

# What is Excellence in Practice? Empirical Explorations of Vocational Bildung and Practical Wisdom through Case Narratives

Ruhi Tyson<sup>1</sup> 

Received: 14 November 2016 / Accepted: 31 March 2017 /

Published online: 7 April 2017

© The Author(s) 2017. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

**Abstract** The approach of vocational Bildung didactics has been developed to investigate practical knowledge in matters of education for Bildung and phronesis (practical wisdom). Case narratives of unusual richness or success are at the core of the approach, each case representing an articulation of someone's practical knowledge. The concept of a practice as developed by MacIntyre is introduced here as a way of situating the practical knowledge of Bildung and phronesis gained from case narratives. A series of case studies are discussed to examine the practices that surfaced. The result is a differentiation of MacIntyre's concept in two directions: one more specific called vocational practice and one more general called a cultural practice. This differentiation is then applied to the case studies and it is argued that it helps illuminate aspects of them that previously were difficult to comprehend within the framework of vocational Bildung didactics. The conclusion is that biographical cases where cultural and vocational practices intersect are uniquely positioned to afford knowledge of how such intersections have been achieved through education and what they have meant for the person initiated into such matrixes. This, in turn, contributes to the insight with which we are able to design vocational education and training curricula that support initiation into dynamic vocational practices with a focus on the goods and virtues possible to develop through them.

**Keywords** Practice · Practical wisdom · Bildung · Narrative · MacIntyre · Excellence · Vocational education · Practical knowledge

---

✉ Ruhi Tyson  
ruhi.tyson@edu.su.se

<sup>1</sup> Department of education, Stockholm University, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

## Introduction

In research on vocational education and training (VET) there has recently been a considerable discussion of vocational practice and practical wisdom from a more or less Aristotelian perspective (eg. Bondi et al. 2011; Green 2011; Kemmis & Smith 2008; Kinsella & Pitman 2012). Alasdair MacIntyre's (2011 [1981]) conceptualization of a practice features prominently in this discussion but seldom as a matter for empirical investigation. His concept of a practice has thus remained largely philosophical, used to explain certain theoretical aspects of vocational knowledge and has been criticized for not actually contributing much to the discussion (Winch 2012). However, as both Hager & Halliday (2009) and Kemmis & Grootenboer (2008) state, the value of MacIntyre's concept, compared to other frequently used practice-conceptualizations such as Lave & Wenger's (1991) "communities of practice," is the explicitly normative characterization of practices that MacIntyre espouses. His normative account fits well with the empirical interest developed here in vocational *Bildung* and practical wisdom, where the knowledge of practitioners is articulated through case narratives. MacIntyre's practice-concept offers a potential for understanding these narratives also as expressions of excellence (the combination of virtue, moral and intellectual, with practical wisdom and *Bildung*) in practices. The aim of this article is to explore some of the problems and potentials with doing this. In the process it also sheds light on the potential in MacIntyre's practice-concept of contributing to empirical VET research.

The basis for a practice-oriented approach to *Bildung* and practical wisdom lies in a framework I have tentatively chosen to call vocational *Bildung* didactics (VBD). VBD has been developed to make empirical inquiry possible into aspects of (educational) practices that are notoriously difficult to gain access to.<sup>1</sup> Two concepts can be seen to cover much of this, *Bildung* and *phronesis/practical wisdom*.<sup>2</sup> *Bildung* as an educational concept has a long tradition stretching back to antiquity, but can be understood here to mean biographical experiences in education (formal or non-formal) which were memorable and especially meaningful and rich. These tend to be connected to experiences of increased autonomy, understanding, character formation, as well as ethical and aesthetic development, which are all part of the philosophical tradition of *Bildung* (Rittelmeyer 2012; Tyson 2016a). *Phronesis* or practical wisdom is a concept that goes back to Aristotle (2009). He identifies two different forms of practical knowledge, both being situational and in need of extensive experience. One form is *phronesis*, which denotes the capacity to deliberate wisely about the course of action best suited to promote human flourishing in a situation. The other is *techne* or craft-like knowledge, the skills and knowledge needed to achieve some instrumental purpose, be it navigation, sculpture or healing. If excellence covers roughly the domain of *phronesis* and *Bildung* the corresponding concept in *techne*, in the context of this framework, would be expertise.

Vocational *Bildung* and *phronesis* represent a perspective where it is recognized that significant parts of a person's *Bildung* and *phronesis* are enacted and experienced in vocational contexts. Furthermore, it represents a view on VET that goes beyond it

<sup>1</sup> It has been comprehensively presented in a recent doctoral dissertation (Tyson 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Practical wisdom is one of the most common translations of the Greek term *phronesis*. Another common translation is prudence. I will be using *phronesis* and practical wisdom interchangeably in the text.

being focused solely on skill-training and technical know-how (ie. aspects of the craft-like, *techne*). Issues such as vocational ethics, the capacity for self-directed lifelong learning, comprehensive insight into a vocational field and the development of so-called key-qualifications are all matters that cover aspects of empirical inquiry into vocational *Bildung* and *phronesis*. Compared to educational actions aiming at teaching skills and formulating principles of technical know-how, actions affording *Bildung* or promoting *phronesis* are more difficult to systematically investigate. They are largely without external markers, often occur in the moment and even more atypical are instances characterized by unusual richness or success. Given these difficulties, VBD is a perspective where case narratives are documented as a way of making this kind of knowledge publicly accessible. This is important not only to counter instances of inappropriate or unwise VET practices, but also to raise educational activity to a more reflective level and to move it beyond personal, local and tacit practices. In effect, to make these articulate and public following Shulman's suggestion made almost 30 years ago (2004, p. 232, my italics):

One of the frustrations of teaching as an occupation and profession [including VET teaching] is its extensive individual and collective amnesia, the consistency with which the best creations of its practitioners are lost to both contemporary and future peers. Unlike fields such as architecture (which preserves its creations in both plans and edifices), law (which builds a case literature of opinions and interpretations), medicine (with its records and case studies), and even unlike chess, bridge, or ballet (with their traditions of preserving both memorable games and choreographed performances through inventive forms of notation and recording), teaching is conducted without an audience of peers. It is devoid of a [narratively documented] history of practice.

... We have concluded from our research with teachers ... that the potentially codifiable knowledge that can be gleaned from the *wisdom of practice* is extensive. ... A major portion of the research agenda for the next decade will be to collect, collate, and interpret the practical knowledge of teachers for the purpose of establishing a case literature ...

These last sentences capture the general aim of VBD, especially as it seems there has been no case literature developed that focuses on narratives of vocational *Bildung* and *phronesis*. The specific aim here, as previously mentioned, is to explore how this fits within a framework of MacIntyre's practice-concept, to see how it relates to the concepts of vocational *Bildung*, *phronesis* and case narratives as articulations of practical knowledge. What is excellence in practice and are *Bildung* and *phronesis* practices or aspects of practices? By discussing these questions it advances a more differentiated approach to narrative cases of unusually wise practice as well as an elaboration on MacIntyre's practice-concept that enriches the interpretation of such cases. The contribution to the general field of VET research is in opening up a potential for systematic empirical inquiry into vocational practices that have long remained largely tacit and local. Furthermore, through the conceptual work undertaken, this inquiry can be performed with greater sensitivity to differences in practice contexts.

The article is divided into two parts. The first begins with a brief conceptual presentation of VBD. I will then introduce MacIntyre's concept of a practice, after which there is a short discussion of how the case studies reported were conceived and interpreted. The main focus in part one is on narratives from several case studies, comparing and discussing what practices they suggest they are part of. The main finding is a differentiation of MacIntyre's concept into vocational and cultural practices. The second part uses this distinction to interpret a final case narrative exemplifying the potential of having these differentiations in the process of interpreting cases and drawing some tentative conclusions about the kinds of contribution to research and practice that this might afford.

### **Vocational Bildung Didactics: Conceptual Framework and Research Design**

The central objects of studies in VBD are case narratives which represent an important source of knowledge about practices rich in Bildung and phronesis, mainly because there are few other ways to surface such practices. As Shulman remarked in the quote above, such case narratives could amount to a kind of history of practice. The other way that the cases are understood in VBD is through Schön's (1987) assertion that much practical knowledge consists of cases, what he calls a repertoire. Thus with regards to Bildung and practical wisdom it is not that we lack texts where general, propositional statements are made. It is that these are confused with practical knowledge of how to enact such general ideas in particular practice. This is where the narrative cases function as both a description of unusually successful actions and as a contribution to potentially enrich other practitioners' actions and reflections. For example, Rosenberg's (2003) non-violent communication method, which was the conceptual basis for cases in one of the studies (see below), is usually presented in texts where the basic ideas are laid out together with a few illustrative examples. From the perspective of VBD it would instead be introduced through a bare skeleton of concepts together with a large volume of case narratives. This presents variations of how the concepts are enacted in practice when these actions are understood as especially excellent. One of the main points is that by articulating such excellence and by demonstrating that there are different ways of enacting the same idea in practice that are deemed unusually enriching, it becomes possible to imagine new ways of action.

The basic conceptual elements of VBD are Bildung and phronesis as especially complex and interesting aspects of practical knowledge. These two terms are used both as sensitizing and "folk"-concepts. As the former they are the conceptual lenses through which case narratives are selected and interpreted (a process that then explicitly is meant to feed back into the concepts in order to enrich and differentiate them). As the latter they are used to guide respondents. Although conceptually one might well argue that practical wisdom is a necessary part of Bildung and thus somewhat redundant, there are differences in practice. In effect, Bildung tends to work well as "folk"-concept when the inquiry is more explorative aimed at recording longer biographical narratives. Phronesis allows for a more specific ethical inquiry focusing on dialogues and interactions with participants over shorter time-spans.

Didactics, understood as the how, why, when, what and to whom of teaching (Uljen 1997), is an additional feature of the conceptual framework, considered here within the Aristotelian perspective on practical knowledge. As such didactics is something that requires practicing to become proficient as well as a sensitivity to the particularities of a situation. Subject-didactics can be understood as the *techne*-side of didactical knowledge whereas *Bildung* didactics can be understood as more of a *phronesis*-aspect of this practical knowledge. In practice, and the cases bear this out to a large degree, *techne* and *phronesis* (subject- and *Bildung*-didactics) are entwined. This focus on didactics is a way of ensuring that the case narratives are sufficiently close to practice, i.e. action-oriented, something that is not necessarily the case in narrative inquiry (cf. eg. Clandinin & Connelly 1995, 2000; Schubert & Ayers, 1992). Thus, although they may well contain judgments, reflections and summaries, the cases need to have a core that is about what was enacted, how, by whom, etc. It is these elements that afford other practitioners the opportunity to make the narratives part of their own repertoire (Schön 1987) of cases from which to draw in the face of uncertain or novel situations.

The research design of VBD is adapted largely from Flyvbjerg (2001, 2006) and his discussion of various forms of case study research from the perspective of *phronetic* social science where the aim of research is less about testable theory and more about increasing practical wisdom. In a discussion on different kinds of case studies, he enumerates two that are of special importance here, what he calls extreme and paradigmatic cases. These correspond to the focus on unusually rich, successful and wise narratives that is central to VBD. The cases are extreme in that they represent unusually rich events in the lives of those telling their stories. If they are paradigmatic, i.e. unique in their capacity to bring insight, it is less straightforward. For example, the first and most extensive case study of the inquiry (that of the educational biography of craftmaster Wolfgang B.) is at least paradigmatic in its importance for the theorizing process of VBD. However, only the relevance of a case for a community of scholars or other practitioners can clarify its paradigmatic status in a wider sense. Further discussion on the research design and method follows below to introduce the various case studies. The question now is how case narratives, as expressions of practical knowledge, can be understood as expressions also of practices. For this, I turn next to MacIntyre.

## MacIntyre's Concept of a Practice

MacIntyre characterizes practice as follows (2011, p. 218 f.):

By "a practice" I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice;

architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music.

He goes on to discuss how a practice has goods internal to it. With this he means the virtues and other valuable experiences as well as capabilities that one might have as a participant in a practice, ie. its excellence. Thus excellence in craft includes virtues such as honesty in work, frugality in the sense of not wasting materials, and so on.<sup>3</sup> These goods are in contrast to those external to a practice. MacIntyre most often mentions money, fame and power, which have a tendency to corrupt it. This, however is much less clear cut than it seems given that food is also an external good resulting from the practice of farming or fishing and hardly one that easily corrupts those practices (Hager 2011). MacIntyre's main example of the distinction between internal and external goods is from the practice of chess. He illustrates it with a discussion on what it means if one thinks one can initiate a child into chess as practice by rewarding it with candy every time the child engages in a chess-match. This confuses the internal goods of chess with an external good, a reward that, if it becomes habit corrupts the actual virtues attainable through skilled practice. This normative view of practice fits very well in the framework of *Bildung* and *phronesis* both of which are squarely focused on human flourishing. The concept can thus be added to the framework of VBD as one that sensitizes the reader of narrative cases from vocational contexts to the virtues and other goods articulated in those cases.

There are also some issues, indicated in the introduction in connection with the scope of *Bildung* and *phronesis* as practices. These issues, broadly speaking, are related to what practices one could actually say are articulated through narrative cases. Are there practices of *Bildung* and *phronesis*, or are they practices of nursing, craft, after school care, etc., in which elements of *Bildung* and *phronesis* are contained. Or perhaps there are practices of eg. non-violent communication which are "vocationalized." Such questions regarding the scope of practices have been discussed from a philosophical standpoint, where Hager (2011) moves in a similar direction as the present inquiry. Here, however, I will be taking a more empirical approach looking to the cases themselves for answers. Thus this brief introduction of MacIntyre's concept of a practice will be used to first explore a group of case narratives. This will then be reapplied to the concept in order to expand and differentiate it.

Finally, there is need here to distinguish between a practice and practical knowledge. The main difference is that a practitioner has practical knowledge, which in turn enables her/him to participate in a practice. The case narratives are applicable as articulations of both. They are descriptions of enacted practical knowledge and at the same time represent what a practitioner considers to be especially wise and enriching practice.

Before presenting the cases a brief note on their design is warranted.

<sup>3</sup> There is a critical philosophical discussion going on about MacIntyre's understanding of virtue and excellence (Cooke & Carr 2014). Suffice it to say that virtue here is understood as more than moral virtues albeit including these. The distinction between internal and external goods is also several degrees more complex than it may appear and remains to be worked out (cf. Hager 2011 for a more extended consideration).

## Design of the Case Studies

The following discussion draws on four case studies. One is an extensive interview with craft-master Wolfgang B. documenting his educational biography as a bookbinding apprentice in Stuttgart in the 1950s, and his further education at the Ecole Estienne in Paris in the 60s. The other three are multiple case studies conducted with students in various teacher training courses at the tertiary level. The student groups included between 20 and 30 participants and were given written assignment tasks to complete. The first was with students in an after school care (called *fritids* in Sweden) teacher education program where they were tasked to write a narrative of an incident of unusually successful conflict resolution (ie. oriented towards phronesis in a fritids context). The second was with students studying to become vocational teachers in several different fields such as crafts, tourism, agriculture, etc., at the Swedish upper secondary school level. They were asked to write about a vocational Bildung experience. The final case was with students in a care or nursing teacher training program. The participants worked in the field of care as nurses, enrolled nurses, midwives and related professions and were training to teach at the Swedish upper secondary school level in vocational tracks oriented towards care-giving. They were tasked with writing narratives of practical wisdom in their daily work. In deciding which cases to include in the article in full and which ones to summarize, priority was given to those that have not been published elsewhere.

The criteria for making the cases extreme and paradigmatic have differed somewhat. In the case of Wolfgang B. they were formalized in terms of unusual vocational expertise (3 master-certificates as bookbinder, gilder and engraver). I also relied on our long history together but this can be regarded as an exceptional circumstance. Nonetheless, such formal criteria give no guarantee that a case will be extreme, only increase its likelihood. In the other case studies there was no selection of participants, rather they were all asked to focus on case narratives that they themselves considered good examples of unusually rich, wise or successful events. In deciding which of these cases to include for analyses, those that were paradigmatic for the process of theorizing were included. Had the aim been less about driving conceptual development and more about publishing a case-book, the selection would have required a more collective approach where various stakeholders decide together which cases to choose.

With the exception of one case, all were originally written or spoken in Swedish and then translated into English by me, which means that they have been slightly edited in the process. The cases taken from the biographical study with Wolfgang B. rest on 20 h of recorded conversation. These texts are more extensively edited to create a coherent narrative. The process of that editing has mainly been to use vocational Bildung and phronesis as criteria for relevance and excluding matters that were about other issues.

It should be noted that the articulation of this kind of case narrative is open to methods beyond those mentioned. Focus group conversations, having apprentices interview their masters, reading auto/biographical literature, etc., are all possible sources of extreme and paradigmatic cases.

The ethical issues of the case studies are mitigated somewhat by a focus on unusual richness so that people in the cases seldom figure in negative ways. Still, standard procedures have been followed where participants were given the opportunity not to have their narrative made part of the research. Furthermore, the researcher has to bear in

mind that it is an exercise in practical wisdom (in connection with the virtues of the practice of educational research) to judge when a narrative might be sensitive to publish. Therefore consideration has to be given not just to the person who has told the story, but also to the other participants in it who were not asked about their inclusion.

## **Cases as Expressions of Vocational Practices**

The first question to be discussed is: what kinds of practices are articulated in the case narratives? I will begin with an example of those that indicate the most straightforward interpretations.

### **The Practice of Phronesis or an Example of Phronesis Intersecting with a Practice?**

In the multiple case study of fritids teacher students (four cases were published in Tyson 2016b) the narratives were all from the context of after school care with children aged 7–10 years, and about successful conflict resolution using the methodological framework of Rosenberg's non-violent communication (Rosenberg 2003). One was about conflict arising because a boy had taken a girls' pocket mirror, another about conflict between two groups of children playing war, one concerned a boy that did not want to wear appropriate clothes in late winter/early spring and one a group of girls having trouble integrating a new participant to their play. There were another four didactically relevant cases (out of 20) concerning social interaction and play.

The cases suggest that although they can well be accommodated within the scope of phronesis, they also illustrate more precise incidences of conflict resolution practice, particularly from the perspective of non-violent communication. It is a practice then, that resides within the general framework of phronesis but which can, if necessary, be considered without reference to either phronesis or *Bildung*. Several case narratives in the multiple case studies can also be viewed from this perspective, which raises the question on whether it is meaningful to speak of *Bildung* and phronesis as practices at all. Perhaps it is more appropriate to speak of a diverse group of practices such as conflict resolution, education in the crafts, etc., and to consider *Bildung* as a philosophical tradition and phronesis a practical form of knowledge both intersecting with these practices. Perhaps there isn't even a practice of conflict resolution but rather this is part of any given practice, be it after school care, bookbinding or nursing, each with its own distinct characteristic. If so, the concept of a practice seems to question the unity of the concepts of *Bildung* and phronesis.

At this point I turn to some of the other narrative cases to consider these issues further.

### **Cases of Practical Wisdom in Nursing-Related Work**

The multiple case study of practical wisdom in nursing-related work complicates the matter. I begin with it because it is set in the general context of phronesis as was the one on conflict resolution. I have chosen three cases that are representative of the variety of narratives from the studies. The first is a long conversation interspersed with reflections from a service home for the elderly; the second a story about an encounter between a midwife and a couple; and the third between a nurse and a man on the way to surgery.



*Maj*

**Case Description** Maj lives in a service apartment and is, despite her comparatively young age of 73, severely disabled because of diabetes which, owing to reduced circulation, has forced amputation of both her legs. Maj has found it very difficult to accept this and experiences a lot of anxiety, especially at night time when she tends to lay awake pondering unjust events from her life. She keeps comparing herself to others, eg. look at her, she's 96 and always seems so happy and content and both her legs remain, why can't I have it that way? Maj has a large social network despite not having any children of her own with good contact to siblings and their families. She also has many friends who come to visit and they do a lot of fun activities together, theatre and concerts are often on the menu.

**Dialogue 1**

I: Good evening Maj, you rang the alarm for me? (friendly and inquiring)

M: Good evening to you! (Maj looks happy to see me)

I: So what was on your mind this evening? (throwing a quick glance at the alarm that beeps)

M: Nah, it wasn't really anything, I'm sure you have lots of others waiting! (Maj seems to become a bit irritated)

I: Tell me what it was you were thinking about, I am here for you now! (Maj often likes a somewhat joking tone so I blink a little with one eye at her and nod in agreement)

M: Well, I've got a bit of pain but it'll probably pass! (Maj doesn't seem entirely convinced judging by the tone of her voice, she shrugs her shoulders and looks in another direction)

I: But Maj, what are we gonna do about that, you shouldn't lay here in pain?! (I approach her and take her hand)

M: Give me a pill! (Maj sounds on the verge of tears but clearly shows that she doesn't want to say more)

I: Ok, is it an OxyNorm you want? (I look at her and she nods and I fetch the pill)

M: Thank you that was kind! But you can hurry on now! (Maj seems a bit annoyed)

I: Are you sure there wasn't something else Maj, I have time if you want to talk!?

M: No I know you don't, everything is in such a hurry in the evening nowadays! (Maj has an irritated tone and shows with her entire body that she wants me to leave)

I: Ok Maj I'll go but promise me you'll ring the alarm again if the pill doesn't help or if you want some more company!? Perhaps you want me to look in on you again in a while? (I look at her questioningly)

M: Yeah if you have time for it you can always come back in a while but maybe I'm already sleeping then. (Maj looks sad)

I: Then that's what I'll do Maj, I'll be back within an hour! (I smile a little at Maj and receive a little smile back)

**Analysis of First Dialogue** In my conversation with Maj I think I start with an open question when asking what's on her mind. My mistake here is simultaneously casting a glance at the beeping alarm. Maj probably interprets my look as saying that I am stressed by it so that my gaze and my verbal communication don't really match. This also comes to expression in her reply. In my reply to this I try to encourage her to tell me what she wanted and I try to repair my mistake from before by explaining that I am here for her now. I think what I was trying to do was a simple form of mirroring her feeling that I wouldn't have time for her by saying that I am here for her now. I also try to add some humor to my verbal sensitivity by nodding in agreement and blinking at her. Maj's bodily expression when she tells me that she is in pain shows plainly that this is perhaps not the primary cause for her ringing the alarm but that it's the loneliness that seizes her and that she feels unwanted and in the way. When I take her hand her feelings come into conflict with each other, her wish for me to stay and talk and her anger at not being able to take care of herself. This is when she curtly asks for a pill. Through a non-open ended question I gather that it's a painkiller she wants and not something for her anxiety. Maj then again shows that she has experienced me as being in a hurry when she asks me to leave. Towards the end of the conversation I make another mistake by asking several questions in the same sentence but we solve this by deciding together that I will return within an hour. My smile gives her hope of talking some more later and she communicates non-verbally to me that she is comparatively happy with the arrangement.

## Dialogue 2

I: Hi Maj! Still awake? (spoken softly in case she has fallen asleep)

M: Yes I am awake, I've been waiting for you! (sounds tired but satisfied that I've come back)

I: Has the pain subsided? (inquiring and friendly voice, I've also turned the alarm off since my colleague knows I am there)

M: Yes it feels better. But that wasn't why I rang the alarm before! (she looks at me a bit impishly)

I: I figured Maj and that's why I'm back now! I understood that you wanted to talk! Can I just get a chair so that I don't have to stand? (Maj looks happy and wants me to get one of the soft chairs from the communal room)

M: Its so nice when you answer my calls because you don't get mad when I snap, you seem to understand what I need! (Maj weeps a little while I sit down by her bed and take her hand)

I: Now tell me, Maj, what it is that weighs on you tonight? (I look her in the eyes and smile and nod encouragingly with my head)

M: My sister was here today and I am always so happy when she comes but just as sad when she leaves again! I know she has a lot to do with her family and that she visits because she feels sorry for me and that she can't stay for very long! (She weeps a lot now, I give her a handkerchief and allow her to cry for a while before we go on talking)

I: So you think, Maj, that your sister visits just out of pity with you? (Maj looks at me and ceases to weep, she appears to be thinking)

M: Noooo, she probably visits because we've always gotten along so well and like each other! Actually, now that you mention it, she came for advice from ME! (Maj remembers that it actually was her sister who was unhappy today and needed her advice in a matter and that she called later that day and told Maj that she had taken the advice and that it gone well!)

**Analysis of Dialogue 2** I break off the conversation here because it would go on for too long otherwise! I open it with some non-open ended questions because I need to know if she is asleep and pain free. When I sat down and everything is calm I ask Maj an open question about what it is that weighs on her this night.

Throughout the whole dialogue I try to be present and to use non-verbal cues to further substantiate my presence. I do this by nodding in agreement, smiling, looking straight into her eyes when speaking and listening to her. I also try to use encouragement when trying to get the conversation going: tell me, Maj, what weighs on you. I also confirm that I have understood that it wasn't the pain that was her primary concern this evening.

I make attempts at paraphrasing her when I reflect her feelings regarding her sister and try to clarify them. This prompts her to reflect more deeply herself and to conclude that the facts aren't as crass as she felt that evening. It is also possible to view this paraphrasing as a confrontational question where I redirect the center of her concern causing Maj to view the visit in a more positive way. She remembers that it was her sister who came to her for advice, which worked wonders for a lonely heart. This event is based on actual occurrences. Maj often experiences anxiety but when one takes the time to talk to her it subsides. Maj fell sound asleep after our talk, which didn't last more than 20 min.

**Reflection** In working with this assignment I have really begun to understand what communication is and how important it is. When analyzing my dialogues I could see both strengths and weaknesses in myself and ... I think there is too little attention paid to the importance of communicative knowledge in everyday work. But it is precisely here in the minutiae of such work that important conversations emerge and where we build our relationships. When this everyday process works and relations are strengthened we stand better prepared for the more difficult conversations and events that we all experience in life. ...

### *The Child*

In my work as midwife I once met a couple during the initial meeting in the first stages of pregnancy. Earlier in the same year they had lost a child in week 24 of the pregnancy. That child had several grave deformations that were not compatible with life outside of the womb.

During our conversation we talk a lot about anxiety, worry and fear with regards to the present pregnancy. The mother weeps throughout the whole conversation and the partner is very silent and looks down on the floor.

The feeling I get during this conversation is that the couple hasn't been able to deal with the loss of their unborn child.

I ask the father what name the son received and they both burst out in uncontrollable weeping. The room is filled with a very heavy atmosphere and I think/worry that the visit is going to end then and there.

After a long time weeping the mother looks at me and says: thank you for asking. No one has ever talked to us about our son. Our family has been completely silent, our friends haven't mentioned him. We've been all alone with our mourning.

We look at a picture of the son that the couple has brought. They weep throughout, but its character has changed. I can sense and understand that now they are crying tears more of relief and gratitude because I didn't shrink from talking about him. During the remaining visit we spoke about the delivery and the time at the hospital. The couple began giving words to their experience and to share their feelings regarding the birth of their son. A burial was not conducted owing to the age of the child. The parents also talk a lot about this.

When the visit nears its end we sit together in silence for a long time.

I thank them for sharing their experiences with me and tell them we will always have the big brother with us in our forthcoming conversations.

We book a new visit in a weeks time to continue our conversation since the couple still has a lot left to talk of regarding their son. No counseling was offered to them after his death so I write a referral to a professional counselor as well.

This encounter, which I feared would end abruptly, became one of the most beautiful encounters I have had during my professional life.

### *The Surgery-Prep*

The encounter/conversation I am about to tell you about occurs in an operation room. There are brief meetings here before a patient is given anesthesia and it isn't always

easy to achieve communication with a patient for obvious reasons: brief meetings, a, for them, unknown environment, nervous patients, pre-medicated patients, etc. We also don't have all the background knowledge of a patient in our nursing team in the surgery but only that which is necessary for this particular operation.

Included in my tasks as enrolled nurse is to hook a patient up to our monitoring equipment, to make sure that the patient is comfortable on the operating table and during these moments, which are quite brief, I always try to read the patient, if s/he wants to talk, ask some question, etc. We in the team feel that it is important that the patients feel that we are there for them and are doing our best to make them feel calm and safe before anesthesia.

One patient arrives at the surgery because he hasn't been able to empty his bladder sufficiently for a couple of days. What we've been able to glean from his info is that he has had two previous surgeries for cancer and that he wasn't born in Sweden.

We meet the patient and get a report from the accompanying nurse. The patient is contorting with pain, which is understandable. When we enter the surgery we move the patient to the operation table and I begin hooking up our monitoring equipment. The anesthesia is administered by another one in our team and within a few minutes the patient relaxes and that's when I see him tear up and so I give him a napkin to wipe his eyes with.

Me: I understand that you are in pain and are worried about what will happen, we are here to help you.

Patient: I am thinking of my son.

Me: I see (*listening and trying to interpret what he means*)

Patient: He becomes sad when I am ill.

Me: I understand that, you're important to him. How old is your son? (*trying to divert attention*)

Patient: He is ten, he has had to experience so much bad stuff.

Me: (*I don't speak but take his hand in mine to show empathy*)

Patient: (*presses my hand in his, the tears have ceased*) When I had my first cancer he thought I was going to die. His uncle had just died in cancer at the time. We have fled from our home country and he only has me.

Me: You will sleep in a moment and the surgeon is going to relieve you of your pain so that you can see your son soon.

Patient: Thank you.

In these kinds of brief encounters one has to be ready to quickly adapt in one's conversations. I thought that the patient was weeping because he was sick and in pain

but the tears were for something entirely different, his thoughts were with his son. In order for the patient to feel as safe as possible he decides what the conversation is to be about and it's just a matter of following. In such a brief meeting it feels like a success to be able to assist someone in changing their frame of mind from weeping to calm.

These three case narratives all relate events and conversations that take place in different vocational practice contexts: a nurse in a surgery, one working with the elderly and a midwife. Of course they have care in common, but the enactment of their practical wisdom requires different conversational techniques, and different understandings of contexts. What this suggests, is that they all point to a similar excellence: empathy and tactfulness in conversation. At the same time the specialized vocational aspect needs to be taken into account thus indicating that there might be two levels of practice here. Before a comparative discussion, here are three Bildung-related case narratives that add some further complexity to the issue.

### Cases of Vocational Bildung Experiences

The first of the three cases is taken from the vocational education biography of master craftsman, Wolfgang B. and was initially reported in Tyson (2015a). I have summarized the main parts of it together with a quote, central to the issue at hand. The second and third are from the multiple case study with students at a vocational teacher program.

#### *Mondange*

The case of Raymond Mondange is from the 1960s when Wolfgang took courses at the Ecole Estienne in Paris and received his three master-certificates as bookbinder, gilder and engraver. Mondange was his gilding teacher and the stories Mr. B. tells are ones of continuous deliberate provocations during their training. One was regular interruptions of the students in their gilding work. He might send them to visit obscure craftspeople like an ivory carver or the maker of handcrafted wood cameras, or he would send them to some museum or library to look at work there. As Mr. B. remembers they always returned from their unwilling excursions with a newfound sense of amazement and interest, often prompting further conversations with Mondange leading to yet more excursions. Mr. B. summarizes:

[And when we complained] and tried to explain to him that we were not overly enthusiastic at the prospect of traveling through the entire city to meet someone ... he was both surprised, saddened and angry. Then he cursed us out telling us that the first thing one had to work at was one's pride over the excellence one possessed. ... [To be aware of] that these were vocational cousins that could make life easier because you could go to them trustingly and say: "I've got this and that problem ... do you have an idea, can you help me?" And then he said the really important part that stuck with me at the time, he said: "and don't forget when you visit someone who works alone and who strives for the exact same reasons as you are striving, to achieve the best possible results with his work. You visit him not as superiors but on an equal footing and ask for help and the person is able to assist you. It depends on your behavior towards him if you will get that

assistance and at the same time it becomes a validation of his professional knowledge or competence, it's a mutuality, you need each other in order for there to be any development in work. It's something one doesn't achieve alone but always confrère [ie. as colleagues]."

... I was convinced that Mondange forced us to come to grips with an attitude we had that reached back 3- or 400 years in connection with an immense impoverishment of professional survey or general view [ie. in connection with increasing specialization]. And he constantly tried to counter it by drawing our attention to how intimately we [ie. the different crafts] were connected and how important it was that one took an interest in what the vocations were then and what they are today.

*Surprise calligraphy* (This case was written directly in English and so required no translation or editing).

**Background** After the completion of University degrees in Restaurant, Hotel/ Hospitality industry Management (back in 1987) I was recruited to work as a restaurant manager at one of the largest Resort and Spas in Palm Springs, California. One Friday afternoon at approximately 5 pm the Food and Beverage manager announced that a fellow colleague had been terminated on short notice and transferred to another division of the company. Included in this specific colleagues job assignments had been, among other things writing and updating menus, wine lists, signs and other texts using penmanship (calligraphy). Very rarely were computer programs used for this purpose since that was considered less creative and inferior quality. The skill was used daily and it was explained that the lack of the transferred colleagues presence and skill could be overlooked in the dining room over the course of the week end, but come Monday morning this was to be included in my job description. So "Go home, learn, get the tools and make it happen over the week end so you can continue this upgraded service to our guests. I'm sure if you hurry to the office, you can snatch some of his materials." was the FB managers' admonition and suggestion.

**The Plan** After "stone facing" the two minutes of the command procedure administered by the manager I went outside, found a quiet spot of the dining room and went into a state of shock (What?? Me??) followed by an indignant fury (Who does he think he is? He must not think I have a life outside of this restaurant!). And finally surprise (Steal from a colleague? Is that a test?!). From there my state of mind was slightly calmed and it became obvious that this was clearly a sign of trust and a great compliment of artistic talent (although at no time had any proof of skills with a pen previously been presented or discussed). He was taking a chance, I would be too and I was not going to let that chance go to waste. After completing the shift a trip to the Arts and Crafts store was next. Taking any of my colleagues' materials or pens from the office were out of the question undignified and ethically wrong in my book. At the store the problem was presented and a kind, obviously very skilled store clerk listened to my assignment, shook his head (signaling that I was in for a major challenge with a failing rate of possibly enormous proportions). He calmly said "You are

going to need THE BEST tools available. Do we have a budget to work with?" The answer was "No" and the billing address and company name transferred from one hand to another. "With perfect skill a person can dabble with less than perfect tools but the more inexperience in penmanship someone has, the greater the reliance rest upon the tools" was the experts' advice. I have later in life found this to be true in so many cases and aspects of life. Possibly this was my greatest lesson learned that evening. The second greatest lesson was of personalized service. Although it was time for the clerk to close shop, realizing my desperation and challenge he kept it open, spent a few minutes of his time explaining the history of penmanship while showing different kinds of tools. While his stories and presentation lowered my anxiety I found the traditions fascinating. Then I watched, then I tried. He actually held my hand working a few strokes on the paper in order for me to get the feel for the task and quickly see a positive result. "Memorize how good this angle of the pen feels in your hand! Memorize how fantastically beautiful this straight and this wavy line looks! When you go home and feel less than successful, remember!" These were the words of an artist and inspiring teacher who never asked for a desperate student, but found one anyway. What he aimed for and tried to convey was a form of kinesthetic intelligence where the hand would translate a text, an idea into something visibly pleasing. Where the body would be able to create knowing how and rely on the quality of the ink, pen, paper. How light and emotion would correlate and when and how to adjust each element. In these few moments the teacher gave relaxation tips used by craftsmen. For instance how to position the light source, how to lower the shoulders consciously every two minutes or so. The shaking of the hand in a vertical position and to remember to "walk it off" when frustration set in." It is impossible to write with flowing beauty while stressed, irritated or aggravated" he said. I left the store with a modest bag of the best tools available. The bag was overflowing with confidence, joy and a sense of accomplishment. And I hadn't even started!

**The Result** The rest was hard practice. Over and over again. Every waking hour of the entire week end. Walking off a lot of frustration. I consciously focused and rewarded myself after completing a word, sentence or a text so that I would remember how success felt and almost tasted. Very similar to an athlete who does a gesture or flip after making a touch down or shooting a bulls eye. Instead of strictly following the preprinted fonts I made personal variations of the letters and numbers which worked well and gave me something to present to the manager on Monday morning. He was very pleased. He asked me where I had found the materials (I suspect he was checking if I had obtained my own tools or taken the lot in the office.) and his approving smile and nod confirmed that it had indeed been "a test" to see if I'd take the easy way out. I'm sure that he saw the flaws on the papers but he applauded the effort and the process that was under way. As I completed menus, wine lists and placement cards for guests I was, over time able to refine my style.

Since then I have read many books, looked at instructional films and even taken a class to work the classical fonts. Almost 30 years later I realize that I have used my skill thousands of times both privately and professionally. Perhaps I would have found this talent and joy on my own eventually, perhaps not. I know that the challenge presented



that afternoon, (along with my sense of team spirited co-worker and competitive nature) gave me an opportunity that had I not taken it would have meant a talent wasted. Hats off to the store clerk who referred to “We” (do WE have a budget) as a sign of our alliance against some evil week end destroying force, spent time, talked away my anxiety, had the knowledge and knew how to share his knowledge!

### *Making a Mess*

When I trained to be a carpenter I did it the traditional way, as an apprentice, which means that one gets one’s training at a firm with a mentor who provides guidance during the apprenticeship. I began it by travelling to Norway and it was there I was first introduced to Stefan who later became my mentor. He was to have a tremendous influence on my way of considering what’s important to think about when doing a task, both in the short and long term.

It was an early fall morning that Stefan and I went to do a job in a client’s home. We had been contracted to finish the upper floor of a house. In this the construction of inner walls dividing the floor into rooms was included. Stefan and I looked at the technical drawing we had received and discussed how we were going to do the job. Stefan wanted me to do as much as possible on my own and if there was any trouble or issue to ask him. I took out the materials I needed to make the skeleton or frame for the inner walls and began to cut the pieces to measure. After this it was time for me to begin assembling them according to the construction drawing I had, Stefan would come by once in a while to check that everything went well and asked some questions. I then had to explain to him what I had done and why. Sometimes there were things that needed improvement and then we would go through how and he showed me what I could do to solve the issue better next time.

When the skeleton or frame for the walls was done I checked that they were all in the right place and also that they were fully upright and not askew. I felt really good about my work. I then continued, mounting the plasterboards that were to be the actual wall-covering. When the boards were in place I went through it all to make sure I hadn’t forgotten any screws and I also checked that there weren’t any gaps between the boards that were too large. It was time to finish up and go home so I gather everything together putting it in a pile in the middle of the floor. I then sweep all the dust and scrap together and push that pile up to the first one with the materials. I figure: “I’ll be back here tomorrow and it’ll get just as dirty then so what’s the point of cleaning now?” I take the machines and place them in a corner of the room and then I kick the cables up against the wall so that they wont get in the way. I feel really satisfied with the day’s work.

Stefan shows up in the entrance to room and steps inside to see how things have gone. After some time going over my work he brought a few things to my attention. He told me how I could cut the boards so that there would be less waste next time and then he told be that my cleaning and the order of my things wasn’t good enough and that it might have negative consequences both for the firm and for me as an employee. I asked him to explain why.

That’s when he told me that a client also sees the kind of order and cleanliness that we have as craftspeople and that they care a lot about this. Naturally one has to do high quality work too. He told me that a customer associates good order with a serious

responsible craftsperson and that this may have a decisive influence on him or her recommending one to a friend. Cleaning and keeping good order in your workplace at the end of the day could thus lead to more work both for you as an employee and for the firm that employs you. That's when I realized that being a good professional isn't just about being quick, skilled with tools and able to read construction drawings.

These three Bildung-related case narratives have some things in common, in particular the excellence that the narrators ascribe to Mondange, the store clerk and Stefan, and the meaning that this came to have for them. It is also clear that this excellence has an ethical component even if it isn't always the most obvious part of the story. Parallel to this, vocational differentiations emerge even more in these narratives compared to the previous ones since they are situated in three different occupational fields. Furthermore, the story about Mondange displays a complexity that is difficult to categorize as part of a vocational practice.

## Discussion and Results for Part One

The brief considerations of the cases and the way they all relate to various excellences highlights their relevance as examples of practices. They are articulations of the virtues and other goods of a practice that MacIntyre is especially concerned with. However, this is not saying very much other than that there is a general correspondence between VBD as a framework and MacIntyre's concept of practice. Davies (2013a), in his discussion of MacIntyre makes the case that architecture is a practice which *includes* carpentry, bricklaying, painting etc. Hager (2011), on the other hand, argues that construction should be seen as a generic activity that includes a number of *separate* practices. In comparison, MacIntyre's own description where football is a practice next to architecture, farming, physics, child rearing and music shows the broad scope of his characterization. Considering the case narratives from the nursing students one might conclude that there is, similar to Davies' suggestion, a practice called 'care' and each one of their cases is part of a particular vocational specialization within that practice. However, I think they could just as well be understood as examples of three related, but different, practices, where practical wisdom in communicative action is shaped by the differences in appropriate responses in diverse environments and with divergent aims (surgery prep, care for the elderly and advice to soon-to-be parents respectively). This would be more in line with Hager's argument. Furthermore, the case of *Mondange* is clearly about interrupting and moving outside a particular vocational practice (gilding) underscoring the latter interpretation of the nursing case narratives, but at the same time asking what kind of practice this is about. What is Mondange *doing*?!

Perhaps to answer this, and as a first conceptual result of the empirical inquiry, one could distinguish between cultural and vocational practices respectively.<sup>4</sup> Architecture encompassing all the various occupations needed to construct a building and the

<sup>4</sup> I want to emphasize that unless the case narratives presented had called for further reflection and theorizing I would not have arrived at this suggested distinction. A purely philosophical analysis then, would have left me with a less articulate concept of a practice or with Winch's (2012) conclusion that the concept obscures more than it clarifies. It does not necessarily help here to refer to examples one might think of in order to illustrate (such as that of chess utilized by MacIntyre) because it is a lot more difficult to think of an example that complicates ones' reasoning than it is to think of one exemplifying it.

various historical styles of architecture would be a broad cultural practice. As would music or natural science or sports (calling these cultural is a suggestion, perhaps social practice would be better, at least in some instances). A vocational practice would then be the more specific practice associated with a vocation which had its own history, ways of education, excellences, etc. Architecture can be a vocational practice as well, a good architect being trained in a way different from a carpenter with (at least in part) other excellences. Both football and tennis are part of the cultural practice of sports but their training and excellences are also different. This differentiation would allow for a more insightful interpretation of what the cases are about. *Most of them are about vocational practices and the enactment of phronesis or Bildung in those practices.* However, just as the vocational practice of architecture and the cultural practice of architecture are not two entirely different things, but rather the vocational practice reflects and diffracts elements of the cultural practice; so in the various vocational<sup>5</sup> practices of nursing a surgical nurse reflects and diffracts elements of the cultural practice of say, therapy, care, healing or medicine.

This concept of a cultural practice is in some ways similar to what MacIntyre (1987) has called “the idea of an educated public.” Davies (2013b) takes this as a point of departure to argue for inter-professional education. His reasoning is that an educated public in the sense MacIntyre construes it, basing it on Scottish educational culture in the early nineteenth century, may well be impossible to recreate. But on the other hand, there is a potential for its reemergence in inter-professional education. This article can be seen as bringing the concepts of Bildung and phronesis into that discussion, together with an empirical focus. A cultural practice is then to be understood as that which inter-professional education aims at initiating one into and empirical studies of case narratives expressing this as a way of accessing parts of this potential aspect of vocational education.

To continue, one might perhaps speak of a cultural practice of education where Bildung (not as concept but as aim or excellence irrespective of the name it has, be it liberal education, paideia, etc.) is the central excellence, ie. where it describes the core of what this practice is when it is enacted. There is perhaps also a cultural practice of wise conduct where phronesis is at the center. These two intersect, both at the level of other cultural practices and at the level of vocational practices. Depending on what it is that is highlighted in a particular case narrative each appears more as one or the other.

This brings me to the question: on what levels can excellence in practice be expressed? As a cultural practice, phronesis might be understood to include, in a general sense, the art of conflict resolution and its various varieties, in particular those aspects related to wise communication. Aristotle (2009) distinguishes between phronesis as the capacity to deliberate wisely on how to promote human flourishing and the various virtues which represent dispositions to act in a brave, generous or compassionate way. It should be clear that the case narratives do not contribute to the virtues of those reading them. Being a tactful teacher requires practicing tactfulness, reading

<sup>5</sup> Sellman (2000) has called this the professional practice of nursing and the only reason I have chosen to call it vocational rather than professional is that there is a whole discussion about “the professions” and what constitutes “a profession” as compared to a regular occupation. Sellman doesn’t refer to this discussion and I think using the term professional practice without considering its further meaning in relation to that discussion risks obscuring things.

about it serves no particular purpose related to this apart from creating an awareness about the need for the virtue of tact. What reading about the tactfulness of others does accomplish is the potential enrichment of one's practical wisdom. There is thus a dialectic between enacted virtue told as story and the enrichment of phronesis for the purpose of virtuous action enhanced by it. Given the affinity between the cultural practice of caring and several of the virtues it is no surprise that phronesis as practice overlaps with and is oftentimes best exemplified through the lens of various vocational practices that are part of caring as cultural practice. However, since phronesis is a virtue aiming at wise deliberation with regards to all virtues, I think it is possible to speak of excellence in practice on three levels. There are practices of vocational phronesis to which the various nursing narratives provide entry points but also the other ones insofar as they involve wise conduct. There are the cultural practices that unite many vocational ones and where phronesis can also be enacted without this immediately being something one might place in a particular vocational practice. The example of Mondange relates to this and demonstrates a phronetic approach within the cultural practice of craft-work.<sup>6</sup> His attempts to elevate the students' attention beyond their own particular vocational practice seems to me to be a comparatively clear example of this. Finally, as described above, we can also consider the possibility of case narratives of phronesis outside of any vocational practice, expressing the cultural practice of wise conduct. I am not thinking here of non-vocational cultural practices like child-rearing but rather about situations that are directly ethical and not mediated by any other practice. For example when I encounter someone in need of assistance or when I must decide what charitable action to take. In Aristotle's own writing this is very much tied to a discussion of politics and perhaps it is equally relevant today to consider political action the practice of phronesis proper. MacIntyre discusses this extensively (2011) and it is also a topic in Knight (2008). There is nothing to prevent the approach of VBD being applied in the political sphere asking for case narratives of unusually rich and wise political action. It seems quite probable that this however, would raise any number of tricky ethical issues (related to eg. political affiliation and power) that are less direct in the vocational settings I have explored.

Turning now to Bildung, the preceding discussion of phronesis applies here as well. The different cases which speak to Bildung-experiences by the narrators demonstrate two things. First, that there is a phronetic element to Bildung that can be more or less at the fore. In the story about Mondange it is very much at the center of the case because he is concerned with his students developing certain attitudes. In *Making a mess* it is less overt, *Surprise calligraphy* seems to be somewhere in the middle. Second, that Bildung can also be viewed in the ways phronesis can. As a capacity to afford Bildung mediated by a vocational practice (*Making a mess*, *Surprise calligraphy*), as a capacity to afford Bildung mediated by a cultural practice, ie. where the vocational practice becomes part of a larger one. This is the case with Mondange who increases his students' understanding of craftwork far beyond their own particular crafts thereby enriching their imagination for work in the process. Finally, there is, perhaps, a cultural practice of education as such, not particularly highlighted in any of the cases, but where the aim is the Bildung, the coherence and flourishing, of a person's biographical narrative. This is not necessarily as Romantic as it sounds. Basic reading and writing

<sup>6</sup> The overlap between crafts and architecture as cultural practices is considerable without being identical.

skills, for example, are part of this simply because they allow one to function in contemporary society. Since I have not conducted any case studies of Bildung with regular schoolteachers for example, this aspect remains undeveloped.

Considering all of the above, in one sense it is somewhat misleading to write of Bildung and phronesis as practices since they are enacted in the context of vocational and cultural practices throughout the case studies. However, discussing them as practices throughout and across other practices highlights their unity and coherence amid all diversity. It also clarifies that they represent the main sensitizing concepts in VBD because it is through them that all these different case narratives become case narratives of “wisdom in practice.” It is to the value of Bildung and phronesis for cases of cultural practices that I turn to next because the distinction between vocational and cultural practices allows for some further reinterpretation of a difficult section in the initial case of Wolfgang B.’s educational biography. This demonstrates the relevance of the conceptual distinctions developed here in part one.

## Part Two: Mr. B. Speaks of the Bauhof and Cusanus

To begin with the extent to which Wolfgang B. had been initiated into both a vocational and a cultural practice became clear only with the express introduction of the distinction as a consequence of looking closer at the case narrative of *Mondange* in comparison with the others. Equally important, there had, until this introduction, been a part of the case that I considered central but which was difficult to fit in the framework of vocational Bildung or phronesis as aspects of practical knowledge. It was a largely philosophical conversation that wasn’t immediately recognizable as a didactically relevant case narrative yet still seemed significant somehow. However, this new context of cultural and vocational practices, as well as the distinction between practical knowledge and practice, changed things. The following description is quoted from Tyson (2015b, p. 103f.):

During our talks Mr. B. came to speak of the educational ideal that emerged from conversations he had with fellow craftspeople who were also engaged in teaching and that he strove for in my apprenticeship: “I didn’t have a vocational ideal [for your education] as in: bookbinder, but... as in: Bauhof.” At one point he characterized this as:

It ended with us [Wolfgang and some craft-teaching colleagues] agreeing that there is only one possibility for a future education and that is the oldest form of Bauhof. The idea that, among other things, stood behind the building of our great cathedrals. [...] Education cannot work pedagogically [...] without the Bauhof idea, ie. the understanding that the plurality of needs and knowledge, the intense will by the mason, scaffolder, structural engineer, architect, artist, sculptor, all of them need to aim at a common goal. [...] Back then it was the dome, today, it is the human being.

The Bauhof, a concept Mr. B. says he took over from Hans Sachs (1494–1576) is mostly known from the context of the great Cathedral constructions where the architect together with the masons and other craftsmen worked together in a Bauhütte. In the context of Mr. B.’s reflections, Bauhof can be taken to mean a group of craftspeople that together strive for

the common aim of building a cathedral. However, later in our conversations, Mr. B. makes a further distinction between Bauhöfe focused on cathedral building and those focused on building large municipal structures that he exemplifies with what in southern Germany is called a Fruchtkasten (generally called Kornhaus or Kornspeicher). This is a large, often multistory, structure built to contain grains, cured foods, and more for the community. A building he characterizes as not only beautiful but also the basis for the survival and life of a community in times of scarcity.

The case discussion goes on to describe how Mr. B. differentiated between the fundamentally hierarchical organization of the cathedral Bauhof compared to the non-hierarchical one of the community-organized ones. He also spoke extensively on the complexity of these building and the differences in how vocational knowledge was treated. In the former as something to guard and provide only through merit or money. In the latter as something to give freely according to the other person's own capacity for learning. On other occasions he has held Gutenberg up as the paragon example of this attitude. Instead of guarding his newly developed printing technique to enrich himself he opened the door to anyone interested in apprenticing at his workshop. Consequently, the technique of printing spread at a radically quick pace for his time.

The other part of the case took up a story Mr. B. told me many times during my apprenticeship. It is one he cannot remember exactly when and where he himself picked up, perhaps a shorter version in the 1950s and a longer one two decades later. It reads (Tyson 2015b, p. 105 f.):

Nicholaus of Cusa (Cusanus) lived from 1401-1464 and was an important Cardinal in the Catholic Church and a philosopher. As one version of the story goes (he tells it with minor variations each time and I remember it in my own words) Cusanus was visiting Rome and a friend of his who was a Bishop told him when they met that he had with him at his home the most profound philosopher he'd ever met. The Bishop begged Cusanus to immediately accompany him home to meet this man who is called the Layman, ie. he is not a priest but illiterate, in the original latin: idiota. Well at his house, they search for the Layman who is nowhere to be found until finally he is discovered sitting in the stairs that lead to the cellar where he is occupied with carving a wooden spoon. This is quite embarrassing to the Bishop who asks him why he is doing work better left to the servants, shouldn't he be more concerned with philosophical contemplation? To this the Layman replies: "I am working formatively on the whole spoonness of the earth" (Ich arbeite formend an der ganzen Löffelheit der Erde). ...

Interestingly, in looking for something approaching this story in the writings of Cusanus, one comes across a treatise called *Idiota de Mente* (the Layman on the mind or spirit (Hopkins, 1996 [1450])). In it Cusanus retells a much longer conversation with the Layman. The Bishop is here called the Orator. They find the Layman carving a spoon but not at the Orator's house, his embarrassment is still there but the Layman's answer is somewhat different and longer: "I am gladly engaged in these tasks which constantly nourish both body and mind," and then he spends several paragraphs speaking about spoons and spoonness in the

context of platonic philosophy. Basically, the Layman uses spoon as an illustration of a material exemplar of the idea or spoonness of the spoon, thus touching on Plato's philosophy even though he himself has not been able to read Plato.

The version told by Mr. B. takes things in a completely different direction and his guess is that he has a later version perhaps formulated in part as a craftsman's pun on Cusanus and in part as a serious challenge to Cusanus' understanding of what it entails to make something. In this "new" version the issue is not to illustrate a philosophical point but rather actual work on that which has spoonness in the earth.

The Bauhof and Cusanus as they are discussed above seem to me to be paradigmatic examples taken from a cultural practice common to all, or many, crafts while at the same time highlighting internal differences in that practice (the Bauhof distinction). So, what does the concept of a cultural practice (of crafts) achieve? There are three possibilities. First, it suggests that not only is MacIntyre's concept of a practice one that can be empirically useful, its differentiation allows for further interpretations of some of the case narratives documented. In particular, it broadens the scope on what a didactically relevant case narrative can be. Mr. B. is not speaking about various actions but about some of the goods or ideals of the cultural practice that he embodies. However, it is still a case *narrative*, they are still spoken of in narrative language rather than a strictly propositional one. Ideals of openness, equality and charity relating to the sharing of knowledge are given context through the examples of the Bauhof and Gutenberg. The spirituality involved in manual work is expressed in the story of Cusanus. This suggests a potential field of study concerned with asking practitioners about their ideals of practice and in aiming for stories and role-models rather than general statements. In effect, looking at cases where the excellences of cultural and vocational practices are embodied with striking richness.

Second, it is probably the case that cultural practices do not become readily available through the kind of brief written assignments that mostly focus on one particular event or a short process, which was the basis for the various multiple case studies conducted. The inquiry from which VBD has developed began with a more extensive biographical study in which the cultural and vocational interacted. The educational biography of Wolfgang B. demonstrates at least three ways that empirical studies can contribute to our understanding of *cultural* practices. One is through descriptions of how they are enacted, like that of Mondange. One is through the documentation of largely oral cultural practices or the ways in which the traditions that a practice draws on are articulated and understood by some of its experts. Here it is irrelevant if Mr. B. is correct about the Bauhof or Gutenberg from a historical point of view, the important point is how he is using them to reflect on certain excellences common to crafts. Finally, one is through descriptions of curricula and educational environments and the way they have been arranged to support an initiation into cultural and vocational practices simultaneously. This last aspect is considered in Tyson (2016a) as a case of general *Bildung* in the vocational education biography of Mr. B., which can now be reread as a case of combining initiation into cultural and vocational practices of crafts.

Third, it seems to me that vocational practices draw much of their excellence and dynamics from the cultural practice in which they are situated. At least the vocational practice of bookbinding that Mr. B. initiated me into during my apprenticeship drew much of its excellence from the wider cultural practice he feels himself to be part of. The cultural practices in which our vocational practices are embedded, like architecture, crafts, sport, care or healing, law and education are replete with traditions of spirituality, history, myth, literature, philosophy and art.<sup>7</sup> An aim for empirical research is to document how unusually wise practitioners have drawn on and reflected on these in their vocational practice.

Another question that emerges from this is the status for comparatively new vocational practices that have grown out of the last three or four centuries of industrial revolutions. For example, Balstad Brewer (1997) argues that management should be considered a practice and defends it as such against MacIntyre's sweeping criticism in *After Virtue*. If management is a vocational practice, where is its larger cultural embeddedness? MacIntyre (2011) writes that a practice, if it is dynamic and initiates one into its virtues, is capable of contributing to the narrative unity of a person's life (the term narrative unity overlaps with *Bildung* to a large degree). So what contributes to the narrative unity of the lives of participants in modern vocational practices?<sup>8</sup> What used to grow from the non-reflected interactions of members of cultural and vocational practices can, if my argument holds, become more of an articulate and reflective process. This is important, not least since MacIntyre has received criticism for making his practices largely self-contained and opaque to outside judgment (Cooke & Carr 2014). Narrative articulations of excellences (in this context *Bildung* and *phronesis*) in various practices open these to the understanding of those who may not be fully initiated into them but still wish to comprehend what practitioners struggle to achieve in their best moments. This brings me to the concluding reflections.

Through the lens of vocational and cultural practice, narrative cases focusing on vocational *Bildung* and *phronesis* invite a systematic scholarly inquiry aimed at achieving a more extensive description of particular vocational practices and the cultural practice/s that they are embedded in. Such descriptions are not limited to historical and perhaps outdated cultural practices (a possible critique of the traditional bookbinding craft explored here). They could begin to connect the threads through which contemporary and emerging cultural practices draw on traditions or create new ones to enrich themselves and develop further. Such inquiry could even contribute to raising the level of reflectiveness among those engaged in practice by increasing systematic awareness of what their confrères (to use Mondange's expression) are doing. As it stands, it seems excellences in both cultural and vocational practices develop tacitly and therefore are difficult to both critique and defend against various corruptive influences from policy measures and external goods. Thus, as an example, the various

<sup>7</sup> Again, to avoid misunderstandings, of course most if not all vocational practices have their own mythology, literature, etc. Bookbinding and the related occupations have Gutenberg for example (and he could be considered a paradigmatic example of someone who is relevant in one way for a vocational practice and in a broader way for the whole cultural practice of crafts). The examples from Wolfgang's biographical case should make it clear that there are important elements beyond the strictly vocational.

<sup>8</sup> MacIntyre's approach seems to be to flatly deny that modern occupations such as management can be organized as practices thus suggesting that there can be no vocational *Bildung* experiences to be had from them. This is an empirical, not a philosophical question.



cases from care-giving contexts can serve to empower practitioners in arguing for the kinds of practices they wish to be part of and to expand the scope of their imagination when it comes to what their practice could be. In other words, systematically articulating and sharing narratives of vocational *Bildung* and wisdom among participants in a practice is a way of opening these aspects to reflection and focused development. The vocational education biography of Wolfgang B., for instance, also provides a wealth of suggestions for how to think about vocational *education* not just for the practice of bookbinding but the wider cultural one of crafts (and perhaps beyond). It also suggests ways to construct curricula for the formal education of practitioners. More systematic inquiry into the intersection of cultural and vocational practices in vocational biographies can further enrich the imagination of those writing curricula and choosing their contents as well as in what vocational tasks to introduce in training.

In conclusion then, social science, especially biographical inquiry, has the potential to investigate what diverse practitioners are practicing with unusual excellence and to bring these inquiries together in order to make larger trends and developments public and open to reflection. Such studies could be a powerful contribution to the development of vocational education and practice in society.

**Acknowledgements** I would like to thank the three reviewers for their valuable suggestions on how to improve the article. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the participants in a philosophy of education seminar where a late version of the text was read and discussed.

**Open Access** This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

## References

- Aristotle. (2009). *The Nichomachean ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Balstad Brewer, K. (1997). Management as practice: A response to Alasdair MacIntyre. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 16, 825–833.
- Bondi, L., Carr, D., Clark, C., & Clegg, C. (Eds.). (2011). *Towards professional wisdom. Practical deliberation in the people professions*. Burlington: Ashgate.
- Clandinin, J., & Connelly, M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry. Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clandinin, J., & Connelly, M. (1995). *Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cooke, S., & Carr, D. (2014). Virtue, practical wisdom and character in teaching. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 62(2), 91–110.
- Davies, R. (2013a). After Higgins and Dunne: Imagining school teaching as a multi-practice activity. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 47(3), 47–490.
- Davies, R. (2013b). Inter-professional education and the idea of an educated public. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 65(2), 291–302.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Green, J. (2011). *Education, professionalism and the quest for accountability*. London: Routledge.
- Hager, P. (2011). Refurbishing MacIntyre's account of practice. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 45(3), 545–561.
- Hager, P., & Halliday, J. (2009). *Recovering informal learning. Wisdom, judgment and community*. Dordrecht: Springer.

- Hopkins, J. (1996 [1450]). *Nicholas of Cusa on wisdom and knowledge*. Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press.
- Kemmis, S., & Grootenboer, P. (2008). Situating praxis in practice: Practice architectures and the cultural, social and material conditions for practice. In S. Kemmis & T. Smith (Eds.), *Enabling praxis: Challenges for education* (pp. 37–64). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Kemmis, S., & Smith, T. (Eds.). (2008). *Enabling praxis: Challenges for education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Kinsella, E., & Pitman, A. (Eds.). (2012). *Phronesis as professional knowledge. Practical wisdom in the professions*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Knight, K. (2008). Practices: The Aristotelian concept. *Analyse & Kritik*, 30, 317–329.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (2011 [1981]). *After Virtue*. London: Bloomsbury.
- MacIntyre, A. (1987). The idea of an educated public. In G. Haydon (Ed.), *Education and values: The Richard Peters lectures* (pp. 15–36). London: Institute of Education.
- Rittelmeyer, C. (2012). *Bildung, ein pädagogischer Grundbegriff*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Rosenberg, M. (2003). *Life-enriching education*. Encinitas: Puddle Dancer Press.
- Sellman, D. (2000). Alasdair MacIntyre and the professional practice of nursing. *Nursing Philosophy*, 1, 26–33.
- Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Schubert, W., & Ayers, W. (Eds.). (1992). *Teacher lore. Learning from our own experience*. New York: Longman.
- Shulman, L. (2004). *The wisdom of practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Tyson, R. (2017). *The rough ground. Narrative explorations of vocational Bildung and wisdom in practice*. Doctoral dissertation, Stockholm University, Department of Education.
- Tyson, R. (2016a). What would Humboldt say? A case of general Bildung in vocational education? *International Journal of Research into Vocational Education and Training*, 3(3), 230–249.
- Tyson, R. (2016b). Pedagogical imagination and practical wisdom: The role of success-narratives in teacher education and professional development. *Reflective Practice*, 17(4), 456–471.
- Tyson, R. (2015a). Educating for vocational excellence: The auto/biographical exploration of enacted craft pedagogy. *Vocations and learning*, 8(2), 229–245.
- Tyson, R. (2015b). *Vocational Bildung in action*. Licentiate thesis, Stockholm University, Department of Education.
- Uljens, M. (1997). *School didactics and learning*. East Sussex: Psychology Press.
- Winch, C. (2012). *Dimensions of expertise: A conceptual exploration of vocational knowledge*. London: Continuum.

**Ruhi Tyson**, born in Stockholm 1978. Apprentice bookbinder with master of bookbinding Wolfgang Bremer 1998–2003. 2003 Journeyman’s certificate. Studies at the University of Stockholm 1998–2003 and again from 2007 to 2011. 2008 BA in Education. 2011 MA in Education. 2017 PhD in education at Department of Education, Stockholm University.