For some years now I have gained insight in the aspirations and work of RIPPLE, the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, Australia. When participating in RIPPLE activities, I have always found them inspiring. That is one reason for me to welcome the new book *Understanding and Researching Professional Practice* (Green, 2009). It offers a comprehended view of what it is all about and it raises questions of epistemological importance.

**Practical reasoning**

How could professional practice be understood and how could it be researched? These are the questions that are explored from different disciplinary approaches. They rely to a great extent on Aristotle and key concepts like praxis, phronēsis and practical reasoning. The authors suggest that a good way to understand and research professional practice is to develop a capacity for «practical reasoning». Practical reasoning will develop the practitioners’ practical wisdom (phronēsis).

What then is «practice»? It may here be understood as «sayings, doings and relatings» (Kemmis, 2009, p. 25) in certain situations and contexts. Further more a professional practitioner, for example a teacher educator, should know how to reflect on
his or her performance in actual settings. The practical reasoning referred to should have the aim to improve professional practice as an individual activity as well as a social activity informed by the tradition of the particular profession. That is the meaning of practical reasoning.

By moving from *practice* (which is the more restricted and technical concept) to *praxis* (which is the Aristotelian, broader and more normative concept) the teacher-researcher takes on a responsibility to act, communicate and relate to others in ways that might contribute to the well being of humankind. In such a perspective a professional educator has an important mission which far exceeds the boundaries of everyday educational activities in a classroom. Education, as well as research, is a moral endeavour with the intention to improve the life we are living and the world where we live. At the same time the profession of an educator is practical, research is practical. The heart of the profession is not primarily theoretical or technical. Wilfred Carr (chapter two) argues that:

> education is primarily a ‘practical’ rather than a ‘theoretical’ or ‘technical’ activity, involving a constant flow of problematic situations which require teachers to make practical judgements about what to do in order to translate their general educational values (such as ‘the development of understanding’, or ‘the realisation of individual potential’) into practice. (Green, 2009, p. 60)

Referring to Gadamer, Carr offers strong arguments for a practical philosophy, a way of thinking and acting that is distinct from the mode of modernity and from modes and theories influenced by postmodernity. This is the position taken by most authors of the book. They explore epistemologies and approaches that could improve our understanding of professional practice. Generally, they reject modernity, rationalism and positivist approaches to social sciences. They criticise the expanding influence of evidence-based practice and policy. Some also indicate scepticism to action research interpreted as a «methodology». However, there are different positions exposed by the authors when it comes to postmodern approaches. I will soon return to that.

**Rethinking ‘experience’**

«Rethinking ‘experience’ in Professional Practice» is the title of chapter five by Benjamin S. Bradley. He makes an interesting analysis of what is meant by «experience» in the perspective of «new managerialism» and «evidence-based» approach. He discusses this approach in terms of «the scientist-practitioner model». Bradley shows that in such a framework «experience» is conceived as a result of a scientific, «empirical» experiment conducted in a research design informed by the idea that aggregate data about individual behaviour could be taken as evidence of how to best relate to a certain individual human being in a certain situation.

He criticises the idea that generalisable knowledge is applicable in a rational way to individual cases where situations, contexts and relations differ. As Jo-Anne Reid and Bill Green emphasise (chapter eleven), practice and professional practice knowledge should not be decontextualised and reduced to particular features as is often the case in conventional forms of research reported in textbooks. They oppose to:

> a philosophy and epistemology of science that moved away from an Aristotelian concern with practical philosophy towards written, universal general, and timeless laws about life and living. (Green, 2009, p. 168)
The message of the book is that when performing professional practice in actual settings you have to consider the specific context, situation and inter-relationships that make practice an uncertain, dynamic and unpredictable phenomenon. Professional practice requires, among other competences, moral judgement and practical reasoning. Again, practical reasoning is put forward as a good way to understand and to research professional practice. As stated before, this approach requires moral judgement.

Robert Macklin (chapter six) writes about how moral dilemmas arise when a person who wishes to act morally cannot easily do so because of the circumstances at hand. In such situations there is need for moral guidelines. However, he says:

as an analysis of cases in textbooks will reveal, making the 'right' decision rarely involves the straightforward application of norms to problems … normative criteria such as codes cannot replace what is called ‘moral reasoning’ or ‘good judgment’. (Green, 2009, p.91)

Moral reasoning and good judgment is part of the Aristotelian notion practical reasoning. These ingredients are important in the «practical philosophy» advocated by Carr.

A Don Quixote framework

Moral judgements, professional practice and good research cannot be achieved by just following rules. Norms, guidelines and scientific rigour are important components of good research. But research is not just a matter of conducting an investigation in a correct way, says Della Fish (chapter nine): «What matters more than being correct is acquiring deeper understanding.» (Green, 2009, p. 141). Like the other authors she offers arguments for a hermeneutic and qualitative approach where the research process is made transparent.

Research is described as a journey where practitioners and researchers collaborate to find what is there of interest and how it could be improved. The research process becomes transparent put in a kind of picaresque-framework originally introduced by Cervantes and the story of Don Quixote. Together with a senior surgeon and practitioner researcher, Fish, originally a teacher educator, now well experienced in medical education, went on a journey to explore the same professional practice from inside and from outside. Their key discoveries came as a result of practical reasoning, that is, when they discussed, from different points of view, the practice they had set out to explore. One example of such a finding is:

how the European Working Time Directive, which has drastically reduced the hours that junior doctors work, has changed the nature of medical practice and seriously undermined the time available for education. (Fish, 2009, p. 145)

This discovery concerns «the practice architectures» referred to also in other chapters.

Fish makes a contribution to research by describing a collaborative approach to conceptualising and theorising practice. This research process includes motivations, reasoning, knowledge-in-use, decision-making, intuition, insight and imagination. A researcher’s way of achieving a better understanding of reality includes narratives, interpretations and creative leaps.

Fish raises the question «What counts as research?» and offers answers inspired by postmodern modes. In such a framework the borderlines between art, narratives, novels and rigorous research are hard to find. She discusses the research she has been part of as an example of practical reasoning:

[we] have moved unashamedly beyond the normal social sciences approaches, of qualitative re-
search and turned to the Arts for an appropriate way of seeing issues of truth and proof. We believe that only by these means could we have achieved such a depth of understanding of the richness of professional practice. (Green, 2009, p. 147)

I tend to agree. This way to report from research will enable for the reader to discover more than one interpretation of the same story. Just like in the Don Quixote story there are interpretations from the hero’s point of view, from the critical companion’s point of view and from the reader’s perspective. The reader will find that research, as well as the researched professional practice, can be interpreted in more than one way and that the researcher does not have the sole privilege to determine the one and only way to understand reality.

**Provinces of meaning**

This epistemological position takes us to a discussion where I would like to serve as a critical companion. In my own research, I have made the same kind of experiences and come to similar conclusions as those reported in this new book (Mattsson, 2004, Mattsson & Kemmis, 2008). Referring to Alfred Schutz, science could be analysed as «a province of meaning» in which similar experiences are acknowledged by the «inhabitants» (Endress, Nasu & Psathas, 2005). However, I think that the authors of *Understanding and Researching Professional Practice* may underestimate the dominant academic discourses giving priority to other experiences, other approaches and other ways of answering the question: «What counts as research?»

In mainstream research the profession of a researcher is distinct from most other professional practices and also from the kind of knowledge construction that takes place in civil society by ordinary citizens. I think that it is reasonable to discuss different regimes of truth as if they are dominant in different provinces of meaning.

In mainstream research, one important characteristic is that a researcher has to publish academic reports in a certain textual genre in order to facilitate for other researchers to examine the truth claims made. Researchers have an obligation to a university tradition and a certain order of justification. What counts as research is «regulated» by the regimes of truth that are rooted in the academic system. Doctoral students, for example, have to subordinate themselves to these regimes. They have to write theses to demonstrate their knowledge.

Aristotle has made substantial contributions in this context. He discusses «Five modes of thought or states of mind by which truth is reached» and says, «scientific knowledge is a demonstrative state» (Aristotle, 2004, p. 148), meaning a state of mind capable of demonstrating what it knows. My interpretation is that research should be made available for other researchers’ critical examination. That is why it should be reported in a certain way. The procedure for examination is crucial. Text is important.

Most other professional practices, I would say, are «demonstrated» in actions, communications and relations taking into consideration context, situation and the inter-relationships at hand. The professional practice of education is mainly a matter of actual performance in authentic settings. By emphasizing differences between research and other professional practices I want to clarify the view that there are different provinces of meaning, different systems of justification and different regimes of truth.

From this point of view, how should practical reasoning best be understood? Is practical reasoning, as advocated by the co-authors, an alternative to modern and postmodern approaches and methodologies? No, I would rather say that practical reasoning is a comple-
mentary way. In mainstream research, text is the acknowledged way to «represent» reality. The general idea in the «enlightenment-model» (supported by modernity) is that scientific truths presented in academic reports have the capacity to enlighten the reader and, as a consequence, the reader will act according to the new knowledge.

University researchers produce academic reports. Practical reasoning and professional practice in terms of talking, acting and relating to other people in certain situations and contexts are not on the top of the academic research-agenda. Unfortunately, practical wisdom and moral judgements does not really count as research, if it is not reported in text. That is one reason to make distinctions between research (communicated in text) and practical wisdom and reasoning (communicated in actual performance in authentic settings).

A call for change

Stephen Kemmis (chapter two) does not use the term province of meaning. But he offers a conceptual framework for the study of practice. Some of the key words and aspects are different discourses, regimes of truth and relationships between different traditions in the study of practice. Practice, he says, is constituted in «sayings, doings and relatings» which are formed materially, economically, discursively and socially. He emphasises the importance of «practice architectures», meaning that:

arrangements of sayings, doings, set-ups and relationships may exist before a particular professional practitioner arrives in a particular location, and there may be traditions in the profession and practice about how things are generally to be understood and arranged in order to be a practice of this or that particular kind. (Green, 2009, p. 32).

He maintains that changing practices requires changing things that might be beyond the knowledge or control of individual practitioners and even beyond their visions: «Changing these things requires forms of collective change and forms of collaborative discussion and inquiry.» (Green, 2009, p. 37). I welcome this call for change of research as a professional practice. Changing a practice requires a change of the practitioners involved as well as the practice architectures that prefigure the practice.

Research approaches inspired by Aristotle will most certainly be helpful in improving educational praxis and in revitalising the profession of educators and researchers as a moral endeavour for the wellbeing of humankind. However, there are no guarantees. Researchers and educators, I think, will still have to dwell in a province characterised by uncertainty. But if there are no attempts to develop the art of practical reasoning, the science of practical philosophy and collaborative ways of conducting research, the world can rest assure that the predominant professional academic practice will be sustained. That would be a pity.

Literature