

Emerging Expertise

What does it look like and how do we bring it on?

David Beckett
The University of Melbourne
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Introduction

In her recent book, Anne Edwards (2010) investigates:

...the relational turn in expertise as professionals work in and between work settings and interact with other practitioners and clients to negotiate interpretations of tasks and ways of accomplishing them. The central argument is that the resources that others bring to problems can enhance understandings and can enrich responses. However, working in this way makes demands on practitioners. At the very least, it calls for *an additional form of expertise...based on confident engagement with the knowledge that underpins one's practice as a social worker or nurse, as well as the capacity to recognise and respond to what others might offer.* (p13, emphasis added)

Confident engagement and a capacity to recognise and respond to what others might offer are features of working together in a team environment – on a project, such as a surgical operation (e.g. Bleakley 2006), a lawsuit, an art exhibition or performance, the construction of a building and so on – with the many associated *capacities* often also described over the past two decades as generic competencies: communicability, problem-solving, conflict resolution, literacy, numeracy and so on.

Building or growing these capacities would entail explicit attention to the quality of the 'give-and-take' apparent in the projective practices – within which there are many learning activities, such as simulations, role plays, skills training, job rotations, formal studies and so on – as has been discussed in Beckett (2012b), and for which an entire industry exists – the vocational education sector of all nations, which encompasses both public and private providers. How to build such capacity is not my interest in this paper (however, see Beckett 2009). But the concept of 'capacity-building' is central.

My focus is upon Edwards' '*...additional form of expertise...based on confident engagement with the knowledge that underpins one's practice...*'. What this paper does is tackle the *emergence of expertise through practices*. It does not deal much with the adjacent issue, that is, the emergence of identity. Those interested in this could start with the emergence of *identity through discourse* which is well-established in Foucauldian scholarship (e.g. Zackrisson and Assarsson 2008). Another way into 'identity' is through considering practices themselves (e.g. Beckett 2010). Obviously, there is overlap, since 'discursive practices' such as those often manifest in the lifelong learning policy agenda (cf Suri and Beckett 2012), construct varieties of individual – the ideal worker, the compliant citizen, the willing consumer – and so on.

What is required, in moving beyond these analyses of emergent identities, is some account of the emergence of expertise of the kind Edwards calls for, that is, which is *relational* by which

she means that, in the workplace, responses and solutions to particular situations that arise there emerge from the *relata* – the myriad, messy but purposeful decisionality that a group generates as it grapples with routine, non-routine and sheer unintended circumstances: the happenstance of life at work.

First, and drawing upon Beckett (2012a) this paper explores what this confident epistemological engagement looks like, and argues for its ontological significance. Something new and important emerges - *innovative expertise*. In the second part of the paper, I sketch out why this is best regarded a virtue, in the Aristotelian sense. I do this by arguing that innovative expertise is a manifestation of human *excellence*. As Daniel Russell (2009) puts it,

...the relevant virtues in this context [of their unity in any single workplace] must be excellences of persons considered as rational, practical agents...it also seems clear...that any theory of the virtues must take such virtues as its central cases...

...*excellences* – [are] traits in virtue of which one fulfils one's nature as a rational and emotional creature that chooses and acts. (p338-9)

The Emergence of Expertise

Edwards' book details several sustained research programs in Europe where the building of capacities towards expertise has been achieved. Her focus throughout, based on Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), is located at the professional or organisational level of analysis, with considerable attention to the purposeful intentionality of those within such sites of practice. Quoting Leont'ev (1978 p62): 'It is exactly the object of an activity that gives it a determined direction' (p68), she goes on:

...he proposed that the object motive, that is how the object of activity is interpreted by participants in the activity, calls forth specific responses which reflect the values and purposes of the dominant practices inhabited by participants and the activities in which they engage. (p68)

Edwards' example of this is of a teacher who will look at a student's development trajectory and interpret academic performance; and of a social worker looking at the same trajectory in the student and who may interpret 'signs of vulnerability and risk of harm' (p68). Leont'ev's 'object motive' is a psychology-based intentionality, 'determining' or interpreting some aspects of the immediate world akin to Dewey's judgements of purposes, arising from the 'significance' the world has, in the present. For Leont'ev, and for Edwards, what follows from the object motive is motivational according to the norms of the 'dominant practices inhabited by participants and the activities in which they engage'.

The 'object' is thus not a fixed 'purpose' in the traditional sense of a goal or target. It is a way of orienting oneself to the field of practice – of locating oneself in a community of practitioners. That it is 'interpretive' through the norms of the practice shows it to be a driver of actions, not a Deweyan 'end in view'. (This 'driving' will be very significant in the second and final part of this paper, where I raise the issue of 'directions', in connection with virtue ethics) The object-motive is an ontological dynamic which is distinctive in its operations. It shapes how a student, or a worker, or a colleague, is perceived. It is a stance on the 'direction' of practice from within the norms of that practice, so it is fluid. Object-motives, albeit from

psychology, are therefore conceptually congruent with the emergence of purposes, to which, as just noted, I return in the second section of this paper. In brief, and so far, I claim that an individual's capacity-building is embedded within the object-motives of her or his peer practices, which all the participants-as-practitioners 'inhabit'.

Capacities are part of who we are, at and through our work. They get us moving – 'object-motivated', we can say. Moreover, I make a larger claim. Capacities help to make us ontologically distinctive – how (and how well), and with whom, we do our work, makes us who we are, and so identity is an emergent property, spinning off from deep within our evolving purposes. As Edwards (2010) sets out:

...identity is not a stable characteristic, but is dialogical, negotiated and accomplished within activities...which are in turn located in practices. But I suggest it is also more than that. One's identity is also an organising principle for action: we approach and tackle what we think we are able to change and make changes in line with what matters to us: our interests. These interests are culturally mediated, but nonetheless experienced personally in terms of our commitments, standpoints and the resources available to us. (p10)

Our interests are experienced personally, that is, subjectively, but their changeability is a matter of give-and-take as our actions within practices evolve. In a world increasingly sensitive to the 'relational turn', our agency is itself in the relational mix. We act amongst the fluidity of daily work (and of course in the more general arena of daily life), so our experience of our agentic selves is itself a component in the construction of our identity. We 'see' our selves as more or less agentic, depending on the exercise of that 'relational agency'. According to Edwards,

Relational agency...is concerned with the "why" of collaboration as much as the "how" ... [therefore] more attention should be given to why people engage in collaboration and what are their "passionately held motives". Here we return to the importance of values in professional practices... [these] are woven through the common knowledge that mediate fluid and purposeful responses and are recognised as crucial to how professionals interpret problems in practice. (p69)

Values-driven practices are an example of the priority that the normative has in what is ontologically distinctive. At work, we value the innovative – we want creative, holistic practitioners who can work with others to come up with unique and efficacious responses and solutions. These responses and solutions emerge from what is originally messy: unpredictable, irreducible and explicable – and so the outcomes differ from their origins.

This requires *innovative expertise*, which is *the relational excellence of the group playing out in finding these unique and efficacious responses and solutions*. This is not to demean, or subjugate our (individual) senses of selfhood or agency. The agentic Self (my sense of Me) is not the mere epiphenomenon of purposeful working experiences. Rather, it is an ontological achievement – a nodal, or high-water, or milestone marker in the daily swamp of working life. These can accumulate as careers unfold, and the jigsaw puzzle of successes and failures takes shape. But throughout, the relational excellence of the group invokes mediated responses, where the give-and-take of the practitioners amongst their innovative activities shapes not only their purposes, but also themselves (collaboratively), and, their Selves (respectively).

Innovative expertise as a manifestation of excellence is ontologically distinctive because, at and through work, it links emergent practitioner purposes with socially intelligent action, and it does so by acknowledging, as central to this linkage, the normative interests practitioners have in making their ‘object-motives’ clear to themselves and others as the actions unfold. As Edwards (2010) states, ‘In brief it involves a capacity for working with others to strengthen purposeful resources to complex problems’ (p14).

Expertise as a Virtue

In the Introduction, I flagged support for the view that expertise is a virtue by drawing upon the Aristotelian approach (set out by Russell) that virtues themselves are centrally practical *excellences*: we admire and wish to inculcate the exercise of traits which one chooses in fulfilment of one’s nature. These include trustworthiness, courage, temperance, humility and so on (there can be any number of virtues: see The Virtues Project at www.virtuesproject.com/virtues.html where there are dozens listed).

Expertise which is innovative, as defined and articulated above, represents in particular workplace contexts (that is, situated agentively and relationally, to again use Edwards’ approach), ‘confident engagement’ with practice-originated knowledge. What is added to the display and exercise of excellence in individuals is *relational* excellence: the exercise of traits that are centrally practical but only apparent in the *relata* of the group (e.g. in the surgery, the lawsuit, the arts production, the building construction and so on).

Following Aristotle, we will find that practical deliberations – the giving and receiving of reasons – are as equally important in the richer relations of the group, as they are between a couple of individuals. The individualistic view on this is well put by Julia Annas (2011):

With skills of any complexity, what is conveyed from the expert to the learner will require the giving of reasons. The learner electrician and plumber need to now not just *that* you do the wiring or pipe-laying such and such a way, but *why*....Reasons enter in here as a medium of *explanation*...The explanation enables the learner to go ahead in different situations and contexts...The ability both to teach and to learn a skill thus depends on the ability to convey an explanation by giving and receiving reasons. It thus requires some degree of articulacy. (p20)

What is going on here, and in groups, which also expect and seek reasons for actions? Annas emphasises two features:

We find the important similarity of virtue to skills where two things are united: the need to learn and the drive to aspire.

Aristotle famously notes an important similarity between virtue and skill: both are practical, and so can be learned by practice, by actually doing what needs to be done. Moreover, both involve learning... “...for example, we become builders by building, and lyre-players by playing the lyre. So too we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions and courageous by courageous actions” [NE 1103 32] (p16-17)

The electrician, the plumber, the surgeon, the lawyer and so on have in common *the need to learn* (what to do next – the emergence of expertise being the shared intention) and the *aspiration* (to improve - when the next situation presents itself – as an opportunity for innovation). These two features of skilled actions point us to *expertise as a virtue*, because they have a common concept: the pursuit of excellence:

Virtue... shares the intellectual structure of a skill where we find not only the need to learn but the drive to aspire, and hence the need to “give an account”, the need for articulate conveying of reasons why what is done is done. The learner in virtue, like the learner in a practical skill, needs to understand what she is doing, to achieve the ability to do it for herself, and to do it in a way that improves as she meets challenges, rather than coming out with predictable repetition. This comes about when the virtue is conveyed by the giving and receiving of reasons, in contrast with the non-rational picking up of a knack. (Annas 2011, p20)

Practical reasoning is thus a feature of both skilled activities, and of virtuous activities. We want to *excel by virtue* of explanations we give and receive amidst daily work and life. As Russell (2009) puts it, ‘...the excellence of such creatures as we are must be a kind of intelligent success in action and practical reasoning’ (p343).

My claim is that excellence is shown in and through practical reasoning (*phronesis*) in relational contexts such as typical workplaces. There, groups grapple with complex and perhaps hitherto unknown situations where responses emerge which are innovative. I call this ‘innovative expertise’ a virtue because such high-level skillfulness shares ‘shares the intellectual structure’ of a skill, namely, practical reasoning, which is apparent in the relational decisionality of the group (the shared ‘giving of accounts’ in the aspiration to learn what to do next, and what to do better).

I gain further support for this argument when we consider the holism and purposefulness of most group-based practices. For example, in a medical clinic, it is increasingly likely that inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary clinical structures will mark daily work life for busy staff. Physicians, nurses, allied and community health workers, office and management will combine in various ways for the welfare not just of the group practice but also for the patient/client. The focus is on the whole person, the case, and the shared decisions need to progress the clinical situation, in its broadest sense (Beckett 2010, 2012b). The direction is the wellbeing of the patient; the ethic is caring, to this end. This is *phronesis* instantiated!

Russell (2009) is in alignment with this emerging context, when he raises a conceptual debate amongst virtue ethicists:

...a major disagreement between proponents and opponents of UV [the unity of virtues] concerns what sort of thing a virtue is: between a view of the virtues as each focusing on its own sphere of concern with little regard for the spheres of other concerns, and a view of the virtues as each focusing on its own sphere of concern as necessarily situated among the others. (p341)

[On the former] the virtues are more like “trajectories” than “directions”: the virtues, that is, tend towards certain sorts of action or considerations, and as such, exercising a virtue will result in good action if the trajectory is unobstructed and tending in what happens to be the right way, but there is not internal to a virtue an excellence by

which a virtue apprehends the correct direction *all things considered*. Consequently, on the “trajectories view” of the virtues, the fittingness of the exercise of a virtue to one’s circumstances –and thus the rightness of such an action – is fortuitous...

The contrasting ‘directions view’...holds that *while each virtue operates primarily within its own characteristic sphere of concern, to have a virtue involves understanding and deliberating about things in that sphere as bearing on the spheres of concern characteristic of other virtues as well*. This sort of view is perhaps best known from Aristotle, who understands a virtue as a tendency to choose, act, and feel in accordance with “right reason” or phronesis, which transcends all the various spheres of concern of the particular virtues (see esp NE VI.1 5) (p342-3) [emphasis added]

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for two claims. First, that expertise emerges from the relationality of daily work life, as ‘confident engagement with knowledge arising from practice’ and that *innovative expertise* is a new concept that captures this well. Second, that innovative expertise is a *virtue* because it is a manifestation of Aristotelian ‘excellence’: it shows the power of learning, of aspirations, of directions and agreed ethical purposes in workplaces, and it does all this by retaining a holistic approach to the problem or issue which sparked the need for experts’ engagement in the first place.

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