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Learning Professional Ways of Being: Ambiguities of becoming

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Abstract

The purpose of professional education programs is to prepare aspiring professionals for the challenges of practice within a particular profession. These programs typically seek to ensure the acquisition of necessary knowledge and skills, as well as providing opportunities for their application. While not denying the importance of knowledge and skills, this paper reconfigures professional education as a process of becoming. Learning to become a professional involves not only what we know and can do, but also who we are (becoming). It involves integration of knowing, acting, and being in the form of professional ways of being that unfold over time. When a professional education program focuses on the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills, it falls short of facilitating their integration into professional ways of being. In addition, through such a focus on epistemology (or theory of knowing), ontology (or theory of being) is overlooked. This paper explores what it means to develop professional ways of being where the focus is becoming, not simply knowing as an end in itself.

Keywords: professional education, ontology, professional ways of being, becoming

Entry to the professions requires a transition period in which aspiring professionals are prepared for the challenges of practice in their chosen profession. Professional education programs offered by higher education institutions are often charged with this task of preparation for professional practice. These programs typically focus on developing specific knowledge and skills to be applied in practice contexts within and beyond the educational program. How can a nurse graduate without knowing about treatment of wounds, it might be argued; or an architect without knowing how to locate a building on a designated site? Those professions that require registration in order to practise tend to direct focus still more strongly to knowledge and skills that must be acquired during professional education.

While knowledge and skills are necessary, they are insufficient for skilful practice and for transformation of the self that is integral to achieving such practice. When we concentrate our attention on epistemology—or what students know and can do—we fail to facilitate and support such transformation. A focus on epistemology occurs at the expense of ontological considerations relating to who students are becoming. We expect professional education programs to lead to transformations associated with this process of becoming, for example, from student to engineer, historian, or medical practitioner. However, these transformations and, more specifically, processes of becoming, often go unacknowledged in theorising and practice relating to higher education programs. More recently, theorising about such programs has begun to take into account this ontological dimension (e.g., Barnacle, 2005; Barnett, 1997, 2004, 2005; Dall'Alba, 2004, forthcoming; Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2005, 2007; Thomson, 2001). The purpose of professional education programs can then be conceptualised in terms of developing ways of being the professionals in question, rather than simply as a source of knowledge and skills acquisition.

In extending previous research, this paper explores what it means to develop 'professional ways of being' (Dall'Alba, 2004), where the focus is becoming the professionals in question,

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not simply knowing as an end in itself. The paper begins by foregrounding ontological dimensions of education, drawing upon ideas from Martin Heidegger. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of ambiguity in our relation to the world is then used as a way of elaborating what ontological education means for learning professional ways of being. Against the background of these analyses, professional education is reconfigured as a process of becoming.

Education as Transforming Ways of Being

Re-thinking ontology, including the being of human and non-human beings, is a recurring theme in Heidegger's magnum opus, *Being and Time,* as well as in many of his later works. Heidegger considered it necessary to clarify what it means to be human if we are more fully to comprehend thinking and knowing as modes of being human. He regarded modes of knowing, such as architecture, biology, history and so on, as ways of being human (1962/1927, p. 33, § 13; p. 408, § 357; see also pp. 88-90 § 61-62). This means that if we are fully to understand knowing within various forms of professional practice, we must understand the being of those who know.

Central to Heidegger's ontology is his concept of 'being-in-the-world', which emphasises that we are always already embedded in, and entwined with, our world, not simply contained within it. As Heidegger points out, we typically are absorbed in a range of activities and projects with others that involve the use of tools or equipment and production of artefacts. We generally carry out these activities and projects in a mode of 'average everydayness'. That is, we are usually absorbed in, and take for granted, the routine and everyday, so we generally do not place them under scrutiny. Operating in a mode of average everydayness enables us to complete our tasks and activities.

As we go about our activities and projects, we take up possibilities that are open to us. For example, we may seek out opportunities to interact with particular people or take action that sets us on a new career path. For Heidegger, being human means having possibilities, or possible ways to be (1962/1927, p. 40, § 42). We also understand ourselves in terms of possibilities (p. 185, § 145). This directedness to possibilities means we are continually in a process of becoming; more specifically, we are already (oriented to) what we are "not yet" (p. 185-186, § 145). For example, if we make a commitment to become a teacher, musician, or economist, what we seek to know, how we act, and who we are is directed by and to this commitment, which organises and constitutes our becoming.

In describing this process of becoming, Iain Thomson points to a distinction made by Heidegger (1962/1927, p. 185-186 § 145) between "being-possible" and "ability-to-be":

> As Blattner nicely puts it, "there are two functions here: opening up the range of possibilities, and pressing ahead into one of them." We become what we are "not yet," then, by pressing ahead into (or projecting ourselves upon) our projects (Thomson, 2004, p. 450).

Through taking up some possibilities and not others, we contribute to forming our present and future, with the anticipation and anxiety that this entails. Given we are entwined with our world, the possibilities open to us are not limitless, as discussed below.

Not only do human beings have a range of possible ways to be, but also our being is an issue for us; it matters to us who we are and who we are becoming. We are "a being who takes a stand on its being and is defined by that stand" (Thomson, 2004, p. 453). The stands we take have particular significance in that:

> the very way reality shows up for us is filtered through and circumscribed by the stands we take on ourselves, the embodied life-projects which organize our practical activities and so shape the intelligibility of our worlds (p. 444).

In potentially forming and shaping the stands we take, education can have a key part to play in who we are becoming: in what we come to know, how we act, and who we are.

Heidegger highlights and offers insights into ontological dimensions of education in the context of his broader project of re-thinking ontology. He argues for an ontological turn as a way forward for higher education (Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2005, 2007; Thomson, 2001). Indeed, Thomson argues that re-thinking education on ontological grounds is an enduring theme for Heidegger, although he points out it is largely unacknowledged in the research literature about Heidegger's work. Thomson notes that "a radical re-thinking of education—in a word, an ontologization of education—forms one of the deep thematic undercurrents of Heidegger's work, early as well as late" (2004, p. 439). For Thomson, these ideas permeate *Being and Time* with a "quiet presence" likely to be noted only by those already familiar with Heidegger's philosophy of education (p. 440). Michael Bonnett (2002), too, argues Heidegger puts forward powerful ideas for education in both his early and later work. Bonnett illustrates, for example, how Heideggerian notions of teaching and learning call into question an instrumental view of education that has relevance for our times. (See also Dall'Alba, 2005; Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2005, 2007 for similar arguments in relation to higher education.)

A central purpose of education, according to Heidegger, is transformation of the self. Drawing on Plato, he calls into question education that is concerned with "merely pouring knowledge into the unprepared soul as if it were some container held out empty and waiting. On the contrary real education lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety" (Heidegger, 1998/1967, p. 167).[i] This transformation of the self can be achieved by interrogating what we take for granted about our world and ourselves; by challenging assumptions we make about them and have historically made. In other words, again drawing on Plato, transformation of the self involves "turning around the whole human being. It means removing human beings from the region where they first encounter things and transferring and accustoming them to another realm where beings appear" (1998/1967, p. 167).[ii] According to Thomson, the purpose is "to bring us full circle back to ourselves, first by turning us away from the world in which we are most immediately immersed, then by turning us back to this world in a more reflexive way" (2001, p. 254). When the familiar or everyday appears in a new light, the way is open for other possibilities, other ways of being. Becoming a teacher, physiotherapist or lawyer, then, involves 'turning around' or transforming the self. Through interrogating and re-shaping assumptions about what it means to teach, provide physiotherapy or apply the rule of law, new ways of being are opened to aspiring professionals and can begin to take shape. It is not only a question of epistemology but, more particularly, of ontology.

When aspiring professionals seek to enter a profession, the practices they learn to embody have their own routines, histories and traditions. Learning to engage with these to the extent they are manifest in the present and relevant for the future is a necessary part of learning professional ways of being. Transformation of the self in becoming a professional is, then, not a wholly individual or isolated enterprise. As Heidegger points out, in our everyday practices we are entwined with our world and we interpret ourselves in terms of the reflected light of that world, but we are also entwined in traditions that tend to cover over what is being passed on down the generations (1962/1927, p. 42-43 § 21). In other words, the traditions of which we are a part tend to be taken for granted and are not transparent to us: the fish is the last to discover water. Becoming a professional, then, involves transformation of the self through embodying the routines and traditions of the profession in question, although this is not straightforward, as discussed below.

Our Ambiguous Relation to Our World[iii]

While Heidegger situates his arguments about the need to ontologise higher education within the context of our entwinement with our world, Merleau-Ponty points to the body as the medium for this embeddedness in, and engagement with, our world:

> The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be intervolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them…. I am conscious of my body *via* the world … [and] I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body. (1962/1945, p. 82)

Here Merleau-Ponty refers not merely to the physical body as a set of interconnected organs, but the body *as lived*. This 'lived body' is a site and source of ambiguity:

> When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of 'touching' and 'being touched'. (p. 93)

Expressed differently, "I apprehend my body as a subject-object, as capable of 'seeing' and 'suffering'" (p. 95).

Merleau-Ponty provides insight into our ambiguous relation to our world when he argues that "ambiguity is of the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has always several meanings" (p. 169). This ambiguity opens up possible ways to know, to act and to be that interrelate with the stands we take on our being. For example, a teacher may feel irritation at the lack of engagement of 'problem' students and/or wonder about the relation between their lack of engagement and the teaching they experience. Such ambiguity provides openings for re-thinking our taken-for-granted assumptions, for example, about what it means to teach and to be a committed teacher. In highlighting ambiguity in our relation to our world, Merleau-Ponty resists a common tendency to isolate and categorise, instead demonstrating that our categories and entities spill over into one another. Exploring implications of this ambiguous relation to our world for professional education can enable us to better grasp what it means to learn professional ways of being.

Ambiguity of Becoming

Several features of learning to become professionals are outlined in this section as we explore the ambiguity that is integral to our professional lifeworld. These features are principally explored in relation to the period of transition from aspiring to practising professionals, although they also have relevance for continuing to learn as professionals. The features include: *continuity* over time *with change* in ways of being professionals; *possibilities* in the ways we can be *with constraints* on those possibilities; *openness* in taking up possibilities *with resistance* to doing so; and *individuals* who are becoming professionals *with others* involved in that process. Attending to, and dwelling with, these ambiguities—while recognising them as ambiguities, not simply conflicts to be resolved—can open possibilities for enriching professional education programs and making these programs more meaningful for those who are learning ways of being that relate to particular professions.

Continuity with Change

Both continuity and change occur through the passage of time as part of our everyday life. Our world today is both the world it was yesterday and a changed world. In some sense, we

are the persons we were yesterday and will be tomorrow, but also not the same. For Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, temporality—or historicity—is not only inevitable but also central to being human. Both these scholars resist the everyday conception that we are contained in time as it flows around us, perhaps carrying us along: "I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1945, p. 140).

According to Heidegger, we are our past. The past not only "pushes along 'behind'", but is also our way of being in the present, which anticipates and creates the future (1962/1927, p. 17 § 20). The past does not determine the present or future, but it opens possible ways of being. The past, present and future do not form a linear trajectory, then, but the past opens a range of possibilities that can be taken up in the present, while directing us away from other possibilities. At the same time, the past becomes a resource in the present and for the future. Elizabeth Grosz considers temporality in a way that is reminiscent of Heidegger when she points out the past is never fixed nor determines the present and future, but inheres in them:

> Life is a becoming beyond what it is because the past, not fixed in itself, never fixes or determines the present and future but underlies them, inheres in them, makes them rich in resources, and forces them to differ from themselves. (Grosz, 2004, p. 255)

This folding of past into present, into future ensures continuity with change in our lives, while opening up a range of possible development trajectories. Even aspiring professionals who may have no prior experience of being an archaeologist, journalist or dentist bring with them some notion of what these professions entail that, initially at least, underpins their becoming. However, when these aspiring professionals gain entry to their chosen profession, they have undergone substantial change, not least in their ways of being professionals. This process of change with continuity continues throughout our professional lives; it is integral to both being professionals and continuing to learn as professionals (Webster-Wright, 2006), as well as integral to being human and continuing to learn, more generally. There is ambiguity, then, in who we are (becoming) as professionals through this enfolding of continuity with change.

For instance, aspiring teachers embarking on their studies in teacher education continue to be the persons they are in some respects, within the context of a world that continues to operate largely as before. At the same time, these teacher trainees undergo change in their capacity to teach and in their understanding of what teaching involves. As they learn to become teachers, both epistemology and ontology are involved. The teacher trainees continue to be who they are and to be recognisable to those who know them, while also being transformed.

Grosz, who draws upon Merleau-Ponty's concept of the lived body in some of her work (e.g., Grosz, 1994), describes this temporal ambiguity as doubling; allowing past, present and future to form a continuity:

> The present not only acts, it also consolidates, the past; it doubles itself as both present and past, actual and virtual. And it is only this doubling that enables it to resonate with the resources, the virtual, that the past endows to it and to the future" (Grosz, 2004, p. 251).

Inherent in this continuity are the conditions for change in the future:

> The present acts, is active, makes. But what it makes is never self-identical, stable, given as such to the next moment. What it acts or makes is the condition of the transformative effects of the future. (p. 251)

For example, as trainee teachers learn to teach, their positive and negative experiences of being students in classrooms over several years can serve as a resource for their teaching. Threads carried forward from the past can serve as resources in the present, as well as providing openings for change that continues into the future. They may afford opportunities for interrogating and transforming understanding of teaching when teaching does not lead to the desired outcomes or students do not respond as expected. Temporality ensures, then, some degree of sameness or continuity, while opening up for other ways of being: "inherence of the past in the present, for the capacity to become other" (Grosz, 2004, p. 252).

Possibilities with Constraints

The interweaving of continuity with change ensures some routines and regularities—including those permeated by domination or, conversely, by mutual respect—while at the same time there are openings for other possibilities; things could be otherwise. These possibilities are not limitless, however. Our possible ways of acting and of being are constrained by the specific situations we inhabit with their history and traditions. Familiar routines and ready-made solutions cover over the range of possibilities open to us in any situation as we go about our activities in a mode of average everydayness, which tends to be the path of least resistance. Our own past that we carry forward also places limits on the possibilities open to us. Heidegger points out that we "grow into" a familiar way of interpreting ourselves that is reflected from our world. He argues that we understand ourselves in terms of this interpretation, which opens possibilities for being as well as constraining those possibilities (1962/1927, pp. 17-18 § 20).

For example, some teacher trainees may strive to engage their students in learning that is challenging and transformative. The efforts they make to achieve this are afforded opportunities, as well as constrained, by their understanding of themselves as teachers in interrelation with traditions of practice relating to teaching. Certain practices, such as involving students in assessing the work of their peers, may be considered acceptable by students and colleagues, while other practices, such as allowing students to determine their own course of study, may be regarded as inappropriate or negligent by some, while exciting or innovative by others. So, traditions of practice for teaching simultaneously open possibilities and constrain. These traditions interrelate with other changes in society, so that teacher trainees and/or experienced teachers may begin to challenge and transform the notion of what it means to teach through their practice.

Opening of possibilities and associated constraints also play out through the aspirations of those who seek to become professionals, although these aspirations may change over time. Doret de Ruyter and Jim Conroy (2002) point to the importance of 'ideal identity', or aspirations about what the person in question wants to be, for formation of a sense of self. They argue that these aspirations contribute to the formation of a sense of self "as a result of: (a) clarifying what kind of person the individual wishes to be; and (b) an interrogation of how she sets about achieving her ideal identity, intimating what kind of person she is at a particular moment by virtue of the way in which she strives to achieve her ideal" (p. 509). Studies of workplace learning (e.g., Webster-Wright, 2006) demonstrate that failure to achieve an unrealistic ideal (perpetuated by organisations, professional associations and/or professionals themselves) can result in feelings of impostership; of never being good enough or as accomplished as others.

The ambiguity associated with possibilities and constraints does not operate in a neutral manner. Practice traditions and social structures constrain opportunities for some, while opening them to others. For instance, in Australian schools until around the 1960s (with exact dates varying from one part of the country to another) female teachers were forced to resign from permanent positions if they married, making teaching positions and promotions

available to male teachers and female teachers who had never married. Bronwyn Davies (2003, 2005) describes constraints on contemporary university teachers arising from a neoliberal agenda, which she argues curtails creative or intellectual work. In short, power relations permeate professional practice and efforts to become professionals.

Openness with Resistance

In a context where power relations play out in concert with self-interpretation, we demonstrate openness to possibilities and opportunities that are presented to us, as well as resistance. Drawing upon Heidegger's work, Glenn Gray points out "there is always a struggle to advance a new way of seeing things because customary ways and preconceptions about it stand in the way" (1968, p. xxi). At the same time, we demonstrate openness to possibilities in relation to, and sometimes by means of, these customary ways and preconceptions. This "struggle" or interplay between openness and resistance can apply to any aspect of our relation to our world; it relates to individuals and professions as a whole.

While aspiring professionals often demonstrate some openness to learning new ways of knowing and acting, sustaining such changes so that they become incorporated into customary ways of being can be challenging. Interplay between openness and resistance not only challenges our knowing or actions, but also who we are and understand ourselves to be. For instance, innovative ideas brought by trainee teachers sometimes challenge pre-conceptions about teaching among experienced teachers, or vice versa. Challenges of this kind can occur for individuals, as well as flowing over to the profession as a whole. Addressing or resolving such tensions involves questioning assumptions, not only about what teaching involves, but also about what it means to be a teacher. Once again, not only epistemology but also ontology is at stake.

Interplay of openness with resistance is linked to the ways in which continuity in routines is interrupted or displaced by efforts toward renewal. Established routines and associated professional ways of being may exert themselves to such an extent that renewal of practice is obstructed. This can present difficulties for aspiring and recently graduated professionals, as well as for experienced professionals, who see the potential for improved practices but experience resistance or disapproval from others. Power differentials often play a key role in influencing the outcome of challenges to established routines and practices. However, where there is some openness to re-thinking assumptions and mutual respect among practitioners, new ways of acting and of being can come into play, bringing about a renewal of practice at both individual and collective levels.

Individuals with Others

It is evident from each of the preceding features of learning to become professionals that engaging with others is integral to the professional lifeworld, with language playing a key role. For Heidegger (1962/1927), being-in-the-world, more generally, necessarily incorporates being with others, including those who are only implicated, such as members of our profession who developed a tool we use but whom we may never meet. Heidegger also points out that through being with others, we learn to think and act as (the generalised) 'they' do. In learning to think and act as 'they' do, we also take a stand on those thoughts and actions, as well as on who we are becoming, even if this means we simply fall into line with how 'one' should think, act and be. For instance, aspiring teachers learn various ways in which one acts as a member of the teaching profession, while taking a stand on the ways and extent to which they will follow what one is expected to do. At the same time, being with others—including those within and outside the profession—extends possibilities for being, potentially enriching the process of becoming. Trainee teachers, for example, are likely to learn from their encounters with students and parents, as well as from colleagues.

The process of becoming a professional occurs, then, through continual interaction with other professionals, as well as those outside the professions. It is misleading to attempt to separate the individual from engagement with others in this process of becoming. Quite simply, an individual does not become a professional in isolation; conversely, a profession cannot exist without individual professionals. The two are interdependent and spill over into one another, as well as being entangled in the broader social world.

Reconfiguring Professional Education as a Process of Becoming

When we take seriously the ontological dimension of professional education and the ambiguities of learning to become professionals, professional education can no longer stop short after developing knowledge and skills. Acquisition of knowledge and skills is insufficient for embodying and enacting skilful professional practice, including for the process of becoming that learning such practice entails. Instead, when we take account of ontology, professional education is reconfigured as a process of becoming; an unfolding and transformation of the self over time. Contrary to what prevalent models of professional development would have us believe, this process is unlikely to occur in a predetermined or linear sequence (e.g., as proposed by Benner, 1984; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986) but, rather, to follow a range of possible development trajectories (see Dall'Alba, forthcoming; Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006). This unfolding is open-ended and always incomplete.

Learning to become professionals entails integrating what aspiring professionals know and can do with who they are (becoming), including the challenges, risk, commitment and resistance that are involved. In other words, learning professional ways of being occurs through integration of knowing, acting and being the professionals in question (Dall'Alba, forthcoming; see also Dall'Alba, 2005; Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2007). This means, for example, that teacher education programs cannot simply impart knowledge and skills to aspiring teachers. Instead, relevant knowledge and skills are embodied and enacted by those in these programs to varying extents and in a range of ways, in line with the social practice of teaching (see Dall'Alba, 2005, for further elaboration in relation to university teaching). For instance, teacher trainees learn to design learning activities and to assess what students have learned. As they do so, they develop their ways of knowing and acting in relation to designing learning and assessment, while at the same time extending and elaborating their understanding and embodiment of what it means to be a teacher. Referring to Heidegger's work, Thomson outlines the way in which our knowing, acting, and being are interrelated:

> Our very 'being-in-the-world' is shaped by the knowledge we pursue, uncover, and embody. [There is] a troubling sense in which it seems that we cannot help practicing what we know, since we are 'always already' implicitly shaped by our guiding metaphysical presuppositions. (2001, p. 250)

Conceptualising professional education programs in terms of an integration of knowing, acting and being further clarifies the inadequacy of a focus on epistemology (or knowing) in which ontology (or being and becoming) is overlooked. Efforts to treat knowing, acting and being as separate entities (e.g., through an emphasis on epistemology at the expense of ontology) fall short of what professional education programs can, and are expected to, achieve (see also Heidegger, 1998/1967; Barnett, 1997, 2004, 2005). Where this shortfall occurs, the most challenging task of learning professional ways of being through integration of these various aspects is left to the students themselves. At the same time, the part that professional education programs can and do play in forming and shaping professionals raises complex ontological and ethical questions. For instance, in what ways and to what

extent is it appropriate to shape another's becoming? Whose knowing, acting and being serve as 'golden standards'? Questions such as these underpin the design and implementation of professional education programs, whether or not they are explicitly addressed in those programs.

Conclusion

In professional education programs, emphasising ontology means placing the focus on learning professional ways of being, that is, on becoming the professionals in question. In other words, it places emphasis on enabling students to integrate their ways of knowing, acting and being professionals. This conceptualisation has the potential to provide clearer direction for our efforts in designing professional education programs, as well as in challenging and supporting students who proceed through these programs.

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Notes

[i] As Heidegger points to the fallacy of a Cartesian separation of body and soul (or mind)
[ii] Heidegger is using Plato's allegory of the cave to explore the relation between education and 'truth' or unhiddenness.
[iii] Discussing our relation to the world may give the impression we are independent of, and separable from, the world. Such a conceptualisation is at odds with the notion of an inevitable entwinement with our world, as discussed below, although contemporary language presents obstacles in developing ideas of this kind.

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