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PRACTICE PAPER

Reflections of an Education Professional

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Abstract

Higher education is a profession, or is it? This paper will debate the nature of higher education as a profession and what it constitutes to be a professional within this environment. It will be argued that professionalism is synonymous with quality and the current practices relating to maintaining and monitoring standards are issues of contentious debate. The paper will conclude by focusing on the professional in practice and offer some reflections on the reality of trying to maintain an equitable, inclusive and up to date professional profile.

Keywords: professional, teaching profession, quality

Introduction

What is professionalism? Who is a professional? What attributes constitute professional status? Is higher education a profession? How does sport link to these debates? This paper intends to provide a range of reflective insights to the lecturing environment of sport within higher education and in so doing, contribute to current debates as to whether or not higher education is really a profession in its own right.

As Lindop (1982) suggests the terms 'profession' and 'professional' have semantic overtones and echoes. Thus because the words are often confused or their meanings misinterpreted, it is difficult to appreciate the literal context with which these concepts are applied and used. Possibly the most commonly used context of the word professional is as an antonym to amateur (Lindop, 1982). This however is problematic, for who or what is an amateur? Perkin (1985) suggests the traditional and perhaps 'original' meaning of the word amateur was associated with 'gentlemen', the learned gentry of the time who were wealthy and had time for leisure pursuits as they did not have to earn a living. Essentially, amateurs are individuals who participate in sport because of the enjoyment and satisfaction they get from the activity. Taking part is more important than the outcome of the match or competition. Amateurs will train and compete in their own leisure time, often after work or at

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weekends. They will receive no formal payment for their participation. Allison (2001) argues that this traditional amateur ethos which has shaped modern sport is under threat and in decline.

By comparison, professionals will be paid to compete and, to such athletes, winning is highly important. The more successful they become, the greater the chance of winning more money. Professional athletes will generally train full-time and devote themselves totally to their sport. It is common for professional athletes to sign contracts binding them to the number and type of competitions they must take part in throughout the year. The introduction of national lottery funding has changed the status of some athletes in recent years. Whilst potentially an amateur, some athletes who now receive World Class funding for example, may differ very little from a professional athlete.

Regardless of the change in meaning of the word professional, the common theme is that it involves some form of regular employment which results in paid remuneration. Allison (2001) suggests that professionalism is about having a career and for some individuals, becoming a professional sporting athlete will be their ultimate goal. Some will be fortunate to recoup vast salaries, in addition to lucrative sponsorship deals. However this is not generally the norm. Even in English soccer very few players earn vast sums of money. For example in 1995 the highest paid employee at Manchester United was Andy Cole who earned £24,000 a week, whereas at Albion Rovers in the Scottish Third Division, Jim Crease was the highest paid employee receiving only £100 a week (Horne et al., 1999). Campbell and Sloane (1997), Sanderson and Siegfried (1997), Simmons (1997) and Syzmanski and Kuypers (1999) argue that the disparity between the top and bottom players' incomes has in fact widened. In addition to such variable earnings a sports professional's playing career will be relatively short; Horne et al. (1999) identify the average length of a professional footballer's career to be only eight years.

Another point highlighted by the historical analysis of the word is the male gender bias that it promotes. In addition to the fact that amateurs were 'gentlemen', little is known historically about forms of professional sport for women (Hargreaves, 1994). Whilst more recently there has been a blurring of the traditional division between amateurs and professionals in many sports, there remains a marked distinction in terms of opportunities, particularly for women's sports professionals (Hargreaves, 1994). For example, there is a severe lack of sponsorship in women's professional sport; in snooker particularly this has almost been to the detriment of the game. If a key facet of being a professional is receiving a salary or wage, why are women underrepresented in employment and why do they receive significantly lower salaries than their male colleagues (Hunter, 1997)? Likewise in sport there are discrepancies between men's and women's prize money at major professional championships. At Wimbledon for example, the prize money is not equally distributed. Highlighting such disparities is important, however Sockett proposes that:

"A profession is said to be an occupation with a crucial social function, requiring a high degree of skill and drawing on a systematic body of knowledge." (1985:27)

In this context the more recent neutrality of being a professional is highlighted so that gender should not be an issue of contention. This would be expected given the introduction of legislation such as the Equal Pay Act (1970) and Sex Discrimination Act (1975), however it still does not explain the paucity of women in highly skilled, professional occupations such as science and engineering, or the fact that in sport it is extremely difficult for female professional sports players to become professional coaches (Hargreaves, 1994). Nonetheless for the purpose of this paper, a professional will be deemed to be either male or female.

Perkin (1985) endorses Sockett's (1985) definition by suggesting that the word professional is used to define a dignified occupation with an element of intellectual training or large mental expertise. Hence someone working as a lawyer, doctor or teacher is a professional, but they will have distinctive characteristics that distinguish their occupation from another (Hoyle, 1985). Thus the organisational context of a profession is important, as it is distinctively different from the individualised context of being a professional. This is illustrated if the features or characteristics of a profession are compared to that of a professional. For example, Millerson suggests there are six common traits to a profession:

"1. A skill based on theoretical knowledge

2. Intellectual training and education
 3. The testing of competence
 4. Closure of the profession by restrictive organisation
 5. A code of conduct
 6. An altruistic service in the affairs of others.”
- (Millerson, 1964 cited in Perkin, 1985:14)

Whereas according to Lindop, being a professional involves the following claims:

- “1. Exclusivity
 2. To do something special for society
 3. Profess to certain socially useful skills and competencies
 4. Practise according to standards that are publicly acknowledged
 5. Enjoy privilege and responsibility in the offering of a service to the public
 6. Exercise personal judgement
 7. Protect the public by guaranteeing certain minimum standards of competence
 8. Conduct and merit recognition by way of payment and status.”
- (Lindop, 1982:157)

Whilst the two terms might appear to be isolated and different, in practice it would seem that there are often degrees of overlap. This perhaps helps to explain the use of phrases such as professional identity or status, professional practice, professional development, professionalism and what Hoyle (1985) refers to as professionalisation. Furthermore the duality of the terms highlights the clear link between the intrinsic responsibilities of individual members of a profession to one another, as well as the extrinsic responsibility of the profession to the public (Lindop, 1982).

In a sporting context professional associations have been developed to represent the interests of athletes, including the Professional Footballers Association, the Cricketers Association, the Professional Golfers Association, the Association of Lawn Tennis Professionals, the Jockeys Association and The International Athletes Club (Horne et al., 1999). Likewise for sports workers there are professional associations or organisations that perform coordinating, informing or guidance roles. Individual members pay a subscription charge and in return receive a range of services such as information updates on national policies or education and training opportunities. Examples of professional associations in the sport, leisure and tourism industry include the Association of British Travel Agents, the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management or the Institute of Sport and Recreation Management.

The teaching profession

What then constitutes the teaching profession? Clearly the generic definitions and criteria highlighted above are relevant. Gordon (1985) proposes that teaching as a profession emerged a little over a century ago. The formal development of universities and colleges awarding recognised teaching qualifications to students is however far more recent. Thus the all-graduate nature of teaching is one specific notion relating to teaching being recognised as a profession and individual lecturers and tutors as professionals (Gordon, 1985; Hoyle, 1985).

Educating pupils, whether children or adults, is a service and as Perkin (1985) suggests, a service which combines knowledge with practice. In this respect the client demands not only theoretical knowledge but also procedural skills. Professions do not exist without clients, so students are an important component in the teaching profession. This provides further evidence of how education is contextualised as a profession.

Professions require organisation (Perkin, 1985). Universities are generally well-structured enterprises with sets of regulations for curriculum design, delivery and assessment. Additionally, staff have some control over what is taught and the content of degree programmes (Brown et al., 2002). In terms of hierarchy, lecturers can progress to become senior lecturers, then principal lecturers, heads of

department, readers or professors. This offers individuals a logical career pathway if they so wish. One area where lecturers frequently have less autonomy and control is over timetabling (Brown et al., 2002). Additionally it has been suggested that some institutions lack structure or organisation. For example, Hirst comments that 'teachers repeatedly present a confused and confusing picture of what they consider they are about' (1982:176). This quote could arguably be seen as outdated, but there are various union bodies representing teachers. Whilst differences of opinion may exist between primary, secondary, further and higher education staff, in essence all are professionals working within the teaching profession, so would it not make logical sense to combine the resources, of for instance organisations such as NATFHE and the Association of University Teachers (AUT), rather than acknowledge diversity? Furthermore, the profession is limited by its ability to accept and acknowledge the various ways individuals enter the profession. In a primary or secondary school qualified teacher status is an essential requirement, whereas in higher education there is an expectation that lecturers have a specialist level of knowledge, but not necessarily a detailed understanding of the theories and practice of teaching. In the latter, experience alone has been deemed a suitable criterion upon which to teach. Do these different ways of 'qualifying' and entering teaching constitute professional practice?

Perkin summarises the limited success of the teaching profession as follows:

"The teaching profession suffers from a vicious circle of low status, lack of competitive resources, inability to control their own selection, training and qualification, divided and consequently ineffective organisation and a degree of state interference and control suffered by almost no other profession all leading to low bargaining power, low remuneration and low status." (1985: 8-19)

It would thus appear that there are certain factors specific to the teaching profession, which perhaps help to explain the recent spate of industrial action and the high number of positions that remain vacant, including 'working to rule' in higher education, strike action in further education and school teachers refusing to cover lessons when vacancies cannot be filled. This section has thus tried to summarise some of the pertinent issues relating to the differences between the teaching profession and what it constitutes to be a professional teacher. In essence, the societal values associated with the commonalities of the profession, compared to the personal values and working practices that an individual brings to the job.

Quality

The next section considers quality, how it influences a professional teacher's work and whether it is an integral part of the profession. What is quality? Carr comments that 'quality is synonymous with meeting professional standards through a system of supervision, inspection and control' (Carr, 1989:2). The first part of this quote raises the question, what constitutes a professional standard? Whilst the generic debates about professions and professionals have been identified earlier, it is important to recognise that in a practical and more specific sense, being a professional is about certain quality traits. For example, in a purely descriptive sense, quality equates to the mental or moral characteristics associated with being a teacher (Carr, 1989). However there is also what Carr (1989) suggests is a normative meaning to quality, when the word relates to a degree of excellence or attributes that are deemed to be vitally important. Quality in teaching is thus about values that are intrinsic to the professional as a whole. Without quality the essence of professionalism is lost (Carr, 1989).

The trend over the last decade has been to accept the notion that quality exists within the teaching profession. For example the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) identifies two dimensions to quality:

"The first is the appropriateness of standards set by an institution and second is the effectiveness of teaching and learning support in providing opportunities for students to achieve those standards." (QAA, 2001)

This illustrates the current mode of thinking about quantifying and measuring quality. Teachers' or lecturers' perceptions of quality within the profession are likely to be influenced by the language of

inspections by for example, the QAA or the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), which include quality jargon such as 'benchmarking', 'self-assessment documents' or 'performance indicators'. These terms equate to the standards against which teachers are measured.

What though of the ethical issues associated with assessing and measuring teachers' working practices? Carr (1989) argues that for teaching quality to be about excellence, efficiency and effectiveness, an individual cannot realistically be expected to exercise professional discretion when bound by a restrictive framework of bureaucratic rules and managerial controls. Inspections can be seen as intrusive and may act as a severe loss of professional autonomy. It has often been assumed that, for trained and experienced professionals there should be no need to investigate working practices to check quality. However there remains a rigid monitoring and evaluation system in the education profession. Why is this the case? The QAA (2001) proposes that academic standards are not a private matter and because a substantial proportion of the population is influenced by education, there are many stakeholders with expectations that must be met. Also, education currently has a wider remit than ever before. Thus, given its egalitarian and mass participation focus with more individuals investing time and money into the system, there is a requirement to maintain high standards and values.

It is the author's opinion that the teaching profession has had too many bureaucratic changes imposed upon it within recent years. Schools have coped with the national curriculum, scholastic aptitude testing (SATS) and the adoption of GCSEs; further education has seen the introduction of vocational awards, key skills and most recently, Curriculum 2000, and in higher education key skills, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and major funding changes have all had a significant impact. Such initiatives have been found to contribute to increased stress levels and have reduced individuals' professional confidence (Thornton, 2000). For instance, within a twelve-month period Thornton (2000) found that 12,000 depressed and stressed teachers called a counselling line. Twenty-seven per cent of those using the service were already suffering from high levels of stress, anxiety or depression. A smaller scale study by the Teacher Support Network, found that a third of the 25 teachers using a service called Teacherline, had already visited their doctor and at least one in five had been prescribed anti-depressants (Thornton, 2000). In relation to the RAE specifically, Maskall argues that rather than judge and reward the quality of research in university departments the RAE has 'done nothing much beyond counting and rewarding the number of pages produced' (2001:18).

The underpinning philosophy for conducting QAA or OFSTED visits can perhaps be justified in terms of serving an extrinsic purpose, such as the national interest, the economic needs of society, or the demands of the labour market (Carr, 1989) and it may be argued that there is no harm in learning from the experience to become a better professional. However, it would appear that the essence of what quality means is perhaps being diluted though imposing such rigid and bureaucratic frameworks (Floud, 2001). It is simply not possible to identify professional, educational values from quantifying and collating materials in module boxes or through aspect groups. Such evidence only provides an 'instant' view, fails to show any progression of the individual in terms of their own professional development and proposes that individuals willingly accept institutional values and do not question or modify practices, statutes or legislation as professionals should (Ryan, 2001).

Regardless of whether teachers accept or discredit the current view of quality being measured and regulated, the debates presented here illustrate the symbiotic relationship that exists between quality and professionalism. This will be an important consideration in the final part of this paper, which is concerned with the professional in practice. If individuals are professionals, how do they come to credit themselves with and maintain such a title? The remainder of this paper will attempt to demonstrate that the term professional can be easily adopted, but requires a high degree of commitment and time in order to be maintained.

Buncher and Stelling suggest that:

"Professional identity can be defined as the perception of oneself as a professional and it is closely related to the knowledge and skills one has, the work one does and the work-related significant others or

the reference group.” (Buncher and Stelling, 1997, cited in Robson, 1998:586)

This implies that there is a degree of individual responsibility associated with being a professional. The onus is on the professional to update and attend regular training courses or conferences in order to prevent stagnation of professional practice. According to Brown et al. (2002), teachers are generally very good at keeping up-to-date with their own subject area, but not so where matters of pedagogic practice are concerned. A reason for this imbalance may be attributed to the fact that there rarely seems to be quite enough hours in the day to get everything done! It is therefore important that departments offer the most beneficial type of support in terms of professional staff development, balancing pedagogical and conceptual opportunities. Whilst this may be a significant challenge, it is one that can be managed, perhaps with some foresight and guidance from a mentor.

According to Hoyle (1985), professional development is the process whereby practitioners improve their competencies. In this respect, re-skilling or learning and incorporating new modes of teaching are important features. The government’s Lifelong Learning agenda is a holistic way of viewing professional development. However since the introduction of National Training Organisations (NTOs) in 1999, there has been a more focused approach to raising standards of professional practice. In higher education the Institute of Learning and Teaching (ILT) is the professional body, launched in 1999 to enhance the status of teaching, improve the experience of learning and support innovation. Its primary aim is to develop and maintain professional standards of practice (ILT, 2001).

Whilst the AUT has accused the ILT of being overly bureaucratic, initial membership take up has been slow and there are concerns that not enough has been done to tackle equal opportunity issues, NATFHE are encouraging members to join. Their view is that far more can be achieved from working with the ILT, by pressing issues from within, rather than from some kind of alternative accreditation organisation (NATFHE, 2001). The benefit of the ILT is that membership is voluntary. Individuals can therefore make their own professional judgement on whether or not to join.

Another method of professional development is staff appraisal, whereby an individual will discuss progress with a more experienced colleague and forward plan what they want to achieve within a certain time scale. Often this will be formalised and recorded in a written format, but kept confidential. The benefit is that the process should highlight areas of individual weakness and ways that these can be addressed.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted that there is a degree of status and prestige associated with belonging to the education profession. There are generic features associated with the term professional. In the context of sport and leisure, various professional bodies and organisations exist. The definitions and arguments presented show it is important to recognise that a professional must ‘practice what they preach’. There is a moral obligation to the client, the students. However the relationship is reciprocal and students must engage with the teacher in order to benefit fully from the service being provided. It is clear that the teaching profession incorporates institutional and societal values, whilst a professional will add personal values. This paper has also highlighted that quality and professionalism are inextricably linked. However, the realities of measuring and quantifying such standards are the subject of professional contention. Likewise it may be difficult for an individual to find the time and motivation to take responsibility for their own professional development.

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