

“Practice”: A Central Educational Concept

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EDUCATION AND PRACTICES

The more or less “traditional” way to conceive of education has been to think of it as an initiation into practices. In the Enlightenment tradition, for instance, the learner is initiated into forms of thought and understanding that are part of a critical cultural heritage. These forms are public but as yet beyond the child’s understanding; he or she must therefore be lured in and skillfully initiated into the knowledge, sentiment, and inherently valuable activities and practices of civilized life. But this classical formulation in terms of a prerequisite for the “conversation of mankind” has long been under pressure due to its so-called conservative tendency of encouraging an unquestioning stance toward the particular content into which one is initiated. Thus society, it is loudly proclaimed, reproduces existing inequalities, such as the distribution of wealth and power. Though such an education generates, even cultivates, some of youth’s critical potential, many see it as too much of a stabilizing factor for the predominant way of living together, giving further advantage to those born into the right kind of families, subcultures, and even societies. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the many child-centered educators who followed him, the adult world, far from representing reason, is essentially corrupt. On this view, the child, as a product of nature, is essentially good and will, if allowed to, learn all he or she needs to know from experience. Others in this lineage have applauded the ethical concern of child-centered education with respecting the vulnerability and individuality of the child, but have questioned its noninterventionist claims. They maintain that, far from being generated spontaneously by the child’s contact with the physical world, much of what the future adult needs to learn is of a conceptual nature and therefore social, not to say traditional, in origin. Hence, even here the concept of “practice” remains in one way or another present in the background. For epistemological reasons, though no less for ethical ones, it seems that we cannot do without it.

Our project here is to reexamine the concept of “practice” and to propose a different way of thinking about it. First, we will outline how the centrality of the concept of “practice” should be understood, drawing primarily from the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein but also borrowing key ideas from Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. Second, we will indicate how the concept has come under pressure to the extent that one may doubt whether there are any “practices” left in contemporary society. Third, we will differentiate between different kinds of practices in terms of how they are learned and enacted, and suggest the central role that *narrativization* plays in these processes. Finally, we will suggest that this reconceptualization does justice to the intuition (impossible to deny, in our view)

that education is in some sense an initiation into practices, without endorsing the conservative and reproductive conception of what that initiation entails.

WITTGENSTEIN, MACINTYRE, AND TAYLOR:
THE CENTRALITY OF THE CONCEPT OF "PRACTICE"

Wittgenstein's later work revolved around the idea that human life begins in doing, not in thinking. He provided a view of human life in which the idea that humans are cultural beings is taken seriously. Language is, on this way of looking at the matter, embedded in a constantly expanding and shifting set of cultural practices, or as he called it, a "form of life." That "practice has to speak for itself" points not only to the ways in which the unity of our concepts is formed; it also comprises the skills involved in *handling* the conceptualized phenomena, our prereflective *familiarity* with them (expressed through the sureness in our behavior toward them), and the *judgmental power* exercised in applying or withholding a given concept on a particular occasion.¹ These factors are all relevant to the establishment of knowledge, but they cannot themselves be fully and straightforwardly articulated by verbal means. In returning to the ordinary, Wittgenstein stresses the essential groundlessness of the social contexts in which assessments can be made and standards evoked.

Here *training* plays a crucial role in education, but this is importantly different from *conditioning* in that the association is structured by a practice, which, for Wittgenstein, is rule-governed, that is, normative: not the mere reinforced association of word and object, or behavior, but an association that is effective in enabling the novice to realize his or her more basic desires by shaping his or her behavior to conform to the activities licensed by the practice or custom. Training is successful if it results in the initiated learner eventually becoming a skilled and, thereby, autonomous practitioner, thereafter performing within, and thus adding to, the practice — perhaps even contributing to a further change in it. A necessary support, both logically and physically, for the novice's linguistic actions is the structuring provided by the community. It is logically necessary because it provides a system of background beliefs, actions, and competencies. This complex pattern is necessary for the token utterance or action to have significance. Thus, training provides the ground for the development of the cognitive competencies constitutive of language mastery or the mastery of any genuinely normative practice.

It should be noted not only that certain ways of judging the empirical world are taken over from earlier generations, but that, in this context, judging is also a way of acting. The child's coming to act according to accepted beliefs cannot be learned simply by learning rules.² That is why the practical aspect of rule-following cannot be taught on the basis of rules; it has to be picked up by examples and by training. As Wittgenstein says, we look at a model or template and learn "to go on" in a similar way. But this is not to say that practices are forever fixed: they are always open to new developments. That standards are embedded within socially constituted bedrock practices is the only view of norms that ends neither in mystery-mongering nor in regress. According to Wittgenstein, these practices are not deliberately chosen conventions, but are constituted by the harmonious "blind" agreement in the words

and activities of a group of people over a period of time, which stands in the background. It is "blind" only in the sense that it does not itself result from the self-conscious or explicit application of rules.³ This does not mean that people are unconscious automata "blindly obeying" rules; the indispensability of the background links the process of learning to the content of what is learned. Thus, regularities that create space for going on in the same way are established. These regularities cannot be specified in propositional form (for then the problems identified in the regress reemerge), but are acted out in reactions and actions shaped by our initial training.

Because humans are cultural beings whose use of concepts presupposes a prereflective familiarity, a context of cultural practices is necessary to communicate and interact with each other. With respect to such practices one cannot *not* be initiated, because not being so initiated would imply not being in any human relationship at all. Yet such essential practices are learned foremost by doing rather than by teaching. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues that these grounding meanings must always come down, at some point, to a recognition that people just *do* accept this or that, just *do* agree about what actions count or do not count as following a certain procedure, without necessarily being able to articulate how or why.

While the normative element is, according to Wittgenstein, not to be radically separated from the "meaning" dimension, it is not clear how to move beyond this minimal characterization in order to determine which kind of practices one *should* be initiated into. To put this differently, there is no straightforward answer to the question of what practices matter most. Therefore, further differentiations are clearly needed about the *kinds* of practice that can be found in present society. But before going into that, we will focus on two positions, where the link between practices and an ethical and/or educational stance is explicitly made.

Alasdair MacIntyre's communitarian approach stresses that practices depend upon rules and internal standards of excellence that are demonstrated to us by the most competent and authoritative practitioners. In *After Virtue*, he defines a "practice" as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partly 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.⁴

For MacIntyre, this concept of a practice and how it is taught is central to understanding society; because he conceives "teaching" as a set of skills and habits, however, it follows that, for him, teaching cannot itself be a "practice," even though it is put to the service of a variety of "practices."⁵ This stance was the topic of debate in a recent issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. MacIntyre's position, according to Richard Smith, ignores the distinction between self-contained practices and purposive practices.⁶ The former are those such as chess or football and games in general, where the essential point of the activity lies within itself; there is no

external end toward which by their nature they aim. The latter are those that, while conforming to MacIntyre's definition, nevertheless have some end beyond themselves. MacIntyre tends to write, so Smith claims, as if practices in general were self-contained rather than purposive. According to Smith, without the element of purposiveness, it is difficult to see what prevents a practice from falling into self-indulgence and self-absorption, from turning into an endlessly sophisticated theatrical. For Smith, teaching is a purposive practice in this sense.

For Charles Taylor, social theory rarely consists simply of making some continuing practice explicit. The stronger motive is the sense that our implicit understanding of a practice is in some crucial way inadequate or even wrong. Theories can extend, challenge, or even criticize our constitutive understandings. Theory makes a claim to tell us what is really going on, to show us the real, hitherto unidentified course of events. Of practices, he says,

[those] which make up a society require certain self-descriptions on the part of the participants. These self-descriptions can be called constitutive. And the understanding formulated in these can be called pre-theoretical, not in the sense that it is necessarily uninfluenced by theory, but in that it does not rely on theory. There may be no systematic formulation of the norms, and the conception of man and society which underlies them. The understanding is implicit in our ability to apply the appropriate descriptions to particular situations and actions.⁷

The validation of a social theory for Taylor, therefore, is not based on seeing how well it describes the practices as a range of independent entities, but rather on judging how practices fare when informed by the theory. The array of practices Taylor envisages is much broader than MacIntyre's, which depends on the normative standard of "achieving excellence." The self-descriptions that he considers constitutive presuppose that human beings understand themselves against a background of what he calls "strong evaluations." The desirable is not only defined by what one desires (plus a calculation of consequences), but by a qualitative characterization of desires as higher and lower, noble and base.⁸ Here one finds a minimal idea of a practice employed by Taylor's position, along with hints about what would characterize practice if one fully takes into account his general stance concerning values and how they characterize human life. In the minimal sense, a practice does not include the criteria that would help us determine the activities that are worth being initiated into. Yet, if there are no distinctions of worth and no strong evaluations whatsoever, there could ultimately be no practices in Taylor's sense.

FRAGMENTATION, PERFORMATIVITY, AND CONSERVATISM: ARE THERE ANY PRACTICES LEFT?

As we argued, the "conservative" view of education as initiation into practices seems to overemphasize the reproductive functions of teaching and learning. Particular practices may be thought to be currently worthwhile because they were worthwhile for earlier generations, but for different reasons. There are at least three views that may be taken in this vein. First, if the preservation is based solely on the value that was attached to them in the past, this represents a straightforward conservatism, which tends to shield from question or criticism the valorization of privileged groups and superior cultures and to reinforce existing power relations.

Second, some practices have “conserving” functions in the sense that they make other things possible. Reading and writing are examples, as are a number of things within the context of child rearing. This does not mean that other means of communication could not be developed; for instance, it is conceivable that all our oral communication could be digitally stored (dictated to a computer, for example), and, to this extent, reading and writing might become less indispensable. (And isn’t it peculiar to imagine that a return to oral traditions and a diminishment of reading and writing could be a consequence of technological “progress”? How would those who are blind, dyslexic, or illiterate be affected by such changes?) But for most of us here and now, reading and writing remain efficient ways to communicate and to accumulate what we have been thinking about. Third, some practices may be “conservative” because they have it written into their very nature, such as the performance arts, which generally derive their status, meaning, and quality from fidelity to a script or score — even when improvisation or variation also play a creative role.

The critique of the “conservative” function of practices tends to refer only to the first of these three senses of the term. Yet the challenge to practices, their stability and meaningfulness, today, derives from other influences and trends as well. The processes of individualization and fragmentation, which characterize society now more than ever, have changed our dealings with each other in radical ways. Output-oriented thinking (or in its postmodern formulation, “performativity”) dominates society and the life of its members, transforming practices that may have had intrinsic or noninstrumental value into activities of a very different sort — or eliminating them entirely. What is left that binds individuals together in the public sphere beyond relations of commerce and power? Without the kinds of shared practices that previously formed the glue of society, can we still meaningfully talk about a *society*? What happens to a society that is losing its practices?

Surely, parts of what constitutes formal education (schooling) can still be seen as an initiation into practices, such as being trained for a profession. But things look different if one tries to encompass the broader sense of education, including childrearing. It can legitimately be asked what it is exactly that children grow into. They hang around, learn the norms of dress for the parties they go to, try vehemently to look cool; but it can be asked whether all of this is merely doing things for others’ approval. There is an overall buffet selection that can please the individual’s appetite. But these are not “practices” in the robust sense. We may choose the date to celebrate one’s birthday, but forgetting Mother’s Day or someone’s retirement party and excusing oneself by saying, “I will make it up to you next week,” seems to erode or, at least, radically change that practice. That such practices can be chosen, that they are important only at one’s discretion, seems exactly to contradict the idea of a practice as traditionally conceived.

We think that the concept of a “practice” remains crucial, even for the broadly critical orientations that question the conservatism of the notion, for even the activities of critique — and certainly the viability of any alternative social order — depend on practices that remain stable over time. Before specifying more precisely

what kind of practices these might be, and how education should be concerned with them, we address the fundamental question of how our ways of *learning* and *coming to enact* practices might be liberating, rather than merely “conserving” or reproducing.

PRACTICES: AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

A way to think about “practice” inspired by Wittgenstein consists in emphasizing (1) how practices are learned — for instance through imitation, initiation, instruction, and so forth — and (2) how practices are enacted. In both cases, one’s *relation* to the practices in which one is engaged becomes crucial: how one is brought into these practices, and how one contributes to them. For example, practices may be learned, or enacted, in a ritualistic, conforming, or ironic way. They may be learned or enacted as a way of transforming them; as a way of portraying them as objects of reflection and questioning; or as part of a process of excelling at them. To be sure, the particular features of a practice tend to promote one or another way of learning or enacting it; there is, as we have said, a *relation* here — but it is a reciprocal one. There are practices that are in essence conservative (as folklore activities may be) and others that are directed at change (as the conventions of debate over the adoption of a law may be); there are more rigid (the performance of a classic piece of medieval music) and more flexible practices (the performance of jazz); some practices are more critical, while others do not tolerate any kind of questioning. There is a normative core to practices, but in a sense different from MacIntyre’s, because interpretation and adaptation is always a potential within them.

Practices usually have a right and wrong way of doing them; for instance, in order to look “cool,” one must dress in a particular way and have one’s hair done according to one or another fashion. But this can be a very subtle exercise. *Too much* effort might negate it; a practice that might be “cool” when one person does it may not be seen as such when another does. The right kind of touch is needed. The expectations of others are crucial.

Part of learning a practice involves *practicing*. But here, too, the matter is complex. While sometimes it is clear what belongs to a practice, in other cases it is not. For instance, in learning to play the piano one may have to practice certain boring and repetitive drills that are in no way “musical,” but that are essential to learning how to produce musical sounds. Practicing needs to be handled carefully, as too much time on technical exercises might seriously endanger one’s enjoyment of the practice and even kill off one’s motivation for playing. In other cases, it is not clear where the boundaries lie. For instance: Is sharpening knives part of the practice of being a cook? Is baking part of it? In many cooking schools, novices do nothing but chop vegetables at the prep table. In what way does this teach them to be chefs? Analyzing the specifically different ways of learning and enacting such practices (or practicing) can help us to answer such questions, because these may vary from person to person and context to context. Such variations can be said to *change* the practices (into mere rituals, etc.); but it is equally true that changes to the nature of a practice encourage or discourage different ways of learning or enacting it. Both directions of influence are important. Hence, we are interested in whether it is

possible to consider a critical/reflective mode of enacting practices: participating in them, and in this sense "conserving" or reproducing them, but at the same time subjecting them to question and possible transformation. For us, it is not a matter of either/or.

Leaving aside simple activities and rituals for a moment, and focusing on practices, the comparison with learning to play a game may be instructive. Clearly, many things youngsters get involved with are not practices in any of the above senses. There is "playing house," a game often played by very young children, where fantasy and creativity are at the heart and rule-following is in some sense minimal. The opposite may be the case in organized sport. Though some kinds of games are first played just for enjoyment, without the need to be excellent, this standard may come to the fore at some point (one may think of the Olympics as an example, which also brings in wider issues such as how practices can become commercialized and institutionalized spectacles). The game may change from something informal and not particularly goal-driven to something aimed at purposes beyond itself. What changes is the relation to the activity, something that does not lie simply within the practice itself but in the aesthetic and moral components that go with it.

What we want to focus on here is people's willingness to engage with such activities in a particular way, thus changing "mere" activities into practices for which standards of excellence do matter. The theoretical issues involved include what counts as a game, or how learning to play may be conceived as, for instance, "just playing," playing as following the rules, playing as changing the rules, and playing as making up the rules as you go along.

EDUCATION, THE SELF, AND THE NARRATIVIZATION OF A PRACTICE

A further dimension of the relation that a practice encourages or discourages through different ways of learning or enacting, is how it is intertwined with our *self* and sense of *identity*, on the one hand, and our *relations* and ways of *interacting* with other people, on the other hand. Here, the way we identify with particular practices, and how seriously we do so, is at stake. Some practices thrive on the possibility of multiple or alternative identities; others exemplify and enforce a more static identity. In both cases our relations to others and to our selves will be changed. Practices transform the self, but at the same time there may be subversions of a practice that give opportunities to the self. This account is intended to balance against an excessive boundlessness on the one hand, and against an inherent conservatism on the other hand. Sometimes the way the practice is enacted encourages a particular "interpretation," sometimes it helps to distance oneself from it. As practices have the potential to deepen one's engagement with them, they clearly have educational relevance and potential. What for one person is a practice, may for someone else be a mere ritual. At heart is the issue is how practices are reproduced and sustained over a period of time.

If this line of argument has any credibility at all, it resonates with the category of *narrative* that Taylor, MacIntyre, and many others refer to. If we want to engage people with some narratives considered to be more important than others (say, moral

or aesthetic ones), a possible foothold could be found in the informal practices in which children find themselves. Indeed, the whole area of informal education may become more important in this regard, and the activities of schooling much less so. There are also questions to be dealt with concerning how narrativization shapes one's *relation to the practice*. This would shed light on how some of the predominant narratives today (performativity, individualism, estrangement from tradition, and the like) are threatening the rich and robust significance of certain practices. Narrativization also involves how a practice becomes aestheticized, how it is given moral weight, how it comes to be seen as having a history behind it, and how it becomes a potential object of excellence/perfectibility. Finally, there are those narratives that can give rise to a more critical/reflective relation to a practice (which we want to call "education *about* a practice" and not just "education *into* a practice"), and how these can revitalize practices and promote a more liberating relation to them.

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), §139.

2. *Ibid.*, §144.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), I, § 219.

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 175.

5. Joseph Dunne and Pádraig Hogan, "Education and Practice Upholding the Integrity of Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 5.

6. Richard Smith, "Thinking with Each Other: The Peculiar Practice of the University," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 314ff.

7. Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 93.

8. Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 23.