

Introduction

Concepts, fads and trends seem to come and go as time progresses, with some words and ideals becoming fashionable for a period of time, and then losing popularity again. Yet the action and reasoning behind these phenomena doesn't really appear to change. For example, the concept of 'a professional' stems back centuries, where the original professions were regarded to be Doctors, Lawyers and the Clergy. While most would still consider Doctors and Lawyers to be professionals in present society, it would be interesting to see how many consider the Clergy in this light. The clergy is often cited as a 'vocation' or a 'calling', as are other so called recognised professions. The term 'profession' therefore needs deconstructing in order to conceptualise the notion of professional learning.

Learning is also a term which has risen in people's consciousness. Education used to be the privilege of the upper classes only, gradually seeping down to middle class males, before becoming a right for every child up to the age of 16. This may soon be extended to 18 in the UK according to current policy documents. Universities also used to be restricted to the top 5-10% of the population, but since the expansion of the University sector in Britain in 1992, the government aims for 50% of school-leavers to go on to achieve a degree.

Lifelong Learning has joined our vocabulary to raise people's awareness that they don't stop learning when they leave school, and various attempts have been made to formalise, recognise and accredit such learning that occurs during our working lives in particular. The vocational qualification framework, for example, looks to accredit prior learning and competence. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is a requirement of many jobs/professions. Work-Based Learning (WBL) has become recognised as a phenomena in the text books and academic journals, when essentially it includes what people have always been doing – learning by doing something themselves and/or watching others do it (sitting-by-Nellie) in order to develop some level of expertise.

'Professional Learning' as a concept lacks a clear definition. Most university websites have a page for 'professional and work-based learning' but the two are merged together and not clearly differentiated. Much has been written on work-based learning (see for example, Rainbird et al, 2004; Boud & Garrick, 1999; Boud & Solomon, 2001; Raelin, 2000 or Rowden, 1996) while there is less on professional learning, and what has been written is largely looking at examples of initiatives as good practice rather than the concept itself.

This paper therefore looks at the concept of Professional Learning with regard to how individuals are constructing the term with regard to their jobs and roles in society. Comparing these results with different schools of thought stemming from the literature with regard to the definition of professionals, a model is developed that delineates professional and work-based learning, to allow providers in the field to be more focussed and comprehensive in their offerings of professional and work-based learning.

Towards a Definition of a Professional

Stemming from a sociological tradition, Abbott (1988) questions the way in which groups control access to knowledge and occupations, viewing professions as a form of occupational control. He refers to the means by which a profession expands its jurisdictions, citing medicine moving into alcoholism, child hyperactivity and obesity as example, such that professionalisation is the result of a larger, external social process

leading to a sequence of functions from identification, to exclusion, the setting of boundaries of academic knowledge, and control of entry to whom that knowledge is available. Licensure to practice is then established. Lawrence (2004) also focuses his attention to group membership seeing the concept of membership as being the base of legitimate participation in a social arena. Membership in professional fields is demarcated by specialised knowledge safeguarded formally by universities and professional associations and informally by culturally entrenched understanding of the meaning of professional work. These rules then work to protect the incomes and social status of professionals through the exclusion of lay persons.

Clarke & Newman (1997) argue that the concept of a professional can be extended to managers, as managerial professionalism is accountable; it has rules and outcomes and it is still continuing to be written. They argue that the roots of professional trust and respect now need to be earned, rather than bestowed through qualifications and expertise, and this is achieved by measuring outcomes against performance indicators and objective external criteria.

Similarly Dent & Whitehead (2002) see a shift in how professionalism is measured from the perspective of morality and ethics shifting towards a regulatory perspective. They view the professional as someone who was traditionally trusted and respected; an individual who was given class, status, autonomy, and social elevation, in return for safeguarding our well-being, and they apply their professional judgement on the basis of a benign moral or cultural code. Now, however, they observe an audit-based measure of professionalism as agencies and organisations are being held to account by measuring profess and performance and enforcing a regulatory framework. On this basis, McKenna (2006) argues that it is time for the management consulting industry to professionalise as they embrace the pleasure of professional status - healthy pay, intellectually challenging work, respectful relationships with clients - but not the hassles of accreditation, a code of ethics, or professional liability. He cites the Enron/Anderson collapse, among other debacles, as being blamed on the consulting industry's lack of professional standards and executives' perception that their consultants and auditors would shield them from risk.

Flexner, as far back as (1915), focussed on the individual professional and identified six traits that distinguish professions from other occupations:

1. They involve essentially intellectual operations with large individual responsibility
2. They derive their raw material from science and learning
3. This material they work up to a practical and definite end
4. They possess an educationally communicable technique
5. They tend to self organise
6. They are becoming increasingly altruistic in motivation

Mintzberg sees the traits of professionals as making them somewhat difficult to lead or manage, resulting in leadership becoming somewhat covert (Mintzberg, 1998). He suggests the profession itself, not the manager, supplies much of the structure and coordination. Professional work consists of applying standard operating routines. Most professional workers require little direct supervision from managers - what they do require is protection and support.

Erout (2000) focuses his definition of professional around the ideological aspect of what professionalism should be about taking a more normative perspective. He argues that there are three central features of the ideology of professionalism: a specialist knowledge base, autonomy, and service. Focussing on the knowledge aspect he goes

on to identify two categories of knowledge needed for professional work: codified knowledge, public knowledge or propositional knowledge which is communicable, explicit and central to programmes of formal education and training that will eventually lead to a qualification; and personal knowledge which is highly situated and individualistic it is developed by a professional over a period of time and is more tacit and learned through the process of performing the professional role. Hence there is something about what the professional knows, and how the professional thinks or applies what they know. Eraut's focus encompasses the traits outlined by Flexner, but using more open language to allow for greater contribution and interpretation.

Quinn et al also see professionalism as stemming from a knowledge base. They suggest that the true professional commands a body of knowledge - a discipline that must be updated constantly. Cognitive knowledge (or know-what) is the basic mastery of a discipline that professionals achieve through extensive training and certification. Advanced skills (know-how) translate 'book learning' into effective execution. Systems understanding (know-why) is deep knowledge of the web of cause and effect relationships underlying a discipline and self-motivated creativity (care-why) consists of will, motivation, and adaptability for success (Quinn, Anderson, & Finkelstein, 1996).

While Eraut and Quinn focus on knowledge, Friedson (1986) focuses on the power relationships that professionals carve out within society, viewing professionals as the agents of formal knowledge. In questioning the difference between professionals and amateurs, Friedson reflects on how people in a society determine who is a professional and who is not; how they make or accomplish professions by their activities; and what the consequences are for the way in which they see themselves and perform their work. Kosmala & Herrbach (2006) also examined the way in which professionals behave in their workplace according to the expectations of their peers and other societal groups, and concluded that professionals are playing their role rather than being, such that differences can arise between the image professionals portray and who they really are.

Friedson also notes the change in the concept of professionalism over time, a theme he returns to in his later work (1994) which questions the extent to which there is a domination of professional power in Gramsci's idea of intellectual hegemony, or whether there is a steady decline of professional power that is described as deprofessionalisation, proletarianization, rationalization, bureaucratization, or corporatization. He views professions as having no intrinsic resources other than their command over a body of knowledge and skill that has not been appropriated by others. Hence the question of whether they are losing their position of prestige and trust in society, and in large organisations, are they losing their autonomy and control?

The moral legitimacy school of thought is presented by Koehn (1994) who argues that 'professional practices qualify as morally legitimate because, and to the extent that, they are structured to merit the trust of clients....Professions are not mere ideologies but inherently ethical practices.' He acknowledges that the term professional is sometimes applied indiscriminately to anyone who exhibits a high level of style, skill or even cunning, as skilled occupations (eg the trades) have tried to increase their prestige and status by calling themselves professions; and that membership of a profession does not exempt one from greed, lust etc, but concludes that the essence of a legitimate profession is a moral one, and hence any one professional will be more legitimate in themselves the more fully they embrace this essence.

Macdonald (1995) outlines the symbolic interactionist interpretation in terms of how individual's construct their careers and worlds as social participants, arguing that it is this that forms the basis of their professionalism. The professional principles of altruism, service and high ethical standards are therefore seen as aspects of the day-to-day world within which members live, work and strive, rather than abstract standards which

characterise a formal collectivity. He also presents an economic interpretation highlighting that professionalisation could be viewed as an attempt to translate one order of scarce resources (special knowledge and skills) into another (social and economic rewards). To maintain scarcity implies monopoly, of expertise and status in a system of stratification. Hence social mobility and market control are the outcomes of the professional project. Macdonald therefore argues that members of society, often working in pressure groups and occupational associations, are actively striving to change the system of stratification to their own advantage. In order to achieve a monopoly, or at least licensure, an occupation must have a special relation with the state. Although a profession may be granted or may secure for itself a monopoly, it must still compete in the market place against others who can provide similar or substitute services. It must therefore defend and probably enlarge its scope of activities.

This interaction with the state lends the concept of professionalism to a Marxist or radical interpretation also. Here the concern would be with the professional hegemony, and the professional classes determining who can and cannot receive licensure, thereby keeping the power bases amongst their own. Equally a legal interpretation would focus on the nature of a fiduciary duty, and the concept of professional negligence.

Moore (1970) claims that 'to have one's occupational status accepted as professional or to have one's occupational conduct judged as professional is highly regarded in all post-industrial societies and in at least the modernizing sectors of others.' He suggests wider professional responsibilities of preserving and enhancing the 'image'; respecting the public interest; respecting the duty to learn; and respecting the duty to perform. Moore doesn't view professionalism in terms of you having it or not, but rather views it as a sliding scale along which individuals can be placed.

While many of these interpretations are not mutually exclusive, they all offer their unique tone. The symbolic interactionist interpretation focuses on the individual's chosen career and how this enables them to participate in society. The Marxist/radical interpretation concentrates on the power the professional role gives an individual over others, and their 'place' in society. The economic interpretation views professionals as owners of a territory, where there is scarcity of their skill or knowledge. The moral legitimacy interpretation focuses on the elements of trust, responsibility and 'client' relationships. The sociological interpretation concentrates on the organisation of labour within the profession, including hierarchy and division of labour. The political interpretation views the bureaucratic elements of a profession, and the gate keeper role of professional institution. Finally, the legal interpretation stems from the law relating to professional negligence and the concept of fiduciary duty.

Methodology

In order to ascertain the nature of professional learning, a qualitative approach was adopted. Early investigations and discussions focussed the research question on 'what is a professional', as a Google search revealed over 150 registered 'professional bodies' some of which were 'chartered' and others which were not. The 'chartered' status is an official stamp and national recognition of the level of professionalism achieved by that particular professional body, and is awarded by the body meeting certain criteria over a period of time. Chartership was not taken as a selection criteria for defining the sample for this study as bodies such as the Chartered Management Institute and the Chartered Institute of Personnel Managers both have 'chartered' status, and yet the debate of whether or not managers are professionals is one which continues.

The sample for the study therefore was a range of 'professions' all of which have a professional body with which they register, and a university qualification which has to be achieved in order for them to qualify for registrations. For convenience purposes, the initial sample was selected as qualified, registered professionals who had returned to study at the researchers own university for CPD or other purposes. Five focus groups were held initially and were asked two questions. Firstly, did they or did they not consider themselves to be professionals? The answers to this question were not recorded, and indeed were not always articulated, as it was asked to focus the samples mind and generate the answers to the next question which was the key question for the research. The second question was 'if yes, why; and if not, why not?' The discussion around this question was recorded as this revealed the factors that the individuals were taking into account in their consideration of what a professional was, in particular with regard to themselves, their practice, and their job role.

The five focus groups were as follows:

1. Qualified Teachers (QT). This group was made up of teachers who had qualified within the last two years and thus were relatively new to the profession and had returned to university to study for a Masters qualification (n=20).
2. Experienced Teachers (ET). This group was a small group made up of teachers with a minimum of 5 years teaching experience who had middle management leadership roles in the profession and had returned to university to study for a Masters qualification (n=4).
3. Investment Managers (IM). This group were accounting graduates studying for their Investment Management Masters programme that includes their professional qualification that allows them to practice independently (n=15).
4. Senior Executives (SE). This group were experienced executives holding senior leadership positions in their organisations and studying for their DBA qualification (n=7).
5. Nurses (N). This group were in the final weeks of their nursing degree having returned to university after their placements and earlier studies (n=21).

The areas of discussion were recorded and then sorted into groups/constructs through a process of semantic content analysis using a card sort activity based on repertory grid methodology. The groupings forming the constructs were carried out for all five focus groups before the constructs were identified and labelled to ensure that the first focus group sorting did not bias the subsequent groupings.

The labelling of the constructs revealed that most of the focus groups had similar constructs, and indeed only one construct appeared once only. The occurrence of this repetition suggested to the researcher that it was not necessary to continue with more focus groups as there was unlikely to be any new, key construct occurring.

Results

A total of eight constructs were found within the five groups, all bar one occurring on more than one occasion, and one stemming from all five groups.

External Perceptions

All five focus groups discussed factors that fell within the construct labelled 'external perceptions'. As the label suggests, this construct represents the issues considered to impact on their sense of professionalism that are determined by how others perceive them. For example, factors mentioned within this construct are people's reactions; client

perceptions; expectations; image in the market; listing in drop-down boxes on e-forms; credibility; power/superiority; and being in control.

This construct suggests that a key determinant of professionalism is how others perceive you, their expectations and the basis on which they will evaluate you. Market image also occurred here, suggesting there is a role for the professional body in establishing the image of the profession as a whole.

External Controls

This construct was mentioned by four of the five focus groups (QT, ET, N and SE). Rather than being concerned with how other people view and consider them, this construct focuses on the role of the professional body or other legal bodies in controlling and impacting on their role and responsibilities. This construct reflects factors stemming from the ability to be struck-off the register; control of entry into the profession; having standards of practice or codes of conduct to adhere to; being licensed to do something; and having legal duties and indemnity cover.

This construct implies that the fact that there are boundaries imposed on what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour within their job role, and a minimum standard of performance and knowledge which needs to be both achieved initially and maintained throughout their careers, delineates professionals from other job roles.

Fundamentals

This construct was mentioned by three of the five focus groups (SE, IM and QT) and refers to the recognition of a knowledge base or base of experience required in order to be able to practice their job role. Included in this construct are experience of job content; experience of organisations; very sound knowledge base; employability; subject knowledge; training level; and experience.

This construct suggests that the sample consider there to be something about actually being able to do the job, having the skills and the experience that contributes to their sense of professionalism. It is more than simply being qualified to do the job – it is being able to do and having the experience to prove you can do it.

Role Definition

This construct was also mentioned by three of five focus groups (N, IM and QT) and focuses on the responsibility and accountability that are factors of the role they perform. The factors that contribute to this construct include the weight of responsibility; knowing their limitations; responsibility; contribution to company; having an impact; standing up and being counted; leadership; influence; and autonomy.

This construct refers to the sense of responsibility that professional's recognise within their role, and the fact that it is not as simple as doing the job they are paid to do and going home at the end of the day. Their responsibilities and accountability goes beyond that, as they recognise the wider implications and importance of their job roles.

Comparative Analysis

Two of the five focus groups (SE and ET) spent time discussing how their profession compared to others. Note that these were the two sample groups that were the more experienced members of the study. The factors they mentioned included, for example, being like a lawyer or doctor or nurse; questioning whether builders or hairdressers were

professionals; apprenticeships; white versus blue collar jobs; trades versus professions; and different classes of professionals.

The fact that it was the two more experienced sample groups that had these discussions is worthy of note. The less experienced groups were focussing on themselves, their job roles and the responsibilities that were placed upon them. Having come to live with that, the more experienced groups started to make comparisons with others, perhaps reflecting wider social discussions that they are aware of amongst their peer groups, family and friendships as their careers progress, or perhaps reflecting the increased capacity to focus outside of themselves as they become more masterly in their professional practice.

Organisational Issues

This construct was evident in two of the five focus groups (SE and QT) and refers to governance issues within the profession and status. For example, factors mentioned which fell within this construct were non-office hours; salaried and pensions; not administrative; 'damage' if you get it wrong; professional indemnity insurance; status; recognition; and governance.

This construct largely reflects the ethical issues around the profession and how they are rewarded and controlled. For example, the fact that hours are not measured but a salary is paid, and the responsibility lies with the individual if they get it wrong hence the requirement for professional indemnity insurance.

State of Mind

Building on the ethical perspective recognised in the organisational issues construct, this construct highlights the individuals personal reflections on how they should be thinking about their job roles, rather than how this is viewed organisationally. In this construct we find issues such as attitude; doing a good job; confidence; hopes, thoughts and inspirations. This construct was found within two of the five focus groups (IM and QT).

This construct emerged for two of the sample groups that were newest to their profession. While this is positive in that it reflects that newer professionals are considering the state of mind or attitude that they need to develop in their job role, but is also of concern in that those more experienced in their profession no longer feel it is worthy of mention. This could be an area that needs to be further addressed within continuous professional development (CPD) within the professions, as the knowledge and skills updating may be overshadowing the attitudinal development that may be required within some professions.

Qualification

This construct was only evident within the Experienced Teacher sample, but nevertheless is worthy of mention, as it reflects on the changing nature of the qualification into the profession. This group reflected that having a degree was not enough anymore, and reflected on the economic devaluation of their original professional training as more advanced qualifications became available. Hence their choices to return to study as a group of mature teachers to gain masters qualifications.

While the Senior Executive group did not voice the same concerns, the fact that they were included in the study by their choice to return to university to undertake their DBA suggests that they too may feel that the currency of their existing qualifications lack

economic value, or indeed may be thinking of shifting their careers in light of the new currency that their DBA's will give them.

Discussion

There appears to be three key elements to the field of professionalism that could be addressed through learning interventions. Firstly there is the subject knowledge that underpins the professional field, and is usually the subject of a University qualification. Secondly, there is something about the individual, their disposition, attitude and ethical base from which they make decisions within their professional field. Finally there is the point where these two meet, and you find the application of the professional knowledge within the workplace, which can be prepared for through simulation and case study type activities.

The field of professional learning can therefore be modelled along two axes: personal learning and subject learning. Each profession can then have its field of professional learning mapped according to the extent of travel along each axis, as illustrated in figure 1.

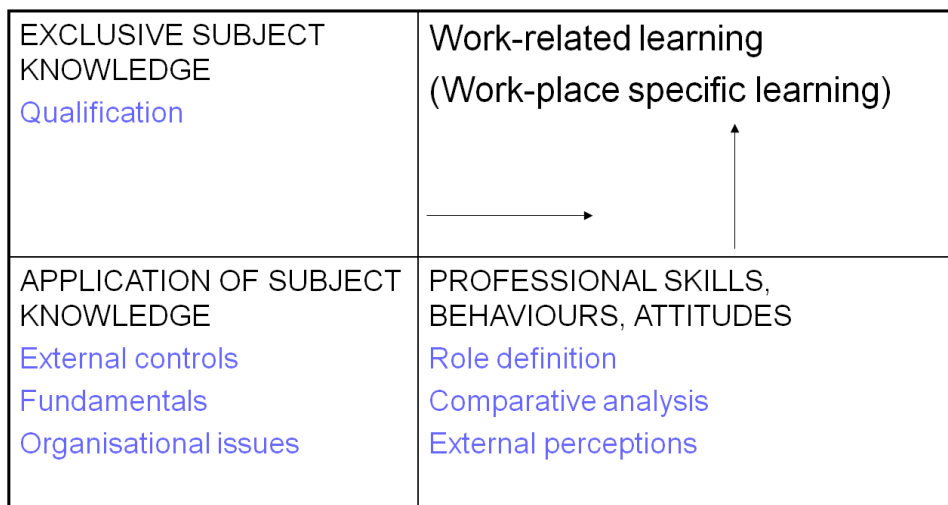


Figure 1: Mapping the field of Professional Learning: Constructs

The eight constructs that were derived from the focus groups fit within this model. The qualification element is the domain of the exclusive subject knowledge, as are some of the fundamentals. The fundamentals also relate to the application of the subject

knowledge, as do the organisational issues and the external controls. The professional skills, attitudes and behaviours are covered by the constructs role definition, state of mind, and external perceptions, and this is also where much of the comparative analysis is made. Curriculum that falls outside of these domains is arguably work-related learning, as it is still occurring in the workplace, could be highly personally relevant, but is not necessarily contributing to the individuals professional identity, role or being.

This model also relates back to the literature, as the various interpretations of the literature can be mapped both against the constructs and the model in figure 1. The construct of qualification, and to some extent fundamentals, is concerned with the mapping of the territory as a scarce resource, and its value in terms of maintaining scarcity and restriction of entry. This is congruent with the economic interpretation of a profession.

The external controls construct is concerned with codes of conduct and disciplinary action which is an element of the legal interpretation. The fundamentals is concerned with the knowledge base and experience which can be interpreted in terms of the political interpretation of knowledge being power. The organisational issues construct is akin to a sociological interpretation as it is concerned with the organisation within the profession, hierarchies, governance and status. The comparative analysis construct builds on this within the symbolic interactionist interpretation as it is concerned with image and comparisons within society. Role definition is concerned with the responsibility, accountability and leadership roles which can be interpreted from a Marxist or radical perspective in terms of the power they give the professional over others and how this is sustained. Finally the moral legitimacy interpretation covers the two constructs of state of mind in terms of attitudes and disposition, and external perceptions in terms of how others perceive the perception and their expectation of a relationship of trust. Figure 2 adds these various interpretations to the mapping in figure 1.

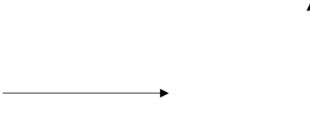
<p>EXCLUSIVE SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE</p> <p>Qualification</p> <p>Economic interpretation</p>	<p>Work-related learning (Work-place specific learning)</p> 
<p>APPLICATION OF SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE</p> <p>External controls</p> <p>Fundamentals</p> <p>Organisational issues</p> <p>Legal interpretation</p> <p>Political interpretation</p> <p>Sociological interpretation</p>	<p>PROFESSIONAL SKILLS, BEHAVIOURS, ATTITUDES</p> <p>Role definition, State of mind</p> <p>Comparative analysis</p> <p>External perceptions</p> <p>Moral legitimacy interpretation</p> <p>Marxist/radical interpretation</p> <p>Symbolic interactionist interpretation</p>

Figure 2: Mapping the field of Professional Learning: Literature and Constructs

To some extent, all professional learning is work-related, but not all work-related learning falls within the realms of professionalism. But does any of this matter? Arguably it does. Those elements which fall purely within the scope of work-related learning do not need to be addressed by professional bodies or any CPD requirements, while those that do clearly need to be addressed throughout the professional careers.

There is much evidence, particularly within the accounting profession following studies stemming from the Enron/Anderson demise (see for example, Anand et al, 2004; or Poneman & Gabhart, 1994), that suggest that the box that represents professional skills, behaviour and attitudes is liable to change throughout the professional's career, and yet it is little addressed within either the formal curriculum of the original professional qualification, or through CPD offerings. This is an area that needs further consideration both by curriculum designers and providers of CPD courses, as well as the professional bodies themselves.

Indeed, much of the field of professional learning is currently supported by the initial subject based qualification which offers the individual entry membership to their professional body. This is where the majority of University effort is focussed, and yet it is only a small part of the field as defined above. The years of articles that lawyers have to complete, or accountants or doctors go some way to addressing the application of subject knowledge, but again this is an area where there is room for further development.

Conclusions

Despite the growth in professional bodies, and the expansion in education provisions and concepts of learning in the workplace, the constructs underpinning the notion of professionalism have not changed particularly over time, although they have amalgamated to include more than a single interpretation. Mapping these interpretations and constructs gives a clear boundary to the field of professional learning, suggesting that while it is a large part of the wider domain of work-related learning, the two are not synonymous.

The implications for providers of professional learning are considerable, particularly for universities. Firstly, there is the opportunity for them to extend their provisions into a wider range of CPD courses that perhaps address domains that they have previously avoided. Secondly, universities are likely to find themselves facing increasing competition as more players enter the CPD market, particularly if they do not address the behavioural aspects of the professional domain. Thirdly, there are implications for the teaching, learning and assessment methods adopted in professional qualifications as the application of the subject knowledge is clearly of importance to the notion of professionalism. Finally, as the lines move up and down the axis of the model, we may find the professional bodies controlling how much of the curriculum falls within the field of professional learning, and how much they prefer to leave to the workplace. This may be a further area in which universities choose to expand their offerings – work-related learning.

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