

Praxis

'Praxis' is an ancient Greek concept, made popular in recent times by the prominent Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.¹ His view is that praxis is a synthesis of theory and practice in which each informs the other; a common paraphrasing of his work in this area is that 'action without reflection is blind, reflection without action is impotent'.

Praxis now appears in different fields and disciplines, including education, political theory and social and community work. In education it is associated with action research: a process where a group works together through cycles of action, reflection and further action to improve a situation.¹ Freirean praxis assumes that education is political, so the practice of education must be informed by praxis, that is, as action relating theory to practice, in a specific context that challenges power relationships and leads to transformative action. Praxis is also associated with 'reflexivity' - a kind of continual, many-layered cycle of 'thinking about thinking' (Giddens, 1990).

At it's most fundamental (see Diagram 1) praxis is learning through action, reflection and change, and there are identifiable stages:

- the initial or new experience
- reflection and observation
- development of a new concept
- further experimental action

Praxis and professional development
(thanks to Richard Dobson for this section)

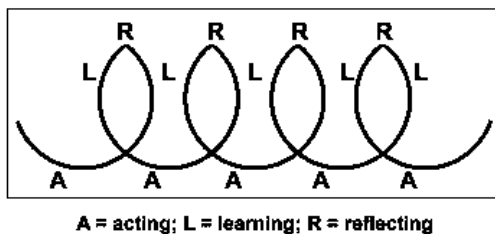


Diagram 1: Action-Reflection model

Schön (1983) believed that professionals do not really have a body of established theory which provides all the answers to every problem they will be asked to deal with. Rather, they improvise on the basis of a repertoire of techniques and experience in using them. To improve, they must not only learn more theory, but also think about the ways they have previously responded to situations.

By theorising, professionals will develop new ways of responding to similar situations. Schön described this as 'reflective practice', believing that reflection-on-practice, coupled with professional development and training, would improve practice.¹ Others, such as Stephen Brookfield (1995), have taken this further in the field of education, holding that when working with others we have to know ourselves and learn to be aware of the implications of our actions. Research suggests that critically reflective practices can be strengthened through discussion with peers and that this process can enhance professional development (Bartlett and Burton, 2006).

Others have developed Schon's ideas further. One resulting model based on ideas developed by Benner¹ (see Diagram 2) suggests that a novice practitioner is very dependent on 'rules', even though 'rules' usually are not very helpful. Over time, a reflective practitioner replaces the rules with learning from their own experience. An expert is often not a good teacher because s/he often can't even remember the rules.

Cavanaugh and Cavanaugh (2005) report on a pilot study they conducted at the University of North Florida in 2005, where they introduced weblogs (blogs) into an Action Research professional development programme. Among their findings was that a weblog was able to promote interaction between participants, which lead to reflective practices occurring. This interaction was able to overcome distance and time barriers between participants.

While reflection-on-practice could be seen as a solely individual process, Day (1993) and Francis (1995, 1997) have each proposed that reflection is better achieved through a socially collaborative process. Forming a 'community of practice' — where groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, learn how to do it better as they interact regularly — has become easier through the use of electronic tools. Innovations such as blogs and wikis have been proposed by a number of ICT educationists, such as McKenzie (1999), as tools that can overcome the tyranny of time and distance to enable such communities to establish themselves.

¹ Benner, P. (1984). From novice to expert: Excellence and power in clinical nursing practice. Menlo Park: Addison-Wesley, pp. 13-34.]

