On professions and being professional

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November 2007 (minor updating March 2009)

1 Introduction

This short paper explores the idea of 'profession' and associated matters such as professional entry routes and what it means to be a professional. It is a discussion piece / personal take on the subject rather than an academic paper, though I have included a few references here and there.

2 The idea of 'profession'

'Profession' derives from the Latin word 'profiteor,' to profess, which can also have the connotation of making a formal commitment in the sense of taking a monastic oath. This root might suggest that a professional is someone who claims to possess knowledge of something and has a commitment to a particular code or set of values, both of which are fairly well-accepted characteristics of professions.

A historic perspective on professions[i] will tend to group them into four or more types depending on the era when they began to professionalise. Generally these are the ancient professions (the priesthood, university teaching, law and physicianship); the mediaeval trade occupations (including surgery, dentistry and architecture); the industrial-era professions (typified by engineering); and various groups that emerged or professionalised in the twentieth century (from teachers to accountants and personnel managers). Reference-points are still needed in this type of study to decide what groups can be considered as 'professionalising.' As a footnote, a recent trend is for some old-established learned professions (such as scientists and curators) to re-professionalise according to more contemporary models.

A social construct perspective considers what kinds of occupations are generally construed to be 'professions.' Nathan Glaser's distinction between 'major' and 'minor' professions partly takes this approach, and it is also explicit in Peter Morrell's 'primary' and 'secondary' professions[ii]. It can produce slightly different results to other approaches to the study of professions (Glaser's 'major professions' include business management, and Morrell includes senior military officers, police chiefs, professors and judges in his list of primary professions), and it also depends to an extent on how the idea of 'profession' is presented. In my experience most people will include medicine and law in their list of obvious professions, then it depends on personal knowledge and experience: architects, engineers, vets, dentists, teachers, accountants are among those commonly mentioned. A list like Morrell's is more likely to result from asking for occupations that are regarded as having authority in their fields.

A static or trait perspective identifies characteristics that mark out occupations as professions. Classic examples are provided by Millerson[iii] and Schein[iv], while a more contemporary one is given by Belfall[v]. Belfall's list includes the presence of an assessment process for entry to the profession, a common body of knowledge, a code of ethics and a professional association. The difficulty with this approach is that it can be debated endlessly, it tends to be based on a few ideal types and therefore represents a particular view of profession, and it also tends to be a product of its time. Nevertheless a few characteristics do appear to be fairly general and stand the test of time: drawing on Hoyle & John, these include the possession and use of expert or specialist knowledge, the exercise of autonomous thought and judgement, and responsibility to clients and wider society through "voluntaristic commitment to a set of principles."[vi] These characteristics have the advantage of being independent of any particular model of occupational organisation.

Of the main sociological perspectives on professions, structuralist or functionalist approaches study the functions that professions perform in relation to society, so that for instance they can be seen as means of making expertise available to the public good, and professional ethics as offering safeguards against external pressures such as those of bureaucracy and the market;[vii] a summary of the functionalist argument is provided by Hoyle[viii]. Neo-Weberian approaches, such as the work of Larson[ix], focus on professionalisation as a market 'project' and its effect in creating market or employment rewards for those who achieve professional status. Marxist approaches focus more on professions in relation to power and class relationships within society[x], while interactionist approaches, typified by the Chicago school, are concerned with the interactions that occur within practice situations and the meanings that these have in terms of wider occupational or societal relationships[xi].

3 Professions, professional associations and professionals

These three concepts are often confused and characteristics overlapped, so it is worth looking at them separately.

A professional might be considered as a person who embodies the idea inherent in ‘profiteor,’ and following Hoyle & John, makes proficient use of expert or specialist knowledge, exercises autonomous thought and judgement, and makes a "voluntaristic commitment to a set of principles." Such a person need not be a member of an easily-defined profession or of a professional association; it is possible to work as a professional from a set of expertise and skills that is relatively unique to the individual. The concept of ‘extended professionalism,’ as well as my ‘Model B’ practice (see later), are both indicative of practitioners that while they may be affiliated to a recognised profession are able to practise from this independent perspective.

A profession might be considered as a reasonably definable occupation that meets a defensible set of criteria for being a profession, whether those are derived from a social construct, trait or sociological perspective. Arguments about whether or not occupations can be considered professions are highly perspective-dependent, so the perspective and criteria being used need to be stated. It may be stating the obvious, but it is not necessary for a profession to have a professional association or registration body either because sufficient identity and coherence is provided through employment, or because (particularly in rapidly-evolving areas) formal organisation has few benefits.

Professional associations exist in a wide range of types that include learned societies, fully self-regulating professional bodies, qualifying associations, bodies that principally fulfil the role of a trade union, and membership bodies independent of the organisation responsible for qualifying or registering practitioners.

4 Conceptions of profession

Over time a number of models of professionality have emerged, which I classify broadly as classical, trade, technical and reflective. These are not the only models available but they do appear to provide a useful set of reference-points.

The classical model emphasises the importance of professional education being founded on a broad base of learning and culture. It is the archetypal model for the ancient professions, and by the 19th century if not earlier became associated with a university education. In this model practical professional training and approval to practise tends to be defined tacitly by the community of practice. In this model there is an expectation that the professional practitioner will have a broad general education as well as specific expertise in the area of practice.

The trade model grew out of the mediaeval trade occupations and emphasises practical training and building expertise through experience. Approval to practise tends to be informal and based on timeserving, though often subject to strong tacit rules. An assumption of craftsmanship and honing skills, rather than an expectation of general learning, is often present in this model.

The technical(-rational) or technocratic model is a product of the Industrial Revolution and the growth of scientific thought. It emphasises rational solutions to problems, standardised training, formal control of entry-routes, and occupational demarcation and expertise. There is now generally an assumption of the need for formal updating.

The reflective or creative-interpretive model has emerged most strongly over the last thirty years. It emphasises learning through action and reflection, making judgements in uncertain contexts, and working with problematic situations rather than clearly-defined problems. It generally includes an assumption of ongoing learning linked to practice.

To generalise, there has been a tendency for newer models to become overlaid on earlier ones as perceptions of professional activity have changed. This has particularly been the case with the technical model in the 20th century, and many of the characteristics that professions are commonly held to display arise directly from a technical-rational view of profession. The ‘crisis of the professions’ of the late 20th century[xii] stems from challenges to the ideal of professional-as-expert and realisation that the technocratic view of professional knowledge is insufficient to meet many of the demands of practice. The reflective-interpretive model emerged partly as a response to this. It is particularly associated with the reflective practitioner philosophy of Donald Schön[xiii], although it also draws on critical action research[xiv] and action learning[xv] traditions. It is still a long way from displacing the technical perspective and some factors, such as increasing demands for accountability and regulation, appear to be favouring a technical-bureaucratic approach; this is apparent in both in the occupational standards movement of the 1990s and in recent positivistic interpretations of the idea of evidence-based practice. Nevertheless it is difficult to see how a technical-rational view of professional work can maintain its adequacy in the face of increasing societal complexity and environmental uncertainty. My own take on the two models, updated from a paper written in the early 1990s[xvi], is given at the end of this paper.

5 Professional work: delivery or realisation?

The idea of ‘delivery systems’ and ‘realisation systems’ harks back to the 1960s, but it is still relevant to the way that professions are developing in the twenty-first century. A ‘delivery system’ is one in which a professional assesses a situation and delivers a solution based on his or her expertise. The client/s, public or what we would now call stakeholders have little part in deciding the shape of the solution. This kind of approach is perhaps typified by the traditional medical model of diagnosis and prescription. A ‘realisation system’ on the other hand involves the professional working with the client or stakeholders in a more collaborative way to produce outcomes that are owned by the latter. While it will still involve the use of expertise, it is closer in principle to the work of a counsellor or facilitator.

Sheldon Schiff[xvii] postulated a general movement from delivery systems to realisation systems, with consequent changes being needed in the way that professionals are prepared for practice. It also fits with the movement from a technocratic to a reflective-interpretive mode. While this has happened to some extent, it has been overshadowed in some fields by what I have called a move to a modified delivery system, based on a more contractual relationship in which the consumer (or the regulator acting on their behalf) has increased power and the professional becomes a ‘deliverer’ of services. This can be appropriate for standardised and easily-defined services, but it works against excellence, creativity and genuinely appropriate solutions where there is any complexity involved. The following diagram is taken from a critique of the modified delivery system in the context of higher education.[xviii]

Table: From delivery to realisation

model:	**Delivery** (expert)	**Delivery** (consumer)	**Realisation**
basis:	trust	contractual	partnership
relationship:	expert - layperson	producer - consumer	collegial
power:	provider	producer, consumer, regulator	shared
nature:	service provided in interests of client	service provided to meet consumer needs	shared endeavour
emphasis:	expertise, judgement	quality, standards, specifications	solutions, ways forward

6 Entry and accreditation

Patterns of initial professional development have evolved in ways that reflect, to some extent, both the historic evolution of professions and the different conceptions of profession outlined in section 4. A broad categorisation is given by Hazel Bines[xix] as apprenticeship or pre-technocratic, technocratic, and post-technocratic. Strictly speaking this ignores the classical university model, although there is little evidence of this surviving into the 21st century outside of the priesthood. These approaches broadly reflect the trade, technical-rational and reflective / creative paradigms discussed in section 4, with the technocratic approach having been dominant since the middle of the 20th century. Briefly, it tends to be characterised by a view that professionals need to be inculcated with a body of scientific or academic knowledge from which applied knowledge is developed and then applied to practice. A typical technocratic development route consists of a university degree, possibly a post-degree professional course, and a period of supervised practice. This is a sequential development route; a less common (although currently reviving) alternative is the parallel route, where on-job training runs alongside a day- or block-release or similar course. In practice there are is a broad range of variations on these basic models with different professions evolving different routes, increasingly with a range of routes in the same profession.

The post-technocratic approach is ideally reflected by an integrated route, where practice and theory are developed alongside each other either in the workplace or in a 'practicum' that mirrors the workplace[xx]. An integrated approach implies more than the parallel model, as the workplace or practicum is used as a source of knowledge rather than just a place where it is applied; nor is it an apprenticeship, as it requires development of academically sound theory through reflection on both practice and documentary sources. Training routes for nurses, some other health professionals, and teachers (through school-based routes) show some of the characteristics of an integrated development route, and in a few other professions there is either a minority route that follows this pattern at least partially, or where individuals can build this kind of route by combining suitable work with a work-based (rather than conventional part-time) university programme.[xxi]

A more noticeable impact of the post-technocratic perspective is that attention is increasingly being given to the period of experience between finishing the academic course and being signed off as ready to practise independently. Other trends include:

- from 'exams' that are passed or failed *en bloc* to 'modules' that can be accumulated and carried forward (including sometimes into another profession's training route or to a degree)
- a greater variety of assessment methods
- multiple entry-routes rather than a single type of approved degree or course
- multiple modes for courses - full-time, part-time, distance as appropriate
- recognition of previous learning - including, increasingly, experiential learning.

There is a growing trend towards more formal processes for final sign-off for accreditation or registration, as opposed to requiring (for instance) achievement of a course component plus a period of experience. This is typically by continuous assessment (e.g. by a mentor or supervisor), through an end-process (e.g. project / portfolio, interview or work-based assessment), or using a combination of the two. Linked to this there has been a trend towards using practice-based standards, competencies or development objectives for guidance and as a basis for assessment, and in some cases these have been used slightly more contentiously to influence off-job development. In a few professions including civil engineering, heritage conservation and landscape architecture increasing confidence in standards of this type has enabled the profession to dispense with the requirement for a set period of work-based training in favour of simply meeting the accreditation criteria.[xxii]

7 Continuing professional development

'CPD' as a formal process or requirement started to appear from the 1960s onwards, reflecting recognition that initial learning needs to be updated to maintain effectiveness.[xxiii] Professional associations' approaches to CPD were initially strongly influenced by the technocratic paradigm and typically focused on meeting requirements through approved courses or through a minimum number of hours or points spent on approved activities. More recently there has been a tendency to move away from input measures towards a more flexible 'learning cycle' approach where practitioners need to identify their development needs, act to meet them, and reflect on the results. This has proved more relevant and in keeping with the dynamic of work in most professions, but it can still have drawbacks particularly in undervaluing more serendipitous and just-in-time learning, and (where CPD reviews are required for audit by professional bodies) creating a burden of recording and reviewing. One of the main problems with formal CPD schemes is that they may do little to move forward the ‘laggards’ who are falling behind with their practice, while failing to provide anything stimulating for practitioners who are closer to the leading edge.[xxiv]

Research on real-life ongoing development[xxv] suggests that the most effective practitioners combine general updating, specific learning for particular activities and projects, and where appropriate more developmental learning that links to career objectives or the development of extended professionalism. The use of approaches such as reflective practice, action research or other forms of practitioner research, and action learning tend to feature in this kind of development as much as do more formally quantifiable activities, and incidental, just-in-time and project-driven learning tend to be regarded as more critical than planned activities. Rather than viewing CPD as updating and maintaining competence, a ‘Model B’ or creative-interpretive approach to ongoing development might see it as evolving a progressive envelope of capability that partly follows and partly directs the practitioner’s evolving envelope of practice.

8 A note: an Anglophone bias

The discussion above tends to assume an Anglophone model of profession, that can broadly be summed up as assuming a free-market self-regulated context where the profession is defined by expertise, autonomy and ethics. While most of the arguments are independent of national boundaries and to some extent cultures, the way professions are organised and defined can be subtly different. To provide some examples from continental Europe, in France and Italy the idea of a professional can be more one of an elite office-holder defined by academic qualification and state registration[xxvi]; particularly in France there is little tradition of autonomous professional associations, these having been viewed in the past with some suspicion as being anti-egalitarian. In Germany, despite a tradition of well-defined training routes and career paths, there is no concept equivalent to the English 'professional': in different circumstances the concepts of *freie Berufe* (liberal or self-employed occupations), *akademische Berufe* (academic occupations), or *Bürgertum* (burghers, with its connotation of middle-class citizens) have some parallels with the idea of profession.[xxvii]

Patterns of professional education and licensing can therefore be significantly different, typically with more emphasis in mainland Europe on academic development and certification (often with a greater emphasis on work experience within the degree), but less on practice-based development and the separate accreditation process that is common in the UK and Ireland. Where traditions and standards vary significantly at the point of registration or award of the licence to practice, this can lead to difficulties in developing appropriate standards for mutual recognition.

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Appendix: two paradigms of professions and professionality

	Model A	**Model B**
character	technical, logical; problemsolving	creative, interpretive; design
capability	solvable, convergent problems	congruent futures; 'messes,' problematic situations, divergent / ‘wicked’ problems
approach	solving problems; applying knowledge competently and rationally	understanding problematic situations and resolving conflicts of value; framing and creating desired outcomes
criteria	logic, efficiency, planned outcomes; cause-effect, proof	values, ethics, congruence of both methods and outcomes; systemic interrelationships, theory, faith
epistemology	objectivism: knowledge is stable and general; precedes and guides action (pure science, applied science, practice)	constructivism: knowledge is transient, situational and personal; both informs action and is generated by it (cyclic / spiral relationship between theory and practice)
validation	by reference to others' expectations: standards, accepted wisdom, established discourse; 'truth'	by questioning fitness for purpose, fitness of purpose and systemic validity; 'value'
thinking	primarily deductive / analytical; sceptical of intuition	inductive, deductive and abductive; uses 'intelligent intuition'
profession	a bounded, externally-defined role, characterised by norms, values and a knowledge-base common to the profession	a portfolio of learningful activity individual to the practitioner, integrated by personal identity, perspectives, values and capability
professionalism	objectivity, rules, codes of practice	exploration of own and others' values, personal ethics, mutual enquiry, shared expectations
professional standards	defined by the employer, professional body or other agency according to its norms and values	negotiated by the participants and other stakeholders in the practice situation in accordance with their values, beliefs and desired outcomes
professional development	initial development concerned with acquiring knowledge, developing competence and enculturation into the profession's value system; continuing development concerned with maintaining competence and updating knowledge	ongoing learning and practice through reflective practice, critical enquiry and creative synthesis and action; continual questioning and refinement of personal knowledge, understanding, practice, values and beliefs

Acknowledgements to Schön (1983) and Fish (1995).[xxviii]

‘Model A’ and ‘Model B’ were first put forward in an article written in the early 1990s[xxix]. The two paradigms are not mutually exclusive; I prefer to read Model B as embracing and including Model A, so that a Model B practitioner has the flexibility to work in ‘pure’ Model B mode when needed but can also adopt a more technical style of working where appropriate.

Notes and references

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[i] Larson (see ix. below) provides a good historic summary.

[ii] Peter Morrell, *Some notes on the sociology of the professions* www.homeoint.org/morrell/misc/professions.htm (accessed November 2007)

[iii] Geoffrey Millerson, *The qualifying associations: a study in professionalization,* Routledge & Kegan Paul (London, 1964)

[iv] Edgar H. Schein, *Professional Education: Some New Directions* McGraw-Hill (New York, 1970)

[v] D. Belfall *Creating value for members*, Canadian Society for Association Executives (Toronto 1999)

[vi] Eric Hoyle & Peter D. John, *Professional Knowledge and Professional Practice* Cassell (London 1995)

[vii] The classic text is Talcott Parsons*, Essays in sociological theory,* Free Press (Glencoe, 1954); see also Millerson (above).

[viii] Eric Hoyle, 'Professionalization and deprofessionalization in education' in E. Hoyle & J. Megarry (eds), *The professional development of teachers: world yearbook of education 1980,* Kogan Page (London, 1980), p 45

[ix] Magali S. Larson, *The rise of professionalism: a sociological analysis*, University of California Press (Berkeley CA, 1977)

[x] e.g. Terence J. Johnson, *Professions and Power,* Macmillan (London, 1972)

[xi] e.g. Elliot Friedson*, Professional dominance,* Aldine (Chicago, 1983)

[xii] Donald A. Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, Jossey-Bass (San Francisco 1987); John D Turner & James Rushton, *Education for the Professions*, Manchester University Press (1976)

[xiii] Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: how professionals think in action*, Basic Books (New York, 1983); and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* as above

[xiv] W. Carr & S. Kemmis, Becoming Critical: education, knowledge and action research Falmer Press (Lewes 1986)

[xv] Reginald W. Revans, *Action Learning: new techniques for management* Blond & Briggs (London 1980)

[xvi] Stan Lester, 'Beyond knowledge and competence: towards a framework for professional education,' *Capability* vol 1 no 3, pp 44-52 (1995)

[xvii] Sheldon K. Schiff, 'Training the Professional' in *University of Chicago Magazine* vol 42 no 4, pp 8-14 (1970)

[xviii] Stan Lester, 'Negotiated work-based learning: from delivery systems to realisation systems' in C Costley & J Hawkes, *Models and implementations of work-based learning*, Universities Association for Continuing Education (Middlesex University 2002)

[xix] Hazel Bines, 'Issues in course design' in H Bines & D Watson *Developing professional education* Society for Research in Higher Education / Open University Press (Buckingham, 1992)

[xx] See for instance Bines and Schön, references as above.

[xxi] See S. Lester & C. Costley, 'Work-based learning at higher education level: value, practice and critique,' written 2008: publication pending (available at www.sld.demon.co.uk/slccwbl.pdf)

[xxii] This section draws on Stan Lester *Routes and requirements for becoming professionally qualified* Professional Associations Research Network (Bristol, 2008)

[xxiii] Cyril O. Houle, *Continuing learning in the professions* Jossey-Bass (London, 1980)

[xxiv] 'Laggards, middle majority, pacesetters and innovators' comes from EM Rogers & F F Schumacher, *Communicating Innovation* Free Press (New York, 1971)

[xxv] Jane Gear, A. McIntosh & G. Squires, *Informal learning in the professions* University of Hull (1994); Stan Lester, 'Professional qualifications and continuing development: a practitioner perspective,' *Capability* vol 1 no 4, pp 16-22 (1995); Michael Eraut & W. Hirsh, *The significance of workplace learning for individuals, groups and organisations* SKOPE (University of Oxford, 2007).

[xxvi] A good source on professions in a European context is R. Collins, “Changing conceptions in the sociology of the professions” in R. Torstendahl & M. Burrage *The formation of professions: knowledge, state and strategy* Sage (London, 1990)

[xxvii] Jürgen Kocka, ''Bürgertum' and professionals in the nineteenth century: two alternative approaches', in M. Burrage & R. Torstendahl, *Professions in theory and history: rethinking the study of the professions* Sage (London, 1990)

[xxviii] Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner,* see above; Della Fish, *Quality Mentoring for Student Teachers: a principled approach to practice* David Fulton (London, 1995)

[xxix] S. Lester, ‘Beyond knowledge and competence,’ see xvi. above.

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