5. REALISING WISE PRACTITIONERS

Through Lifelong Practice-Based Education

This book explores exemplary practice-based education, particularly from the perspective of practitioners entering the world of practice. In this chapter we step through and then beyond professional entry education and the preparation of beginning practitioners to examine the way lifelong practice-based education can enable individuals to become wise practitioners and help educators and mentors to foster practice wisdom in their students and colleagues. We believe that wisdom has been overlooked and undervalued within higher education for some time. Within the university wisdom has lost territory to knowledge and, because of its nature as individualistic, situational and personal, it has been in the “too hard basket” with university educators. We consider that research on practice wisdom from a variety of disciplines would benefit from a return to its roots in the scholarship of wisdom more broadly. Practice-based education (PBE), when it extends to lifelong and lifewide learning, is conceptualised as a bridge to wise becoming.

WISDOM

Wisdom is highly valued by society at large. In his popular account of wisdom, Hall (2011, p. 6) asserted “we crave wisdom – worship it in others, wish it upon our children, and seek it ourselves – precisely because it will help us lead a meaningful life.” But the academic view of wisdom has not been so enthusiastic. Some of the literature on wisdom focuses on its intellectual and cognitive aspects at the expense of its moral and personal dimensions (Sternberg, 1985; Dixon & Baltes, 1986; Sternberg, 1990b). Marcel (1955) even suggested that the emphasis on scientific knowledge may have led to the decline of wisdom within the Western tradition. To address this topic we start by examining what is meant by wisdom and how a fuller understanding of wisdom articulates practice wisdom more coherently.

In missing the opportunity to maintain the philosophical connection between wisdom and practice wisdom, scholars have not deeply translated ideas about educating for wisdom into the higher education context. As an individual and personal characteristic, wisdom transcends the boundaries of any particular higher education program but sits comfortably within the realm of lifelong and lifewide education (Barnett, 2011; Jackson, 2011).
Wisdom is highly individual and contextualised, and in many ways defies a reductionist attempt to observe, categorise, classify and define it. Wisdom means different things to different people, as in the old parable of the blind monks seeking to understand from varied perspectives, what this strange creature, an elephant, was (see Figure 5.1). Consider the range of definitions of wisdom found in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 highlights the lack of consensus on a definition for wisdom. Indeed, a complete definition of wisdom is something of a mirage. Two insightful views in support of this point of view are:

To understand wisdom fully and correctly probably requires more wisdom than any of us have. … The recognition that total understanding will always elude us is itself a sign of wisdom. (Sternberg, 1990a, p. 3)

As soon as you’re confronted with a definition of wisdom, however provisional or tentative, however debatable or howlingly inadequate, you are forced to view the definition through the prism of your own history and experience … We all have a working definition of wisdom floating around our heads, but we are rarely forced to consider it, or consult it, or challenge it, or amend it, much less apply any standard of wisdom to gauge our own behaviour decisions on a daily basis. (Hall, 2011, p. 10)

Nonetheless, our intention here is to make a contribution to the discussion of what (practice) wisdom is. In homage to the fabled task of labelling and interpreting an elephant, we have identified key words from the definitions in Table 5.1 and produced a word cloud shaped like the “memorable” elephant (see Figure 5.2).