

Editorial

Walking on the edge: Educational praxis in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This special issue is a collection of articles that emerged from a series of symposia on praxis in higher education, aimed at critically exploring challenges and possibilities for educational praxis, including its role in the contemporary university. The collection highlights the need for asking critical and uncomfortable questions about what is and what could be in higher education. It calls for more focused attention on the consequences of what we do as teachers and university communities, both intentionally and inadvertently, so that higher education can be more socially just and responsive to student and societal needs amidst contemporary challenges. In explicating the concept of ‘educational praxis’, the editorial introduces the metaphor of ‘walking on the edge’ to illustrate the concept’s ‘uncomfortable dimension’ in terms of academics’ responsibility to engage critically with challenging issues in endeavours to address educational concerns.

KEYWORDS

educational praxis, higher education, moral dimensions of education, praxis, public good, social justice

This editorial provides a theoretical and historical framing for the issue. It does so first by providing background information about the praxis symposia from which this special issue emerged, then introducing the notion of ‘educational praxis’ and its relevance for contemporary times, and finally highlighting key ideas and questions raised by the articles. Universities all over the world are at a critical point historically. In an era characterised by increasingly complex higher education environments, significant changes in the nature of academic work (linked, for example, to the digitalisation of work and learning, managerialism, and changing faculty values), and



changing societal expectations (see Tummons and Beach 2020), what is often lost is attention to universities' civic responsibilities and education for the 'public good' (Giroux 2010). This arguably involves supporting people to participate meaningfully in society (see Altbach et al. 2009; Giroux 2010) and contributing to the creation of a society worth participating in (Kemmis et al. 2014). The lack of attention to such responsibilities is troubling when we consider its implications for teaching, learning and research in our universities, and for the purpose of higher education.

We (the guest editors) have been discussing these issues amongst ourselves for some time. In 2018, we decided to advance our discussions by creating a 'communicative learning space' (Sjølie et al. 2018) where otherwise overwhelming pressures could be challenged in the spirit of a critical conversation, with the aim of finding joy and meaningfulness together in our academic work. We organised the first symposium of 'Praxis in Higher Education' at the University of Borås, Sweden, and invited local scholars to take part and contribute with their latest research on key challenges for praxis in higher education. The second symposium, in 2019, had a Nordic focus. Teachers, students, and researchers came together to explore and debate common concerns and questions across Nordic contexts. In order to sustain and extend the dialogue, and to foster actions that resist unproductive academic work, the praxis symposia will continue to be held annually. Hence, the third one was held in October 2020. This special issue, an outcome of the first two symposia, is an invitation to a wider community to join the conversation.

The aim of this issue is to highlight efforts to address some of the above-mentioned challenges, marked by a (re)turn to the notion of 'praxis'. Praxis, we shall argue, relates to intentionality in human action or 'agency'; it signals the moral dimensions of everyday action, such as what might be 'right' and 'wrong' given the context. In this sense, 'praxis' is a normative construct, and thus needs to be discussed, revisited, and renewed in light of contemporary global challenges. Our metaphor, 'walking on the edge', is an attempt to recognise that praxis does not denote 'comfortable' actions, but rather points towards humans' – and, we claim, especially academics' – responsibility to engage, in a balanced way, with critical, uncomfortable questions.

What is educational praxis?

While in some contexts, 'educational praxis' denotes routine, everyday actions in educational settings ('how we do things here'), the term can also



be understood in terms of the moral, reflexive and political dimensions of human action in such settings. It is the latter interpretation that we have primarily adopted in this special issue, although it is explored from different angles and used in different ways in the various articles. This interpretation draws in part on a neo-Aristotelian notion of praxis as ‘right-conduct’ on the one hand, and a Marxian view of praxis emphasising morally and socially committed actions that are ‘history-making’ (Kemmis 2010) on the other.

The notion of *praxis as ‘right conduct’* (Kemmis and Smith 2008: 15–16) invokes the idea that when we act, we deliberate over what is ‘right’ and ‘good’ (or ‘wise’ or ‘appropriate’) given the particularities of the situation at hand, and act accordingly. Educational praxis, from this perspective, amounts to engaging in education-related activity in ways that reflect a moral commitment to doing what is ‘right’ or ‘good’ for those involved – especially students in the case of formal education – and the broader community. However, history has taught us that what might be ‘right’ for particular students, groups, societies, or generations under certain circumstances may not be so for others, nor for the same people under different circumstances. There are often competing interests as well as hegemonic stances. This suggests that what is considered ‘right’ and ‘good’ should always be subjected to scrutiny in the light of context. Asking questions related to what is ‘good’ and/or ‘right’, for whom, why, and under what circumstances, is arguably part of our obligation as academics (see Nixon 2011) as well as core to our understanding of praxis.

The related notion of *praxis as ‘history-making action’* captures a sense of acting in the knowledge that our individual and collective actions ‘make’ history (Kemmis 2010, after Marx). What we do locally and globally today in response to the coronavirus pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, for instance, will impact on the lives of many tomorrow. In relation to educational activity or educational practice, this means acting with awareness that what is done in the name of education and educational research – or even accountability, quality, and equality in education – has social and political consequences (see Kemmis and Smith 2008; Kemmis et al. 2014). It *affects others*, and not necessarily only those in the immediate situation or environment, and sometimes not just in the short term or in intended ways. In this issue, the latter point is exemplified by Bagga-Gupta et al., whose study shows how the inadvertent reinforcement of mechanisms of marginalisation plays out in the provision of educational support for individuals and groups who are marked as being ‘peripheral’. Indeed, what we think might constitute

appropriate and socially just action can turn out not to be advancing equity and inclusion when considering the actual consequences and later understandings about what is in people's interests (see Ax and Ponte 2008).

Based on these two notions of praxis, then, educational praxis can be understood as socially responsible and responsive, reflexive educational action. Other ideas captured in this concept stem from the work of such scholars as Paolo Freire and bell hooks. Freire (1970) emphasises that education could be the practice of freedom, and bell hooks translates Freire's '*conscientization*' [*sic*] into 'critical awareness and engagement' in the classroom (hooks 1994: 14). Hooks emphasises that one aim of teaching is not only to share information but 'to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students' (hooks 1994: 13). This approach to teaching can be understood as a resistance to instrumentalism and instrumental attitudes, accountability pressures, and the reproduction of the social injustices that are increasing in our universities (see Giroux 2010; Orr and Orr 2016). We acknowledge that 'educational praxis' is not the only term to stand for what we have been talking about. Philosophies around the world, like *ubuntu* and Confucianism, similarly locate education within a collective approach that is 'reciprocal, interdependent and mutually beneficial' and that encompasses 'a view of education that is closely intertwined with a moral imperative' (Oviawe 2016: 3, see also Biraimah 2016; Walker 2002). What is considered as morally just and beneficial, however, is never straightforward and should always be contested.

Educational praxis is therefore not envisaged here as a static, taken-for-granted construct. On the contrary, we contend, it is its sensitivity to context and its need to be constantly negotiated, as well as its resistance to universalistic stances, models or frameworks, that render it a useful lens through which to interrogate the moral-political purposes, nature and consequences of educational activity and structures. It has potential as a conceptual tool for 'rethinking education and educational work' and exploring alternative educational possibilities at classroom, organisational and societal levels (see Mahon et al. forthcoming). The next section elaborates why we need to be able to do this.

Why is educational praxis important?

There are many ways in which the educational and civic missions of universities are currently being restricted, undermined or distorted, for example by the neoliberalisation of academic work and the instrumentalisation of higher



education pedagogy (see Garforth and Gallinat 2018; Giroux 2010; Rogers et al. 2020). University education is increasingly constituted by practices for ‘measuring’, ‘seeing’ and ‘labelling’ abstract outcomes that students are expected to ‘achieve’ at the end of courses and educational programmes. Faculty, including administrators and study counsellors, also find themselves constrained in the exercise of their professional knowledge and judgement (see for instance Giroux 2014; Todd 2016). As suggested above, interrogation of education from a praxis perspective can shed light on the limitations of university objectives that have arisen to accommodate new public management and neoliberal agendas of higher accountability, efficiency and marketisation. A praxis approach can also assist academics and students to take action and foreground difficult and uncomfortable questions about the responsibilities of university communities.

As the second decade of the twenty-first century reaches the end of its last year, we are facing interesting and challenging times. Ecological struggles linked to sustainability and the survival of our planet, as well as a pandemic, have changed and are still changing human lives in ways that were unthinkable before and at a speed never witnessed in history. It is in such moments of deep crisis and astonishment that praxis, in terms of ‘taking action’ that is morally driven to change history, becomes important. To be more concrete, let us consider some issues as examples. In what ways can a political agenda of inclusiveness and widening participation in higher education be possible without affecting academic freedom and turning into ideological indoctrination, or empty administrative tasks? Is any kind of educational praxis just and good ‘for all’? The development and spread of digital technology and internet access have added further complexity and weight to these already difficult issues. As Tummons and Beach (2020) put it, technology can enable greater access and participation in education, but it is also the answer to growing demands for productivity and efficiency. Technology, like all other tools, is not ‘good’ or ‘efficient’ per se. Whether a technology is ‘good’ or ‘efficient’ depends on the underlying political and moral dimensions and the consequences of its implementation and use. Thus, we need to pay attention to these dimensions of higher education in a way that ideally involves, we suggest, ‘walking on the edge’.

Walking on the edge

The metaphor ‘walking on the edge’ is used here to conceptualise how educational praxis can be enacted in higher education. This balancing act may



consist in pondering the known and the unknown, the comfort and the risk, what 'is' and what 'could be', or the boundaries between education, indoctrination and 'schooling'.¹ It involves being critically aware of the consequences of what we do. Educational praxis could mean *not* tipping over into being too normative or too fundamental – or too compliant in terms of following rules and administrative demands – in cases where the main task of our work as university teachers and academics runs the risk of being derailed, forgotten or blurred. Educational praxis could also mean considering, for instance, when we might need to reproduce or reinforce particular aspects of education and society, and when we might need to resist and transform them;² or reflecting on how what we do in the form of professional action, or indeed activism, might be counterproductive or even destructive when working towards 'change' from a privileged position. In this view, praxis-oriented universities are key actors in the endeavour to be critical, to foster and encourage praxis as a balancing act between various extremes.

In this special issue, we present cases where the data generation enterprise itself could be understood as a liminal process between the researchers' and university teachers' aspirations to 'act wisely' and develop practice in a certain direction, as well as to shed light on burning issues from a curiosity-driven analytical position.

Summary of the special issue contributions

The articles in this special issue prompt us to think about how, for instance, universities are dealing with diversity in society through widening participation and 'higher education for all' agendas (Bagga-Gupta et al.), or the complexities of students' geographical mobility for access to higher education (Haley), or how transcultural approaches to teaching and learning can be enhanced (Smith). Furthermore, the importance of time for reflection and challenges related to how critical thinking can be fostered are explored in various contexts (Aarnikoivo et al., Smith, Thelin).

The articles are all based on empirical studies. They use the concept of praxis to examine student practices, teaching and professional learning amongst academics in particular contexts. Collectively they contribute to a deeper understanding of how educational praxis in higher education can be explored, enacted, reoriented, enabled and constrained in an era of global change and ambiguity regarding the purpose of universities and their responsiveness to student and societal needs.



In the first article, 'Creating a reflective space in higher education: The case of a Swedish course for professional principals', Katina Thelin engages in praxis from a university teacher's perspective. The study shows the conditions, possibilities and challenges of creating what is referred to as a 'reflective space' to enhance the quality of course participant learning. The article raises questions about power relations and the importance of critical thinking both for the university teachers and for the school principals enrolled in the course in focus. It reminds us about the importance of creating conditions where authentic (critical) sharing and learning can occur.

Another reflective space is explored in the article by Melina Aarnikoivu, Matti Pennanen, Johanna Kiili, and Terhi Nokkala: 'Multidisciplinary peer-mentoring groups facilitating change? A critical educational praxis perspective'. Their study, conducted in Finland, focuses on a multidisciplinary peer-mentoring practice in which both doctoral students and senior scholars take part. Using critical educational praxis as a conceptual lens, the authors show how learning amongst doctoral students and established academics is nurtured, and also what constrains and enables this reflective practice. The article raises questions about and identifies what is needed in higher education to nurture a strong academic community. Like Thelin's study, it highlights the value of creating spaces where there is dedicated time for reflection, and where engagement in critical conversations to enhance learning and educational changes is prioritised.

In 'Transculturality in higher education: Supporting students' experiences through praxis', Heidi Smith considers how the learning experiences of students in a transcultural context can be enhanced. The article draws on a case study involving an Erasmus Mundus Transcultural European Outdoor Studies (TEOS) Masters programme and theoretical resources pertaining to praxis to theorise 'transcultural pedagogy'. It offers the notion of 'critical transcultural pedagogical praxis' as a kind of teaching practice that supports the transcultural learning experiences of both 'globally mobile learners' and those studying in their 'home' countries.

The last two articles report on studies conducted in Sweden to explore policies and institutional conditions for equity, and in doing so they highlight the need to make education more responsive to twenty-first-century societal demands and complexities. Both articles focus on universities as excluding or including spaces. Aimee Haley reports on a study of student mobility in 'Geographical differentiation in access to higher education in Sweden'. The study contributes with knowledge about the ways in which higher education

structures, social conditions and subjective factors affect perceptions of choice and possibilities for students from different backgrounds regarding where to study (i.e., in which university). It considers the social justice implications of these issues for access to what the article labels 'prestigious academic programmes' for students living in rural areas.

Finally, the article 'Equity and social justice for whom and by whom in contemporary Swedish higher and adult education' by Sangeeta Bagga-Gupta, Giulia Messina Dahlberg and Sylvi Vigmo sheds light on how policy framings shape institutional praxis and people's participation in higher and adult education. The article problematises 'inclusion and integration' by scrutinising websites in higher education and in The Swedish Folk High School with a focus on the support services that they purport to offer individuals and groups designated as 'peripheral'. It highlights how policy is enacted in a variety of institutional contexts of higher and adult education in Sweden and raises questions about the potential consequences of naming and categorisation for these groups.

Concluding remarks

This special issue raises important educational concerns and highlights the need for concerted efforts to change or challenge practices and conditions that can inadvertently undermine universities' and educators' intentions. It also serves as a reminder of the need for reflexively examining our collective and individual intentions as academics. The contributions, whether exploring educational praxis or implications for educational praxis at a classroom, institutional or system level, shed light on the complexities of university education, and on how educational praxis can be enabled in the contexts in focus. They provide much food for thought regarding what we could do differently, beyond these contexts, to make higher education more praxis-oriented and socially just. They offer ideas about how universities might be 'communicative learning spaces' of possibilities, intellectual nourishment and reflection in order to create a world worth living in. They additionally offer insights that can help us find a balance in our work, captured in the notion of educational praxis as 'walking on the edge'. We look forward to continued dialogue about the tensions, issues and possibilities that the issue's contributions raise.



Acknowledgements

Each of the guest editors contributed equally to this editorial and the work involved in putting this special issue together.



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Notes

1. See Kemmis and Edwards-Groves (2018) for a discussion on the difference between 'schooling' and 'education'.
2. See Braidotti (2010) for a discussion about the paradox of engaging in the resistance of the present in an oppositional yet affirmative manner.

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