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# THE RETURN OF PRACTICE TO HIGHER EDUCATION: RESOLUTION OF A PARADOX

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## **THE RETURN OF PRACTICE TO HIGHER EDUCATION: RESOLUTION OF A PARADOX**

**Joseph A. Raelin**

We are witness to a growing paradox in higher education ever since the recognition that one of its primary purposes has become the advancement of professional education. Perhaps the most unrecognized trend in college education in the United States has been the decline in the liberal arts, which purportedly prepare students for moral and civic participation in society. The apprehensiveness of liberal arts exponents notwithstanding, by the start of the 21st century, some two-thirds of college undergraduates had voted with their feet to enroll in professional fields (Brint, 2002). The paradox is that in spite of this rampant professionalization throughout higher education, the provision of professional education has been orchestrated through standard classroom delivery mechanisms that are based on methods associated with liberal arts provision. This methodology has been retained, while in other fields of endeavor, such as social theory, organizational studies, and technology and society, there has been a “practice turn” that has elevated the value of experience as a basis for knowledge. In this article, I shall attempt to elaborate on the history behind this paradox and attempt to resolve it by demonstrating the

opportunity now available to higher and general education teachers and administrators in adopting a more practice-oriented approach.

### **Derivation of the Paradox**

Until the 20th century, most people prepared for professional life by apprenticing in the field. Few found much value in college preparation, which, in the United States, was associated almost exclusively with moral and also intellectual preparation, known as liberal arts education. Young people of means attended college to refine their comprehension of the virtues of civic participation in a society they would one day come to shape. College was not a time to prepare for work that awaited them upon graduation. They would inherit their employment through their privileged upbringing. Graduate school would eventually become the means of preparing college students, now morally equipped, to enter the advanced professions, such as law and medicine (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005).

Meanwhile, the professions were experiencing a shift in their identity as they became more sophisticated through the advancement of knowledge and technology available to them through the latter half of the 19th century. The professions, already identified as occupations that required specialized knowledge, dedication to a craft, and moral rectitude, looked to secure their knowledge base, not just as a means to protect their growing clientele but to advance their monopoly over their specialized skills (Freidson, 1986; Raelin, 1991). Thus, an alliance was formed with the land-grant institutions of higher education to offer a professional education (not merely a vocational education, which would be reserved for lower-level trade preparation) that would come to be revered as the ideal pathway into the professions. By the midpoint of the 20th century, the transition from work-based to school-based professional education was secure, as

the country's educational system became a form of mass higher education offering clear tracks into students' chosen professions (Bledstein, 1978; Geiger, 2000).

As higher education thus secured its role as the gateway into the professions, in the latter half of the century, professional training came under increasing attack for its disassociation from the world of practice. What had happened through the social evolution described above was that the institutions, many of which were state universities and colleges as well as second-tier private universities, in order to gain respectability, attempted to emulate the first-tier liberal arts colleges, which were still teaching using tried-and-true classroom methodologies that relied on cognitive development rather than field-learning approaches (Freeland, 2004). Furthermore, to gain and sustain prestige, these institutions encouraged faculty to continue to develop their research at the expense of more time-consuming teaching strategies that might afford greater intersection with the practice world that the students would someday face on their own. The scholarship chosen by faculty would also rarely scrutinize their own practice; rather, it would be used to explore the content of the discipline (Braxton, 2005). It is no wonder that critics in nearly all the professions have formed a chorus denouncing our universities for preparing students with the wrong competencies required to become successful in their fields (see, i.e., Association of American Medical Colleges, 1998; MacCrate, 1992; Mintzberg, 2004). In particular, the critics have ultimately detected that our professional education has emphasized the technical skills over the interpersonal, the accumulation of facts over wisdom, and a focus on individual accomplishment over intersubjective appreciation. It is not surprising, however, that a hierarchical, decontextualized, and cognitive form of education would emerge in a provision that became detached from the world of practice. Even in contemporary general education, although there is interest in developing autonomous lifelong learners, only recently have curricular models

emphasized the value of real-world and interdisciplinary connections (Bastedo, 2002; Glynn, Aultman, & Owens, 2005).

### **Theory Detached From Practice**

The advancement of the professions in the university was reliant on a modernist platform that viewed knowledge as a tangible resource that could be produced from a scientific method based on scrupulously objective means of inquiry. This form of knowledge was seen as an advance over a more volatile knowledge produced from values, feelings, or untested experience. The modernist formula thus insisted on separating theory from practice. Indeed, teaching in the professions became associated with the teaching of theory occurring as a process of transferring information from teacher to student. Learning would occur not from the conceptualization and application of practice but from the storing and recapitulation of the received information. It was further associated with a specific place, that being the classroom. Contextualization of theory within its place of application would occur later by students themselves once safely ensconced in the practice world. They would be responsible for making the link between the previously learned theory and their current workplace problems.

Knowledge thus assumed a connotation of tangibility and permanence (Letiche & Van Hattem, 2000). As a commodity, it was something to be acquired through study or through mental acquisition rather than through day-to-day experience. It would be accessed through reason and intellect, not through emotion and reflection (Damasio, 1994), and it was also thought to be fixed rather than something ever evolving through practice (Styhre, 2003). The fluidity of knowledge, heretofore lashed to theory as presented, was not apparent perhaps until the “practice turn” in social theory, which decentered the knowledge production process. Using language as an

ends not as just a means of transference from one mind to another, contemporary theorists were able to point out how the in-process sharing of ideas could expand the fount of knowledge at the same time that it could be used to improve practice (Bergson, 1968; Lyotard, 1997).

In particular, Henri Bergson and Pierre Bourdieu through their respective concepts of *durée* and *habitus* were able to demonstrate the recursive relationship between structure and agency—that we could shape the world at the same time that it was shaping us. Through *durée*, Bergson's (2001) idea of lived time, we begin to realize that we are in a constant state of becoming and thus that our knowledge is not just based on past cognitive learning but can be composed of actual experiences in the present as well as future anticipations. Through *habitus*, Bourdieu's (1990) way of referring to how people internalize social structures, we learn that though historically conditioned, social agents can change their way of both perceiving and acting using consciousness and socioanalysis. Our actions can change or reinforce current structures over time and then, in turn, can serve as constraints or supports of future actions (Archer, 1995; Lawson, 1997; Mutch, 1999). However, access to our consciousness and to our knowing-in-action requires some form of elucidation of the rules and norms governing our collective understanding in the moment (Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001). Fortunately, language is available to enhance our self-understanding, were we but to consider its contribution to knowledge not as a tool but as a component of the very process of learning. One way to conceptualize language in this way is to consider the role of reflective practice.

### **Reflective Practice**

Higher education has available a methodology that can encourage both the production and the application of knowledge in service of thoughtful action. We refer to it as reflective practice.

Although it has a significant history in teacher education (Clift, Houston, & Pugach, 1990), its contribution as a concurrent and collective practice supporting learning from work experience is more recent (Raelin, 2001). Perhaps most noteworthy has been the systematic use of reflective activities in service learning to provide a link between community service experience and a host of learning outcomes, in particular critical thinking skills (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Reflective practice is often thought of as the public form of reflection that can be characterized as the process of inquiry that seeks to uncover and make explicit what one has planned, observed, or achieved in practice, such as might be made available through internship-type placements. It often seeks to understand experiences that may have been overlooked. As a vehicle for learning, it can enhance understanding beyond the immediate interactive setting to applications within other levels of experience—organization and society in particular. We tend to refer to the interactive exchange in this case as a learning dialogue. Rather than constituting an exchange of mere points of view, dialogue brings to the surface, in the safe presence of trusting peers, the social, political, and emotional data that arise from direct experience with one another. Often these data are precisely those that might be blocking operating effectiveness (Raelin, 1997).

Reflective practice is also associated with the tradition of contextualized learning theory that posits that learning can occur in the midst of practice, rather than more conventionally as a representation transmitted from teacher to student (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Instead of banking knowledge into one's mind (Freire, 1970), knowledge can be viewed as an interactive contention among a community of inquirers who share meanings, interpretations, and ideas (Dewey, 1916).



Meaning can thus be derived by conversants in situ rather than from a fixed set of scientifically or culturally derived specifications (Garfinkel, 1967; Lynch & Peyrot, 1992).

From a contextualized learning perspective, reflective practice has a number of distinctive features that permit its consideration within the branch of learning referred to as praxis. First, it is not merely a cognitive or mental process; it is also a behavioral process. It can involve others as opposed to being an individual experience. It often requires some facilitation to help learners reframe their knowledge base, but the facilitation is not equivalent to classic teaching. It can also occur concurrently with practice rather than before or after experience. Finally, and perhaps most important as a basis for higher education provision, it is typically concerned with critical inquiry, probing into the deep recesses of experience. In the ensuing discussion, I take up each of these points, reserving more attention to what we may call “critical reflective practice.”

### *Behavior*

That reflective practice can be a behavioral process suggests that learning be more than representational; rather, it can refer to manifestations that though often cognitively derived are inherently behavioral, such as the ability to improvise. Some learning theories suggest that behavior precedes cognitive development or is in continuous reciprocal interaction with cognitive and environmental influences (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1962). When cognition precedes behavior, learners tend to compare current cognitive frames with data that challenge existing patterns or meanings. As this process of comparing meanings unfolds, learners may not change their behavior. Furthermore, we may not be able to change even after having experienced a cognitive reinforcement of what we may think is best. We may also use new information to

change our frames or patterns of relationships but may not change behavior or even need to change behavior at that moment. However, any new meanings stored in memory could eventually produce new behavior.

### *Interaction*

Although reflective practice can technically occur as a solitary process, it is frequently interactive because most work or practice entails contact with others. Further, though learners may reflect privately to compare phenomena against their cognitive frames, they often bring out their reflections with others once they become absorbed in practice. Their internal dialogue is enhanced by external dialogue that induces and then refines it (Wertsch, 1979). In other words, our experience with others informs us, pulls us, and even transforms us. As Wenger (1998) suggests, we create ways of learning in practice in the very process of contributing to making that practice what it is.

Reflective practice's interactive property resonated with Socrates, who had the idea of relationships in mind when he remarked that "the unexamined life isn't worth living." This phrase has often been misinterpreted as a call for additional introspection by people. Although that is a useful notion, the actual meaning is that we need to include trusted others in the examination of experience in our life. Socrates' idea (captured by Plato) resonated with Aristotle, who recognized that human beings are social animals whose good is bound up with the good of society. Jürgen Habermas (1984) saw the reconciliation between individual and society through intersubjective recognition based on mutual understanding and free cognition about disputed claims. It is through communicative action that we are able to realize ourselves within a civic community. We must subject our entire experience to criticism, even our tacit understanding. For

Habermas, then, the Enlightenment project of modernity can be saved through open, public dialogue.

The interactive, as opposed to the private, nature of reflective practice was also the lifelong concern of social psychologist George H. Mead. Mead (1934) saw the relationship between the individual and society as a continual process of construction by the self as part of the social environment. Rediscovered by authors Cinnamond and Zimpher (1990), Mead described the self as formed as much from how others respond to one as from what one does. The self, then, is linked to the social communities that give it definition.

The collective nature of reflective practice can be associated with an expansive form of learning as it incorporates diverse stakeholders in its generation. There are new approaches in epistemology that have begun the task of integrating learning co-configurations. For example, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) calls for the incorporation of horizontal or sideways theorizing in addition to the more familiar vertical models. Traditional science's preoccupation has been to find ways to pass down applications of its deductively derived formulations. Critical and emancipatory theorists demonstrate how local knowledge and practice theories can be valuable when allowed to move upward (Yanow, 2004). CHAT makes room for bringing together otherwise loosely connected actors to integrate, and evaluate, and then reintegrate separate threads of activity (Engestrom, 2000). Actor-network theory illustrates how through a natural process of translation, disperse actors can be brought together to practice and learn as part of a social network (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1992). These approaches have begun the process of decentering learning so that it becomes practicable to disassociate it from a fixed site and allow its emergence within the context of practice itself.

### *Facilitation*

Learning requires facilitation not in a pure instructional sense but in a mediating sense. Bruner (1966) argues, for example, that instructors should engage students in active dialogue in order to help them discover principles by themselves. The basis for this perspective of reflective practice is constructivism, which stipulates that the purpose of teaching is not to transmit information but, rather, to encourage knowledge formation and development (Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1995). Learners, when given wide freedom to engage in self-discovery, will actively construct the necessary knowledge to make sense of their environment. Constructivism makes room for the presence of a conceptual guide. In a review of the literature on the pure discovery model of education over a 30-year time span, Richard Mayer (2004) found that unguided discovery methods only exceeded lecture methods when supplemented by trained facilitation. The reason for this conclusion is that students need guidance because their cognition activated by experience requires the integration of new information into a taught knowledge base.

### *Contemporaneity*

Reflective practice is concerned with reflection as much in the here and now as before or after the experience it examines. Adopting Loughran's (1996) labels, anticipatory reflection occurs prior to experience often in the form of planning, as learners suggest to themselves and to their peers how they might approach a given situation. Retrospective reflection looks back at recent experience. It can be initiated as the first instance of reflection, or it may be triggered by plans and hypotheses generated from anticipatory reflection or by insights evolving from contemporaneous reflection.

Contemporaneous reflection occurs in the moment, akin to Schön's (1983) "reflection-in-action," such that in the midst of performance one reframes unanticipated problem situations in order to see experience differently. While engaged in experience, planned responses often do not go according to plan, triggering a series of unexpected reactions. In this situation one often reframes the problem on the spot in order to release oneself as well as one's colleagues from fixed views, leading to the consideration of new approaches.

### *Criticality*

Reflective practice is associated with praxis because the latter, derived from the Greek word for "action," refers not only to what one does but to how one thinks about what one does and what others do. It constitutes an interdependent process that links the human mind with the external world through activity with others (Braaten, 1992; Kihl, 1995). It thus requires collective reflection in its attempt to dialectically bridge theory and practice. In turn, if reflection results in challenges that bring out contradictions in the current power structure, it can assume a critical, liberating stance (Heydebrand, 1980; Markovic, 1979).

The question of reflective practice's critical nature has been a preoccupation of organizational sociologists, especially those ethnomethodologists and conversational analysts who focus on the relationship between interactional and institutional phenomena. Focusing primarily on the data, the principal issue is whether the analyst should impose his or her categories onto participants' discourse (Richards, 2001). The focus of the classic ethnomethodologist tends to be on how participants understand what they themselves are doing. From this point, the analyst can determine why the speaking was done and for what purpose. Analysis is thus embedded in the local and realized context (Oswick & Richards, 2004). Yet,

without interpretive analysis, it becomes difficult to deconstruct taken-for-granted assumptions in discourse that may show the pretenses that lie apart from language. There is often a discrepancy between what is said and what is seen (Bergson, 1968), so at times it is just as important to focus on what was not said as what was said. Further, the critical analyst would insist on knowing who was not included in the conversation or even which conversations were not recorded though they may have taken place. In this way, reflective practice may detour from conventional conversational analysis in order to incorporate the role of power or struggle to contest the meanings behind everyday discourse (Clegg, 1975; Deetz, 1992). A critical reflective practice would thus consider that some local conversations privilege particular stakeholders at the expense of others.

Critical reflective practice need not take a political or ideological stance other than its insistence on an inquiry that is genuine and that actually seeks out disconfirmation of immanent mind-sets. What is strange or contradictory should produce zeal in the activity of the reflective practitioner because of its potential to disclose new knowledge. It is thus supportive of what Argyris and Schön (1974) call “double-loop learning,” which not only questions the means toward already preformulated goals but the goals themselves as well as the values underlying them. Reflective practitioners thus are known to question why things are done in a historical way; to accredit the local and informal knowledge that has been acquired on the subject at hand; to admit nontraditional forms of knowledge, such as emotions, into the inquiry; to question the questions that they tend to resort to; to look for discrepancies between what they and others say they do and what they actually do; and to try to become aware of how their reasoning may at times become self-referential and self-confirming (Bright, 1996; Raelin, 1997).

Reflective practice's critical nature has been taken up by Mezirow (1981), who refers to this level of discourse as "transformative," that is, a learning that can take us into new meanings. Transformative learning can help us review and alter any misconstrued meanings arising out of uncritical half-truths found in conventional wisdom or in power relationships. Mezirow (1991) later distinguishes three forms of reflection based on the object of the reflection itself. Content reflection entails a review of the way we have consciously applied ideas in strategizing and implementing each phase of solving a problem. Process reflection, on the other hand, is an examination of how we go about problem solving with a view toward the procedures and assumptions in use. Premise reflection goes to a final step of questioning the very presuppositions attending to the problem to begin with. In premise reflection, we reconsider the very questions we have been asking in order to challenge our fundamental beliefs.

Premise reflection when interpreted as a collective process has also been referred to as "heedful" action, such that people act attentively, conscientiously, and critically (Ryle, 1949; Weick & Roberts, 1993). This means that any reflection needs to take into consideration data beyond our personal, interpersonal, and organizational taken-for-granted assumptions (Raelin, 1997). We need to understand how knowledge has been constructed and managed and how what is deemed to be relevant or even common sense has been arrived at. For example, we may assume that everyone has the psychological and even physical security of reflecting with others, but in fact this may not be the case for marginalized individuals or groups that may not be invited to the table. We need to elucidate the barriers preventing learners from finding their voice or reaching their potential (Shor, 1992). In finding their voice, participants learn to "speak up" not just in ways sanctioned by privileged social authorities but because of their self-identified interests.

## **An Epistemology of Practice**

An epistemology of practice would make way for learning that is acquired from reasoning and sense making in the midst of action itself, rather than only from formal logic and content knowledge. There are times when students need to consume raw content, such as macroeconomics, actuarial mathematics, survey methodology, quantum mechanics, or harmonic functions. At other times, students may be encouraged by teachers serving in more of a facilitation role to seek out available knowledge to help them solve classroom-based or experiential problems emanating from a service placement. The second instance may also present students with the actual predicament of the current supply of knowledge being insufficient to solve a problem, in which case they would need to learn how to develop new knowledge to attack the puzzle at hand (Piaget, 1969; Rorty, 1989).

Conventional classroom epistemology, interpreted as knowing in advance of practice, can lead to “haste in wanting to know.” An epistemology of practice espouses as much intellectual quietness as the staccato of questions and answers. Students take in experience and reflect on the lessons available in front of their eyes. They compare their experience to existing theory and determine its applicability. If experience is not conjunctive with theory, then ongoing reflection with others can produce new theory. The reflective stance, suggested above, fits well with the practice setting. For example, it is one thing to learn the principles of behavioral reinforcement in theory, but then it is quite another to see them applied in an actual context. Consider the case of workers in an assembly plant competing for their individual compensation though they are ultimately dependent on one another for the fabrication of the total product. When experience conflicts with theory, student learning can be elicited on many fronts: Why is current theory not



working? What am I misunderstanding? Should I disclose my insights? Can I actually affect the system in a productive manner? What if my knowledge is incomplete? What if there is no solution? What sources should I consult to “learn” my way out?

Bergson (1968) would have us consider the possibility that organizational circumstances may be inexpressible for a while. Perhaps our only way of knowing is by steeping ourselves in the object or experience that we are encountering. In this way, we can come to know it as fully as possible, though our knowing may be noncognitive and prelinguistic (Wittgenstein, 1953). Although we may have the urge to express it using familiar symbols or language, the knowing in question, rather than an individual process that can be disembodied through mental reasoning, can be phenomenological and social. It may arise from the social interactions occurring as people engage in their practice. Learning occurs as students share their narratives in their own ways. This form of knowing, though often reported in a local idiom, can be apprehended for subsequent use in other settings through more conventional recordings of practice.

An epistemology of practice would not so much augment the store of knowledge as it might adapt the knowledge that we have to lend insight to our own ways of configuring the world. It might also shed light on our so-called regimes of signification, the abstractions that make knowledge appear coherent to a community of inquirers (Lash, 1990). In fact, as Chia and Morgan (1996) advise, it is often preferable in practice to invoke—quoting Keats—“negative capability,” that quality that allows one to resist conceptual closure. In this way we stay with an experience, even with its indeterminacy, soaking up its presence, rather than needing to codify it for fear that the embedded knowledge will otherwise be lost (Arnal & Burwood, 2003; Lyotard, 1984).

## **The Instructor's Role in Practice Education**

In my entreaty for a critical reflective practice in higher education, I am calling for a deeper form of reflection than the technical form associated with improvement on one's technical applications, such as how to revamp one's lectures or add interesting exercises. Premise reflection, described above, relates to the epistemological domain of praxis, representing a dialectical tension between the human mind and the external world that can repeat into developing cycles of deep questioning (Hedegaard, 1998; Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles, & Lopez-Torres, 2003).

Within the realm of praxis, the instructor's role is more that of the facilitator than the teacher, although it is quite possible for a faculty member to fulfill both roles. In praxis, furthermore, the instructor is not necessarily viewed as the expert, if expertise constitutes the purveyance of objective truth introduced from some source exterior to the present context. Learning in context is derived as much from self-referential inquiry as from external input. One way to characterize facilitation is to recall adult educator Malcolm Knowles's (1970) reference to andragogy rather than teacher-directed pedagogy. In andragogy, students are encouraged to be more autonomous in their actions, more reliable in their assessment of their own capacities and developmental needs, and more capable of accepting greater levels of responsibility for their own and others' actions. In andragogical practice, then, facilitators need to model such behaviors as tolerance of ambiguity, openness and frankness, patience and suspension of judgment, empathy and unconditional positive regard, and commitment to learning. Clearly, the opportunity to demonstrate these behaviors calls for settings that are less hierarchical than the standard classroom. The creation of learning cells or learning teams is appropriate along these lines because such structures provide, along with sensitive facilitation, a safe environment for students

to experiment with others to accomplish diverse learning goals. In particular, the learning team can become a human laboratory in which students can become more aware of their actual behaviors in their group and at work, such as exercising influence, establishing meaning, or effecting meaningful change.

Although the facilitator can be seen as encouraging the learning of others, the role has other modeling capacities, in particular, modeling how to become a learner using experience as a knowledge base. One important capacity, for example, is knowing how to draw the most salient information from the environment. As pointed out earlier, another might be to know how to construct new knowledge when faced with problems for which there is no known solution or even for which there is no known conceptual lens. Eventually, as students begin to adopt more andragogical behaviors, the facilitator can moderate his or her use of proactive interventions.

Some other facilitator skills discussed in the literature include:

- listening and attending
- clarifying goals, agendas, and norms
- promoting the raising of problems from diverse viewpoints
- openly but sensitively confronting conflict or disagreement
- looking at the underlying assumptions operating in a situation
- revealing one's own assumptions and inferences
- being aware of inconsistencies between one's beliefs and actions
- giving feedback in a nondefensive way
- soliciting and receiving feedback from others
- reflecting on self and on the process of the group
- allowing and encouraging the airing of emotions and feelings

- taking ownership of one's own learning
- drawing on knowledge from diverse sources to make meaning
- recognizing patterns in the domains of experience
- making contextually relevant judgments
- reinforcing an open and participative environment

### **Methods to Introduce Praxis**

There are numerous approaches to consider when using practice as a basis for educational reform. Besides a deliberate merging of practice with theory, approaches would tie the participants' self-consciousness to a public reflection of interpersonal and intersubjective phenomena.

Action learning, as a contextualized learning approach, seeks to generate learning from human interaction arising from engagement in the solution of real-world work problems (Boshyk, 2002; Marquardt, 1999; Pedler, 1996; Raelin, 2000; Yorks, O'Neil, & Marsick, 1999). Typically, participants work on a project of significant strategic import to the organization to which they are attached. Project experiences are often designed to be novel to provoke learning, so, for example, familiar problems could be examined in different settings or new problems could be confronted in familiar settings. Throughout the program, the participants continue to work on the projects with assistance from other participants (who are working either on the same project as part of a team or on an individual project in their own organization) as well as from qualified facilitators or coaches who help them make sense of their project experiences in light of relevant theory. This feedback feature principally occurs in learning teams or "sets," typically composed of five–seven participants, that hold intermittent meetings over a fixed program cycle

(Smith & O'Neil, 2003). During the learning team sessions, the participants discuss not only the practical dilemmas arising from actions in their work settings but the application or misapplication of concepts and theories to these actions.

An alternative method that features higher-order learning is action science, which, in its conception of “double-loop learning,” subjects the long-established practices of individuals and social systems to critical reflection (Argyris, 1982; Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). It exposes inconsistencies between individuals’ espoused theories—what they say they will do—and their theories-in-use—what they actually do. It probes into the defensive routines used by practitioners to be rational and stay in control over others or over organizational events that could make them vulnerable. In this way, it promotes the exploration of hidden resistances and conflicts in human discourse. For example, in a technique known as the “ladder of inference,” learners begin to understand how they and others select data from experience and draw immediate conclusions from these data without examining their embedded attributions and inferences.

The method known as cooperative inquiry invites participants to engage in self-critical examination in the presence of a group, which, itself, invites spontaneous inquiry into its own patterns (Heron, 1996; Reason, 1994). Rather than accept preordained content and methods, cooperative inquirers search for their own patterns of knowing while continually examining their practices, asking such questions as, “Who am I that is engaged in this knowing?” Thus, participants become decentered from a narcissism that characterizes human agency. They learn to view themselves as self-referents and as observers of each other in a community that persistently constructs and shares its own interpretations of the world.

It is important to note that distinctions between formal and informal learning loosen under a practice epistemology. Although formal learning such as lecturettes, readings, or

assignments is encouraged, a practice epistemology would add conversation and concurrent reflection to these experiences. There are many strategies available to stimulate learning conversations. Mezirow (1991) has demonstrated how projective instructional materials along with dialogue might be used in small group settings to elicit and challenge psychocultural assumptions behind habituated ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and behaving. Bohm (1996) and Isaacs (1999) assert that dialogue, as opposed to discussion, can reduce teacher talk and instead facilitate learner voice. Similarly, problem posing can be used to elicit students' thoughts as a basis for developing critical understanding of personal and societal experiences and for identifying possible collective actions (Freire, 1970).

Besides service learning, mentioned earlier, there are numerous variants of experiential education that furnish practice-based learning through off-campus activities, such as cooperative education, internships, clinical practice, international experiences, undergraduate research, and fine arts studio. Each of these approaches is developing reflective methods to help students surface their learning from experience. These reflective methods not only can be applied at the level of individual learning but can be deployed on behalf of team learning and even at macrolevels to encourage open dialogues regarding an organization's operating assumptions. Some of the methods noted in the literature include critical incidents, learning biographies, personal journals, portfolios—written and electronic, literature, repertory grids, conceptual mapping, and metaphor analysis (Brookfield, 1992; Gathercoal, Love, Bryde, & McKean, 2002; Kelly, 1955; Mezirow & Associates, 1990; Novak, 1990; Zubizarreta, 2004).

It should be duly noted that these approaches do not tend to produce submissive students. As a result, employer organizations as clients of our educational institutions may object to this form of pedagogy. Nor can students and families, socialized to consider education as a

commodity service, be expected to react passively to a pedagogical approach that in its emphasis on reflection endorses uncertainty. In this age of the “student as customer,” wherein education might be viewed as a production experience, there could be resistance to methods that do not give students the answers that they are paying for. In addition, this form of epistemology holds risks because its focus on inquiry may lead to changes in the self as well as to both the academic institution and organizations sponsoring students/practitioners. We are inclined to respond: Is such change not a critical purpose of education?

## **Conclusion**

Higher education seems to be caught in a 19th-century modernist web that portrays the vital knowledge to improve the world as being isolated within the hands of our brightest thinkers, who have only to transmit this knowledge through written and verbal text. Yet advances in epistemology have certainly demonstrated that human agency can be improved through discourse within the very activity of practice. Aside from discourse’s lens into social structure, we can also analyze it as a means to expand knowledge for improved action in the world. I have submitted in this article that praxis, exhibited through the processes of reflective practice, is available as a means to enrich professional, general, and liberal arts education within the academy.

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