Reading 4.1

Practical judgement and evidence-informed practice

Ruth Heilbronn

This reading explains the deep roots of ‘practical judgement’ in Aristotle’s philosophy and thus confirms the enduring qualities which are required in combining experience and analysis in practical contexts. Interestingly, Bennett writes on managing behaviour (Reading 7.3) from a similar position.

Heilbronn identifies three dimensions of practical judgement: ethics; flexibility; personal rootedness. In this way she affirms that teaching has moral purposes which always require personal judgement from the person who is the teacher. This is what makes it so interesting, and such a responsibility.

What forms of evidence could help you in making practical judgements?


Practical judgement might be characterised as a capacity ‘to do the right thing at the right time’: to respond flexibly and appropriately in particular situations, whose unique correlation of variables could not be known in advance. (Reading 1.1) Training for professional practice is designed to enable such expert decision making and action.

The concept of ‘practical judgement’ goes back to Aristotle’s concept of phronesis. Although this rich notion has been interpreted in a variety of ways, a relevant understanding for teachers is found in Dunne’s statement that phronesis is: ‘an eye for what is salient in concrete situations’ (Dunne, 1993: 368). Expert practitioners know what to do in specific situations. They have what seems to be ‘an intuitive sense of the nature and texture of practical engagement’ (Dunne, 1993: 8).

Phronesis does not ascend to a level of abstraction or generality that leaves experience behind. It arises from experience and returns into experience. It is, we might say, the insightfulness – or using Aristotle’s own metaphor, ‘the eye’ – of a particular type of experience, and the insights it achieves are turned back into experience, which is in this way constantly reconstructed or enriched. And the more experience is reconstructed in this way, the more sensitive and insightful phronesis becomes. (Dunne, 1993: 293)

In the above quotation the key term is ‘experience’. There can be no split between elements encountered in reading, research, university and schools, because these elements make no sense, have no meaning, bear no significance to the practitioner, until and unless they are integrated and able to be applied. Understanding develops through the practical
situation in which novices are placed, and with which they grapple. This is true for many kinds of workplaces, where novices may be changed by experience into highly proficient practitioners (Hogan, 2003).

It is possible to outline some characteristics of practical judgement in three main dimensions.

First, there is an ethical dimension to ‘the right’ response. Professional practices have their codes of ethics and it is expected that practitioners follow these codes and uphold the values of the profession. If we try to think of an example of practitioner action that seems ‘value free’ we soon give up the attempt. Teaching, nursing, social work, are thoroughly relational practices. They have ‘the other’, the client, the learner, the patient, whose welfare is inextricably linked to choices and actions. So the right action at any time needs to draw on ethical considerations: a good practitioner will be someone whose actions we can trust as ‘wise’ or ‘judicious’. In acting seemingly spontaneously practitioners draw on their own values, qualities and dispositions, as well as on technical know-how and information based on previous, relevant experiences.

Having professional values and living by them in practice are an essential part of being a practitioner involved with others. The capacity for trustworthiness is fundamental to teaching. The practice of teaching involves the ability to see things from the learners’ perspective, to show ‘pedagogical thoughtfulness’ (van Manen, 1991) and to make adjustments accordingly. Van Manen has described ‘tactful’ teaching, as that which ‘locates practical knowledge not primarily in the intellect or the head but rather in the existential situation in which the person finds himself or herself’ (van Manen, 1995: 45–6).

Practical judgement is connected to ‘virtue’, in the sense that such a practitioner exercises qualities of ‘practical wisdom’ (Reading 1.1). A good teacher could be said to be a wise person, someone who exercises an ethical sense of doing what is right, of acting for the good. An example would be a teacher who rejects a strategy for gaining order in the classroom which would involve humiliating pupils, in favour of another, involving more effort based on developing trusting relationships. As Smith (2003) has stated the importance of relationships between pupils, and between them and their teacher cannot be over-emphasised. Teaching is ‘thoroughly relational’ (Noddings, 2003: 249) and many of the virtues are exercised in relation to others in a pedagogical space of trust (van Manen, 1991).

A second dimension of practical judgement is its flexibility. Expert practitioners can respond flexibly to changing situations. We cannot know in advance what individual situations will throw up in the way of stimuli requiring response. Experts respond flexibly. Since there cannot be a definitive, right way to respond in every circumstance, it follows that any expert response might not be the best one for the circumstance. Therefore, reflecting on practice, interrogating aims, purposes and outcomes of particular choices in particular situations, can be a fruitful source of knowledge and understanding, and can support the development of practical judgement. It follows too that there can be no universally applicable, infallible theory or pedagogical intervention, given the contingency of individual situations of practice. This is significant if there are government promoted pedagogical strategies and educational changes and control over the school or college curriculum.
A third feature of judgement is its rootedness within an individual person, with a particular character, dispositions and qualities. When a teacher decides what is to be done in any situation, for example with a recalcitrant pupil, even if her decisions seem intuitive they are informed by the teacher’s prior experiences and values. There is always more than one available course of action and individual teachers make choices of what they consider the right action in the circumstances. These choices may be based on a number of different factors, involving practical and ethical considerations. A teacher’s character, dispositions and capacities underlie the exercise of practical judgement.

Good teachers can be said to exercise sound practical judgement, which involves exercising virtues such as justice, tolerance and courage, and qualities such as patience and optimism. We think of good teachers as acting with integrity and trustworthiness, being open-minded and able to learn from experience. It is an interesting exercise to think of all the qualities required, desired and expected, an exercise fruitfully revisited at various points in a teaching career (Burbules, 1997).