A feminist perspective on communities of practice

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Introduction

I argue that feminist theory is relevant in the understanding of the practices of education, focusing particularly on learning communities of practice. I start by outlining a view of practices of learning and teaching within education, drawing on both philosophical and social learning theories (especially Collins, Brown and Holum, 1991, Lave and Wenger, 1991, Smith, 1999, Burbules and Smeyers, 2002,). I then seek to improve on this view by presenting a critique of it from a feminist perspective. In doing so I draw particularly on feminist philosophy, especially Fraser (1997), Battersby (1998), Young (2000), Greene and Griffiths(2003), and Le Doeuff (2003). The initial view is thus modified into a sketch of a feminist theory of practice. It makes use of theories of embodiment, diversity and structures of power. Firstly, I argue that any practice is properly seen as fluid, leaky and viscous. Secondly, I argue that any practice benefits from recognising diversity among its members, because such recognition encourages the acknowledgement of different models of expertise. Finally, I argue that the effects of socio-political structures on the practice need to be taken explicitly into account or else they bias perceptions of expertise by creating a kind of ‘illegitimate peripheral participation’ which is likely to be pernicious especially given the ubiquity of hegemonic masculinity. There are consequences for the organisation and development of learning communities of practice. For simplicity I focus on the practices of teaching, but many other examples could be chosen.

Practices

'Practice' is a much used, much abused, contested and indispensable concept in education. In the United Kingdom the term 'best practice' has become a mantra of government. In the worst cases, a technicist view of teaching sets up and valorises 'practice' as against 'theory'. Smith, (1999) gives an incisive, critical account of this tendency, focused on the United Kingdom but applicable much more widely. In this article I will concentrate not on that false dichotomy of unthinking practice and the relevant theory, but on a theorisation of practice in which 'theory' -- roughly understood as abstraction, articulation and/or explicit reflection -- draws on and contributes to 'practice', roughly understood as action, conduct and/or performance. It should be noted, however, that intelligent practice may include the activities of abstracting, articulating and reflecting.

The current dichotomisation of practice and theory owes little to philosophy. Most philosophical accounts of practice, for all their variety, are indebted to Aristotle who helpfully distinguished varieties of practice and of theory. As Noel (1999) usefully shows, different accounts of education practice emphasise different aspects of Aristotle's discussion. However, all of them are agreed that Aristotle presented us with a way of thinking of the human capacity to deal intelligently with the question of what to do for the best in any situation -- as opposed to only contemplating it (whether to describe, explain or analyse it). The terminology Aristotle used still permeates much contemporary discussion: *praxis*, *phronesis*, *techne*. As Dunne says (Dunne and

Pendlebury, 2003: 200):

> But the great significance of Aristotle lies in the fact that he also set limits to the sway of techne and, through his novel conception of phronesis, provided a rich analysis of the kind of knowledge that guides, and is well fitted to, characteristically human -- and therefore inescapably ethical -- activity (*praxis*).

Aristotle's terminology and distinctions continue to be useful to philosophers reflecting on the different levels of intelligence and wisdom needed for acting in the world, as compared to the intelligence and wisdom needed for solving puzzles or for contemplation on the world. Indeed, his philosophy has had something of a resurgence owing to the rise of anti-foundational ways of thinking during the last 50 or 60 years (Hogan and Smith, 2003; Dunne and Pendlebury, 2003). To find his terminology and distinctions useful does not mean accepting his whole philosophy. Rather, the very difficulty of translating his terminology for our own times seems to have proved fruitful (Noel, 1999; Smith, 1999).

I have argued that any account of practice must be predicated on epistemology: what practical knowledge is taken to be. It must also be predicated on an understanding of what is to be a human being. Many of the newly popular, anti-foundational approaches emphasise the significance of social and material contexts. Still, even for those impressed by such approaches, individualism remains powerful. Thus, educational accounts of practice and practical reason still tend to focus on the individual acting with wisdom; the man of judgement; the *phronimos*. A more adequate account of practice and practical reason needs to take full account of the fact that being a human being is not only to be an individual but also to be part of both a public and private community. As Arendt says (1966: 301):

> The human being who has lost his place in a community, his political status in the struggle of his time, and the legal personality which makes his actions and part of his destiny a consistent whole, is left with those qualities which usually can become articulate only in the sphere of private life … [and which] can be adequately dealt with only by the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy, or by the great and incalculable grace of love.

As I have argued (Griffiths, 1995: 16):

> 'I' is a fragment rather than an atom (I am always part of a 'we').

Similarly, think of Wittgenstein's forms of life, and of Heidegger's Being thrown into the world.

Educational theorising about the practices of teaching has not derived only, or even mainly, from philosophy. For the last 20 years there has been an influential movement within the social sciences, especially within psychology, theorising the ethos and culture of teaching – that is, the practices of teaching -- as best understood within a framework of social learning theories. Thus there is the opportunity for a coming together of two different areas of theory. On the one hand, from educational philosophers, there is a concern with epistemology, ethics and the nature of persons in relation to practical wisdom, deliberation and learning. On the other hand, from social scientists, there is a concern with theories of learning which are based on empirical evidence and social theories of learning but with clear, often explicit, links to the epistemological investigations of the philosophers. Both parties agree about the significance of being part of a community, about focusing on details of situations in particular times and places, and about the impossibility of translating practice into explicit theory. It should be quite a happy partnership. I have drawn on both in this article.

The social learning theorists take their starting point from Vygotsky. Drawing especially on his theory of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), and strongly influenced by his Marxist emphasis on the social and material world, a number of theories have developed around the idea that learners are inducted into a practice by their teachers. In the process of developing skills and other cognitive abilities, a learner is brought to see objects and situations as their teachers do. This practice is always part of a culture 'in which most, if not all, members are participants in the target skills' (Collins, Brown and Holum, 1991). Only some of these theories focus on school learning, and almost all of them take their starting point in empirical evidence related to apprenticeship. Lave and Wenger (1991), in their influential book, show that novices must learn how to perceive the social and material world in order to become adept. They do so within 'a community of practice' through 'situated learning', terms which have become familiar in learning theory. Part of the knowledge they gain is distributed in the designed artefacts of the practice: physical tools, diagrams, and the like (Pea, 1993). Learners actively negotiate their place among their peers and in relation to acknowledged experts in a series of 'complex interrelations between the individual subject and his or her community' (Engeström, 1999).

Approaches in philosophy and philosophy of education are sympathetic to the thrust of social learning theory. In his discussion of possible modern senses for the Aristotelian term *phronesis*, Smith argues for the significance of 'attentiveness (understood as including alertness and sensitivity)' (Smith, 1999: 331) in practical judgement, a necessary part of wisdom. Attentiveness, he says, is closely related to how we see the ordinary world around us. Practical judgement is practical because it guides us in knowing what to do. Ryle (1971) made a useful distinction between this knowing *how to* do something, and the more passive, contemplative knowing *that* something is the case. Polanyi (1958), like Ryle, shows that knowing how to do something does not depend on explicit formulations of rules. On the contrary, it precedes them. Equally so for attentiveness, what Polanyi calls connoisseurship. Thus far, the account remains individualistic. Polanyi however explicitly argues that practical knowledge is gained within a tradition through apprenticeship to a master. He also discusses the indispensability of conviviality. Burbules and Smeyers (2002) show that certain of Wittgenstein's remarks provide a way to understand practices as being a result of social learning.

Burbules and Smeyers use Wittgenstein to develop a philosophical account of practice which fits well with social learning theories. For Wittgenstein, learning and understanding take place within forms of life (1958: ¶23). By participating within a form of life, someone demonstrates that they understand the rules, they understand what is relevant for applying the rules, and they can decide whether or not to follow them (1958: ¶206). Learning to participate means beginning to participate with help (1958: ¶208):

> But if a person [who only speaks French] has not yet got the *concepts*, I shall teach him to use the word by means of *examples* and by *practice* … I do it, he does it after me; and I

> influence him by expressions of agreement, rejection, expectation, encouragement.

Burbules and Smeyers draw on Wittgenstein's remarks to explain how they understand practice (2002: 251):

> It is a constellation of learned activities, dispositions, and skills. We learn to engage in complex practices through observing or emulating others who are more skilled than we; through our own practice, trial, and error; through making mistakes, and learning from them; through deliberation and reflection on what we are doing and why; through creatively responding to new and unexpected situations; and so on.…We are initiated into a form of life that values these activities and that supports us in enacting them.

This is a perspective that accords well with the view of practice used in this article. It also accords well with social learning theory, and supports it. A form of life could be said to be a community of practice.

To sum up this section, there is an increasingly widespread consensus across areas of educational theory, which would accord with Burbules and Smeyers' characterisation of practice. It is one which is based in a view of the human being as being inescapably part of the society. Equally, the human being is inescapably part of the material world, interacting with it and developing into a particular kind of person because of it. So practice is essentially social and intimately interconnected with the material world in all its local specificity. Practice is therefore part of a form of life, a community of practice. So a practice is 'what we do' or 'the way we do things round here'. Interaction takes place because a human being is someone with desires and the capacity to act on them, who actively seeks to become part of a practice -- or who actively resist it. To become part of a practice, a form of life, a person must desire to join it, to learn the language game and to play it. To do that means forming judgements based in attentiveness or connoisseurship. Doing all this requires acquiring tacit knowledge, knowledge how to do particular things and it probably means acquiring the appropriate forms of articulation.

Seeing practices from a feminist perspective

So far, the argument has followed an unexceptional philosophical and theoretical pathway around articles in the mainstream journals, and well cited and studied books -- and these articles and books are well worth the attention. However, it should be noticed that of the 22 authors so far cited only 6 are women. The argument may seem to have been studiously gender neutral but, as ever with philosophical and theoretical attempts to be neutral, it tends to the masculine (Le Doeuff, 2003). The landscape appears rather different when viewed from an explicitly feminist perspective (Martin, 1994; Griffiths, 1995; Kohli, 2001; Greene and Griffiths, 2003). This difference is not just about seeing that there are women in the landscape as well as men. That is only a beginning. More significantly, it is about changing the understanding of the landscape because it is seen from a different perspective.

To take a feminist perspective is not to take an essentialist position. In other words, it is not a view that biology is destiny. However, it is a view that biology -- skin colour, sexuality, disability and age as well as sex -- is relevant in constraining how a person comes to construct their individual identity. Indeed, this is not only about biology. The process is very similar for social class, religion and ethnic heritage. (Fraser, 1997; Battersby, 1998.) None of these determine a perspective, but all of them leave a 'footprint', and then influence ‘footsteps’ forward as Mahoney and Zmroczek (1997) and Maguire (2005) have put it for social class. Greene argues from a feminist perspective in philosophy of education for the importance of recognising a range of material differences between persons (Greene, 1988, 1993, 1995).

Feminist philosophers are more likely to notice certain significant features of the philosophical landscape. The phrase 'more likely' is relevant, precisely because this is a matter of perspective. Men and women inhabit the same world and their paths through it crisscross, even though some areas are much more trodden by one sex than the other (Greene and Griffiths, 2003: 76):

> There is not anything that can be added on to philosophy-as-usual to get the woman's angle on it. That is, taking any feminist perspective changes all of philosophy-as-usual but not to any single recognisable end.

In what follows I very briefly outline the significance for understanding practice of three themes often to be found in feminist philosophy: embodied relationships, diversity, and socio-political structures of power. To repeat, none of these are the exclusive province of women or feminists, but they have, in fact, hardly appeared in the previous section.

Embodiment is relevant to the most fundamental assumptions underlying philosophies of practice, identity, reason, etc. Battersby develops a feminist metaphysics, using a Kantian rather than an Aristotelian tradition of metaphysics. She argues that this 'metaphysics of flesh and fluidity' (Battersby, 1998:14) shows both men and women that their subject-position (Battersby, 1998: 10):

> is linked to fleshy continuity, rather than to an autonomous individualised 'soul' or 'mind' that merely inhabits the flesh.

The embodied person is embedded in their relationships, some personal some professional, some political. They exist in particular material circumstances. These are not the rational men of liberal philosophy who might as well be severed heads in vats. They are particular persons in a particular place and time.[1] Similarly, Haraway emphasises the particularities of biological embodiment for understanding a person (Haraway, 1991, 2000). These are views of bodies and relationships as fluid rather than fixed; multiple rather than unitary: replacing the phallogocentric imaginary of western philosophy (Irigaray, 1985). As Battersby says (1998: 53):

> It can be seen that Haraway has embarked on much the same project as Irigaray: asking that female identity be conceptualised in terms of a different understanding of boundaries…It is not that all identity disappears on this model; but rather that identity has to be understood not in terms of an inner mind or self controlling a body, but as emerging out of patterns of potentialities and flow.

Issues of diversity are probably much more familiar to non-feminists than issues of embodiment. However diversity is still much more a feature of feminist theory than of the mainstream. Fraser details some of the history of the feminist movement in the second half of the 20th century which explains how this issue became embedded in both theory and practice (Fraser, 1997: 179):

> The exclusive focus on 'gender difference' proved increasingly counterproductive as

> 'identity politics' proliferated in the 1980s. … All the various movements cut across one another. And each was going through an analogous process of discovering the other differences within itself.

Within feminist philosophy the issue of belonging and becoming -- and the link between them -- have assumed increasing importance. Belonging and becoming are both central concepts for practice: being part of a practice, and becoming someone identified with it. Lugones (1989) discusses the contradiction she feels in her identity as a Latina and as an Anglo philosopher. Young (2000) discusses how participation in a group solidifies mutual affinity, and how such groups are necessarily overlapping. In Griffiths (1995, 2003), I explore this issue using some examples from education. Similarly, in Greene and Griffiths (2003), we present a dialogue about some contradictions and difficulties we find in our identities as (very different) women and as philosophers of education. It has been argued that masculinity or femininity are themselves communities of practice (Paechter, 2003). But this is not an argument I agree with, precisely because gender difference is so crosscut by other markers of difference. Rather, my argument is that any practices, such as teaching, will themselves be inflected by gender.

The issues of sociopolitical structures of power are closely linked to issues of identity and are equally fundamental to understanding practice. Feminism, like other forms of identity politics, is no mere celebration of difference. It is a response to perceived injustice. Power relations and power structures constrain who may belong in any social sphere. For instance, to take just two examples from very different social spheres, Rose (1994) details men's efforts to keep women scientists out of the Royal Society, and Hoberman (2002) describes men's alarm when women began to exercise their right to use the British Museum Reading room in the 19th century. Greene traces the effects on herself of entering a male dominated sphere (Greene and Griffiths, 2003). Feminist philosophers and theorists have explored ways of understanding what underlies such attempts at exclusion. For instance, Lloyd (1993) traces the changing meaning of 'reason' in western philosophy -- and how it was always male. Similarly, Le Doeuff (2003) argues that history of philosophy shows that women are allocated what men do not value -- their 'castoffs' -- such as: intuition rather than reason; bearing knowledge rather producing it. Men then proclaim neutrality and universality of their own perspectives. Thus, mainstream discussion operates within an assumption of neutrality, which masks masculinity.

What difference does all this feminist philosophy and theory make to the understanding of 'practice'? Earlier, I approvingly quoted Burbules and Smeyers' characterisation of practice. I remarked that it was a characterisation which would attract considerable agreement. However, the feminist perspective outlined above shows there are significant features of the landscape of practice which are missing in it.

Firstly, practices are marked by embodiment. This is not just a matter of noticing that the members of a community of practice are bodies and that these bodies may not be male. It is also to notice that practices, like the human beings who create them, are relational and formed in particular material circumstances. Human beings, in their diverse ways, create practices which are formed, in part, as a result of particular human delights and terrors. The form of a practice depends on forms of conviviality. Practices are fluid. They are also leaky and viscous. Their boundaries are not sharp. Being a woman teacher also means being seen by students and colleagues as -- and perhaps seeing herself as -- a daughter, auntie, mother, nanny, 'her indoors', interruptible (Steedman, 1987; Blackmore, 1999; Galea, 2002). Equivalently, for a man: son, uncle, father, breadwinner, doing something important elsewhere. The practice of teaching leaks into the practices of mothering, fathering, managing, facilitating, counselling and philosophising -- and vice versa. Practices change and move, but slowly and stickily. The practices of teaching are recognisable across decades of apparent change, but some of the change is real, not just apparent.

Secondly, communities of practice are marked by the diversity, or otherwise, of their members. Men and women belong to a wide variety of other, overlapping cultures which interact with the practices of teaching. Different cultures and practices leak into each other. For instance, not being heterosexual will affect how teachers enter their community of practice – and this will be different for lesbian and gay teachers. (See, for instance: Biddulph, 2003; Manke, 2003.) Similarly for other markers of difference such as race or social class. Similarly for particular local communities, and for particular practical or intellectual passions. If there is enough diversity within a practice there is room for some communities to develop within the larger practices. Therefore diversity makes it possible for the practice itself to be more fluid, flexible and nonhierarchical. It can become a community of learners, rather than a set of novices seeking a single model of expertise. A range of models may develop, comfortably coexisting within a practice. This provides a less hierarchical model for learning a practice. We may think of such a community of practice as more like the Himalayas and less like the single peak of Kilimanjaro. The more diverse a community, the more chance of a range of models of expertise and the more its members can negotiate a practice which does not compromise their identity. Thus not only does entering a community of practice help define 'who we are' both as a group and as individuals, but also 'who we are', our particular identity, helps define the community of practice through the models of expertise which develop.

Thirdly, it is important to bring the idea of systematic, structural, power into any analysis of communities of practice. Practices are changed by structural power relations existing in the society. Thus, the practices will always be political and marked by politics -- over and above their marking by diversity. Within standard theories of communities of practice, such as that of Lave and Wenger, the issue of power is little discussed, except as it is involved in novices becoming experts and replacing the old experts.[2] Lave and Wenger use the term 'legitimate peripheral participation' to indicate how any novice in a practice begins at the periphery and moves inwards (though not necessarily to any single centre). They are resistant to the idea that there may be such a thing as 'illegitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 35). But there is. Illegitimate peripheral participation is about not being allowed in. So girls and boys can observe some of the practices of the other sex. They can role-play them, and would be able to begin to take part in them but they are not allowed to -- especially the boys.[3] It is well-known that in general, career progression in teaching is correlated with gender. Heads and deputies are disproportionately male. Thus what is perceived as expertise by novices and outsiders is strongly influenced by gender. Further, they are in a position to influence practices within their schools, and, therefore, the direction of change within a practice.

Conclusions

I have argued for a feminist theory of practice. It draws from Aristotelian and Wittgensteinian philosophy and from Vygotskian social learning theories. Taking a feminist perspective highlights some inadequacies in the orthodox versions. The feminist theory not only embraces but extends current understanding of learning communities of practice. It distinguishes between communities and political structures, showing that power relations within the society can be reproduced within a community of practice -- and probably will be.

I suggest that understanding how the structures work can lead to a reflective, reflexive approach which has the potential to disrupt current one helpful power relations. In particular, it has the potential to disrupt hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), a masculinity which is individualistic, competitive, performative, calculative and hierarchical. This would be a benefit not only for women but also for many men within their communities of practice. A feminist approach to embodiment, diversity and participation would help to break the self-reproducing power of this masculinity within communities of practice. At the same time, communities would be more open to the diverse talent and imagination available, and would be able to develop better forms of practice, suitable for all the people.

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Notes

[1] To underline the point that feminist philosophy is not about claiming any particular content as feminist, one of the foremost philosophers of embodiment is Merleau Ponty -- who is not a feminist. As Richard Smith and Padraig Hogan, point out, Plato’s dialogues include descriptions of Socrates and his male group friends as embodied and embedded in their world. Again this demonstrates that the view of feminist philosophy advanced here is not a perspective irrelevant to men.

[2] But see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) and Engestrom (1999). Cameron (1997) explores the processes of gendered power from the point of view of language communities.

[3] Reed (1999) includes a rich description of inner city teenage boys successfully role-playing women.