Examining the professionalism of adult educators

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Introduction

Ever since I became an academic twenty years ago - and, as part of that professional package, a teacher of adults - my teaching-related practice has been based on precisely the same principles and rationale as those applied to my work in a previous career as a primary school teacher. Although I cannot – nor would necessarily wish to - recreate in the lecture hall or seminar room elaborate, visually-stimulating settings paralleling the Narnian^1 dwellings, the space ship interior, or the ancient Egyptian tomb that captivated my ten-year-old pupils (Evans, 1991; 1992), my methods essentially remain unchanged. Driven by the same enduring desire to motivate students and engage their interest, alongside formal lecturing I typically use games, quests, group activities, challenges and quizzes – though obviously designed to have adult-appeal. My need to provide visually stimulating resources is satisfied by the use of powerpoint presentations replete with images and interactive slides. I still use clips from popular television programmes – drama as well as documentary – to help get my point across and illustrate theoretical perspectives, and, of course, I still monitor students' progress and assess their knowledge and understanding.

On the basis of its admittedly very limited information, this account does little to support the notion that adult education is a profession in its own right, distinct from that of teaching in the compulsory sector. But is there more to the picture than is suggested by my simplistic comparison? Adult education is, after all, generally identified not only as a distinct category of education, but also, reflecting this, as a distinct field or sub-field of study within educational research (Chapman, 2005). How accurate, then, is this conception, and how reliable are its bases? Are adult educators a breed apart, or are they essentially no different from other teachers? And if, indeed, they are distinct, is it only on the basis of the context(s) within which they work, and/or the category of students whom they educate (Houle, 1996), or is the distinction more fundamental? (Hansman, 2001; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Merriam, 2001). This theoretical and analytical paper addresses these questions and issues by focusing on the professionalism of adult educators, and, more specifically, examining the extent to which – if at all – it may justifiably be considered distinct.

A breed apart? Examining the case for distinction

The basis of any professional distinction claimed by, or on the part of, adult educators has so far been tied up with the ongoing debate about the concept of

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^1 'Narnian' is the adjective derived from 'Narnia', the name of the fictional world created by the English novelist, C. S. Lewis, who wrote a series of children’s books collectively known as the Chronicles of Narnia.
andragogy (Hanson, 1996; Merriam, 2001), which relates to the issue of whether adult learning is distinct from learning during childhood. As Merriam (2001, p. 6) observes, ‘the concept of andragogy serves as a touchstone in the continued effort to professionalize through the establishment of a scientific discipline.’ But on the matter of andragogy’s distinctiveness from pedagogy, the jury is still out. And whilst the brief testimony provided by my comparative career experiences appears at first glance to support a ‘no distinction’ judgement, I believe there is other evidence to consider: specifically, the nature of adult educators’ professionalism. Accordingly, in this paper I shift the focus of examination away from the client constituency and onto the service providers: those who do the educating. (Of course, on the basis that self-directed learning, along with andragogy, is generally regarded as one of the ‘pillars’ or ‘foundational theories’ of adult learning (Merriam, 2001, p. 3), it could be argued that adults, as students or learners, play a part in doing the educating. For the purpose of advancing my discussion, however, I dismiss such reasoning as restrictively pedantic within the context of this article.) My focus, then, is not on how adults learn but on how they are taught - which involves examining adult educators’ professionalism.

The first stage of this examination is to establish what is meant by ‘professionalism’, for I am with Freidson (1994, p.15), who laments the lack of conceptual clarity and definitional precision in this field: ‘in order to think clearly and systematically about anything, one must delimit the subject-matter to be addressed by empirical and intellectual analysis. We cannot develop theory if we are not certain what we are talking about’. Consistent with the ‘looking forward’ element of this SCUTREA conference theme, in the next subsection I first define and then present a new conceptualisation of professionalism that I go on to propose as a framework not only for delineating and illustrating the professionalism of any occupational group, but also for comparative analysis as a basis for examining the extent and nature of similarity or distinctiveness.

**Conceptualising professionalism**

Perceiving it as qualitatively-neutral – as something that *is*, rather than as something that *ought* to be - I define professionalism as:

> professionalism-influenced practice that is consistent with commonly-held consensual delineations of a specific profession and that both contributes to and reflects perceptions of the profession’s purpose and status and the specific nature, range and levels of service provided by, and expertise prevalent within, the profession, as well as the general ethical code underpinning this practice (Evans, 2008, p. 29).

In being distinct from everyday, non-academic, interpretations of professionalism as something commendable that practitioners should aspire to manifest, my interpretation correlates with academic conceptions of professionalism within the evolving field of the sociology of the professions (Evetts, 2003; 2006). My conceptualisation of professionalism, represented in Figure 1, constitutes deconstruction. I currently identify three main constituent components of it: behavioural, attitudinal, and intellectual. Each of these incorporates further elements or dimensions, as indicated in Figure 1. In representing what I conceive as professionalism’s ontological composition, the model demonstrates its
(professionalism's) quiddity through its componential structure. Quiddity is a little-used term that means the 'whatness' of something: what it is, or its essence.

Figure 1: the componential structure of professionalism

Professionalism, as I define it, is principally about practitioners' 'being' (as) professionals: it is about what they do (in the context of their working lives); how they do it; what they know and understand; where and how they acquire their knowledge and understanding; what (kinds of) attitudes they hold; what codes of behaviour they follow; what their function is: what purposes they perform; what quality of service they provide; and the level of consistency incorporated into the above. These determine the components identified in Figure 1.

The behavioural component of professionalism relates to what practitioners physically do at work. I identify as its sub-components: the processual, procedural, productive, and competential dimensions of professionalism, which relate respectively to: processes that people apply to their work; procedures that they apply to their work; output, productivity and achievement (how much people 'do' and what they achieve); and their skills and competences.

The attitudinal component of professionalism relates to attitudes held. I identify as its sub-components: the perceptual, evaluative, and motivational dimensions of professionalism, which relate respectively to: perceptions, beliefs and views held; people's values; and people's motivation, job satisfaction and morale.

The intellectual component of professionalism relates to practitioners' knowledge and understanding and their knowledge structures. I identify as its sub-components: the epistemological, rationalistic, comprehensive, and analytical dimensions of professionalism, which relate respectively to: the bases of people's knowledge; the nature and degree of reasoning that they apply to their practice; what they know and understand; and the nature and degree of their analyticism.
My definition of professionalism, presented above, incorporates reference to ‘professionality-influenced practice’. Whilst some readers will be familiar with it, ‘professionality’ is not a widely-used term. It was introduced by Hoyle (1975), who explained the distinction between status-related elements of teachers’ work - ‘those strategies and rhetorics employed by members of an occupation in seeking to improve status, salary and conditions’ (p. 315) - which he categorized as professionalism, and those elements of the job that constitute the knowledge, skills and processes that teachers use in their work, and which he categorized as professionality. In the absence of a stipulative definition from Hoyle, I define professionality as:

an ideologically-, attitudinally-, intellectually-, and epistemologically-based stance on the part of an individual, in relation to the practice of the profession to which s/he belongs, and which influences her/his professional practice (Evans, 2008). I think of it as, in a sense, the singular unit of professionalism, since it relates to how the individuals who make up a profession each approach and go about their work. By the same token, I conceive of professionalism as the ‘plural’ – or the amalgam - of individuals’ professionalities.

Making comparisons
I propose my conceptual model of professionalism as an analytical framework for scrutinising more closely the structure and nature of the professionalism of any occupational group, as well as for making comparisons between the professionalisms of different occupational groups. This analytical process involves compiling a profile or ‘picture’ of the professionalism in question from descriptors of each of the components identified in my model, highlighting in fine detail what it is to be a member of this profession. Used as analytical categories, these components each contribute a different shade or colour to what would otherwise be a flat, monochromatic image.

Referring back to the model’s specific dimensions, such analysis will reveal the typical work-related processes and procedures that delineate the professional practice of people belonging to a specific profession, and whose common practice defines their shared professionalism (i.e. the processual and procedural components or dimensions), and what kind of output they typically achieve (i.e. the productive dimension). It will allow us to see what kinds of skills and competences they manifest and utilise (i.e. the competential dimension), as well as what kinds of attitudes they typically share, and what the bases of these attitudes are (i.e. the perceptual, evaluative and motivational dimensions), and what picture of intellectual capacity and application they typically portray (i.e. the epistemological, rationalistic, comprehensive and analytical dimensions). The basis of the distinctiveness of any profession may then be pinpointed to one or more specific dimension.

The process of compiling an overall profile of a professionalism that applies to an entire occupational group is, however, complicated by the heterogeneity that reflects the diversity of individual practitioners’ or professionals’ biographies and professionality orientations. It can therefore only ever be an approximation of a professionalism that is compiled and represented: an impressionistic sketch, rather than an authentic likeness.

My purpose in this paper is to test out my model’s capacity as a tool for putting together an indicative sketch of adult educators’ professionalism, which may be used
as a gauge of how distinct it is, and where, precisely, any distinction lies. To do this I compare adult educators’ professionalism with that of child educators, but within the constraints imposed by word limit I confine this to the case of my own career experiences: my transition from the compulsory to the higher education sector in the UK. As a proxy for each of these two professions I use an impressionistic and approximate profile of the professionalism that, according to my recollection, I manifested as a primary school teacher, and the professionalism that I consider myself to manifest currently as an adult educator. In the next section I summarise in outline the process involved in this, and its results.

Spot the difference: comparing adult educators’ and child educators’ professionalism
Of course, I recognise fully that university-based postgraduate teaching represents only one strand of adult education, just as primary school teaching represents only one strand of child education. Moreover, the experiences of a single person – in this case, me - cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered representative of the profession as a whole. Notwithstanding these limitations upon generalisability, my comparative analysis has yielded interesting results.

The analytical process involved my compiling a table with three columns and eleven rows. The first column listed the eleven dimensions of professionalism (one per row) as identified in my model. Against each of these, in columns 2 and 3, I inserted – often in the form of listed bullet points – brief descriptors of the key ways in which I manifested the specific dimension when working as a primary school teacher (column 2), and the ways in which I currently manifest it as an adult educator (column 3). Confined by space restrictions, I postpone presentation of the completed table until the conference. Here I summarise below what the table’s content revealed about the similarities and differences between the two professionalisms.

Adult education and child education: commonalities and distinctions
In relation to the dimensions of the behavioural component, very few distinctions were revealed. My entries in both columns were identical regarding the productive dimension (specifically: ‘Work long hours, in excess of the designated working day/week; self-imposed workload and working hours determined by task requirements, not by contractual entitlements’), and the procedural dimension, which, in keeping with my intention to present general pictures of professionalisms, I summarised at a basic level as ‘following procedures established formally and informally’, to avoid becoming embroiled in constructing an interminable list of specific procedures each applicable to the specific institutions in which I have worked. In terms of the competential dimension, too, there was no distinction, the competences and skills that I exercise(d) being, in both professions: ‘teaching that engages and interests; motivating through praise, recognition and challenge; creative and innovative ideas for learning activities; empathy with and understanding of students’ backgrounds and contextually determined circumstances; communicating information, ideas and perspectives; the capacity to communicate effectively on a differentiation basis - accommodating diversity’. The processual dimension differed only insofar as a small number of specific processes that were applied to primary school teaching (e.g. ‘interaction with parents to discuss child’s progress and development’; and ‘classroom display’) were not applicable to adult education. Most processes were common to both contexts (e.g. ‘interaction with students(or pupils) as a class’; ‘interaction with students (or pupils) on a one-to-one
basis’; ‘interaction with students (or pupils) on a small group basis’; ‘collegial interaction with colleagues: planning, exchange of ideas, team teaching’; ‘planning of work’; ‘production of teaching resources’).

In relation to the intellectual component both professionalisms manifested remarkable similarities; indeed, the epistemological, rationalistic, and analytical dimensions were identical: ‘My practice was/is informed by a mediation of experientially-acquired knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning, knowledge derived through collegial interaction, and research-informed theoretical perspectives. I am influenced by a social justice epistemology’, ‘My practice was/is rationally-based’ and ‘My practice involves my analyses of processes that I (need to) apply to my work, including interpersonal relational issues and, in particular, the selection and formulation of learning resources and activities.’ The slight differences in how each professionalism is/was enacted in relation to the comprehensive dimension are evident from the content shown in Figure 2.

If significant distinctions between the two professionalisms did appear, I would have expected them to be located in the evaluative and perceptual dimensions. Here one may reasonably expect to uncover emphatic evidence of a gap separating primary school teachers’ anecdotally renowned caring, child-centred professionalism from the more detached, indifferent image that characterises university teachers. On the other hand, Chapman’s (2005, p. 309) reference to ‘andragogical perspectives’, implies a parallel with child-centredness. Yet, it was, indeed, these two dimensions that revealed the greatest distinction in my own (proxy) case.

*Figure 2: the comprehensive dimension of professionalism: comparing two professionalisms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of professionalism</th>
<th>Enactment as a primary school teacher</th>
<th>Enactment as an adult educator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>comprehensive</td>
<td>I understood/knew:</td>
<td>I understand/know:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• how to interest pupils;</td>
<td>• how to interest students;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• how to motivate pupils;</td>
<td>• how to motivate students;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• how to motivate colleagues;</td>
<td>• the needs, expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• the needs, expectations</td>
<td>and priorities of the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and priorities of the families</td>
<td>whom I teach (particularly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>whose children I taught;</td>
<td>international students);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• some of the ways in which children</td>
<td>• some of the ways in which</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learn;</td>
<td>adults learn;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• how to impress others</td>
<td>• how to impress others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(colleagues, line managers, pupils,</td>
<td>(colleagues, line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>parents)</td>
<td>managers, students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• how to relate to and work</td>
<td>• how to relate to and work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>collegially with others;</td>
<td>collegially with others;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• the (micro)politics within</td>
<td>• something of the (micro)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>my institution;</td>
<td>politics within my institution;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• most of the procedures</td>
<td>• some of the procedures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that applied to my performing my work;
• to varying degrees, the subject matter of most of what I was required to teach.

that apply to my performing my work;
• the subject matter of what I teach.

The evaluative dimension of professionalism, as I define it, relates not only to ‘grand’ values but also to the small, seemingly insignificant, things that matter to people in their work contexts. In my own case, in both professions these include(d): being – and appearing – effective, and equity and justice in relation to how colleagues act and are treated. But distinctions were also revealed; some of the issues that mattered to me as a primary school teacher (e.g. collegiality; collegial camaraderie; and the quality of my colleagues’ practice) do not feature as key concerns now that I am a university teacher and what matters to me more are: the quality of my relations with my students; and providing a good service – giving value for money. It was, however, in relation to the perceptual dimension, that the greatest distinction was revealed. This is illustrated by the lists of what I consider the key perceptions that define each each professionalism, shown in Figure 3.

Yet the basis of the distinction between these two sets of perceptions is contextual, rather than fundamental. Each set clearly reflects views and mindsets that are relevant to, and have been shaped by the key issues relating to, the very different sector-related and institutional contexts in which these two professionalisms, as enacted by me, are located. This, I argue, supports the notion that adult educators share the same basic professional make-up of any other group of teachers or educators.

Figure 3: the perceptual dimension of professionalism: comparing two professionalisms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of professionalism</th>
<th>Enactment as a primary schoolteacher</th>
<th>Enactment as an adult educator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>perceptual</td>
<td>My key perceptions included:</td>
<td>My key perceptions include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• children, for the most part, need to be motivated to carry out learning activities that meet national curricular requirements;</td>
<td>• adult learners, for the most part, are self-motivated to learn;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• education is a right for all children, regardless of circumstances and background;</td>
<td>• adult learners, for the most part, prefer interesting, stimulating learning activities to boring, lack-lustre ones;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• education is a vehicle for improving children’s life chances;</td>
<td>• postgraduate education, in general, suffers from a dilution of standards due to institutional admissions and assessment policies and practice;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• education is a medium through which societal improvement may occur, through the implicit and explicit transmission of</td>
<td>• international/overseas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
students have distinct learning and development needs and priorities;

- postgraduate students should reasonably be expected, on admission, to manifest sufficient proficiency in the language of instruction to be able to function effectively at postgraduate level;
- research-led teaching is greatly beneficial to teachers and students.

Concluding comments
So are adult educators a breed apart? My own case reveals no convincing evidence of their being so on the basis of their professionalism. Any distinctions that I did uncover may be dismissed as fairly superficial and context-related. Clearly, much more in-depth, representative, studies would be needed to provide more authentic and convincing evidence, but I would be surprised if these were to throw up anything that comes close to indicating fundamental distinctiveness.

As Merriam (2001, p.5) observes, andragogy has become something of ‘a rallying point for those trying to define the field of adult education as separate from other areas of education’. But if the andragogy-pedagogy debate remains inconclusive, with continued challenges, such as those of Houle (1996), to the notion that andragogy is fundamentally distinct from pedagogy, then the basis of categorising adult education as a distinct field will begin to be eroded away. Though this may threaten the distinct identity that many adult educators enjoy, there are clear epistemologically-related potential gains that may result from augmenting the adult education knowledge and theory base through a merger with other fields that focus on how people learn and, in turn, how they are – and should be – taught. Perhaps it is time for those who research, study, and work as practitioners in adult education to look forward by starting to break down the boundaries that have traditionally separated them from those working in other fields of learning and teaching.

References

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