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The Gardener’s Practical Knowledge

The importance of time, reflection and knowledge of a place to become a site builder

ABSTRACT

With this article, I want to raise questions about the gardener’s practical knowledge in order to create greater awareness in educational contexts and working life of the importance and application of what it means to be and work as a gardener. Practical knowledge takes time to develop and requires experience and conscious reflection. It also requires knowledge of the particular site you are working with, which in principle is always complex, as it involves everything from natural habitats to human expressions, such as history. To understand what practical knowledge is, I drew on situations from my working life and discuss these with references that highlight the importance of involving different forms of knowledge, phenomenology and hermeneutics. I used the concept of genius loci to formulate the meaning of places and posthumanist thoughts on the relationship between humans and nature. My conclusion is that experience, reflection and knowledge of a place are central to building sites, a task in which the gardener is highly involved. I conclude with a number of questions about how to work with these aspects of the profession in education and working life.

Keywords:

Practical knowledge, reflection, genius loci, site building.

INTRODUCTION

The professional title of master gardener is old and was traditionally gained through an apprenticeship system. Today, the title is used in many different contexts, usually with a positive meaning that refers to quality and knowledge. For example, many good and comprehensive horticultural education programmes use the title for their graduates. However, an apprentice was expected to practise the craft for many years under the guidance of experienced professionals before becoming a master craftsman,

which is far from what our education system offers. Practice is a key ingredient in the formation of what is called practical knowledge. Instead of gaining knowledge in a craft community, this takes place in different workplaces, often with a personal responsibility to acquire this knowledge, depending on the employer. In many cases, however, there is no room for further training of staff, as many gardening companies are small and have high work intensity. Raising awareness in education programmes and in the horticultural sector about what practical knowledge is, is therefore important to further understand what the profession entails and to enable a development in the horticultural sector that more consciously takes into account the nature of the profession.

Acquiring practical knowledge takes time and is strongly linked to the conditions and circumstances of the site. Students who graduate after two years, for example, need to be aware that the educational programme should be seen as an important basis for continued practice in order to achieve practical knowledge that embodies the title of gardener, so to speak. The meaning of practical knowledge is also something that employers need to be aware of. If it can be made visible to an employer, methods and procedures can be offered to bring practical knowledge to life in the workplace. Different types of professional certificates and quality assurance programmes are also important. Here, I will not give ready-made examples of such methods but rather intend to raise issues to draw attention to practical knowledge, which hopefully can lead to more concrete proposals in a later stage.

I am a professional gardener and work with horticultural education programmes at Skillebyholm. This article is based on my ongoing master’s project at the Centre for Studies in Practical Knowledge (CPK), Södertörn University (Pihlgren, 2021). Based on my profession and my work in adult education, I want to explore how practical knowledge is created, why it is important and what we need to pay particular attention to in order to understand it better.

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

What is practical knowledge, how does it develop and what does it mean? As a basic text for the theory of practical knowledge, CPK uses Aristotle’s text, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, in which the different forms of knowledge are divided and defined (Nilsson, 2014). This makes it clear that knowledge does not manifest in a single way. Involving different forms of knowledge also means that there must be different ways of approaching the understanding of different types of knowledge. For us in our time, this becomes clear when, for example, healthcare and school staff have to use quality assurance programmes in ways that do not really account for core activities and whose quality cannot in fact be accounted for in this way (Bornemark, 2020). In a book published by the National Agency for Education, Bernt Gustavsson also addressed the dilemmas of a narrow view of knowledge in which theoretical knowledge has had a higher status for a long time, something that the public authorities have an ambition to change, not least for democratic reasons (Gustavsson, 2002).

Studying Aristotle is a reminder that knowledge is not only about the theoretical and factual version, the one you can read and logically understand, which is static in nature and therefore can be easily incorporated into tables and universal methods. This type of knowledge is important, but not the only one. Experiential and situational knowledge related to time, place and reflection then becomes something that can be emphasised as a counterbalance to and nuance factual knowledge, which tends to be valued much more highly. Why this is the case has many different explanations that I will not go into here. However, the application of the *episteme* has proved easier to manage in a market economy system in which quality assurance and documentation systems have become central tasks in many industries. In interpersonal professions, it has proved devastating in many ways because, for example, there is too little time left to work on the core activities (Tamaddon, 2017). Practical interpersonal work, which to a large extent involves acting on the basis of a unique situation and the experiences of individuals, is difficult to manage according to models that are designed for a different form of knowledge. For example, horticultural companies must deal with tenders, where management descriptions specifying cost and efficiency tend to outweigh this. Such a document is obviously important for reaching agreements, but since practical knowledge is difficult to include in these docu-

ments, an important part of the gardener’s competence is also left out of this agreement. For example, the maintenance of a gravel path takes longer if it is poorly laid out or if people prefer to take a shortcut across the lawn, which means that the gravel path is not used and weeds grow faster. In other words, something that is site specific. Another example is that there has been no transfer of knowledge in the company to newly trained staff, which means that the work takes longer than the contract says because lack of experience often means that the choice of method can be incorrect.

Similarly, at the Department of Conservation, University of Gothenburg and Craft Laboratory, methods for how craft knowledge can be presented where practical knowledge is at the centre—that is, personal experience in combination with the changeability of the situation (Westerlund, Groth, Almevik 2022).

Time, reflection and place

There was a place in a park that I was responsible for where there were tall fir trees that created a special atmosphere of tranquillity, solemnity and introspection that many visitors appreciated. After a spruce bark beetle attack, the trees died and had to be taken down, giving the place a completely different character. I then had the opportunity to reflect on different possible ways forward: Should we completely change the concept and, as a colleague suggested, build a tree house or should we still try to retain the previous character? The decision was to work on the original character, which turned out to be equally connected to phenomena on the site other than just the fir trees. I arrived at this decision by working for several years, partly through practical gardening but also by reading about the park and talking to people who had helped shape it. The result was good, but because the process of removing the fir trees and allowing the deciduous trees to recover took quite a long time, I never had the opportunity to reflect together with my colleague, who made the opposite proposal. It was also the first time that I encountered such a diametrically different point of view and I did not have the organisational tools to deal with it in a constructive way. In such a case, could the two seemingly opposite proposals have even been synchronised?

Practical knowledge has to do, among other things, with time, with experience formed over a long period of time, but also because there are opportunities for reflection. Without regular re-evaluation, not much happens. What you experience must be placed in relation to what you have experienced before and to what others experience. The parties must adopt each other’s perspectives and try to see each other’s *horizons of understanding* (Svenaesus, 2014). This must be discussed, and in the best case, a constructive exchange takes place that allows a common experience to be formulated—a *fusion of horizons*. Hans-Georg Gadamer, who described the process as a *hermeneutic circle*, uses the metaphor of the horizon (Gadamer, 1997). I enter every new situation with a pre-understanding; in the situation, I gain new knowledge that can be compared and re-evaluated, whereupon my knowledge shifts and a new understanding arises, which then becomes a pre-understanding in the next situation. This process can very well take place in a conscious way and together with others, where a common pre-understanding can be achieved that leads to a new mutual attitude.

Donald Schön has provided the reflection process with several nuances and levels in which experience affects the possibility of reflecting on the actual action at the same time (Schön, 2014). The more experience I have, which has grown through constant re-evaluation, the more opportunity I have to act reflectively in the moment and, for example, to adapt and adjust my actions when something unexpected happens. A kind of intuition has thus developed that can also be verbalised. Bengt Molander adds that this interaction can be innovative. Therefore, it is not just a matter of thinking while acting, but of adding elements of experimentation, of putting one’s thoughts to the test (Molander, 1996). There is a real risk for a gardener that one’s actions will become routine. For example, the possibility of introducing new technology can become an insurmountable challenge when the manual way of working is certainly time-consuming and physically demanding but has proven to work. It can be tempting to stay with the tried and tested way of working, not to reconsider the usual and thus miss out on at least a valuable complement that simplifies the work. Here, despite extensive experience, the reflection itself has been rejected.

For someone working in the garden, a third party must also be included in this reflective interaction, namely the site. In the Roman Empire, the concept of *genius loci* was important for understanding place (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). The Latin *genius* can be translated as ‘protective’ and *loci* as ‘place’. People, but also places, were considered by the Romans to be animated. The Romans used the knowledge of *genius loci*, for example, when placing buildings in the landscape to achieve harmony and aesthetics (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

For a gardener who works very closely and concretely with places, it is particularly important to familiarise oneself with what has happened to the place, how it is used and what the vision is, but also to formulate the factors that have created and now create atmosphere, function, meaning and how the concrete work effort affects this. I think the concept of *genius loci* is still useful and can be translated into a more modern context if only as a way of defining a place’s identity (Blinck, 2011). A current question is how a gardener can act in places created by humans, at best in interactions with nature, which quite quickly have new conditions. In one park, for example, *Reynoutria japonica* was planted, which has created beautiful jungle-like environments in a pond area over the years. It was planted to help shape and reinforce the *genius loci*, which in this case included moisture, shade and lushness. Nowadays, *Reynoutria japonica* is considered an invasive plant that must be controlled. Thus, a new task for the gardener, but with the same purpose, is to continue working on developing and reinforcing the original atmosphere that is still there—the *genius loci*.

The example of *Reynoutria japonica* can show a shift in the way in which 20th-century gardens were created, based on a view of humans as superior and separate from nature, in which they simply introduced the plants that they thought suited the concept. Now, however, there is another idea that is partly linked to posthumanism: that gardens are created and managed in interaction with nature. Andreas Malm discussed in an interesting way Bruno Latour’s idea that nature and the social cannot be separated. Malm believes that there is instead a sharp dividing line between them and that they are in constant collision (Malm, 2020). For gardeners who have nature as their work tool and who de facto refine it and transform it into culture, the truth is perhaps somewhere in between. The basic conditions of nature also exist in gardens. An earthworm will probably never behave in any new way and we have come to realise that no matter how beautiful the *Reynoutria japonica* is, it must be considered harmful to the whole. But because humans are both nature and culture, the dualism is there, but we can use knowledge to work in a way that integrates it with cultural expression and resembles a hybrid, a way in which the gardener does not have a dominant role in relation to nature. Here, too, recurrent reevaluation plays a significant role.

In the space that emerges between Malm and Latour, there are similarities with Martin Heidegger, who argued that human existence involves the concept of *dwelling*, which is linked to nature. For example, human houses have walls, floors and roofs because there is sky, earth and vegetation. Thus, the concrete environment in which we live is an integral part of the way humans dwell, even though the building itself has its own spirit (Heidegger, 1974; Norberg-Schultz, 1980). Heidegger also emphasises that human beings are different from other beings who all have their specific beings; there is no hierarchical structure here, but it is different. This puts Heidegger alongside posthumanism, which dismantles dualism (Rae, 2014).

Knowledge and place-making

In addition to the opportunity for time and reflection, technical knowledge is also needed. Heidegger developed the understanding of the Aristotelian knowledge form (Svenaesus, 2014) *techne*, which, in combination with *phronesis*, I believe, adds further dimensions to the gardener’s knowledge. He believes that a prerequisite for reaching the knowledge form *techne*, where creativity and free creation are given space, we must know the spirit¹ of things. This may seem obvious to a craftsman, but the question is how aware we are of this. We gardeners learn about tools and about conditions for cultivation, and we practise and gain experience. But how often do we ask ourselves conscious questions about what the essence of a thing really is? What does it mean, what does it do, how does it feel and so on. An example would be knowing and understanding habitats. Before we have this knowledge, a plant choice is completely meaningless. However, once we know the habitat, we can choose suitable plants

and start interacting and creating freely. We can even challenge the spirit of things, for example, by investigating whether we can make a plant thrive in a different environment than usual. Constructed growing environments, such as greenhouses or plant propagation in nutrient-poor soil for bare-root planting, are examples of this. Through deeper understanding and awareness, we end up in what Heidegger called a *free space*, where we can build a site created from an understanding of the spirit of the place (Heidegger, 1974).

CONCLUSION

Being a gardener

The gardening profession can be viewed as multi-faceted. It is, of course, a craft where the material and the method are at the centre. But a gardener also has to deal with people, with different types of places, with organisational issues, logistics and more. The gardener is always, to a greater or lesser extent, involved with and has an important role in place-making with all that it entails.

Unique situations and unique places

Nature and gardens are constantly changing, for example, with weather and climate, causing motifs to change, sometimes suddenly and often over time. Working conditions have a variable quality that is related to the situation, that is, something that is unique. Situations may be recognisable, but they are always new, occurring in new contexts. Here, we can recognise the hermeneutic circle and also by defining the *genius loci*, we can help transform the constant reorientation into a common horizon of understanding. To better deal with these unique situations, experience that has been subjected to reflection over a longer period of time is required. The situation, the space in question, is thus linked to time, and without the element of change, experience-based knowledge and wisdom cannot emerge.

Possible tools?

How do we communicate a situational and experience-based approach to clients, customers and others? How do we create free spaces where the gardeners have room to work based on their practical knowledge, which includes flexibility and dynamics?

A first step is to become aware of practical knowledge, to recognise that it exists and is a central part of professional knowledge. For the gardener as a 'site builder', there are so many parameters involved in the profession. In this way, the gardener is, in many ways, a key person; however, the gardener rarely has this role in an organisation, whether the work is about a single location or with many different locations and motifs. Often, there may not even be self-awareness of the wide range of knowledge and expertise that a gardener actually possesses.

Marcia sá Cavalcante Schuback proposes the concepts of influence, inspiration and improvisation as indicators of dynamic life and development (sá Cavalcante Schuback, 2006). According to her, these are signs that there is an opportunity for striving, development and free creativity that creates new values. If this exists in a workplace, for example, there is also an opportunity for gardeners to fully exercise their profession. The signs could then become visible as working methods and be valued more highly, perhaps even in a quality policy.

If a more flexible and dynamic way of working is allowed and a form that is financially sustainable is found, reflection also becomes an important part of the work. Methodological questions about individuals' identification of places, which are regularly pitted against overall formulations, mean that these must always be open to reformulation. Can we allow our working methods, documentation systems and so on to also be mobile in their quality? Can reflection and recurring fusion of horizons permeate, for example, a management plan? A question raised by Molander (1996) is whether methods can also be different depending on the nature of the organisation?

I conclude this text with a number of questions that remain unanswered. I hope that they can inspire further questions and explore what practical knowledge is and how it can be formulated and become an important part of the gardener's work and influence. I think this is important to pay attention to, not least because the profession, industry and education programmes have gained greater import-

ance in today's society, which is gratifying. However, there is also a risk that the inherent character of the profession is devalued in favour of a one-sided form of knowledge. Instead, there are real opportunities to highlight the inherent potential of the gardening profession to contain a wide variety of knowledge orientations. Knowledge of practical knowledge should thus include the time aspect, the acquisition of experience through practice and reflection and an in-depth understanding of the site one is working with, which also implies a knowledge and understanding of the people who are present and acting in this site.

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¹ In German *Geist*.