

## Phronesis as Embodied Professional Knowledge

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### Abstract

*If one listens to those within the sphere of the OECD who claim to represent education at national levels, we could be excused for believing that education is simply the measuring of certain skills within the narrow confines of functional literacy and numeracy and we might believe that this is all there is to educating. This paper makes a call for the restoration of teaching professionals: teachers who are capable of making decisions and knowing what counts as suitable curricula for their students, teachers capable of making critical and informed judgements and evaluations. This restoration would presuppose that we value a form of embodied knowing termed phronesis, which is practical wisdom that uses experience, disposition, reflection, judgement and ethics. The term originated with Aristotle but is used today in relation to professional knowledge. The Aristotelian notion of Phronesis is that of an embodied social practice which requires interactions with others and which typically involves a judgement through deliberation that is not calculative. Phronesis is distinguished from theoretical knowledge or science, or even technical skills; it is an intellectual virtue. This paper provides examples of the types of practical knowledge and wisdom necessary to evaluate music performances, compositions, arrangements, understanding styles and genres, musical knowledge and aural acuity, not within the confines of simple narrow structures, but through informed ethical judgements which embrace all musical styles, both cultural and subcultural. This kind of practical wisdom requires the know-how and moral commitment to make judgements as phronesis and to shape new kinds of professional knowledge.*

**Key words:** phronesis, practical wisdom, standards-based assessment, virtue

### Introduction

New Zealand fell under the sway of neo-liberal thought in the late 1980s and this meant that education began to work towards developing a focus on market-based delivery. In 1987 part of the Treasury brief to the incoming third Labour Government, in line with neo-liberal thought, was as follows.

Education tends to be thought of as a natural sphere for government intervention because it is a social or public good ... In the technical sense used by economists, education is not in fact a 'public good' ... education shares the main characteristics of other commodities traded in the marketplace. (New Zealand Treasury, 1987, p. 33)

Within two years of that statement, the Government had dismantled the Department of Education and restructured it into three key units: policy and curriculum (Ministry of Education), qualifications and examinations (New Zealand Qualifications Authority), and a group designed to carry out audits of schools to ensure the tax payers' money was being spent productively (the Education Review Office). Other aspects of education, such as payroll and property, were contracted out. Everything was in place by the beginning of the 1990s and the Ministry of Education established the Curriculum Framework to ensure consistency of educational product across the country. Meanwhile, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) developed the New Zealand Qualifications Framework to deliver national assessment processes. It is this latter framework that forms the focus for this paper.

### Standards-based Assessment

NZQA were lucky to have David Hood as their first Director. He could see the possibilities of setting in place more equitable assessment systems that would allow students to achieve according to their strengths, rather than being lock-stepped into the traditional year-long packages of subjects that had the potential to hinder the progress of almost 50 percent of students in the previous decades. One way Hood sought to achieve this was through competency-based standards, then popular in Australia, and he set in place an assessment design for New Zealand called Unit Standards.

Unit standards were to be pass or fail, often needed demonstrated knowledge and skills, and the theory was that if you were already competent at Level One, then you should go to Level Two or Three and pass those standards. In this way students could progress through senior schooling at their own pace. Level One equates to the first year of senior secondary school (15- to 16-year-olds) but the standards were also flexible enough for members of the community to engage with. Naturally, the notion of pass/fail brought strong criticism from the New Zealand Business Roundtable, who strongly promoted neo-liberal principles across the employment sector, and their opposition was supported by its education arm, the Education Forum, who promoted national year-end examinations and competitive individualism.

It was my privilege to be elected Chairperson of the Music Advisory Group (from 1995 to 2002 when the committee was disbanded) who steered the development of unit standards in music. The 25-member group contained several teachers and various members of the industry in the form of working musicians, composers, techno-buffs, recording engineers, etc. No record company (or similar) was represented, but the New Zealand Vice Chancellors Committee had a representative to report back on the deviation to assessment quality, which is how the universities saw it. Each unit standard carried a number of credits which were believed to relate to the number of hours of study and practice it would take to pass the standard; one credit equated to ten hours of study. All the standards were internally assessed by the provider, with a percentage being sent each year for national moderation. I was fortunate enough to sit on each expert panel as we developed 55 unit standards in composition, performance, group performance, recording technologies, the music business, music retail, research, etc. What was so stimulating about this process was that the unit standards were designed by practitioners, those with the practical wisdom to professionally deliver in their area of expertise—diverse groups of experts sharing ideas and ‘tricks of the trade’ with each other.

The pressure to abandon unit standards was kept up by Business Roundtable and other groups, including many in government, and especially the Ministry of Education who saw the development of tools for assessment as its role and saw NZQA’s role as becoming mere record-keeper. By this time David Hood had long since stepped down from his role. The Directorship was handled by many who simply were not up to challenging the Ministry and who quite possibly either did not understand or did not believe in the unit standards themselves. Barely any schools were adopting the unit standards—in Music around 60 across the country—and this was mainly due to pressure from both the Education Forum and certain schools viewed as elite, who denigrated the unit standards for not testing a depth of knowledge and understanding. This situation produced a kind of educational fundamentalism which idealised ‘tradition in the traditional sense’ (Giddens as cited in Thwaites, 1997, p. 80). In addition, few tertiary institutions were delivering the higher Levels, 4 to 7, although they were quick to adopt the material to their own ends, putting their institutional stamp on them. This was, after all, a climate of competition and, therefore, various institutions offering the same unit standards was unsustainable. Thus we find, in the 1997/98 financial year, that the government funding for qualifications framework development had dropped from NZ\$3 million to \$700,000, further undermining the confidence of those involved in the process and schools or tertiary institutions who might have been considering adopting unit standards (Thwaites, 1997, p. 79).

Under the government initiative ‘Achievement 2000’, the Ministry introduced Achievement Standards. These standards have three levels of achievement and one of non-achievement (rather than simply pass/fail). The levels of achievement are: Achieved, Merit and Excellence. Achievement standards contain a mix of externally assessed standards (through national examinations) and internally assessed standards. Whether students attain Achieved, Merit or Excellence, they still get the same number of credits for passing the standard, but the grade is noted. As with unit standards, one credit equals, hypothetically, ten hours of study. The

difference between the development of unit standards and achievement standards was that the expert panels (of which I was a permanent member until last year) comprised teachers or teacher educators. Gone were those professionals with the practical wisdom. Many standards remained but were rewritten by the expert panel to better reflect the school setting rather than the industry setting. These standards have undergone several upgrades (the most recent in 2012) and Achieved, Merit and Excellence have now been broken into low achieved, achieved and high achieved, etc. This means that the so-called standard-based assessment is edging perilously close to the old percentage type of marking, although no mention of the norm-curve has yet been made. This in itself suggests that practical wisdom is lacking across the education sector, given the move back to compartmentalised and possibly soon fractionalised marking systems. The wise practitioner can think holistically; the rational calculator cannot. When compared, the unit standards lead to vocations and focus on competency, while the achievement standards lead to qualifications and focus upon performativity.

Both unit standards and the internally assessed achievement standards are moderated nationally and NZQA selects the standards a school must submit each year. The Moderation Team is headed by a National Moderator, a role I took on as the first National Moderator 2000–2007. During my term I had a team of seven moderators working with me. We were all part-time moderators, and my role was to cross check a percentage of the material my team had moderated. I resigned when the role became full-time and this was initially filled by two National Moderators, who shared the role. One was a teacher with long experience and an expert violinist, specialising particularly in Baroque music, and the other also a teacher (Correspondence School) and an opera buff, who enjoyed singing in local productions. This moderator was also very accomplished with the new computer-based technologies. In 2011 a single National Moderator was appointed, accompanied by check moderators. The current National Moderator has musical skills and is an effective classroom music teacher and previously spent several years as Head of Music in a Catholic boys' school known in particular for its outstanding rock bands.

### **Moderating and Assessing Practical Aspects in Music**

It would be fair to say that moderation and assessment in the areas of musical Performance (both as a featured soloist and within a group), Composition and Arrangement are somewhat inconsistent both in schools and within national moderation. If we are to improve the quality of assessment in these practical areas then it becomes apparent that the national assessors (moderators) must first improve themselves with regards to knowledge, skills, understanding and experience. They need to cultivate the abilities, habits, thoughts, technical mastery, musicianship and values of the practice. Not only that, the teachers who both establish and assess standards such as performance and composition need to cultivate the virtues of practical knowledge as wisdom. Understanding assessment in musical performance and composition requires a practical wisdom, what Aristotle called *phronesis*. Practical wisdom goes beyond simply knowing how to apply the assessment tools; it requires a self-knowledge of the practice.

The unit standards are (or were) quite detailed, with generally two to four Elements in each standard and each Element contains from one to four Performance Criteria. Some critics regard the unit standards as atomistic, but in their development the professionals in the field had little problem establishing what kinds of clear competencies would be required to produce the appropriate knowledge, skills and understanding. In contrast, the achievement standards offer more generic statements that ignore the distinctiveness of subject knowledge, usually one sentence for each grade (A, M, or E), and while the Explanatory Notes offer some guidance, the holistic nature confuses many teachers and professional judgement is desirable, even though not in plentiful supply. The Ministry's aim was to make all achievement standards look as close as possible to each other across disciplines and so the often vague descriptors add to the confusion. I speak as someone who has worked on these for the past 14 years, and trying to fit our professional and practical knowledge in with the Ministry's model has proven most difficult. The problems in assessing the more practical standards lie, for both teachers and moderators, in the fact the neither intuition nor empirical observation is enough to grasp the context.

Clearly, some form of practical wisdom or knowledge is required in order to have the grounding necessary to make reliable and valid judgements. Such claims stretch at least as far back as the Greeks and their notion of phronesis.

### **Phronesis**

Phronesis is generally defined as ‘practical wisdom or knowledge of the proper ends of life’. In Aristotle’s scheme, phronesis is classified as one of several *intellectual virtues* or *excellences of mind* (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012, p. 2). Aristotle claims ‘there are three things in the soul controlling action and truth: perception, intellect, and desire’ (Aristotle, trans. 2000, p. 104, Bk VI, Ch. 2). He urges us to assume that there are five ways in which the soul arrives at truth by ‘affirmation or denial; namely, skill, scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, wisdom and intellect, adding that supposition and belief can be mistaken’ (p. 105, Bk VI, Ch. 3). Phronesis is, as Aristotle termed it, the practical wisdom that comes from an intimate familiarity with the contingencies and uncertainties of any particular social practice (Schram, 2012, p. 16).

We should remind ourselves that, for Aristotle, *episteme* is characterised as scientific, universal, invariable, context-independent knowledge, usually known today as *epistemology* or *epistemic*; it is knowledge that is abstract and universal. *Techné* is the know-how associated with practising a particular craft; it is usually characterised as context-dependent, pragmatic, variable, craft knowledge and is oriented toward practical instrumental rationality, governed by a conscious goal. Today it might appear as *technique*, *technical*, *technology*. Phronesis, on the other hand, is an intellectual virtue that implies ethics. It involves deliberation that is based on values, concerned with practical judgement and informed by reflection. Kinsella and Pitman’s interpretation of phronesis is pragmatic, variable, context-dependent and oriented toward action (2012, p. 2). In Aristotle’s world the object of intellect was to gain knowledge and, through knowledge, wisdom (*sophia*) and to develop a love for knowledge (*philos*) (p. 3).

For Aristotle, ‘practical wisdom is a virtue and not a skill. And since there are two parts of the soul that possess reason, it will be the virtue of one of them, namely, that which forms beliefs, both belief and practical wisdom being concerned with what can be otherwise’. A state of belief involves reason, ‘such a state can be forgotten, but practical wisdom cannot’ (2000, p. 108, Bk VI, Ch. 5). He suggests that ‘we may grasp what practical wisdom is by considering the sort of people we describe as practically wise... for they have the ability to deliberate nobly about what is good and beneficial for himself... [and] about what conduces to living well as a whole’ (p. 107, Bk VI, Ch. 5). Practical wisdom is ‘concerned with human affairs, namely, with what we can deliberate about... The person unqualifiedly good at deliberation is the one who tends to aim, in accordance with his calculation, at the best of the goods for a human being that are achievable in action’ (p. 110, Bk VI, Ch. 7).

Phronesis, as practical wisdom, seems to have three aspects: it is content (resource/store of experiential knowledge), a quality of persons (the capacity to acquire and appropriate the practical knowledge) and a form of action (doing, a practice where experiential knowledge is both used and gained) (Flyvbjerg, Landman & Schram, 2012, p. 4). As Aristotle puts it: ‘practical wisdom is concerned also with particular facts, and particulars come to be known from experience’ (Aristotle, 2000, p. 111, Bk VI, Ch. 8). He continues by saying that a young person is not experienced, since experience takes a long time to produce, adding that a boy can become accomplished at mathematics but not in wisdom or natural science. Mathematics is a matter of abstraction, while the first principles of the other two come from experience.

Phronesis is a form of deliberation, such as when doctors and nurses engage in *social practices* where *practical wisdom* is one of the central *virtues* (Stout, in Ellett, 2012, p. 16). Central in this discussion on phronesis is *aporia*—the unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainties. As a characteristic of the work of professional practice, *aporia* needs to be embraced.

Aristotle’s conception of phronesis can be defined through four aspects:

1. Phronesis involves judgement; in this case forming reliable judgements on student performances and compositions which are deliberative but not calculative.

2. Phronesis is a virtue which requires an ethical dimension to determine the proper ends of conduct and of the means of attaining them; in this case we begin by setting aside personal musical tastes so we can make valid judgements.
3. Phronesis is an embodied social practice, both corporeally when our bodily engagement with the world encourages accounts which accommodate our gestures and movements as a significant bodily mediated dimension at play in the reception and interpretation of meanings, and as embedded institutional knowledge sometimes defined as best-practice.
4. Phronesis involves complicated interactions between what is general and considered usual, and what is practical and perceptive.  
(based on Ellett, 2012, p. 14)

### **Making Professional Judgements in Education**

In the first half of the twentieth century Dewey (1934) adopted a neo-Aristotelean approach to practical knowledge, acknowledging that phronesis is the intelligent use of practical reason and its concern is with worldly action or *praxis*. Dewey sees all reason as practical reason and, as with Aristotle, intentionality distinguishes intelligent action from mere behaviour. Thinking makes explicit the intelligent element in our experience and makes it possible to act with an end in view, while interpretation exposes the possibilities for some consequence. Deliberation Dewey sees as a part of practical reason, a sort of rehearsal in the imagination, which clears the way to a naturalistic freedom constrained by context. Deliberation requires experimentation through which reason will unconceal a desired value that we then assert into action.

Kemmis posits that ‘our longing for phronesis, for wisdom, is really a longing for praxis. *Praxis* is a particular kind of action. It is action that is *morally committed, and oriented and informed by traditions in a field...* *Praxis* emerges in ‘sayings’, ‘doings’, and ‘relatings’ (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012, p. 9). *Praxis* is a *prerequisite* for phronesis and is the centrepiece of a morally committed practice. It is through experience and action—through praxis—that we develop phronesis (Kemmis, 2012, p. 158). To be a person of practical wisdom one must not only know what to do but also know how to act accordingly.

Good *judgement* is considered a virtue, but it is not the same as knowledge. Judgement is not concerned with what is eternal and unchanging but with what someone might puzzle and deliberate about. For this reason ‘it is concerned with the same things as practical wisdom’ (Aristotle, 2000, p. 113, Bk VI, Ch. 10.). Teachers (and moderators) need to have practical wisdom—the ability to exercise sound educational judgement and discernment—as well as the courage to do what they do and have a faith in the system and in themselves and to act accordingly. Phronesis is knowledge that is sensitive to its application and experience is necessary to developing phronesis.

In music education, as teachers and moderators, we can expect our learners, as performers and composers, to arrive with a diverse range of skills, knowledge, musical tastes and abilities that go beyond what might have been covered in class or expected to have been covered generally. Every subject area that requires practical wisdom can expect the same. To act phronetically, therefore, requires us to have an ethical focus and a competence in ethical action.

Practical wisdom contains a corporeal aspect; it is embodied wisdom. It requires us to be in tune with our bodies, to focus on the context and to engage the senses in our professional judgements. All forms of embodied learning need to be related to social learning because phronesis itself is situated and acquired from the community in which performative practical actions are central as well as the modes and conditions for learning (the habitat). Phronesis is the result of habituation which is acquired through deliberate, repetitive and determined effort. It might be regarded as a virtue. It is one thing to promote habits of mind, but phronesis is habits of the body, the hands, the senses and as such is an embodied praxis. Praxis is ethically informed and guided by critical reflections on one’s own practices in relation to the established practice traditions.

Sellman (2012) reminds us that the professionally wise practitioner ‘continually strives to be the best practitioner she or he can be given the constraints under which practice occurs’ (p. 116). To be an effective, professionally wise educator we need our own personal competencies and skills to be in place. Aristotle describes skill as a ‘productive state involving true reason; and its contrary, lack of skill, is a productive state involving false reason’ (2000, p. 106, Bk VI, Ch. 4.). Taking this into account, we should also see that personal competence acts as a precursor for professional phronesis. Authenticity and faithfulness can be addressed through the phronetic approach, since the teacher/moderator’s practical wisdom develops out of his or her expert status.

A characteristic of specific curriculum areas is the use of a body of knowledge which is both characteristic of the discipline and differentiates from other curriculum areas. Professional judgements need to identify both pedagogical knowledge and practical knowledge—the enactment in practice—and to apply this in the service of some good: in the case made in this paper, for valid and reliable assessment to be best practice. The professional educator who applies practical wisdom and reflective judgement demonstrates a disposition characterised by a form of phronesis. If we are to take phronesis seriously, then we must emphasise the cultivation of professional judgement which is grounded in the moral purpose of judging how educators should act for the good of the student.

### **Conclusion**

In the abstract to this paper I make a call for the restoration of *teaching professionals*, professionals who are capable of making decisions and who know what counts as suitable curricula for their students. Professional wisdom, in both pedagogy and specific curriculum areas, would be a requirement, as well as practical wisdom—phronesis—an embodied knowing which uses experience, disposition, reflection, judgement and ethics. Such wisdom has become even more necessary in New Zealand where forms of standards-based assessment are in place and where many standards are internally assessed by the teacher with a sample externally moderated by the national moderation system. Such a system that I propose would demand moderators and teachers who are capable of making critical and informed judgements and evaluations. This would set in place a primacy of practice in which knowing how to do something is the basis for knowing that (Bernstein, 2010, p. 120). This way of knowing would support the transparency of the qualifications framework.

A collaborative phronetic approach was put in place when musical performance and composition were introduced to senior music programmes in New Zealand in 1992. The system used a form of achievement-based assessment, and student videos of performances and recordings of compositions were moderated by two representative six-member teams. This model used an experienced mix of composers and performers who, once benchmarks had been established, operated in pairs to evaluate the material, with each pair changing halfway through the day. This pooled wisdom was invaluable in making reliable and ethical judgements. The model was replaced in 2002 with the current system with cost being claimed as the reason.

In standards-based assessment as it presently exists in New Zealand, it is too easy to rely on single words, assembled to reflect some form of taxonomy of knowledge but which are virtually meaningless when taken in isolation. This vocabulary (for example: convincingly, effectively) enables those with little knowledge of musical performance or composition to make conscious decisions about the content they are evaluating—decisions that are not, however, informed by experience and practical wisdom and as such are unreliable and invalid. Rather than making generalised judgements in a template response that puts a distance between the judgement and the essence of the musical performance or composition, teachers and moderators should strive for what is perceptive and widely considered as valid (musical) practice. They must strive to engage practical wisdom as a central virtue and engage in phronesis as a form of deliberation.

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