



Cannon, P. (2017) A review of professionalism within LIS. *Library Management*, 38(2/3), pp. 142-152.

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Deposited on: 13 January 2017

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A review of professionalism within LIS

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of professionalism within Library and Information Science and in doing so draw comparisons with the education and medicine professions.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper provides a review of the extant literature from the three professions and gives a brief review of the theoretical constructs of professional knowledge using the work of Eisner and Eraut to explore knowledge types. It then relates these definitions to knowledge use within LIS, education and medicine, before examining the roles that professional associations have on the knowledge development of a profession. It concludes with a reflection on the future of professionalism within LIS.

Findings

The literature suggests a fragmented epistemological knowledge-base and threats to its practices from outside professions. It does, however, find opportunities to redefine its knowledge boundaries within the phronetic practices of LIS and in socio-cultural uses of knowledge. It finds strengths and weaknesses in professionalism within LIS and its practitioners.

Originality/value

This review provides a contemporary update to several earlier, related, works and provides useful context to current efforts to professionalise LIS by CILIP.

Keywords

Professionalism; Professional Knowledge; Professional Associations; Ethics; Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals; CILIP.

Introduction

This paper reviews the nature of professionalism with reference to the Library and Information Science (LIS) profession from a UK perspective, drawing on comparisons with the education and medical professions. Education and medicine serve as useful comparators to LIS where some have questioned whether it is even a profession (Kostrewski and Oppenheim, 1980). Education can be considered a “fledgling” profession (Berkeley, 2001), yet one that has successfully built a legitimate and publically recognised knowledge-base, and medicine is a long-established profession (Archer and de Bere, 2013) with a considerable body of literature on the themes of professionalism. These professions, therefore, give a range of views and experiences across the various characteristics of professionalism and offer routes for LIS to be considered a true profession.

Ethics and issues concerning professionalism have been prevalent in LIS since the first code of ethics for the sector was published by the American Library Association Code of Ethics Committee in 1938 (Kostrewski and Oppenheim, 1980). Early attempts to define the profession started with occupational groups seeking to gain professional status which led to debate on the professional characteristics that differentiated one set of occupational groups from another (Broady-Preston, 2006). This development has parallels with that of medical education where there was also a desire to define professional characteristics to enable the profession to be delineated from others (Martimianakis *et al.*, 2009), thus allowing a body of professional knowledge to be built and controlled, in turn leading to public recognition and trust in the profession (Kanes, 2010).

Oppenheim and Pullecutt (2000, p. 187) suggest that “professions at a minimum offer: a specialized skill or knowledge gained through extensive education; the development of this body of knowledge through research; a valuable service that benefits society; autonomy”. These facets are also identified by Cullen (2000) and Hardy and Corral (2007). Byrd and Winkelstein (2014) state that the best ethical codes pay particular regard to a professional obligation to society, a characteristic that can be seen in both the medical and the health librarian ethical codes of practice compared in their study.

One of the main contrasts between LIS and medicine, is that medicine is an all-graduate profession. In education, the devolved nations of the UK have differing positions on the qualifications practitioners must hold, but as with medicine, newly qualified individuals are required to successfully complete probationary periods before they can be certified to practice with full registration of their respective professional bodies (O'Brien and Hunt, 2005). In LIS, an individual is not necessarily required to be qualified to become an 'information professional'; this harms both the public perception of LIS as a profession and employer recognition of its knowledge-base.

The paper begins by introducing some of the main themes of professionalism with reference to LIS; different knowledge types and how socio-cultural settings affect the production and use of knowledge. It continues by using the work of Eisner and Eraut as a framework for the investigation into knowledge types, drawing upon the literature within LIS, education and medicine. The final section of the paper deals with professional associations, in particular the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), the General Teaching Council (GTC) and the General Medical Council (GMC). It assesses the impact of professional associations on knowledge development and professionalism within the practitioner, before discussing whether LIS can be considered a profession and reflecting on its future.

Professional knowledge

Eraut (2000) uses two parallel definitions in his explanation of knowledge – codified knowledge and personal knowledge. Eraut describes codified knowledge as that which has been recorded, its worth given value through editorial control, peer-review and debate, and its status enshrined by being included in academic programmes and courses, which ultimately leads to professional accreditation – this knowledge can also be termed episteme, “true and certain knowledge” (Eisner, 2002, p. 375). Personal knowledge is the incorporation of skills and personal experiences to codified knowledge. Personal knowledge can either be explicit, in written procedures and processes, or tacit, “that which we know but cannot tell” (Polanyi, 1967 cited in Eraut, 2000, p. 118), also referred to as phronesis, “wise, practical reasoning” (Eisner, 2002, p. 375). “Codified knowledge is identified by its source and

epistemological status, personal knowledge by the context and manner of its use” (Eraut, 2000, p. 114). Both types of knowledge are required in order to confer professional status upon an occupational group. However, knowledge is also influenced by socio-cultural influences and the environment in which it is learnt and used, or doxa, “about the way they are” (Eisner, 2002, p. 376). Lastly, as Eisner (2002, p. 382) also notes with regard to teaching, “Good teaching [or use of professional knowledge] depends upon artistry and aesthetic considerations”, or *techne*.

Knowledge within LIS

Despite LIS having a long history of practice, it is difficult to define the boundaries of its episteme. Nolin and Åström (2010, p. 7) state that “the fragmented nature of LIS can be further exemplified by a variety of views on procedures, approaches and even the *raison d’être* of LIS”. They further claim that such is the fragmented nature of LIS there is no generally accepted definition of LIS itself. Whilst there is an epistemological knowledge-base (CILIP, n.d.-b) it is right to ask whether the rapid developments of information technology and socio-cultural changes in information use represent an extension of the body of professional knowledge and working practices or a completely new epistemological shift (CILIP, 2015d; Griffith, 2015).

A further challenge to the epistemological knowledge-base for LIS is the impact of other professions making valuable contributions to the debate on information use within society; psychology on organisational knowledge, teaching on information as a learning process, sociology on information use within society (Currall and Moss, 2008). Nolin and Åström (2010) argue this has led to increased importance in the drawing of boundaries of LIS epistemological knowledge due to such competition; they suggest an “epistemological convergence”. Reflecting on technological change at the end of the 20th century, Abbott (1998) asserts that the advent of microfilm, keyword indexing and online catalogues have progressively developed the episteme of LIS; it is difficult to argue otherwise with the rise of the internet and social information use. As with the late 20th century, there is an opportunity to progressively shift the epistemological knowledge-base of the profession and, in the meantime, develop further collaboration opportunities and impact on the businesses LIS serves. Whilst a convergence may be required in some areas of LIS knowledge, these changes should be seen through the lens of a profession gradually adjusting its

epistemological knowledge-base to new socio-cultural settings of knowledge rather a fundamental epistemological shift.

Epistemological change should be embraced as it allows the professional organisation to explore, reject, define and redefine new knowledge to “build new strategies of legitimisation” (Fournier, 2000 cited in Broady-Preston, 2009). This control and use of epistemological knowledge to gain control over professional work leads to a dominance over other professional groups and political and economic autonomy (Hotho, 2008). Broady-Preston (2010) acknowledges the impact not only over the collective profession, but also on the individual, by pointing to the control over the knowledge-base and its use in academic accreditation.

LIS has always been a research field embedded in phronetic practice (Robinson and Bawden, 2013) and therefore less reliant on a fixed epistemological knowledge, using democratic professionalism, doxa and techne of professionals to drive forward its knowledge-base. Such is the nature of change within the knowledge-base of LIS that there are arguments as to where the knowledge-base lies. For example, the cultural shift within academia has had a profound impact on academic librarians, as reflected by Wheeler and McKinney (2015), where a shift towards teaching skills at the expense of ‘traditional’ LIS skills is observed. There are even arguments as to whether information literacy can be taught (as in epistemological knowledge) or is something to be trained in (phronetic knowledge influenced by doxa and techne). This may well reflect the differences between LIS and professions with established and recognised epistemological knowledge-bases, such as education and medicine.

Socio-cultural settings of knowledge

On a macro-level, the impact of technology, and its rate of change, has had wide implications on the LIS sector, not only in how society interacts with, creates and uses knowledge, but the systems and skills that are available to do so. This too has driven developments across all professional sectors, but it has led to professional boundaries between the information professions becoming even more diffuse leading notable figures such as Natalie Ceeney, former CEO of the National Archives and Head of the UK Knowledge Council to call for their demolition (Broady-Preston, 2009, p. 173). If this is the case it will be even harder for an already wide and inter-disciplinary-natured profession to define its episteme and its professional

identity. Broady-Preston (2009) further illustrates these conflicts on a micro-level with more generic, rather than profession-specific, competency-based frameworks being favoured by employers. However, in a later piece Broady-Preston (2010) acknowledges that a key threat to the long-term existence of LIS professionals would be the failure to engage more widely across knowledge strata at the expense of focussing on a defined “power/knowledge nexus”.

Whilst the opportunities for collaboration may allow the strengthening of the epistemological boundaries of LIS, they also are a source of weakness when redefining new epistemological boundaries. Nolin and Åström (2010, p. 9) point to research that states of the 50 European LIS departments “35 per cent were housed within the arts and humanities, 15 per cent within the social sciences, 13 per cent at communications and media, 9 per cent within business/management, 4 per cent at computer science and 24 per cent within ‘other’”. These departments are more likely to be shaped by local socio-cultural rather than LIS-specific professional factors; this will bring opportunities to collaborate using *phronesis* and *doxa* to establish new epistemological knowledge, but there is a risk that it may further fragment the epistemological-base of the profession, weakening its standing as a profession. In turn, with disparate housing in many different university faculties, it may prove more difficult for the professional body to control *episteme* and influence education. This may not be the case, however, as LIS has always relied on *phronetic* practice to drive forward its epistemological knowledge, a practice Nolin and Åström (2010) describe as the “external dependency problem” – the field has its expertise outside of academia, and this they see as a source of strength. The difficulty in developing and furthering epistemological knowledge comes from the lack of academic maturity within the sector, certainly in comparison with education and medicine.

Reflecting on the micro-level of professionalism within education Patrick *et al.* (2003) contemplate that the individual professional is one who works within limitations set by the boundaries of knowledge specialism set by the professional body, and government control in terms of designated targets and plans that others have set for them. The impact of managerialism is that professional development is, therefore, set within the bounds of external expectations rather than individual, autonomous ideas of self-directed reflection; the individual no longer defines their own development. To this extent, LIS having an “external dependency problem” allows

the individual to maintain their professional autonomy and greater influence of movement between knowledge boundaries, something that happens to a lesser extent within education and medicine.

Professional associations, knowledge development and professionalism

Impact on knowledge development

Despite attempts to conceptualise professionalism within LIS and other sectors, in a systematic review of professionalism within the medical profession, Birden *et al.* (2014) found no universally accepted definition of professionalism in the literature. Indeed, in one study identified in their review, 1052 attributes of professionalism were identified. Hamerly and Crowley (2014, p. 5) note that professionalism is a “nebulous status” and that “sustaining professionalism has involved ongoing effort to influence or persuade others to believe that it is in their best interest to accept one’s professional self-definition”. The launch of the CILIP Professional Knowledge and Skills Base (PKSB) (CILIP, n.d.-b) has, therefore, been a welcome development for the profession, as it now can be argued that LIS does have a defined knowledge-base and self-definition.

However, the extent to which CILIP can call the epistemological knowledge contained within the PKSB unique to LIS, and consequently within their control, is open to debate. Broady-Preston (2006, p. 52) explains that due to the rapid change and the complex multi-disciplinary nature of LIS, the nature of other professional organisations having a stake in the development of skills and knowledge for LIS, “renders devising suitable professional education and training programmes extremely difficult”. There may be a need for an ‘epistemological convergence’ in order to define a truly unique knowledge-base, but in doing so there is a need to acknowledge that it may streamline the existing wide knowledge-base of LIS and, thereby, exclude some practitioners who may instead drift toward other professions (Nolin and Åström, 2010).

One weakness of the professional bodies of traditional disciplines who, it can be argued, have “difficulties in listening and fully understanding other perspectives”

(Nolin and Åström, 2010, p. 19), is that it may impair the development of knowledge due to researchers failing to translate knowledge to fit socio-cultural perspectives leading to a distance between academic theory and practice. To this extent the 'protectionism' of knowledge can be seen as a "market project" where the professions attempt to control the market for their unique professional skills and knowledge, thereby, controlling access to education, training and employment (Hotho, 2008). In seeking to control their knowledge-base by approving and accrediting award-bearing academic courses the courses become exactly that, academic, as opposed to practical which is often at the expense of learning about issues of value and belief (Kennedy, 2005). This is particularly pertinent for LIS with its phronetic and doxa-influenced knowledge-base rather than an epistemological knowledge-base.

It can, however, be argued that the continued servicing of an autonomous professional knowledge-base can be seen as a barrier to professionalism along with the threat of organisational managerialism to professional autonomy (Broady-Preston, 2006). Within medicine, government health policy has had profound changes on the standing of doctors within the National Health Service. Gill and Griffin (2010) refer to medicine as a "profession redefined by the state", where the government is "steering" the profession away from its epistemological roots. Likewise, education finds itself being reformed from outside governmental influence which has seen the role of a teacher expanded and diffused, leaving some to consider where their commitments and responsibilities should end. The effect of this on the individual professional is "to return teaching to an amateur, de-professionalized, almost pre-modern craft, where existing skills and knowledge are passed on practically from expert to novice, but where practice can at best only be reproduced, not improved" (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 168).

Whilst it could be suggested that LIS is less directly influenced by government control, recent government reforms to public services have had a large impact on the LIS profession, especially within public libraries (Goulding, 2013). However, unlike the above examples where professionalism and the professional knowledge-base is eroded by managerialism, reforms to LIS could be seen as opportunities for the individual professional to redefine the epistemological knowledge-base by embracing the convergence of professions. Broady-Preston and Cossham (2011, p. 36)

emphasise the individual taking responsibility for their CPD which “will have a positive impact on the profession, both in terms of the individual levels of skills and knowledge attained, and in terms of the wider understanding of the importance of professionalism gained by members of the profession, employers and the general public.”

Impact on professionalism

An important role in enabling professionalism within its members is for the professional body to adopt a code of professional ethics. CILIP has a series of ‘Ethical Principles’ which set out the values which its members should conduct themselves (CILIP, 2015a) and also a ‘Code of Professional Practice’ which provides a framework of the “ethical principles to the different groups and interests to which CILIP members must relate. The Code also makes some additional points with regard to professional behaviour” (CILIP, 2012). The guidance produced by CILIP, the GTC for Scotland (General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2012) and the GMC (General Medical Council, 2014) is fairly similar in their categorisation of ethical and professional principles. Gill and Griffin (2010) note that the guidance from the GMC is as much addressed to the public in order to let them know what they can expect from doctors, as much as the guidance being for doctors; this in turn builds public trust in the profession – a tactic that CILIP could adopt.

The CILIP Ethics Committee has responsibility to keep the ‘Ethical Principles’ and ‘Code of Professional Practice’ under review. Failure to adhere to the ‘Ethical Principles’ or ‘Code of Professional Practice’ may result in the member being suspended or expelled from CILIP (CILIP, 2011). This is also the case for the GTC and GMC who have the power to determine when competence falls below set standards of practice, whether that be through misconduct, poor performance or failing educational standards (Berkeley, 2001). However, unlike the GTC and GMC, the expelled member may still legally practice as an ‘information professional’ despite a lack of professional membership. This does in essence create a ‘two-tier’ system of professions, those who can legally enforce their standards of conduct and those that cannot, whose ethical standards are strictly voluntary (Goode, 1969 cited in Broady-Preston, 2006, p. 56). This leaves professional bodies such as LIS unable to protect the reputation of the profession from unethical or incompetent individuals,

whereas bodies such as the GTC are able to not only protect their reputation, but the reputation of the body of professionals.

Despite not being able to expel members, it is largely the case that in LIS practitioners do need to be members of the professional body to progress professionally (Oppenheim and Pollecutt, 2000) and this in itself acts as a deterrent. It is interesting to note that a survey of practicing librarians (n=100) and LIS students (n=114) found only a small majority (55.7% and 53.1% respectively) were in favour of disciplinary action being taken against LIS staff who violate the CILIP code of ethics (Ball and Oppenheim, 2005, p. 58). It is perhaps this indifference towards disciplinary action that explains a lack of knowledge of professional standards amongst some LIS professionals. In a survey of the American Medical Library Association (MLA) members' awareness and assessment of the 'Code of Ethics for Health Science Librarianship' found that "over 30% of the respondents [n=515] did not know when they had last viewed the code, with an additional 13.5% being unaware that MLA had a code of ethics. Nevertheless, most of the majority who were aware of the MLA code (233 of 252, or nearly half of all respondents) had referred to the code within the last 5 years" (Byrd *et al.*, 2014, p. 266). In contrast, it is a requirement from the first day of study for medical students to understand and follow the guidance in 'Good Medical Practice' and to keep within the guidance in 'Medical Students: Professional Values and Fitness to Practice' (Stirrat *et al.*, 2010). It is noted by Palmer *et al.* (2010) that whilst it is possible to dictate that students and professionals must comply with standards and that it is possible to develop teaching outcomes around professionalism, it is far more difficult to assess whether these outcomes are complied with.

The lack of an authoritative professional body able to police the ethics of its members is a cause for concern within LIS. This perhaps explains why one study revealed that "LIS professionals expressed an allegiance to the service above and beyond any allegiance to the profession of librarianship and its representative body" (Wilson and Halpin, 2006, p. 89). It seems pertinent, given the lack of awareness of codes of ethics and apathy for the codes to be upheld, for LIS to adopt the medical model and embed its ethical principles in academic courses and promote its use to its members regardless of whether compliance can be measured.

What makes a professional?

A recent mapping of the LIS sector shows a highly qualified workforce with 61% of practitioners holding a postgraduate qualification and 57% holding professional qualifications, although only 54% hold professional memberships (CILIP and Archives & Records Association, 2015). It must be noted that whilst holding an academic qualification may allow entry into a profession, without “maintenance” an individual cannot be considered “fit to practice” given the rate of change in developments in any sector. Indeed, a key question for any profession is not how prepared for practice an individual is upon completion of an academic course, but in how any qualification can maintain relevance in the face of rapid change to knowledge and the nature of professionalism itself (Kanes, 2010).

With reference to medical education, Gill and Griffin (2010) warn that professionals must move on from nostalgic views of professionalism and look to where the professional body is directing practitioners. This is a very pertinent message for LIS where CILIP have been trying to introduce ‘obligatory revalidation’ for professional members. Compulsory CPD, Broady-Preston (2010 p. 74) argues, “offers the profession the opportunity not only to demonstrate equivalency with other professions, but also to move forward with confidence in an ever-changing landscape”, and to also demonstrate the competency of its practitioners (McFarlane, 2015). The CILIP Ethical Principles require a member to have a “commitment to maintaining and improving personal professional knowledge, skills and competences” (CILIP, 2015a). As previously discussed, CILIP does not have the authority to uphold these principles, however, most LIS professionals will undertake some CPD activities as part of their workplace obligations regardless of whether they are members, or follow the principles. It is optional for CILIP members who have achieved professional registration to demonstrate that they are maintaining their professional skills. In November 2015, CILIP balloted its members on a proposal to make revalidation obligatory; the outcome of the vote was that 51% of members voted against the proposal with 49% voting in favour. Turnout was 37% (or 4602 members) (CILIP, 2015e). It is important to reflect on the impact on professionalism of this decision, especially in comparison to the mandatory schemes run by the GTC

and GMC. For example, the GMC have, since 2012, required the compulsory revalidation of all practicing doctors who must submit an annual appraisal that reflects upon the 'Good Medical Practice' framework. It does seem rather paradoxical that LIS professionals 'resoundingly' object to the 'amateurisation' of library services (Poole, 2015; Wade, 2015) stating that it is "a threat to our profession" (Richardson, 2015) yet, when given the opportunity to demonstrate professional characteristics in line with long-established professions members chose not to. It is particularly disappointing when CILIP revalidation requires a minimum of 20 hours CPD, compared to 35 hours for teaching in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2011) and, whilst the GMC does not prescribe a set number of hours (GMC, 2012), medical colleges set around 50 hours as a minimum (The Royal College of Anaesthetists, 2013); this further sets the boundaries between CILIP and the established professions of teaching and medicine.

Whilst compulsory CPD ensures that professional standards are maintained by individuals Patrick *et al.* (2003) consider that compulsory CPD becomes a "contractual obligation" which does not centre on an individual's professionalism, but rather a threat of non-compliance, potentially leading to a lack of critical personal reflection. As reflected earlier with regard to professional standards, it is equally important that CPD standards set by a professional body reflect the socio-cultural environments of individuals and existing good practice. The GTC, GMC and CILIP require CPD revalidation to be authenticated by a senior professional, the professional body, or both. What is not always clear, as informed by Kennedy (2005), is at what level acceptable competence is set and to whose notion of competence it reflects; the individual, the assessor or the professional body and the socio-cultural influences upon the assessor and the assessed.

The introduction of the ACLIP grade of professional registration with CILIP is an interesting development with respect to 'new professionalism'. The qualification allows members to "gain some recognition for the knowledge and skills they have developed working in a library, information or knowledge role" (CILIP, n.d.-a); there are no educational barriers to entry, the grade of membership simply exists to recognise experiential learning, where previously full professional membership of CILIP would not have been possible until a relevant degree had been acquired. Interestingly, in teaching, entry requirements for the Chartered Teacher Programme

include employment at the top of the main grade teachers' scale and the maintenance of a CPD portfolio (O'Brien and Hunt, 2005), indicating both an individual's experience within the sector and a history of practicing professionalism. In the world of 'new professionalism' with blurred professional boundaries the CILIP move could be seen as progressive and reflecting the democratisation of knowledge, but it does further highlight the gap between the 'new' and 'elite' professions and their notions of professional practice and professionalism.

Conclusion

In a sociological analysis of professionalism, Evetts (2003, p. 404) states that, "professions might need to close markets in order to be able to endorse and guarantee the education, training, experience and tacit knowledge of licensed practitioners". Whilst there are threats to LIS, with other professions undertaking many tasks underpinned by its knowledge-base, LIS episteme, although fragmented, is strong; other professions studying information do not have that history. However, the lack of public acknowledgement of a LIS body of professional knowledge may prove "the stumbling block to the universal recognition of librarianship as a profession" (Broady-Preston, 2006, p. 50), and that "recognition of the value of professional qualifications is a matter of choice amongst relevant employers, and thus actively engaging with employers constitutes a key task for professional bodies" (Broady-Preston, 2010, p. 74). The deficiency of high-quality research in the sector (Brettle and Maden, 2015) only serves to hold this recognition back. Brettle and Maden (2015, p. 22) continue that "at a local level, librarians need to determine what outcomes are important to their stakeholders and provide the evidence that meets these needs". To this extent, the challenge for CILIP, and its main priority, should be to follow the lead of the education profession and engage its members to build upon its knowledge-base, turning phronetic practice into defining its new epistemological boundaries.

As noted, the rejection of a compulsory CPD scheme which would have brought CILIP and its members in line with the education and medical professions is disappointing. CILIP should build upon its consultation in this area (CILIP, 2015e) to commission further research to understand the reasons for rejection, and what

measures its members would accept in order to move the sector into the professional realm.

Failure to continue to build upon the epistemological knowledge-base of LIS and to professionalise its members through compulsory CPD will see its knowledge become further diminished by other professions, and the sector itself remain on the boundary between an occupation and a profession.

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