Digging deep for clues to higher ground: researching professionalism in a further education (FE) college

Annie Ostapenko-Denton, Truro & Penwith College, England

Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

This paper charts a piece of research for an EdD undertaken with the University of Exeter. In it I consider what a small group of participants from Further Education (FE) colleges in the South West of England understand by the notion of professionalism, both theoretically and in practice. The research works in a hermeneutic framework, seeking to reach a shared, negotiated meaning with the participants ~ to achieve collaborative meaning-making.

The purpose of this paper is to share the journey that this research has taken. I use the term journey purposely ~ as I begin to see an end in sight to this particular piece of research, I realise that it has been an almost self-indulgent stroll through my own understanding and meaning-making. Initially, I believed that I was undertaking hermeneutic research because I wanted to give voice to the participants, but now I begin to see that I did it so that my own voice was not lost in the reporting of others.

Meaning making: what does professionalism mean?

In a classic piece on carrying out hermeneutic research, Young & Colin (1988) suggest that the first stage is to identify one’s own initial framework. This for me began with the realisation that I was seeking knowledge which is verstehen (understanding). Van der Zalm & Bergum (2000) suggest this is best found in the sharing of common meaning, and I felt that led directly to the use of hermeneutic research. It was my aim to gain and provide an understanding of the internal essence of individual’s notions of professionalism, which I saw (and still see) as a semi-concrete term at its most solid.

Having realised that I sought to understand, I needed to identify my own understanding before bringing in anyone else’s. Unless I understood the term itself I could not achieve a shared, negotiated meaning with my participants. This involved getting to grips with the theories and writings on professionalism in order to inform my own understanding which led me to the consideration of a number of terms, all surrounding the idea of professionalism.

Professionalism, professionality and democracy

Evans (2008) suggests that professionalism encompasses the skills, knowledge and procedures that we use in our day to day jobs, whilst professionality is the individual aspect of professionalism ~ the part embedded in individual epistemology and ontology, enmeshed in moral codes and having foundations in the our own understanding of what our profession demands. Sachs (2001) discusses democratic
professionalism, professionalism not under state control but seeking to demystify the role of the teacher by building alliances. The core of democratic professionalism is its emphasis on collaborative, cooperative action between teachers and other stakeholders. The first stage of this research was to realise that I wanted to put together these two ideas, seeking to achieve movement towards democratic professionality with the participants, reaching for a shared understanding of the inner workings of professionalism in a collaborative framework.

Goodson and Hargreaves (1996) suggest seven principles for post-modern professionalism. These seven principles appealed to me, as they were very close to my own idea of professionalism and fitted in to my own need for categorisation of such an enormous concept. Alongside such taxonomies, authors such as Robson, Bailey & Larkin (2004) suggest that the underpinning aspect of a notion of professionalism is the key idea of individual autonomy. I decided that these two extremes, the extensive taxonomy and the key idea would be the foundation for this research. I analysed the initial interviews using the seven principles of Goodson & Hargreaves (1996) and also identified instances where autonomy was discussed in all interviews.

**Initial frameworks**

I came to this research with a very clear initial framework for the meaning of the term professionalism. For me, professionalism, when I first started, was a notion that had three distinct aspects; action, theory and morality. I will briefly consider each of these here.

*Professionalism as action*

In my own initial framework professionalism is about professional behaviour. Professional behaviour involved turning up to class on time, finishing on time, marking assignments promptly and following my internal codes of conduct with regards to dress and appropriate language, for example. This checklist would not be exhaustive as there is very much a need to maintain flexibility within the classroom context. Even in situations which are new, however, I maintained the belief that a true professional would always know what was best. As far as professionalism as action is concerned, my initial framework fell very much into the notion that professionalism can be codified, rules can be created and certain behaviours are, and are not, appropriate. In short, my notion of professionalism in action was very black and white.

*Professionalism as theory*

I felt that the theory of professionalism was analogous to looking at a brochure, an idyllic representation of a potentially quite different reality. To take this further, I was quite sure that the brochure was written by someone who had not visited the location. Research on professionalism was done unto FE professionals, rather than by them. I felt that the ideas put forward in the current and less contemporary research that I read were representations but, since I was working in the reality of FE lecturing on a day to day basis, I was the one that had the real insider knowledge. In truth, when considering the theory of professionalism I was dubious as to the relevance of it to my day to day practice. It seemed to be something that was written about my job, but certainly not something that told me anything that I did not already know.
Professionalism as morality
The final aspect of professionalism in my initial framework was that professionalism has a moral aspect, and is a moral imperative. As a lecturer in FE, I have a moral obligation to my students, to provide them with not only the knowledge they need, but with the support and encouragement to believe in themselves. As part of this, I have a very strong belief that lecturing is a fundamentally honest occupation. I have a moral duty to do the greatest good for my students, but that must be within a framework of honesty and mutual respect. I subscribe most strongly to this belief, this idea that integrity is vital to my work. By maintaining integrity, I provide my students with what is, in my opinion, the most important aspect of my job ~ a strong example. It is not my aim to tell my students what they must think unquestioningly, but rather to teach them to think, and question, for themselves.

The further education professional
FE is different. It is not a school and it is not a university, it meets the needs of very diverse groups and is market-led in a manner unlike any other educational institution. Over twenty years ago, Robson (1998) suggested that FE was a sector experiencing an identity crisis, more recently Bathmaker and Avis (2005) illustrated a lack of professional identity in trainee FE lecturers and a mere three years later Jephcote, Salisbury & Rees (2008) found that experienced staff identified the realities of FE lecturing as being akin to fire fighting, not planning. These researchers have all identified the FE sector as different from all others. It is as a subscriber to this philosophy that I undertook this research. This links to Lucas’ (2004) description of FE as ‘polycontextual’ in terms of its provision and complexity and Hodkinson, Anderson, Coley, Davies, Dimment, Scaife, Tedder, Wahlberg & Wheeler’s (2007) reminder that the ‘Cinderella Sector’ is filled with uniqueness ~ every site and college is a distinctive creature, with specific and individual aspects.

Participant frameworks
Above and beyond is the norm
The participants each came to the initial interview aware of their own notions of professionalism. Universally, they discussed the workload and level of work that they had to undertake. This linked with Hodkinson et al (2007) who point out that tutors in the FE sector have a tendency to go ‘over and above’ the demands of their role by, for example, engaging in emotional labour and working to absorb the problems of their students. The participants all discussed the need, not desire to engage in underground working to maximise student achievement, carrying out duties which were specifically outside of their remit but which were deemed ‘necessary’ in order to help their students achieve. One of the participants, for example, described her job as being to turn students’ lives around, to give hope to those who perceive themselves as failures. These students, according to Coffield, Edward, Finlay, Hodgson, Spours, Steer & Gregson (2007) are the people who have had negative experiences throughout their previous education and for whom FE is an opportunity to reinvent themselves as a learner.

Gender issues
There was a significant difference, however, in how the participants described professionalism. At a surface level in their initial frameworks, there seemed to be gender differences in their descriptions. This linked with Murray’s (2006) idea that women educators seemed to promote more of an ethos of care and adopt the ‘caring
professional’ role. Certainly, the female participants each described the need to care for students very strongly in their first few interviews. They talked about having to go above and beyond the basics and to exhibit concern for their students. Conversely, the male participants used far more words which were about rules and guidelines, adopting a much more pragmatic approach to their notions of professionalism. There was, for example, one of the male participants who identified an almost formulaic approach to the idea of students getting better results ~ if the lecturer follows this formula, then any student who is capable of achieving will do so. However, as the interviews progressed, it became apparent that many of the participants were merely using different words to mean the same thing. When analysed and questioned more closely, it became obvious that the gender issue was a much more complex one than at first appeared. It is, as Gunter (2000) states, not an issue easily solved. Deeper discussion indicated that both sets of participants were talking about the same things and that, in fact, the difference was in the words used, rather than the meanings behind them.

Polycontextual complexity
The polycontextual nature of FE that I previously discussed was very much evident in the teaching workload of the participants. Some of them were purely FE lecturers, encompassing the variety of levels and courses that this entailed whilst others were purely HE. Both groups recognised differences in this, with HE being seen as having higher status and more conflicting demands. The participants who worked in HE all described a feeling of getting the ‘worst’ students, as those students who choose to come to a FE college for their HE experience are likely to be the students who are not as committed due to other demands on their time. Hoelscher, Hayward, Ertle, & Dunbar-Goddet (2008) identify first year undergraduates in an FE college as far less concerned with the quality of the institution than their university counterparts. Interestingly, whilst all the HE participants agreed that this was the case, putting a real pressure on their ability to be professional, the FE participants all expressed the idea that professional behaviour was easier for the HE staff since their students were far more motivated and academic.

Beyond complexity
The participants all identified themselves as being unable to clearly identify their own professional identity at the beginning of the research, although most of them felt able to do this by the end. This was best summed up by Edward, a very experienced lecturer who has worked in HE for all of his teaching career. He explained that there was no such thing as a professional identity for anyone who works in an FE college, and that situation is exacerbated by the identity of being a HE lecturer. Professionalism, to Edward, for a HE lecturer in an FE college is something that can never be achieved, as the demands on professionalism from the FE ethos is in constant conflict with the demands of professionalism from the University which accredits the HE courses. He identifies it as

_impossible to work within the restraints put on us by the FE pencil-police, and completely impossible to do that within the restrictions of HE in that. And that’s before we even set foot in to the classroom with all the issues that our students bring..._

Certainly, this was a feeling that was echoed by all of the participants who worked in HE in an FE college. They identified, along with their FE counterparts, the demands
made by the culture of their college which they say as unachievable and impossible. However, those who worked in FE stopped their description there whilst, unanimously, those who worked in HE, either exclusively or alongside an FE timetable, then went on to describe how they were asked to adopt a professional identity by the university which was often at direct odds with the FE ethos. This links in to the notion of supercomplexity of academic identities, moving beyond the ‘normal’ supercomplexity of working as an FE lecturer in an FE college and entering into a new realm (Barnett, 2000). This was, perhaps, best summed up by Julie who said

*I feel sometimes like working in HE here is like being back in school and not even the chess club understanding me. Management expect one thing, students another and even my own sense of appropriate professional behaviour is blurred sometimes. It’s just too much to ask for one identity when this job is so many roles*

**Impossible tasks and the push of policy**
The HE/FE distinction disappeared in the common despair at the constant pull and push of policy. Each participant, without exception, spent the majority of their time in the first two interviews discussing the impossibility of policy demands. What was most interesting was that there were no differing groups in this theme – men and women, FE and HE lecturers, all participants identified the push of policy as one of the main impacts on their professionalism. Palmer (2001) suggests that the focus on retention and achievement has led to a parallel decrease in the ability to widen participation, which was echoed throughout the interviews. This forms part of what Humphreys and Hoque (2007:1200) term a ‘professional swindle’ of FE lecturers. They purport that post-incorporation FE colleges have been encouraged to adopt the approaches of management which reside in the private sector. Furthermore, this management style focuses on ‘participatory’ management, with all members of the work force being involved in the decision making process. Certainly those participants who were more experienced as lecturers all spoke of the ever changing face of working in an FE college, with the constant demands of policy causing ‘jelly goalposts’.

It is worthy of note that most of the participants focused on micro-policy of their institution rather than on Government policy. The Institute for Learning (IfL) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the two professional bodies for the participants were barely mentioned and, when asked about them, the participants were dismissive of their usefulness. As Norman said:

*What can they do for me? They don’t know me, they have no idea who I am or who my students are. They give me professional standards without giving me clarity on them, they enforce CPD when I’ve barely got time enough to see my kids. It sounds dramatic, but they’re just another hoop to jump through and they can take a ticket.... it’s a long line.*

**In conclusion**
Professionalism, professionality and professional identity are confused and complex notions in this study. The participants are unclear of their institutional boundaries and consider themselves to be islands unto themselves, hopefully functioning in a way that meets the conflicting demands of their role.
The notion of supercomplexity is one which is interesting and appropriate to these individuals, but although the HE lecturers specifically identified something beyond the norm, it seems that all of them are working in a supercomplex environment at the least. Participants in this study identified their own notions of professionalism and professional identity, but spent the majority of the interviews discussing the pressures which would work against it. It seems appropriate to conclude with a quote from Edward:

It doesn’t matter what I do, I can’t fit into all the shapes they want. If I’m concerned about retention, then I’m spoon feeding them. If I treat them as adults, then I’m not providing sufficient support. When I point out that this student is failing because she’s barely literate, then I’m not adhering to the widening participation agenda. I think that professionalism in FE, whether you teach in HE or FE within it is to be able to be a positive scapegoat, to have the skills of accepting the blame for the inevitable. I am the ultimate hypocrite trying to keep everyone happy and still maintain a sense of self worth.

References:
Barnett R (2000) Realising the University, Berkshire, OUP


*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 30 June 2010*