

How Is Practice Possible?

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There is much that is commendable in the critical reexamination of the concept of “practice” offered by Paul Smeyers and Nicholas Burbules. Such a reexamination is much needed, not only for the reasons they give, but also for a reason they do not mention, which is the almost total dominance of “initiation-into-practice” approaches in current theories of learning. The magic spell cast by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s *Situated Learning* has led many to believe that education is a process of participation in “communities of practice” through which the learner as a “legitimate peripheral participant” moves from the margins to the center of the practice in order to become a full and competent member of the community in question.¹ If there has ever been a time in which we need a critical reexamination of the idea of “practice” in order to counter its conservative and conserving connotations, it may well be now. I would like to contribute to this important discussion by making five critical comments.

First, Smeyers and Burbules comment, almost in passing, that it is “impossible to deny...that education is in some sense an initiation into practices.” It should not come as a surprise, given the nature of the practice of philosophy, that serious attempts have been made to deny precisely this. In “Education, Not Initiation,” an essay I presented at the annual conference of the Philosophy of Education Society in 1996, I set out “to challenge the idea that education is a process of initiation.”² The argument developed in that essay attempts to challenge a claim made by Smeyers and Burbules, which is that “a context of cultural practices is necessary even to communicate and interact with each other.” The gist of the argument in that essay is that everything depends on the way in which we understand the idea of “community.” Is it the case, as Smeyers and Burbules seem to assume in some parts of their essay, that communities exist by virtue of some kind of communality? Or is it the case that a *human* community, as distinct from a community of “performing robots” (to draw on Hannah Arendt), is by its very definition a community without a common identity. How, then, should we understand the community that upholds a particular practice? What does initiation in such a community mean? And how relevant are such processes from an educational point of view?

This brings me to my second point, which has to do with a conceptual distinction that seems to be absent from Smeyers and Burbules’s discussion: the distinction between education and socialization. One way to understand this distinction is to say that socialization is about the insertion of “newcomers” into an existing social order, while education is concerned with the ways in which individuals can become free, independent, and autonomous beings. Some see the Enlightenment as a watershed in the development of modern education and credit Immanuel Kant with having inaugurated a completely new way of thinking about education, one aimed at releasing human beings from their “self-incurred immaturity” through the exercise

of their own reason. Smeyers and Burbules do not seem to think that there is a fundamental difference between pre- and post-Enlightenment views, since they depict the Enlightenment as one of the practices in which people can be initiated. Is their essay therefore only about socialization? Would they argue that there is no fundamental difference between initiation into a practice and the ability to engage critically with a practice? Would they argue that such a difference would simply reflect a difference in the nature of specific practices, that is, are some practices “simply” enacted uncritically, while others are “simply” enacted critically? Or is it the case, as I would contend, that this difference is not a difference between practices but a difference between how we engage with *any* practice?

My third comment has to do with the way in which the notion of “practice” is used in the essay. What strikes me most is that Smeyers and Burbules seem most of the time to depict a practice as a “thing,” as something that has objective and independent existence. All the questions they ask about how practices are learned and enacted assume that practices in some manner or form already exist. The question they do not ask, however, is *how* practices actually exist — how, in other words, practices are actually possible. In order to answer this question, we need to move from the outside view to the view from the inside. What does it mean to be part of a practice? What does life inside a practice look like? Does everyone who is part of a practice have the same understanding of the practice and the same commitment to it? Can a practice only exist if all its members act in the same, appropriate manner? The normative answer might well be that this has to be the case, because otherwise the practice would fall apart, would no longer be proper. But while this sounds nice in theory, it is difficult to imagine this actually being the case in practice. Think of a practice like philosophy of education. Many of us would not only identify themselves with this practice, but might even say that they belong to this practice and work hard in keeping it alive. But do we all do the same things? Do we all share the same views? Do we all represent the practice in the same way? This is very unlikely and suggests that practices exist because of the fact that the people who make up the practice do many *different* things to keep the practice “going.” Maybe, therefore, the conclusion has to be that any practice only exists “in difference” (or, but I do not have the space to elaborate on this idea, “in deconstruction”). We could even use a Wittgensteinian intuition and suggest that the parts that make up a practice are only linked by family resemblances, not by some overarching identity.

The answer to the question as to how practices exist has far-reaching educational consequences, which is my fourth point. If practices only exist because many people do many different things, then it becomes very important, from the point of view of learning, where and when one actually enters and engages with a practice. If all cooks are the same, you can learn to cook from any one of them. But if there are real differences between them, then it becomes important to ask where and from whom one can learn the practice of cooking best. This is the main reason many educators have questioned the value of informal learning. While informal learning may have a “real life” quality that is difficult to reproduce in a school context, it only presents the learner with “the present and the particular.” This may, in some cases,

result in splendid learning experiences, but it may also lead to narrow-mindedness, to uncritical acceptance, to conservation, and to reproduction of the status quo. This is why liberal education urges learners to go “*beyond* the present and the particular,” and it is why critical pedagogy urges educators to equip learners with the critical tools to see through the power structures and interests that make the present and the particular as it currently is, in order to be able to envisage a different way of being and doing.

This shows how important it indeed is to have a way of thinking about practices and their learning “that is liberating and not...merely ‘conserving’ or reproductive.” But do Smeyers and Burbules offer us a convincing alternative? I think that the answer to this question has to be “not yet.” I find it difficult to see how their alternative model of practice is different from the views they present in earlier parts of their essay. I also find it difficult to see how their alternative model of learning or enacting practices helps to explain how a “critical/reflective” way of learning/enacting might be facilitated. They put too much emphasis on the capacity of some practices to bring about a critical/reflective attitude/engagement and invest too little in investigating what makes this possible. The idea of narrativization may provide a way of dealing with this problem, but they have not yet developed it in much detail. All of this may also have to do with the fact that Smeyers and Burbules may have been looking in the wrong place. While the idea of practice is important, I think that it is only important to understanding the *problem*. The solution, however, is not to be found in how we understand what practices are but in how we think about *initiation*. Maybe we need another PES essay with the title “Initiation: A Central Educational Concept” — although the respondent to that piece may well go back to the 1996 essay mentioned previously and argue that initiation is anything but an *educational* concept. To be continued...

1. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1991).

2. Gert Biesta, “Education, Not Initiation,” in *Philosophy of Education 1996*, ed. Frank Margonis (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 90–98.