

Foreword

Few phenomena are as crucial to human life and as tricky to figure out as education. In recent years the world has witnessed a plethora of efforts to deal with the complexities of this enterprise by specifying common policies and standards as well as precise performance metrics for all schools located in particular, large-scale (often national) jurisdictions. The authors of this outstanding new book, *Changing Practices, Changing Education*, claim that this approach—which they call New Public Management—strips education of its proper goal, that of preparing students to live well in a world worth living in, and transforms education into standardized, factory-like schooling. The antidote to this baneful effort is the realization that education always transpires in particular sites and can achieve its promise if it and its transformation are conceptualized as such. The authors acknowledge that the idea that education always transpires in particular places and should be attended to as such is not new. What this book brilliantly provides is a new way to understand this truth and, thereby, a new conception of a path whereby education can fulfil its mission.

This new approach involves reconceptualizing education and the sites where it occurs through a type of social ontology that has recently been making waves in the social sciences: practice theory. Ontologies of this type advocate analyzing social phenomena as composed of practices. Applying the authors' version of this ontology to education and its transformation involves treating education as a complex—or ecology—of practices, the sites where it transpires as places where practices intersect and develop, and its transformation as a matter of reconfiguring practices, practice ecologies, and the conditions under which they transpire. The result of this reconceptualization is a new, insightful grasp of what must occur for education to realize its promise. Since the book marshals an original version of practice theory, it also makes an important contribution, not just to educational theory, but to practice theory itself.

The book well succeeds at its tasks. The elaborate theory exposition provides the reader with a compelling account of the nature of practices, the semantic, material, and social arrangements that support practices and prefigure their development, and the idea that practices form networks that can be likened to living entities. The authors very nicely conceptualize interdependencies among practices as a matter of practices providing resources for one another. They also stress the importance

of sites, the fact that practices always transpire in particular places: while practice architectures—sets of supporting arrangements—are always the arrangements that support particular practices at particular sites, it is in particular places that practices exist in ecological configurations. The book thereby adroitly depicts how practices concretely proceed and hang together.

The book's version of practice ontology proves its empirical chops in being put to work analyzing what the authors call the education complex: learning, teaching, professional learning, leading, and researching (self-study on the part of teachers and administrators). These phenomena are analyzed as practices, a tack that sometimes yields original delineations, for example, professional learning treated as practices of developing practices. The authors explore ecological relations among practices of these five sorts, clairvoyantly revealing how practices of one sort provide resources for practices of other sorts—in particular classrooms, schools, and districts. Most intriguing among the many insights that result from treating the education complex thus is the authors' recasting of the venerable question about the effectiveness of teaching in inducing student learning as a matter of the interdependence, that is, the resource interdependence between particular teaching and learning practices. The book's version of the idea that learning is initiation into practices—in its hands, a Wittgensteinian becoming able to go on in practices—is also most illuminating.

The book concludes with an eloquent elucidation of site based educational development, the idea that the realization of education as preparation for living well in a worthwhile world must be taken up site by site in response to the particular practices, architectures, and ecologies present in them. Having already traced the complex architectures of and entanglements among practices in particular classes and schools, the authors cogently argue that reforming education requires changing practices class by class, school by school, and that doing this in each case requires altering the arrangements that support practices in a class or school and transforming the practice ecologies located there. No doubt a tall order, but a necessary one.

The significance of this exceptional book lies not just in delivering a novel alternative to opponents of the standards and curriculum establishment. It also lies in demonstrating the value of attending to ontology in empirical research and policymaking. The book provides insightful analyses of schools while also offering new ways to fill out ideas about education and its path forward. It thereby provides guidance for education and a lesson for other researchers throughout the social disciplines.

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