

Interview with Professor Hannu Heikkinen

## **“Nothing can grow forever”: Working with planetary praxis for future higher education**

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### **Introduction**

The idea for this interview came originally in 2023 during a seminar with the HEPP (Higher Education, Politics and Professions) research group at the University of Borås who were critically discussing different aspects of praxis in higher education. At the time, I had just read the book “Living Well in a World Worth Living in for All” (Eds. Reimer, Kaukko, Windsor, Mahon and Kemmis, 2023) and knew that professor Hannu Heikkinen from the University of Jyväskylä was engaged in parts of a second edition of this book. After the seminar I started to look at examples of using praxis from different theoretical angles and came across the concept of eco praxis.

Being a higher education researcher with a strong feminist interest, I wanted to learn more about eco praxis, how it is or can be used and its relation to gender and power. For me, feminist theory and practices are very closely related to the idea of creating a more sustainable, fair and inclusive society. In, for example, Sara Ahmed’s (2017) wonderful book about living a feminist life she argues for a feminist way of living which embraces the idea of a world worth living in. I was also curious about these questions in my role as Editor-in-Chief, and why questions about eco praxis or sustainability were rarely referred to in our journal (*Journal of Praxis in Higher Education*, JPHE).

I had already met Professor Hannu Heikkinen at a symposium back in 2019 (the so called Praxis symposium, University of Borås), where I learned that he is a Finnish Professor who is exploring educational philosophy as a base for analysing teacher’s professional practice. I was curious to find out more and to understand why he started to work with sustainability issues and the concept of eco praxis. Hannu is a valuable member of JPHE’s Editorial Board, so I already knew he was interested in the journal.

When I contacted Hannu for an interview, I explained that I was eager to learn more about eco praxis research and what these issues and perspective mean

to him, but that I would also circle around his professional life, important crossroads, and interesting future prospects. I also mentioned that, as Editor in Chief of JPHE, I wanted to address how this kind of perspective could influence the journal, and if Hannu had ideas about what would make the journal align better with planetary well-being issues.

Our conversation below is structured around a few themes that emerged in the interview.

### **What is an academic life?**

*Petra: I am so happy you were interested in having this conversation. As you already know, I'm interested in your professional and academic background. So, why not start there? What would you like to share about your professional experiences?*

**Hannu:** Thank you for arranging this. To begin with I want to say that the first sentence on my website reads: “Honestly speaking, I am a teacher, first of all, and I am proud of it”. I think that says a lot about where I come from professionally.

In more detail, I was first educated as a primary school teacher and worked as that for 10 years. During my last years, I started to think about my path forward, and how I wanted to spend the remaining days of my life. That is why I decided to do a PhD and later became a teacher educator at the same university where I graduated. From there, I went on to the Finnish Institute of Educational Research and later took up an appointment as a professor. Then, when my son was about 5 years old, he told me that he was very proud of me, and that he had told his classmates that his dad is the teacher, of teachers, of teachers. So, as a professor I am the teacher of those who teach teachers. This is truly a wonderful description, I think, and it says important things about my role today.

In my work, I have worked a lot with professional teaching and learning, and I have also been engaged in a number of projects and assignments connected to these questions, both nationally and internationally. My roots are in professional teaching, but I have, over the years, moved more and more towards issues of sustainability. The turning-point was in 2018 when two specific things happened which gave me a certain professional push: A publisher asked me to write a testimonial text on the back cover of the book: “Education in the era of eco crises”. I read the manuscript before the book was printed, and then replied to the publisher

and told him that I could of course write some kind of recommendation text: “However, I am not sure if the publisher wants my recommendation”.

The reason was that after I had read this book I just couldn’t sleep for almost two weeks. I was just so taken by how the book framed and manifested the future of humankind, and the environmental crises we are in, and the role that education plays in this situation. It was such an eye-opener for me. Then, a couple of weeks later, in September 2018, the release of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report made me realize, once again, fully, that we are in the midst of a huge environmental crisis and are doing very little to prevent it.

Again, the second time in my career I asked myself: “What would be the best way to use my time in the remaining days of my life?” I came to the conclusion that the best thing I could do, as a human-being, was to do my best to prevent this ecological crisis happening. That is how I became a researcher in “sustainability education”.

*Petra: Thank you Hannu, your description is so rich and interesting. I just can’t help but wonder a little more about your path and perhaps especially about the crossroads you describe and if you have had more similar experiences of this type of crossroads?*

**Hannu:** Before 2018, I was more focused on mentoring new teachers and what it means to be a teacher. And, of course, during that time, I was much more broadly interested in philosophical questions in education, and praxis and practice research, if you like. I started off by focusing on action research, especially during the years as a primary school teacher. Action research was precisely how I got to know Professor Stephen Kemmis, who is known as one of the gurus of educational action research globally.

So, I started with action research and then followed the discussions in the PEP network and started to wonder about what Kemmis talked about when he referred to praxis. He seemed not to speak so much about action research per se but instead emphasized the importance of understanding how practices are prefigured on the social site where practices happen. I had great problems with figuring out why. After a few years, I started to realize the connection. Action research is a research strategy to change practices. The theory of practice architecture (TPA) is a theory about practices. If we want to change practices, we first need to understand what keeps practices in place as they are. This is what the theory of practice architectures is all about, and it is indeed crucial for making a change in the social action.

### **Becoming thoughtful and wise**

*Petra: What would you say the concept of praxis has opened for in your research? And how does the praxis concept correspond to that and how does it affect your research?*

**Hannu:** For me practice means actions, doings, or what people engage in, as in habits and routines. Praxis is a concept that entails deliberate actions and relationships. It is informed by moral commitment that is involved in these actions. It is more than a habit, because it includes deliberate and value-laden actions.

So, from my end, praxis is clearly morally committed, but also informed action based on the best knowledge we can acquire at a particular point in time. It's very close to the concept of wisdom, so in a sense praxis means wise action. It is formed by traditions, by reality, and how we try to understand what is happening around us. Kemmis talks about praxis as history making actions. That is one central element, the other element is the moral commitment, or virtuous action. Praxis is illustrating how humans try to act in a virtuous way.

Recently, I, Huttunen, Mahon and Kemmis have started to develop the concept of planetary praxis. The traditional notion of praxis is clearly based on the humanist tradition, whose Latin motto is "homo mensura"; man is the measure of all things. We believe that it is necessary to renew this thinking from the perspective that what is good for the planet or for nature is also good for human life. In doing so, we take a step forward from the humanist tradition and think from a more-than-human perspective. In our latest publications, we seek to explore how we can protect life on this planet from this perspective. In this way, human flourishing is enabled and promoted by letting nature flourish. So, I believe that human well-being is nested within planetary well-being and that we need to seek to extend the concept of praxis, based on the humanist tradition, towards planetary praxis inspired by post-humanism.

Our concept of planetary praxis is in line with Gert Biesta (2021) and his ideas about problematizing human desire and what it means to exist as a human in a grown up way. The key question is: "Is what I desire desirable?" This question can be addressed on three levels. The first level is the personal level: so, I firstly ask myself "does the fulfillment of this desire make me happy?" Secondly, I ask if this is desirable for the life with others: "how does this impact the life we live together?" The third question takes us to a planetary level. At that level, I ask about

the consequences of fulfilling my desires in terms of the life we all live on this planet.

In terms of praxis, the first question addresses personal praxis, the second one socio-political praxis and the third one planetary praxis.

*Petra: You raise so many important questions, but I can't help myself also wondering about the pitfalls. What are you struggling with concerning praxis research today? Wouldn't the risk with this idea of a planetary praxis, for example, be that we take the very basis of moral commitment for granted, that it relies on resources, agency, influence that some parts of the world simply don't have?*

**Hannu:** This is surely an important question, and I have reflected a lot who are morally responsible for the ecological crisis. We can start, of course, by simplifying the issue and claiming that it is *homo sapiens*, the human species that has caused all this. But this answer is only the beginning; not all humans are equally responsible. Humans have exploited the world in different ways, and we in industrialised societies have undoubtedly done the most damage. So, the more industrialised countries are the more responsible in comparison to the less industrialised ones. From a historical perspective, it is obvious that the rich countries have exploited the planet more, and we are still doing so, and at the same time we are exploiting the global south. We also have better resources to deal with the ecological problems, which is another important aspect. We should simply do more in wealthy countries.

*Petra: Your core concepts are wisdom, ethics, flourishing, planetary praxis, but in all of them justice is embedded, right?*

**Hannu:** Problems need to be solved in a just way. All these concepts are interlinked and try to address these problems in a just way.

*Petra: Would feminist theory correspond to these ideas?*

**Hannu:** Definitely, and the whole history of masculinity is involved in the ecological crisis ahead of us.

*Petra: To act in a grown-up sense would then be to consider our history and what could be planetary praxis, which would then be to strive for wisdom, by challenging the dominant values we are currently framed by. Have I understood you correctly?*

**Hannu:** Yes, and in this we should strive for a broader “for all” perspective, which means including those who are not heard as much today. And I don’t only refer to living things then, but also to systems and processes that maintain life.

### **Praxis means doing differently**

*Petra: In our journal, when I look at the submissions we receive today, very few actually address planetary issues – issues of sustainability, or planetary praxis issues. Why do you think that is?*

Hannu: That is surprising. In higher education in Finland, we pay a lot of attention to issues of planetary well-being today, in our university and in the field of higher education research. In my academic bubble, we focus a lot on this today, so I am surprised. We have courses, research work, in programs and on the agenda. So, my reality is different.

*Petra: I will bring this question to my “bubble”, too, but I wonder if it is a conceptual issue, or if we are caught in political ideas about what sustainability is or should be? Not sure? The submissions to JPHE are certainly about resources, or the misuse of resources in a way, but do not really ask for alternatives. You seem to work more on how to challenge the current system... or?*

**Hannu:** Yes. Of course, I see that too, and critical aspects of a taken for granted system are still more common, not questions about a new system or new thinking. One of the examples of this kind of research angle is critical studies on PISA or how we accept ranking systems etc. However, I think higher education research needs to ask different questions now, new starting points. For example, the de-growth movement advocates for reducing global consumption and production to create a more sustainable and equitable economy that prioritizes well-being over GDP growth. It emphasizes ecological balance, social justice, and a transition away from growth-dependent economic systems. In my opinion, nothing can grow forever. That is an infantile idea, in my perspective, and we need to accept that. My hope is that humankind will be wise enough to stop the process we are in now before a full-scale disaster occurs.

*Petra: What could I do, as Editor in Chief of a journal dealing with praxis in higher education, to act and engage in issues of planetary wisdom? What would be your advice?*

**Hannu:** I would say that the whole idea of this journal is very healthy actually. Just by referring to the concept of praxis opens for critical debate about planetary well-being. In my opinion, the concept invites us to reflect on what is sustainable in higher education today.

*Petra: What do you think about the publishing world more generally, which is often based on competition and publishing work today?*

**Hannu:** This is an important issue for me actually. As a teacher, I need to publish both for the academy and for the general public. So, I try to publish in daily newspapers. I find that the news articles are more influential than anything else I have written. One of my writings, a recent essay, was, for example, accepted in our largest daily newspaper. The topic concerned “What is the purpose of education”. The amount of feedback I got was so surprising. Many of my colleagues marked that I made such an important point, and I was also able to refer to the book on planetary praxis. Today, I am a columnist in another daily newspaper and have the opportunity to elaborate on several topics, and I really enjoy it.

*Petra: So, to summarize: As I understand it, you are saying that one goal of planetary praxis is that we start asking questions like “what is the purpose of education”, and “what is the purpose of research”? To contribute to a good life – and to create a life worth living. Do I understand you correctly?*

**Hannu:** Yes, and thank you for that summary. I just want to stress that besides academic publishing, also popular texts are an important part of the work we do in education research. By writing popular texts, I feel like I am making a difference and also combining my research with my teacher identity. As I said before, I am first and foremost a teacher.

*Petra: It sounds so relevant and important. I wish we would all start thinking about why we focus so much on the competition and measurement aspects of academic careers... Thank you so much for participating Hannu, and for sharing all your important insights. This has been a truly inspiring conversation, not the least from the journal perspective and our continued work.*

## References

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