

Aristotle's *Phronesis* and Youth Work: Beyond Instrumentality

Jon Ord

Abstract

This paper attempts to address some of the fundamental problems which underlie current attempts to bring youth work to account. Firstly it is argued that the accountability agenda with its emphasis upon outcomes and outputs misunderstands the process by which they emerge. Rather than youth work being portrayed as a linear process it will be proposed that there is an indirect 'incidental' relationship between what youth workers do and the outcomes that emerge out of a process of engagement; such that simplistic accountability measures are inadequate. Secondly it is argued that given the essentially 'moral' nature of youth work interventions and the resulting outcomes, ie. whether their decisions and actions enable young people to live 'good' lives. We need to develop a methodology for youth work evaluation which reflects this. It will be suggested that much can be gained from an application of Aristotle's concept of Phronesis, not least because of the importance placed on 'context'.

Key words: Youth Work, Phronesis, Outcomes, Process, Context

IT DOES NOT need me to point out that the recent history of youth work is one of increasing compartmentalisation, accountability and an increasing emphasis on its outcomes. This is however the context for this paper, which attempts to answer some of the questions about why such an exclusive focus on outcomes is particularly problematic for the practice of youth work, and what we can try and do about it. Youth work does have significant and profound outcomes for the young people who are engaged in its process, but an exclusive focus on outcomes independent of the process that produces them is at best putting the 'cart before the horse', if not expecting the cart to pull itself. Before exploring this problem however, as well as suggesting why Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* offers a solution to it, I want to remind us of some of the key drivers of this current policy context, from an English perspective, though I am sure much of it will resonate with many of you outside of this national context.

Policy Context

Attempts to draw youth work into a specific outcomes-focused practice are evidenced as early as

1979 by Bernard Davies in his seminal paper 'In whose interests...' (Davies, 1979) where he refers to a fundamental shift in youth work from an open ended social education model to 'social and life skills training'. Davies' early warnings seemed to have been merited when within the following decade, the infamous ministerial conferences of 1989 – 92 had been established, a significant focus of which sought to identify what the then Minister referred to as: 'the priority outcomes which the youth service should seek to provide (NYB, 1990: 34).

This shift in focus for youth work coincided with the election of the Thatcher government and corresponded to a wider sea change in policy characterised by Clarke, Gewirtz and McClaughlin (2000) as a shift from welfarism to post-welfarism. Welfarism was underpinned by a commitment to social democracy, whilst post-welfarism has been driven by an emerging neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is underpinned by a commitment to the pre-eminence of the market and the conception of individuals almost exclusively as consumers. In educational policy terms, neoliberalism brought about an emphasis on 'utility' or usefulness, what Ross (2000) refers to as the establishment of the utilitarian curriculum. This has resulted in an almost exclusive concern with outcomes, a focus on what education provides in tangible terms, as well as the rise of vocationalism and the skills agenda in education.

The rise of neoliberalism and the associated specific changes in educational policy have been accompanied by a wider assault on professionalism, and the disappearance of a situation where, 'the professional was trained to a high level and largely to use his or her judgement in the delivery of services. This can be characterised as the shift from 'trust me (I'm a professional)' to 'prove it (and if you cannot I will sue)' (Ford et al. 2005: 110). Alongside this, the establishment of a managerialist culture (Ord, 2012) begins to redefine how judgements about 'quality' are made in the public sector (Cooper, 2012), as private sector business practices characterised by the three E's of efficiency, effectiveness and economy become the dominant discourse (Farnham and Horton, 1993).

Ironically for those who thought the arrival of New Labour might herald a return to the Social Democratic tradition, it was under the influence of New Labour that youth work really began to experience the impact of neoliberalism. Youth work was brought in line with other social welfare services under the auspices of Connexions (DfES, 2001) in England and Wales; and then more specifically with the arrival of Transforming Youth Work (DfES 2001, 2002), with its targets for recorded and accredited outcomes, its imposed planning cycles and its emphasis on the delivery of programmes. Mark Smith argued strongly at the time that this was the end of convivial informal education-based youth work (Smith, 2003). Specific targets for both accredited and recorded outcomes (DfES, 2002) went some considerable way in re-prioritising youth workers' practice. Outcomes and product-focused as opposed to person-centred and process-focused youth work had arrived (Ord 2007; Davies 2008).

One of the latest examples of this 'quest' for outcomes arose out of the Education Select Committee Report (House of Commons, 2011) which expressed the belief that: 'there is no good reason why robust but sophisticated outcome measures should not be developed to allow services to demonstrate impact...' (2011:26). As a direct result the Young Foundation produced 'An Outcomes Framework for Young People's Services' (Young Foundation 2012) but more about that later. The neoliberal policy drive is continuing with an emphasis on the importance of the market and competition resulting in outcome-based commissioning. As a lecturer in Youth and Community Work, I received a stark reminder of this complete reframing of practice when a current student requested a module on 'results based practice'.

Returning to the problem of outcomes for Youth Work

I would argue strongly that outcomes-focused practice is necessarily problematic for youth work, not least because outcomes themselves are problematic for youth. Not that I'm arguing youth work does not have significant outcomes for young people but that outcomes-focused practice tends to fail to comprehend how those outcomes are produced.

Outcomes-focused practice tends to conceive of learning and the resulting outcomes in a linear fashion. An example of this is provided by Merton and Wylie (2002). Commenting on the traditional educational goals of youth work both within their own statement of a youth work curriculum and via their influence on the production of the *Transforming Youth Work* document they argue that:

Such broad goals need to be expressed in a set of more specific outcomes if they are to be helpful in the planning and in practice. The more clearly we can specify the ends, the better we will be able to choose the means for achieving them (Merton and Wylie 2002:2; and DfES 2002:11).

This approach is often characterised in educational terms as a 'product approach' (Kelly 2004, Ord 2007), that is, one which is premised on the pre-specification of outcomes and an emphasis upon the necessary inputs required to achieve those particular outcomes. This approach places an emphasis on the educator and has parallels with what Kelly (2004) refers to as 'education as transmission' or what Freire (1972) refers to as the 'banking approach to education'.

This approach is not totally alien to youth work and it is possible to plan some youth work in this way, for example, the almost ubiquitous sexual health awareness sessions about how to put on a condom and avoid sexually transmitted diseases, or drug education sessions which focus on specific knowledge about harm minimisation, and the effects and the potential harm of particular drugs. However, I would argue not only that the profound and transformative outcomes that youth work enables are not produced in this pre-planned and pre-specified fashion, but also that insisting

that youth workers plan their work in this way actually has a detrimental effect on their ability to produce significant outcomes for young people.

Mark Smith (1988) following Brookfield (1986), suggested that many of the outcomes in youth work are 'incidental', that is, arising by pure chance and yet distinct from 'accidental'. They are rarely a product of what Smith refers to as: 'planning and managing instruction so that the learner achieves some previously specified object' (Smith, 1988: 125). They are produced through a complex set of processes and particular circumstances which unfold in practice, as the late Jeremy Brent (2004) explains in his excellent depiction of the emergence of such outcomes in his paper 'Communicating Youth Work: The smile and the arch'. Within the paper he portrays the transformation that a young woman undergoes as a result of becoming an active member of a youth club. He describes how at the outset she was 'a shadowy appendage of her boyfriend' (Brent, 2004: 70) and despite attempts at identifying specific problems that she appeared to be dealing with such as a housing issue, or her lack of attendance at school, none of the specific interventions seemed to be particularly merited. She did however throw herself into the life of the club, for example taking responsibility for organising a trip. Over time she began to smile, a visible transformation taking place in her demeanour and her sense of self. Brent argues this significant outcome could not have been planned for in any pre-specified manner but it emerged out of a process of engagement with both workers and young people:

There has been no product, no target met, no plan completed, yet all the evidence points to there being a profoundly important personal outcome for Kelly (Brent, 2004: 70).

It is important to acknowledge that such outcomes 'emerge' (Ord, 2007) out of a process of engagement which is purposeful and has educational intent, but is not pre-planned. The process of learning and the production of such outcomes are not pre-specific and linear. Neither is there a one-to-one correlation between what the youth worker does and the outcomes young people achieve with many of the most significant outcomes in youth work.

That is not to say that youth workers do not have educational aims but that their aims are broad and not specific and importantly are grounded and developed in responses to the young people's aspirations, intentions and interests rather than immutably pre-set in advance by 'others'. Contrary to Merton and Wylie's (2002) claim that we can only achieve our aims if we are more specific, I would argue that on the contrary we can only achieve our aims if we remain broad in our educational intentions. This is well illustrated with the example of confidence. I admit to being more than mildly irritated by evaluations of youth work sessions which boldly claim improvements in young people's confidence as a result of the undertaking of particular activities. How can confidence be produced in this manner? On the contrary I would suggest that confidence is built over time with appropriate interventions, such as guidance, encouragement and support or the setting of surmountable challenges. It cannot be rushed and can be easily undermined. It is

difficult to produce a genuine growth in confidence. Youth work does enable young people to grow in confidence (DES, 1987) but the reframing of youth work into specific sessions akin to a series of lesson plans is not likely to assist this process (Smith, 1988; Ord 2007). Not least because it is often not the confidence itself which youth workers directly focus on but what is 'going on' for young people – what is pertinent to them, at that particular time.

The Problem of causality

To explore this a little further I would like to spend a few moments reflecting on causality, and offer a rudimentary distinction between three types of causation;

- Direct causality: All things being equal, doing A is both necessary and sufficient; eg. Turning the key in my car starts the engine.
- Non-causality: doing A bears no relation to the production of B, eg. No amount of talking to my tomatoes will have any bearing on how well they grow;
- Indirect causality: one can be reasonably assured that all things being equal Doing A consistently and appropriately over time is likely to assist in the production of B, but in itself it is not a guarantee. Whilst the same time the absence of A, or doing the reverse of A, is likely to have the opposite desired effect. Doing A may be necessary in certain circumstances but it is certainly not sufficient. eg. Watering my tomato plants in the greenhouse to make them grow.

The importance of indirect causality is that the action is 'a factor' in the causal process, ie. it is 'a part' of the whole picture, but in itself it is no guarantee. If we follow the example of watering the tomato plants – I could over-water or the water could be contaminated or other factors may override my watering. It may be too cold and not sunny enough, or other factors may play a greater causal role, for example a disease or a pest may affect the plants. Either way, my watering of the plants in this instance has not produced an abundant crop. The amount and regularity of the watering is dependent on a number of other factors which cannot be pre-specified eg. how hot it is. Importantly a judgement is required based on the complex interplay of a number of variables, or 'what is going on' at that particular time.

Youth work is in the main not directly causal. It may provide some specific solutions to designated problems and specific youth work interventions may produce specific outcomes. For example, a young person approaches a youth worker for advice on filling out an application form and, as a result of the assistance provided in filling it out, the young person is offered an interview. Or two young people are involved in a dispute and, as a result of responding to a request to sit down and talk it through, the young people resolve their dispute. Yet the relation between youth work and

many of its more profound and transformative outcomes, such as those described by Brent (2004) above, is not one that is correctly characterised as 'directly causal'. Neither of course is it entirely non-causal; it would be foolish to say there is no relationship between what youth workers do and the outcomes that emerge. There may be some merit in conceptualising the process of youth work as being 'indirect causality'.

If we follow the example of confidence we reflected upon earlier: there are a number of factors which come into play in terms of what a youth worker may do to try and increase a young person's confidence, such as provide opportunities for taking an appropriate level of responsibility, set surmountable challenges, offer guidance and support, and provide appropriate praise and recognition. And of course in order to undertake these interventions it is necessary to have a good relationship with the young person concerned in order to know what their interests and capabilities are so as to be able to provide appropriate opportunities and challenges. It also goes without saying that this process takes time. We need to trust and have faith in the process, and trust is something which is in short supply in the current climate (O'Neill, 2002). The process cannot be easily broken down into separate parts, and needs to be seen holistically, youth work often only makes sense if it is seen in the context of its progression over time; and the concept of distance travelled goes some way to ensuring an appreciation of this.

Aristotle

Whilst the distinction between types of causality is useful and enables us to start to distinguish between different ways of conceiving of youth work and its complex processes, the very notion of causality itself is potentially problematic. What is needed is a different way of conceiving of youth work independent of notions of causality, as causality itself is located in a particular way of seeing the world. To illustrate I want to introduce a distinction proposed by Aristotle, a Greek philosopher of the fifth century BC.

Aristotle offered a threefold distinction between different forms of knowledge:

- *Episteme*
- *Techne*
- *Phronesis*

(Aristotle circa 5th Century BC, in Irwin 1999)

Episteme equates to scientific knowledge (Irwin, 1999; Flyvbjerg, 2001) and is found in the modern words epistemological and epistemic. It relates to knowledge that: 'must be the conclusion of a demonstration, a deductive inference in which the premises are necessary truths explaining the conclusion' (Irwin, 1999:347).

Episteme thus concerns universals and the production of knowledge which is invariable in time and space and which is achieved with the aid of analytical rationality. *Episteme* corresponds to the modern scientific ideal as expressed in natural science (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 55).

Techne equates to craft and is defined as: 'a rational discipline concerned with production' (Irwin, 1999: 321). It is found in the modern words technological and technical. Craft or *techne* is concerned with 'bringing something into being' (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 56). Aristotle provides an example: 'building, for instance is a craft, and is essentially a certain state involving reason concerned with production' (Aristotle 1140a 7-9 in Irwin, 1999: 88): Flyvbjerg sums this up:

The objective of techne is application of technical knowledge and skills according to a pragmatic instrumental rationality... episteme concerns theoretical know why and techne denotes technical know-how (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 56)

Phronesis is difficult to translate directly. Irwin (1999) suggests that wisdom would be a suitable translation, however the Greek word *sophia* is already translated as wisdom. Flyvbjerg (2001) points out that unlike *techne* and *episteme*, *phronesis* has no direct translation into modern terms, but that is not to say it is any less important. The word prudence is most often used to translate *phronesis* (Irwin, 1999; Flyvbjerg, 2001) but it is sometimes also referred to as practical wisdom, or 'practical common sense' (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 56). *Phronesis* translated as prudence can lead to confusion as Irwin suggests prudence is not meant in the sense of:

narrow and selfish caution... [going on to suggest that] the prudence in jurisprudence comes closer to Aristotle's use of phronesis. Since it is deliberative, prudence is about things that promote ends but it is also correct supposition about the end' (Irwin, 1999: 345).

Phronesis or prudence is therefore essentially ethical. As Aristotle suggests: 'virtue is similar to prudence' (Aristotle, 1144b: 2 in Irwin 1999: 99). Or as Irwin points out, Aristotle is arguing that 'prudence is necessary and sufficient for complete virtue of character' someone cannot have it and fail to act correctly' (Irwin, 1999: 345).

In contrast to *phronesis*, *techne* or craft is amoral. Aristotle uses the example of a stone mason and points out that whether or not he is a good stone mason bears no relation to whether that particular person is regarded as 'good' in the moral sense ie. is virtuous or leads a 'good life'. *Techne* can be applied correctly or incorrectly, while *phronesis* cannot. *Phronesis* is necessarily a kind of action which leads to a good life. (Irwin 1999: 345). *Phronesis* or prudence is therefore 'concerned with action' (Irwin, 1999: 345), action being a translation of the Greek work *praxis*. In its strictest sense, *praxis* is rational and deliberative action based on a decision, but which: 'is its own end and is not done exclusively for some end beyond it. It aims at 'doing well' (or 'acting well' – *eupraxia*) for itself' (Irwin, 1999: 315). This is what further distinguishes *techne* from *phronesis*: 'craft must be

concerned with production, not with action (Aristotle 1140a: 18 in Irwin 1999: 89). Aristotle sums this up:

Prudence is a state of grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being (Aristotle, 1140b: 5-7, in Irwin 1999: 89).

One of the few 20th century commentators to embrace the notion of *phronesis* is the political theorist Hannah Arendt who interprets it as the ability to judge or have insight. She cites its importance in relation to the development of political thought, as it entails:

The ability to see things not only from one's own point of view but in the perspective of all those who happened to be present; even that judgement may be one of the fundamental abilities of man as a political being in so far as it enables him orient himself in the realm... the Greeks called this ability phronesis (Arendt, 1961: 221, in d'Entreves, 2008).

There are immediate parallels between Arendt's description of *phronesis* and youth work, given the importance she places upon discussion in the development of judgement or insight and the importance of conversation in youth work practice (Jeffs and Smith 2005; Batsleer, 2008). As d'Entreves (2008) a contemporary commentator on Arendt, claims, *Phronesis*: 'debate and discussion, and the capacity to enlarge one's perspective, are indeed crucial to the formation of opinions' (d'Entreves, 2008); these are also notable features of youth work practice (Young, 2005). Arendt argues this is a 'representative' process:

Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them ... The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion (Arendt, 1961:, 241).

It is important to point out that Smith (1994) provides a notable, if brief, exception to the absence of references to *phronesis* in youth work related literature. He cites the importance of *phronesis* or practical wisdom, which entails an appreciation and commitment to the 'good or right rather than the correct' (1994:76) in the formation of dispositions in the informal educator.

Phronesis and Youth Work

Of the three aspects of knowledge Aristotle presents, I would argue that *phronesis* provides a sounder basis for understanding the process of youth work than either *techne* or *episteme*, despite

the fact that both *techne* and *episteme* appear to be increasingly utilised. Admittedly this is dependent on what we mean by youth work, which is acknowledged as contested practice. The above assertion is most clearly evidenced if we look to the definition of youth work provided by Young (2005) who argues:

The core purpose of youth work is to engage young people in the process of moral philosophising through which they make sense of themselves and their world, increasingly integrate their values actions and identity, and take charge of themselves as empowered human beings (Young, 2005: 59).

Although Young does not explicitly link her description of youth work to Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* (or prudence) there are implicit parallels between the approach she advocates and Aristotle's concept, not least in her claim that youth work: 'supports young people's disposition towards virtue' (Young, 2005:45). Other clear parallels exist with her suggestion that youth work's job is to assist young people to negotiate the 'morally textured landscape' (ibid) as well as enable young people to 'make judgements and take action' (Young, 2005:45) within it. The only writer to explicitly argue for the relevance of *phronesis* to youth work is Smith (1994) who suggests:

Local educators think 'on their feet' ...broadly guided in their thinking by their understanding of what makes for the 'good'; of what makes for human well-being... this mode of thinking comes close to what Aristotle describes as 'prudence or 'practical wisdom' phronesis (Smith, 1994:76)

Less morally explicit definitions of youth work include that presented to the Education Select committee by Janet Batsleer (chair of the Higher Education Training Agencies Group for Youth and Community Work) that:

youth work is there to produce opportunities for the personal, social and spiritual development of young people so that they reach their potential outside of the school system through activities that they join in their leisure time (House of Commons 2011:10).

This definition does not differ greatly from that offered by the National Youth Agency:

Youth Work helps young people learn about themselves, others and society through informal educational activities which combine enjoyment, challenge and learning... Their work seeks to promote young people's personal and social development and enable them to have a voice, influence and place in their communities and societies as a whole (NYA, 2011)

Even if we accept the latter definitions, *phronesis* is a suitable and positive frame of reference for youth work. To explain this further we need to look at some more recent commentaries and

applications of a 'phronetic understanding', such as that offered by Bent Flyvbjerg (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Flyvbjerg attempts to argue that *phronesis* offers a better foundation for a social science than *episteme*. He argues that what are often considered the failings of social science, such as its lack of predictability or its inability to produce universal laws, are in fact a result of an unhelpful comparison between the social and natural sciences. He goes on to argue that they operate on a different basis, and until that is fully acknowledged social science will never be fully appreciated for what it is. It is not necessary to follow all his arguments in order to learn some of the lessons about the usefulness of *phronesis* to an understanding of youth work, but one which does need to be considered is the importance of context.

The centrality of context

One of the primary distinctions between *phronesis*, and both *episteme* and *techne*, is that *phronesis* is context dependent, whereas *episteme* and *techne* are context independent. *Techne* and *episteme* strive for context independent explanations of actions, behaviour or wider social practices upon which generalisations, laws and predictions can be made. What constitutes rules governing production or the laws of science are independent of the context in which they are applied. Indeed it is a: 'requirement that a truly explanatory and predictive science must operate independent of context' (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 46). Similarly the rules governing production are independent of what is actually produced (for example, the principles of building such as providing a sound foundation). *Phronesis*, by contrast, is essentially social and as Flyvbjerg suggests, context-independence seems impossible in the study of social affairs (ibid). Citing Giddens, Flyvbjerg (2001:32). suggests the difference in the study of social affairs is that: 'The object is a subject...'

An appreciation of the importance of context has profound implications for both youth work and its associated outcomes. Context dependent explanations are of a different order. They are not reductionist, but multi-layered and unique to both individual social subjects and their specific circumstances. Such explanations are qualitatively different, again as Flyvbjerg points out:

Context dependence does not mean a more complex form of determinism. It means an open-ended, contingent relation between contexts and actions and interpretations. The rules of the ritual are not the ritual, a grammar is not a language, the rules of chess are not chess and traditions are not actual social behaviour (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 43).

Given the importance of context, it is therefore the 'particular', that is important within *phronesis*. As Aristotle emphasised, *phronesis* concerns 'knowledge of particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars' (Aristotle 1141b, in Irwin 1999: 92). Aristotle also emphasises the importance of experience in understanding the particular. In a discussion about healthy eating he argues that theoretical knowledge of light meat alone will not necessarily mean a

healthy diet unless one has experience of eating chicken: 'people who lack [theoretical] knowledge but have experience are better in action than others who have knowledge' (ibid). As Smith (1994: 10) points out: 'practical wisdom [phronesis] is grounded in experience'.

If we return then to an application of this thinking to the understanding of youth work we can see how Aristotle's phronetic knowledge resonates with an approach to youth work which is grounded in an appreciation of young people's lived experience. Youth work is rooted in the personal, social and spiritual development of young people which has to be understood in the context of their 'particular' lives and therefore their 'experience' (Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Batsleer 2008; Ord, 2011).

To illustrate, consider the following example from the national Choose Youth lobby in London. A young man gave an impassioned account of his personal transformation as a result of his engagement with his youth worker. Throughout much of his school life he had been labelled as awkward and difficult, and had been increasingly getting into trouble. A profound change took place as a result of the engagement with his youth worker. In recounting his story the young man described how, through their conversations Sam had helped him redefine who he was. He now saw himself not as difficult but as passionate, not as problematic but as energetic and committed. Importantly he came to see his previous problems at school as a result of the school failing to provide an appropriate outlet for his energies. The young man is now the chair of a youth forum and a credit to himself and his peers.

This example, like the Jeremy Brent one recounted earlier where Kelly begins to smile for the first time, is not only rooted in the 'particular' and the context of the young person's life. Equally importantly it is founded in an understanding and appreciation of the meaning of young people's lives – the context in which they live and how they construct their own lives. Such an example embraces a phronetic approach to youth work one which is concerned with questions of what it means to live a 'good life', to make moral decisions which result in actions (praxis) which are both informed and deliberative (Aristotle, in Irwin 1999). Let me illustrate with an hypothetical example. Within the neoliberal technocratic and epistemic approach to youth work a particular agency or project might be expected to collate the number of young people entering work as a result of undertaking a particular youth work programme or attending a project. However what would be considered a good outcome in this respect? What if a young person held down a job at McDonald's for six months? Would this be considered a good outcome? The answer to this question is entirely context dependent. If for example the person had been rehabilitated from a drug or alcohol problem, had few if any educational qualifications, had challenging behaviour, and had never had a job before this would be a remarkable achievement. However if a young person in question had none of these 'problems' and had ten A star GCSEs, holding down a job at McDonald's alongside school may well be considered a problem in itself, and not as 'outcome' at all.

The dominance of *Techne*

As we saw earlier with what was described as a product approach to the framing of youth work, with its emphasis on programmes, planning, and a linear specificity between educational intention and outcome, it is easy to recognise the dominance of Aristotle's *techne*. It is no surprise that what tends to be emphasised within this approach is the acquisition of tangible knowledge and skills. Indeed as Stenhouse (1975) (an ardent critic of the product approach to education) admits, the product approach is suitable when dealing with tangible outcomes, but that these make up a minority of suitable foci for education, given the value laden and controversial nature of knowledge itself.

The transformative and life changing outcomes of youth work, such as genuinely building confidence, encouraging aspiration, or facilitating changes in young people's beliefs about themselves and the world around them, do not lend themselves to this 'product' approach. As we saw with our earlier reflections upon causality, youth work, though purposeful and intentional, is an open ended educational process with what can be described as indirect causality. *Techne* emphasises rules, rationality, objectivity and universality whereas *phronesis* emphasises context dependent interpretations of social practices, which require an appreciation of both the meanings and values of the social actors involved. As a practice, youth work rooted in *phronesis* would be concerned with providing opportunities which necessarily contain a degree of uncertainty, fluidity and unpredictability, not least because they need to be 'played out' in the real lives of young people.

Arguably the dominance of *techne* is all pervasive (Smith 2002, Davies and Merton 2009, Davies 2010, Batsleer and Davies 2010, Ord 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2012; de St Croix, 2008, 2010). The effects have been profound, from the micro to the macro: from how individual youth work interventions are framed not as part of an overall educational aim but justified in terms of specific outcomes, to how rigid youth work plans are required to link directly to tangible outcomes, and how our overall services are conceptualised in a 'fix-it' fashion. Young people arrive with identifiable, observable and rectifiable issues or problems which workers are expected to resolve, or if they are unable to resolve them, they are expected to refer on or signpost to someone who can.

I have argued that one of the roots of *techne's* dominance is the issue of causality. Causality originates from a technical and scientific (*techne/episteme*) approach to the world, one which emphasises predictability, universality and rationality above context dependence, unpredictability and complexity. *Phronesis* implies that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, i.e. a qualitative difference is achieved which is not reducible to a succession of stages. As Flyvbjerg (2001: 43) argues, '[*phronesis* is not] a more complex form of determinism, it is of an entirely different order, one concerned with, and underpinned by, values, judgements and meaning.'

To illustrate the differences let us consider two alternative approaches to a common youth work issue: challenging racist language. It is widely accepted that racism is contrary to the fundamental values of youth work (NYA 2001), but how to effectively challenge racism is a complex matter. An approach derived from *techné* would prioritise a tangible outcome from a specific intervention, such as young people ceasing to use particular words which were deemed racist. This however provides no guarantee of a change in attitude or belief and may reflect mere compliance to avoid further consequences. Attitudinal change is complex, unpredictable, and context dependent. The context of young people's racism might be embedded in familial beliefs and attempting to change such beliefs and resulting attitudes will take considerable time and require the youth worker to engage in a dialogue about how the young people see themselves and other people. The approach must maintain respect for the young person, but open up alternative ways of seeing the world and other people within it. This is an approach driven by *phronesis*, and has the potential to facilitate significant change. Indeed we may be better off limiting the use of such terms as 'intervention' with its strong connotations of specificity and use notions of engagement instead.

***Episteme* and the question of measurement**

Alongside *techné*'s dominance of youth work has been the increasing presence of *episteme*, what Aristotle refers to as scientific knowledge, with its emphasis on the quantifiable, measurable and generalisable, as well as the establishment of universal laws. There has been a noticeable correlation between the rise of *episteme* and the demands for youth work outcomes. The starkest example of this approach was presented by Dr Louise Bamfield (2011), ex-advisor to the Department for Children, Schools and Families in the Blair government, who advocated the need to provide an evidence base and even suggested the performance of randomised trials to measure the effectiveness of youth work. Only by doing this, she argued, could a sufficiently robust evidence base be provided upon which future claims for funding could be based.

The latest example of epistemic thinking can be found in the recent *Education Select Committee Report on Youth Services* (House of Commons, 2011) where they claim:

We find that many services are unable or unwilling to measure the improvements they make in outcomes for young people. The lack of a common measurement framework across the sector makes it extremely difficult for authorities to decide which services to fund (House of Commons, 2011: 75).

Indeed one of the recommendations of the committee was to produce such a framework which resulted in *The Outcomes Framework for Young People's Services* (Young Foundation, 2012). This Framework:

- *Proposes a model of seven interlinked clusters of social and emotional capabilities that are of value to all young people, supported by a strong evidence-base demonstrating the links to longer term outcomes.*
 - *Sets out a matrix of available tools to measure these capabilities, outlining which capabilities they cover and key criteria such as net cost and the number of users.*
- (Young Foundation, 2012: 4)

What is clearly evident in the framework is a desire for objectivity, universality, and predictability, the purpose of which links directly into the framework of commissioning. This framework, whilst not wholly unsurprising given the dominance of *techne* and *episteme* is nevertheless disappointing given that the committee appeared to have a genuine appreciation of youth work, both the way it works (its processes), and its benefits (its outcomes). They did arguably grasp the ‘particular’, and perhaps therefore appreciate at least implicitly the importance of *phronesis*, acknowledging:

There is little doubt that good youth services can have a transformational effect on young people’s lives and can play a vital role both in supporting vulnerable young people and in enriching the lives of others without particular disadvantage (House of Commons, 2011: 75).

The Select Committee also appeared to grasp the importance of context in making judgements about the quality of youth work:

We accept that the outcomes of individual youth work relationships can be hard to quantify and the impact of encounters with young people may take time to become clear and be complex. In that context, it is hard to reject the basic tenet expanded by a range of such representatives and young people themselves, that ‘you know good youth work when you see it’ (ibid).

It is therefore frustrating and with considerable irony that whilst acknowledging the importance of context and the ‘particular’ – an implicit appreciation of *phronesis* – that the ultimate suggestions and recommendations ran totally counter to it.

What we see here is evidence of the universal trumping the particular. The desire for the objective rides roughshod over the importance of the subjective. Despite even the best efforts to acknowledge phronetic knowledge it is technocratic and epistemic (instrumental or scientific) approaches which inevitably dominate. As Fairfield (2011:95) points out in his comments about education as a whole, we seem to be ‘profoundly beholden to a single conceptual framework – ‘science-technology’” so that approaches which are rational, quantifiable, measurable and generalisable always take precedence. As a result:

The rational perspective has been elevated from being necessary to being sufficient, even

exclusive. This has caused people and entire scholarly disciplines to become blind to context, experience, and intuition, even though these phenomena and ways of being are at least as important and necessary for good results as are analysis, rationality and rules (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 24).

The very notion of measurement asks the wrong kinds of questions and looks to provide the wrong kind of answers. We would be better off talking in terms of ‘demonstrating changes’ rather than ‘measuring outcomes’. This would more accurately reflect and bring to life the process of youth work. Measurement is derived from technical and epistemic conceptions of the world where everything is quantifiable, rational and universal. Einstein reputedly had the following quote on his wall in his Princeton office and knew the important message it conveyed: ‘Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted’ (Einstein in Anon, 2007).

The problem is that with the domination of *techné* and *epistémé* over *phronésis* ‘we tend to count what we can measure, and what we can measure counts’ (Bennet, 2005:30), thereby denigrating that which can’t be quantified and measured. ‘Aristotle is arguing that natural and social science are, and should be, different ventures’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001:3) and the process of bringing youth work to account must reflect its essentially phronetic nature.

A way forward...

We must be able to articulate the practice of youth work with confidence. It is not intellectual laziness that the practice cannot be pre-specified with any degree of certainty beforehand or brought to account objectively, but it can be demonstrated afterwards. Quite the contrary, openness or uncertainty is a prerequisite of enabling a practice to develop which ironically is more likely than not to be able to meet the unfolding and emerging needs of young people. Indeed, the recent parliamentary Education Select Committee acknowledged this (House of Commons, 2011).

We have also been shown a way forward in the recent publication from In Defence of Youth Work: *This is Youth Work: Stories From Practice* (IDYW, 2011). This booklet provides 12 accounts of ‘particular’, ‘context dependant’ examples of practice – ‘stories’. The communication of important narratives like this provides a powerful evidence base of practice, but the fact is we have very few accounts of young people’s stories. Rather than spending time devising outcome measures and attempting to apply technocratic and epistemic thinking to an essentially phronetic practice we would be better off spending our time communicating and celebrating stories from practice, locally and nationally. In isolation they are separate raindrops which may quickly evaporate but together they may combine to produce powerful rivers which have the potential to erode immovable objects.

References

- Anonymous (2007) <http://fridayreflections.typepad.com/weblog/2007/10/not-everything-.html>
- Bamfield L. (2011) *Youth Work, Research and the Need for Evidence*, presentation to the TAG Conference, Brighton July 2012.
- Batsleer, J. (2008) *Informal Learning in Youth Work*. London: Sage.
- Davies, B. and Batsleer, J.(eds), (2010) What is Youth Work? Exeter, *Learning Matters*, pp 153 – 165.
- Bennett, F. (2005) ‘Promoting the health and well-being of children’ in J. Scott and H. Ward (eds) *Safeguarding and promoting the well-being of children, families and communities*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Brent, J. (2004) ‘Communicating youth work: The smile and the arch’, *Youth & Policy*, 84, pp 69 – 73.
- Brookfield, S.D. (1986). *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Clarke, J., Gewirtz, S. and McClaughlin, E., (2000) *New Managerialism*, New Welfare, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Cooper, S. (2012) ‘Evaluation: ensuring accountability or improving practice’ in J. Ord, (2012) (ed.) *Critical Issues in Youth Work Management*, London: Routledge.
- Davies, B. (1979) *In whose interests: from social education to social and life skills training* available at:http://www.infed.org/archives/bernard_davies/davies_in_whose_interests.htm.
- Davies, B. and Merton, B. (2009) ‘Squaring the Circle?: The State of Youth Work in Some Children and Young People’s Services’, *Youth & Policy* no.103 pp.5-24.
- Davies, B. (2010) ‘Straws in the Wind: The state of youth work practice in a changing policy environment’, *Youth & Policy* no.105, pp.9-36.
- Davies, B. (2008) *The New Labour Years: A History of the Youth Service in England Volume 3 1997–2007*, Leicester: NYA.
- d’Entreves, M. P. (2008) ‘Hannah Arendt’, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/arendt/>.
- Department of Education and Science (1987) *Effective Youth Work. A report by HM Inspectors. Education Observed 6*, London: Department of Education and Science. Available in the informal education archives: http://www.infed.org/archives/gov_uk/effective_youth_work.htm.
- De St Croix, T. (2008) *Swimming against the tide*, detached.youthworkonline.org.uk/forum/topics/informal-education-or
- De St Croix, T. (2010) ‘Youth work and the surveillance state’ in B. Davies and J. Batsleer, *What is Youth Work?*, Exeter: Learning Matters, pp 140-152.
- DfES (2001) *Understanding Connexions*, London: HMSO.
- DfES (2001) *Transforming Youth Work: Developing youth work for Young People*, London: HMSO .

- DfES (2002) *Transforming Youth Work: Resourcing Excellent Youth Services*, London: HMSO.
- Fairfield, P. (2011) *Education After Dewey*, London: Continuum.
- Farnham, D. and Horton, S. (1993) *Public Management in Britain* (2nd ed.), Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Limited.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001) *Making Social Science Matter: why social science fails and how it can begin to succeed*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ford, K. Hunter, R. Merton, B. and Waller, D. (2005) *Leading and Managing Youth Work and Youth Services for Young People*, Leicester: NYA.
- Freire, P. (1972) *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- House of Commons Education Committee (2011) *Services for Young People: Third Report of Session 2010 – 12 Volume 1*, HC 755-1. London: The Stationary Office Ltd.
- In Defence of Youth Work (2012) *This is Youth Work: Stories From Practice*. London: Unison. Available at http://www.indefenceofyouthwork.org.uk/wordpress/?page_id=837.
- Irwin, T. (1999) *Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics* (translated with commentary by Irwin). Indianapolis / Cambridge: Hackett.
- Jefferis, T. and Smith, M.K. (2005) *Informal Education, conversation, democracy and learning* (3rd Edition). Derby: Education Now.
- Kelly, A. V. (2004) *The Curriculum: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Merton, B. and Wylie, T. (2002) *Towards a Contemporary Youth Work Curriculum*, Leicester: NYA .
- NYA (2001) *Statement of Ethical Values*, Leicester: NYA.
- NYA (2011) *The NYA Guide to Youth Work in England*, available at <http://www.nya.org.uk/catalogue/workforce-1/nya-guide-to-youth-work-and-youth-services>.
- NYB (1990) *Danger or Opportunity: Towards a Core Curriculum for the Youth Service*. Leicester: NYB.
- O'Neill O. (2002) *Reith Lectures: An Introduction*, online at : http://www.open2.net/trust/oneill_on_trust/oneill_on_trust2.htm.
- Ord, J. (2004 [a]) 'The Youth Work Curriculum and the Transforming Youth Work Agenda', *Youth & Policy*, 83, pp. 43 – 59.
- Ord, J. (2004 [b]) 'The Youth Work Curriculum as Process not as Output and Outcome to Aid Accountability', *Youth & Policy* 85, pp. 53 – 69.
- Ord, J (2007) *Youth Work Process, Product and Practice: Creating an authentic curriculum in work with young people*. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.
- Ord, J. (2011) 'John Dewey and Experiential Learning: Developing the theory of youth work', *Youth & Policy* 108 pp. 55 – 72.
- Ord, J. (2012) (ed.) *Critical Issues in Youth Work Management*, London: Routledge .
- Ross (2000) *Curriculum: Construction and Critique*, London: Falmer.
- Smith, M. K. (1988) *Developing Youth Work*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Smith, M. K. (1994) *Local Education: Community, Conversation, Praxis*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

- Smith, M. K. (2003) [a] 'From Youth Work to Youth Development.' *Youth & Policy*, 79 pp. 46-59
- Stenhouse, (1975) *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*, London: Heinemann.
- The Young Foundation (2012) *An Outcomes Framework for Young People's Services*, available at <http://www.youngfoundation.org/publications/reports/an-outcomes-framework-young-peoples-services>.
- Young, K. (2005) *The Art of Youth Work*. (2nd ed), Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.

[*To Contents Page*](#) 