Professionalism and social change – the implications of social change for the ‘reflective practitioner’.

Nick Frost, Lifelong Learning Institute, University of Leeds, Leeds UK

Abstract

This paper examines the role of critical reflection on the context of the changing character of professionalism and the professional experience. It is argued that modern professionalism is undergoing a rapid and persistent period of change and that changes specific to the professional experience must be placed in the context of wider social and global change specifically: globalisation, informationalism, the emergence of the network society and managerialism. The paper will analyse the new space available to the reflective professional in this emerging social context – and argue that critical reflection must be located in this wider social and political context.

Introduction

This paper argues that the space in which the modern professional ‘practices’ and ‘reflects’ has been fundamentally re-structured over the last 30 years, a period sometimes known as ‘late modernity’ (Parton, 2006). It will begin by outlining some of these social changes and discuss their implications for critical reflection in the ‘late modern’ era. Although the paper draws on the experience of the ‘human service’ professions in particular, it is suggested that the analysis has wider implications throughout a wider range of professions.

Firstly, it needs to be established that the environment in which the modern professional operates has of late been subject to rapid, persistent and fundamental change. It is argued here that as we live through the ‘late modern’ era we can reflect on four major forms of change in the wider social environment, these are identified as: globalisation, informationalism, networking and managerialism.

Once the case has been made for these trends it will be argued that this social change has fundamental significance for the reflective professional practitioner. It will then be suggested that some schools of ‘reflective practice’ have become idealist in their approach. That is they have conceptualised reflection as something that happens subjectively in the head of the individual practitioner, thus marginalising the role of the wider social environment. In contrast it will be suggested here that a materialist view of critical reflection – that is one grounded in the material reality of professional practice provides a more realistic and potentially transformative form of reflective practice.
Four major forms of social change

Initially the paper argues the case for the significance of wider social change for our understanding of professionalism.

GLOBALISATION

Worldwide developments, often identified by the shorthand of globalisation, have had a profound impact on culture, identity, economy and governance in late modern societies. Giddens defines these changes as follows:

‘Globalisation can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. This is a dialectical process because such local happenings may move in an obverse direction from the very distanciated relations that shape them. Local transformation is as much a part of globalisation as the lateral extension of social connections across time and space’ (1990, p.64).

These widespread social changes help to re-define the nature of professionalism as the professions confront changes arising from globalisation (see Lyons (2006) for an example relating social work and globalisation). As Giddens (1990, 1999) points out time and space have been compressed in the period of globalisation. Thus we can communicate across the globe in real time, retrieve information from almost everywhere in the world and we can confront issues and challenges from many cultures within even one small neighbourhood of one city.

Professionals therefore have to have a worldwide reference point – we have to utilise the web, may travel to conferences all over the world and may have to understand cultures from diverse corners of the globe. As a consequence the space for reflection is therefore global, diverse, changing and complex.

INFORMATIONALISM

Perhaps the most profound change that has had an impact on professionals has been the explosion in information. The modern professional is surrounded by information – there has been an explosion in web-based information, journals and broadcast and printed information. Government, particularly in the United Kingdom, has been ‘hyper-active’ in producing new policy initiatives and guidance (Fawcett et al, 2005). Handling the volume of information is a major challenge to the modern professional. As a result it becomes very difficult to feel comfortable with ones own ‘expertise’, as there is always a new book we haven’t read, and a research report we aren’t really familiar with. We have to sift a wide-range of diverse information. Charles Leadbeater reflects on the explosion of information as follows:

‘More information is not better information. We are deluged by useless information. Our capacity to generate information far outstrips our ability to use it effectively. About 20 million words of technical information are published every day around the world. A fast reader, reading 1,000 words in three minutes, non-stop for eight hours, would need a month of solid reading to get through a single day’s output. About
1,000 books are published each day around the world. There has been more telephone traffic in the world in the last seven years that in the rest of human history. More data will soon be carried over telephone lines than conversations. These floods of information make people anxious that they are missing out, being left behind.’ (2000 p42)

Whilst our claim to expertise, say in the 1960’s, could feel firmly grounded in comprehensive research, this is a difficult claim to make today. Alongside the information explosion we have a greater emphasis on basing decisions on research – the what works agenda – and the diminishing status of the ‘expert’ both of which are discussed later in this paper. The student, the patient, or the client we work with can be armed with information that we might not be familiar with - they have consulted the website we haven’t seen and read some research we are unfamiliar with. As Castells has argued we are living in an ‘Information Age’ – where much of our time is spent collating, storing, digesting and producing information. The modern professional can feel that their major task in life has become handling information – rather than working with people.

THE EMERGENCE OF NETWORK SOCIETY

Castells has also argued that modern western societies are network societies where individuals and organisations exist in a complex and ever-changing relationship to each other and where no-one can practice in isolation. Organisations and individuals have to be flexible to respond the rapid pace of change discussed above. This development of networking can be linked to the work of the socio-cultural theorist Etienne Wenger and the key concept he developed with Jean Lave – ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998). Both these theoretical concepts can be to help us understand that the single, unitary professional or professional organisation can no longer exist in isolation. This leads to forms of professional expertise becoming increasingly networked, integrated, or ‘joined-up’ (Frost 2005b) a development obviously linked to globalisation:

‘A global (in the sense of transplanetary) social relation is one that (like an Internet chat room and certain communicable diseases) can link persons situated at any inhabitable points on the earth. Globalization involves reductions of barriers to such transworld social contacts. With globalization people become more able – physically, legally, linguistically, culturally and psychologically – to engage with each other wherever on planet Earth they might be.’ (Scholte, J. A., 2000, p.59)

The new professional is therefore a networked professional, having to co-operate and communicate with a wide range of colleagues within and beyond their particular profession.

MANAGERIALISM, RISK AND THE AUDIT SOCIETY

The theorist Ulrich Beck (1992) has utilised the concept of ‘the risk society’, which has led to demands that expert systems, run by professionals, control and regulate risk. When this doesn’t happened (when a storm is not predicted or when a disease
cannot be controlled) professionals and politicians are called to account. They are expected to predict, control and account for the wide range of risks that exist in the late modern world. For professionals this might mean their actions being inquired into (child abuse deaths), criticized (false arrests), subject to new systems of accountability (changes in registration as for GP’s following the Shipman Inquiry) and for enhanced training (the police following the findings of ‘institutional racism’). The sum of this is to shift the terms of professional expertise. For a professional today to claim autonomy on the basis of their skills, knowledge or experience sounds rather ridiculous. In a modern, complex society where each system is dependent on another there must be systems of mutual accountability. In every day terms this is manifest in the daily complaints in the professional workplace about inspections, monitoring, league tables and specific initiatives such as the Research Assessment Exercise in the university system.

This audit approach profoundly alters professional relations to their organisations. There is a shift from trust and relative autonomy to measurement and managerialism. This can also have the effect of privileging a technicist, or ‘what works’ approach to policy that operates through adopting a seemingly ‘neutral’ technical stance to professional practice, so effectively critiqued by Donald Schon (see Frost, 2005a)

Again such developments can be linked to globalisation as Bottery has argued:

‘Economic globalization does not produce just greater demands for flexibility: paradoxically, it also increases demands for standardization and predictability, and many organizations are being driven down this road rather than the road to flexibility….The goal of standardisation is reached through the managerial imposition of goals, standards and inspections.’ (2004, p.8)

And the relationship between the professional and their organisation shifts with increasing managerial regulation:

‘measurement of professional work by external quantitative measures…. emphasises a form of administrative control where professionals are ‘on tap’ to managerial strategic decisions rather than ’on top’ autonomously deciding how their practice is best used. In the process, professional educators service a mindset which asks not ‘is it true?’ but ‘is it useful?’’ (Bottery, 2004, p.9).

Thus it is argued here that the growth of the ‘risk society’ (Beck) and the ‘audit society’ (Power) have reduced and re-structured the space available for this professional action. As a result perceptions of professionals during the ‘late modern’ period have shifted and changed. As Bottery argues:

‘Views of professionals have changed over the last fifty years, from ones of high trust, peer-based accountability, mystique, and autonomous practice, predominantly low-trust, involves extensive external quantitative accountability, and grants only limited professional discretion.’ (2004, p.9)

This focus on audit and control in turn has a negative impact on the way that organisations work which leads Power to argue that:
‘audit culture fails in two ways:
a) the audit process becomes ‘a world to itself, self-referentially creating auditable images of performance’
b) Organizations are in effect colonized by an audit process which disseminates and implants the values which underlie and support its information demands. The audit process can be said to fail because its side-effects may actually undermine performance’ (1997, p.95)

The impact on reflection

What pressures and changes exist for the modern ‘reflecting’ professional in this emerging social environment arguably led by these four aspects of social change?

Five potential aspects of the impact on professionals are discussed here.

First, the modern professional often feels stressed and pressured. There are always targets to be met, papers to be read and waiting lists to be addressed. If we worked in a factory then it could be argued that the speed of the labour process has increased rapidly. A recent UK survey of school headteachers found that 38% of all those away from school sick were off with stress related illness (Guardian, 28th April, 2006).

Second, the modern professional feels less in charge of their own labour process. A concept such as ‘professional autonomy’ is beginning to feel out-of-date. The modern professional has often to operate to a procedure manual and is instructed to change their priorities to fulfil an externally imposed agenda (The Research Assessment Exercise for an academic, the OFSTED inspection for a teacher). Certainly the professional employed by an organisation (teachers, police, many medical staff and so on) often have to shape their practice within an organisational regime, often imposed by State-led targets and audits.

Third, the modern professional feels the pressure of the ‘risk society’. All in the human professions are concerned by the question ‘what if something goes wrong? What if the child on my caseload dies? What if the student on my field trip is fatally injured? Professionals are expected to foresee risk and to manage risk – when they fail their skill and expertise will be challenged and in some cases subject to public inquiry (see Parton, 2006).

Fourth, the modern professional is audited, inspected and checked. These inspections might be regarded by the professional as mis-informed and faulty – but they have profound implications for the future of professional work. The critical OFSTED report is difficult to move on from, the poor RAE score has long-term funding implications. Thus inspection regimes have a profound and long-term impact.

Fifth, the skill and expertise of the modern professional are constantly challenged and contested. The deference previously accorded to the teacher or police officer might be challenged by people they work with – who do not except a claim to expertise simply based on status, uniform or training. None of us would any longer base our expertise claim merely on qualifications or experience. Richard Sennet, the eminent American
sociologist, has argued that quite the opposite is occurring – that performance trumps expertise and experience:

‘The new order does not consider that the sheer passage of time necessary to accumulate skill gives a person standing and rights – value in a material sense; it views such claims based on the passage of time to represent yet another face of the evil of the old bureaucratic system, in which seniority rights froze institutions. The regime focuses on immediate capability.’ (1998, p.96)

There are then many challenges that face the modern professional. The list is probably endless – but the key argument here is that modern professionalism is changing and that the role of reflection is challenged by these changes.

The changing nature of the reflective practitioner

So what do these changes mean for professionalism and more crucially in the context of this conference for critical reflection? It is argued here that to move beyond reflective practice we need a form critically reflective practice that situates itself between the immediate reality of professional practice and the wider social changes we have outlined above. Specifically in terms of professional practice the implications include the following:

a) the rapid pace of social change makes lifelong professional learning – in both the formal and informal senses- absolutely essential for professionals. As the world changes rapidly so professionals have to challenge and constantly re-new their expertise. A failure to do so will mean that professional knowledge and expertise will soon be out-of-date. Thus the contemporary professional is involved in a process of continuous change and reflection.

b) most human service professionals constantly confront diversity – in terms of social class, disability, sexuality, gender and ethnicity. Diversity is a key element of the late modern world. These diversities are very challenging for professionals. Can professionals develop their reflection and practice so that they understand the wide range of diversity that confronts their practice? Examples would include a white police officer dealing with a ‘mentally ill’ African Caribbean person, or a white social worker assessing the parenting of a Bangladeshi mother. Such examples raise fundamental issues about skills, values and knowledge and how these are deployed by professionals (Lyons, 2006).

c) handling the information explosion is a major challenge for all of use in our professional practice – can we cope with the volume of e mails, the pace at which we are expected to respond, do we have time to follow up journals and new research? The skill involved in locating, sifting and critically assessing information is a key professional skill in the new social and political environment.

d) challenging the organisational practices of our employer is a major challenge for the modern professional. We may feel de-skilled by organisational practices and may disagree with a target-driven policy that diverges from our professional boundaries. It is important that in taking into account wider social factors our practice is not ‘frozen’ by them. We should be able to mobilise critical reflection in order to engage
creatively with social change and challenge our organisations where and when this is appropriate.

The ‘reflective practitioner’ school is a wide church as will no doubt emerge at this conference. We are all reflective practitioners now - and there is obviously a strong lobby for ‘critical reflection’. This paper argues for critical reflection - but reflection that is grounded in the reality of modern social change. True critical ‘reflection’ cannot occur in a social vacuum and I would argue that is a mistake if reflection over-emphasises the space for human action. The ‘reflective practitioner’ should not become a free floating practitioner free of the constraints of the reality in which they practice.

This idealist approach to reflection can be seen in this approach to ‘journaling’ as a reflective tool suggested by Rainer:

‘the journal is a practical psychological tool that enables you to express feelings without inhibition, recognise and alter self defeating habits of mind, and come to know and accept that self which is you. It is a sanctuary where all the disparate elements of life – feelings, thoughts, dreams, hopes, fear, fantasies, practicalities, worries, facts and intuitions – can merge to give you a sense of wholeness and coherence. It can help you understand your past, discover joy in the present, and create your own future’. (quoted in NCSL, Vol 1, 2004, p.17)

This is an example of a school of thought that propose reflection as the way forward – but where instead of the focus on wider social factors that is proposed here that focus is on ‘the self’ and ‘one’s life experiences’. In this context reflection becomes something apart from the reality of professional practice where the individual professional can ‘create your own future’. This paper argues for an interaction between the professional and the environment they work for – the call to ‘make your own future’ is a chimera and a myth.

In this context of this paper it is argued that the approach taken by Etienne Wenger is helpful – where professional work can be seen as being influenced by ‘participation’ (the active, reflective worker) and also by ‘reification’ (the fixed and solid environment we all work in). The work environment is formed by an active interplay between these two aspects:

'Participation and reification transform their relation; they do not translate into each other … participation and reification describe an interplay; they are not classificatory categories’ (1998, p68).

This paper proposes a materialist approach to critical reflection. That is where reflection is not simply something that happens inside the head of the professional practitioner but where that reflection engages with the material reality in which they work – a reality that I have argued is structured by globalisation, informationalism, the audit society and risk. To move ‘beyond critical reflection’ involves the modern professional actively engaging with the broad sweep of social change that has been outlined in this paper.
Conclusion

This paper has argued for a future for professional critical reflection that is based in a focus on global social and political change. The agenda for the future is put well by Bottery when he argues for:

‘An ecological and political awareness allows professionals to understand the context they find themselves and their society in; espousing a notion of a public good allows them to raise their sights, and that of fellow societal members, above the level of the self-gratifying consumer to this larger project; the call for an extended, proactive and reflexive accountability requires of them that they see accountability as more than something external ‘done’ to them, but as something they can and must feed into’ (2004, p.12)

Further Bottery agrees with the central thrust of this paper when he puts the case that:

‘professional self-reflection does not mean an appeal to introversion, but precisely the opposite; for greater self-knowledge is only possible where the person is situated within contexts and when the impact of such contexts is appreciated. By specifying this last, then, we return to the first professional requirement: the ecological and political context of professional practice. These, then, seem worthy and achievable requirements for the professional educator of the twenty-first century’. (2004, p.12)

References

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