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Always the practitioner: reflections on a journey into the academy

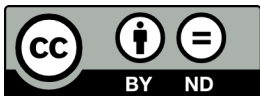
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Always the practitioner: reflections on a journey into the academy.

FINAL Version

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‘When we make a commitment to become critical thinkers, we are already making a choice that places us in opposition to any system of education or culture that would have us be passive recipients of ways of knowing.’ (hooks 2009, p. 185)

Settling down to write this piece in the small room where I do such work, leaning books on the shelves to my right, CDs stacked to my left, a creaky angle- poise on the desk and a Ramones poster circa 1977 in my gazing space, I listened to the academic inside me and returned to the literature. ‘Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom’ by bell hooks (hooks 2009) seemed a useful starting point, a grounding for any personal reflections on my own learning journey. On re-reading the book it was clear many of the discussions around theory, practice, knowledge and experience could frame parts of my story but there were other passages that raised some prickly questions. One sentence that I kept revisiting opens this chapter, thirty- eight words eloquently written that poked at my preconceptions. Could I pinpoint when I first made that ‘commitment to become’ a critical thinker, to move beyond being a knowledge recipient? My initial assumption was that my switch from practice to academia ten years ago represented that turning point, the beginnings of a transition from the experienced, well-trained professional into the more questioning and insightful academic. Yet as I leaned back in my swivel chair doubts began to arise that spoiled this convenient narrative. Were my years as a practitioner really devoid of critical thinking? Did my previous practice experience have any residual impact on me as I have become part of the academic world? Is there an important part of me that will always identify as a practitioner?

I entered the world of practice on leaving school, a choice which I recognise now was shaped to a large extent by my upbringing rather than any clear sense of purpose. My parents were newly elevated professionals, a local government officer and a nurse, who had broken away from their solid working- class roots in mining and mill towns buoyed by the heady optimism of the post- war years. Yet, although the 1970’s represented an era of further social mobility when many young people became the first in their family to enter university, I was reluctant to join this next generation of pioneers. Instead I chose a direction with an emphasis on vocation rather than academic study which unimaginatively mirrored my parents’ occupations, firstly for a brief period as an accountant and then into nursing. From qualifying as a nurse in a large residential hospital for people with disabilities I then took what was to be a defining step for me, training as a teacher in special education.

Teacher training was in some ways my introduction to degree level study although, as was common practice at the time, this took place in a separate college and provided a very different experience to being part of a university community. There were no faculties or college lawns, no fraternising with other students studying exotic histories or cutting- edge

sciences. Consequently, I gained little appreciation of what immersive academic study involved or what the academy represented. Yes, in creaky lecture halls and seminar rooms we covered the concepts and paradigms, the theories of learning, communication and child development, the conceptual underpinnings for any pedagogue. However, those theoretical foundations had little time to settle because we were almost immediately thrown into blocks of teaching practice in schools. Learning to become a teacher was therefore shaped primarily by experience, through reflections on our stumbling encounters with children in those restless classrooms and corridors.

Following training I immediately took up my first teaching post in a school for children with learning difficulties on the edge of the city that had become my home as a student. From this familiar starting point I embarked on a teaching career in special schools before moving into peripatetic work, providing early intervention and learning support to pre-school aged disabled children in their homes. I settled in this niche area of education practice for nearly twenty years until in 2010 my journey reached its current destination when I became a lecturer in early childhood at the Open University.

It would be tempting to see my eventual transition from the world of practice into academia as pivotal in shaping my awareness of the interdependence between theory and fact, knowledge and experience (hooks 2009). From this perspective January 2010 would signify my inauguration into the critical thinking club, a seminal moment in my quest for some deeper understanding. Yet looking back on my years of practice I now recognise that there were periods which involved some rigorous self-examination and critical reflection on my values and beliefs. When thinking about my move from nursing to teaching I recollect becoming increasingly unsettled by the injustice and hopelessness of long-term hospitalisation of disabled people. Those I supported as a nurse, from young children to the elderly, were conduits for my caring but their access to education offered a way forward, a re-focusing from the inevitable to the possible. Over time I recognised that I wanted to be part of the shift away from the medical model and this realisation, more than any clear professional ambitions, motivated my move into teaching.

Whilst in practice, in addition to such phases which marked gradual shifts in my awareness, there were also other more distinct moments that jolted the principled, comfortable assumptions that I held about being a practitioner. During my second teaching appointment at a small special school in southern England, I was invited to dinner by one of the children's parents because they wanted to thank me for the work that I was doing with their son. I had met the family briefly at parents' evenings but outside those formalities my only regular contact with them was through the stilted written communications of the home-school book. Every day I would record their son's achievements and misdemeanours at school whilst attempting to keep a delicate balance between professional distance and supportive informality. Then each morning I would read their brief polite replies expressing their gratitude to the school and occasionally noting that their son had been 'a good boy'. So, I accepted the invite thinking that I could build on this tentative relationship and gain some insights that might enhance my support of their son's learning.

I still recall feeling slightly embarrassed at the sight of the crisp tablecloth and best cutlery that greeted me in their dining room that evening. As we sat down to eat, I noticed that their son was curled in the corner of the cramped living room under a blanket. He never came to the table and when I asked if my presence had fractured his safe personal routine they answered 'no, he always needs to take time'. The parents then told me that mealtimes with their son would usually involve several hours of patient coaxing and that often he would refuse to eat anything. I had never known this; at school he was sometimes fussy with his food but usually would sit happily for lunch alongside his classmates. The revelation shook me.

From that point on I tried to work more in partnership with parents, to tune into their everyday priorities, to think beyond the home-school divide. I also began to question the structures of special education, the limitations it imposed on young people and the system's tendency to separate children from their local community. Reflecting on the incident now it clearly disrupted my professional passivity and enhanced my 'practical wisdom', that capacity where 'as critical thinkers we are to think for ourselves and be able to take action on behalf of ourselves' (hooks 2009, p.185). For me taking such action soon meant making the move out of the special school environment into teaching much younger disabled children before they started formal education and supporting them within their family home. Yet although I became settled within this particular practice world for almost twenty years, my understanding of the value of my role and critical awareness of its limitations continued to be stretched by seemingly routine day to day experiences.

As the Co-ordinator of the home teaching team I was responsible for making the introductory visits to families whose young child had been referred to the service so that I could explain what support we could provide. I particularly enjoyed this part of my work, offering what I saw as something tangible and positive to parents who often felt confused and compromised, uncertain about what the future might bring for them and their young child who was now deemed to be 'different'. For me this aspect of the job represented a concrete example of my 'helping' and in many ways re-affirmed what I regarded as my professional worth.

I still remember one such visit on a parched summer evening to a small terraced house on an anonymous new town street. There was no door-bell, so I tapped the glass. A young man, who I assumed to be the father of the child I was going to meet for the first time, opened the door. Smiling I introduced myself and held up my ID. He glanced briefly at my photograph then at me, bowed his head and, with a softly spoken 'Welcome', gestured for me to cross the threshold. I was shown into a bustling front room crammed with grandparents, other children and, sinking in a huge armchair, the mother holding her tiny baby. After a round of introductions, I began to explain how the home visits would work. At one point I remember the mother delicately passing the baby to Dad as she insisted on preparing tea and sweetmeats for me. I took this as the moment to say hello to the young person who up until now I had only seen as a bundle of blankets. The baby boy stared up at me from the safety of his father's arms and wriggled his arm free. Sensing an opportunity to do something I fished a small dangling toy from my bag and suspended it close to the baby's

fingers. Almost immediately, with tiny digits flexing he ignored the toy, looked away and reached up to tug at his Dad's beard.

Soon after, having explained all I needed to, it was time to leave. We agreed that I would phone the following morning to confirm which day the home visits would start. As I turned to say goodnight to the father at the front door he held my arm. I could sense his grip, calm but firm. 'Would it be ok to wait another month, maybe two so that we can get to know him as a family' he asked. I paused before replying 'no problem', then retreated to my car to take in the impact of his polite and reverent door-step plea. Any notions I held about the significance of early intervention and the sanctity of professional expertise had been sharply deflated.

For me vivid stories such as these from my time as a teacher exemplify that practice is an experience of becoming 'knowledgeable in a special way' through the 'spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life' (Schon 1983, p.49). This 'special way' involves not only developing expertise and skills but also a level of critical thinking driven by self- reflection. Such criticality may not be as informed by theory or conceptual understanding, but it is shaped by the powerful encounters with daily realities. Comparable experiences were also common within the community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) in which I worked. My colleagues were professionals from different therapeutic, sociological and educational mindsets and although tensions were inevitable, joint solutions were found as we endeavoured to support children and families. Reflecting on these times now through my academic lens I can see that being part of such a community meant that I was included in participatory learning relationships rich with critical thinking. However because such learning happened tacitly and to a large degree unconsciously (Rogoff and Gardner 1984) I entered academia in 2010 unsure whether the ideas shaped during my years as a practitioner would have any relevance, value or currency.

The first time that I walked onto the sculptured modernism of the campus was for my interview. It was October, a chill morning mist hung over the building tops while a works team cleared the first Autumn leaves from the pavements. Everything seemed so organised. Anxiously early I went to the canteen for a coffee and to listen into some conversations. I was curious, what do academics talk about over their cappuccinos? Catching the chat about road works and weather, families and football I began to relax. I carried that reassurance into the interview room and sitting in front of the panel of five draped my arm casually over the back of the empty chair next to me as if seeking support from an invisible ally. To my relief everything unravelled amicably, each person asked questions in turn, nothing proved too difficult, there were nods, smiles and we all laughed in the right places. The Chair of the panel was sitting to my far right. I had glanced in her direction occasionally noticing that she appeared to be concentrating on the paperwork in front of her. As Chair she was privileged with asking me the final interview questions one of which I can still recall in cold detail, 'so John what have been the theoretical influences on your work as a practitioner'? It was a tumbleweed moment, the longest silence in the whole forty-five minutes hung in the air before I could form some garbled response that failed to make even the slightest connection to theory.

Reflecting back I can recognise that the question encapsulated the shift that was expected of me as I stepped into the shoes of an early career academic. The critical thinking in this new world drew from a frame of reference, conceptual and theoretical, with which I felt at the time I had very little connection. The question also signalled that my professional standing had reduced relevance in this context and my working identity had shifted from being a highly experienced professional to someone who was 'beginning again', whose authenticity was going to be redefined (Tomkins and Nicholds 2017). From now on I would need to transform the way that I thought about the complexities of early childhood and commit to ways of knowing that extended beyond the encounters within everyday practice.

The decade of participation within an academic culture which followed my move from practice has in many ways been personally transformative (Rogoff 2003). From an intellectual perspective, developing a deeper understanding of the sociology of childhood, socio-cultural theories of learning and concepts of disability has been an enriching experience. I have published journal articles, chapters, co-authored and edited books, lead research projects, made successful funding bids and presented at academic conferences in dreamily wonderful locations. To borrow from Bourdieu's sociological analysis of the academy my long apprenticeship has involved a shift in my cultural capital where I have acquired new skills, knowledge and subconsciously a re-shaped way of being (Bourdieu 1988). Yet much of my research work has continued to focus on the practitioner world and developing practice rather than more conceptual or theoretical concerns. For example, my most recent projects have explored how an observational tool called 'In-the- Picture', originally developed for research purposes, can be used by practitioners in their own settings (Rix, Parry and Malibha-Pinchbeck 2020). Such prioritisation suggests that the knowledge and experience I developed as a teacher, my practical wisdom, continues to have a huge influence on the way that I work. It may also be symptomatic of where I position myself within the academy, as someone whose transformation has some way to go, who still sees himself as a practitioner adapting to the academic world rather than an academic who used to be a practitioner.

Of course, continuing to identify so strongly with my practitioner roots has been a personal choice. Early on in my academic career I decided not to follow the conventional path of studying for a doctorate despite the encouragement from my colleagues and superiors. Indeed I have never been swayed from that original decision even though in some respects my promotion to Senior Lecturer in 2018 could be seen as a signifier that I was developing a 'feel for the game' (Enright, Rynne and Alfrey 2017, p. 25). I am not sure whether this intransigence was driven by a lack of confidence, pragmatism, laziness or something more fundamental. In many ways the academy appears to shape participation of inductees within its own parameters of established values, procedures, systems and hierarchical structures (Bourdieu 1988 in Enright, Rynne and Alfrey 2017). In my experience there is less emphasis on exploring the potential of interdependent learning between well-established members and any new entrants whatever their previous background or experiences (Nind and Vinha 2017). Consequently academic criticality and rigour seems to occupy an elevated status over practical wisdom with little of the synergy that bell hooks celebrates. Perhaps that is why I have rarely told my practice stories as a contribution to academic discussions and

why, faced with such rigid conditions that determine inclusion (Enright, Rynne and Alfrey 2017), I have found feeling part of the community to be a more complex and drawn out process than expected.

Looking to the future for some form of personal resolution, maybe for me it is simply a question of time? Perhaps in another fifteen years when my time spent in practice and the academy match up, my identity as a scholar and practitioner will merge imperceptibly. Unfortunately, however interesting this might seem, I think I may not be around to check out the premise. By then I will be nearly 80 years old and well into days spent giving the garden the attention that it has long deserved.

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