

## Editorial

### Professionalism and Practice: Critical Understandings of Professional Learning and Education

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## **EDITORIAL**

### **Professionalism and Practice: Critical Understandings of Professional Learning and Education**

Research about professional learning is a serious concern for those involved in initial and continuing professional education, and the accreditation and training of professionals. Many of the professions have developed their own spaces – conferences, journals, symposia, associations – to consider research about issues such as processes of learning, feedback and assessment, the curriculum, the development of professional attributes, professional standards, professional practice, the educational implications of the moves towards interprofessionalism, and so on. And educational and theoretical debates within professions are lively: how should professional attributes be developed? What forms should continuing professional development take, and how should it be regulated? Who regulates professional education and how is such regulation informed by educational understandings as well as risk and accountability factors? These are, indeed, important questions for those involved in developing professionals.

As a group of researchers who work within and across professions, we have been concerned for a number of years about the ways in which knowledge informing these questions about education, training and development may be understood by some as uncontentious, value-free, instrumental and universally applicable. When we began our discussions over fifteen years ago, we found that it had often been assumed within professional communities that the methods used to derive such knowledge should be experimental, nomothetic and manipulative of factors, with high levels of control in order to ensure that results were generalisable and ensured predictability. Even in the area of teaching and learning in higher education, at the turn of the century such restricted understandings prevailed (Malcolm and Zukas, 2001).

The situation has changed considerably in many professions such that educational knowledge is understood to be value-laden, specific, and based on judgement. It is recognised through, for example, research practices and journal publication guidelines that knowledge may be ideographic

(see Reich, Rooney and Boud, this volume). But we have observed that a limited number of theoretical ideas about learning derived from outside the profession (for example, reflective practice, andragogy) may circulate somewhat uncritically within professions. Ironically, whilst employed originally to provide a countervailing critique of normative understandings of learning, some of these latter understandings in turn become hegemonic. In other words, they may militate against the kinds of professional learning and the practices which professionals themselves would wish to encourage. For us, therefore, research about professional learning may depend on uncritical foundations which we are concerned to trouble.

This special edition of *Studies in Continuing Education* is therefore intended to extend a dialogue between questions of professional learning and education arising within professions and those that have been raised within educational contexts. It is part of an ongoing project to promote critical understandings of professional learning and practice. We are most grateful to the Editor, David Boud, and the journal's editorial assistant, Terry Fitzgerald, for all the support they have given. Below we trace the history of our involvement in the dialogue before introducing the six papers which constitute the special edition.

### **From professional lifelong learning to critical perspectives on professional learning**

In 2006, members of the current editorial group set up a conference series at the University of Leeds in the UK entitled 'Professional lifelong learning: beyond reflective practice'. (The papers for this special edition come from the sixth in the series of conferences.) In setting up the series, we had two objectives in mind: first, through our own engagements with a number of different professions, we were aware that debates arising in one professional arena were often isolated from those in others. We had a sense that profession-specific research sometimes (re)visited questions which had already been discussed extensively elsewhere and that insights generated were not shared widely. When, for example, the concept of reflective practice was employed in some professions, it seemed as if

there were few spaces in which professionals could engage with the extended arguments and debates from elsewhere which surround it.

A second reason, as indicated above, and which we came later to emphasise as 'critical' in the conference's title, was our desire to encourage professional educators (including ourselves) to question theoretical ideas, received pedagogical wisdoms, accepted practices, policy assumptions, methodological certainties and research 'findings'. Such critical engagement rests, in part, on the need to shift understandings of what we mean by knowledge about professional education, training and development. For many, our own educational experiences (whether we reject or embrace them) may already shape our perspective and limit the extent to which we feel competing theories and approaches might be relevant. We might feel that our own profession is highly specific and not well understood by others. Further, the approaches to knowledge generation in our own fields might well lead us to assume that it is possible to generate 'neutral' knowledge, particularly about training. We felt therefore that the requirement to step outside one's field of vision – to engage with other professions as well as one's own - and, of necessity, to consider competing theoretical ideas might facilitate this critical engagement. We also felt that it would enable professionals to understand better the commonalities and specificities of their own professions, from an education and learning perspective.

A further contextual issue for the group was that we had been involved in the bringing together of a number of research interests in work and learning. In 1999, the biannual Researching Work and Learning conference was also established by colleagues in the University of Leeds where we all worked at one time. The conference, which continues to meet, brings together various workplace learning communities: adult educators, vocational education experts, trade union educators, organisational development experts, human resource development researcher and educationalists interested in the professions. This has proved to be a rich resource for all concerned but, because of the organisation of academic and professional networks noted above, the arguments may remain

somewhat distant from those in the professions, and vice versa: educationalists may not be able to engage effectively in those professions.

Within the broad arena of educational research, there have been a number of moves aside from ours to foster these discussions. For example, ProPEL (Professional Practice, Education and Learning), founded at the University of Stirling in Scotland in 2010, is an organisation which focuses specifically on the changing nature of professional learning and responsibility in professional practice; a new open access journal, *Professions and Professionalism*, founded in Norway, seeks to create a space for the development of the research field which encourages traditional and knowledge-based professions to contribute; and of course *Studies in Continuing Education* itself has supported and sustained this project over many years.

### **An exercise in professional learning and education**

*Studies in Continuing Education's* own focus is on all aspects of continuing professional and lifelong learning, trying to contribute to improving practice in the field of continuing education and bringing theory and practice into close association. The journal is very encouraging in its scope in terms of formats: eg reports of research and development, accounts of new initiatives, reflections on theory and practice. It is particularly interested in contributions from practitioners wishing to engage in critical reflection on their own practices. It had also proved to be a supportive and appropriate forum for a previous collection of papers from the 2010 conference (Kilminster, Boud, Frost and Zukas, 2012).

The journal therefore provided a congenial and responsive site for our new project as an editorial group: to utilise the publication process as a developmental one for those working in professional education but not publishing within the educational context (in keeping with our overall project, as described above). And it has been a two-year long process. Following the sixth conference on critical professional learning in Leeds, England, in 2013, we invited submissions from those presenting at the conference, particularly from early-career as well as experienced researchers coming from primarily

professional, rather than educational research, contexts. In the event, all those publishing in this special edition are based in universities and have strong practice interests. Within our invitation, we asked potential contributors to “Remember that, by publishing a journal article, you are taking part in a long-standing conversation (some of which you may not have been aware) with those who read the journal, and who are seeking to develop new understandings.” In order to make more transparent what we meant, we shared three papers from *Studies in Continuing Education* to show the range and variety of papers published by the journal, as well as to illustrate what we meant by a long-standing conversation. We asked authors to consider how their work connected with previous debates and papers in the journal, which we took as a proxy for the field; and we also asked how someone outside their field might gain from reading the paper. In other words, how did the issues raised connect with other areas of professional practice?

We went through two rounds of review and feedback, at least, and we have, collectively, debated long and hard about some of the issues which arose: for example, if a debate is fresh to a specific professional field but has been rehearsed elsewhere, how might it be developed to make it suitable for publication? We are grateful, therefore, to all our contributors and reviewers for the sustained process of developing these articles. We are conscious that they reflect the picture we were painting above: on the one hand, educationalists who have broad-ranging theoretical perspectives on the education of professions (in this case, for example, continuing professional learning), and on the other, highly specific concerns about practices in particular professional groups. For some of those publishing in this special edition, this is the first time they will have appeared in an ‘educational’ journal; for others, their contribution is a development of debates within the terrain of this and other educational journals. What makes this edition ‘special’, as it were, is what makes the conferences special: the bringing together of a range of professional concerns to contribute to a more critically engaged understanding of and research about professional learning.

### **Introducing the articles**

The questions addressed by these articles range from a wide-ranging consideration of the ways in which learning inscribed in professional education and training is different from that elicited in practice (Reich et al; Beighton and Poma; Griggs, Rae, Holden and Lawless) to more local investigations. Yet smaller, focused studies generate issues of significance for the broader field: how do we bridge the educational and workplace establishments in general, let alone when the individuals involved challenge existing professional group identities (Reid)? What happens when we challenge professional boundaries and what is the role of learning in such circumstances? What about the current insistence on teamwork and interprofessional collaboration? How do staff learn to work together (Collin, Paloniemi and Herranen)? What is the role of learning in contemporary discourses of co-production and analogous interventions to change relationships between professional groups and service-users to be 'co-productive' (Ledger and Slade)?

These important questions are introduced through a range of theoretical resources drawing from contemporary understandings of learning. These include practice-based theories of learning which are here understood as being prompted by engaging in work with others, rather than as independent of context (Reich et al), and related ideas such as knowing in practice (Ledger and Slade) and participatory learning in work (Collin et al). The influence of theories of expansive learning (Beighton and Poma), activity theory (Reid) and reflective practice (Griggs et al) are all present too. Professions represented include healthcare professions, human resource managers, engineers and police firearms officers. One paper also includes service users' perspectives. Research findings are produced through case studies, intervention studies, interviews, ethnography and self-ethnography and other qualitative approaches. And all are concerned to generate implications and recommendations beyond the immediate profession and/or context for the research. They do, indeed, represent critical understandings of professional learning and education, and offer new ways forward for professionalism and practice.

In the first article, Ann Reich, Donna Rooney and Dave Boud offer a fresh challenge from practice theory to the assumptions underpinning many continuing professional education frameworks. They suggest that, whilst many of these frameworks assume that professional practice and the (assumed) resulting learning is measurable and specifiable (particularly at the level of the individual), practice and learning cannot be described in this way: instead, it should be understood to be emergent and relational. Unless this is recognised, continuing professional education will tend to privilege formal provision, with all its attendant problematic issues of relevance, impact and transferability. The paper suggests alternatives for continuing professional learning such that it becomes part of work, rather than standing separately, as at present. The second article takes the (unusual) form of a research report, in which Kaija Collin, Susanna Paloniemi and Sanna Herranen progress both methodologically and theoretically the idea of team learning (rather than individual professional learning) as part of work. The research reported here was based on a project with staff in an emergency unit of a Finnish hospital and sought to promote interprofessional collaboration. In an extended project involving authentic everyday work practices and interactions, the researchers observed and shadowed staff; they interviewed those staff at various stages; and they recorded the learning taking place as changes occurred within the emergency unit. The outcomes of the study emphasised that collaboration works well when professionals are able to collaborate across professions but retain their professional identities, but rather less well in relation to interprofessional collaboration, not least because of the power relations embedded across professional groups.

The questions of changing professional boundaries in healthcare have also been raised in relation to service users and clients. Alison Ledger and Bonnie Slade's case studies of two organisations which have tried to encourage coproduction (defined here as equal professional and public involvement in service delivery) provide interesting accounts of ways in which individuals who had been service recipients become the deliverers of services. Their paper argues that service recipients charged with becoming service deliverers under this framework did not see themselves as expert facilitators and



did not recognise their learning as expertise; nor indeed did organisations. There are questions that might be asked as to whether or not this challenges the movement towards coproduction, troubles its definition and associated rhetoric or reflects the embedded power relations identified above in Collin et al's paper. Further, the study highlights the need to reconceptualise what is understood by learning in this context. This is where insights from broader understandings of learning – that is, those that situate learning as called into being by work (here facilitation), rather than as emergent properties of individuals – might be helpful.

The challenges of integrating learning and work are dealt with in a direct way in Anne-Marie Reid's article on a new role in healthcare: the assistant professional. The case study of a two-year programme intended to develop this new category of staff focuses on the 'practice trainer' whose role is to integrate learning across academic and workplace environments. Drawing on activity theory and expansive learning, Reid argues that such roles have the potential to deal with the long-standing issue of mediating between education and work. Whilst this might be helpful for this specific context, it remains to be seen as to whether such a role could be employed elsewhere. In particular, the questions raised above about the relationships between practice and learning (as emergent), as opposed to education and learning (as measurable and specifiable) are pertinent.

The final two articles are not concerned with healthcare but with other professional groups: Chris Beighton and Sabrina Poma's paper is about police firearms training, and Vivienne Griggs, Jan Rae, Rick Holden and Aileen Lawless research human resource education. Beighton and Poma also draw on expansive learning theory to look at how standardised professional development (of the kind highlighted by Reich et al) fails to develop the kinds of competence and flexibility it is intended to promote, because it is insufficiently informed by practice. Their study of police firearms officers from three English forces identifies two developmental parameters - affectivity and fluidity – which emerge from their study of workplace learning but are excluded from the standardised approach.

Finally, Griggs et al return to the long-standing question of reflection and reflective practice, this time in relation to human resources education in three universities. In their self-ethnography, they join the long-standing conversation about reflective practice particularly in relation to the vexed issue of critical reflective practice, the subject of the very first of the professional lifelong learning conferences mentioned above. Indeed, one of the first outcomes from the professional lifelong learning conference project from which this special edition derives was a collected edition on this very topic (Bradbury, Frost, Kilminster and Zukas, 2009). Their paper reflects the extent to which debates about ideas in one professional arena or another do not necessarily permeate across professional boundaries. Instead, they have to be re-thought and re-studied within professional spheres. But the existence of this contribution and many of the others gives us hope that we are, indeed, opening up for critical debate conceptualisations and theorisations of professional learning both within and across those professions.

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Guest Editors

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