



INSTITUT FÜR HÖHERE STUDIEN
INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES
Vienna

Public Lecture:

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Do practices have a life cycle? Beyond learning'

Date: January 17., 2011

Time: 16.30-18.00

Ort: Institut für Höhere Studien, Seminarraum Soziologie, 1. Stock

We expect novices to make mistakes or to behave in ways not in keeping with the criteria of expert performance of a practice they are in the midst of learning. We do not expect this of “professionals” – those who have mastered their craft. Hence, the errors or “misbehaviors” surprise, and puzzle. Much practice theory looks at how novices become masters; this paper looks at mastery itself and the problematics of its practice. It is physically not possible in “master-y” to sustain the level of focal awareness required in novice-ry; moving certain things to subsidiary awareness is required if we are to “perform.” Schön’s “reflective practice” theory was intended to promote interventions in practice that would solve the problematic of unthinking professional practice; but although the concept has been taken up in several fields, the conditions under which it can be generated are not clear. Might some things that are “unlearned” in the process of mastering a practice be crucial to successful practicing, i.e., without which other sorts of problems surface? And might this give us better leverage on the problem than reflection *tout court*?

Informed by literatures ranging from (collective) organizational learning to science studies and drawing on examples of practices thickly described, this paper seeks to identify gaps in our theorizing about practices specifically oriented toward the question of practice problems in mastery and potential interventions to repair them. In laying out a research agenda, it calls for the creation of a Center for Practice Studies that would enable comparative studies of practices, informed by ethnographic observational methods producing detailed descriptive data.