

Chapter 4

Practising Wisdom: Wisdom Is Realised in Practice, in History



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Abstract This chapter complements Chap. 3 in this volume. The question of wisdom in practice is addressed here from a perspective that is different from, and complementary to, the philosophical and psychological perspectives introduced in the previous chapter. The basic assumption of this chapter is that wisdom manifests itself—or fails to manifest itself—in everyday *practices*. In this chapter, practices are addressed from a social perspective—in particular, from the perspective of the *theory of practice architectures*, a particular version of practice theory. Rooted in the philosophical legacy of Aristotle and Hegel, a Marxian view of praxis as ‘sensuous human activity’ and ‘history-making action’ is outlined. Next, a contemporary view of practice is introduced as learned, situated, embodied human social action in history. It is argued that practising-in-history is the medium in which people discover how things turn out, and in which they discover whether those consequences might be judged ‘wise’. Next, it is argued that wise action comes from listening (attending to different sources), noticing, reflecting, deliberating, discerning, and

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prioritising, which are not only mental processes but also practices, as we have defined them. People can learn to do these things better, and when they do so they transform themselves and their worlds. It is then argued that the double purpose of education (learning to live well in worlds worth living in) aligns with developing isdom. Finally, to conclude, some suggestions are made about educating people for wisdom in practice.

Keywords Wisdom · Practice · Praxis · Education · History-making action · Historical consequences · Self-realisation · World-realisation · Situated knowing · Ontological transformation

4.1 Practising Wisdom

In Chap. 3 of this volume—*Philosophical origins of wisdom in practice: phronesis and sophia grounded in moral virtue*, Virtanen and Kallio (2026) discussed Aristotelian conceptions of notions including *sophía* (wisdom), *phronēsis* (prudence), and *praxis* (virtuous action aiming for the good) which continue to play roles in contemporary philosophical and psychological literature about wisdom. The first two notions—*sophía* and *phronēsis*—are intellectual virtues that are precursors of action: that is, they are capacities that guide the decisions and actions of the one who acts (or does not act). The third notion, *praxis*, is a specific kind of morally-informed action, guided by a person's reflection on the specific circumstances they face in a situation in which they must act (or refrain from acting) in pursuit of the good, and by their deliberation about the best course of action to take under the circumstances.

In this chapter, we do not revisit the Aristotelian notions discussed in Chap. 3 but instead explore how wisdom manifests itself in the territory beyond the decision or the impulse to act—in the realm of action itself, in *practice*. We address the question of wisdom in practice from a perspective that is different from, and complementary to, the philosophical and psychological perspectives prominent in Chap. 3. In this chapter, we explore practice from a social perspective—in particular, the perspective of the theory of practice architectures, a particular version of practice theory (e.g., Schatzki, 2002, 2010, 2012; Kemmis et al., 2014b; Kemmis, 2022; Grootenboer & Edwards-Groves, 2023). While Chap. 3 focussed more on wisdom as an intellectual and moral virtue that is a capacity and a precursor for action, in this chapter, we focus on wisdom as it is realised—made real—in practice.

Since the time of Aristotle (e.g., in his *Nicomachean Ethics*; Bartlett & Collins, 2011), wisdom has generally been treated as a precursor for action; that is, as the capacity that guides the actions of a wise person. That meaning of wisdom is preserved today in everyday language use. In this chapter, by contrast, we explore wisdom as it is revealed in *practices*—what people do. In our view, when wisdom

is attributed to someone—when they are called wise—it means no more than that they are acting or have acted wisely, perhaps even regularly or characteristically. Wisdom is made real in their *practice*—that is (we will argue), in their *learned, situated, embodied human social action in history*. On this view, to call someone or something ‘wise’ is a value judgement people place on that person’s actions after they have happened, when it is possible to judge the extent to which things turned out well or badly.

Here is an example of wise action, based on contemporary media reports and subsequent responses to a violent extremist event:

Around 3.20 pm on July 22, 2011, Norwegian man Anders Behring Breivik detonated two bombs near the Prime Minister’s office in Oslo, killing eight people and injuring dozens more. Breivik then travelled to the island of Utøya in Tyrifjorden lake, about 40 km northwest of Oslo, the site of a summer camp organised by the youth league of the Norwegian Labour Party, arriving around 5 pm. Dressed as a policeman and saying he had come to help, he used an automatic rifle to shoot and kill a further 69 people (33 under the age of 18) and injuring 32 more. At the time, there had been controversy in Norway about immigration from Muslim majority countries. Early the next day, some commentators therefore speculated that the attacks were the work of Islamist terrorists (Borger & Beaumont, 2011) since Norway had 550 soldiers in Afghanistan, and Norwegian jet fighters were flying sorties in Libya. In the hours that followed the attacks, to forestall possible retribution against Muslim immigrants in Norway, Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg confirmed that the perpetrator was a 32-year-old, ethnically Norwegian man whom he did not name. Police later identified the perpetrator as Breivik—a white neo-Nazi who had posted a long anti-immigrant manifesto on the internet in the hours before the attacks.

Stoltenberg’s announcement identifying the perpetrator as ethnically Norwegian was wise because it prevented harms to innocent people, especially immigrants.

The view that wisdom is revealed in practices may seem unusual or provocative, but it is not. There are precedents for arguments along these lines. For example, Jorge Larraín (1979) criticised earlier notions of *ideology* as (a) a socially--determined way of thinking (Marx & Engels, 2022), (b) a worldview shared by some population (*Weltanschauung*; Mannheim, 1991), or (c) false consciousness (Lukács, 1923/2000) and concluded, following Althusser (1971) and Gramsci (1971), that ideology is carried in practices. In a similar way, Foucault (1980) argued that *power* (e.g., patriarchal power) is not a possession concentrated in the hands of ‘the powerful’ (e.g., men) but, rather, circulates in populations through the habitual, capillary reproduction of intimate, local practices of control and submission, sometimes disrupted by practices of resistance or opposition.

While we acknowledge that wisdom is frequently understood as a feature of a person said to be wise, in this chapter we focus on wisdom as it is revealed in practice—in what people do. This is the shift that Marx (1845, 1852) made when he criticised the idealism of G.W.F. Hegel, 1967 and the materialism of Ludwig Feuerbach (1841) in his (Marx's, 1845) *Theses on Feuerbach* in which he outlined his understanding of *praxis*.

4.2 A Marxian View of Praxis

Today, there are competing views about the nature of praxis. In some Continental European languages, praxis means approximately what 'practice' means in everyday English—simply, what people do. As noted in Chap. 3, for Aristotle, praxis was *virtuous action* guided by *phronēsis* (prudence; Bartlett & Collins, 2011). Contemporary neo-Aristotelians also regard praxis as action that pursues the good for humankind (e.g., MacIntyre, 1983).

After recalling the Aristotelian view of praxis, philosopher Richard Bernstein (1971) explored several contemporary perspectives on praxis and action. He credited Marx (e.g., 1845) with developing “a thorough, systematic, and comprehensive *theory of praxis*” (p.xi; italics in original) which went beyond Hegel, 1967 philosophical idealism to *materialise* praxis both in human bodies ('human sensuous activity') and in history (e.g., in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852).

Marx was influenced (via the Young Hegelian Moses Hess) by August Cieszkowski, 1979, who had concluded that truth is revealed in history rather than in abstract, idealist philosophy (as in Hegel). In his 'Prolegomena to Historiosophy', Cieszkowski (1838/1979, p.62) remarked, “the whole essence of being and thought must appear on the stage of universal history in the form of deeds”. Later (p.77, italics in original), he adds,

The future fate of philosophy in general is to be practical philosophy, or to put it better, *the philosophy of praxis*, whose most concrete effect on life and on social relations is the development of *truth in concrete activity*.

Several critics of Hegel's idealism (e.g., Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, Joseph Dietzgen, and Karl Marx) rejected Hegel's idealism, advancing instead various versions of materialism. Marx then rejected the particular form of materialism advocated by Feuerbach (1841) because it continued to privilege thought about action over action itself. Responding to Feuerbach (1841), in the first of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx (1845) wrote (n.p.):

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism—which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.

Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity.

Here, Marx describes practice as ‘sensuous human activity’—what today we might call ‘embodied human action’. In the eleventh thesis, he concluded that “Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it”. This was a call for philosophy get up from the philosopher’s armchair and commit itself to the world of praxis—the world of political action, revolutionary practice. This was a conclusive step in the shift from an idealist to a more fully materialist view of praxis as action in history. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx (1852) wrote:

[People] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

This Marxian view of praxis can thus also be described as ‘history-making action’ (Kemmis, 2012; Mahon et al., 2020).

According to MacIntyre (1994), the *Theses on Feuerbach* was Marx’s last purely philosophical work, although Brudney (1998) rightly argues that, despite no longer using the word ‘philosophy’ in his writings, Marx never ceased doing philosophical work in his theorising. After the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx’s historical materialism and his historical and political work was grounded in the commitment to action to change the world. Marx invited philosophers to step into history—to *make* history. He invited people to take a problematising, critical perspective and to learn from the consequences of embodied human action in history—the consequences of *practice*, especially in the form of *praxis*. Today, given the prominence of the widespread idea that praxis is action in pursuit of the good for humankind, Huttunen and Heikkinen (2024) have argued for a non-anthropocentric view of praxis they call *planetary praxis* that sustains not only human beings but also the community of life on Earth, and the geophysical systems that support life. After reviewing Aristotelian and Marxian traditions regarding *praxis*, and complementing them with insights from deep ecology and the more-than-human perspective, Huttunen and Heikkinen (2024, p.28) propose

... a posthuman interpretation of praxis ...: praxis as planetary wisdom which can be enabled and promoted by education for planetary well-being as praxis. This is to conceptualize praxis as deliberative human action, aimed at human well-being which is intertwined with planetary well-being, including the well-being of present humans, future humans, and non-human nature.

Heikkinen et al. (2024, p.2) argue that this posthuman view of *praxis* can be pursued through education for planetary well-being:

... non-anthropocentric perspectives [on praxis] can be substantially extended and enhanced by a new theory of transformative praxis that breaks through the anthropocentric limit imposed by the notion of ‘the good for humankind’ to embrace collective human action for planetary well-being. We call this approach a praxis orientation to environmental education.

In the 180 years since Marx wrote the *Theses on Feuerbach*, many social theorists and social activists around the globe have stepped into history with the aim of

changing the world by transforming their collective embodied human social practices and learning from reflection on their experience about the conduct and consequences of their praxis—consequences that are written in history, in cultures and discourses, in economies, in societies, and in ecologies.

The step from idealist philosophy into materialist social and political action is dramatically exemplified in the study of social movements arising in opposition to established social orders by Alain Touraine (1981) and his co-researchers. They studied a variety of European social movements in the 1970s (e.g., the green movement, anti-nuclear movement, and the pro-democracy movement ignited in Poland's Gdansk shipyards) in an approach Touraine called *the method of intervention*, in which researchers were embedded with leading activists in such movements, documenting and informing events as they unfolded.

Similarly, various forms of action research from the 1920s to the present have studied social practice as it unfolds in efforts to transform practices, people's understandings of their practices, and the conditions under which the practices occur (see, for example, McTaggart, 1991; Kemmis et al., 2014a). For example, in the 1920s and '30 s, Jacob Moreno studied social relations through psychodrama and sociodrama (Gunz, 1996); in the 1940s and '50 s, Kurt Lewin (1946) used action research to study racial segregation and integration in US restaurants and factories; in the 1940s, John Collier (1945) used it to study inter-ethnic relations in US First Nations settings; in the 1950s, Stephen Corey (1953) used action research in studying and changing practices in classrooms; Nevitt Sanford (1969) used it in studying higher education in the 1960s. Since the 1970s, it has burgeoned in the action research of thousands of educators who have followed in the footsteps of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975), John Elliott and Adelman (1973), and Bridget Somekh (2006) and Susan Noffke (Noffke & Somekh, 2009) who worked in partnership with teachers exploring their educational practice.

This step from philosophy into action also happens in higher education, when teachers encourage students to step into practice and history by requiring students to undertake (e.g.) professional experience, workplace learning, service learning, internships, and action research projects.

4.2.1 *Acting in Uncertainty*

When we act, we make histories in which we hope things will turn out well. Although we may generally feel that we know what we're doing, we also know that our actions are always a projection into the unknown. Despite this uncertainty, we act, knowing that things might turn out unexpectedly. No matter how they turn out, however, if we reflect attentively on the conduct and the consequences of our actions, we can hear the world speaking to us in its own language—according to Cieszkowski, 1979, the language of history. When we do, we learn from experience, hoping that we can reach a vantage point—wisdom?—from which we will be able

to see beyond the limits of our present horizons. Given the history of the notion of wisdom, it is not surprising that people think of it as a distillation of what we learn from our experience. Here, however, we want to focus on how wisdom is realised *in people's practising*.

4.3 Wisdom Is Realised in Practice

We turn now to consider what it means to say that wisdom is realised in *practice*—that it is realised in people's practising-in-history, that is, in the medium in which people discover *how things turn out*.

There is debate about the nature of practices, however. Schatzki (2010, p.51), for example, says that a practice is “an open, organized array of doings and sayings” held together by particular *action understandings*, *rules*, a *teleoaffective structure*, and *general understandings*.¹

Kemmis, Wilkinson et al. (2014b, p.31), by contrast, defined a practice as

... a form of socially established cooperative human activity in which characteristic arrangements of actions and activities (*doings*) are comprehensible in terms of arrangements of relevant ideas in characteristic discourses (*sayings*), and when the people and objects involved are distributed in characteristic arrangements of relationships (*relatings*), and when this complex of sayings, doings, and relatings ‘hangs together’ in a distinctive *project*.

Later, Kemmis, Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer (2025, p.23) described practice simply as ‘embodied human social action in history’. To that, we might now add that practice is also learned, and that it is also situated, because practices always happen in specific sites. Thus, in our view, practice is *learned, situated, embodied human social action in history*. Table 4.1 elaborates these defining features of practice.

¹ Schatzki (2010, p.51; our italics) says: “By a ‘social practice’ I mean an open, organized array of doings and sayings. Examples include political practices, horse breeding practices, training practices, cooking practices, religious practices, trading practices and teaching practices. Practices of any of these sorts can vary historically and geographically, the variation consisting in different practices of a given sort comprising different doings and sayings, organized differently, with a different history. The doings and sayings that compose a practice are organized by phenomena of four types: (1) *action understandings*, which combine knowing how to perform an action that helps compose the practice, knowing how to recognize this action, and knowing how to respond to it; (2) *rules*, by which I mean formulated directives, admonishments, orders, and instructions to perform or leave off certain actions; (3) a *teleoaffective structure*, which comprises acceptable or prescribed ends, acceptable or enjoined projects to carry out those ends, acceptable or prescribed actions to perform as part of those projects—thus acceptable or prescribed end-project-action combinations—as well as, possibly, accepted or prescribed emotions and even moods; and (4) *general understandings* about matters germane to the practice. The ends, projects and actions that form a teleoaffective structure can be enjoined of and acceptable for either all participants in a practice or those participants enjoying certain statuses, for example, certain roles or identities”.

Table 4.1 Defining features of practices

<i>Practices are ...</i>	
learned	Practices are learned. Even the simplest, apparently instinctual, practices like a baby’s sucking at the breast or turning its head towards a parent’s voice, are learned in the sense that they are iteratively refined to meet the changing circumstances of particular moments and places. More generally, people learn practices in the sense that they come to know how to go on (Wittgenstein, 1958) in the <i>sayings, doings, and relatings</i> that compose the practices of a particular group or community. These sayings, doings, and relatings hang together (Schatzki, 2002) in the <i>project</i> (purpose, <i>telos</i>) of the practice (Kemmis et al., 2014b). People also <i>reproduce</i> their practices from occasion to occasion, varying, adapting, and transforming them to respond to changing needs and circumstances (Kemmis, 2022). Kemmis (2021) argues that practice theory should not regard learning solely as the acquisition of knowledge but also, more capaciously, as “coming to practise differently” (p.289).
Situated	Practices happen in specific sites, among specific <i>cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements</i> (Kemmis et al., 2014b) found in or brought to a <i>site</i> (Schatzki, 2002). ^a The sayings, doings, and relatings that constitute practices are only possible when the specific arrangements that support them (e.g., language, material objects, social relations) are present in a site; these arrangements are conditions that make it possible for a practice to occur, and serve as an ecological niche that permits a species of practice to persevere, be sustained, and evolve (Kemmis, 2022). Practices are always entangled (Hodder, 2012) with arrangements in <i>practice-arrangement bundles</i> that Schatzki (2012, p.12) views as fundamental to analysing social life. ^b This entanglement or bundling is an expression of Schatzki’s (2002, 2003, 2005, 2006) <i>site-ontological</i> view of practices.—The significance of situational factors is empirically further elaborated in this book on the basis of interview data from experienced experts in Chap. 10— <i>Collaboration and Wisdom in Practice</i> (Billett & Le, 2026).
Embodied	Practices are not composed of ideas or intentions plus action; they are realised (made real) in “sensuous human activity” (Marx, 1845). In more contemporary terms, one might say that practices are carried out by embodied persons in a material world (Schatzki, 2019). To call practices ‘embodied’ also points to their ontological status as material happenings in <i>timespaces of human activity</i> (Schatzki, 2010) in everyday life.
Human	The lives of human beings are conducted in practices (Lave, 2019, p.131; Kemmis, Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2025, p.18). The term ‘practice’ is usually reserved for things done by human beings—expressing human agency—although other non-human beings (e.g., animals) and entities (e.g., rivers) can also do things and cause effects (see Schatzki, 2012, p.16; Schatzki, 2025; and Kemmis et al., 2025, p.67). Unlike other social theorists like Bruno Latour (2007), Kemmis, Edwards--Groves and Grootenboer (2025, p.64) do not attribute agency to non-human entities. Schatzki (2025) also rejects the ‘strong’ approach to sociomateriality favoured by Latour (i.e., granting agency to non-human entities), while noting that “most nexuses to which human people are integral aggregate the different agencies of the entities and events that compose them” (p.2), and that agency is a form of causality.

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

<i>Practices are ...</i>	
Social	Practices are always social in the sense that they are sites of human coexistence (Schatzki, 2002, p.xi)—even when a person practises alone (e.g., cooking, writing, or meditating). Practices are always socially-formed in the sense that they are shaped by ways of thinking and speaking (ways to express and interpret meaning), ways of doing things (producing external objects, bringing about states of affairs, or contemplating the nature of things), and ways of relating to others and the world that are regarded as appropriate or acceptable in a specific culture or social group at a particular time. Practices affectively attune not only what is said and done in them, but also feelings and emotions, norms, and conventions about what is regarded as appropriate and acceptable by some social group (Reckwitz, 2017; Kemmis, forthcoming)—and may sometimes be intentionally inappropriate when someone opposes, resists, ignores, or flouts accepted feelings and emotions, norms, or conventions.
Action	Practices are things that people do; they are material events (Schatzki, 2019); they occur in timespaces of human activity (Schatzki, 2010); and they appear in practice-arrangement bundles (Schatzki, 2012), enmeshed with the discursive, material, and social arrangements (Kemmis et al., 2014b) present in sites—the places where practices happen. The sayings, doings, and relatings of practices hang together ^c in a <i>project</i> : they are generally purposeful—aimed at an end or <i>telos</i> —and generally guided by intentions, including purposes and intentions of which an actor may presently be unaware. Practices may also serve multiple purposes although at a specific time an actor may be conscious only of one or some.
In history	Practices are the products of local and wider histories (Marx, 1852; MacIntyre, 1983; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) of ways of thinking and speaking, ways of doing things, and ways of relating to others and the world. Practices always arise, and are produced, reproduced, and transformed, in specific times and places—histories that can frequently be reshaped by people and groups. Practices also evolve (Kemmis, 2022), not only in the changing practising of individuals, but also in the changing distributed practising of participants in different kinds of social ensembles and communities. According to Kemmis et al. (2014b), the forms practices come to take in specific places, times, and communities may give rise to local and wider <i>practice traditions</i> —traditions in the histories of the conduct of practices which may give rise to different, competing practice traditions. Practices also happen in <i>practice landscapes</i> in which other practices also occur, with which they may be interrelated or interdependent, or unrelated and independent.

^aSchatzki (2002, pp.146–147) wrote that “The social site is a specific context of human coexistence: the place where, and as part of which, social life inherently occurs. To theorise sociality through the concept of a social site is to hold that the character and transformation of social life are both intrinsically and decisively rooted in the site where it takes place. In turn, this site context is composed of ... arrangements of entities (for example, people, artifacts, things, whereas practices are organised activities. Human coexistence thus transpires as and amid an elaborate constantly evolving nexus of arranged things and organised activities.”

^bSchatzki (2012, p.16) says: “To say that practices and arrangements bundle is to say (1) that practices effect, use, give meaning to, and are inseparable from arrangements while (2) arrangements channel, prefigure, facilitate, and are essential to practices.”

^cSchatzki (1996) translates the German *Zusammenhang*, used by Wittgenstein (1958), as ‘hanging together’

From a practice theory perspective,² *living human beings appear in the world and in history in and only in their practising*—that is, only in their learned, situated, embodied human social action in history.

We have argued that wisdom is a property of *actions* that are judged to be wise—that is, it is evident in people's conduct and its consequences. In general, we take the view that wise actions are those which avoid being—or minimise the extent to which they are—*unreasonable, unproductive, unsustainable, unjust, undemocratic, and harmful*. It is always a matter of practical reasoning to determine what seems to be the wisest course of action to take in an uncertain practical situation, however. We next consider how wisdom appears in people's practising, and especially in practices of listening, noticing, reflecting, deliberating, and prioritising that foster wise action.

4.4 Wise Action Comes from Listening, Noticing, Reflecting, Deliberating, Discerning, and Prioritising

In the example in the introduction to this chapter, we declared that Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg's action in revealing that the bomber in the Oslo and Utøya attacks was ethnically Norwegian was wise because it averted vigilante reprisals against Muslim people in Norway. Stoltenberg *listened* the different voices of advisors informing him about the bombings near his office and the shootings at Utøya. He took care in *noticing* the significance of what was happening as he was briefed about developments in real time. As he *reflected* on the unfolding events, and especially when Breivik's manifesto was discovered, he recognised that the attacks were on Norwegian multiculturalism, rather than the work of Islamist terrorists. When he *deliberated* about what to do, he *discerned* that some features of the situation were more important than others, especially in those first hours, and initially *prioritised* concerns for the safety of immigrants over other matters, and so decided that, to forestall reprisals against Muslims, he should immediately reveal that the attacks were a case of anti-immigrant extremism. It is also striking that Stoltenberg's press statements after the attacks emphasised Norway's values of recognition, care and compassion for all, its democratic character, and its unity as a multicultural nation, embracing love, and resoundingly repudiating hate as a force for change. Subsequent investigations and commissions into the events of July 22–23, 2011, exposed various missteps in the immediate responses of the police and politicians but Stoltenberg's statements and his contemporary revelation of the perpetrator's ethnic identity were not criticised.

²There is a variety of contemporary practice theories; for introductions, see (e.g.) Schatzki (2001), Shove et al. (2012), Nicolini (2013), and the different views presented in Hui et al. (2017). The theory of practice architectures (Kemmis, Wilkinson et al., 2014b; Kemmis, 2022; Grootenboer & Edwards-Groves, 2023) is grounded in the conceptualisation of practice outlined in Table 4.1.

Stoltenberg's listening (attending to different sources), noticing, reflecting, deliberating, discerning, and prioritising were not only mental processes; they were *practices*. That is, each one was a case of Stoltenberg's *learned, situated, embodied human social action in history*. Those things left their traces not only in the immediate *conduct* of Stoltenberg's practice as it happened, but also in history, in the form of the historical *consequences* of his and others' conduct (practices). When someone (e.g., Stoltenberg) is praised or blamed for their actions, they may be described as wise (or not wise), but they are generally so described on the grounds of how things turned out—that is, in terms of the historical consequences of their practices.

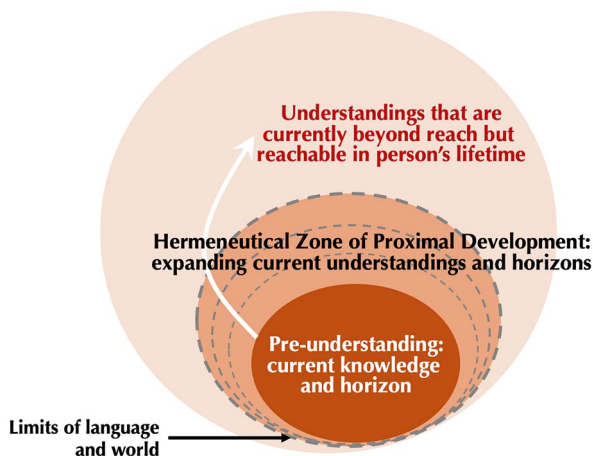
In general, we submit that a person's actions will be judged wise when they avoid or overcome consequences that are unreasonable, wasteful, unproductive, unsustainable, unjust, undemocratic, or causing suffering or harm, and when they help to bring about consequences that are reasonable, productive, sustainable, just, democratic, and foster well-being for humans, the community of life, and the geophysical systems that support life. In every concrete case requiring practical deliberation and action, however, circumstances differ, so in each case some of these criteria will be more and some less relevant than others.

As in the case of Stoltenberg responding to the attacks in Oslo and on Utøya, thoughtful, prudent people *attune* themselves to the uncertain situations in which they find themselves; they listen to various sources of information and advice; they *notice* how things are around them. Smith (2008, p.77) elaborates the idea of 'noticing' by speaking of participants '*noticing, naming, and reframing*' what is happening around them—'noticing' as in paying attention to; 'naming', as in putting into words what has been noticed; and 'reframing' as in reflecting on and problematising whether the way one understands what is happening takes into account other people's perspectives and other possible perspectives on what one notices. Here, Smith invokes Erving Goffman's (1974) idea of the (material and social) frames through which people ordinarily perceive the world—frames which they can problematise and, to a greater or lesser degree, change to take into account other possibilities. Kakkori and Huttunen (2014) make a similar point about reframing when they invoke Gadamer's (1975) notion of the hermeneutical 'fusion of horizons' that happens when people come to understand something new,³ along with Vygotsky's (1978, p.84) notion of the 'zone of proximal development':

... we would like to introduce a concept of the *hermeneutic zone of proximal development* (HZPD) in order to signify those learning processes or hermeneutical experiences that lead the way to the experienced person in the Gadamerian [1975] sense (*Erfahrener*). ... With the notion of the HZPD we do not refer to development precisely in the Vygotskian manner, but nevertheless hermeneutic experience is a learning experience. As a learning experience, hermeneutic experience widens a person's horizon, and the HZPD is the zone in which this widening occurs (p.8).

³See Hogan (2025) for an extended account of hermeneutics and coming to understand through education.

Fig. 4.1 The hermeneutical zone of proximal development (adapted from Kakkori & Huttunen, 2014, pp. 8–9)



In several diagrams, Kakkori & Huttunen depict the way a learner moves from their present pre-understandings of things in the world through the hermeneutical zone of proximal development in which they encounter new ideas and reach beyond the limits of their current language and understandings, towards a ‘fusion of horizons’ through which they come to arrive at new understandings, while still other ideas remain beyond the limits of their language and thought (see Fig. 4.1).

This expansion of horizons of understanding happens through listening, noticing, naming, and reframing, reflecting, deliberating, discerning, and prioritising. What prudent people notice and listen to feeds and fuels their reflection and their deliberation about and prioritising what to do. While we might ordinarily think of their listening (attending to different sources), noticing, reflecting, deliberating, discerning, and prioritising as *mental processes*, we should also note that they are *practices*—that is, each is realised in learned, situated, embodied, human social action in history. In turn, these practices contribute both to people’s *self-realisation* and to *world-realisation*, that is, the realisation of the *worlds* around them (Stetsenko, 2016; Stetsenko, 2019). Both selves and worlds are realised through people’s practising.

Wisdom, we can say, is practised through (e.g.,) noticing, reflecting, and deliberating. For this reason, many people say that wisdom is borne of experience, but they also note that wisdom is not a certain proof against making mistakes or causing untoward, unforeseen outcomes. Citing Gadamer (1975), Dunne (1993, p.131) wrote:

... the perfect form of what we call “experienced” does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else ... the dialectic of experience has its own fulfilment not in definite knowledge but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself.’ The truly experienced person is the one who has learned this lesson, ‘who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future,’ who has discovered ‘the limits of the power and the self-knowledge of his planning reason,’ and who

has come to see that ‘all the expectations and planning of finite beings is finite and limited,’ ... [recognising] ‘the limitedness of all prediction and the uncertainty of all plans’ and [understanding] ... that ‘it proves to be an illusion that everything can be reversed.’

People become *experienced* by *experiencing* and by listening (attending to different sources), noticing, reflecting, deliberating, discerning, and prioritising what to do in their *conduct*, and then by noticing, reflecting, and deliberating among the *consequences* of their practices as they emerge—that is, attending to what happens when and after they act. One way in which they can enhance their capacity for wise action is to conduct action research to improve their practices, their understanding of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice (Kemmis et al., 2014a).

4.4.1 *Learning and Situated Knowing*

We have focussed on wisdom as a feature of social practice, and how it might be evaluated in terms of the conduct and historical consequences of people’s practising. We might then ask how wisdom in practice can be learned. Before we answer this question, we might note that there is some debate in practice theory about what learning is.

Schatzki (2017, pp. 23–4) argued that practice theory could accept the ‘standard’ view of learning as “the acquisition of knowledge”, while Kemmis (2021) disagreed with that view. He argued that the site-ontological perspective in practice theory offers resources for thinking about learning very differently, concluding (p.289) that *learning is a process of coming to practice differently*. We regard these views not as alternatives, but as complementary faces of ‘learning’.

As people are initiated into practices, they come to *know how to go on* (Wittgenstein, 1958) in the situated sayings, doings, and relatings that together compose practices (Kemmis et al., 2017). Following Jean Lave’s (2019) recent writings on situated learning, Kemmis (2022, p.68) argued that, by being initiated into practices, people develop *situated knowing*, in the forms of

1. *knowing-sayings*: ... how to think about, speak about, and communicate in the sayings of the practice—that is the cognitive understandings that make it possible to perform the practice;
2. *knowing-doings*: ... how to act, perform, and conduct themselves in, the doings of the practice, amongst the objects, times and spaces, and layouts and set-ups where the practice unfolds—that is, the skills and capabilities to perform the practice; and
3. *knowing-relatings*: ... how to relate to [other] people in the relatings of the practice, amongst the lifeworld and system relationships to be found in the settings where the practice happens—that is, the values, feelings, and emotions appropriate in performing the practice.—The role of personal values in achieving wisdom



Fig. 4.2 Things changed in learning (adapted from Kemmis, Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer 2025, p.55)

in practice is examined in more detail in Chap. 11 of this book—*Personal beliefs and values in wisdom in practice* (Billett et al., 2026a).

Through their learning, agentic learners come to know what to say, what to do, and how to relate to others and the world in an expanding repertoire of practices—a repertoire that expands as people come to practise differently (Kemmis, 2021). As suggested earlier, their repertoires of practices expand as their practices are nudged along in what, following Vygotsky (1978), Kakkori and Huttunen (2014) called ‘the hermeneutical zone of proximal development’.

In the course of learning, people come to change the situated knowing-sayings, knowing-doings, and knowing-relatings by which they know how to go on in a practice. But their learning—their coming to practise differently—also brings about changes in the sites in which they practise: the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements among which they practise—that is, the local culture and languages, the materialities, and the webs of social relations in the site (Kemmis et al., 2014b). To put it another way: learning does not befall just learners, it changes the worlds they inhabit.

Following Lave and Packer (2008), Kemmis et al. (2025) argue that learning is a process of *ontological transformation* of persons and worlds; it changes practices, sites, histories, and lives. Figure 4.2 depicts these changes.

This view of learning reflects what Gadamer (1975) means by ‘hermeneutical experience’ and ‘dialectical experience’. Hermeneutical experience is a deep

learning experience which changes a learner's worldview, personality, self-understanding, habitus, and action. As hermeneutical experience happens—over minutes, days, or years—the learner becomes a changed person, who sees both their own life and the world through different glasses. Indeed, Hogan (2025, p.39) says, “to understand at all is to understand differently, at least in some degree”. That is, the learner understands things in the world in a different way and perhaps comes to see things that they didn't notice before—as, for example, when someone comes to appreciate the suffering to animals that is the consequence of their choice to eat meat, and to recognise that raising domestic livestock for meat in turn causes harms to nature.

Much of the time, people learn—they come to practise differently—without teachers, coaches, mentors, colleagues, or friends, although sometimes with their help. They frequently learn by mirroring (Iacoboni, 2008) or by consciously imitating others. Practices are not exactly reproduced from one occasion to another; people vary them in response to the specifics of a present situation. They adapt. Sometimes their practices are transformed so irrevocably that they never go back to an old way of doing things. Along the way, they steer and stabilise their developing practices through *self-reflection*—reflecting on how things turn out in their practising. Sometimes others assist them in their self-reflection.

Acting wisely is fostered especially by *attuning to* and *noticing* features of the situations in which people find themselves, *retrospective self-reflection* (Schön, 1992) on the conduct and consequences of people's practising, and *prospective deliberation* (Schwab, 1969; Reid, 1978) about what to do. Through listening, noticing, reflecting, deliberating, and prioritising, then, wisdom (like knowledge and learning) “arises from, represents, recalls, anticipates, and returns to its use in practices” (Kemmis & Edwards-Groves, 2018, p.120; see also Kemmis et al., 2014b, p.58). And, it might be added, wisdom arises from, represents, recalls, anticipates, and returns to its use *in history*.

People can develop their capacities for wise action by learning from their own experience and by developing their practices of listening, noticing, reflecting, deliberating, and prioritising. Kallio and Tynjälä (2025) argued that people can also learn wisdom from others' experiences and reflections—for example by studying, reading, experiential learning, and practising with mentors or coaches in workplaces and other settings. Päivi Tynjälä (pers. comm.) says that wisdom can be taught by “creating supportive learning environments for learners, organizing educative experiences for them, and guiding and supporting their learning processes”. On the basis of our view that wisdom is realised in practice, however, we conclude that wisdom is forged in the fire of practice, in history. This suggests that learning opportunities for developing wisdom include educative experiences in which learners can have opportunities to act with deliberation and to learn from their conduct and its consequences.

4.5 Wisdom and the Double Purpose of Education

Kemmis (2023) says education has a double purpose: the formation of persons and the formation of worlds worth living in. This formulation echoes the continental European tradition of *Bildung* (to use the German term), which concerns both self-formation and the formation of the cultural, material, and social conditions in which people coexist. The roots of the tradition reach from ancient Greece and Rome, through the Enlightenment, and through philosophical idealism to historical materialism and into the twenty-first century. Describing *Bildung*, Kivelä, Siljander and Sutinen (2012, pp. 310–311) say:

The *Bildung* concept appears useful in characterising the openness and dynamics of relations between mind and world; it (*Bildung*) seems to offer fruitful perspectives for philosophical inquiry into the complexity of mind-world relations. *Bildung* refers, moreover, to processes that occur between mind and world, processes that contribute to the transformation of world and individual alike. In particular, *Bildung* impacts the transfigurations of human life constituted by relations between self and world, occurring on both an interpersonal level and in the realm of subjective relations with the self.

In parallel with the dialectical perspective of the *Bildung* tradition, by the late 20th and early 21st centuries, many social and educational researchers explored how education and schooling played roles both in the formation of persons and in the reproduction and transformation of cultural, economic, and social conditions—for example, Apple (1981), Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) and Giroux (1983).

As in Stetsenko's (2019) radical-transformative view of agency as realising both selves and worlds, we also think education is a process of self- and world-realisation. Smeyers and Burbules (2006) argued that education is an initiation into practices. We want to extend this view. Following Young (1990),⁴ Kemmis, Wilkinson et al. (2014, p.26), and Kemmis and Edwards-Groves (2018, p.134), we therefore define education as the process by which children, young people and adults are initiated into

1. forms of understanding that aim to foster individual and collective self-expression, to secure a culture based on reason⁵;

⁴Iris Marion Young (1990) observed that philosophers find it difficult to agree about the positive term 'justice' but can find more common ground about what constitutes *injustice*. She argues that there are two kinds of injustice: *oppression*, which occurs in structures and practices that unreasonably limit self-expression and self-development, and *domination*, which consists in structures and practices that unreasonably limit self-determination. She (1990, Chap. 2) enumerates five "faces" of oppression: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. In Young's view, injustice resides in structures and practices that unreasonably limit or constrain individual or collective self-expression, self-development, and self-determination. The definition of education outlined by Kemmis, Wilkinson et al. (2014) implies that a just education enables people, individually and collectively, to avoid, resist, and overcome these kinds of injustice in life and work.

⁵Here, 'reason' is not limited to a dry, narrow rationalism; rather, Kemmis and Edwards-Groves (2018) understand it as grounded in *reasonableness* which recognises that often good reasons for

2. modes of action that aim to foster individual and collective self-development, to secure a productive and sustainable economy and environment; and
3. ways of relating to others and the world that aim to foster individual and collective self-determination, to secure a just and democratic society.

These individual and collective aims mean that education is always oriented, on the one hand, towards the good for each person and, on the other, towards the good for humankind, the community of life, and the geophysical systems that sustain life.

It is not difficult to think of examples of pedagogies relevant to these three dimensions of initiation into practices.

1. Initiation into forms of understanding promoting self-expression can occur through pedagogies that (e.g.) expose learners to particular kinds of discourses (e.g., of hope, about consciousness-raising, about justice, ethics, and morality).
2. Initiation into modes of action that foster self-development can occur through pedagogies that (e.g.) create opportunities for learners to practise in relevant ways (e.g., being courageous and agentic, reflecting on and getting feedback on action, exploring resources for improving the well-being of human beings, communities of life, and the geophysical systems that sustain life).
3. Initiation into ways of relating to others and the world that foster the good for humankind, communities of life, and the geophysical systems of the planet, including through pedagogies that (e.g.) create opportunities for learners to understand critically how they do, can, and could relate to others and the world (e.g., via exposure to communities and places that instil a strong sense of connection to human and earth others like emplacement and service activities, nurturing deep listening skills, and learning to think critically and imaginatively about what is possible and how things might be otherwise).

On this view of the double purpose of education, to be educated is to develop forms of understanding, modes of action, and ways of relating to others and the world that constitute living well; and it is also to live in the world in ways that help to secure, for everyone, cultures based on reasonableness, productive and sustainable economies and environments, and just and democratic societies. In our view, *to act and to live in these ways is to act and to live wisely*.

In Book 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Bartlett & Collins, 2011), Aristotle suggests that the young, and those who are immature, will not benefit from his discussion of the good life, because they are as yet inexperienced in human affairs. In Book 10 (Bartlett & Collins, 2011, p.224, 1177a, 24–25), he also argues that those who are more knowledgeable are more likely to act wisely. We agree that more knowledgeable people are likely to act and to live more wisely. On our argument in this chapter, however, we believe that they do so *not* so much because they possess an attribute called ‘wisdom’ but because their actions and lives are guided by

action include things like people’s feelings, emotions, longing, fear, and pain—that is, the kinds of things of which Blaise Pascal (1670/1993, sect. 4, no.277) said: “The heart has reasons, which Reason does not know”.

practices of listening, noticing, reflecting, deliberating, and prioritising. It follows, then, that to teach wisdom is to create conditions under which learners can transform themselves so that, when they find themselves in uncertain practical situations, they attune themselves to their situation and notice what is happening there, then reflect on the concrete particulars of the situation, and deliberate about how they might to conduct themselves in it, taking into account the likely consequences of different possible ways of acting.

4.6 Conclusion

Many, most, people seek wisdom. We have argued that it is elusive: while some look for it as a characteristic of persons, we see it more as a feature of practice. It is found in wise action, whether by individuals or groups. People are more likely to act wisely if they are practised in listening, noticing, reflecting, deliberating, and prioritising about how to conduct themselves, and then listening, noticing, reflecting, deliberating, and prioritising among the consequences of their actions both as and after they act. This kind of practice in the face of uncertainty is *praxis*, which is action for the good and history-making action (Kemmis, 2012)—action for the good for humankind, and for the good of community of life, and for the good of the geophysical systems that support life.

Kemmis (2012) argued that people could only gain wisdom through experience. How wisdom is acquired or learnt specifically through practice is also explained in more detail in Chap. 9—*Learning to be wise in practice* (Billett et al., 2026b). Kallio and Tynjälä (2025), have recently argued, however, that wisdom *can* be taught, and made suggestions for how it can be taught at various stages in education, including in higher education. They identify four dimensions of wisdom: the cognitive, the affective-social, the ethical-existential, and the action dimension. These can be taught, they argue, through pedagogies that combine theoretical knowledge and practical experience, including through studying texts, lectures, group discussions, work placements, project work, service learning, and volunteer community engagement.

In our view, learning is coming to practice differently, and teachers can only initiate learners into *any* new practices by creating conditions under which they exercise their own agency to transform themselves. Kemmis (2012) concluded that it is the same with wisdom: teachers can only initiate learners into wisdom by putting learners in situations where they can develop it in and through their own practising—in life, or through studying histories, cases, or art. This theme, according to which wisdom cannot actually be taught but can indeed be facilitated through pedagogical arrangements, is further developed in Chap. 12 of this book—*Nurturing Prerequisites of Wise Practice in Higher Education* (Tynjälä et al., 2026). The opportunities and conditions for learning wisdom are examined in more detail also in Chap. 6—*Learning to be wiser from the perspective of the Holistic Wisdom Model* (Virolainen et al., 2026). Our argument in this chapter

leads us to the conclusion that the way to teach ‘wisdom’ is to help people develop their practices so they can be more open-eyed and open-minded in their listening, noticing, reflecting, deliberating, and prioritising among possible courses of action and their consequences. If, as we have argued, wisdom is realised in practising, then one way to develop it would be through conducting action research projects in which people act deliberately and reflect thoughtfully on the conduct and emerging consequences of their action so they can avoid harm, and so their conduct and its consequences are reasonable, productive, satisfying, sustainable, just, and democratic, in the interests of human beings, the community of life, and the geophysical systems that sustain life. The fundamental idea behind action research is the development of social practices in collaboration between people. In this book, the central role of collaboration has been identified particularly in Chap. 10—*Collaboration and Wisdom in Practice*) (Billett & Le, 2026). Through such pedagogies, they may come to act wisely, and people may call them wise.

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