

Challenging Organisations and Society

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Elaborating the Theory – Practice Space: Professional Competence in Science, Therapy, Consulting and Education

Editors: Ilse Schritteser & Maria Spindler

Ilse Schritteser and Maria Spindler
Editorial
**Between and Beyond Theory
and Practice**
page 739

Ilse Schritteser
**The Theory–Practice Space in
the Professions:
Casework as the Missing Link**
page 744

Ruth Lerchster and Gary Wagenheim
**Hunting elephants in the room:
How bringing theory to practice
helps clients address obvious but
unaddressed issues**
page 756

Tom Brown
**Locating Practical Wisdom in Boisot's
Information Space**
page 768

Matthijs Koopmans
**Large-Scale Studies and Their
Impact on Theory and
Professional Practice**
page 782

Erna Nairz-Wirth and Klaus Feldmann
**Teacher Professionalism:
The Double Field of Tradition
and New Professionalism**
page 796

Ruth Anderwald + Leonhard Grond
Many Have Gone On These Bends
page 813

Maria Spindler
**Being a Unique Misfit
My Life Viewed Through the
Reflective Hybrid Lens**
page 819

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Ilse Schrittester

The Theory–Practice Space in the Professions: Casework as the Missing Link

Abstract

Theory seems to be increasingly considered as something that is “nice to have” in the so-called ivory tower of knowledge, but not enormously necessary or helpful for effective decisions in the everyday rat race of occupational pressure. Even universities, the very institutions where theory used to be the foundation of all curricula, are increasingly confronted with the call for more practice-oriented study programmes. In education for professions like medicine, law, business, architecture or – last, but not least – the all-time favourite in this debate, teaching, the value of practice has continued to gain strength, while theory seems to be increasingly losing its appeal. Where concepts of technical rationality reign, research-based theory has long been considered the relevant resource to inform practice, and elaborate techniques based on theory regarded as the instruments to resolve practical problems. These ideas have been shattered by the fact that by the time theory reaches the practitioner in our fast-changing knowledge society, it seems to have already lost its novel impact. Thus, the complexities and pressures of a fast-changing world have shattered the research-to-practice model that long dominated the sciences and the professions in particular. Today, a focus on “what works” and on short-term effects is regarded among practitioners as more rewarding than well-grounded theoretical long-term visions. Moreover, serious research does not provide simple answers to increasingly complex questions and, thus, often appears too abstract and too untrustworthy to practitioners as a practical guide.

In this article, I argue that the current doubts regarding the potential of theory to resolve practical problems are based on a misunderstanding of the relation between theory and practice. This misunderstanding is the result of a technical concept of theory as the direct instruction for practice and

a concept of practice which is completely dependent on theoretical knowledge, a view which Bourdieu refers to as an illusion which “objectivism has to construct in order to constitute the social world as a system of objective relations independent of individual consciousnesses and wills” (Bourdieu 1977, p. 4). On the other side of the coin is the concept of practice as a realm of its own, one in which tacit knowledge reigns and which is too fragilely aligned to theory to favour a reliable relationship. Given the increasing complexity of practical problems, the concept of technical rationality has proved too instrumental, too one-dimensional and, consequently, less helpful than expected. The second concept, i.e. practice as a realm of its own, can be seen as a counter-reaction which claims the quasi-independence of practical solutions from theory, dismissing the latter as too abstract, too esoteric and too inefficient when immediate practical solutions are required.

In contrast, practice theorists like Pierre Bourdieu have tried to complexify the theory–practice relationship as a dialectical pattern where neither one nor the other has the lead (cf. Bourdieu 1977, 1979). Likewise, Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory also offers an alternative approach to this question (Giddens 1984).

Bourdieu’s concept is governed by the notion of habitus, a set of dispositions as a product of history resulting in particular practices. According to Bourdieu, it has to be understood as a “system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations.” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53). Carrying both practical knowledge and structural properties, the habitus is a generative phenomenon expanding in response to new situations, yet only within certain boundaries. It is an open system subjected to experiences which either reinforce or modify its structures (cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 133). By defining the habitus as the medium through which social reality is created and recreated, Bourdieu offers an alternative to the traditional dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism, between a concept of practice as application of theory and a “what works” idea of practice.

Giddens' structuration theory is based on a similar assumption. Social reality, according to Giddens, is based on the production and reproduction of its structures by human agents who enact and interpret given structures, which are both constraining and enabling. (cf. Giddens 1982, 1984) "One of the main propositions of structuration theory is that the rules and resources drawn upon in the production of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction (the duality of structure)." (Giddens 1982, p. 19.) This means that the structural properties of social systems "are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize." (ibid., p. 25)

In this way, Bourdieu and Giddens, among other practice theorists, have created a novel approach to the objectivist-subjectivist battle and, through this, help to redefine the theory-practice relationship as a dialectical pattern in which practice fertilises theory just as much as theory can give new meaning to practical knowledge.

For the professions – and the notion of professional expertise in particular – the practice-as-applied-theory model has proved too shallow and has led to a crisis of confidence in professional knowledge. A complete understanding of professionalism requires an understanding of the indeterminate zones of practice, the "micro-practices" (Kanes 2010, p.9), how they relate to knowledge, and how knowledge, in turn, relates to professional expertise. Practice in such an approach has to be essentially understood in the plural, i.e. as "practices", insofar as it involves the varying social interactions between the professional and his/her clients, who should not be perceived as objects to be operated on but as "co-participants in practice" (Kemmis 2010, p. 145). Against this background, the relation between theory and practice in the professions also presents itself as a structured and structuring space, defining and re-defining theory from the practical case perspective. Theory, in turn, represents the horizon before which the various practical decisions must be tested and justified. As a result, we can neither reduce practice to applied theory nor dispense with theory in favour of mere practical effectiveness and a "what works" philosophy. The reason this idea has not found adequate recognition either with practitioners or in the discourse on the professions

may well have to do with the functional perspective on the professions that prevails in the sociology of professions on the one hand and with the increasing complexity in professional practice on the other.

However, the role of professions in society is not – as is assumed in some accounts of professionalism – merely to apply expert knowledge. Nor can professionals simply rely on “what works”. A professional has to draw not only on research-based knowledge but also on a repertoire of skills that fosters case sensitivity (cf. Kanen, 2010, p.6). In addition to their domain-specific expertise, professionals are supposed to comprehend and judge every individual case as unique in its own right based on an ethical code to which each professional is expected to adhere and which is in line with their contract with society (cf. Stichweh 1996, Oevermann 1996). The potential of the individual case lies in the narrative it offers and in its interpretation by the professional. Theory serves as a magnifying glass through which the individual case is examined by drawing on its findings. The idiosyncratic language of the case – its uniqueness – works on the other hand as a test of theoretical assumptions and their robustness.

Over the past two decades, both study programmes at professional schools and professional development further education programmes have increasingly introduced the case study approach, not only to foster problem-solving and decision-making skills by confronting the learners with fuzzy and complex problems, but also to sensitise learners to the importance of meaning and meaning-making in the construction of the case by both the client and the professional. According to the Stanford Newsletter on Teaching, for instance, the case study approach is recommended because “[c]ases can help us organize and bring to life abstract and disparate concepts by forcing students to make difficult decisions about complex human dilemmas.” (Winter 1994, p. 1).

Understanding casework means learning to explore a problem from various points of view and almost playfully taking on the different perspectives inherent in the narrative, while at the same time critically holding it against

the findings of research and theory and understanding it as an example of a more general or even universal question (cf. Schritteser 2014). The specific conflict represented in a law case, for example, might then be translated into more general ethical questions of society. Or take the conflict between Greece, the European Union and the International Monetary Fund as a specific case of economic expertise. The different narratives of the Greek government and the representatives of the European Union and their views of the situation can be used as a starting point to discuss various approaches to a situation of economic crisis, e.g. austerity vs. Keynesian politics. In the course of this discussion, a great deal of economic theory has to be worked through and tested for its validity, while, at the same time, the individual consequences (e.g. high rates of unemployment, lasting economic recession, etc.) of specific economic decisions must be kept in mind. All this constitutes a classic scenario of conflicting interests – and precisely the type of problem (future) professionals will have to deal with and for which they will have to work with their clients to find a sustainable solution.

When translated into real-world problems and then back into theoretical questions, topics are not encountered as abstract ideas, but instead come to life in all their ambiguity and complexity. The focus on the individual narrative against the background of theoretical knowledge encourages exploratory and relational questions instead of technical shortcuts and the application of easy solutions based seemingly on data and truths.

Case orientation demands research-based knowledge, epistemological know-how and practical experience, which makes it an ambitious enterprise: in addition to technical knowledge, it also implies a *receptive and intuitive capability*, which forces professionals to *perceive* and *comprehend* the underlying meaning in a situation, a remark or a gesture and enables them to offer appropriate interpretations and, consequently, adequate solutions. Some researchers prefer to speak here of an art rather than of competences (Argyris & Schön 1974, Schön 1983, 1987, Oevermann 1996) because the interpretation of cases and the solutions derived do not follow strictly logical

steps and are instead often inspired by creative turns and intuition. Schön describes this notion as follows:

“Inherent in the practice of professionals we recognize as unusually competent is a core of artistry. Artistry is an exercise of intelligence, a kind of knowing, though different in crucial respects from our standard model of professional knowledge. [...] In the terrain of professional practice, applied science and research-based technique occupy a critically important though limited territory, bounded on several sides by artistry. There are an art of problem framing, an art of implementation, and an art of improvisation – all necessary to mediate the use in practice of applied science and technique.” (Schön 1987, p. 13).

In this view, professionals have to use their knowledge and expertise to draw up their action plans, but, in turn, also assess these plans artfully with an open mind and a case-sensitive attitude in the context of the specific situation. However, to recognise the particular demands of the specific situation, they require a rigorously *receptive attitude* and interpretative skills to help them become aware of what the individual situation – the “case” – has to tell them (Oevermann, 1996).¹

To learn these skills, such narratives can take the form of stories communicated verbally, in discourse or in fixed or moving images, which means that cases can be taken from real-world qualitative empirical data, such as transcripts of client-professional interactions, videos, audiotapes or pictures

¹ Recent research on expertise comes to a similar conclusion and defines this sensitivity to the “here and now” by the concept of situation awareness (Endsley 2006). The perception of relevant information forms the basis of situation awareness. Yet this involves not only perception but also comprehension, which “demands that people understand the meaning and significance of what they have perceived” (ibid., p. 634). This, in turn, “encompasses how people combine, interpret, store and retain information, integrating multiple pieces of information and arriving at a determination of its relevance.” (ibid.) Finally, the ability to project is developed along with refined perception and comprehension: “The ability to project from current events and dynamics to anticipate future events (and their implications) allows for timely decision making. Experts rely heavily on future projections as a hallmark of skilled performance.” (ibid., p. 635)

capturing critical incidents. They can also be taken from literary texts with all their rich metaphors and condensed meaning, which are particularly suitable for stimulating the power of observation.

Narratives have an unfolding structure and are layered with meaning. Therefore, the interpretative procedures used have to focus on reading between the lines, on paying attention to such details as the images used, the narrative structure, the exact choice of words in their given context and, potentially also to the gaps, i.e. what is not explicitly mentioned or shown (be it in a transcript, video, picture or other form of ethnographic material). There are, of course, various methods available in qualitative research to analyse and interpret narratives and these can be used to provide a methodological framework. In any case, regardless of the interpretation approach chosen, its purpose is to unfold the rich meaning found in a narrative – meaning which sensitises the reader, listener or observer to its obvious and latent messages. The role of theory here should not be to provide a method of interpretation, nor should the cases be turned into applications of theory. Wolfgang Iser, a literary critic, explains the role of theory in the interpretation of art in a way that relates to the interpretation of narrative in general. According to Iser, the cases or examples “are not meant to corroborate the validity of the theory concerned, not least because [...] theories themselves often resort to examples in order to underpin basic arguments at the point where explanation leaves off. The example then functions as a compensation for what the concepts are unable to grasp, and thus is meant to furnish the generalizations which the cognitive frameworks can no longer provide. This is a practice by no means confined to theories of art but one which is widespread in a great many theoretical discourses today.” (Iser 2006, p. X)

In the following, I will conclude by providing two examples to illustrate my line of argument so far. My aim with these examples is to offer an answer to the following question: What is it that makes a case an interesting narrative and gives it the power to inspire interpretation and foster the competences and skills (or artistry) mentioned above?

The short passage below is taken from a narrative by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood. A daughter listens to her 89-year-old mother recounting a recurring dream.

It was around this time – when she was still walking, when she’d begun to fall down – that she told me another thing she’d never told me before. She was having a recurring dream, she said; the same dream over and over. It frightened her and made her sag, although she didn’t say this.

In the dream she was alone in the woods, walking by herself beside a small river. She wasn’t exactly lost, but no one else was around – none of the people who ought to have been there. Not our father, not my brother, not me; none of her own brothers and sisters, or her friends or parents. She didn’t know where they’d gone. Everything was very silent: no birds, no sound of water. Nothing above but the empty blue sky. She came to a high logjam across the river; it was blocking the path. She had to climb up on the slippery logs, hauling herself hand over hand, up and up and up, toward the air.

‘And then what?’ I said.

‘That’s all there is to it,’ she said. ‘It wakes me up. But then I have the same dream all over again.’ (Atwood 2006, p. 220f.)

I chose this example specifically because it offers a rich illustration of what people who have grown old might feel when confronted with the limitations of old age and the losses they have suffered by outliving almost all of their close peers. Working with such literary texts – an approach advocated by the “Narrative Medicine” programmes² – can help medical practitioners and students of medicine to better understand what might be going on inside an elderly person’s mind and how this might influence that person’s well-being. It also trains their attentiveness to the rich patterns of language and its multi-layered meanings in a specific context, thus enhancing their diagnostic

² Cf. <http://ce.columbia.edu/narrative-medicine> or <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/groups/chh/Narrative-Medicine-Conference-/The-Network.aspx>

intuition and reasoning. A close reading of this passage will therefore draw attention to the choice of words (e.g. that the dream is described by the dreamer as ‘*frightening*’; that she misses the people who ‘*ought to have been there*’ and ‘*doesn’t know where they’d gone*’; that she is ‘*alone*’ in the woods with an ‘*empty blue sky*’ stretching above her; that the ground she steps on is ‘*slippery*’; the effort she makes to *haul herself ‘up and up and up*’, etc.).

Having professionals or students work on such a narrative and encouraging them to analyse it closely not only fosters narrative knowledge, i.e. “what one uses to understand the meaning and significance of stories through cognitive, symbolic, and affective means.” (Charon 2001, p.2), it also offers various starting points for a discussion on topics dealing with authentic medical questions (such as how to deal with elderly patients and their specific situation or how to ensure their well-being while at the same time recognising that old age is not an illness in itself that can be cured, etc.). It might also trigger a discussion on the ethical questions raised by the increasing demand in Western societies for nursing care for the elderly.

According to the narrative medicine approach, “growing narrative sophistication has provided medicine with new and useful ways in which to consider patient-physician relationships, diagnostic reasoning, medical ethics, and professional training.” (Charon 2001, p.3)

My second example is taken from a school research project and is an excerpt from data collected through classroom observation.

The morning break has just finished, and the teacher is about to start the next lesson when one of her pupils, Max, raises his hand and tells her that he does not want to sit next to Lucas any more. He wants to swap seats with someone else. The teacher agrees and suggests that he swaps seats with one of the boys in the front row of the class. She asks these pupils if one of them would be prepared to change seats and sit next to Lucas. One of the boys openly refuses to do so and says that he can’t stand Lucas ‘because he always wears strange, old-fashioned clothes’. Several pupils agree. The

teacher asks them to be quiet and continues the discussion by asking the rest of the class for a volunteer to sit next to Lucas. Nobody volunteers. Finally, the teacher asks one boy in particular, but he also refuses and asks if Lucas can't sit on his own 'because nobody wants to sit next to him'. The teacher explains that there is not enough space in the classroom for single desks and asks a girl to change seats with Max. The girl tries to argue with the teacher, but ultimately agrees in the end, albeit unhappily. (Bennewitz, 2012, 207f.)

This narrative triggers a number of speculations concerning the behaviour of the teacher, e.g. how she seeks to find a quick solution to the problem by having Max swap places, the fact that she negotiates who should sit next to Lucas in his presence without consulting or addressing him, that she finally asks a girl to sit next to Lucas, possibly in the assumption that a girl will be more obedient than a boy and will not refuse, etc. This might raise questions like the following: How might Lucas feel in this situation? What are his classmates aiming to achieve? Which other responses to Max's request might be possible and how would they be justified in classroom management terms? It also provides the opportunity to address and discuss crucial theoretical questions, such as what research has to tell us about ostracism at school and its effects on children or adolescents and why teachers (like the one in the story above) tend to stick to their routines without being aware of the severe risk potential of such incidents for the development of children and adolescents.

In conclusion, the theory-practice gap can be turned into a prolific space that inspires both theory and practice through the analysis and interpretation of cases as narratives and the use of case studies as a workable medium for such a process.

In this article, I have endeavoured to demonstrate the potential of this approach, which not only cultivates a receptive, context-sensitive attitude and fosters interpretative skills that are central to monitoring and negotiating the understanding of the case with the client as the co-constructor of

meaning, but also teaches people to learn to generalise about how the case might be viewed from a theory perspective and why it might be considered an example of a more general question in the context of research-based theory. Finally, it also teaches people to learn to feed the novelty of the individual case into current theoretical knowledge and to use this to either support or question such theory.

Working with cases as instances of narratives opens up a space in which neither theory nor practice and routine prevail as sources for sound professional decisions. The narrative and its multiple meanings, shape and latent patterns – all of which can be revealed through careful interpretation – establish a dialogue between theory and practice. This dialogue's potential lies therein that theory and practice cross-fertilise each other, thus creating new knowledge that is derived from practical experience on the one hand and that helps to reassess seemingly natural or self-evident practices through the lens of theory on the other. Finally, casework and narrative unfold their full potential when they become an integral part of the education of professionals and of life-long professional development.

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Centro Don Orione (www.donorione-venezia.it), Venice, Italy

“Flow beyond Systems” is understood as the creative force of new realities for organisations and society through each of us. The lively nexus between the worlds of organised systems and individual worlds is our main focus: Individual development faces challenges and in return poses challenges to organisations and society. Growing together, step by step, requires facilitating the interplay between individuals and existing organisations and new organisational realities that are waiting to be created.

The way we lead and organise ourselves in collectives is reflected by what organisations, larger social structures and ourselves as parts thereof have become. Freedom and structure do not pre-exist in organised communities but are relationally constructed in the common space to which its (more or less) equal members bring their uniqueness and create something of (more or less) lasting value such as an organisation or larger organised structures. Leadership is momentous for supporting development and meaningful creations beyond known forms.

Reaching beyond is neither a result of will power nor sheer mental excellence, nor can it be made to happen. Such attempts tend to result in forms of mind-body splits, bringing forth unwelcome symptoms or rigid, “more-of-the-same” patterns in the relation of the body and its organised, interactional environment becoming powerful limiting patterns. Changing these realities largely depends on our ability to intentionally bring somatic intelligence to the creation of new larger structures.

The conference offers cutting-edge methodology for bridging inner and outer worlds and serves as a co-creative space for development, transformation and inspiration. The participants engage in rich conversations, deepen relationships with like-minded colleagues, forge collaborative partnerships and have an opportunity to integrate and share insights and learning. We invite you to join a delightful development!

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The future is an unknown garment that invites us to weave our lives into it. How these garments will fit, cover, colour, connect and suit us lies in our (collective) hands. Many garments from the past have become too tight, too grey, too something...and the call for new shapes and textures is acknowledged by many. Yet changing clothes leaves one naked, half dressed in between. Let's connect in this creative, vulnerable space and cut, weave and stitch together.

Our target group is reflective hybrids – leaders, scientists, consultants, and researchers from all over the world who dare to be and act complex. Multi-layered topics require multidimensional approaches that are, on the one hand, interdisciplinary and, on the other hand, linked to theory and practice, making the various truths and perspectives mutually useful.

If you feel you are a reflective hybrid you are very welcome to join our COS movement, for instance by:

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