings"), in action and interaction in physical and material space-time ("doings"), and in the networks of relationships between the people it includes and excludes ("relatings").

- Practice is always culturally and discursively formed and structured—it realises and is realised in language, words, ideas, specialist discourses and theories.
- From the last point it follows that practice is thus always “theoretical”—in the sense that practice always refers to a theory or theories that name, inform and justify it (even if these theories are not fully elaborated or if the practitioner is not aware of them, and even if the theories involved are contradictory or incoherent).
- Practice is always materially and economically formed and structured—it is shaped by physical and material circumstances, by “set-ups” of physical objects including tools, resources, “raw materials”, and in more or less regular patterns of activity (“activity systems”) that involve different people and object and people at different stages in the unfolding of the practice.
- Practice is always socially formed and socially structured—it realises and is realised in social interactions and relationships, in relations of belonging or not belonging, inclusion and exclusion, differences of standing or role among people, and relations of power.
- Practice is always historically formed and structured—it is always the product of a local history (in this situation, among these people) and also history in the wider sense, and it helps shape the history of the future.
- Practices are frequently preserved, maintained, developed and regulated (a) in institutions and (b) in the cooperative work of professions.
- Practice is always dramaturgical in character—it unfolds in human and social action.
- Practice is always embodied (and situated) —it is what particular people do, in a particular place and time, and it contributes to the formation of their identities as people of a particular kind, and their agency and sense of agency.
- Practice always involves “practical reasoning”, using knowledge in the face of uncertainty, understanding that action is always a kind of exploration of what might possibly be done, and understanding that the historical consequences of practice in a particular case will only become apparent in the future—and then only if people reflect critically on what was done in particular cases of practice.
- Practice is always transformative—it changes existing states of affairs in the dimensions of semantic space (“sayings” physical and material space and circumstances (“doings”), and social space (“relatings”), and its consequences are always to produce greater or lesser modifications in people’s understandings, physical circumstances and social relationships.
- Practice is reflexive—it is understood as *being* practice only in the light of the features already listed, and it is developed and transformed in the light of critical reflection on those features in relation to a particular situation, particular participants, and a particular moment in history.
Though the first four traditions of research into practice are all necessary in their own ways, and for particular kinds of purposes, the fifth tradition is of special interest to those who want to change practices through their own efforts, and especially by their efforts in participatory, collaborative research. It is a tradition in the study of practice which aims to make explicit connections across the dimensions of “objective” and “subjective”, the focus on the individual and on the social, the aspects of structure and agency, and the connections between the past and the future.

The significance of the word “connections” here deserves special notice. The study of a practice as complex as the practice of education, or nursing, or public administration (to give just a few examples), is a study of connections—of many different kinds of communicative, productive and organisational relationships between people in socially-, historically- and discursively-constituted media of language (discourse), work and power—all of which must be understood dynamically and relationally. And we should recognise that there are research approaches which aim to explore these connections and relationships by participating in them and, through changing the forms in which people participate in them, aim to change the practice, the way it is understood, and the situations in which the practice is conducted. At its best, such a research tradition aims to help people understand themselves both as “objective” forces impinging on others and as subjects who have intentions and commitments they share with others, and both as people who act in ways framed by discourses formed beyond any one of us individually, and as people who make meaning for ourselves in communication with the others alongside whom we stand, and whose fates—one way or another—we share.

This relational view of practice—understanding practices in terms of characteristic relationships or connections—also invites us to understand practice in terms of arrangements. In the case of professional practices, each distinctive kind of practice presupposes traditions of practice in which there are characteristic arrangements of words, utterances and ideas in distinctive discourses, characteristic arrangements of activities in distinctive kinds of work, characteristic arrangements of things and objects, and characteristic arrangements of social relationships between people and groups.

Thus, for example, the characteristic discourses, work and social relationships of the practice of law are distinguishable from those of farming—they involve different and distinctive arrangements of words and ideas in their own distinctive vocabularies, preoccupations and discourses; they involve different and distinctive activities and forms of work; and they involve different and distinctive kinds of relationships between people. These two kinds of practice—law and farming—may not be too difficult to distinguish in terms of these things. On the other hand, the practices of medicine and nursing may involve arrangements of discourses, work and relationships that overlap and intersect with one another, sometimes causing confusion and conflict at the points where the different and distinctive aspects of
these two professions come to bear on the same people in the same locations—as both groups of professionals work with the same patients in a hospital, for example. To untangle such confusions and conflicts requires reminding ourselves of the distinctive preoccupations and discourses, activities and kinds of work, and social relationships characteristic of each of these health professions.

PRACTICE AS CONSTITUTED IN “SAYINGS”, “DOINGS” AND “RELATINGS”

Practices as Materially and Economically Formed

By now, perhaps, we have gone beyond the view that practices are to be understood as raw “doing”—simply as behaviour or activity, or even as intentional action. For many people, too, practice is not just activity but labour, or work. It takes place in a material context of action in the physical world, and in an economic context of production, consumption and exchange. As Aristotle (2003) recognised in *The Ethics*, practice is doing or conduct, but it is also more than just doing, more than just what someone does. Each particular and each local form of a particular practice presupposes distinctive arrangements of things and distinctive arrangements of exchange relationships which are characteristic of this or that particular kind of practice—the things and exchange relationships characteristic of medicine or social work or teaching or accountancy or farming, for example.

Practices as Discursively Formed

What has already been said indicates that practices are also discursively-formed—that practices are also constituted and represented in forms of thought (what we think we are doing, our intentions) and language or specialist discourse that makes practice comprehensible, understandable and interpretable as this or that particular kind of practice—medicine, social work, accountancy, history or caring, for example. Practice is thus also constituted in “sayings”—what people say the practice is, as well as what they say while they are doing it and what they say about what they do. Each particular and each local form of a particular practice presupposes distinctive arrangements of words, ideas and utterances—distinctive discourses—which are characteristic of this or that particular kind of practice.

Practices as Socially Formed

More than this, however, practices also constitute relationships of particular kinds between people. The relationship between a professional practitioner and a client is just one of the most obvious of these, but professional practices ordinarily exist in quite complex characteristic patterns of relationships between different kinds of people involved in and affected by them. For example, teaching involves not only a relationship between teachers and students, but also relationships between these two groups and students’ families and wider communities, with government agencies and policy-makers, with future employers of graduates, and with the civil society all exist within. Thus we may say that practices are also constituted in “relatings”—
current and anticipated social connections made and invoked in and through the practice. Each particular and each local form of a particular practice presupposes distinctive arrangements of people, roles and relationships which are characteristic of this or that particular kind of practice.

Professional practices are always a composite of characteristic “sayings”, “doings” and “relatings”. In terms of “sayings”, different professional practices involve particular ways of thinking about what the practice is and means, and different kinds of practices involve their own characteristic discourses, conventional topics of thought and conversation, general ideas about the kinds of problems and issues they address. In terms of “doings”, different professional practices involve different and characteristic kinds of activities and work for professional practitioners and different kinds of activities (and consequences) for others involved in and affected by the practice. In terms of “relatings”, different kinds of professional practices similarly involve different kinds and complexes of relationships between practitioners and those involved in and affected by their practices—different kinds of networks and communities of practice that are made and remade through the living connections that surround the practice. These “sayings”, “doings” and “relatings” form compound structures that are characteristic of different kinds of practices, making them comprehensible and giving them their “teleoaffactive structure” as “tasks” and “projects” for those involved (Schatzki, 2002).

Schatzki’s View of Practices

In my view, understanding professional practices requires understanding what might be described as “arrangements”:

– arrangements of language (words or symbols) in particular discourses;
– arrangements of actions and things (what people do with what) in particular activities and kinds of work, and;
– arrangements of people (learners, actors) in particular patterns of social relationships or connections.

On the one hand, these can be understood in terms of the “internal” relationships:

– between words or other symbols within discourses;
– between particular kinds of actions that “hang together” in particular kinds and patterns of activities and work, and between objects or things within particular kinds of “set-ups” characteristic of particular practices and the places where they are typically carried out (for example, the arrangement of the familiar objects generally found in a school classroom or the objects characteristically found in a dentist’s surgery), and;
– between people within particular networks of social connection familiar in different practice locations and communities (for example, the relationships between students, teachers, principals and students’ families in and around schools, or the relationships between dentists and their clients, office staff and professional peers). Some of these social networks become so familiar that they condense into characteristic roles (student and teacher, or social worker and client, for example) and role-relationships.
On the other hand, practices can also be understood in terms of the “external” relationships between words and actions and things and social connections—relationships that form “bundles” of related sayings and doings and things and social connections. Arguably, social practices, especially professional practices, consist of such “bundles” grouped in characteristic ways. Different kinds of practices involve different kinds of “bundling” of sayings and doings and things and relatings. Some very general, non-specific social practices, like asking questions or walking, are what philosopher Theodore Schatzki (2002) calls “dispersed practices”—they appear in many different kinds of “higher-order” practices. Other social practices, ones that Schatzki calls “integrative practices,” involve many of these dispersed practices (often bundled in characteristic ways), arranged in larger patterns. Professional practices like education or medicine or social work or farming would be described as integrative practices, on Schatzki’s view of practices. Schatzki describes practices as being organised, as “hanging together” in comprehensible and characteristic ways.

Schatzki identifies four principal constituent features of practices:

- … practices are organized nexuses of actions. This means that the doings and sayings composing them hang together. More specifically, the doings and sayings that compose a given practice are linked through (1) practical understandings, (2) rules, (3) a teleoaffective structure, and (4) general understandings.
- By “practical understandings”, I mean certain abilities that pertain to the actions composing a practice (p. 77).
- By “rules”, I mean explicit formulations, principles, precepts, and instructions that enjoin, direct, or remonstrate people to perform specific actions (p. 79).
- A “teleoaffective structure” is a range of normativized and hierarchically ordered ends, projects and tasks, to varying degrees allied with normativized emotions and even moods. By “normativity”, I mean, first oughtness and, beyond this, acceptability (p. 80).
- And Schatzki describes “general understandings” in terms of such things as that:
  - “a variety of the doings and sayings that compose … practices” jointly express a common orientation among people to the meaning and significance of what they are doing, and/or;
  - people share a “sense of common enterprise, [or] concern”, and/or;
  - participants share the same kind of understanding of the significance of what is being done, and/or;
  - they share a common manner of doing things, which are “expressed in the manner in which people carry out projects and tasks” (p. 80).

We should note, following Schatzki, that doings and sayings and relatings “hang together” in different ways in different kinds of practices, and that they may be linked or bundled together in terms of the four kinds of features that Schatzki identifies—practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structures, and general understandings.

What it means to understand a professional practice in terms of sayings and doings and relatings still depends on the standpoint from which we view practice—whether we view it as (1) as the behaviour or activity of an individual viewed from an external perspective, as an object, or (2) a kind of social system or pattern of
social interaction viewed from an external perspective, as an object, or (3) as the intentional action of an individual knowing subject, seen from the standpoint of a participant or “insider”, or (4) as the enactment of an unfolding tradition of practice, seen from the participant or “insider” standpoint of a member of that tradition or profession, or (5) as some combination of all of these views. These are very different standpoints, and, as has already been suggested, they are represented by whole traditions in the study of practice.

What “sayings” and “doings” and “relatings” actually mean is also highly dependent on which of these standpoints one adopts—whether as an observer or as a participant, as an individual person or practitioner or as a member of a community of practice and a tradition of work in a particular profession or a particular workplace.

Table 2 depicts this cluster of relationships:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus:</th>
<th>The individual</th>
<th>The social</th>
<th>Both: Reflexive-dialectical view of individual-social relations and connections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective Perspective:</td>
<td>(1) Practice as individual behaviour</td>
<td>(2) Practice as social interaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discourses/language</td>
<td>Discourses/language</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activities/work; set-</td>
<td>Activities/work; set-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social connections; power</td>
<td>Social connections; power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective Perspective:</td>
<td>(3) Practice as intentional action</td>
<td>(4) Practice as shaped by tradition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discourses/language</td>
<td>Discourses/language</td>
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<td>Activities/work; set-</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social connections; power</td>
<td>Social connections; power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both: Reflexive-dialectical view of subjective-objective relations and connections</td>
<td>(5) Practice as constituted and reconstituted by human agency and social action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discourses/language</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Activities/work; set-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social connections; power</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Sayings”, “doings”, “set-ups” and “relatings” each mean something slightly different when viewed from the particular perspective of each of the cells of this
It means a very different thing to understand “discourses and language” viewed “objectively” from an outsider perspective as verbal behaviour (Tradition 1), for example, than to understand discourse “subjectively” from the insider perspective of a particular participant in a community of practitioners who attaches particular meaning, significance, values and intentions to their ideas or utterances (Tradition 2). These two perspectives differ, in turn, from the kind of perspective we might have if we understand the discourse of participants in a particular community of practice from the outsider perspective of someone studying the linguistic or verbal interactions among participants (Tradition 3). And we have yet another understanding of professional discourses if we understand them from the insider perspective of members of the profession who see the unfolding language and ideas of their practice as participants in different living traditions of thought in their fields (Tradition 4). And all four of those perspectives give a different understanding of a professional discourse than the understanding we might reach if we take a critical view of the discourse of our profession, trying both to understand our ideas and traditions of thought from an insider perspective as members of the profession while also trying to adopt an outsider perspective from which we can also view our discourses as ideologically-loaded systems of thought, or what Michel Foucault (1980, for example, pp. 131–133) describes as “regimes of truth” which we may need to reconstruct for changing times or changed circumstances or particular local conditions (Tradition 5). In short, these five different perspectives on discourses yield very different ways of understanding professional discourses, with rather different kinds of implications for action by the observer or participant (or the observer-participant or participant-observer) doing the understanding.

Without going through Table 2 mechanically to discuss each of the other elements mentioned in each cell of the Table, it should also be evident that similar, perhaps dramatic, shifts of meaning and possibilities of understanding will appear by taking each of the different perspectives (Traditions 1 to 5) on “doings” (“activity and work”), “set-ups” (of “objects” and “things”) and “relatings” (“social connections and power”). The different traditions in understanding practice adopt different **standpoints** from which the practice is viewed: the standpoint of the observer or the participants (outsider or insider), and the perspective of the individual or the social (the particular person or the professional or local community of which that person is a member).

The Table is thus a conceptual framework which invites us to consider whether a particular piece of research about practice, or even a particular conversation about a particular professional practice, adopts an “outsider” or observer standpoint or an “insider” or participant standpoint, and whether it aims to observe or to understand a particular individual actor/practitioner or to see that person within a wider social nexus which enables and constrains the action of individuals.

Discourses and language are not “essentials” which can be understood as singular, with firm or fixed meanings that can be defined or disclosed once and for all. At any moment, they are seen or understood from one or other of the perspectives in Table 2. So, too, activities and work and social connections and power are not **sui generis**—at any moment, they too are always seen or understood...
from one or other of these perspectives. Language is not just language—it is their language or your language or my language or our language; this utterance is what this one or that one said, or a particular move within a system or tradition (or language game; Wittgenstein, 1957) of meaning and communicating. The same is true of “doings” and “relatings”—they are doings and relatings seen from the inside or the outside, as done by particular individuals or in the unfolding actions that form the life and history of particular communities.

The point here is that it is necessary to treat these different standpoints as relational, and to treat different kinds of sayings, doings, set-ups and relatings as relational—both in terms of the “internal” relationships within sayings, doings, set-ups and relatings, and also in the “external” relationships between sayings and doings and set-ups and relatings.

To make these statements is to oppose two foundational views. Firstly, it is to oppose the foundational view that any one of the standpoints represented by Traditions 1 to 4 in the cells of Tables 1 and 2 is the sole bedrock on which the truth about things can be constructed. Secondly, it is to oppose the foundational view that either discourse (language) or action or set-ups of material things (work) or social connection (power) can be epistemologically privileged as the most “basic”—as the bedrock on which the truth about practice and professional can be constructed.

To oppose the first foundational view is to assert that practice must be understood multi-dimensionally, not just in terms of either a so-called “objective” or “subjective” perspective, or in terms of either a view of people as individuals or as members of groups or communities. To take either perspective in each of these two dimensions is to occlude or obscure important features of practice.

To oppose the second foundational view is to assert that practice is always simultaneously formed and conducted in related or bundled sayings, doings, set-ups and relatings; practices cannot be adequately understood if they are treated solely in terms of what people do (as behaviourist psychology might try to do) or solely in terms of what they say (as some discourse theorists might think) or solely in terms of what objects and set-ups are involved (as some kinds of systems theorists might want to say) or solely in terms of what social connections and relationships are involved (as some kinds of soft systems theorists might want to suggest). None of these can be privileged above all the others; they are all implicated and imbricated in the construction and conduct of social practices including professional practices.

All of this is to say that whenever we aim to comprehend, to explain, to understand, to interpret or to critically grasp a practice, we always do so from some standpoint which places us in a particular kind of relationship with the sayings and doings and set-ups and relatings of a practice, whether it is our own practice or the practice of others, and whether we view it from the perspective of an individual practitioner (or other) or from the perspective of a set of cultural, material-economic and social arrangements that enable and constrain the practice even as the practice enacts and reconstitutes those arrangements (that is, reproduces and transforms the arrangements). There is no “innocent” or “privileged” position from
which we can have special and unmediated access to any practice, and we must always remember that our activity aimed at grasping practice as an object for understanding is always itself a practice. Especially as researchers into practice, we should or must become conscious of the “melting of horizons” between the practice we are researching and the practice of our research—that is, we must recognise the “effective-historical consciousness” (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 267–269) by which the observer enters a living, reflexive relationship with the observed.

In the act of researching professional practice as a professional practice, then, we face twin dangers. On the one side, there is the danger that the discourses and language, the activities and work, the set-ups (of observations or experiments or analytic technologies and procedures or libraries and laboratories), and the social connections and power relations of the research act distort or obliterate the discourses and language, the activities and work, the set-ups and the social connections and power relations internal to the professional practice being studied. On the other side, there is the danger that the discourses and language, the activities and work, the set-ups and the social connections and power relations of the professional practice being studied distort or obliterate the discourses and language, the activities and work, the set-ups and the social connections and power relations of the research act. Understanding these twin dangers requires negotiating a path between the Scylla of the researcher standpoint and the Charybdis of the participant (for us, here, the professional practitioner) standpoint.

It requires a “melting of horizons” in which the two standpoints find and articulate their relationships with one another. Figure 1 is an attempt to depict this relationship.

![Figure 1. The relationship between researcher and participant standpoints](image)

What constitutes a successful negotiation between these viewpoints may mean one thing from the researcher’s side, and another from the participant’s. One thing is certain: we can accept only those interpretations that both regard as valid as acceptable accounts of professional practice for particular research purposes and audiences. And this requires both that researchers understand professional practices and the worlds of practitioners and that professional practitioners understand research practices and the worlds of researchers. This is a criterion to which little research into professional practice has aspired and to which little professional practice has aspired—the aspiration to be adequately understood within and from the perspective of the other as well as within and from one’s own perspective. It is a criterion which begs for (to use Habermas’s [1984, 1987]) criteria for
communicative action: communication, intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and consensus about what to say, what to do, how to do it, and how to relate to other individuals, groups and cultures (see also Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

PRACTICE ARCHITECTURES: ARRANGEMENTS, PREFIGURING AND THE LEARNING OF PRACTICES

We have spoken about practices, and especially professional practices, in terms of bundles of particular arrangements of sayings, doings, set-ups and relatings characteristic of this or that practice, in this or that place, at this or that time, and in this or that particular community of participants. Put another way, we have spoken of practices as discursively-, socially-, economically, materially- and historically-formed. We have noted that practices vary from place to place, and that they may evolve into particular local variants that will have particular local “dialects” in sayings, doings, set-ups and relatings.

Professional practices involve particular contents or “substances” of the things being arranged—whether particular contents and forms of discourses (ideas, words, utterances), activities and work, things or objects, or people and the kinds of relationships among them for example, inclusions and exclusions from membership of groups, roles and role relationships). To be distinctive, professional practices involve distinctions and divisions to make differences between arrangements in one field or another, one place or another, professionals and clients, professionals and people who are not members of that profession.

To some—often large—extent, as Schatzki (2002) notes, these arrangements prefigure the actions of particular actors—their professional practice, for example. That is, arrangements of sayings, doings, set-ups and relationships may exist before a particular professional practitioner arrives in a particular location, and there may be traditions in the profession and practice about how things are generally to be understood and arranged in order to be a practice of this or that particular kind. Particular kinds of discursive, material, economic and social arrangements always already enable and constrain the conduct of any practice. Schatzki gives an extended example of the herbal medicine production practices of the Shakers at New Salem in Pennslyvania, to show how things like buildings and their design and architecture, machinery, tools, crops, plants, gardens, records, roles and rules enabled and constrained herbal medicine production by the Shakers, as well as the training and disciplining of participants in these practices (the development of their professional practice knowledge and capacities). Clearly, the elaborated arrangements of school classrooms, dentists’ surgeries, prisons and farms similarly enable and constrain the practices characteristic of these settings.

Mediating Preconditions of Practice

Viewed in this way, then, there is a sense in which professional practice, usually so intimately understood as realised by the particular, personal and self-chosen
performance of the practice by a practitioner, also has a kind of “exoskeleton” of arrangements which cause the performance to be realised in particular ways characteristic of this or that profession or this or that location as well as through the idiosyncrasies and unique performance of this or that particular professional practitioner. I have elsewhere (Kemmis, 2005a, 2005b, forthcoming) described this “exoskeleton” in terms of “extra-individual features” of practice. These extra-individual features might better be described as the mediating preconditions of practice, arranged in terms of cultures and discourses, social and political structures and dynamics, and material and economic conditions under which a practice is practiced. The arrangement of these mediating preconditions enables and constrains particular characteristic modes of professional practices as well as local variations on their more general forms.

To some extent, then, a new professional practitioner, or a professional practitioner new to practice in a particular place, is shaped by arrangements that constitute the mediating preconditions of practice—preconditions that “prepare the ground” for the practitioner as she or he comes to begin practice in this or that particular place. How things are said and thought about in this place, how things are done, the resources and facilities available, and the other people involved and their established relationships create an always-already pre-structured framework that enable and constrain practice in that particular place. These structures or forms do not entirely constrain or limit what can be done or developed; they are simply a background against which the practice can be conducted and from which different forms of practice might be developed.

A new dentist coming to an established dental practice has to learn to use the equipment available in this practice (and make do because some other kinds of equipment might not be here). She must learn the ways the work is thought about and talked about here, by other dentists, the other staff of the practice, and by clients. She must relate to other people and established groups that form the social structure in this practice and in this community. She must get to know the kinds of people who are here, and something of their circumstances—including their capacity to pay for different kinds of possible treatments. Over time, perhaps, she will “put her mark” on the practice, making dental practice in this place more her own and changing the way things are done here by others as well.

Practice Architectures

Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning a practice in terms of “legitimate peripheral participation” by newcomers to a practice situation—a “community of practice”. At first the newcomer watches and learns from the margins, and gradually she or he is absorbed into the life and story of the organisation or the section of the organisation, learning to talk, work and relate to others like a “native”. She or he becomes a bearer of the practice in the setting—someone whose sayings, doings and relatings contribute to reproducing and transforming practice and the setting, and giving still later newcomers ways to access the life of the setting.
Lave and Wenger speak of “learning architectures” in organisations—the way things are arranged so people learn how to do their jobs in particular organisations. Elsewhere (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008), I have preferred the term “practice architectures” to indicate that it is not just the learning that is structured by the work-patterns of an organisation, but the whole work of the organisation—in the case of a professional practice setting, the ways that practice is constructed, enabled and constrained.

Practices thus exist within the broad frameworks given by the “exoskeletons” of practice architectures which are complex bundlings of arrangements of mediating preconditions of practice—ways of saying, doing and relating, and objects and set-ups with which people in the setting interact. They are put on recognisable paths of practice which may simply be one possible path through a forest of possibilities, and which may also be changed over time. The point is that changing practices requires not only changing the professional practice knowledge of practitioners but also these “exoskeletons” of practice, these practice architectures constituted as mediating preconditions of practice.

Some practice architectures are more durable than others. Some have the weight of living and consciously-remembered traditions of thought and action justifying them; some stay the same over time merely by habit; some are kept in their course by coercion or ideology; some are kept in place by rules and sanctions, by regulation and compliance mechanisms. Other practices, and some parts of all practices, are more transitory, ephemeral and changing, left to the discretion of practitioners, or left to their judgement as they interact with different kinds of local clients and circumstances. Sometimes the boundaries between related professions blur and overlap in benign and mutually accepting ways; sometimes the boundaries are matters of continuing conflict and a kind of war (as Foucault, 1980, p. 90, suggests about the operation of power through discursive regimes). The relationship between teachers and school counsellors are sometimes, though not always, examples of the former; the relationships between hospital doctors and nurses are sometimes said to provide examples of the latter.

Great and proper emphasis is put on the development of professional practitioners’ professional practice knowledge, as it should be. It is especially emphasised in the initial preparation of professional practitioners for practice in their fields. This newly formed practice knowledge is what individual graduates will take into the field, into their careers, with them. It will be their resource, their identity, their mask, their manner, a source of their status, their particular way of being in the world, and, for some, what they see as their reason for being. I have tried to show, however, that the authorship of their practices does not lie solely with these new graduates, or with experienced professional practitioners, or even with the whole of their profession—current and past. The authorship of practices is also enabled and constrained by the discursive, material, economic, social and political arrangements that form an exoskeleton of mediating preconditions around the practice—and the practitioner—here and now, limiting the possibilities of practice in some ways, and pushing practice beyond existing limits in others.
The practice of medical doctors in a neighbourhood clinic, for example, is shaped by what these patients will tolerate; by what resources the organisation can afford; by what this manager will complain of; by what that colleague will insist on; what this or that professional body will and will not permit; by what the law prohibits. All these things also change and evolve over time, so that what was once unthinkable becomes thinkable; what was once forbidden is now encouraged; what was once tolerated is now forbidden; what was once too expensive becomes affordable; what was once too difficult becomes easy. Moreover, this evolution takes place in more public and more regulated ways in almost all professions, so that what was once left to the judgement and discretion of practitioners increasingly becomes regulated by law, policy and various technologies for compliance. Professional judgement in some areas increasingly becomes encapsulated in laws or rules or policies—some of which are poorly suited to the needs of some practice settings, especially where clients or communities or conditions or circumstances differ from those prevailing where the professional bodies are headquartered and from those that prevail where the relevant law-makers live and work.

The Sustainability of Practices

Sometimes, perhaps often, this is “progress”. Sometimes, some argue, greater regulation is not only cumbersome and costly, but also contrary to good sense in particular conditions, circumstances and settings, or with particular groups of clients. The crucial question to ask in such cases is whether practices or the practice architectures as they are represented or enshrined in laws, regulations, rules, policies or social technologies (like funding and accounting systems) are sustainable.

In general, practices are not sustainable if they do not meet criteria necessary for their continuation in one or more of five dimensions:

- **Discursive sustainability**: the practice is not incomprehensible or irrational, in the sense that it does not rely upon false, misleading or contradictory ideas or discourses.

- **Social and political sustainability**: the practice does not include or exclude people in ways that too greatly corrode social harmony or social integration; the practice is not unjust because it is oppressive in the sense that it unreasonably limits or constrains self-expression and self-development for those involved or affected, or dominating in the sense that it unreasonably limits or constrains self-determination for those involved or affected (see Young, 1990).

- **Material and environmental sustainability**: the practice is not physically and materially infeasible or impractical, and does not consume physical or natural resources unsustainably.

- **Economic sustainability**: the practice is not too costly; its costs do not outweigh its benefits; it does not transfer costs or benefits too greatly to one group at the (illegitimate) expense of others; it does not create economic disadvantage or hardship.
- **Personal sustainability:** the practice does not cause harm or suffering; it does not unreasonably “use up” the personal knowledge, capacities, identity, self-understanding, bodily integrity, esteem, privacy, resources, energy or time of the professional practitioner or others involved in or affected by the practice.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter has set out some dimensions in which practice can be understood and studied. Different practice theories and different traditions in the study of practice have understood professional practice as different kinds of “objects”, to be understood in different ways. In this chapter, I have attempted to outline a variety of perspectives from which practice can be understood, and a variety of the individual features and mediating preconditions that shape, enable and constrain practices.

As has been suggested, practices have various kinds of “internal” shapes and structures as well as discursive, material-economic, and social-political exoskeletons that give them characteristic shapes at different times and in different places. Changing these “exoskeletons” or practice architectures—the mediating preconditions that shape practices—is as much necessary as changing practitioners’ professional practice knowledge if practices are to change and develop. Indeed, changing practices requires understanding how characteristic arrangements of sayings, doings, set-ups and relatings of different practices are bundled together at different times, in different places, in different groups or communities of practice, and in relation to different kinds of client groups. Changing only one part or some parts of these bundles of arrangements may or may not be sufficient to produce, secure or sustain changes in practice. Things need to be re-arranged in relation to one another within the dimensions of saying, doing, set-ups and relating, but also in terms of the way arrangements are bundled together across these dimensions.

Foucault (1980) speaks of regimes of discourse changing not by rational persuasion—it being politely agreed that one idea or way of seeing things should be replaced by another—but by a power-saturated process of continual contestation. He regards the practice of a regime of discourse, a regime of power, as like an unending war in which power is constantly being produced and consumed by the practice of power relations between people in different kinds of settings and organisations. Foucault set out to understand how power works, not as cascading from a presumed power centre like a sovereign or the governing body of an institution to the whole of a governed population, but through understanding how power operates and circulates in and through the “capillaries” of a regime, in which each person is subjected to power through practices of power and through which each person *practices power* in relation to others nearby, in accordance with the flows of power characteristic of the whole regime.

Power is one of the crucial dimensions in which practices are conducted; as Foucault understood, knowledge is another. He conjoined them in the formulation “power/knowledge”. His notions of “regimes of truth” and “technologies of power” correctly point to things often unsaid, concealed or apparently absent in this or that
action or event or utterance—things that constitute regimes of truth as regimes of power.

In this chapter, I have hoped to invoke a similar sense of what lies beyond the individual practitioner’s knowledge about their practice—worlds of sayings, doings, material set-ups and relatings that stretch out in webs that enable and constrain what professional practitioners can think and say, what they can do with what resources, and how they relate to others and how others relate to them. I have tried to suggest that the mediating preconditions of practice—arrangements of ideas, words, utterances, things and people—take characteristic shapes in different professional practices at different times, in different places, with different kinds of groups. I have aimed to show that changing practices requires changing things frequently beyond the knowledge or control of individual practitioners, and frequently outside the individual practitioner’s field of vision (though also, sometimes, right under their noses). Changing these things requires forms of collective change and forms of collaborative discussion and inquiry to explore not just changing what practitioners know and think and say and do and how they relate to others, but also the practice architectures, constituted by mediating preconditions, which surround and support them, and sometimes place them in impossible and unsustainable conditions (discursively, materially, economically, socially and politically, and personally). Changing practice architectures frequently requires organisational, institutional, or regulatory changes—and not all such changes are for the better. Some, indeed, are unsustainable—they fail to meet the criteria for sustainability of practices outlined earlier.

Thus we might conclude that professional practice and changing professional practice are not matters for individual practitioners or indeed whole professions alone. They are frequently matters of political and legal debate. And, whether professionals or professions like it or not, they are and will remain matters of public interest to be discussed in all kinds of forums, from government committees to the local cafe. The professional privilege required in some professions, where what a client discloses to a professional practitioner cannot be disclosed by the practitioner, may not extend to professionals or professions themselves (except when they are also clients protected by professional privilege). Matters of professional practice will always remain topics for public discourse in public spheres (Kemmis, 2005a).

REFERENCES


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