Excerpt from:

Schwab, Joseph J. The Practical: A Language for Curriculum (often referred to as Practical I)


The Practical

The radical difference of the practical from the theoretic mode is visible in the fact that it differs from the theoretic not in one aspect but in many: it differs from the theoretic in method. Its problems originate from a different source. Its subject matter is of a distinctly different character. Its outcome is of a different kind.

The end or outcome of the theoretic is knowledge, general or universal statements which are supposed to be true, warranted, confidence-inspiring. Their truth, warrant, or trustworthiness is held, moreover, to be durable and extensive. That is, theoretic statements are supposed to hold good for long periods of time and to apply unequivocally to each member of a large class of occurrences or recurrences. The end or outcome of the practical, on the other hand, is a decision, a selection and guide to possible action. Decisions are never true or trustworthy. Instead, a decision (before it is put into effect) can be judged only comparatively, as probably better or worse than alternatives. After it has been put into effect, it can be judged by its consequences as good or bad, but this is an afterthought and usually sterile as far as further decisions are concerned. A decision, moreover, has no great durability or extensive application. It applies unequivocally only to the case for which it was sought. Applications to other cases proceed only from analogy and turn out to be good ones mainly by chance.

The subject matter of the theoretic is always something taken to be universal or extensive or pervasive and is investigated as if it were constant from instance to instance and impervious to changing circumstance. The most obvious examples are among the subject matters of scientific and mathematical investigation: mass, equivalence, time, class (among the universals); the mammalian thyroid gland, Homo sapiens, igneous rock (among the extensive); electrons and protons (among the pervasive). The subject matter of the practical, on the other hand, is always something taken as concrete and particular and treated as indefinitely susceptible to circumstance, and therefore highly liable to unexpected change: this student, on the South Side of Columbus, with Principal Jones during the present mayoralty of Ed Tweed and in view of the probability of his reelection.
The problems of the theoretic arise from areas of the subject matter marked out by what we already know as areas which we do not yet know. This is to say that theoretic problems are states of mind. Practical problems, on the other hand, arise from states of affaires which are marked out by fulfilled needs and satisfied desires as being states which do not satisfy, which hurt us, or which deprive us of more than they confer. They are constituted of conditions which we wish were otherwise and we think they can be made to be otherwise. (The duality of this origin of practical problems has an important corollary: Practical problems can be settled by changing either the state of affairs or our desires. The latter kind of solution is as legitimate as the former. It follows, then, that practical problems intrinsically involve states of character and the possibility of character change.)

The differences in outcome, subject matter, and origin of problem which distinguish the practical from the theoretic are paralleled by an equally radical difference in method. Theoretic methods proper (those used directly in the pursuit of knowledge) are numerous, but each of them is characterized by the same defining feature: control by a principle. The principle of a theoretic enquiry determines the general shape of its problem, the kind of data to seek, and how to interpret these data to conclusion. In the theoretic, then, the formulation of a good specific problem and he devising of the right experiment may challenge wit and reward genius, but the direction in which the experiment is to go and what is to be done with the data, once collected, are dictated by the guiding principle of the enquiry.

The practical has no such guide or rule. We may be conscious that a practical problem exists, but we do not know what the problem is. We cannot be sure even of its subjective side — what portion of the state of affairs is awry. These matters begin to emerge only as we examine the situation which seems to be wrong and begin to look, necessarily at random, for what is the matter. The problem slowly emerges, then, as we search for data, and conversely, the search for data is only gradually given direction by the slow formation of the problem.

At some indeterminate point along the way, as the problem assumes shape and the data search becomes more clearly directed, the character of the process alters. It becomes more of a search for solutions and less of a search for the problem. In the second phase, we envisage alternative actions, consider their possible consequences, and estimate their cost and feasibility. Even here, however, the problem cannot be taken as fixed nor, in consequence, can we rest on our definition of what data are relevant. For the consideration of means determines ends as much as ends determine the search for means. We may have thought, for example, that our problem was one of increasing our income or reallocating resources. However it may prove so difficult to adjust our budget or make more money that we shift our problem to learning how to want less of what money can buy. Then, the relevant data no longer concern only credit, cash, extra pay, and the price of things; relevance suddenly embraces what personal resources of satisfying arts we have yet to discover in ourselves, how they might be discovered and developed; how, that is, we can alter our behavioral and emotional habits.
One case of the interplay of ends and means, of problem, data, and solution, deserves special attention: the selected fruits of practical enquiry which go by the name of policy. Policy seems to be an exception to the assertion that practical enquiries have no guiding principles, for, in the course of some deliberations for the institution whose policy it is. It is both a memorial to the coherence and continuity of the institution and, to some extent, a guide toward maintenance of that continuity. Both policy as a quintessence of past decisions is no better than its origins. It arises in and from past deliberations. Deliberations are the better to the extent that they take account of circumstances, but circumstances notoriously change. Hence, policies grow obsolete. A policy may be conceived, indeed, as one part of an institution’s circumstance. As such, it is a factor which deliberation must take into account. But, by the same token, it is one of the factors which deliberation must entertain as possibly subject to deliberate change. To some extent, then, policy is a guide to deliberation, but it is, in more than a punning sense, only a practical guide. It can be used only to the extent that present problems and circumstances permit, and sometimes they do not permit at all. Furthermore, it is by deliberation that we determine the relevance of policy to a present situation. Thus policy determines the course of a deliberation no more than deliberation permits.

The method of the practical (called “deliberation” in the loose way we call theoretic methods “induction”) is, then, not all a linear affair proceeding step-by-step, but rather complex, fluid, transactional discipline aimed at identification of the desirable and at either attainment of the desired or at alteration of desires.

1. For a more complete treatment of the principles of theoretic enquiry, see my “What Do Scientists Do” chap. 7 in this volume, and “The Structure of the Natural Sciences,” in The Structure of Knowledge and the Curriculum, ed. G. W. Ford and Lawrence Pugno (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964) pp. 31-49.