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**Abstract:** Educational action is a species of praxis in both an Aristotelian sense and a post-Marxian sense: in the first, it involves the morally informed and committed action of the individual practitioners who practise education; in the second, it helps to shape social formations and conditions for collectivities of people. In this paper, it is argued that, in the context of a profession like education, research into praxis has two main purposes that parallel these two senses of 'praxis': (1) to guide t ...

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## Research for Praxis: Knowing doing

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Educational action is a species of praxis in both an Aristotelian sense and a post-Marxian sense: in the first, it involves the morally-informed and committed action of the individual practitioners who practise education; in the second, it helps to shape social formations and conditions for collectivities of people. In this paper, it is argued that, in the context of a profession like education, research into praxis has two main purposes that parallel these two senses of 'praxis': (1) to guide the development of educational praxis, and (2) to guide the development of education itself.

Some approaches to researching praxis that have emerged in recent years include 'praxis research', 'phronetic research', 'praxis-related research' and 'research as practical philosophy'. These approaches are briefly analysed in terms of their ability (or inability) to strengthen and extend praxis.

In contrast to earlier approaches to studying practice/praxis, which usually regard practice as an object of study external to the researcher or observer, the practical philosophy approach regards practice and especially praxis as 'internal' to the persons and groups whose practice/praxis it is, and as 'internal' to the *practice traditions* which give meaning and significance to a practice like Education. Following this insight, the paper outlines a new view of what it might mean to 'research' praxis by studying praxis and practice traditions 'from within'. It is argued that this can only be achieved by those whose own individual and collective praxis is both their proper work and, at the same time, the focus of their critical investigation. The paper also invites further exploration of the relationships to be found between different kinds of practices and praxes – particularly the relationship between different kinds of *research* practice/praxis and different kinds of *educational* practice/praxis.

### Praxis

'Praxis' has two principal meanings. According to the first, following the usage of Aristotle, praxis is "action that is *morally-committed, and oriented and informed by traditions in a field*" (Kemmis and Smith, 2008, p.4). According to the second, following the usage of Hegel and Marx, 'praxis' can be understood as 'history-making action'. In *The German Ideology* (1845) Marx articulated his historical materialism, arguing that social formations, ideas, theories and consciousness emerge from human and collective social praxis, and that social action (praxis)

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared for the 'Researching Practice' conference sponsored by the journal *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* and Gothenburg University, held at Gothenburg University, September 13, 2008.

makes history<sup>2</sup>. In much Anglo-American-Australian usage today, the technical term ‘praxis’ is used in the Aristotelian sense; in much of Europe, by contrast, ‘praxis’ is used in the post-Marxian sense.

Educational action is a species of praxis in both these senses because, on the one side, it involves the morally-informed and committed action of those who practise education, and, on the other, it helps to shape social formations and conditions as well as people and their ideas, their commitments and their consciousness. Thus, in the context of a profession like education, we might say that research into praxis has two main purposes. The first is to guide the development of educational praxis, that is, to guide the development of professionals’ conduct in ways that will help them to be better educators for their times and their circumstances. The second is to guide the development of education itself by helping educators to develop a more self-conscious understanding of the ‘history-making’ significance of their collective educational work (both for the profession itself and for the people and societies they serve through education). Taking into account these two different but related meanings of ‘praxis’, then, what kind of ‘research’ would contribute to praxis and praxis development?

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<sup>2</sup> In *The German Ideology* (1845), Marx summarised his materialist conception of history thus: This conception of history depends on our ability to expound the real process of production, starting out from the material production of life itself, and to comprehend the form of intercourse [that is, the social relations of production – SK] connected with this and created by this mode of production (i.e. civil society in its various stages), as the basis of all history; and to show it in its action as State, to explain all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc. etc. and trace their origins and growth from that basis; by which means, of course, the whole thing can be depicted in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another). It has not, like the idealistic view of history, in every period to look for a category, but remains constantly on the real ground of history; it does not explain practice [in the original German, praxis – SK] from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice [praxis]; and accordingly it comes to the conclusion that all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism, by resolution into “self-consciousness” or transformation into “apparitions,” “spectres,” “fancies,” etc. but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which gave rise to this idealistic humbug ...

## The ‘happening-ness’ of praxis

### *An Aristotelian view*

Aristotle (2003) saw praxis as a form of conscious, self-aware action, as distinct from technical action (*poiēsis* or ‘making action’) and from theoretical contemplation (*theoria*) (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, pp.15-17). Dunne (1993) quotes Hannah Arendt’s (1958) *The Human Condition* to suggest how Arendt understood Aristotle on the “sheer actuality” of “the work of man” (to live well):

Aristotle, in his political philosophy is still aware of what is at stake in politics, namely, no less than the *ergon tou anthropou* (the “work of man” *qua* man), and if he defined this “work” as “to live well” (*eu zēn*), he clearly meant that “work” here is no product but exists only in sheer actuality. This specifically human achievement lies altogether outside the category of means and ends; the “work of man” is no end because the means to achieve it – the virtues, or *aretai* – are not qualities which may or may not be actualised, but are themselves “actualities.” (pp.101-2).

Central to Aristotle’s conceptualisation of praxis, then, was the sense of *knowing what one is doing in the doing of it*.

### *Marx on praxis*<sup>3</sup>

In the first of his (1845) *Theses on Feuerbach* Marx articulated a view of praxis as human activity:

The chief defect of all previous materialism (including Feuerbach’s) is that the object, actuality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the *object or perception [Anschauung]*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice [Praxis]*, nor subjectively (Bernstein, 1971, p.11<sup>4</sup>).

The phrase “sensuous human activity” draws our attention to the notion that practice/praxis is *what actually happens* when people act and to the fact that it happens via human subjects who

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<sup>3</sup> In a future version of this text, I hope to do justice to Alasdair MacIntyre’s reflections in his (1998) ‘The Theses on Feuerbach: A road not taken’.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Knowing practice’ was the title of an invitational conference *Participant Knowledge and Knowing Practice*, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden, March 26 – 27, 2004, sponsored by the journal *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* and the Swedish Research Council and the University of Umeå. Revised versions of the papers presented appeared as a special issue of the journal, 2005, vol.13, no.3.

act. He says that the subjective experience of acting subjects can be understood as “‘revolutionary’ or ‘practical-critical’ activity” (p.11) of a kind that happens in the context of social change. Concluding Thesis 3, he says:

The coincidence of the change of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be comprehended and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice* (p.12, emphases in original).

Although Marx was clearly interested in revolutionary change on an international scale, the phrase ‘revolutionary practice’ can be understood on a smaller scale, namely action aimed at self-conscious change of people’s circumstances and of themselves (self-change). ‘Revolutionary practice’ in this sense would include action of the kind taken by people involved in critical participatory action research which Kemmis & McTaggart describe as “a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations” (1988, p.1). On this view, action research aims to change practices and the selves doing the practices and their circumstances.

In Thesis 8 of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx emphasises that social life is

... essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and the comprehension of this practice (Bernstein, 1971, p.12).

The ‘happening-ness’ of practice/praxis, its ‘sensuousness’, its human-ness and its sociality, is at once both obvious and difficult to grasp. It is difficult to grasp because when we make practice/praxis an *object* of our thought we risk shifting from the ‘rawness’ of conscious human social activity to *discourse* about it. We risk shifting from the perspective of action to the perspective of knowledge, from the perspective of practice to the perspective of theory. In Thesis 11, therefore, Marx wrote:

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is, to *change* it (Bernstein, 1971, p.13).

The point is, one might say, to act in the world, to practise, and to *do* – and not just to engage in discourse about it.

If this is so, then we have reached this small and not entirely original insight: *knowledge is not action; theory is not practice; and words are not the world*. If this is so, we might be tempted to conclude that *knowing practice is a contradiction in terms*– hence the subtitle to the present paper: “knowing doing”.

This sense of knowing what one is doing *in the doing of it* is something different from knowing practice/praxis *as an object*. This is the distinction that Marx was exploring in *The Theses on Feuerbach*.

### ***What cannot be undone again***

Our actions and practices are part of a wider, deeper ‘happening-ness’ that is constituted by the world and history even as it constitutes the changing world and unfolding history. As Marx (1852<sup>5</sup>) noted, our actions and practices become part of an ‘external’ material, historical reality that exists for each of us equally, no matter how differently (or unequally) we may perceive it, how different (and unequal) our access to aspects of it may be, or how different (and unequal) our self-interests may be. Written into the world and to history, our actions and practices escape our control in the same way that language does – as Habermas observes in his (2003b) *The Future of Human Nature* on the linguistic grounding of intersubjectivity:

As historical and social beings we find ourselves always already in a linguistically structured lifeworld. In the forms of communication through which we reach an understanding with one another about something in the world and about ourselves, we encounter a transcending power. Language is not a kind of private property. No one possesses exclusive rights over the common medium of the communicative practices we must intersubjectively share. No single participant can control the structure, or even the course, of processes of reaching understanding and self-understanding ... The

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<sup>5</sup> In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Marx (1852) wrote: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” (p.1).

*logos* of language escapes our control, and yet we are the ones, the subjects capable of speech and action, who reach an understanding with one another in this medium. It remains 'our' language (pp.10-11).

Action and practice likewise "escape our control" in a shared world and history.

As they are "loosed upon the world" (Yeats, 1922, p.19), spiralling 'out' from us in space and 'down' through time, action and practice become things less and more and different than we intended, desired, anticipated, expected or hoped. Their effects are irreversible and may be amended only by apologies, compensation or promises to do differently in future (Dunne, 1993, pp.97-100; Kemmis & Smith, 2008, pp.19-21). As Aristotle (2003, p.120), quoting the Athenian poet Agathon (448-402 BC), observes:

For one thing is denied even to God:  
To make what has been done undone again

This is the feature of action and practice that prompts people to learn from experience, from history, and from literature, and to seek knowledge through science. This is the feature of action and practice that prompts us toward research on practice and praxis.

### **Different ways of Knowing and theorising practice through research**

Different general approaches to research take different kinds of relationships with praxis.

Empirical-analytic research adopts a third-person relationship with practice as an object of enquiry; interpretive-hermeneutic research adopts a second-person relationship with practice as the action of another person who is a subject like oneself; and critical-emancipatory research adopts a first-person relationship with practice as constituted in one's own action or in one's participation in the social praxis of a community or group or profession.

Reformulating the Aristotelian distinction between theoretical, technical and practical forms of knowledge and reasoning, Habermas developed his (1972) theory of knowledge-constitutive interests (the interests that provoke the search for knowledge), distinguishing

empirical-analytic sciences oriented by an interest in technical control (the technical interest), interpretive-hermeneutic sciences oriented by an interest in educating readers and developing their practical capacities for wisdom and prudence (the practical interest), and critical-emancipatory sciences oriented by an interest in emancipating people from dependencies on myth, superstition, custom, tradition, ideology and irrationality (the emancipatory interest). Oriented by the technical interest, some scientists and sciences aim to achieve technical control in ways that will allow them to produce desirable products or states of affairs. Oriented by the practical interest, other scientists and sciences aim to educate people so they will act wisely and prudently in the world. Oriented by the emancipatory interest, still other scientists and sciences aim to identify and overcome forms of irrationality, injustice and unsustainability that cause people harm or suffering.

The different knowledge-constitutive interests evident in different kinds of research on action and practice lead the researchers involved to construe actions and practices differently as objects of research. Technical research is likely to construe action and practice in objectivist terms, as 'external' things or mechanisms that can be made to work differently. Practical research is likely to construe action and practice in subjectivist terms, as activities that are authored by the people who enact them, and that can be enacted differently if people see reasons to do so. Emancipatory research is likely to construe action and practice as socially- and historically-constructed and continually reconstructed in cultural discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements ('sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings'; Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008). On this view, transforming action and practice therefore requires transforming these arrangements so that actions and practices will be enabled and constrained in different, less harmful ways.

### **New developments in approaches to researching practice/praxis**

There have been some new developments in thinking about researching practice and praxis in recent times. Various researchers into practice/praxis have wanted to grasp practice/praxis in all their 'materiality', 'worldliness' and 'happening-ness', in the knowledge that all research always pre-constructs the objects it studies according to the particular research approaches (often described as 'methods') that are employed (Kemmis, 1980). These approaches continue to be a matter of debate in the literature of research methodology and in practice theory.

Some new approaches to researching practice/praxis have been proposed in recent years; for example, 'praxis research' (Sandberg, Broms, Grip, Sundström, Steen & Ullmark, 1992), 'phronetic research' (Flyvbjerg, 2001), 'praxis-related research' (Mattsson & Kemmis, 2007), and 'educational research as practical science' (Carr 2007; see also Carr 2000, 2004, 2006a, 2006b). In each case, the authors have attempted to find new ways of grasping praxis and practice as objects of study.

#### ***Praxis research***

Responding to the kinds of difficulties that arise when action research projects in industry are subordinated either to the demands of the research community or to the demands of action, Sandberg, Broms, Grip, Sundström, Steen and Ullmark (1992) propose the notion of 'praxis research':

*Praxis research* is characterised by a conscious and planned interaction between an action phase of research and a phase characterised by a more remote conceptualisation and reflection. In so-called action research, the latter is often lacking. Even if there is a declaration in principle of the necessity for a cumulative development of knowledge and theoretical reflection, the tendency, as we have seen, is to neglect these necessary parts of the research process in favour of the action aspect. This interaction distinguishes praxis research from consultation, and from development and change projects in general. We may also call this research approach *interactive research* (pp.34-35).

In describing the way this interaction should proceed, Sandberg et al. explicate a crucial assumption: practitioners are practitioners and researchers are researchers. The social division of

labour represented in the organisational affiliations of the two groups is paralleled by a technical division of labour in which the practitioners conduct their practice and the researchers conduct their research, each according to the different requirements and conditions of their practice.

Sandberg *et al.* also see the interaction between researchers and practitioners taking place in a long-term dialogue in which initial problem selection and clarification of issues are matters of discussion, as are emerging interpretations and suggestions. In the end, though, this remains a dialogue based on difference: the standpoints and the interpretive horizons of the two groups do not “fuse” in a common intersubjective space. The quality of the science is still to be judged in the academy; the quality of the practice or action is still to be judged in the organisation or community.

Sandberg *et al.* envisage a new kind of research in which change in collective praxis takes place in dialogue with researchers and scientific traditions and knowledge, but the ‘happening-ness’ of the practice remains ultimately in the province of the practitioners. Moreover, the scientific knowledge produced remains in a province external to the exigencies of practice. On this view, the kind of scientific knowledge produced remains essentially contemplative, and its stewardship remains within the preserve of the academy.

My reading of the aspiration of this view of ‘praxis research’ is that it aims to offer a new approach as a corrective to some cases or forms of action research in which the demands of action override the demands of reflection and conceptualisation (especially as these are construed in the academy), but that it fails as a conceptualisation of a new form of research into practice. It fails, firstly, because it maintains rather than transcends or overcomes the dualisms of thought or knowledge and action, and of theory and practice, both in the material form of a social and technical division of labour. It fails, secondly, because it does not grasp what Aristotle and Marx

both understood about the ‘sheer actuality’ (Arendt, 1958 in Dunne, 1993) of praxis in which knowledge is, we might say, *in play*, not standing contemplatively apart from the action. So: Sandberg *et al.* seem to me to have made the dualisms between research (or knowledge) and action, and theory and practice, internal to their view of praxis research. It seems to me that the dialogue they envisage is one which reproduces and reinforces difference between the worlds and perspectives of the participants. Moreover, the knowledge developed in these interpretive interactions is not conceptualised by Sandberg *et al.* as elaborating a new intersubjective space in which different contributions are tested and extended, and in which new ways of seeing the world have validity grounded in that shared intersubjective, communicative space (see Habermas 1987, 1996, 2003a; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The dialogue Sandberg *et al.* envisage; is not a “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer, 1975, p.305) in which the knowledge and theory developed will be *in play* in action and practice – instead, it is converted into a store of knowledge *about* action or practice owned by the academy, to be made available to practitioners if they need it. In the conversion, it seems to me, something crucial has been lost. In such a case, the *scientific* knowledge and theory developed in and for the academy becomes external, once again, to the internalities of the action and practice it was meant to inform. It has lost its grounding in the happening-ness, the ‘sheer actuality’ of practice. When “cumulative development of knowledge and theoretical reflection” are interpreted as “necessary parts of the research process” (Sandberg, *et al.*, p.35), then ‘research’ is being understood as belonging to the academy rather than to the praxis field.

If I am right, then, praxis research, as Sandberg *et al.* conceptualise it, loses its grip on praxis the moment it hands over the knowledge and theory it develops to the academy. It turns out *not* to be ‘praxis research’ when it asserts the imperative of *research* as an imperative of the

academy rather than the field of praxis. From my point of view, this is a pity because the name ‘praxis research’ is a very attractive one, promising a more intimate connection with praxis than is achieved in the Sandberg *et al.* conceptualisation. I hope the term can be rehabilitated in a different conception of praxis research of the kind I will describe later in this paper.

### ***Phronetic research***

Flyvbjerg (2001) adopted a different approach to envisaging a form of research that might contribute to individual and social life. He uses Aristotle’s notion of *phronēsis* (interpreted as ‘prudence’) to envisage a form of social research that could contribute to social life and decision-making *not* in the contemplative or theory-making mode of Aristotle’s *epistēmē* (especially, Flyvbjerg argues, if theory is understood on the model of natural scientific theory) or in the applied science mode of *technē* (which amounts to constructing rules for practitioners and others to follow). The kind of research and social science he has in mind can, he argues, distinctively contribute to praxis by contributing to public practical deliberation in the way that public philosophy can do. He says (p.60):

the principal objective for social science with a phronetic approach is to carry out analyses and interpretations of the status of values and interests in society aimed at social commentary and social action”, i.e., praxis.

Later, while cautioning that too great a concern with methodology and methodological rules can distract from the real work of social science (p.129), he offers (pp.129-140) a set of “methodological guidelines for a reformed social science”. He concludes by stating that:

The result of phronetic research is a pragmatically governed interpretation of the studied practices. The interpretation does not require the researcher to agree with the actors’ everyday understanding nor to discover some deep, inner meaning of the practices. Phronetic research is in this way interpretive, but it is neither everyday nor deep hermeneutics. Phronetic research is also not about, nor does it try to develop, theory or universal method. Thus, phronetic research is an analytical project, but not a theoretical or methodological one... (C)larification is a principal concern for phronetic social science and provides the main link to praxis. Phronetic social science explores historic circumstances and current practices to find avenues to praxis. The task of phronetic social science is to clarify and deliberate about the problems and risks we face and to outline how things may be done differently, in full knowledge that we cannot find ultimate answers to these questions or even a single version of what the questions are (p.140).

Flyvbjerg suggests that the phronetic researcher is a kind of public philosopher helping to clarify choices about what is to be done, and providing a kind of critical perspective on the use of power that might allow people to find alternative ways of proceeding in social life. These are attractive aspirations and encouraging admonitions.

Flyvbjerg's phronetic researcher, however, remains on the sidelines. In a footnote to the methodological guidelines, he distinguishes the phronetic researcher from the action researcher (echoing Sandberg *et al*'s apparent fear that the researcher may 'go native' and lose the protection and authorisation of the academy):

Action researchers typically identify with those they study; that is, researchers take on the perspective and goals of those under study and use research results as part of an effort to achieve these goals. This is not necessarily the case for phronetic research (p.192).

Whether or not this is an adequate characterisation of action research, especially participatory action research, it implies that the phronetic researcher is located 'outside' and perhaps 'above' the practices and practitioners being studied.

Flyvbjerg's characterisation of phronetic research shares with Aristotle the valuing of the contemplative life. In phronetic research, however, the philosopher enters public deliberation in the way an Athenian statesman, trained by Aristotle, might have entered a debate about proposed laws for the city-state. But Aristotle also understood that practice was *in the doing* (as did Marx). Flyvbjerg's phronetic research aims to nurture praxis from phronēsis – by contributing to serious and informed practical public deliberation about power and its consequences in social life. The phronetic researcher, it appears, does this *on behalf of* social life and those who inhabit it – as one who shares the planet with those others, certainly, but also in a special role – perhaps as a kind of 'conscience' for social life.

It is clear that Flyvbjerg's phronetic researcher enters public deliberation about issues in an interpretive-hermeneutic mode; in the second-person attitude of the self talking to others who are also selves. This is a reasonable stance. It is the stance of the public intellectual.

Since phronetic researchers do not necessarily "identify with those they study" (p.192), however, and since they stand on the sidelines commenting on the social life and practices they study, it follows that the praxis they aim to inform *is not, or is not necessarily, their own praxis*. It will be up to others – politicians, administrators, practitioners, communities or organisations – to make their decisions taking account, or not taking account, of the deliberations of the phronetic researcher. The phronetic researcher enters a dialogue with those others, but from a refined and somewhat distanced perspective on the issues and practices under study. Like Sandberg *et al.*, Flyvbjerg aims to preserve and extend the work of social science in the academy, and his phronetic research is a way to make the social science faculties matter again to university administrations and to governments. Of course he also hopes the fruits of phronetic research will matter to wider publics as well.

Oddly, and once again, then, we find ourselves distanced from praxis in phronetic research, even if in dialogue with it. Phronetic research feeds deliberation – phronēsis – directly, and feeds praxis indirectly, through the decisions of others. Perhaps, then, phronetic research might equally be named 'deliberative research' (as in the notion of 'deliberative democratic evaluation' championed by House & Howe, 2003).

The products of phronetic research are words addressed to the world, to be sure, and in a spirit of mutual deliberation, but they are not yet praxis, even though they aim to orient it. Speaking may be praxis, and be part of praxis, but reports from phronetic research are not themselves the praxis of those phronetic research aims to influence. We might therefore conclude

that those whose phronēsis and whose praxis is the subject of phronetic research are different from those whose praxis is the object of phronetic research.

Phronetic research clearly reaches out to praxis, but it enters praxis through becoming part of *others'* phronēsis and then, perhaps, their praxis. Phronetic research does not bridge the division of labour between the researcher and the practitioner, and the interests of the researcher and the practitioner remain distinct, served by different forms of praxis, different institutional conditions, and different kinds of rewards. Phronetic research thus remains vulnerable to Marx's charge in the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it."

### ***Praxis-related research***

In Sweden, a new form of educational research has recently been proposed, aiming to bring research nearer to educational praxis: 'praxisnära forskning' (which translates literally as 'praxis-close research') or, as Mattsson & Kemmis (2007) translated it to English, 'praxis-related research'. Issues regarding 'praxisnära forskning' were explored in two reports published by the Swedish Research Council (Torpe & Askling, 2003; Carlgren, Josefson & Liberg, 2005).

Mattsson & Kemmis (2005) outlined a number of features of praxis-related research, aiming to show that it is oriented towards changes in social praxis rather than contributing to knowledge and theory alone, in the manner of 'conventional' scientific research. On the one hand, the authors aimed to show how praxis-related research contributes to social praxis; on the other, they also wanted to show that the reports of scientific research and of the degree projects produced by undergraduate students in the form of small theses are usually pressed to conform to the usual requirements of scientific reports rather than requirements that might be more appropriate to transformations of social praxis.

The aspects of praxis-related research elaborated in Mattsson & Kemmis (2005; see also Mattsson & Johansson, 2008; Hesselors Arktoft & Lindskog, in *Enabling Praxis*, 2008; and Mattsson, 2008) take us towards praxis, and certainly describe a form of research that aims to contribute to praxis. As indicated, the Swedish term ‘praxisnära forskning’ translates as ‘praxis-*near*’ or praxis-*close*’. The English term ‘praxis-related research’ also suggests that there is a relationship between this kind of research and praxis. According to Mattsson & Kemmis, ‘praxis-related research’ aims to change things in praxis: developing an inquiry culture in a field setting, developing a critical approach among participants, empowering participants to take action, building their sense of solidarity, drawing on and developing their life experiences, opening communicative space between them, and so on, all of which can contribute to changes in currently-established modes of praxis.

Mattsson & Kemmis embrace the possibility that praxis-related research can be conducted both by practitioners themselves and also by researchers (perhaps action researchers) who are not necessarily wholly in the practitioner role. They emphasise the generativity of praxis-related research for social praxis and its transformation. They envisage research endogenous to the ‘happening-ness’ of praxis that transforms the way praxis happens.

As indicated by the question in the subtitle of their article “Serving two masters?” Mattsson & Kemmis thus envisage praxis-related research that produces *different* kinds of outcomes for practitioners and their praxis field, on the one hand, and, on the other, for researchers and the academy. Two questions then arise: (1) what is the nature of the role played by any non-participant or not-wholly-participant researchers involved in praxis-related research, and (2) what is the nature of the contribution of reports of praxis-related research *beyond* the praxis setting?

In relation to the first question, we might reasonably conclude that non-participant or not-wholly-participant researchers play a kind of ancillary role in the conduct of praxis-related research *as research*. It might also be the case, that such not-wholly-participant researchers raise and investigate problems and issues explored in relevant scientific research literature related to the field of practice in which the praxis-related research occurs. To the extent that this is so, it suggests an answer to the second question: not-wholly-participant researchers might make contributions via research reports in the same way and from the same position as the ‘praxis researchers’ described by Sandberg *et al.* – that is, contributions to knowledge and theory in academic research literatures based on the concerns and criteria of academic research fields which conduct their enquiries independent of the concerns and issues of particular praxis fields. Such reports might then be vulnerable to the criticism (made earlier of the views of Sandberg *et al.*) that their contributions would be extracted from, and appropriated to, knowledge and theory in the academy and thus, in the process, made *exogenous* to praxis and the praxis field in which the research took place. To the extent that this is so, then the research begins to be evaluated by criteria different from those Mattsson & Kemmis describe for praxis-related research, namely, the criteria for ‘conventional’ scientific research. The research then begins to be evaluated in terms of its textual products rather than in the social life and social praxis of some community, group or organisation.

To the extent that praxis-related research produces outcomes in the forms of reports for the academic community, then, it is research that produces discourses whose standing is to be evaluated outside the deliberative discourses of the settings in which the research was conducted. Under such conditions, the ‘research findings’ no longer have an ‘internal’ relation to social life and social praxis as *knowledge in action*, and *theory in practice*, that is, as knowledge and theory

that are *in play in the doing*. We then return to conventional presuppositions that research produces knowledge and theory *about* praxis or practice rather than *in* practice or praxis. This is an important distinction, as I hope to show.

### **Researching Praxis within Practice traditions**

While earlier, twentieth century approaches to studying practice (and, sometimes, praxis) have regarded practice as an object like ‘behaviour’ or ‘action’ or ‘activity’ that could be explained or understood as a phenomenon separate from or external to the researcher observing it, some recent approaches regard practice, and especially praxis, as in principle inseparable from and ‘internal’ to the persons and groups whose practice/praxis it is, and also as ‘internal’ to the *practice traditions* of which these people are members. If this is the case, then it might follow that practice/praxis is only researchable ‘from within’, by the people whose practice/praxis it is, either as individuals reflecting on their own practice with a view to transforming it, or as collectivities like the communities that constitute a profession, who might want collectively to explore the consequences of the work of their profession with a view to transforming it. If practice/praxis is only researchable from within, then, it may follow that we need to take a very different view of what it means to ‘research’ practice/praxis than has been taken in existing traditions of research (at least in those traditions that regard praxis as an object external to the researchers or research communities concerned).

### ***Research as practical philosophy***

In a series of related articles on education, educational theory, methodology in education and educational research, and practical philosophy, Wilfred Carr (2007; see also Carr 2000, 2004, 2006a, 2006b) has posed a number of stark challenges to conventional views about research, theory, methodology and ‘method’. He argues that modernist notions of theory and method

forged over the last two hundred years have failed to deliver what they promised to deliver: scientific knowledge and theory that would provide reliable bases for application in practice.

Carr offers an alternative understanding of what it means to orient a practice by returning to the Aristotelian conceptualisation of praxis, and to the notion of a form of practical philosophy whose principal task is to assist in deliberation about what to do at any moment in the conduct of a practice, under current and existing conditions and circumstances. He points out that every practice – including a professional practice like education – is only intelligible as a practice of its kind in the light of a tradition that informs and orients it. Here, he follows Gadamer (1975) on the role of tradition as shaping our perceptions and interpretations. Carr also draws on MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian conception of practices as shaped by intellectual virtues, traditions and "the narrative unity of a human life" (1983; pp191-2) that gives meaning to those practices through consciously living "a certain kind of life" (p.163).

Elsewhere in practice theory, Theodore Schatzki (2002) also regards mutual intelligibility as a crucial feature of practices (following Wittgenstein, 1953, on 'forms of life') – we know what someone is doing when we see them teaching, or practising medicine, or farming. Schatzki sees practice as "the site of the social" (to use the title of his 2002 book), where people meet and interact with one another in mutually-comprehensible ways, in the course of the different kinds of projects ("teleoaffective structures"; Schatzki, 2002, pp.80-81) that orient them in their mutual interaction.

A crucial thread of Carr's argument in these articles is that educational research ought to be understood as research that orients and guides the individual and collective praxis of educators. For Carr, however, only people who have some grasp of the traditions of thought and action, theory and practice, in the field and discipline of education can reason or deliberate

*educationally* about what they are doing. Education, like other distinctive kinds of practices, is a *practice tradition*. This means that what makes actions and interactions *educational* is intelligible in any sophisticated or learned way only by those who have engaged in the practice traditions of education themselves, and have deliberated for themselves and with others in their profession about what it *means* to act educationally and to have *acted* educationally – to have practised education, to have practised the traditions of education. That is, what makes the practice of education more fully intelligible is that it is mutually-intelligible within a community of practitioners of the field and discipline of education whose communal praxis constitutes the tradition as a practice-tradition. What is to count as the practice of ‘education’ then, is not just a matter of following rules about certain kinds of actions and activities (that is, *technē*) and it is not just a matter of contemplation about the meaning of education in some ideal sense (that is, *theoria*); rather, decisions about what is to count as ‘education’ must be made in shared deliberation about past, present and future praxis. Since those situations always vary, practical deliberation and praxis are always required, for individuals and collectivities whose concern is principally for the good of the traditions of education – for the continuation, thriving of those traditions, sustainability as forms of life; as collective praxis; as living traditions.

Of course circumstances always change, so the practice traditions of education must continually be re-interpreted for new times, new places and new conditions. An example is the way in which the late nineteenth century, early twentieth century, liberal progressivism of John Dewey was re-interpreted when teachers in Dalton, Ohio, developed the ‘Dalton Plan’, fixing upon the child as individual and creating a more individualistic form of child-centred education (Parkhurst, 1922). Later, standardising tendencies evident in schools following the Dalton Plan were identified, and a new form of curriculum known as the ‘Winnetka Plan’ (Washburne &

Marland, 1963) was developed as a corrective, giving greater prominence to creative and social activities (on this example, see Connell, 1980, pp.277-9).

Educational traditions always evolve in and through the practice of self-aware educators who see their individual and collective praxis as needing to respond to new circumstances and opportunities. This evolution cannot be sustained for long just through the isolated innovations introduced into the tradition by individuals; they need to be interrogated in the community of enquiry that constitutes the profession. Educational traditions may orient and be present in the deliberation and conduct of individual educators, but they can only survive and thrive as traditions by being sustained in communal debate and deliberation among members of the profession. By insisting on the role of a practice tradition, and by emphasising that practice traditions orient deliberation about the particular circumstances and settings in which educators find themselves, Carr makes a stronger connection with praxis than do the other forms of research into practice described earlier. Perhaps one might say that, for Carr, praxis is the ‘home’ of *phronēsis*, not merely an expression of it. Similarly, *phronēsis* is not a body of knowledge or theory or deliberation that precedes and guides action; it is conducted *in the doing* of praxis.

Education, we might say, does not come into existence (into ‘happening-ness’) except in individual and collective educational praxis. But a person’s praxis or a group’s collective praxis cannot be *educational* unless it is oriented by practice traditions and unless it is made intelligible as a praxis of this particular sort.

For Carr, then, praxis is primary to educational research. Since individual educational praxis or collective, social, educational praxis can only be understood as the praxis of individuals and groups who are actually doing it, it follows that a researcher can only have access to that praxis *as praxis* only by having access to the deliberation and action of the one or ones doing the

praxis. The ones with the greatest and most privileged access to practice *as* individual and social praxis are *those whose praxis it is*. On this view, practitioners themselves are best positioned to be educational researchers – doing practical philosophy that aims to evaluate their own individual and collective praxis in the light of tradition and in response to current and emerging conditions and circumstances. On this view, it follows that a special case must be made to consider anyone external to the actuality of educational praxis as being adequately positioned to conduct research in or on praxis.

It also follows that the community of those who constitute a collective practice tradition – in this case, educators themselves – are best positioned to evaluate whether a particular form of educational praxis is within, or a contribution to the evolution of the practice tradition of education. Only they have access to the barriers and exigencies that confront contemporary educational praxis, and that challenge the practice traditions that have informed their educational praxis until now. They are the ones in a position to deliberate about how changed forms of those traditions and practices might respond to changing historical and local circumstances like meeting the global challenges for education in a digital age, or the local challenges faced by a remote Indigenous community in inland Australia. It is not that practitioners have privileged knowledge that is somehow *superior* to the knowledge or theories others may have about their praxis; rather, it is that they are the *only* ones who have in their collective care the individual and social project of Education (and, in the European sense, of Pedagogy).

As Carr argues, much educational research of recent decades has aimed to change educational practice from without, by recourse to ideas about learning or motivation from educational psychology, for example, or ideas about social class or difference from sociology or cultural studies. These forms of educational research have aimed to make educational action a

species of *technē*, or rule-following, and they have typically focused on improving various kinds of ‘products’ like ‘learning outcomes’ that are products external to the person doing the producing. As Dunne (1998) observes, however, praxis, as ‘right conduct’ and as ‘history-making action’ is inseparable from the person or persons performing it; it is always also a process of *self-formation*. It might be added that praxis is always a process of self-formation in both an individual and a collective sense – praxis forms the person, the identity, of the one who acts and the communities of which they are part; and these persons and communities are, as Marx observes, both products and producers of history. Education forms individual selves and social selves; it forms the identities, capacities and fortunes (in the broad sense) of communities and nations. It follows that those whose conduct is educational praxis – that constitutes educational praxis – must evaluate the quality of their work not just against technical criteria like the magnitude or depth of the learning outcomes of their students, but, rather, by evaluating the excellence of their students as persons, and by evaluating the excellence of the communities and societies in which they live; excellences, that is, in intellectual virtues of the kinds described by Aristotle and by MacIntyre (1983) like honour, justice and rationality (to which might be added, for our times, sustainability in its many dimensions).

It also follows from this that university educators can have a place in the evolution of practice traditions of education, not as ‘experts’ on the sidelines of educational praxis but as participants in that praxis, through their own work as teachers. Like educators in schools and other child and adult education settings, university educators also confront the challenges of changed historical conditions for education, changed student populations, changed community and government expectations of education, and changed local conditions for their work (see, for example, Kemmis & Smith, 2008; Ax and Ponte, 2008). Through reflection and research on their

own individual and collective praxis, they, too, are positioned to comment on and contribute to the evolution of the practice traditions of education for changed times and different places.

### **Research as praxis, within practice traditions of research**

No socialised human being lives outside practice-traditions. To be human is to participate in a communal social life that gives meaning, value and social significance because the individual has cultural-discursive terms in which to interpret themselves and their world, material-economic activities through which to meet physical and social needs and desires, and social-political commitments and obligations that provide social solidarities in which individual exist for others as well as for themselves. Practice-traditions are ubiquitous, not rarefied or specialised in highly-differentiated forms of life like the life of a profession.

To conduct research in any field or discipline, from a more or less amateur position, as a member of a profession, or as a member of a university or a research organisation is thus to participate in a practice tradition that makes a set of activities and interactions with others and the world comprehensible as research. To do research in any serious sense is thus to see one's activities against the background of, and as a contribution to the knowledge, the theory, the action and the praxis – the life – of a field or discipline.

If this is so, then most researchers conduct their research as realisations of and as contributions to the development of practice-traditions of their fields and disciplines.

This does not, however, necessarily mean that, for example, their research contributes to the practice-tradition they might think it contributes to. Because some researchers say they are doing educational research does not necessarily mean that they are making a contribution to the praxis-traditions that actually constitute education. Similarly, some researchers who conduct what they say is educational research make contributions to the practice-traditions of education

only indirectly, by changing (enabling or constraining) the external and institutional conditions under which education can be carried out, for example, by changing the financial or material or curricular resources or the time available to educators, or by changing the access of different people and groups to different educational activities. For more than a hundred years now, many researchers who have adopted an empirical-analytic approach to educational research have changed these externalities (resources, conditions, curricula) with the aim of informing and transforming education as a production process – as *technē*. Other researchers have adopted an interpretive-hermeneutical approach, aiming (like the advocates of phronetic research) to inform the deliberations of those (teachers, educators) whose work actually constitutes education, whose work *is* education. And some, like participatory action researchers in education, have conducted research adopting a critical-emancipatory approach, aiming to transform the practice-traditions of education from within.

Yet each of these groups of researchers – all considering themselves educational researchers – conducts its work within a particular kind of practice-tradition. Some empirical-analytical researchers work in the practice-traditions of various schools of educational psychology. Some interpretive-hermeneutical researchers have worked in various schools of history of education, philosophy of education and sociology of education. Some critical-emancipatory researchers have worked in practice-traditions of critical theory and critical social science.

Like the participants in Herman Hesse's (1969/1943) *The Glass Bead Game*, a novel describing the vicissitudes of the leading practitioner of a highly-esoteric form of practice (the glass bead game) played far in the future, researchers within a practice-tradition realise, recreate and develop the tradition continuously through their participation in its practices. There is little

doubt that when they conduct their enquiries, they are doing so as a form of individual and collective praxis – a *research praxis*.

It does not follow, however, that this research praxis is *educational praxis*. Indeed, for those researchers who investigate practice as an object or phenomenon to be controlled and constrained, their research praxis is by definition external to educational praxis (although they may communicate and debate their findings with students or fellow-researchers in the mode of educational praxis). The case is more difficult with those researchers who aim to interpret education in relation to contemporary cultural, economic or social-political traditions; they enter deliberation about education that might or might not be within the tradition, or might only be within it to the extent that they influence the ways practitioners of educational praxis understand their work. When those researchers – those in universities, for example – enquire into their own educational praxis (for example by reflecting on the cultural and historical conditions that shape their praxis), however, it is likely that their research is *both* within a practice-tradition of research (a research praxis) like participatory action research *and* within a praxis-tradition of education.

From the perspective of practice-traditions of education, then, some forms of research praxis are also educational praxis and some forms of research praxis are external to educational praxis.

### **Conclusions**

It would be extravagant and inaccurate to say that those practice-traditions of research that are external to educational praxis are always or necessarily harmful to educational praxis. Some may be. It would be reasonable to suppose, however, that if most or all research into education were conducted (as a research praxis) from the standpoint of practice-traditions external to educational practice, then it might not nurture educational praxis and the practice-traditions of education.

If the expenditures by governments and research councils on educational research were the sole criterion for judging whether educational research is in this state, one would be tempted to conclude that educational praxis is not being nurtured by research from within the practice-traditions of education. The preponderance of funded educational research investigates educational praxis from a vantage point external to the practice-traditions of education. On the other hand, government programs fostering action research and other forms of self-reflective research by practitioners suggest that some support is being given to encouraging practice-traditions of research that are internal to educational praxis. The situation may not be as bright as it might be, however, since some programs of support for teacher research aim to ‘assist’ teachers to develop in ways that make their practices more compliant to government policies about education.

On the other hand, enthusiastic teachers and educators continue to debate issues and concerns about their individual and collective educational praxis, with or without research funding. This communal discourse is essential to the vitality of educational praxis.

Communal discourse within the educational profession is not as much under threat of extinction, however, as it is under threat of distraction and obfuscation. Properly *educational* debate, within the practice-traditions of education and conducted in the interests of individual and collective educational praxis under changing historical, cultural and material conditions, is under a threat of *distraction* because the discourses of many governments and the researchers who advise them are not, in themselves, *educational* discourses. They are administrative and technical discourses about how education should be managed and what it should produce. *Educational* debate is under a threat of *obfuscation* because practitioners of education – those whose work constitutes individual and collective educational praxis – are continually subjected

to critique and attempted reconstruction from those external administrative and technical discourses which misconstrue educational praxis as *technē*, and education as training, and thus erode the opportunities to use properly educational discourses to understand and interpret education under changing historical conditions and in different locations.

Dunne (1993) and Carr (2000, 2006b) have argued that the discourses in which education as a practice can be understood are being contested and marginalised by technical and theoretical discourses that are external to educational praxis. Kemmis & Smith (2008) and Ax & Ponte (2008) have argued that those colonising discourses are undermining the field, the discipline, the practice, the traditions and the profession of education. Strengthening – in some places reviving – practice-traditions of research internal to individual and collective educational praxis is needed to resist those colonising tendencies. Without such resistance, the practice-traditions of education that orient and inform educational praxis might decline and disappear like one of the indigenous languages around the world today that suddenly loses the last of its speakers, taking with it not just the language but also the knowledge it articulated, a specific form of human culture, a particular way of life, a way of being human.

If this account of research praxis is correct, then a great deal hangs on how those – or at least some of those – who conduct educational research identify themselves. If they regard themselves, first and foremost, as educators and as practitioners of education, then they may conduct research according to practice-traditions that see the activity of developing education as something internal to educational praxis, as a necessary part of doing education well. If, on the contrary, they regard themselves primarily as theorists or researchers authorised by practice-traditions external to education and educational praxis, however, then they may alter the conditions under which education and educational praxis are conducted, indirectly enabling or

limiting educational praxis, but *not* for *educational* reasons. Instead, administrative or technical or some other reasons would provide justifications for the changes proposed.

I believe this is in fact the current state of official debates about the development of education. Instead of regarding all educational questions from the perspective of how best, under changing and sometimes difficult and distorted circumstances, to develop the capacities of every individual and every community and society for individual and collective self-expression, self-development and self-determination, official questions of school education have largely become questions of administering the learning and the lives of all children towards enhanced participation in the economic life of societies. Questions of adult education have similarly resolved themselves into debates about ‘life-long learning’ harnessed to the participation of adults as workers in ‘flexible’, changing and increasingly uncertain occupations and jobs. In both cases, ‘learning’ has replaced ‘education’ as the core concern of those whose lives and work are conducted *for* education. Similarly, states see their educational responsibilities as responsibilities for the administration of schooling (at every level) and ‘skill formation’ rather than for the education of citizens and societies in the interests of the good for humankind. Under such circumstances, goals of civic participation (‘active citizenship’) are reduced to social integration as compliance with the will of governments and employing organisations, and goals of human development are reduced to a kind of law-of-the-jungle adaptability to economic opportunities and consumerist satisfaction.

These tendencies are partly, though insufficiently, ameliorated by initiatives and social movements fostering forms of research praxis, and practice traditions of research that are internal to education as a field and discipline – including advocacies and initiatives about participatory action research and other forms of reflective practice.

In the light of the contemporary dilemma about how research can contribute to the development of practice-traditions of education and individual and collective educational praxis – whether and to what extent from locations external to or internal to the practice-traditions of education – I believe that a revitalisation of debate about education and educational praxis is needed, along with continuing enquiries concerning the character of different kinds of research into practice.

In this paper, I have tried to show that there are promising leads towards forms of educational research that can connect with public deliberation about education and the continuing development of education from ‘within’ its own practice-traditions. Carr’s (2007) notion of educational research as practical science, or as practical philosophy, is one such promising lead.

Throughout the paper, I have also tried to suggest that the Aristotelian notion of praxis as morally-informed, committed action and the Marxian notion of praxis and as ‘history-making action’ pose difficult conceptual questions for research and researchers. Aristotle and Marx make plain the ‘happening-ness’ and ‘sheer actuality’ of praxis, and that it is the praxis of individuals, communities and societies that unfolds in and through their action. While some forms of educational research, and practice-traditions of educational research, aim to grasp educational practice as a phenomenon, from the standpoint of the outside observer, what they grasp instead is an object constructed by external theory and methodology. Those forms of educational research do not grasp the ‘happeningness’ and the ‘history-making-ness’ of individual or collective praxis *from within*. Having thus misconstrued praxis as an object seen from the perspective of an external observer, those practice-traditions cannot construe the educational activities of educators as praxis, as the right conduct and the socially-responsible action of people aiming to make their

world better through education. They therefore offer advice on how 'it' can be improved not in educational terms, but in administrative or technical terms.

The 'experts' offering this advice, by virtue of their training as researchers in administrative or social and behavioural sciences, offer the kinds of advice that administrative science, or sociology or behavioural science can offer education, namely advice from the sidelines. What is needed today is advice from the field. What is needed is knowledge and theory that comes into play *in the doing* of education, not from the sidelines but from the field of play, from the players whose life and work *is* educational praxis. In the words of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, those external researchers have only attempted to explain or interpret education; the point is to change it. Researchers who study education from the outside do not grasp the palpability and actuality of individual and collective educational praxis, with all its wanted and unwanted consequences, and its incessantly urgent need for development in the light of changing circumstances. In the end, educational praxis can only be changed from within, by those whose work – whose individual and collective praxis – is education.

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