Educating the reflective practitioner and vocational Bildung

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Abstract: In his work Educating the reflective practitioner, Schön (1987) discusses some of the challenges in teaching design-like occupations. His work there mostly engages with what might be termed the craft-like aspects of these occupations, i.e. the combination of skills, knowledge and perception required to “get it” as he terms it. He makes clear that what he is not explicitly engaging with is the study of how a reflective practitioner also comes to develop: “wisdom in response to ethical dilemmas.” This important area of vocational education as it relates to, and ties in with, education for reflective practice is the focus of this paper. It will be discussed in relation to a case study of the vocational education biography of master craftsman Wolfgang B. taking some examples from his narrative to clarify the close relationship between Schön’s concept of reflective practice and one that will be developed here of vocational Bildung.

Keywords: Biography; Bildung; Narrative Inquiry; Reflective Practice; Schön; Didactics;

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1 Introduction

In his work *Educating the reflective practitioner*, Schön (1987) discusses some of the challenges in teaching design-like occupations (architecture, psychoanalysis and teaching). His work there mostly engages with what might be termed the craft-like aspects of these occupations, i.e. the combination of skills, knowledge and perception required to “get it” as he terms it. He also makes clear that what he is not explicitly engaging with is the study of how a reflective practitioner also comes to develop: “wisdom in response to ethical dilemmas” (1987, p.xiii). This important area of vocational education as it relates to, and ties in with, education for reflective practice is what I will be discussing in the following paper. In effect extending Schön’s question: how is the education of a reflective practitioner constituted, to encompass: how is the education of a practitioner who is gebildet1 constituted?

2 Vocational Bildung

Rather than narrowing the question to the education of an ethical or wise practitioner I have chosen to use the broader concept of Bildung (cf. Lange et al., 2001; Rittelmeyer, 2012) to encompass wisdom and virtue together with aesthetic sensibility, the formation of character traits (overlapping with what is elsewhere called key-qualifications) and an expansive sense of one’s vocational practice and knowledge which corresponds roughly to Humboldt’s idea of general Bildung but in a vocational context rather than one of the Greek and Roman classics.

This is a matter of adequate research design. Schön in his discussion of education for reflective practice builds on observational case studies that describe how, for example, teachers of architecture interact with their students. Bildung, on the other hand, has a tradition of being described and researched in terms of biographical narratives where it often makes sense to argue that much of what leads to Bildung is not available to observation as it occurs, but rather emerges with time and hindsight (Rittelmeyer, 2012). Thus an aspect of the argument is that by framing such issues as “wisdom in response to ethical dilemmas” as part of a larger issue of becoming vocationally gebildet, it is easier to understand why instead of observational studies it makes sense to do biographical ones. This also connects the approach to the Bildungsgangdidaktik research in Germany (Meyer, 2009; Terhart, 2009; Trautmann, 2004). Furthermore the analysis of such biographies is made more comprehensive since, I would argue, Bildung as a conceptual construct is closely related to what one perceives as meaningful in one’s life and thus the biographical conversation is less conceptually driven than it would be if one went straight for issues of vocational ethics where the narrators understanding of ethics is more likely to determine the stories chosen and the interpretations given.

3 An explorative biographical case study

To deal with the question of how the education of a practitioner who is gebildet might be constituted I have conducted an extensive series (20) of conversations documenting the vocational education biography of a master bookbinder, gilder and engraver, Mr. Wolfgang B. (cf. Tyson, 2015a). These detail his apprenticeship in Stuttgart in the 1950s and his further education at the Ecole Estienne in Paris in

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1 Gebildet is someone in possession of Bildung.
the 1960s. By setting the criteria as him having an unusually high level of education and also a long engagement in teaching his occupation there are good reasons to assume that such a biographical narrative will carry strong reflective elements of Bildung. The aim of these conversations has been to get at extensive educational narratives, ie. narratives in which he describes the actions of his teachers, experiences related to a work-task and similar issues. Owing to the biographical character of Bildung such descriptions are often descriptions of Bildung-processes and thus lend themselves to an analysis of how a practitioner who is gebildet was educated and through this to a discussion of the patterns (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Larsson, 2009) that emerge through it.

4 Reflective practice and vocational Bildung

There are several different lines of analysis and reflection that can be pursued from the study. Two have resulted in previous papers (Tyson, 2014; 2015b) discussing aesthetic Bildung and VET and education for vocational excellence (the combination of virtue and wisdom). A third one will be emphasized here and that is the relationship between education for reflective practice and vocational Bildung.

Schön’s main focus is discussing education in design-like occupations and, in particular, the craft-like parts of such education. As mentioned initially, with craft-like I mean the combination of skills, knowledge and perception required to “get it” as he terms it. To describe what knowledgeable people in such vocational fields do, Schön distinguishes between reflection in action and reflection on action (Schön, 1983; 1987). Through this he tries to articulate how reflective practice is central to expertise in design-like occupations. The focus on reflective practice opens his argument to incorporate a Bildung perspective on several fronts.

First, Bildung as a biographical process is highly reflective and it would be an interesting field of study in its own right to look at people engaged in work that is characterized by reflective practice in Schön’s sense and see if there was an uncommon prevalence of biographical reflection as well.

Second, reflection on action is mirrored repeatedly in the case narrative. There are several stories of how the teachers that Wolfgang B. remembers enacted various educational measures. They did this in such a way as to bring out the interplay between teaching the craft-like parts of a skill and providing affordances of Bildung, showing how these can be mutually supportive. For example, he describes one of the teachers who had the nickname Lange-Otto (Tall-Otto) who worked at the Württembergische Bibelanstalt and taught a course in edge gilding (edge gilding is the technique with which one applies gold-leaf to the edges of book-leaves). We came to speak extensively about this course as an example of how they were taught the techniques and skill involved in edge gilding. Lange-Otto took them to the forest to show them the trees, Hainbuche (Hornbeam in English), used for the presses and pressing-boards and why this particular wood had to be used rather than any other. He furthermore taught them how to make their own edge gilding tools and spoke to them about gilding from a scientific and cultural perspective, for instance going into an extended discussion about the reasons for gilded weathervakes on churches. In effect, Lange-Otto turned what could have been viewed as teaching a craft-skill into a composite process of skill-training and Bildung-affordances that were developed through that training. Such a curriculum is a result of reflection on action, but not limited to Schön’s sense of an expert
reflecting on how to solve a particular problem or develop a new technique, etc. but rather in a combined skill-teaching and Bildung-oriented educational sense.

Third, Mr. B. also describes a process strongly similar to reflection in action but one not oriented towards solving an issue in the process of making or towards dealing with a problem of skill training. Instead it focuses on an episode in which my skill-training as a bookbinder’s apprentice with him became the basis for his deliberation and action aiming at the development of certain vocational virtues.

W: Do you remember that we always made almanacs for the bazaar in November? [a reference to geometrical embroideries made in 6th grade on colored paper that was glued onto thick cardboard and turned into calendars] Do you remember that there were a couple of girls that came late after we had made them and asked to have theirs done and you forgot to use a [thin sheet of glossy paper between the calendar and the cardboards] and everything was in a hurry and I stood there and thought to myself: “should I say something?” But instead of reminding you about the paper I said: “Ruhi, quick in and out of the press.” And you looked up at me and you were a bit irritated and you put the first in the press and I said: “out.” And you took it out and part of the cardboard was stuck to the calendar and you started to swear over yourself, you’d forgotten the paper because you were annoyed at the girls who disturbed you in another job you were doing. And there was no need for verbal corrective, it was an experience of: “aha,” you relived, remembered everything we’d talked about regarding pressing […] and all of that you literally owned and then it’s not: “ah sorry, it didn’t get any better than this.” […] That was the kind of reality or experience that you had, that: “ah, that’s just not allowed to happen,” and you saw the girls and their expectation, the whole complexity. I didn’t have to argue with you, you had no chance to just say: “sorry it didn’t get better than this,” but instead you encountered an immediacy of neglect that gave you armor [for the future] through it.

[…]
I paid attention to the next one you made and if you had repeated the same mistake with the second as well and not made an immediate correction then I would have had to tell you: “Ruhi, not one more time.” [Spoken with a voice as in Ruhi, never again or else] And that wasn’t necessary and what is that? Is it morals? Or is it care and considerateness? Or, what is it? It’s a complexity one develops that exists beyond the technique.

This is an example of the kind of reflection or deliberation often termed phronesis or practical wisdom (Tyson 2015b) where it is not separated from the reflection in action accompanying teaching a vocational skill as a craft-like process (ie. didactics).

In brief I have tried hereby to argue that Schön’s research on reflective practice can be expanded in educational matters to include a Bildung-perspective that enriches its scope and brings depth to what we can understand and look for among expert practitioners.

Perhaps the most important result emerging thus far from the present inquiry is that the divide between systematic research and personal practice knowledge can be bridged. The potential is there when we understand that narratives of practical knowledge (such as the above) are a way of documenting it especially when there is no other significant way in which to do this or when other approaches are time and resource heavy. The former might be when it leaves little or no physical trace, say leadership-actions or conflict resolution processes or where quantitative
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Educating the reflective practitioner and vocational Bildung approaches do not actually document practical knowledge per se. The latter might consist of things such as filming or observing a practice in order to get at Bildung-related knowledge when such actions occur unpredictably, suddenly and are often difficult to perceive as such other than retrospectively. My argument then, is that narratives of vocational Bildung “actions” contain significant reflective aspects and these narratives can be gathered systematically in order to explore and analyze various fields of Bildung-related educational practice. Thus between formulating knowledge as rules and concepts and viewing it as embodied, tacit and personal there is a whole world of stories which, taken one by one, do not constitute more than examples of practical knowledge in connection with something. But taken together, from different practitioners and different contexts, they can begin to enrich practitioners’ repertoires locked as they are in their own local and personal situations, as well as form the basis for systematic scholarly analysis.

References