

Conceptualisations of practice: implications for VET practitioners

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Abstract

This paper reviews six different conceptualisations of practice deemed relevant to the work of VET practitioners. Certainly each of these carries significant implications for learning, teaching, curriculum, professional development and practitioner research in this sector of education. While a complete synthesis of the conceptions is considered impractical, an argument is offered in support of a selective and 'strategic eclecticism'. The paper begins a discussion drawing on selective aspects of each conceptualisation.

Introduction

Connell (1995: 97) suggests that the purpose of all teaching is to develop the capacity for social practice. Within the VET sector, the idea of social practice can be interpreted to include work-related practices. VET teachers, design, develop and enact, activities and tasks (pedagogical practices) to engage learners - they do so with the understanding that they are developing capacities for work-related practices in others. But what do we mean by 'practices'? What frameworks underpin the dominant conception(s) of practice in VET? What other frameworks are available to VET practitioners for them to begin to unpack and understand their own practice; and, that which they are developing in others? Clearly the various frameworks have a flow on effect to other aspects such as teaching, learning, curriculum, professional development and practitioner research.

With respect to practitioner research, Kemmis & McTaggart (2000: 600) argue, before we can decide questions about what kinds of research methods are appropriate, we must decide what kinds of things "practice" and "theory" are - for only then can we decide what kinds of data or evidence might be relevant in describing practice and what kinds of analyses are relevant in interpreting and evaluating people's real practices in the real situations in which they work. This paper provides a brief review of six schemas or conceptualisations of practice - each is associated with an extensive research agenda within education. The purpose of the review is twofold. First, it identifies conceptions of practice for VET practitioners to consider and compare. VET practitioners need to have clarity and make informed choices about the frameworks which guides and underpins their own pedagogical practices - their own work as teachers. Second, while each conception offers a framework that can stand alone, this paper utilises 'strategic eclecticism' to explore interesting and relevant aspects of each that VET practitioners might find useful to draw upon, or at least consider further. The need for brevity in this paper means that there is only room to begin to identify implications. It is hoped that once opened up, this process may lead to the need for further follow up effort.

Conception 1: 'from novice to expert'

One avenue of study into professional practice has been through the development of expertise. Most notable amongst these is the notion of 'from novice to expert'.

Initially, the work of Dreyfeus & Dreyfeus (1985) identified three characteristics of skill acquisition. These were: the movement from the abstract to the concrete; a shift from rule based analysis to intuition; and, a change in perception, to becoming more holistic in outlook. But their major contribution came with the description of a five-staged progressive process in the development of expertise. Developed from the study of pilots and chess players, these two brothers identified these stages on the continuum as novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert. (Hence, providing the idea of 'from novice to expert').

Benner (1982, 1984; Benner et al., 1991) took up this framework further and applied it to the study of clinical nurse practice and the area of acute care in particular. Working with the Dreyfeus brothers and other nurse educator/researchers, these researchers identified what each stage, and progress through each stage, might mean in the specific terms of nursing practice. The practice of novice's was found to be rule governed, until they gained further confidence in their own understandings and knowledge base. The advanced beginner nurse was found to be concerned with technical mastery and organisation. They tended to 'delegate upward to more senior staff, and like the novice had a focus on learning and used formal rules to understand concepts. Generally, nurses moved on to the competent stage after approximately three to five years of nursing. Interestingly, this stage is the third and middle stage on the continuum. At the competent stage, nurses were found to see relationships forming amongst various aspects of a situation. Nurses showed deliberative planning and goal setting and were able to limit the unexpected. There was also a shift in their skill of 'involvement'. At the proficient stage, nurses could see changing relevance. They developed an increased sense of salience, increased pattern recognition and were more attuned with the situation.

Expert nurses showed evidence of very strong qualitative frameworks; they made substantial qualitative distinctions and exercised considerable judgement. They could direct the clinical group involved with the whole situation and were at home in rapidly changing environments and situations. They attended to environment and context and sorted out and entered into dialogue with others about their learning. Recently, the ideas from the novice to expert research have been developed further and reported in the field of adult education by Ferry & Ross-Gordon (1998) and Daley (1999, 2001). Daley (1999) has followed up the studies of Benner to do research into how novice and expert nurses learn in order to be able to progress through the five stages. Daley found, novices learnt very differently to experts. Novices were found to be contingent learners who were very intent on initially forming concepts. In contrast, expert nurses were found to be much more constructivist in their learning processes, (Daley 1999).

Table 1 below taken from Daley (1999) summarises the comparison of novice and expert learning for nurses. To understand that people learn differently at different stages of their professional development has a number of significant educational implications.

Table 1 Comparison of novice and expert learning for nurses (Daley, 1999)

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Novice</i>	<i>Expert</i>
Learning processes	Contingent Concept formation Best-fit	Constructivist Integration with and differentiation from experience
Feelings	Fearful	Confident

Learning strategies	Memory Accumulates information	Dialogue Creates knowledge base
Relation to context of practice	Understands specific issues	Understands system implications

While originally derived from the study of nursing practice, Daley (2001) has since verified these findings within four other professions. It is interesting to begin to think about the implications of this research to VET practitioners.

Conception 2: 'reflective practice'

Schon (1983, 1987, 1991), argues that a substantial discrepancy exists between how the work of some professionals is described in college and university textbooks and the way that the work in these jobs is actually performed. Experienced managers, who take up university study for the first time as mature age learners, also report this discrepancy between the textbooks and the actual practices of the workplace. Therefore, the 'espoused' theory denotes the way that the profession wants to portray their work to others. In contrast, the 'theories in use' are the way that professionals in those jobs 'actually' go about doing their work.

Schon (1983: 21-22) argued that both the espoused theory held by professionals in a field and the education for the profession are significantly influenced by the notion of 'technical rationality'. This he described as when, 'professional activity consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique'. He went on to say that all occupations are concerned with the instrumental adjustment of means to ends, though it is only the professions that practice rigorous technical problem solving based on specialised scientific knowledge.

Schon (1983) critiques the prominence of technical rationality as the dominant epistemology of practice. The point of his seminal texts is a call to break free from 'technical rationality' and instead based on an analysis of work within emerging professions, to adopt a more realistic approach to learning professional practices. This led to his further thinking and advocacy for the development of 'reflective practice'. Schon argued that professionals needed to engage in ongoing development and that a way of learning the most appropriate knowledge in a field was to develop skills to reflect upon practice. In this way, reconsidering the experiences of actually working through different problems that arose in the course of specific work roles and contexts was to become the basis and the preferred and most authentic means of learning for professional development. Schon argued that professionals used two different types of reflection to learn from their experience. The first form he called, 'reflection-in-action'. This was a common occurrence when the actions of the professional were not going as expected. In such circumstances, he argued, professionals tended to make immediate adjustments to the way they were doing their work. Their actions being guided by their 'knowledge in use' which in turn is derived from their 'theories in use.

The second form of reflection used by professionals to learn from their experience is more retrospective to the action and this he referred to as 'reflection-on-action'. This form of reflection happens at a later stage to the action and occurs in tandem to the practitioner revisiting their actions either as a mental exercise or through verbalising. Moon (2000: 46) explains that reflection-on-action is a narrow concept but which has 'a role in learning, in informing action and in theory building. Van Manen (1991)

suggests four levels in his categorisation of reflection, (Moon 2000: 62). Located on the first level, is the thinking and action that is conducted in a common sense manner on an 'everyday' basis. This shows a clear distinction being made between reflection and action. The second level involves reflection that is focused on specific events or incidents. This equates to Schon's notion of 'reflection-on-action'. The third is reflection on personal experience that is more systematic and which has the objective of reaching understanding. This is a higher order reflection. It may be on several events or on reflection that has already occurred. This goes further than Schon's two forms but could be described as 'reflection-on-action that goes well beyond the event'. This is described as reflection on the manner of reflection. This is self-reflection on the nature of knowing and therefore a form of meta-cognition.

Moon points out that this model assists to distinguish between reflection on experience and reflection on the conditions that shape the experiences. This allows for the view that reflective practice is essentially 'a critical and political stance'. Critical reflection is a form of reflection that emphasises a political stance.

Conception 3: 'vocational practice'

There is no doubt that 'practice' holds a central place within vocational education and training. For many, central to the notion of vocational practice is competence. It is interesting that a pet project of Victorian TAFE directors over the past decade or so has been the development of competencies that define the work of VET practitioners. This is an engaging strategy on the part of the Directors. Remembering that they are also the employers of these education workers. Therefore it is apparent that the employers of the VET practitioners believe that this is a sensible way to develop the expertise of these teachers.

Significantly, one of the criticisms of this approach is that to define a job in terms of all of its supposed parts, as competencies, assumes that the sum of the parts will add up to and equate to satisfactory practice within that work role. At best though, this will result in an aggregated response. The fact that these education workers have not been involved on any substantial scale in having input into decisions or determinations on what their jobs involve, is also significant. But putting competency aside, the work on learning and levels of specificity by Billett (in Velde 2001) is worth attention with respect to attempting to understand vocational practice. Daley (2001) has suggested that constructivist learning theories as a category is used to mean at least three different things. In general, it is about the learner making sense and meaning for themselves, thereby constructing meaning and understanding. This remains a common thread across these variations. Daley argues that constructivist learning is variously used to describe an individual making meaning for themselves. Second, it can be used to describe learning that is social or which occurs across a group, and third, the term can be used to describe learning that is highly situated and context specific.

In a similar way, Billett (2001a, 2001b) draws on socio-cultural frameworks to argue that vocational practice can be distinguished at three different levels of specificity. These are at the socio-historical, the socio-cultural and the situational levels. In brief, this means that practice can be understood at each of these levels. At the level of the socio-cultural it is about the occupation. While the situational, refers to the actual

work practices, in a particular work role, in a specific workplace. Clearly this kind of distinction has ramifications for those who are basing their curriculum and pedagogical practices on one or other of these levels of specificity. Therefore it may follow from this that any aggregated curriculum developed for utility across an occupation or industry is in fact, problematic.

Conception 4: 'a critical science of practice'

Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) outline what could be described as 'a critical science of practice'. They initially establish what seems like a matrix approach to the study of practice but which they explain to be an array of five different traditions associated with research into practice. They revisit these arrangements to provide a number of overlays. Each pass over adds complexities to their conceptualisation.

They begin by describing five epistemological traditions in the study of practice. They establish four of these by distinguishing between studying an individual's practice and that of a social group and between studying practice objectively as an outsider or more subjectively as an insider. Their second pass over the different traditions is to describe common methodological issues, methods and techniques for researching and studying practice within each tradition. The third pass aligns each tradition to one of the three different knowledge constitutive interests, described by Habermas (Habermas 1972 & 1974; Carr & Kemmis 1986). The fourth iteration makes the matrix arrangement into a three-dimensional display when 'time' or 'movement with time' is added as a further consideration.

Tradition 1: sees practice studied from the perspective of an objective outsider with a focus on the individual. Practice is studied 'as individual behaviour', seen in terms of performances, events and effects: behaviourist and most cognitivist approaches in psychology (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000: 576). Common techniques for researching practice are quantitative, correlational-experimental methods, psychometric and observational techniques, tests, interaction and schedules (p. 581)

Tradition 2: this sees practice studied from the perspective of an objective outsider with a focus on the social. Practice is denoted 'as social interaction (e.g., ritual, system-structured: structure-functionalist and social systems approaches) (p. 576). The techniques for researching practice are quantitative, correlational-experimental methods, observational techniques, sociometrics, systems analysis and social ecology, (p. 581). In terms of knowledge constitutive interests, these first two traditions align to the Habermasian notion of 'the technical'.

Tradition 3: practice is studied from the perspective of the subjective with a focus on the individual. Practice 'as intentional action, shaped by meaning and values: psychological *verstehen* (empathetic understanding) and most constructivist approaches' (p. 576) are included in this category. The methods and techniques are qualitative interpretative methods, which utilise clinical analysis, interview, questionnaire, diaries, journals, self-report, and introspection (p. 581).

Tradition 4: is practice as socially structured and shaped by discourses and tradition. The perspective is subjective and the focus is on the social or group. The study of practice is interpretive, aesthetic-historical *verstehen* and post-structuralist

approaches, (p. 576). The methods are qualitative, interpretive, historical methods, which include discourse analysis and document analysis (p. 581). Tradition 3 and 4 align with the Habermasian category of knowledge constitutive interest of 'the practical'.

Tradition 5: this is where the matrix arrangements is explained as being deceptive by setting up what may seem like dichotomies but which needs to be understood instead as inclusive. These authors note, rather than representing an either/or thinking, instead it needs to be 'never either, always both' thinking (p. 575). Practice is considered reflexive, to be studied dialectically. Within this arrangement the study of practice needs to oscillate between the perspective of both the subjective and the objective with a focus that switches from the individual to the group and back again. The movement to and fro means that one aspect is always continually informing another and thereby builds further understanding.

Under this tradition, practice is socially and historically constituted, and is reconstituted by human agency and social action. Within this tradition, practice is studied using critical social science and framed up using critical theory. The methods for studying practice are critical methods, dialectical analysis and multiple methods. This tradition aligns to Habermas's critical-emancipatory category of knowledge constitutive interests. These authors argue that participatory action research should be aligned to this fifth tradition. Importantly, this allows for the possibility for the research to draw on all of the other traditions - collecting data from a wide and diverse range of sources and forms.

Conception 5: 'postmodern practice'

Beckett and Hager (2002) have recently consolidated work that they have been writing about for the last decade in a publication that has the subtitle, '*practice in postmodernity*'. Initially, Beckett and Hager (2002) agree with Schon with respect to the prominence of technical rationality. They describe technical rationality as being based on three assumptions. These are described, first, as a belief that there are general solutions to practical problems. Second, that solutions can be developed outside of practice, and third, that solutions can be translated into practitioners actions by means of publications, training and written procedures. These assumptions have implications for novice practitioners. In terms of education and training, these assumptions can tend towards a strong grounding in theoretical knowledge. Underpinning these is the belief that knowledge is reliable and that it remains relatively constant. Similarly, it is assumed that knowledge falls into clear hierarchical and subject specific divisions. Further, it is assumed that knowledge is best transmitted as structured information via teachers and texts.

The second implication follows on from the first and assumes that the main business of higher education institutes is the development, transmission and certification of general theoretical knowledge. This can have two undesirable consequences, namely that 'know how' is considered less important than theoretical knowledge. The other is that attributes that are important in a flourishing life, both at work, and more generally, such as interpersonal, social and political abilities, are regarded as something to be acquired outside of education.

Aligned to these assumptions, is what these authors describe as the standard paradigm of learning or the front-end model. This approach to learning has ramifications for the selection of students who are chosen and invited to continue into higher education. It also has implications for the selection of the curriculum. For example, preference is given to propositional knowledge that is logically ordered such as discipline or subject knowledge. Likewise the selection of teaching methods may tend to revolve around verbal and written propositions for students. This primarily occurs through lectures, tutorials and textbooks. Selection of assessment is also effected and students are required to demonstrate their knowledge by reproducing verbal and written propositions in appropriate combinations. They show their knowledge through written essays and examination processes.

By way of contrast, Beckett & Hager argue that this approach is a relic of modernism and instead what is needed is a more postmodern approach. They describe their more appropriate approach as 'practice based informal workplace learning'. They note six key features. These are, that it is,

- (1) organic and holistic,
- (2) contextual,
- (3) activity and experience based,
- (4) arises in situations where learning is not the main aim,
- (5) activated by individual learners rather than by teachers and trainers,
- (6) often collaborative and collegial.

These authors make the point that the postmodern paradigm for work-related learning is one that occurs in the midst of 'hot action'.

Conception 6: 'a critical postmodern vocational practice'

Kincheloe has attempted to offer academic arguments for the reform of vocational education and in the course of this work has developed a position that he calls a critical postmodern approach to vocational practice. Unlike either Kemmis & McTaggart (2000) who provide a critical approach, or Beckett and Hager (2002) with their foundation in postmodernism, Kincheloe (1993, 1996; & Kincheloe, Slattery & Steinberg, 2000) attempts a synthesis of the social theories that underpin the two previous conceptualisations.

Kincheloe in his publications *Toil and trouble* (1996) and *How will we tell the workers?* (1999), has begun to describe 'a critical postmodern pedagogy of work'. This addresses the political, economic and social realities that shape schooling for employment and the conditions that produce the students who are affected by it. This pedagogy escapes from the technicist constructions that are common within VET and this leads to realisation amongst critical educators that conceptualisations of a critical work education involves creation of a political vision - a vision grounded on re-constituted democratic ideals (1996: 58).

Kincheloe concludes *Toil and Trouble* (1996) with an explanation of 'the critical integrated curriculum'. In brief this is a curriculum that is built upon experiential learning, with learners taking on various roles; namely, 'students as researchers', work-site placements and/or apprenticeships. There are a number of additional ingredients to this curriculum that attempt to balance the micro with more macro analysis. At one end, is the inclusion of skill development as required in the day-to-day activities in

workplaces, and at the other end, it also includes exploration of the impact of work on society, the connections between work, economics and power and even debates on the future of work. Surely, such debates are appropriate discussions for workers to be informed about and actively participating.

Conclusions

Due to the need for brevity one or two implications only are identified and drawn from each conception in this paper with the intention of starting a process of inquiry and consideration rather than attempting to be definitive. From the first conception, 'from novice to expert', two significant implications can be highlighted. First, it seems appropriate and advantageous that the idea of the five stages of development and the kinds of changes that are apparent across the continuum could be openly shared and discussed with practitioners in a field. Increased awareness by the practitioners may very well assist the process of learning and even progression through the stages. Second, there appears to be a correlation between stage of development and approaches to learning. It would be advantageous to explore this more with practitioners as it may assist with understanding where others in the workplace might be coming from.

From the second conception of reflective practice, it is worth considering whether it may be advantageous to have practitioners develop their understanding of reflection and critical reflection as an approach to learning and professional development. There are a number of skills such as writing in a professional journal that could be developed and practiced. The work of Moon (2000) is interesting and has ramifications for professional development. She has developed a schema that puts together stages of transformative learning theory, surface and deep learning, with a reflective process for professional development, which is worth much greater consideration.

The work of Billett is a must for those interested in vocational practice. His text, *Learning in the workplace* provides an important introduction to his work, though the foundation of the discussion in this paper is his most recent work on the levels of specificity with respect to analysing and understanding work and worker understandings. What this paper attempts to contrast is the dominant view of practice in VET, which is about competency with a more complex view such as that offered in this more recent work of Billett. Clearly the significance of the different levels of specificity for understanding vocational practice is also worth greater attention by those working in this field.

The work by Kemmis and McTaggart is in many ways a self-contained schema and the work of John Smyth (2000, 2001) provides a good example of research associated with this fifth tradition. In direct contrast, with their fifth tradition, in terms of underpinning social theory is that offered by Beckett and Hager. This work offers an update and advance on the work of Schon that connects this previous thinking with contemporary social theory. The work of Beckett and Hager is significant in that, like that of Billett, it recognises, values, and makes space for, the informal learning that occurs through work, (though Billett would not use the term 'informal', instead he might prefer the term 'authentic').

Kincheloe's notion of critical postmodernism is interesting and his thinking has many broader ramifications with respect to placing democratic ideals at the centre of issues associated with vocational education and training. The exclusion of the learner in determinations around knowledge within VET remains a stark and unresolved concern in this sector of education. However, research and theorising like Kincheloe's offers ideas and strategies to take these democratic ideals forward.

In conclusion, these six conceptions are not extensive. The work around 'communities of practice' is a further example or schema though considered outside the scope of this paper. But what is clear is that there are numerous conceptions of practice available to the VET practitioner. Each has aspects that are relevant and each has significant ideas and implications for the work of VET practitioners. Can we afford to choose just one schema in preference over all the others, do we really need to be corralled within just one conception, or, is it appropriate to be strategically eclectic?

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