Practical Wisdom

The Curriculum Design Initiative
Practical Wisdom (Greek *phronesis*) “is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad”

“It involves the knowledge of what is good or bad, … not merely theoretical knowledge, but a capacity to act on such knowledge as well”

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics VI. 5*
Practical Wisdom at the University of Brighton

Practical Wisdom is the ability to create knowledge, have a critical understanding of how to apply it into practice, and use that experience to develop further knowledge and create change for social good in the wider world. Practical Wisdom informs the judgements made in complex professional situations where decisions have to be made in the moment, and where there are no clear right or wrong solutions. It embodies values of professionalism, inclusivity, reflection and action.
Aristotle 384-322 BC

- Identified 3 intellectual virtues
  - Episteme (scientific, universal, context independent knowledge)
  - Techne (context dependent, pragmatic, variable, craft knowledge)
  - Phronesis (implies ethics, values and concerned with practical judgement, informed by reflection, especially to do with practical matters).

- Phronesis is the most important, as it is needed to manage the other two intellectual virtues. It is frequently interpreted as practical wisdom

- (Kinsella and Pitman 2012)
Theory (episteme) versus practice (techne)

- These two concepts have traditionally been divided in Enlightenment thought, with theory prioritised.

- Philosophers and social theorists have drawn on Aristotle’s discussions of phronesis, to explore the relationship between theory and practice.

- In particular Heidigger, and later Gadamer have used phronesis.
Praxis

- Praxis is another, more familiar, term relating thought to action that overlaps with phronesis.

- Praxis is action that is morally committed, and oriented and informed by traditions in a field (Kemmis and Smith 2008 p. 4).

- The concept of praxis used by Habermas is based on understanding society to engender change in it.

- Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: praxis is “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed.”
Phronesis in professional education

- Phronesis has been used to conceptualise how knowledge is put into practice in professional disciplines.

- In particular, it offers a critique of instrumentalist rationality (i.e. routine application of technically derived protocols), rather than decision making based on values (Kinsella and Pitman 2012 p. 7).

- Uncertainty defines professional practice, but runs counter to instrumentalist rationality.

- In other words, in professional education there is a tendency to teach students to follow procedures rather than to think independently as professionals.

- A familiar text which explores complex decision making in practice is Schon’s *The Reflective Practitioner*. 
Identifying and exploring practical wisdom in the curricula

- Introduce more opportunities into the curriculum for students to practice complex decision making.

- Decision making is part of the unspoken, inexplicit rules of thinking and behavior within a discipline, so is already embedded into many disciplines.
  - Being explicit about practical wisdom with students could be part of their preparation for working life and how they will make decisions in rapidly changing environments.

- Difficult decisions are often made at the boundaries of, or new areas within disciplines.
  - These could be the subjects for discussion in inter-professional and interdisciplinary debates, and when thinking about the impact of digital technology on professional practice, for example, data protection.

- Finding ways to allow students to develop critical approaches, including to look objectively at professional bodies.
References and further reading


