Educating for the Future – Cultivating Practical Wisdom in Education

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ABSTRACT

Education is unimaginable without human virtues such as wisdom (*prudence*), courage (*fortitude*), moderation (*temperance*), and justice (*liberty*). Wisdom as a leading virtue aims to achieve human excellence and the common good, not only for individuals but for all of humanity. In this paper, I seek to answer the question: *"How can education cultivate practical wisdom in thinking, feelings, and in the actions of future generations?"* With the practice ecosystem framework, I will present two models: one that incorporates the key features of practical wisdom, and another one that shows how they could manifest themselves in education. The paper calls for the increased responsibility of educators and educational institutions in enhancing future generations' capacity for actions guided by practical wisdom. It calls for integrating moral values, ethical decisions, and altruism into education in order to make practical wisdom present in the everyday practices of future generations.

Keywords: Education, wisdom, practical wisdom, human virtues, practice ecosystem framework.

1. NEED FOR WISDOM IN EDUCATION

Wisdom (*prudence*) is one of the human virtues, along with justice, fortitude, and temperance. As a phenomenon, wisdom has always been vital throughout human history. The main goal of wisdom is to achieve the common good, from which both the individual and society could benefit. This is an increasingly important aim, especially in the digital world and in the crisis-ridden nature of our current times. Therefore, it is natural and logical that wisdom has been widely researched and discussed in contemporary philosophy, psychology, and management literature.

Philosophy has always involved the study of wisdom, through the work of Socrates, Plato Aristotle, Epictetus, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Kant, Spinoza, etc. However, recently, discussions about wisdom have enjoyed a renaissance in the contemporary philosophical literature (e.g., [1], [2], [3], [4]). Swartwood and Tiberius [3: 25] argue that "philosophers have sought to examine the components of wisdom: the motivations, habits, dispositions, beliefs, knowledge, or abilities that make up wise understanding".

In the 21st century there has been a revival of wisdom research in psychology [5], [6], [7], [8]. Psychologists research the characteristics of both wise persons and experts, such as intelligence, wise decisions, skills, behaviour, and relationships. For example, Bangen, Meeks, and Jeste [8: 1257] in their extensive literature review of wisdom theories, categorized the authors who define wisdom based on subcomponents of wisdom, such as decision-making knowledge (23), prosocial attitudes (21), self-reflection (19), acknowledgement of uncertainty (16), emotional homeostasis (13), tolerance (7), openness (5), spirituality (5), sense of humour (3), etc. The numbers after the subcomponents of wisdom definitions indicate the frequency of the specific subcomponent in the definitions found in the reviewed literature. Bangen et al. [8: 1262], conclude that "the most commonly cited subcomponents, which appeared in at least half of the definitions, relate to social decision-making/knowledge of life, prosocial values, reflection, and acknowledgement of uncertainty".

Psychologists focus on implicit and explicit theories of wisdom. The *implicit theories* of wisdom explore the non-observable, psychological features of the concept of wisdom. For instance, research has been done on the followings:

- the three dimensions of wisdom, i.e., affective, reflective, and cognitive [6: 275] and [9];
- the six qualities of wisdom, i.e., reasoning, sagacity, learning, judgment, quick use of information, and perspicacity [10];
- the three conceptualizations of wisdom, i.e., *sophia*, *episteme*, and *phronesis* [11];
- the meanings of wisdom [12];
- the features of wisdom [7];
- the characteristics of a wise person [6] and [13];
- cultural context and wisdom [14].

The *explicit theories* of wisdom focus on more observable, behavioural, and performance characteristics of wisdom. Their pragmatic approach is based on earlier theories, such as personality theories, cognitive development theories, stage theory, and life-span theories. According to Lopez, Pedrotti, and Snyder [15: 228-231], in this group of theories there are two main ones that "emphasize the organization and application of pragmatic knowledge" [15: 229]:

1) **The balance theory of wisdom** (e.g., [10] and [16]) emphasizes the moral decisions of a person, using his/her practical intelligence when facing real-life problems, personal values, and the role of context when making wise decisions, and striving to achieve the common good with the suggested solution.
2) **The Berlin wisdom paradigm** (e.g., [12], [17], [18], and [19]), proposed by researchers of the Max Planck Institute (MPI), focuses on expertise in wise performance. It emphasizes that an expert considers his/her specific life situation and context, along with the cultural and social values of others, and recognizes and manages uncertainties by flexible thinking when he/she proposes pragmatic solutions to problems.

Lately, wisdom become a hot topic in the leadership and management literature as well (e.g., [2], [20], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25], [26], [27], [28], [29], [30], [31], [32]). Here, the focus is on the characteristics of wise managers and wise leaders [33]. Nonaka "finds in wisdom a way of showing what is good, collectively, about an organization and its productive powers and argues persuasively why it is that wise leaders are able to do what is good for their companies and for society by understanding the higher moral purpose of what they do while remaining grounded in everyday detail" [30: 368].

The factors that force education to place more emphasis on wisdom in education are: technological changes (digitalization, AI, robotization, virtual learning, distance work); psychological challenges (work-life balance, burnout, stress); cultural, religious challenges; environmental changes (global warming, flooding, earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes); political issues (wars, immigration); government regulations of education; moral crises (Enron scandal, bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, VW emission scandal); health crises (pandemics, Covid-19).

Regardless of the intense wisdom research and discourses in contemporary academic literature, the role of education in cultivating wisdom has been discussed only superficially. Therefore, in this paper, I call for more focus on wisdom in education, and I seek to answer the question: *"How can education cultivate practical wisdom in thinking, feelings, and in the actions of future generations?"*

The rest of the paper has five sections. Next, practical wisdom and educational concepts will be clarified, after which the role of practical wisdom in education is presented. The paper offers implications for educators and traditional educational institutions. Finally, there is a conclusion, and a reference list is provided.

2. PRACTICAL WISDOM AND EDUCATION

Practical wisdom

Wisdom of life (s*ophia*), wisdom of knowledge (*episteme*), and wisdom of practice (*phronesis*) are the three dimensions of wisdom [11]. According to Swartwood and Tiberius [3: 5, emphases in original], "practical wisdom is understanding of how things *ought* to be (how we ought to live, and what is good and why) … Practical wisdom is understanding of *prescriptive* truths or reasons (truths about how we *ought* to conduct ourselves, or reasons we *ought* to conduct ourselves in certain ways)".

The existing theories of wisdom largely focus on being wise rather than on becoming wise. They aim to describe the characteristics of a wise person and to measure the consequences of wise decisions and wise actions. However, they seem to ignore the antecedents of identity formation and the causes of these actions. Therefore, I argue that this paper could contribute to the evolutionary, developmental theories of wisdom by focusing on the role of education in cultivating practical wisdom in future generations.

Bachmann, Habisch, and Dierksmeier [2: 157] explore practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in philosophy, theology, psychology, and in the management literature. They identify eight characteristics of practical wisdom: action-oriented; integrative; normative; sociality-linked; pluralism-related; personality-related; cultural heritage; and limitation-related features.

In Figure 1, I applied the practice the ecosystem framework [34: 209] to demonstrate the eight characteristics of practical wisdom [2]. This tool is based on the evolutionary ontology and epistemology of duality and becoming. This framework is an integration of (1) the human activity theory, (2) the theory of practice, (3) the organizational knowledge creation theory (including the process model of the knowledge-based firm), and (4) the ecosystem theory [34: Figures 1 & 2, pp. 204 and 205]. This framework has the following elements: action (in the middle of Figure 1), why this action is taking place (goal), who is acting, with what skills and tools, with what rules and values, when (at what time), where (in what place and space), and with what results and outcomes.

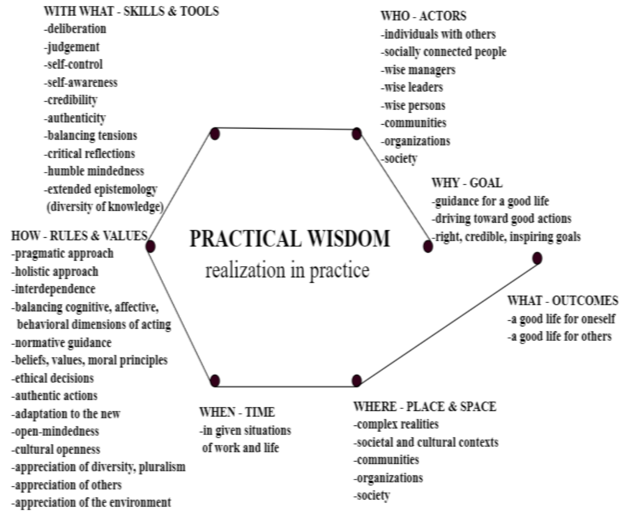

Figure 1. Features of practical wisdom
(source: author)

Education

Education has been an ongoing concern of human society. In Greek civilization, even before Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, educating the younger generation was considered important. Proposing questions, experimenting, theorizing, reasoning, logical and dialectical thinking, argumentation, and having meaningful dialogues and discussions about life and environment have long been seen as critical areas of learning. Socrates, who thought that the utmost important thing was to search for knowledge, was put to death for asking questions of those in power and for encouraging young people to question all aspects of life. The motivation of human beings to understand and influence their environment is driven by their hunger for knowledge.

Education is a complex concept. It can be formal (school, university, classrooms), non-formal, and incidental (work, communities, networks, social practices, friends, hobbies, travel). Education takes place in all these forms anytime and anyplace. It is a lifelong, social, and contextual process of becoming. During the process of education people combine different types of knowledge and knowing such as experimental, presentational, propositional, and practical. Education is not limited to training or developing different skills and competencies. Education is a continuous identity and character formation. It is an exploration of new ways of being.

Because of pressures from the environment, education is dynamic; it is evolving continuously. Jakubik in her paper, *"Quo Vadis Educatio? Emergence of a New Educational paradigm"* [35], identifies four elements of a new educational paradigm that could help answer the needs of the 21st century:

1) **Practices**: learning (remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, creating); working (self-work, organizational work, institutional work); and innovating (exploration, discovery, interpretation, acting differently);
2) **Practitioners**: learners; knowledge providers; and knowledge seekers;
3) **Praxes**: pedagogy (a variety of approaches, work-based learning); values (moral responsibility, dignity, truthfulness, fairness); and ethics (ethical and positive thinking); and
4) **Contexts**: time (the knowledge, mind, creative, and digital economies); place (educational institutions, networks,

community work, community); and space (virtual learning platforms, BlackBoard, Moodle, MOOC, Coursera).

We need to think about education in a broader perspective than just in terms of formal education. The Latin proverb *"Non scholae sed vitae discimus!"* meaning that "We do not learn for school, but for life!" is very true. Learning is the key practice in education.

3. CULTIVATING PRACTICAL WISDOM IN EDUCATION

Bangen, Meeks, and Jeste [8: 1257 and 1262] identify the main components of wisdom definitions as the following: decision-making knowledge; prosocial attitudes; self-reflection; acknowledgement of uncertainty; emotional homeostasis; tolerance; openness; spirituality; sense of humour; social decision-making/knowledge of life; prosocial values; reflection; and acknowledgement of uncertainty. Similarly, Bachmann, Habisch, and Dierksmeier [2: 157] determined the features of practical wisdom as the following: action-oriented; integrative; normative; sociality-linked; pluralism-related; personality-related; cultural heritage; and limitation-related features. These features are integral parts of education.

In Figure 2, I show how all these components of wisdom and characteristics of practical wisdom manifest themselves, and how they need to be cultivated in education.

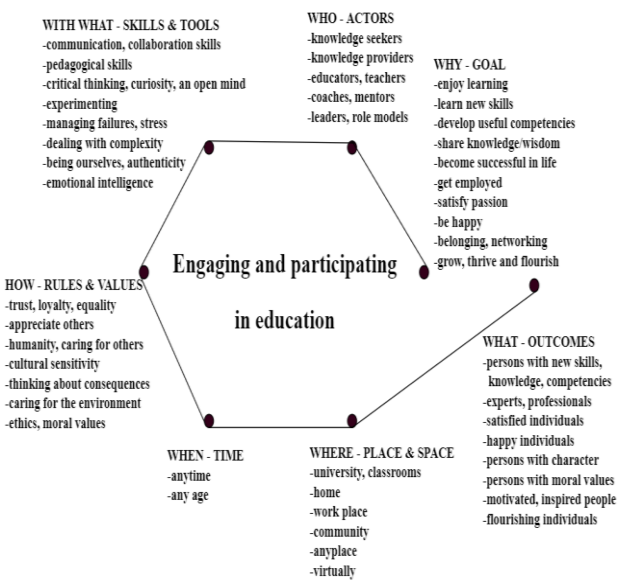

Figure 2. Cultivating practical wisdom in education (source: author)

Education (formal, non-formal, incidental) starts with the action of engaging and participating (in the middle of Figure 2). Learners, knowledge-seekers, and knowledge providers as actors participate in education with specific goals, skills, tools, rules, and values. Education is a lifelong journey. It is not limited to formal education in schools, or to training sessions. Education takes place anytime and anyplace.

The responsibility of all participants in education is to cultivate human virtues, aiming to achieve human excellence and the common good for all. During this process not only skills, knowledge, and competencies are formed, but more importantly, identity and character. Educators, teachers, coaches, mentors, role models, family, and friends are all parts of this process. Educating for the future means learning how participants could increase the capacity for the practical, wisdom-guided actions of future generations.

4. IMPLICATIONS

Educators

Implications for educators are related to less focus on teaching, more co-creation of knowledge-based, pragmatic, and multidisciplinary approaches, and to the identity formation of future generations.

Educators and knowledge providers should focus on the learners' needs. They ought to put knowledge seekers into focus, with the aim of letting students grow and flourish. Educators need to be learning process facilitators, who focus on learning and not on teaching. I concur with Wenger [36: 266-267], who argues, similarly to Illich [37] and Berger and Luckmann [38], that "much learning takes place without teaching, and indeed much teaching takes place without learning".

It is also recommended that educators negotiate purpose and meaning together with learners, rather than only giving instructions that satisfy the teacher's needs. Learning needs to be based on the passion of learners because this intrinsic motivation leads to the best results. Learning as a social process is a co-creation of meaning and knowledge. Therefore, when learning happens, all participants learn. Teaching in traditional educational institutions should not be a one-way transfer of knowledge.

The educator's role is to link theory and practice with moral values and ethical thinking. They need to take moral responsibility for future generations. They need to get rid of silos of specific subjects, and to focus on a broader view, on the impacts of decisions within a multidisciplinary approach. Nowadays, team-teaching has started to gain traction in education. This could provide a broader perspective, rather than just a specific subject-related goal.

Applying a variety of approaches, enabling learning with mixture of tools, and making learning enjoyable and fun for all participants are all things that enhance learning. Education is a continuous identity-development process. Educators, when trying new approaches and experimenting, must not be afraid to fail. They need to ask for feedback, learn from it, and act differently next time.

The educator's role is crucial in forming the character, values, and identity of future generations. Their role in cultivating practical wisdom in the thinking, feelings, and actions of future generations is of the utmost important. They need to provide continuous, personal, constructive feedback to learners. They need to be available, not only accessible, to knowledge seekers. The best way to achieve this goal is probably to be humble, authentic, trustworthy, and to act as a role model for learners. This is possible when educators love what they do, when they have a passion for learning, are open-minded, and have a curiosity for the new.

Educational institutions

Implications for traditional universities are related to the future of the university, boundaries of the university, curriculum development, creating a more positive educational agenda, and building a context for meaningful relationships between knowledge seekers and knowledge providers.

What should be the university of the future? Remenyi, Grant, and Singh [39] argue that universities will become learning centers for all ages, they will offer a wide variety of choices for learners. Many of them will establish themselves in virtual spaces, being able to recruit students from all over the world. Because of the pressures from the environment, traditional universities should rethink their mission, policies, and practices. University leadership should support educators in being innovative and in trying new approaches. They should give autonomy to teachers to try new ways of enabling learning and experimenting, without punishment if they fail. Less regulation and more freedom for educators are needed from policy makers.

Universities should support multidisciplinary learning and allow the mobility of learners between disciplines. Because most learning happens beyond the traditional boundaries of schools and universities [40], more involvement from business leaders, managers, engineers, experts, and consultants is needed in the learning experience. More efforts are needed to get rid of silos and focused disciplines. Educational institutions should therefore promote collaboration between and among disciplines (e.g., team teaching).

In curriculum development, adding separate courses involving business ethics and corporate social responsibility would not be an especially wise decision, because they need to be integrated into general practice. Universities should be able to provide a variety of learning opportunities (virtual, face-to-face, group and team learning). Traditional educational institutions need to rethink their policies of moving education entirely into cyberspace through virtual courses, because this could hinder the transfer of tacit knowledge, community-based knowledge, feelings of belonging, and social contact.

Concurring with Ghoshal [41: 87] – who argued for a more positive agenda in business schools when he wrote that "if we are to have an influence in building a better world for the future, adapting the pessimistic, deterministic theories will not get us there" – I also believe that educating for the future means we need to change our negative assumptions about learners and focus on their passion, their thriving and their flourishing. Ghoshal argued for the wisdom of common sense, for more moral and social responsibility, and for the concerns of management education.

In order to educate people for the future, traditional educational institutions are encouraged to build a context in which educational innovations, community spirit, feeling of belonging, and trust can flourish. It is crucial for effective learning to have a context of positive relationships, enabling learners to fully engage in learning activities, to be meaningfully connected to others, to be understood, supported, and helped, and "to be authentic, present, and intellectually and emotionally available" [42: 190]. Concurring with Kahn [42: 191-194], I believe that meaningful relationships enhance task accomplishment, career development, sense making (cognitive sense-making purposes), and the provision of meaning (sense of being valued), as well as personal coaching and mentoring.

5. CONCLUSION

Despite the intensive wisdom research and discourses about wisdom in the academic literature of contemporary philosophy, psychology, leadership, and management literature since the mid-1980s, there has been little attention is paid to the role of wisdom and practical wisdom in education.

Here, I have sought to address the question: *"How can education cultivate practical wisdom in the thinking, feelings, and actions of future generations?"* The aim of my paper has been to show how practical wisdom can manifest itself and how it can be cultivated (cf., Figure 2) in education. In my view, we should research not only what it means to be wise, what the characteristics of wise people, leaders, and actions are, but also to explore the journey of becoming wise and behaving wisely, thus implementing human virtues, moral values, and ethical decisions into our everyday practices.

The original contribution of this paper lies in implementing the practice ecosystem framework into two figures. Figure 1 shows in a concise way the eight features of practical wisdom that emerged from the literature. Figure 2 presents the ways in which practical wisdom can be cultivated in education. I have provided a few practical implications for educators and traditional universities about how to educate students for the future. Although my paper is a small step, my hope is that the ideas expressed here will generate further discussions regarding this important topic.

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