Teaching as a Practice and a Community of Practice: the Limits of Commonality and the Demands of Diversity

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This paper examines some neglected aspects of the conceptualisation of teaching as a ‘practice’ and as involving a ‘community of practice’. The concepts of a ‘practice’ and of a ‘community of practice’ are brought into focus by contrasting the differing senses of the notions employed in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Etienne Wenger respectively. Concepts of educational ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ which embody a coherent overall holistic vision of education are contrasted with senses of educational ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ which relate to lower level, specific and subordinate elements of the educational process which are detachable from such visions. The possibility of specifying a single, common, overall, holistic conception of an educational ‘practice’ or ‘community of practice’ in the context of a pluralistic, diverse, liberal democratic society is discussed. It is suggested that the demands of diversity in this context open up the possibility of, and the need for, diverse forms of teacher education and training based on differing and partly competing conceptions of educational ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ involving contrasting, coherent, overall, holistic visions of education.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is regularly conceptualised as a ‘practice’ and as involving ‘communities of practice’. The general appropriateness of conceptualising teaching in these terms is intuitively plausible for a range of familiar reasons, and some important work has been done in providing the fuller characterisation of ‘practice’ and of ‘communities of practice’ which is needed if this intuition is to be given detailed support. The paper seeks to explore a neglected aspect of this topic arising from difficulties in specifying a single, common, overall or holistic educational ‘practice’ or ‘community of practice’ applicable for all teachers and educational
contexts in a pluralistic diverse liberal democratic society. This neglected aspect concerns the possibility of, and the need for, diverse forms of teacher education and training in such societies based on differing and partly competing conceptions of educational ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ involving contrasting, coherent, overall, holistic visions of education.

The paper has three sections. In the first section, the concepts of ‘practice’ and of ‘community of practice’ are brought into focus with reference to the different senses of these notions employed in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Etienne Wenger respectively. In the second section, concepts of educational ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ which embody overall and holistic views of education are contrasted with senses of educational ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ which relate to lower level, subordinate and specific elements of the educational process. In the final section, issues relating to diversity with respect to conceptions of educational ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ in the overall or holistic sense are explored.

PRACTICES AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: MACINTYRE AND WENGER

Alasdair MacIntyre’s well-known account of a practice, in which he defines the notion in a specific way to serve a particular purpose in the first part of his ‘socially teleological’ account of the nature of the virtues (MacIntyre, 1981, especially chs 14–16) has led many people to see teaching as a practice in precisely MacIntyrean terms. It will be recalled that MacIntyre describes a practice as:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 175).

MacIntyre’s recent denial, in his dialogue with Joseph Dunne, that teaching should in fact be seen as a practice in this sense is therefore striking, and for some, disconcerting. It emerges that, for MacIntyre, teaching is not itself a practice but rather a set of skills and habits—‘put to the service of a variety of practices’ (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 5). Teaching, he maintains, is an ingredient in these other practices but is never more than a means: it exists ‘for the sake of something else’ and does not have its own goods (p. 9). Teaching therefore has ‘no point and purpose except for the point and purpose of the activities to which it introduces students’ (ibid.). A teacher, in MacIntyre’s view, should see him or her self as a mathematician, a historian and the like, ‘engaged in communicating craft and knowledge to apprentices’ (p. 5). Dunne’s resistance to this claim and his argument contra
MacIntyre that teaching itself should be seen not merely as the servant of a variety of practices but as a practice in its own right in MacIntyrean terms repays attention (pp. 6–9).¹

Leaving this issue to one side, it is interesting to contrast MacIntyre’s notion of a practice with the way in which the term is used in the currently influential discussion of the notions of ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ in the work of Etienne Wenger (Wenger, 1998). The notion of ‘communities of practice’ is central to Wenger’s attempt, developed within the tradition of ‘situated cognition’, to delineate a ‘new conceptual framework for thinking about learning’ (p. 11) which emphasises its fundamentally social character, including the significance of active participation in social communities, the development of ‘modes of belonging’ and the construction of identity. Although Wenger does not discuss teaching itself as a practice in any detail, his analysis lends itself to application to teaching. The term ‘communities of practice’ does not feature in MacIntyre’s work in the same way as it does in Wenger’s, although the general implications of the notion are inherent in MacIntyre’s concept of a ‘practice’.

Wenger’s approach to ‘practice’ and to ‘communities of practice’ is, of course, different in significant respects from that of MacIntyre as are his interests in relation to these matters. Wenger engages in a primarily ethnographic study of practices and communities of practice, and the centrepiece of his discussion are vignettes describing a particular community of practice concerned with the processing of medical insurance claims (Wenger, 1998 pp 16–41; Part 1). The basis of Wenger’s study is therefore not philosophical reflection but detailed empirical observation. His aim is not to articulate an overall philosophical thesis about the nature and role of the virtues in human life but to delineate and illuminate central features of practice and communities of practice as they actually operate in order to identify ‘social infrastructures that foster learning’ (p. 225) and their implications for education (Chapter 12).² Caution is needed, however, in drawing too stark a distinction between philosophical and empirical considerations and seeing MacIntyre as exclusively concerned with the former and Wenger with the latter. MacIntyre acknowledges that his conceptual account of the virtues has empirical content and implications (MacIntyre, 1981, pp. 182–183): for MacIntyre ‘every moral philosophy has some particular sociology as its counterpart’ (p. 209). It would be interesting to attempt to relate Wenger’s ‘sociology’ (or more precisely ‘social psychology’) to MacIntyre’s thesis in some detail. In the absence of such an exercise here, it should be noted for our present purposes that Wenger’s work is not merely descriptive: its interpretative elements qualify it as in some sense ‘philosophical’ also.

Having acknowledged that MacIntyre and Wenger are engaged in rather different projects, it is interesting for the purposes of the present discussion to note a number of contrasts between the different notions of a practice found in the work of the two thinkers. In order to bring some of these contrasts into focus it is useful to explore them with reference to the particular elements of MacIntyre’s conception of a practice.
A coherent and complex form of socially co-operative human activity

The activities of Tic-tac-toe, throwing a football with skill, bricklaying and planting turnips are not seen as practices by MacIntyre partly because they fail a criterion of complexity: they are sub-elements in the more complex activities of chess, football, architecture and farming (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 175). Although Wenger deploys the term ‘practice’ in a less specific way than does MacIntyre, reflected in his observation that practices are everywhere (Wenger, 1998, pp. 6–7), he is nevertheless alert to the dangers of using the term in an unrestrictedly general way. Wenger accepts that to describe ‘every imaginable social configuration’ as a practice would render the concept meaningless (p. 122) and he gives some attention to determining the appropriate ‘level’ of activity that it would be appropriate to describe as a practice (Chapter 5). Wenger concludes that a practice is a ‘mid-level’ category of analysis: ‘It is neither a specific, narrowly defined activity or interaction nor a broadly defined aggregate that is abstractly historical and social’ (pp. 124–125). Thus, for Wenger, a conversation is too determinate and transient to qualify as a practice and a nation or culture is disqualified because it is too general and embraces many discontinuous elements (p. 125). Wenger offers fourteen indicators that a community of practice has formed (pp. 125–126) and he holds that a community of practice has three dimensions: ‘mutual engagement, a negotiated enterprise, and a repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time’ (p. 126). The respects in which Wenger’s conception of a practice is more general and inclusive than MacIntyre’s will emerge shortly.

Through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised

MacIntyre distinguishes the internal goods of a practice from those goods externally and contingently related to it such as prestige, status and money which are achievable in other ways and can be the objects of competition for possession by individuals. Goods internal to a practice, in contrast, are unspecifiable apart from that practice and only identifiable, recognisable and assessable by the experience of participating in the practice, including the discovery of the good of a certain kind of life. The competition involved in their acquisition involves the non-exclusive achievement of standards inherent in the goods in question, the achievement of which benefits all participants in the practice (MacIntyre, 1981, pp. 175–178). For Wenger, however, a practice can be engaged in for extrinsic reasons and goods, as in the case of the claims-processors who engage in the activity to earn a living and who would rather be somewhere else doing something else (Wenger, 1998, p. 45). Thus, whilst members of a community of practice in Wenger’s sense ‘sustain dense relations of mutual engagement organised around what they are there to do’ (p. 74), those things may be seen under an extrinsic aspect. Wenger argues that those things which are necessary to make the practice contingently bearable are also part of the practice. The distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ goods does not
figure in the list of ‘indicators’ Wenger offers of a practice having been formed (see note 3). Wenger’s conception of a practice therefore lacks the distinctive evaluatively specific ‘content’ of MacIntyre’s conception. The basic notion of a practice for Wenger involves ‘doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do’ (p. 47). This evaluatively less determinate conception of a practice is apparent in the general viewpoint on practices adopted by social theory, where they are seen as human actions which are socially based and organised, underpinned by formal or informal rules, procedures, standards and institutions, implicated in discourse and part of the materiality of social reality (Frazer and Lacey, 1994, pp. 268–269).

In the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity

MacIntyre holds that the goods of a practice can only be achieved by ‘subordinating ourselves to the best standard so far achieved’ in the practice (1981, p. 178) and that it is in the various requirements of this subordination, including its implications for our relationship with other practitioners, including practitioners from the past who are part of the tradition of the practice, that the nature of, the need for, and the inescapability of the virtues come into focus (pp. 178–181). MacIntyre argues that:

we have to accept as necessary components of any practice with internal goods and standards of excellence the virtues of justice, courage and honesty . . . the virtues are those goods by reference to which, whether we like or not, we define our relationships to those other people with whom we share the kind of purposes and standards which inform practices (pp. 178–179).

Wenger’s account of the relationships between participants in a practice, with its emphasis on dynamic forms of interactive co-ordination and negotiation, embodies a rather different ethos from that emphasised by MacIntyre, not least because of the absence of an emphasis on ‘internal goods’. The emphasis upon ‘negotiation’ in these relationships is one which MacIntyre is likely to view with considerable suspicion.

With the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended

MacIntyre argues that, whilst practices involve the exercise of technical skills, they cannot be reduced to them because the distinctiveness of a practice includes ‘the way in which conceptions of the relevant goods and ends which the technical skills serve . . . are transformed and enriched by . . . extensions of human powers and by that regard for its own internal goods which are partially definitive of each particular practice or type of...
practice’ (1981, p.180). Wenger’s conception of a practice includes forms of poiesis guided by fixed ends and governed by determinate rules. One application of the extension of the human powers and conceptions to which MacIntyre refers concerns the need to resist the ‘corrupting power’ of institutions, which are necessary for, but importantly in tension with, practices (p.181). Whilst Wenger has some interesting things to say about the relationship between practices and institutions (Wenger, pp. 9–11, 79–80, 118–119, Chapter 11), his concerns and emphases are rather different from those of MacIntyre. Wenger is also more forthcoming than MacIntyre on the question of evil practices, arguing that practices can embody and reproduce injustices, prejudices and the like (p. 132).

There are several claims which Wenger makes about ‘practices’ which MacIntyre can be expected to accept, at least in general terms. These include the claim that practices embody ‘shared histories of learning’ (1998, p. 86), involving learning of many complex forms (Chapter 3; Coda II ) including forms of ‘knowing in practice’ (Coda I). Another claim which is likely to commend itself to MacIntyre is that a practice involves tacit elements which themselves have a communal and not a mere individual dimension. Wenger claims that a practice includes ‘all the implicit relations, tacit conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, recognisable intuitions, specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understandings, underlying assumptions, and shared world views. Most of these may never be articulated, yet they are unmistakable signs of membership in communities of practice’ (p. 47). The account which Wenger offers of the relationship of practices to each other (Chapter 5), and to the world as a whole (Chapter 4), contains elements with which MacIntyre is likely to agree as does Wenger’s account of the significance of involvement in practices for identity (1998, Part II).

There is, of course, no ‘correct’ way in which the terms ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ should be used. Wenger rightly observes that how one chooses to identify a practice is partly related to the purpose that is served by the analysis (1998, p. 123). MacIntyre makes it clear that he is self-consciously using the term ‘practice’ in ‘a specially defined way which does not completely agree with current ordinary usage’ (1981, p. 175). A clear awareness of the different senses in which the notions of ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ are used by different thinkers is nevertheless important in bringing central issues relating to the matters under discussion in this paper into clearer focus.

PRACTICES AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN THE CONTEXT OF TEACHING AND EDUCATION: CONTRASTING LEVELS OF IDENTIFICATION AND FOCUS

How should practices and communities of practice be properly conceived in the context of teaching and education? At the outset it is important to note that the notions of ‘teaching’ and ‘education’ have been typically
distinguished from each other in terms of the greater normative freight carried by ‘education’. ‘Teaching’, it has been argued, is capable of being undertaken in contexts which, in one way or another, fail to satisfy criteria which are properly educational.8 Be this as it may, for the purposes of the present discussion, I shall use the terms interchangeably, therefore inviting the reader to interpret ‘teaching’ throughout as implying ‘educative teaching’. This is an important point, since the nature of the normative character of teaching looms large in the matters addressed in the present discussion.

The consideration of the contrasting views of MacIntyre and of Wenger on the nature of ‘practices’ and ‘communities of practice’ undertaken in the last section has shed light on a number of aspects of the proper conceptualisation of these activities in the context of teaching. One particular issue which emerges as significant for the present discussion concerns the ‘level’ at which the term ‘practice’ is appropriately applied to an activity. It will be recalled that both MacIntyre and Wenger are reluctant to apply the term indiscriminately. MacIntyre, however, confines the term to activities which possess such features as coherence, complexity, internal goods, invitation to a certain kind of self-involving and self-transformative co-operative engagement and the necessary involvement of the virtues in this engagement. It is difficult to sum up this conception of a ‘practice’ in a brief way. For the purposes of the present discussion, however, I shall refer to MacIntyre’s conception of a practice as one involving a coherent, overall, holistic vision of the activity in question, conscious that this ‘label’ does not do justice to the fullness of MacIntyre’s view. Wenger extends the term ‘practice’ to include activities which, as a result (for example) of their lack of complexity, lack this quality of necessary connectedness to coherent, overall, holistic vision.

For the purposes of the present discussion of practices and communities of practice in the context of teaching, I shall draw a rough distinction between conceptions of ‘practice’ which specify a coherent, overall, holistic vision of teaching, on the one hand, and conceptions of ‘practice’ which include, on the other hand activities which constitute lower level, specific and subordinate elements of teaching detachable from such a vision. This distinction is rough in part because of the lack of attention I shall give to the complex question of the relationship of practices at different levels to each other. Wenger offers an extended discussion of the ways in which practices are related to each other in complicated ways, which he illuminates by reference to ‘constellations’ of practices (1998, Chapter 5). In the present discussion I shall leave such complexities unexplored and will indicate a line of general argument with broad brush strokes.

Whether or not the lower level, specific and subordinate elements of teaching which I have referred to should be described as ‘practices’ is in part a matter to be settled by stipulative definition. It seems clear, however, that any conception of teaching which restricts itself to these elements and which neglects questions of coherent, overall, holistic vision is inadequate. This inadequacy can be illustrated in a number of different
ways. The limitations inherent in an over-emphasis on ‘skills’ in the conceptualisation of teaching, for example, are widely acknowledged. Among crucial difficulties which Richard Smith detects in such an over-emphasis are tendencies to conceive of teaching ‘skills’ as unduly specific and separate from each other and as disconnected from dispositions, virtues, values, motives and other personal qualities of the teacher widely seen as central to teaching (Smith, 1987). Smith argues that ‘To put “skills” at the heart of our conception of a teacher is to come close to conceding that teachers have nothing to say about the ends of education, no vision of human potential or of the way life might be lived to communicate to their pupils, but are experts in means only’ (p. 45). Smith therefore insists on the importance of trainee teachers being invited to consider and develop a broad, overall vision of education (p. 53).

Similar points can be made about conceiving of teaching primarily in terms of ‘competences’ or ‘standards’. The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) in the UK specifies a range of approximately fifty ‘Standards’ for the award of Qualified Teacher Status grouped under the headings of Professional Values and Practice, Knowledge and Understanding and Teaching (the latter further subdivided into planning expectations and targets, monitoring and assessment and teaching and class management) (Teacher Training Agency, 2002, Part 1). The TTA defines ‘Standards’ as ‘outcome statements that indicate what trainee teachers must know, understand and be able to do in order to achieve QTS’ (p. 4). Such an approach seems open to a range of criticisms similar to those which have been developed in relation to the conceptualisation of teaching in terms of ‘competences’ (for such criticisms see, for example, Eraut, 1994, Chapters 8, 10; D Carr, 2000, Chapter 6). It should be noted, however, that the TTA’s specification of ‘Standards’ displays some sensitivity to criticisms of these kinds. The latest specification therefore acknowledges the necessary interrelatedness of the ‘Standards’ and provides amplifying indications of the scope of each ‘Standard’ and the nature of the evidence required for it to be met. In particular, there is a recognition of the demands of overall, holistic vision in the insistence that the ‘Standards’ relating to ‘Professional Values and Practice’ underpin, and permeate, all the rest (p. 4) and in the inclusion of elements of holistic vision in the formulation of a number of the ‘Standards’. An element of holistic vision is perhaps most clearly seen in the ‘Standard’ S2.2 which in part requires candidates for Qualified Teacher Status to demonstrate that ‘they know and understand the Values, Aims and Purposes and the General Teaching Requirements set out in the National Curriculum Handbook’ which includes an awareness that ‘the National Curriculum is based on a rationale that is linked to a set of values and principles, and is much more than a set of subjects’ (p. 20). This is at least a nod in the direction of the requirements of holistic vision, although there is a lack of reference to the need for trainees to engage in critical discussion of the issues at stake and an over-confidence in the coherence, self-sufficiency, quality and significance of the statements of aim, value and purpose in the National Curriculum Handbook (on these statements see, for example, Bramall and
White, 2000). The ‘Standards’ in relation to ‘Professional Values and Practice’ are linked to the recently developed professional code of the General Teaching Council for England (see www.gtce.org.uk) but the extent to which this code does, and can, adequately embody considerations relating to overall, holistic vision is open to serious question.

These lines of criticism do not imply that ‘skills’, ‘competences’, ‘standards’ and the like have no place in the conceptualisation of teaching. The point is rather that any justification of them is connected to their relationship to broader views of the activity of teaching: they need to be ‘situated’ and ‘contextualised’. The need for this kind of broader vision is captured in the following remarks by Paddy Walsh: ‘the whole soul of education is present in every good educational practice . . . To undertake a particular practice as education is precisely to inform it with something of [a] holistic spirit’ (Walsh, 1993, p. 48).9

The need for this broader frame of reference and overall, holistic vision leads naturally to something like the MacIntyrian or Aristotelian notion of a practice, a number of the elements of which render its application to teaching and education attractive. The features of a MacIntyrian practice identified earlier (coherence, complexity, internal goods, invitation to a certain kind of self-involving and self-transformative co-operative engagement and a necessary involvement of the virtues in this engagement) all correspond to deep-seated intuitions about the nature and value of teaching, properly conceived, particularly in opposition to technicist and instrumentalist conceptions of this activity. The attractiveness of the general MacIntyrian and Aristotelian conception of a practice, if not its detailed features, has been illuminated, and found convincing, by a number of writers (see, for example, W. Carr, 1995, especially Part 1; Dunne, 1995, especially pp. 72–82). One feature of conceptions of this kind is their emphasis on practical wisdom and its related notions of situational alertness, appreciation and flexible judgement10 bringing together general and particular considerations in the service of action which is ethically charged in various ways (on these matters see, for example, Dunne and Pendlebury, 2003; Smith, 1999).

The connection of conceptions of practice of this kind with an overall holistic vision, or telos, can be clearly seen. Langford observes that the existence and identity of a social practice depends on a sense of the ‘overall purpose’ of the practice which its members self-consciously share and which is inevitably connected to judgements made as part of the practice in particular circumstances (Langford, 1989, pp. 27–29). Langford’s insistence that the most important thing which newcomers to a social practice need is an understanding of its overall purpose (p. 29) needs, however, to be put carefully. As stated, Langford’s remark is capable of being interpreted as implying that a social practice such as teaching has one overall purpose which is fully articulable and transparent.11 One of the features of the MacIntyrian and Aristotelian conception of a practice, however, is its recognition that the telos of the activity is multidimensional and in part inarticulable and opaque. It is precisely these features of the telos of the practice that constitute the
complexity of the practice and its requirements with respect to the virtues. Stated in a more nuanced way, however, Langford’s claim holds good.

Wilfred Carr draws attention to the social character of the understanding which is associated with a practice such as teaching: it is a way of thinking and acting that is ‘learned from, and shared with, other practitioners and preserved by those traditions of educational thought and practice within which it has developed and evolved’ (W. Carr, 1995, p. 42). Questions in teaching therefore cannot be intelligibly posed without reference to the ‘community of practice’ within which the teaching takes place and in relation to which the questions arise. The focus of attention is thereby shifted from individual teachers to ‘communal concerns and criteria’ (Dunne and Pendlebury, 2003, p. 204). The significance of communities of practice is wide-ranging. One of the important contributions that ‘communities of practice’ make is related to difficulties in articulating educational goods in fully transparent ways, especially when what is at stake is not the articulation of abstract ideals but of forms of action in particular circumstances. The need for ‘communities of practice’ is seen, for example, in relation to the exercise of forms of pedagogic phronesis in relation to complex pedagogic challenges where abstract principles and guidelines require interpretation and implementation in practical contexts. An example of this is the implementation of Lawrence Stenhouse’s conception of the role of the teacher in the Humanities Curriculum Project in terms of ‘neutral chairmanship.’ (Stenhouse, 1983, Part Two). Here the interpretation of the implications of the ideal in particular pedagogic circumstances required ‘communities of practice’ which engaged in detailed practical experiment, support and collaboration, resulting in the emergence of a shared ethos of practice of precisely the kind to which the MacIntyreian/Aristotelian conception of educational practice alludes. In a similar way, the requirement that education for citizenship be taught in schools in England in a way which pays due attention to appropriate ways of handling controversial matters (QCA, 1998, section 10) is likely to demand the same kinds of ‘communities of practice’ for the same general reasons.

Conceptualising teaching as a practice in MacIntyreian/Aristotelian terms confronts a number of difficulties. Some of these concern specific matters of conceptualisation and interpretation. A more general difficulty, however, concerns the specification and justification of the overall holistic vision involved in the conception. How can one justify a single, coherent, overall, holistic vision of education in the context of a pluralistic diverse liberal democratic society? Langford observes that the overall purpose of a social practice like teaching is ‘inevitably’ contentious in that questions about how education should be properly understood is inherently controversial (Langford, 1989, p. 28). There are of course not only contrasting but also rival conceptions of teaching as a practice in an overall holistic sense (on such rivalries see, for example, W. Carr, 1995, Chapter 3).

One cannot evade these difficulties in any straightforward way by appealing to the notion of values ‘internal’ to a practice. This point is
highlighted by some remarks which David Miller makes about MacIntyre’s discussion of a practice. Miller claims that MacIntyre does not consider an important distinction which needs to be made between ‘self-contained’ practices (such as games) where the whole point of the activity consists in its internal goods and their achievement and contemplation and, on the other hand, ‘purposive’ practices (such as farming or medicine) which, whilst they have internal goods, exist to serve social ends beyond themselves. With respect to ‘self-contained’ practices the distinction between an internal and an external good is relatively unproblematic in that an internal good is entirely and exclusively specifiable in terms of the practice itself. In the case of ‘purposive’ practices things are more complicated: internal goods are specifiable no longer simply in terms of the practice itself, but in terms of the social purpose which the practice serves. In the case of ‘purposive’ practices critical review and assessment can be conducted not only from within the practice itself, but also in the light of the purpose which the practice is meant to serve. According to Miller, this has important implications for MacIntyre’s account of the virtues: they can no longer be seen as self-sufficient in that, in the case of ‘purposive’ practices, the virtues relevant to them will in part be dependent upon the ‘needs and purposes’ of a particular society (Miller, 1994. For MacIntyre’s reply to this general line of argument see MacIntyre, 1994, pp. 284–286). The extent to which MacIntyre can evade the force of this point by his denial that teaching itself is a practice, as distinct from the servant of other practices, is worth exploring. The difficulty, however, of justifying an overall educational vision remains.

One approach to the justification of an overall holistic vision of education is made by Pádraig Hogan, who attempts to illuminate the ‘designs on sensibility’ which he sees as implicit in the practice of teaching by reference to human experience and not to abstract concepts or to accounts of human nature (Hogan, 1993). For Hogan, practice should be seen as involving a form of ‘courtship of sensibility’ and a ‘dance of influence’ which eschews proprietorial influence in its various forms, and which involves a distinctive mingling of ethos and telos at the heart of which is ‘a recurrent venturing of emergent personal identity’ (p. 13). Hogan insists that his account embodies virtues which are ‘potentially universal’ in character and which accords the courtship he specifies a ‘definite, if qualified’ sovereignty over other less worthy designs upon learners (p. 14).14 This is part of Hogan’s more general thesis that there is an educational standpoint as such which does not ‘take its purposes and orientations from some substantive doctrine, or ideology’ (1995a, p. 11) and which compels a recognition of teaching and learning as having ‘effective integrity of purpose as a practice in its own right, i.e. as a practice entitled to certain rights which are inviolable, but also accountable’ (p. 11). Thus Hogan seeks to ‘articulate the basis for a universally defensible educational practice in an increasingly pluralist democracy’ (p. 175); ‘a telos universally worthy of our moral energies’ (1990, p. 25). Hogan attempts to identify inescapable features of teaching
and learning and of human understanding for which the non-metaphysical stance of Socrates of Athens, with its emphasis on the search for truth, is an indispensable reference point. Without entering into a full analysis of Hogan’s position at this point the success of a line of argument such as his seems necessary to the specification of a single common specific view of educational practice in an overall, holistic sense.

At this point it is necessary to contemplate the implications of a plurality of overall, holistic conceptions of educational practice.

PRACTICES AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN THE CONTEXT OF TEACHING AND EDUCATION: DIVERSITY IN OVERALL HOLISTIC CONCEPTIONS

The sources of contrasting general educational perspectives are varied and include differing political and religious beliefs and commitments as well as differing beliefs and commitments related more directly to education itself (as in conflicts between progressivist trends of educational thought and their antagonists). The extent to which seemingly opposed overall educational visions share common ground should not be underestimated (on this matter in relation to Catholic Education see, for example McLaughlin, 1999b). Indeed, for contrasting visions to warrant the description ‘educational’ there must be basic shared elements between them which are recognisably educational in some sense. Notwithstanding these elements of commonality, however, contrasting general educational perspectives generate differing and partly competing conceptions of educational ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ in the overall or holistic sense. Such contrasting conceptions specify and embody distinctive interpretations of aspects of educational ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ such as the telos of the activity, the nature of its internal goods and the sorts of personal qualities seen as desirable in a teacher (on the latter question see, for example, Hare, 1993). They also specify specific forms of pedagogic phronesis relevant to the conception in question.

These general features can be seen in the example of Catholic Education within the context of a Catholic school where a complex form of pedagogic phronesis is demanded by a range of sensitive discernments and judgements about such matters as the proper requirements of the distinctiveness of Catholic schools and the proper interpretation of the various features of the Catholic tradition of faith and life and their educational implications (on these matters see, for example, McLaughlin, 1999b; on the complex judgements faced by Catholic teachers and educational leaders in contemporary Catholic schools see Grace, 2002, especially Part III). MacIntyre’s point that what is distinctive about Catholic education is the achievement of a certain kind of integrated and integrative understanding (MacIntyre, 2001) brings out a particular aspect of the kinds of pedagogic phronesis which is demanded.
What are the implications of such differing and partly competing conceptions of educational ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ for teacher education and training? It is an interesting feature of contemporary educational policy in England that whilst increasing diversity is being urged on publicly funded schools, teacher training is being shaped in an increasingly homogenised way by bodies such as the TTA. Yet diverse and distinctive forms of teacher education and training would seem to be demanded by diverse and distinctive conceptions of ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ in the overall and holistic sense. For example, merely ‘bolting-on’ elements to general teacher training in England is inadequate for Catholic teacher education and training properly conceived. Examples of the sorts of formation which are needed are provided by the Notre Dame service-oriented Catholic teacher education programme, which is focused on Catholic schools in the Southern United States of America, and which includes not only academic formation but also experience in community and a spiritual dimension (Pressley, 2002) and also by Lacey’s case study of a teacher development group established by a network of Catholic schools in the USA (Lacey, 1996). Such distinctive contexts are demanded by the logic of the kinds of learning specified in the notion of ‘practices’ and ‘communities of practice’ in the Aristotelian and MacIntyrean sense.

Discussions of teacher education and training in England tend to assume that a common form of such education and training can be provided which deals with broader aspects of the activity of teaching adequately via invocation of the notion of the ‘reflective teacher.’ The notion of the ‘reflective teacher’ is, however, a highly problematic one (on this see, for example, McLaughlin, 1999a). An acknowledgement of the legitimate plurality of differing and partly competing conceptions of educational ‘practice’ and ‘communities of practice’ in the overall and holistic sense has as a corollary the need to consider provision of and justification for a corresponding plurality in forms of teacher education and training. Whilst much more needs to be said in amplification and defence of this neglected claim, it demands further attention and consideration.

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NOTES
1. For an application of MacIntyrean insights to a conception of education as a practice, see Dunne, 1995, especially pp. 72–82, and also his article in the present collection.

2. The adequacy of Wenger’s emphasis for educational purposes on ‘identities’ and ‘modes of belonging’ in communities of practice rather than ‘skills’ and ‘information’ cannot be pursued here. See Wenger, 1998 especially Coda II and Chapter 12.

3. These indicators are: (1) sustained mutual relationships—harmonious or conflictual; (2) shared ways of engaging in doing things together; (3) the rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation; (4) absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of an ongoing process; (5) very quick set-up of a problem to be
discussed; (6) substantial overlap in participants’ descriptions of who belongs; (7) knowing what others know, what they can do and how they can contribute to an enterprise; (8) mutually defining identities; (9) the ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products; (10) specific tools, representations, and other artefacts; (11) local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter; (12) jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones; (13) certain styles recognised as displaying membership; (14) a shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world (Wenger, 1998, pp. 125–126).

4. Wenger argues that the mutual engagement of claims processors in practice ‘includes all the energy they spend—within the stricture of their tight institutional context and also in spite of it—not only in making claims processing possible in practice, but also in making the place habitable for themselves’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 78).

5. MacIntyre argues ‘we shall be unable to write a true history of practices . . . unless that history is also one of the virtues and vices’ (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 182).

6. Wenger argues that different enterprises give practices different characters, but that—‘pursuing them always involves the same kind of embodied, delicate, active, social, negotiated, complex process of participation’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 49).

7. On this matter see, for example, MacIntyre, 1994, pp. 289–290.

8. On this matter see, for example, Peters, 1966, pp. 35–43.

9. See also Walsh, 1993, Chapter 3.

10. On the nature of practical judgement in Aristotle, Dunne writes: ‘The materials of human affairs, he believes, are subject to such variety and fluctuation that they do not lend themselves to exceptionless, universal formulation: true rigor entails due appreciation of the kinds of rigor that are and are not available in disparate domains . . . Arising from his understanding of the nature of praxis, then, Aristotle’s treatment of phronesis incorporates . . . interrelated elements . . . under the rubric of ‘‘judgement’’: the open texture of the deliberation it sets in train; its need for fresh acts of perception or insight to meet the particularity of each action-situation; its irreducibility to general propositions and its hence inextinguishably experiential character; its being not only directive of present action but also itself shaped by the history of one’s previous actions as these have become layered in one’s character’ (Dunne and Pendlebury, 2003, pp. 200–201).

11. For issues and complexities in relation to the specification of educational aims and ideals, see, for example, Bramall and White, 2000; Marples, 1999.

12. On this matter see, for example, Hirst, 1996.

13. For example, for difficulties in Aristotle’s account of practical reasoning, see Smith, 1999, pp. 329–330.

14. For Hogan’s further elaboration of the virtues of teaching and learning implied in his account see Hogan, 1995, Chapter 7.

15. For an extended discussion and defence of Hogan’s position, see Hogan, 1995.

16. Although MacIntyre is writing here in the context of Catholic higher education, his remarks apply to Catholic education more generally.

17. See also Walsh, 2000.

18. For MacIntyre’s scepticism about the provision of a common form of moral education in a liberal democratic society, see MacIntyre, 1999b.