Enabling Praxis

Challenges for Education

Stephen Kemmis and Tracey J. Smith (Eds.)
Enabling Praxis
PEDAGOGY, EDUCATION AND PRAXIS

Volume 1

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Enabling Praxis
Challenges for Education

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School of Education, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, Australia
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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Pedagogy, Education and Praxis

The ‘Pedagogy, Education and Praxis’ series arose from shared concerns among educational researchers from Australia, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom about the relationships between different traditions of education and educational research that inform our work. The meanings of terms like ‘pedagogy’ and ‘praxis’ are contested within European research traditions and Anglo-American traditions and even more confusingly contested across or between traditions. These words, shared across languages and intellectual traditions, inhabit different spaces in different languages, with different characteristic ways of behaving in each. What ‘pedagogy’, ‘education’ and ‘praxis’ mean in Dutch or English or Swedish – where variants of these words occur – cannot be translated precisely and without remainder into another language. The Series aims to encourage a ‘conversation of traditions’ in which the voices of different traditions can be heard, and different perspectives can come into view. In this way, readers may glimpse beyond the English in which the conversation is conducted to the rich intellectual traditions presented by contributors to the Series. We hope to use these key ideas – pedagogy, education and praxis – as windows through which we may see, even if darkly, into the rooms of other languages and traditions, and to learn what we can about those other traditions. The international collaborative project ‘Pedagogy, Education and Praxis’, of which this Series is an expression has three kinds of aims:

1. theoretical aims concerning the exploration and critical development of key concepts and associated understandings, from different educational and research traditions, of pedagogy, educational science and educational studies, and social and educational praxis and practice;
2. practical aims concerning the quality and transformation of educational praxis in settings including education, teacher education and the continuing professional development of teachers, in relation to a variety of contemporary educational problems and issues, as they emerge in a variety of educational contexts at different levels of education and in different national contexts; and
3. strategic aims of
   a. encouraging the dialogue between different traditions of theory, research and practice in education;
b. enhancing awareness about the origins and formation of our own (and others’) presuppositions and understandings as participants in such dialogues; and

c. fostering collaboration and the development of networks between scholars interested in these problems and issues across traditions.

The volumes in the series are intended as contributions to this dialogue. Some aim to foster this dialogue by opening and exploring contemporary educational contexts, problems and issues within one country or tradition to readers from other countries and traditions. Other volumes aim to foster dialogue by bringing together, to address a common topic, authors and contributions from different countries and traditions. We believe that this endeavour will renew and revitalise some old conceptual resources, and make some, old or transformed, accessible as new resources for educational theory and practice in the international conversations, conferences and collaborations which constitute the globalised educational research communities of today.

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On the first page of his book *Lessons of the Master* (Dutch translation, Amsterdam, *Bezige Bij*, 2004), Steiner argues that ‘we are so immersed in the profusion of forms of education – primary, technical, scientific, humanistic, moral and philosophical – that we seldom just take the time to think about the wonder of transfer, the resourcefulness of deception, which I, pending a more precise and relevant definition, would like to call the mystery of what happens’.

This book has found the courage, at a time when the pursuit of the manageable of the human spirit is in the ascendancy, to pause and reflect on the ‘mystery of what happens’ in schools and on teacher education courses. It deals not only with the individual relationship between master and pupil, which was what concerned Steiner, but also with the context in which that relationship is formed.

We can ask ourselves why there is a need for this reflection now and, more than that, why any such attempt is relevant. After all, teaching is as old as humanity and much of our education still has characteristics of the education of centuries ago. At the same time we can see that educational needs have changed over time and that, in fact, teaching was always subject to pressure from social and societal developments. A significant example of this was the rise of education for the masses in the industrial age. Still it is possible to argue that right now we are also facing changes on an unprecedented scale due to our globalised information society, which present us more than ever before with global problems on the environment, intercultural relations, wealth and poverty, war and peace. These are issues that at the most profound level refer to the democratic quality of our global community. It seems obvious that there will be an attempt to reposition education in this new world order, so it is not surprising that the reflections in the book focus mainly on the moral responsibility of education and of those whose job it is to put it into practice – the teachers in schools and on teacher education courses. The book is concerned with analysing education as a morally informed endeavour, based on the responsibility to ‘do good for oneself and humankind’.

The authors have tried in their analyses to capture the ‘mystery of what happens’ in a language borrowed from a concept that was formulated way back in antiquity, that is Aristotle’s concept of praxis. Aristotle tried to answer the questions: What is wisdom? What is knowledge? What makes a person who has the capacity to act? He defined praxis as ‘action’, referring in a general sense to all intentional activities, by which people can reach a particular ‘goal’ through their own efforts. More specifically, the term referred to rational action based on a conscious choice and ‘action’ was defined as the product of observation, desires, and intellect or reason.
The praxis concept, as further developed over the centuries, offers an alternative to the dominant metaphors in present-day teaching which have been derived from domains of practice other than education. A striking example of this is the language used in connection with issues of total quality management (TQM): tailor-made teaching; client-oriented services; closed chains of information exchange; achievement-based reward and so forth. All of these notions have been developed in the world of industrial manufacturing and, more specifically, the domain of predictable technologies and closed production processes. A tendency to now perceive the teaching profession in terms of a combination of technological prediction, client orientation, efficiency and manageability can clearly be detected.

Clearly there is a world of difference between the language of praxis and the language of manageability. On page 253 of his book *Freedom Evolves* (Dutch translation, Amsterdam: Contact, 2004), Dennett described a fable to illustrate the misunderstandings that can arise from such a difference in language. In answer to the question as to whether things such as ‘faith’ and ‘pain’ are real, he wrote:

"The fable concerns people who speak a language in which they are talking about being overcome by ‘fatigues’ where you and I would simply say that we are ‘tired’ or ‘exhausted’. When we come to them with our sophisticated science, they ask us which of the small bodies in the bloodstream are the fatigues. We wave the question aside, which then leads them to ask in disbelief: are you denying that fatigues are real?

Praxis can be compared with being tired. We all know that it exists, but it cannot be marked out as set rules, procedures and outcomes, just as fatigue cannot be marked out as ‘small bodies in the bloodstream’. That makes communicating about praxis difficult and a dialectical mode of understanding would seem to be the obvious solution. That is why the book first presents some in-depth conceptual-theoretical views, placing the concept into an historical context. Then questions to do with how praxis manifests itself in empiricism today are fed into the debate: What are the characteristic features? What aspirations are there? What opportunities are seen and what problems are experienced in the practice of education as morally informed action? The comprehensive descriptions of practical experiences and empirical data are used in turn to enrich the conceptual and theoretical views. The advantage of this method of working is that it tends to open up and initiate fundamental debates about the essential tasks of education rather than closing down and warding off discussion.

Fundamental debates about the core tasks of education were initiated in the international context of the ‘Pedagogy, Education and Praxis’ project. The international reflections in the penultimate chapter are the product of these debates and they enabled the Australian study to be emulated in several forms. They also enabled the moral role of education to be debated proceeding from multiple conceptual usages. These discussions seemed to lead back time and time again to the question of the legitimacy of our practice, or as Steiner (ibid) put it: ‘What gives a woman or a man the authority to teach another person? Where does the source of the power lie? How will those who are being taught respond?’ These
questions apply not only to the individual teacher, but also to the institutional power of governing bodies and authorities.

The authors of this book deserve genuine praise for the fact that as colleagues at the School of Education of Charles Sturt University they have been able to raise these issues together. They also deserve praise for the honest and thorough way they went about this.

Petra Ponte
Jan Ax

July 2007
Leiden/Amsterdam, The Netherlands
PART 1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
1. PRAXIS AND PRAXIS DEVELOPMENT

About this book

This volume aims to answer these questions: What is the nature of praxis? In what ways can a deeper understanding of praxis inform and guide the actions of educators? To what extent do the conditions of educational practice today, especially in institutionalised settings, enable, constrain or disable praxis? How best can praxis be developed in initial and continuing education? And finally, to what extent can praxis be safeguarded and preserved?

We have chosen to write a book about praxis because we believe there is too little of it in education today. From the outset, we would like to make clear that we are not presenting a ‘how to’ book or manual for praxis development. Instead, our book captures the collective work of a group of colleagues that have interrogated the notion of praxis from multiple perspectives over a sustained period of time. As educators, we think it is essential that we consistently ask the question “what should we do?” in relation to our practice. Perhaps an equally important question is “In whose interests are we acting?” This book foregrounds moral purpose in education and aims to examine praxis using a variety of lenses. Moral purpose is an aim for all professions that we would like to renew through the connected conversations threaded through the chapters in this book. In each of the chapters, our underlying assumption is that education and being an educator are inextricably linked to social and moral responsibility. Our hope is that we can reignite conversations about praxis for all professionals involved in the work and study of education.

As a community of inquirers, we have strategically examined the development of praxis in different fields of education, including the initial and continuing education of teachers for schools, vocational education and training, educational leadership, educational policy-making and community education. Collectively, our endeavours as writers and researchers have been to look more closely at the pattern and fabric of practice in diverse settings to discern those qualities of practice that embody praxis. We have engaged in open and sustained conversations about praxis and praxis development. One set of these conversations has been among the contributors to this volume in the university in which we work together as teachers and/or researchers. Another set of conversations has been with contributors to other volumes in this series – some from intellectual traditions rather different from our own. In addition to these conversations, of course, there is also the larger conversation we join as participants in the research fields and literatures of praxis, practice and pedagogy in education.
What is praxis?

Praxis is a particular kind of action. It is action that is morally-committed, and oriented and informed by traditions in a field. It is the kind of action people are engaged in when they think about what their action will mean in the world. Praxis is what people do when they take into account all the circumstances and exigencies that confront them at a particular moment and then, taking the broadest view they can of what it is best to do, they act.

Throughout this volume, we have italicised the word ‘praxis’, following the convention for foreign words. We have done this to emphasise the ancient Greek and Aristotelian usage and roots of the term. In doing so, we have taken a particular view of praxis which may or may not be taken in other languages and other theoretical traditions, where praxis sometimes means simply ‘social practice’ which, by virtue of its being social, necessarily implies a moral stance towards others involved in or affected by a particular practice.

Praxis means different things in different intellectual and cultural traditions. In some European traditions, for example, praxis is understood as any social action undertaken in the knowledge that one’s actions affect the well-being and interests of others. In other traditions, notably Marxian traditions, praxis is the kind of action that makes transformations in the social world. In this book, we regard praxis as a kind of enlightened and ‘elevated’ action. From this perspective, we understand praxis to be a rather special kind of action undertaken in occupations and professions like education or social work or medicine or farming. In the specific setting of education, when an educator, through her or his practice, takes into account not only her or his own interests, but also the long-term interests of each individual student, and the long-term interests of society and the world at large – he or she is engaging in praxis.

One reason we take this particular view of praxis is that, in English, the word ‘praxis’ is a specialist term. In everyday speech in English, people refer to ‘practice’ in contexts in which the term ‘praxis’ might be used in German or Dutch, for example. We speak of ‘practice’ as something more shaped by intention, by social context and by tradition than mere ‘action’, ‘acts’ or ‘behaviour’. Thus, for example, we speak of practices like chess or farming or medicine as socially-, culturally- and historically-formed, shaped and ordered. As far as we understand the way the term ‘praxis’ is used in some other European languages, it seems to be used more or less the way the word ‘practice’ is used in English. In this book, we therefore reserve the term ‘praxis’ to refer to those forms of practice that are enacted by those that are conscious and self-aware that their actions are “morally-committed, and oriented and informed by tradition” – like the traditions that orient the work, the being and the becoming of people practising a particular occupation or profession. By contrast, we will use the term ‘practice’ to refer to social practices more generally, when actors are not necessarily conscious or aware of the moral import and the social and historical consequences of their action.

Another important consideration for the authors in this book is that any understanding of praxis also needs to take into account that our actions as
educators often involve in-the-moment decisions about complex and demanding situations. Acknowledging the messiness and day-to-day decision making related to being an educator must be part of any efforts to capture the nature of \textit{praxis} and renew its place in education. There is no \textit{praxis} utopia. Likewise, \textit{praxis} does not refer only to an ideal. A proper understanding of \textit{praxis} recognises that the person who is acting is doing so in response to the practicalities and particularities of a given situation – they do the best they could do on the day, the best they could do under the circumstances.

\textbf{PRAXIS AS ENDANGERED: A FORGOTTEN TRADITION?}

We believe \textit{praxis} in education today is endangered. This concern has motivated us to write this book. In our view, \textit{praxis} today risks being replaced by something else. We think this state of affairs has important and untoward consequences for students, teachers and the societies they serve. We think that \textit{praxis} is slowly being edged aside in late modern times – what some think of as postmodern times – by that form of practice that amounts simply to \textit{following rules}. While we do not consider rule-following to be generally or necessarily wrong or inappropriate, what we do consider important is that, as educators, we must regard the laws, policies, rules and procedures that impact on our actions critically, to explore whether, how and the extent to which they enable or constrain our educational \textit{praxis} – our action when it is morally-committed, and oriented and informed by tradition.

What is at stake when practice becomes rule following is the \textit{moral agency} of the educator. At some point, hemmed in by rules, the educator may become no more than the \textit{operative} of some system – the organisation they work in. This distinction between being an agent and being an operative is at the heart of our concern for educational practice and \textit{praxis}. Our capacity to live with, live by, interpret, extend and sometimes creatively trouble or avoid the rules of organisations is one of the things that give us our identities as educators. It is the thing that allows us to develop and enact \textit{praxis}. In other words, \textit{praxis} demands creative thinking, care, compassion and critical consciousness – thinking outside or beyond the rules. \textit{Praxis} is not confined to education, of course: it is played out in a vast variety of settings including the actions of professional practitioners in all fields and occupations, in conscious acts of citizenship and frequently in social and political action.

We are not alone in our concern about \textit{praxis} and its survival in contemporary educational practice. Joseph Dunne (2005) described practice as endangered in education and in other professions, building on arguments first advanced in his (1993) book \textit{Back to the Rough Ground}:

We speak of a species as endangered when, no longer responding adaptively to the imperatives of its environment, it fails to meet the implacable requirements of natural selection. Practices of course are not biological entities, nor can concern for their endangered status imply any wish that they find a place on some evolutionary superhighway. But for decades now the greatest dangers to living species have come from environmental changes
caused by human intervention and assault. And practices have their own similar ecology: they too are exposed to drastic changes in their human environments that threaten their continuing viability. ‘Viability’ here, however, is not a matter of mere survival; one can perhaps better speak of ‘integrity’ which introduces a necessary moral inflection and makes one look to other analogies, as, for example, when the integrity of a national territory is compromised by commercial pressures. While every analogy limps, I introduce ‘practice’ as the notion of something that can succeed or fail in being true to its own proper purposes, and that it can fail in this, even as it succeeds in accommodating powerful pressures from its environment (Dunne, 2005, p.367).

In our view, educational practice today sometimes does “fail in being true to its own proper purposes”. It does so for different kinds of reasons which, we hope, will become clearer in the chapters that follow. Firstly, when educational practice is guided by theories not of education but of other kinds (for example, psychological theories or sociological theories) it can ‘hand over’ the practitioner’s control of educational action to the authors of those ‘external’ theories. Secondly, when educational practice is guided solely by state or institutional policies and procedures that are not responsive to the needs of students and teachers and their communities, the practitioner similarly hands over control to the authors of those policies and procedures. At an extreme, curriculum, pedagogies and assessment may be governed by state and systemic policies and procedures to an extent that professional judgement and a practitioner’s praxis are endangered. Thirdly, when educational practice is conducted in ways that are governed by the decisions of local school or organisational managers that exclude consideration of the needs of students, teachers and communities, then we can say that the practitioner becomes an operative of those decisions and not an agent.

In our view, too, a variety of trends and tendencies in recent educational literature offer responses to these dangers. For example, new developments in action research (see, for example, the Educational Action Research Journal) and self-study (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey & Russell, 2004) aim to strengthen reflexive practice (Cole and Knowles, 2000). Similarly, developments in practice theory (Schatzki, 2002) also suggest that our concerns for the state, the development and even the survival of praxis in education are widely shared.

THEMES THAT STRUCTURE THIS BOOK

As will become clear, the book explores tensions between praxis and practice. As we have suggested, perhaps controversially, we see ‘praxis’ as that particular kind of practice which is morally-committed, and oriented and informed by traditions. By contrast, we see the term ‘practice’ as more general and encompassing, and as applying to a wide variety of actions and activities in social settings. In the book, we will encounter different kinds of theories of practice that explore its social, cultural and material formation. In a sense, then, the purpose of the book, insofar as it is addressed to educators as individuals, is to encourage praxis in the lived
conditions of practice; insofar as it is addressed to those who create and shape the conditions under which educators work, it aims to encourage the formation and development of social, cultural and material conditions that make educational praxis possible.

A number of topics or themes recur in our conversations about the nature of praxis and reverberate through the chapters that follow:

1. agency, subjectivity, being, becoming, identity (and difference and otherness) and reflexivity;
2. particularity, concreteness and materiality;
3. connectedness, relatedness, order and arrangement;
4. history and biography;
5. morality and justice; and
6. praxis as doing (not just saying or intending).

These themes emerge in different ways in different chapters, not always explicitly, as we interrogate and reframe the notion and the development of praxis. An aspect of our reframing has been challenging ourselves to see beyond what we think we are doing to explore the consequences of our actions.

The first cluster of topics concerning the agent (a person with moral agency) is very significant. From the perspective of praxis, the actor is (perhaps intensely) aware of being watchful or conscious in order to ‘steer’ unfolding action and events towards a desirable state of affairs, not only in the best interests of participants in the action in the here and now, but also in terms of the good for humankind. The agent or actor rarely acts alone; she or he acts, in practice, in ways oriented by the actions of other persons. And perhaps most importantly: as we shall see, praxis is not just action in or on others and the world; it is also and always a process of becoming, of self-formation – the formation of the moral agency and the very identity of the actors through their acts.

The second cluster of topics, concerning particularity, recognises that all practice is located in concrete conditions of place, time and arrangement of objects. We discuss some of these by reference to cultural-discursive, social-political, material-economic and environmental dimensions and connections. Practices prefigure or frame action-possibilities in ways that are concrete and local, even if they are sometimes, and in some respects, abstract and general. This draws attention to difference and possibilities for recognition of difference. Each of us, in studying practice/praxis, enters particular relationships with particular people in the cases we are examining, particular ways of observing, particular times and places. This also influences our research methods and we need to be attentive to the particularity of these relationships in the cases we are reporting. The acts that make practice and praxis are always particular; they respond to particular circumstances and conditions; they are cases where we may act well or badly. This is at the heart of praxis – it concerns how well we did on the day, when we ourselves had to choose and to act (or not to act), when the consequences of our actions flowed on to others for better or for worse.

This last feature also distinguishes what is written in this book from other books about the quality of education. All too often, books about quality – in education
and in other fields (like ‘total quality management’ or ‘quality assurance’ or even ‘quality teaching’) – are books about external criteria to which a process or an act must conform if it is to be regarded as of high quality. This is to regard quality impersonally, objectively and, in the end, we suggest, bureaucratically. To take that view of ‘quality’ is to take the actor out of the act, the person out of the unfolding events in which each of us does our best or aims to do as well as we can under the circumstances. A great deal of our contemporary experience of science, research and professional life is premised on this objectivising attitude – the notion that each of us, like all others, should strive to meet objective criteria of quality in our work. Although we do not reject that objectivising attitude out of hand, here we want to follow the poet W. B. Yeats (1965; from his 1928 poem ‘Among school children’): “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” We want to insist that praxis is the action of people who act in the knowledge that their actions will have good and ill consequences for which they have sole or shared responsibility, and who, in that knowledge, want to act for the good. The book is thus addressed to those who want to develop not just ‘quality’ or ‘quality outcomes’, as ‘quality’ is seen by others, but the substance and excellence of their own and others’ practice as praxis, and their virtue as practitioners in their own fields – in this book, the field of education. In short, the book is addressed to educational practitioners who want to judge their actions by their educational consequences, that is, the consequences of their actions for the particular students and communities with whom they work.

The third cluster concerns connectedness. Connectedness presupposes plurality. The actor exists in relation to, and in connection with, a variety of kinds of orders and arrangements: orders and arrangements of people, objects, words and ideas, and the natural orders and arrangements that form the living environment in which we exist. One might go so far as to say that the substance of practice and praxis is always enacted in each and all of these dimensions, enabled and constrained by pre-existing arrangements in each dimension. That is, we cannot conceive of practice or praxis other than in terms of its connectedness in each of these dimensions and, as we have seen, in the concrete particularity that situates it in real time, space and place.

The fourth topic is history – practice and praxis are always located in biographies, narratives, and histories and traditions of practice that prefigure practice/praxis in this particular time and this particular place. The way the world is interpreted depends on an understanding of history and one’s own historicality. In praxis, a person is conscious of themselves as acting in history, as making a world and a history through their action. The practitioner comes to a field of action that is always already structured by their own and others’ ways of thinking and seeing the world, their ways of doing things, and their ways of relating to others. A critical consciousness in terms of history can help us find ways of thinking that, at least partially, allow us to escape the constraints that tradition has placed upon our thought, interpretations and perspectives and imagine our futures. Both in a broad sense in relation to traditions of practice and in the narrower sense of the situatedness of practice in this or that particular time or place, practice and praxis