The Learning Triangle: Learning as a Complex Adaptive System

What is Praxis?

Praxis describes the action we take as we put theory into action. It comes from Greek and Latin roots and means, literally, “doing.” In HSD Institute, we invite people to establish their own HSD praxis. Why do we put so much emphasis here? We see learning as a complex adaptive process, where patterns of learning emerge as individuals take action based on theories they hold about the world. Their theories about how the world works change as their experiences give them new insights.

The Teaching-Learning Collaborative, a group of educators and HSD theorists, created the Learning Triangle to represent the relationship between emergent theory and practice. Here’s what it reflects about my learning:

I stand in my current capacity at the intersection between ongoing practice—activities and actions that make up my day-to-day life—and my theory—underlying assumptions, knowledge, and beliefs that inform how I see the world. (Practice lies along the right side of the Learning Triangle. Theory lies along the left side.) I come to new challenges in either place if I am asked to do something I don’t know how to do (Practice Challenge), or I come across a theory or idea that is new to me (Theory Challenge). (Theory Challenge and Practice Challenge are reflected at the base corners of the Learning Triangle).

I try something new. I change what I am doing and/or how I think about what I am doing. I actually “theorize” what will work and try it out—testing both my new skill and the underlying theory that is informing this trial. Then I see how it works.

This test helps me know whether my new way of acting or my new way of seeing the world is more or less effective than where I stood before the trial. That answer informs my next step. If the new theory provides better insight and generates more effective action, I continue to use those new ideas as I plan next steps. If not, I abandon the ideas or try to adapt them to fit what I did experience. I continue this cycle of observing, testing, and reflection around new ideas and new skills until eventually, a higher level of performance or action emerges as my way of “doing”—it becomes my praxis.

We can see the applications of the Learning Triangle in everyday life:

I watch my three-year-old granddaughter go through this cycle as she figures out the world. It’s almost as though I can hear the questions in her head:

• What would happen if I stomped my foot at my mom to get her to know I mean what I say?
• How can I move my body in such a way that I am turning a somersault like the children on television?

At the same time, I watch my daughter test her theories about being a mother against her experience of being a mother. It’s my observation that they are both doing pretty well. My granddaughter is developing her praxis of being three. My daughter is developing her praxis as a mom of a three-year-old girl.

So what difference does this make in real time?

Many of us are perfectly functional as we go through life, cycling through this iterative process intuitively or unconsciously. Why would I need this “picture” of my learning?

As a learner, it reinforces that I can’t just “think” about something and bring about change. Nor can I just keep “doing” and bring about change. I have to examine my experience and my theory. Then I
continuously make adjustments to both as I inform **theory** by what **experience** teaches me and I inform **action** by what **theory** shows me.

As a teacher, it helps me slow down the process and analyze my own teaching and instructional design. I can reflect on what is happening with my students to see if they need more **theory** or if it’s time for more **practice**. I can help them be conscious of their learning and celebrate their emerging praxis.

As a consultant and coach, it helps me understand what might be happening as I work with individuals to develop new skills or practices.

> I worked with a group forming a community of practice. They structured their experience according to all the “rules.” They met regularly, read new literature about their work, honored everyone’s voice, and shared their experiences. I realized they were neither intentional nor articulate about what happened when they tested new theory in action. They didn’t see how their theory base shifted as they changed their actions; nor did they try to examine their action against their new theory. Consequently they were “stuck” in a frustrating cycle of “do, talk, do, talk, do, talk…” that never got them anywhere. I talked about the learning triangle, and they moved into analytical discourse about their experiences—in light of emerging theory. They developed an alternative cycle of “reflect, do, talk, reflect, do, talk,” which not only took them to a higher level of practice, it also helped them learn more about their practice and their emergent theory. They moved toward authentically new ways of doing their work—emergent praxis.

Frequently when people look at the Learning Triangle, they say, “Of course. That makes sense.” Then they move on. More often than not, however, they come back to it and realize its value in helping them see more deeply into their own learning or into the learning experiences of their students and staff. At its surface the learning triangle draws a picture that seems familiar and simple. Its real power lies in its ability to help them “slow down” the learning process and look for ways to shift both experience and theory to bring about meaningful and sustainable change.