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COLDRON, John and SMITH, Robin

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Published version

COLDRON, John and SMITH, Robin (2015). Being a teacher : practice theory, exemplification and the nature of professional practice. In: PESGB Oxford 2015, Oxford, 26-29 March 2015.

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***Being a teacher: Practice theory, exemplification and the
nature of professional practice.***

John Coldron and Robin Smith

Corresponding author:

John Coldron
Sheffield Institute of Education
Sheffield Hallam University
Sheffield
England
S1 1WB
Email: j.h.coldron@shu.ac.uk

Introduction

Some recent applications of practice theory to education (Kemmis 2010 and 2012) draw on the work of Theodore Schatzki and has offer a conceptualisation of the nature of schooling and the professional practice of teachers as an architecture and ecology of practices. This paper briefly outlines some of the main benefits of this application of practice theory but also some attendant problems – particularly the difficulty of characterising the personal dimensions of experience. We argue that Nelson Goodman’s work in the general theory of symbols provides a way of filling that gap and, further, that Goodman’s theory complements, and in turn needs to be complemented by, practice theory. After brief expositions of his theories of denotation, notation and exemplification, we show how they imply something like practices and that these can be conceptualised in ways consistent with his nominalistic system.

Along the way we anchor the analyses in how the import of the following six sentences or assertions a teacher may make about themselves and their professional practice might be understood:

1. I am a teacher
2. What I do is what a teacher does.
3. What I do is what a teacher should do.
4. I am a good teacher.
5. I do it my way.
6. The way for others to comprehend what I do is by showing rather than telling.

Practice theory

Schatzki (2001) summarises a main motivation of the practice turn as a recognition of the need for alternatives to defining the social mainly in terms of individuals, or interactions, or language, or signifying systems, or the life world, or institutions and roles, or structures or systems. It seeks to move beyond problematic dualisms such as subject and object, or structure and agency, by characterising knowledge, meaning, power, language, social institutions and history as occurring within, and as aspects of, an organised array of activities - that is, the total nexus of interconnected human practices. Practices in turn are embodied, materially mediated activity centrally organised around shared practical understandings. The

practice-skilled body is the common meeting point of mind and activity and of individual and society

Schatzki's own contributions have been firstly an elaboration of the later work of Wittgenstein (Schatzki 1996 and 1997) to argue that the meanings of words, feelings, and actions are established in practices and secondly to synthesise a good many of the strands of the practice turn (Schatzki 2002). He characterises practices as sayings, doings, understandings and purposes which take place in a contexture of many other associated practices and patterned physical arrangements. The criteria of meanings are, he argues, given by practices and particular meanings are established in their use - that is as a performance of a certain practice. Meanings do not exist independently of practices. That is they are not in the head of an individual waiting to be expressed and they are not in some essence of the thing being denoted..

Schatzki makes a distinction between integrated and dispersed practices. Teaching, or doctoring, or neighbouring for example can be characterised as integrated in that they are sustained bundles of associated sayings, doings, understandings and purposes that take place in particular social sites. Questioning, listening, helping, betraying, and promising can be characterised as dispersed in that they thread through many different integrated practices. The sayings and understandings of integrated practices necessarily constitute projects with purposes and aspirations (Schatzki calls this teleo-affectivity) which in turn makes possible virtuous actions according to criteria internal to the practices, and also feelings such as pride, shame, disappointment, or guilt provoked by success or failure in relation to the practice as project.

Practices make available certain identities. A person becomes (that is can successfully describe themselves as) a teacher, gymnast, or footballer by being acknowledged as a participant of an educational practice (e.g. schooling), gymnastics (e.g. competing in the Olympics) , or football (e.g. playing in goal for a team). But, as noted above, identities are not the only kinds of things that practices constitute. They also constitute schools and schooling as both concepts and as the buildings and spatial arrangements of individual institutions that variously realise those concepts as particular identities, classrooms, timetables, rules and regulations, criteria of worth, and purposes.

How long a practice is sustained varies. Some will be so entrenched as to seem incontrovertible and able to be taken as the bedrock of our world while others will be recognised as temporary. But all practices and the kinds of things (including identities) that they bring into being are arbitrary in the sense that they could have been otherwise. Sustaining a practice requires a continuous reproduction and acceptance of its sayings, doings, understandings and physical arrangements all of which are subject to change through challenge or altered circumstances. Bourdieu in particular stresses the arbitrariness (Bourdieu 1992) and it is also illustrated by Hacking, using a Foucauldian approach, in his accounts of how kinds of people have been brought into being by practices and how those kinds disappear as the practices become unsustainable (Hacking 1995 and 2007).

But however arbitrary in theory, performance of the roles and achievement of the aims of a well entrenched practice are normally experienced as relatively intractable from an individual point of view because compliance is part of qualifying as a member of that community - a goalkeeper would not last long in a team if he or she did not accept their role as keeping the ball from entering the net. As Holland et al (1998) and Holland and Lave (2009) show, managing the contradictions of living tolerably within inherited practices requires improvisation. Practices are sustainable in so far as they serve the interests of enough participants and are sufficiently compatible with the interests of others in the wider social system. They would otherwise wither or come under fatal attack in one way or another.

The philosophy of practice shows that who we are and what we do are shaped by our inescapable participation in current practices. Those practices are relatively well established as they are because they habitually work but also because they are the outcome of historical struggles and serve enough interests to warrant being sustained.

In summary integrated practices furnish:

- a. available identities (roles and kinds of people);
- b. a set of intelligible things (kinds of physical entities that fulfil functions determined by the purposes of the practice)
- c. a language (i.e. a vocabulary or set of signs associated with that practice, and a set of meanings of those signs) to denote these things, identities, kinds, roles and arrangements

- d. understandings that identify the purpose or purposes and, in this sense, the meaning of the practice;
- e. ways of doing things that are both pragmatic in relation to ends given within the practice but also that express them;
- f. norms and forms of feeling that are appropriate to the sayings, doings and understandings and which can guide or provoke action.
- g. A context in which dispersed practices such as questioning, listening, helping, betraying, and promising occur.

From this perspective we can understand:

Sentence 1: I am a teacher

and

Sentence 2: What I do is what a teacher does.

as assertions of compliance with and understanding of the currently accepted practice of teaching. Further, it helps us to partly understand the two subsequent sentences,

Sentence 3: What I do is what a teacher should do.

and

Sentence 4: I am a good teacher.

as acceptance of, or compliance with the criteria of worth purveyed by that particular understanding of practice in which they are participating at a particular time.

But practice theory only offers a partial understanding of sentences 3 and 4 for it is equally plausible that a teacher uttering such a sentence might wish to imply some freedom from the social determination of the practices in which they participate. It is undeniable that the practice of individual teachers working in similar positions, teaching the same children, experiencing the same demands within the culture of the same school invariably differs in significant ways. Individual teaching styles and the ethos of each person's classroom is distinct and recognisable.

Given the intense and complex nature of the performance that a teacher has to pull off in order to create a sustainable learning community in their classroom it is not surprising that those creations all differ. A teacher's professional practice is constituted by intense forms of interaction coloured (as all interactions with other persons are) by their moral commitments, emotional dispositions and cognitive understandings.

It is not only the intensity and frequency of interaction but also the nature of the teacher's role because of their responsibility to lead the classroom community. In that mini-society she or he has to be, among many other things, setter of moral norms, legislator, diplomat, lawyer, policeperson, criminal investigator, advocate (prosecution and defence) and entertainer (to maintain morale). The teacher must manage those 'civic' responsibilities in such a way as to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the pupils and ideally their affection too. How they do so will inevitably be influenced by, and improvised out of, the idiosyncratic bundle of values, attitudes, feelings, dispositions, skills, knowledge, anxieties, identities and beliefs that the individual teacher attempts to hold in a bearably coherent self. As life-history studies (Goodson 1992) have shown our professional practice is affected by our biography.

It is possible to explain the differences arising from these aspects of professional practice as a result of having resources for thinking and acting beyond those provided by the practice of their particular school. That such resources are available follows from the fact that each individual is a participant in practices other than that of schooling – being a member of a religion or political party for example – that may import different and perhaps conflicting purposes and criteria of worth setting up a critical relation with how things are done (Coldron and Smith 1999). Eschewing psycho-analytic explanations we may call this the theory of idiosyncrasy – literally 'self-mix' in Greek – where our unique mix of identities, purposes, norms etc are nevertheless furnished by the range of practices in which we participate. In this way it is possible to stretch the notion of idiosyncrasy to account for the sense of the personal that these aspects of practice seem to warrant. But in the next sections we turn to Goodman's nominalistic philosophy to argue that there is an additional and more radical source of a personal dimension.

Goodman on denotation

How should we understand

Sentence 1: I am a teacher

in Goodman's terms?

The assertion is a matter of denotation - that the person speaking is correctly referred to by the word 'teacher'. His account of denotation is nominalistic. Labels denote. Denotation is the successful application of a label to an individual¹. An individual may be denoted by any label under whose extension it falls. An individual label comes as part of a set of related labels or syntactic apparatus - a schema. The set of English words for the three primary colours (red, yellow and blue) and three secondary colours (purple, orange and green) is one such relatively simple schema. The more numerous (and often more whimsical) names on a paint retailer's colour chart (poppy red, brick red, paprika red etc) offer a more elaborated schema naming more things. The label 'teacher' may be taken as one label among others in a schema of professions such as doctor, lawyer, accountant, etc, or more widely as a schema of occupations which would include the previous professions but also many others.

Denotation by a label in Goodman's analysis may be understood as the equivalence of the four statements below (using for clarity the simple colour schema) with A4 the formal expression within his system:

A1. 'Red' denotes the colour of an English fire engine.

A2. An English fire engine is red.

A3. An English fire engine possesses the property of being red.

A4. The extension of the label 'red' includes the colour of an English fire engine.

Goodman explicitly extends reference (including denotation) beyond the linguistic. Not only do words operate as labels so can pictures and sounds. For example, pictures of balls, skipping ropes, bats and bean bags on a set of boxes for PE equipment may equally well denote their contents. Any individual - a word, a picture, a musical sound - can act as a label.

We may ask how it is that red *successfully denotes* (A1); or that the fire engine *is* red (A2); or that it *possesses the property* of being red (A3); or that it *falls under the extension* of the label

¹ By which is meant a logical individual as defined in his system. See (Goodman 1951).

'red' (A4). But this is a question only indirectly addressed by Goodman. A distinct aspect of his system is a radical irrealism - a refusal to countenance any answer to these questions beyond an habitually successful but defeasible projection of a label.

Goodman defines a symbol system as a symbol scheme correlated with a field of reference. The symbol scheme is the class of 'characters' in the system (the schema) used to refer to some object or event. The field of reference of a character is that which is denoted (or referred to in some other way) by a character. So for a standard colour wheel of the three primary and three secondary colours showing a different colour in each of twelve discrete segments the syntactic element, the schema, is the 12 colour words '*red*', '*blue*', '*yellow*', '*purple*', '*orange*', '*green*', '*red-orange*', '*yellow-orange*', '*yellow-green*', '*blue-green*', '*blue-purple*' and the semantic element, the field of reference, is the twelve colors arranged on the wheel. In this case both the semantic and syntactic elements are disjoint and finitely differentiated. That is, for any one character we can establish which of the regions it denotes and for any regions picked out by the pointer we could establish with which character they comply.

Now consider another symbol system as represented by another color wheel where there is a continuous and gradual change from one color to the next as in the spectrum. This means that no matter how small a movement the pointer makes, a change of colour, albeit minute, will have occurred. Now this is not markedly different from our previous example if we still take the same six colours as the only characters in our scheme i.e. retain the distinct syntactic element. All that we will have done is to make determination of the boundaries in the semantic field much more difficult. However we do significantly change the nature of the system if we say that for every movement of the pointer, there being a change in colour there is a change in character. We can do this by generating some such additional characters as '*yellow-yellow-green*' and '*green-green-blue*' and '*yellow-yellow-yellow-green*' and '*green-green-green-blue*' and so on. In this case there are an infinite number of characters for between any two there will always be a third. Discrimination of characters and the colours they denote is impossible to accomplish. Goodman describes such a system as syntactically and semantically dense. The result is a practically ineradicable indeterminacy of reference. Another example is offered by the difference between a digital thermometer that signals a change in temperature using whole numbers and an analogue mercury thermometer in an

unmarked tube where even infinitely small movements of the mercury column indicate a difference in temperature.

Goodman's theory provides the means to identify how far and in what ways any symbol system complies with or departs from maximal determinacy. To be maximally determinate five logically independent conditions must be fulfilled by the system. The syntactic apparatus must have characters that are disjoint and finitely differentiated. The compliance classes of the semantic field must be disjoint, the semantic field finitely differentiated and there must be no semantic ambiguity. Indeterminacy arises when a symbol system is ambiguous or is either syntactically or semantically dense, or both, and density is defined in relation to differentiation. Unsurprisingly, this places most ordinary languages as often indeterminate.

In *The Structure of Appearance* (1951) Goodman gives an intricate and technical account of the logical relation of the truth status of statements² which provide a set of clearly defined concepts which form the building blocks for his later accounts of induction, representation, expression and world making. We do not need to assess the adequacy of these efforts to appreciate the fruitfulness and prescience of aspects of his work. He holds that there is no one way that the world is and that all we can do is to make decrees about the way things are. This threatens an anarchic arbitrariness but we actually achieve a workable stability of meaning such that everyday life is sustained. Goodman thinks that this occurs as a result of successful habit which results in the projectibility of a sufficient range of sufficiently consistent predicates. He describes such predicates as becoming entrenched.

Goodman places the act of concession, the acceptance of a decree, as the final support of any assertion. Even though he has characterised such concession as far from being arbitrary it is a fundamental tenet of his system that the choice between acceptance and rejection of any decree is always open. In addition the exercise of this essential freedom is informed by how far it serves our interest. There is no process by which opposing decrees arising from conflicting patterns of articulation can ultimately be resolved.

He deliberately does not elaborate on how those interests may be shaped or determined other than simply to acknowledge and embrace the conclusion that there are many legitimate

² For a full exposition see Coldron (1982) and Shottenkirk (2009). Also Schantz (2009).

world-versions. His system thus gives equal logical status to all world-versions which are capable of sustaining themselves in the context of all other statements. They maintain their status only by asserting predicates projectible within their own version. Any particular assertion should not conflict with other assertions that they would wish to uphold. As Goodman says, any decree, however unnatural, can be maintained by giving up enough others (Goodman 1976).

What does this mean for our understanding of **Sentence 1: I am a teacher.?** Firstly it provides an ontology. The successful projection of the predicate *is a teacher* is dependent on the label *teacher* being a member of a schema that constitutes a kind. Secondly, the projection is necessarily defeasible. Thirdly, the semantic field, the reference of the label 'teacher' is indeterminate because being part of a natural language it departs from maximal determinacy. It can play a part in many different schema and without other resources such as contextual cues, we cannot fix a workable meaning. And fourthly, to be a sustainable assertion those with the power to do so must determine that it is an acceptable decree i.e. deem it true, or true enough, for the moment.

We must take due note of the effect of Goodman's strictures upon decrees. Firstly, he emphasises that versions differ in degrees of consistency, subtlety, simplicity and explanatory power. He identifies the legitimacy, the acceptability of any decree, with consistency with our whole past and future decrees and at the same time links the language we use to make those decrees with inherited entrenched patterns. This effectively debar arbitrariness and ensures that when two world versions come into conflict there will be important issues of interest at stake but also independent criteria for challenge.

Goodman does not reject on principle the possibility of a theory explaining why we make certain choices between decrees which ultimately determine our world versions. Goodman is concerned with the logical variety of forms of reference; their logical inter-relationships; their combinations into powerfully illuminating chains; and the way in which this better understanding calls into question our current classifications of things as for example, scientific, artistic, affective or cognitive. He offers a re-sorting by offering new categories created through new distinctions and a systematic way of understanding why the act of re-sorting is so powerful a process.

He accepts the possibility of a theory of psychological determinism but argues that it is unworkable in practice. If psychological determination is accepted in principle then a theory of radical social determination might be acceptable and offer a better explanation for some choices of classification. A theory that traces operant interest, a central theme of practice theory, is compatible with the formal analysis of symbol systems that Goodman develops in his work.

Goodman on Exemplification

A characteristic of denotation highlighted by Goodman is its singular direction of reference from a label A to a feature or property B. In denotation labels refer but are not themselves referred to by the thing denoted. Samples on the other hand do just that in his formulation. Labels denote features that the sample possesses and the sample refers back to (some of) those labels.

If a exemplifies b then (1) a possesses or is denoted by b; and (2) a refers to b.

The often quoted illustration from *Languages of Art* is that of the tailor's swatch. The swatch has (possesses) properties of colour, weave etc in so far as it is correctly denoted by labels from the differentiated sets of weave-labels (weave-schema), colour-labels (colour-schema) etc. And it refers to these labels to exemplify the properties of the different cloths available. But it also possesses properties not considered relevant. Its properties are countless but only some of them are exemplified because it is used to make reference to only some of the labels that denote it.

The labels a sample refers to are usually less determined by precedent than in denotation and therefore it is even more important to attend to clues present at time of use. For example the properties exemplified (i.e. possessed and referred to) by the tailor's swatch will vary if the interrogative context changes. If it is offered as a sample in response to the question, '*What kinds of material are available?*' the swatch will exemplify certain properties of the different kinds of cloth it contains. But if it is offered in response to, '*What is a tailor's swatch?*' it would exemplify being a tailor's swatch even if none of the cloths it contains are currently available. And if at another time it was presented as an example of a door stopper the relevant properties change again.

But there are many cases of samples that appear to have no relevant labels available (Dempster 1989) and these seem to stand as counterexamples to Goodman's analysis. Goodman's answer to this is in terms of self-exemplification and this is one of his most fruitful but contested constructs. He uses dance as an illustration.

...the label a movement exemplifies may be itself; such a movement, having no antecedent denotation, takes on the duties of a label denoting certain actions including itself. Here, as often elsewhere in the arts, the vocabulary evolves along with what it is used to convey. (Goodman 1976 p64-65)

What is being exemplified is indeterminate. Indeterminacy arises from the dynamic nature in which we determine correct reference and Goodman's analysis effects a re-description of artistic practice as a dynamic, interactive, symbolic activity. Goodman celebrates the fecundity of indeterminacy and the vital role of critical reflection and commentary in Languages of Art. He says of pictorial exemplification and expression:-

In any...system with a dense symbol scheme and a dense or unlimited set of reference-classes, the search for accurate adjustment between symbol and symbolized calls for maximal sensitivity, and is unending. (Goodman 1976 p236)

and of music :-

....despite the definition of works by scores, exemplification or expression of anything beyond the score by a performance is reference in a semantically dense system, and a matter of infinitely fine adjustment. (Goodman 1976 p238)

and of literature:-

...even though a literary work is articulate and may exemplify or express what is articulate, endless search is always required here as in other arts to determine precisely what is exemplified or expressed. (Goodman 1976 p240)

Such an analysis gives great importance to contextual clues and the determining influence of the host of semi-rules, customs and conventions of (in these instances) artistic practice. He also gives joint responsibility for the achievement of meaning to the art object as presented and to dialogue about it.

Goodman's concept of exemplification has been widely criticised on the grounds that the implied self-reference leads to paradox and, further, that how a sample refers is fatally unclear. A recurring theme has been the difficulty of characterising the way in which the sample displays, or picks out from a vast array of candidates, just those that are actually exemplified. A kind of indeterminacy, the criticism goes, lies at the heart of the relation and it

is difficult to find a formulation that avoids the difficulty. Vermeulen et al (2009) for example argue that it should be taken as a basic notion.

Goodman's formulation of exemplification is we have argued elsewhere (Coldron 1982a and 1982b) defensible, even within his own strict nominalistic system, but requires an elaboration of the role that practices play in his formal system. The most recent defence along these lines has been given by Textor (2008) adopting a Gricean account of communicative intentions where what labels are exemplified is determined within a context of intentions and actual presentation.

We gain a great deal by elaborating the fuller account of the role of context and intention that practice theory provides. For the tailor's swatch to exemplify requires participants to know, among other things, how to take and play their roles as customer or vendor; what a shop (and more precisely a tailor's shop) is for and both customer and vendor being aware of and knowing how correctly to perform the general practice of promising in which the swatch participates. These are the integrated and dispersed practices that constitute a teleo-affective project as part of a complex interdependent web of practices. The exemplification of practice-relevant labels by a tailor's swatch is a function of its role in such a web of practice and it will change its role (i.e. the labels it denotes or exemplifies) when the swatch is used as part of a different set of practices. Social practice is crucial in his theory of exemplification because it picks out the labels a sample exemplifies from an almost infinite set. Talk of practices can easily be transposed into systematic language where the syntactic and semantic apparatus and the criteria of projectibility furnished by practices are used in the processes of referring by denoting and exemplifying.

Such arguments do not eradicate indeterminacy of reference. As we have seen an ineradicable indeterminacy exists in the absence of maximal determinacy (rarely found in natural languages) while artistic practices are characterised by a fruitful semantic and syntactic density (some of Goodman's symptoms of the aesthetic). In contrast to arguments that see indeterminacy as a weakness it is largely this feature that enables his general theory of symbols to contribute so fruitfully when applied in the field of the arts and the social sciences.

How might Goodman's concept of exemplification help us to interpret the following sentences?

Sentence 5: I do it my way.

and

Sentence 6: The only way for others to comprehend what I do is by showing rather than telling.

Take this example from a teacher talking about his practice. He describes how the experience of a particular lesson, in which he read at length from a story by Capote, came to have significance for him.

...the taste of this lesson lingers with me still. It is the taste of a failed relation. I was swept up by the power of my teaching past the bounds of my ordinary judgement, defended the teaching to myself despite my own clear sense of its faults, felt compelled to write out that long sequence of moments that nearly made me weep, and in the process nearly wept again...In the end doubts about this lesson are what I remember most. The result is that my memory of the incident has become an exemplar, a constituent element of my practical judgement as a teacher. (McDonald 1992: 26)

The initial sense of the lesson as in some way a failure impelled McDonald to greater understanding of what went wrong. He worked at it painstakingly recording each moment in order to recognise where he was at fault. By the metaphor of taste he conveys the visceral nature of the experience and invites us to consider appropriate forms of understanding - should it be sensed rather than analysed? Savoured rather than defined? Absorbed and integrated rather than compartmentalised and added? He confesses to a moral laziness and self-deceit, being 'swept up' past the bounds of his ordinary judgement.

McDonald's emotionally charged attempt to discover the reality of the lesson is an act of transmutation. He constructs his memory of the lesson as an exemplar. This failed lesson becomes a sample that exemplifies 'wrongness' or more precisely 'wrongness-as-displayed-by-this-example'. It is a sample that exemplifies itself. By taking it as a sample McDonald has made the experience (which he alone endured) available as a way of labelling (denoting) and exemplifying and therefore as a powerful tool for him to categorise and articulate his experience. As such it is used by him to discern, to come to know, to re-cognise and discriminate. It is also imbued with, and in some part constituted by, feeling which is both a

part of the experience itself and a means by which the experience is understood, judged and appreciated.

McDonald, we may assume, has constructed many such samples during his career. All teachers have their own stock of stories, examples and moments which cumulatively contribute to their sense of professional identity and guide their professional practice. Such knowledge is, and can only come as, the fruit of experience. Goodman's theorisation of symbols enables us to characterise the difference between the practice of a teacher of long standing and that of a novice precisely as the greater articulacy afforded by a more extensive means of naming and describing – a richer resource of syntactic and semantic elements. It also provides a rigorous account of the notion of reflective practice and the (potential) development of connoisseurship at least partly as the creation and deployment of personally wrought labels and samples to make a variety of forms of reference in sometimes complex strings in particular contexts.

Further, this approach offers a characterisation of a radical personal dimension of teaching. The description given here of the way in which a personally tailored language inevitably arises from experience implies nothing about the substance of that language or how others may assess its effects on practice. Although we may assume this was for him a way of becoming a better teacher the affect of this personal labelling need not be what others would consider positive. Also a teacher may use such exemplification to retrench their existing (perhaps questionable) practice. The wrongness and the rightness that McDonald is now better able to discern are *his* wrongness and rightness. How he comes to adopt his particular values and moral positions concerning his professional practice is part of his active social location within, and in relation to, the array of discursive resources available to him (Coldron and Smith 1999). But the formal account of the kind of reference achieved is the same. And crucially, the labels are private and personal in a radical sense although not in principle uncommunicable.

As a result of the forms of reference involved – syntactic and semantic density and self-exemplification - these individually wrought meanings are inherently difficult to communicate to others except by further exemplification. As in the arts, a particular event or happening has initially no prior denotation and therefore if the teacher uses it as a sample for

themselves or, say, to a student teacher assigned to them, it is a label exemplifying itself. This is how I propose we understand:

Sentence 6: The way for others to comprehend what I do is by showing rather than telling.

Without the development of an appreciative critical discourse (analogous to that provided by art critics and commentators) it can only be communicated by showing it again. But that of course is an extreme and such exemplification, as in the arts, will almost always be in conjunction with other forms of reference (such as denotation) constituting a meta-language of shared sayings, doings and understandings. How far a teacher develops a personal critical language varies but the presence of the dialogue (with oneself and others) required to do so is a measure of the level of reflexivity of a teacher or community of professionals.

The tailoring of a personal language from a variety of resources in response to the urgencies of everyday life in the classroom offers the possibility that teachers may fashion a critical relation to other (including official) discourses. The personal nature of the forms of reference used to label experience and the complexity and mutual interdependency that an ecological conception of the nature of practices implies (Kemmis 2010 and 2012) makes the difficulty and unpredictability of attempts to ‘improve’ practices understandable.

Concluding remarks

Focusing as we have on the practice of an individual teacher may seem to lapse into a kind of individualism fundamentally at odds with the perspective of practice theory. But we wish fully to accept the description of an individual’s practice as constituted within the interrelation of interdependent practices – just not wholly constituted. We have attempted to show that the deployment of Goodman’s concept of exemplification in conjunction with elements of practice theory provides a way of conceptualising practice in both its largest possible dimension of socio-historical space and in its smallest dimension of individual experience.

There is we believe more to be gained from a return in the light of practice theory to Goodman's philosophy and an application of his analysis of forms of reference in educational debate and social theory more widely (Douglas 1992). For example we have said nothing about his distinction between literal and metaphorical exemplification. If his theory of metaphor and expression can be successfully defended, which I think they can, (Coldron 1982a) and the above arguments about exemplification can be sustained then these together may offer useful and interesting ways of conceptualising the metaphorical and affective dimensions of social practice and for clarifying what might be meant by the term 'expressive' commonly used in philosophy and social theory but whose meaning is rarely exposed to sufficient analysis.

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