



Response to Comments

Practical Wisdom in the Service of Professional Practice

by Lee S. Shulman

The work of both scholarship and practice progresses as a consequence of dialogue, debate, and exchange. I am grateful to Rodney Evans (“Existing Practice Is Not the Template,” this issue of *Educational Researcher [ER]*, pp. 553–559) for his comments on an earlier *ER* article that I cowrote with three colleagues at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006, “Reclaiming Education’s Doctorates: A Critique and a Proposal”).¹ It is gratifying that Evans took our work seriously enough to prepare a carefully argued and passionate critique of our proposals for reclaiming the education doctorate. When the dust settles, I anticipate it will be clear that we agree far more than we disagree. Much of our apparent disagreement is a consequence of our uses of language, our backgrounds, and the sources we regularly use. I am also grateful to the editors of *ER* for encouraging this exchange of ideas and proposals.

Evans’s critique is based largely on a misreading or misrepresentation of our argument, its rationale, and associated proposals. The critique employs a familiar set of rhetorical devices. It begins by summarizing the essence of the earlier argument in terms that are readily attacked, by transforming the original set of ideas into their caricature. This is an important move, not only because it sets up the critique so beautifully. It is quite possible that the misreading at the heart of the caricature is one that other readers (and our critic, as well) might indeed have made, and thus it is useful to have the caricature before us so we can clarify and elaborate the original argument rather than merely attempt to refute the criticism.

The Evans critique is beautifully summed up in the title “Existing Practice Is Not the Template.” Evans argues that our emphasis on the “wisdom of practice” is an insufficient, overly narrow, conservative, and ultimately regressive basis for designing a doctoral program for educational leaders. Our work, he maintains, rests on a simplistic distinction between theory and practice. He argues that ideas of theory and practice are not truly separate (I agree), that their integration or synthesis in the traditions of praxis constitutes a more solid basis for imagining new approaches to the doctorate in education (I agree in part),² and that taking seriously our emphasis on the wisdom of practice would lead to a perpetuation of robotic, conservative, and uncritical local and national education policies (I disagree).

There is an important distinction to be made between *existing practice*, that is, what practitioners already do, and *wisdom of practice*, which refers to the full range of practical arguments engaged by practitioners as they reason about and ultimately make judgments and decisions about situations they confront and actions they must take.

Evans writes as if he believes (and I can’t believe he does) that there is a simple, monolithic, unitary, and internally consistent set of actions called “practice,” which will be documented and then mindlessly imitated in the design of programs. But of course, practice neither is nor ever has been monolithic. To take seriously the world of practice and the intelligence that guides it is to recognize the stunning range of practices that characterizes the work of educators. To interrogate both practice and the wisdom of practice is to confront the kinds of rich, nuanced, contextually varying worlds that ethnographers and other qualitative researchers, such as Evans, write about eloquently. To put it in statistical terms, the wisdom of practice is of interest because of its variance, not its mean. We are inspired by its range, not its median. Evans ascribes to us a unidimensional, stripped, and dumbed-down conception of practice and its wisdoms that we do not espouse.

Evans also asserts that the wisdom of practice is only about concrete practical action-in-the-moment (he refers somewhat derisively to Schön’s phrase “reflection-in-action” as critiqued by van Manen) and ignores the central functions and interactions of both abstract theoretical constructs and normative value-laden commitments in the thought and actions of practitioners.

The conception of practice that we employ draws on a set of philosophical traditions quite different from those that inspire Evans. We build our own work on a broad, eclectic, and extended family of conceptions of practical reason that begin with Aristotle and are further developed by Thomas Green (1971) and Gary Fenstermacher (1994; Fenstermacher & Richardson, 1993) on teaching; Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin (1990) on ethics and medicine; and William Sullivan (2004) on the professions. At their heart is a recognition that practical reason and practical arguments are not limited to premises that derive from practical experience and action alone. The premises of practical arguments are replete with theoretical, descriptive, critical, and normative assertions as well.

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The power of Fenstermacher's conception of practical reason, which we have found particularly useful, is in his unpacking of the process of practical reason into an exploration of the premises of the practical arguments engaged in by teachers and other educators. Practical arguments embody and include premises that are not only concrete, immediate, and "practical."

Practical reasoning aims at judgment and action, in contrast to theoretical reasoning, which produces conclusions in the form of propositions. Conceptual analysis has a place in practical reasoning (as when we ask, "What is this a case of?"); theoretical reasoning does not exhaust the challenges of living. A practical judgment is always an expression of value, as it ends with a choice of actions in a context of uncertainty.

Education for practical reasoning is therefore best done within a community whose members understand and appreciate the importance of honing the intellectual and moral skills upon which good judgment depends. Developing the capacity for such judgment lies at the heart of professional preparation. It is also one of the often-expressed aims of liberal learning. This is the formative dimension of education. There are few educational tasks more urgent, or more demanding, than this.

Practical reason is exercised not only "in action" but particularly before practical action is taken and after its short- and long-term consequences are experienced. The premises of the practical argument include theoretical, empirical, personal, normative, and other premises that come together in acts of practical reason. Thus, if we study and learn from the wisdom of practice, we are studying the rich ways in which practitioners draw upon their theoretical understandings, their values and commitments, their practical experience, the interests of their stakeholders (Fenstermacher & Amarel, 1983), and a variety of other sources to reason about their options and make their decisions. The emphasis on both practice per se and the wisdom of practice is far from conservative or unitary; it is inherently multifocal and exploratory, critical and visionary.

Recall that our essay did not emerge from thin air. It grew out of a 5-year project on the doctorate in six fields (Golde & Walker, 2006; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, in press) and the recognition of how doctoral study in education was quite different when compared with that in the other disciplines and interdisciplines. Whatever the philosophical standing of the distinction between theory and practice, our field is undeniably constituted of doctoral candidates who seek to develop in quite different ways for distinctly different ends. There are thus two different degrees, different traditions, that underlie those degrees and programs, and serious problems of both professional preparation and the preparation of scholars. This reality will not disappear in the face of a philosophical analysis that analyzes and critiques the distinction between practice and theory.

Thus current practice and the status quo cannot and ought not be ignored, whether by individual leaders confronted by decisions or by academic leaders approaching the reform of doctoral curricula. They are the unavoidable, even necessary, starting points for the exercise of practical reason and the eventual ends to which practical judgment must return. As Stephen Toulmin (1990) observed in *Cosmopolis*:

The idea that handling problems rationally means making a totally fresh start had been a mistake all along. All we can be called upon

to do is to take a start *from where we are, at the time we are there*, i.e., to make discriminating and critical use of the ideas available to us in our current local situation, and the evidence of our experience, as this is "read" in terms of those ideas. There is no way of cutting ourselves free of our conceptual inheritance: all we are required to do is use our experience critically and discriminatingly, *refining and improving* our inherited ideas, and determining more exactly the limits to their scope. . . .

. . . No neutral "scratch line" exists from which to jump. . . . The only thing we can do is to make the best of starting with what we have got, here and now. (p. 179)

The caricature portrays our proposal as supporting a behavioral task analysis of a typical educator's workday, followed by the translation of those behaviors into a curriculum in which the future educators will be trained to use those skills. This image gives Evans nightmares. His nightmares envision new doctoral programs that rest on indefensible distinctions between theory and practice, that would contribute to slavish and uncritical imitations of the average behavior of typical education leaders, that would educate a generation of educators who would treat the excesses of overly prescriptive educational policy as acceptable guides to practice and would in general treat what *is* as what ought to be. If that is what we were indeed proposing, I would be joining Evans in many sleepless nights. But it is not even remotely what we propose. We see practice as deeply theoretical. We agree that theory must be permeated by practice. Evans is absolutely correct in his critique of the caricature of our position. An approach to the learning of practice that is merely about a narrow band of practical skills would be seriously deficient.

There are portions of the critique where the progressively abstract argument reminds me of my mentor Joseph Schwab's (1978) observation about how educational thinkers respond to tough curricular dilemmas (of which the redesign and reclaiming of the doctorate is a paradigmatic example) by flight from the field itself. Among those flight plans, quite prominent are

a flight of the field itself, a translocation of its problems and the solving of them from the nominal practitioners of the field to other men. . . .

. . . a flight upward, from discourse about the subject of the field to discourse about the discourse of the field, from *use* of principles and methods to *talk* about them, from grounded conclusions to the construction of models, from theory to metatheory, and from metatheory to meta-metatheory. (italics added; Schwab, 1978, p. 301)

If the wisdom of practice, even as elaborated and explained in terms of practical arguments, were the sole basis for formulating the conceptual and practical features of a doctoral program in leadership or teacher development, then Evans would still be justified in his criticisms. I have been writing about the wisdom of practice since 1985 (Shulman, 1986, 1987, 2004) and even then argued that the wisdom of practice is a necessary but ultimately insufficient basis for teaching and pedagogical action. Values, visions of the possible, and theoretical conceptions of learning, teaching, development, justice, and equity must be drawn upon. If by advocating praxis Evans urges us to accept the argument that educational practice is permeated with theory and norms, that educational theory reeks of practice, and that educators must be

taught to be critics of the status quo and not only analysts and diagnosticians, we have no disagreements.

Indeed, one of Evans's most insightful lessons about the multiple determinants of educators' thoughts, judgments, and actions is drawn from Heidegger's proposal that there are three modalities that must be taken seriously—the actual, the wealth of the possible, and the stringency of the necessary. Evans asserts that position: "In addition to the most present and most insistent modality—that of the 'actual'—there are what Heidegger calls the 'wealth of the possible' (p. 22) and the 'stringency of the necessary'" (p. 559). Then, Evans quotes Heidegger as follows:

Thus beings do not exhaust themselves in the actual. . . . Henceforth, if we earnestly think beings *as a whole*, if we think their being completely, then the actuality of the actual is contained in being, but also the possibility of the possible and the necessity of the necessary. (Heidegger, 1993, p. 22)

It is precisely the careful examination of practice itself and the wisdom of practice that permits us to discern how the complex interactions of the actual, the possible, and the necessary characterize most educational work and how each of those modalities both influences and limits each of the others. For us, case studies and surveys of the range and varieties of practice; the diversity of policies, practices, communities, and goals that characterize them; and the manner in which the practical arguments and actions of practitioners help us develop visions of the possible as well as cases of the actual are the most valuable sources for imagining curricula and programs for educating the next generation of educators. We do not eschew other forms of analysis; we privilege those that begin with and respect the creative range of practical work as well as the ways in which the multiplicity of stakeholders and the limitations of policies and resources forge the elements of practical work.

Fortunately, this exchange with Evans is not solely a philosophical argument. For much of the past year, representatives of now nearly 50 institutions of higher education under the leadership of David Imig have been meeting to work together on reclaiming the education doctorate, using our essay as a starting point. The institutions are large and small, public and private, secular and faith based, research intensive and teaching intensive. I can assure Evans and our readers that not a single one of them is interested in preparing the robot educator nor in a preparation for practice that lacks the tools of theory, values, social criticism, or interpretive flexibility. Nor are they interested in becoming one another's clones. They are interested in the interaction of theory, research, and scholarship on teaching and learning; the creation of "laboratories of practice" that are located astride the intersection of academy, schools, and communities; and the reexamination of fundamental doctoral ideas such as "the dissertation" and "coursework"—and they are prepared to radically modify all of these. They will draw upon their own experiences, values, visions of the possible, and critiques of current practice to design a variety of new doctoral programs. They come together with a commitment to meet regularly to exchange their designs and their evaluations, lessons learned, and errors acknowledged. Each institutional team includes professors and doctoral students, representatives of the academy and of "the field." And as they experiment and document, try and err, they will

develop a new generation of practical wisdom upon which others can build.

Although I disagree with the manner in which Evans has characterized our proposals for reclaiming the education doctorate, I still must express my gratitude for his analysis. As I observed earlier, he may well have captured a readily available misreading of what we had in mind. If that is the case, then we are culpable for having expressed our positions without adequate clarity or precision. We are beholden to Evans for providing a critical analysis that affords us the opportunity to correct those errors of expression. I am confident that as the work proceeds, even Evans will bear witness that the attempt to reclaim the education doctorate is not an attempt to impose any kind of monolithic template at all. He may even decide that many of the successful holders of the new professional practice doctorates could be called *praxitioners*.

NOTES

¹Each of my original coauthors has now taken a new position. Chris M. Golde is associate vice-provost for graduate education at Stanford University. Andrea Conklin Bueschel is senior program officer at the Spencer Foundation. Kristen J. Garabedian is secretary of the board of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

²I agree with the general principle of integration or synthesis of theory and practice (as illustrated by the work of Dewey), but I do not find at all necessary the particular mix of conceptual analysis and political ideology typically used to achieve that integration by those who use the term *praxis*.

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