

Becoming professionals: Teacher education students linking industry and community

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This paper seeks to evoke thinking about the notion of becoming a professional in modern times. Inasmuch as the authors are teacher educators, the paper is concerned with the education of teachers as professionals while possibly having something to say to the larger question of the education of professionals in general.

Currently "professional development" is a buzz word in education and training circles with considerable resources being spent in its name. We are asking if it might be wise to pause and reflect on our understanding of what it means to be a professional today.

The paper is written as a consequence of a study that sought to evaluate the home economics professional practicum unit within the BEd(Secondary) program at Deakin University (Rusden Campus), and it falls in three parts, the first two being largely drawn from the evaluation report. Part one relates to the significance of the unit. Part two speaks to what the evaluation brought to light. Part three points to some aspects of the dilemma for educators in educating for professional practice while exploring some possibilities in the links between education and business/industry.

PART I BACKGROUND

The Home Economics Professional Practice Unit (HEPPU) was made compulsory for students majoring in Home Economics within the Bachelor of Education (Secondary) Degree program in 1988. At the time, the designers of the course were responding, in part, to the policies and reforms under way regarding changes in the relationship between education and different sections of the community. Partnerships between Federal and State governments were beginning to shape concepts, policy and practice in Australian schools in ways that would link education more closely to business and industry and the workplace generally. Reforms of the 70s and early 80s, relating to issues of equality and equity, socio-economic disadvantage, special needs, personal development and multiculturalism, were being revised in light of concern for the nation's economic well-being. Since the late 80s, education

policy has been increasingly influenced by a Federal government concern for Australia's foreign debt and trade performance, with Education and Training being seen as significant components in making industries more efficient and internationally competitive.

Current initiatives toward a National Curriculum reflect a movement to bring vocational and general education closer together in ways that focus on preparing students for life in an increasingly technological society. Priority is being given at the national level to developing curriculum statements and profiles in eight broad areas of learning, in contrast to past practice where single subject curricula were developed at state level. Simultaneous to these innovations has been the influential, national reports of the Finn, Mayer, and Carmichael committees that emphasise the importance of preparing young people for employment. In stressing the nation's need for a multi-skilled, flexible and adaptable work force it is being

recommended that general education for students facilitate the development of 7 Key Competencies deemed essential for effective participation in work. Thus teachers of Home Economics are facing the possibility they will be soon working in multi-disciplinary teams focussing on areas of learning such as Technology, Health and perhaps Studies of Society and Environment, and that increasingly their teaching will relate to the world of work--paid and unpaid.

What is so significant about the inclusion of the Professional Practice Unit as a requirement for students majoring in Home Economics within the Bachelor of Education program is the vision the developers initially had for its potential to address the issues and problems of the current economic and educational climate. For the HEPPU was designed to provide students with the opportunity to explore career paths in home economics other than school teaching but also with the view that the field placements would provide the kinds of experience that would enrich teaching if that were the path chosen.

Moreover, as the BEd degree continues to become a more general degree than previously, the value of the unit continues to grow in significance as a way of helping students face a world characterised by uncertainties that were less evident, or not recognised, in the past. Then, the majority of holders of BEd degrees assumed they would enter the school system and remain within that for the duration of their career, with perhaps brief breaks in service, due to factors such as parenting or further study. The realisation that those trained in education can serve the community in ways other than formal teaching is only recently being acknowledged and recognised, pointing to other directions and prospects for current students.

In light of these factors, the evaluation report becomes a starting place for re-viewing 1) other units within the BEd

program from the perspective of the relationship of the developing links between education and business/industry/community and 2) the question of professional development and how it might be understood.

The Home Economics Practice Unit;

As a one semester unit to be undertaken during the eighth semester of the BEd program, the Home Economics Professional Practice Unit is planned to assist in the transition of students from college life to professional work in home economics, by providing pre-professional experience in areas other than post-primary schools. Drawing on the experience of training in other professional fields, the unit has been developed to provide a form of experience that integrates professional and academic aspects in a vocational way

In its design the unit is structured to take account of two inter-related parts:

- * a half-semester lecture-discussion program that addresses professional issues in home economics and
- * a not-less-than 60 hours field placement that provides professional experience in the fields of commerce/industry/manufacture, health, community or social service.

The practicum is not intended to be understood as merely "work experience" but rather in terms of the student acting in the role of a "helping professional" or home economist-in-business under the supervision of host organisation personnel.

The unit is managed by a team of lecturers from the Home Economics Department at Deakin University. Each lecturer serves as a field placement supervisor/facilitator in her/his area of specialisation. Specialisations relate to student field placements in nutrition and food service, textiles and clothing, financial advising, home economics in business or family support services. In that the unit is concerned with professional

practice it depends on numerous host organisations providing placements and providing personnel to serve as field placement supervisors and perhaps as role models, mentors or facilitators, within the field placements. These factors make for wide variation in the sorts of situations students encounter, which in turn makes grading for the unit problematic. As a way of overcoming the difficulty assessment for the unit tasks is all pass-fail except the research paper which is graded.

The unit is intended to

- a) provide students with an opportunity to experience some aspects of the work of a Home Economist or related occupation;
- b) develop further skills and knowledge gained through academic studies by integrating these into the daily working environment;
- c) provide students with an opportunity to develop the

perceptive and communicative skills required to work with and for others, thereby developing self-confidence, a sense of responsibility and an ability to deal with problems;

d) familiarise the student with the overall structure of a particular organisation and the means by which the organisation, and the supervising professional within that organisation, identify the needs of their customers and achieve customer satisfaction;

e) develop an understanding of the interaction between technological and commercial factors and between interests of producers and consumers in preparation for a career as a Home Economist;

f) enable the student to establish career opportunities.

PART II

THE EVALUATION

The research approach for the evaluation of the unit was informed by literature that sees the tasks and roles of evaluation in several ways; in particular the works of Aoki (1984), Giroux (1981) and Hamilton (1977) were helpful.

The starting point for the research was an interest in the extent to which the unit achieves its aims with a view to revealing possibilities that may enhance the goals being achieved and maximising the benefits to participants. Initially questionnaires were designed and distributed, and the information collected and assembled to see how well the unit contributed to:

- 1) the participating students' self-confidence and understanding of the professional work of home economists and
- 2) the participant host organisation supervisors' understanding of what home economics students bring to professional work.

Follow up interviews were conducted with the intent of probing more deeply how some participating students and host organisation supervisors saw the practicum in terms of its benefits to them. The interest here was in revealing how some students perceived and experienced the unit as appropriate and meaningful to their own situations and concerns, as well as hearing from some supervisors what the practicum meant to their organisation. With the underlying intent of the evaluation being a way to determine possible changes that might enhance outcomes for participants and the community they serve, a reflective lens was brought to bear.

Students' Perspectives;

Participating students said they benefited from participation in the program in both personal and professional ways. For some the benefits were in the further development of technical skills such as computing and demonstrating skills or altering commercial patterns. For others, it was in their skills of new product and recipe development, organisation and time-management skills. Many cited how the practicum experience meant

enhanced interpersonal and communication skills, as well as increased confidence in their capacity to perform in the

workplace. As one said, "It helped me recognise the abundance of knowledge and skills I have."

Many saw the benefits in terms of broadening their employment options through the contacts they made in the business world, and in understanding where home economics skills and knowledge might contribute to an occupation. Some whose practicum took them into organisations providing community services found their problem solving skills together with their craft skills in foods and/or textiles, were valued by the organisations and their clients in ways they had not thought of before. As one said, "I just didn't know how little the average person knows about nutrition."

For many the benefits lay in the realisation that their teaching skills were transferable to situations other than schools. As they approached the end of the degree course, a number of students were aware that teaching home economics in schools was not the career they now wished to follow. For these students the practicum broadened their horizons to opportunities for professional service in areas not previously recognised as being home economics work related--youth and family welfare centres, financial counselling services, health and fitness centres, womens' refuges, centres for intellectually handicapped people. For many the practicum was an eye opener in raising their awareness to the educative potential of home economics in a variety of community settings.

The practicum was of benefit to some in terms of it being an opportunity to, as they said in their reports

For others, the practicum experience lead to them re-thinking many things. As the following comments illustrate, the unit provided the opportunity to:

realise I'd been living in a vacuum. There is so much poverty in this place.... I had never encountered it before. Perhaps I'd read about it but I'd never actually seen it.

see the needs of the people here were very different from anything I had encountered or experienced.... What was needed were recipes for a one-burner stove because many of them only had one burner in their housing commission flats.

work with women who had experienced the rough time which I can only imagine. I have never felt privileged, affluent or socially advantaged before. Now I know that I am.

One respondent to the questionnaire, currently teaching in a secondary college, said

The practicum presented a depth of experience--in fact it was shocking at times and is etched in my memory. Teaching is a breeze by comparison!

For another teacher, the practicum was an "eye opener" in helping get rid of the "blinkers" she now senses she wore as a student, particularly as a student-teacher where the emphasis was on "performance and creating beautiful hand-outs." Coming to terms with the placement situation and establishing where she wanted to

go with the practicum, she said was particularly helpful with her initial teaching appointment in deciding what kinds of things to include in her teaching program and making changes in existing programs.

Another student spoke of the difference between the professional practicum and the customary teaching practice. She said with the latter everything seemed to be organised for them as student teachers

You walk in and are told, "We've arranged for you to teach Period 2 Maths and Periods 3 and 4 year 7 Home Economics and here are the topics." It's all done for you except the content, but then they advise you on that anyway!"

Whereas on the professional practicum, help was provided by way of access to resources and host personnel talking about the clients

so I was able to set up my own program teaching slightly disabled people how to look after themselves--skills I thought they would need.

Views of host organisation supervisors

For many supervisors, providing a placement is beneficial to their organisation. Several spoke of how highly motivated and enthusiastic the students were, and of how the skills and knowledge they brought meant the tasks assigned were well done. As one said

We're happy to go along with it [the practicum] because we're limited in our person power.... We always have more good ideas

than could possibly be put into operation.... The students were able to do something that was extremely valuable to us. Another said that having a student enabled them to complete a small project that was "otherwise on hold and it made us clarify our tasks goals and objectives."

Some supervisors see the placement in terms of its two-way benefits. As one said "it gave us an opportunity to help them, plus they had ideas that were helpful to us." Another talked of it being not only the opportunity to initiate students into the "sort of mad world" in which she operates but also that she likes "to have young people around me because you can't create in isolation and they're the future generation, the future consumers and their ideas are very different to mine sometimes." A third spoke of the sense of satisfaction she experiences in having students in these circumstances:

They can be like an apprentice--I'm the master, it helps me reflect on the purpose of the organisation.

This supervisor, like others, saw her pre-conceptions about home economics originating from her own school days and she was somewhat surprised to find how home economists could contribute in significant ways to the financial counselling service her organisation provides.

Others see the practicum as important for students going into the teaching profession in that it provides them with the practical experience of the work place. As one said "some of our future employees may be taught Textiles by these people."

Another spoke of the practicum being

A third cited the benefits of the interaction between home economists and consumer scientists....[It] broadens our horizons and reminds us of other professional perspectives.

For one supervisor in a community service organisation located in an inner suburb, the practicum is an opportunity for students to experience other realities of the world

They can't go back to teaching in the Eastern suburbs without knowing something about what this part of the world is like....

I hope something touches them, that they don't just accept things the way they are.

In his view, home economics and social work have much in common in their concern for the quality of people's lives. Both areas of study seek to dispel the myth they are not academic because of the "futility of number crunching" to the discipline.

PART III

AN EMERGING DILEMMA

Overall it would appear supervisors view the practicum favourably seeing its benefits in both the short and the long

term. They are appreciating the actual work done by students for their organisation as well as the links being forged between their organisation--business, industry or community service--and education. And while many said their students helped clarify the aims of the unit, some of the feedback suggests not all supervisors recognise the significance of the practicum as professional experience rather than work experience. Whereas work experience entails largely "doing," professional practice encompasses not only "doing" but "thinking" also--an aspect that does not feature largely in comments made about the student placements.

This in turn raises a question of how professionals in a field view their work. Do they see it in terms of an occupation or career for which their training has equipped them with skills and relevant knowledge, to be an expert within some organisation or field of endeavour? In this view, a professional--as expert--defines problems, plans and delivers services to others. A professional's expertise is informed by scientific research, and professional practice is concerned with managing resources to achieve pre-determined goals, efficiently and effectively. On the other hand is the view of a professional as one who seeks to fulfill a field's mission and calling such as healing the sick, teaching the young. With this orientation comes something missing from the professional-as-expertise-provider concept, an element that is considered critical to a personal service profession in that it involves the ethical-moral dimensions of professional practice--practical judgement or wisdom--or doing the right thing in the particular circumstance.

Aspects of the dilemma

That understanding what it means to be a professional is problematic, is hardly an issue we, as educators of professionals, can afford to ignore. At a time when decisions about policy in education, at the level of higher education and in the K-12 curriculum are being influenced by economic and industrial matters, it could well be that by default, professional practice becomes the application of technical and scientific knowledge in the name of "best practice" whether the linking of education and training more closely to economic and trade policies by the federal government is in itself, an appropriate way to go, is hardly the question. The reality is, it is happening and as such it provides an opportunity for educators to explore its possibilities.

New alliances between education and the community such as the professional practicum unit for students in the BEd program, are providing the incentive for professionals in the field and in education to meet, to discuss pre-professional practice. As one home economist in business said
I think they (university educators) need to come out into the

business world a bit more. I can get very narrow in my little world too. I try to get out and meet others, seeing how other industries work and how the business world functions...because, let's face it, we're all very commercial...

To what extent professionals meeting together can take advantage of the opportunity for reciprocal learning is open to question,

given the time constraints imposed by the current mode of economic rationalism. Increasingly time is being talked of in terms of money, just as the language of professionalism is increasingly becoming dominated by industrial metaphors to the exclusion of those that reflect the spirit of professionalism and its ethical dimensions. Personal service professionals are struggling to resist the intrusion of corporate values into their world of practice as it is one of the consequences of current ideology that increased productivity is expected of practitioners. Numbers of visits, numbers of clients, or amounts of research undertaken and publicly communicated are becoming the measure of worth for professional activity. That no one has discovered a way of inventing more time to reflect on the value of the activity in human terms seems to have been overlooked. Rather the technological juggernaut rolls on with professionals becoming busier and busier discovering more and more information or applying the findings of the latest scientific research in their practice. Either way, they are caught on a treadmill of doing more and reflecting less on the human problems that call them to become professionals in the first place. What is disturbing about the situation is that professionalism becomes paternalistic when reliance on a technical-economic mode of rationality determines professional practice as that of "the expert." Clients' perspectives are ignored partly due to the time it would take to listen to their point of view, and partly because it is assumed the experts knowledge is superior to that of those experiencing problem situations.

Moreover, we are reminded in education the corporate metaphors are beginning to dominate the language of teaching, when Kenway (1990) notes the change in key words in commonwealth education policy since 1988. Whereas for over a decade earlier, teaching had been guided by policy concerned with greater educational justice for disadvantaged groups, together with notions of child-centred teaching, devolution of decision-making and community involvement, more recently the key words have the ring of corporate management with talk of teaching in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, performance indicators, productivity and standards.

In another way the effects of the federal educational policy in the tertiary sector is providing a challenge for educators of professionals. Part of the problem relates to the post-WW2 history of higher education in Australia. For example, prior to

the establishment of the Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs), teacher training for primary teachers and some secondary school subject areas such as home economics, was largely undertaken in a teachers' college where a teaching certificate was earned. On the other hand, many secondary teachers undertook study in the arts or science in the universities, thus beginning teaching with a degree and a diploma of teaching. With the advent of CAEs, students were able to earn a degree as eligibility to join the professional ranks of a variety of occupations including radiography, social work, and more recently, nursing. Superficially, there was the view that CAEs provided training for newly-emerging professions while upgrading older ones like teaching, with the emphasis being on 1) the application rather than the generation of knowledge, 2) relevance to the workplace and 3) acquiring the pertinent skills of a profession. On the other hand, and again superficially, the "academic" universities continued to train students for professional occupations with the view that exposure to the life of science or scholarship is a significant aspect in the future lives of professionals. That the inquiry be relevant in its content to the professionals' later practical duties was not as important as having students learn to apply themselves to the possibility of experiences which awaken questions. In other words research or scholarship in itself is formative of persons, and is educational in the sense

that it stimulates the need and desire for more education--as Dewey was wont to say, it brings about growth.

Another aspect of the dilemma for educators of professionals, is the revolution in the research culture since the collapse of the binary system of higher education. Insofar as the advanced education sector had a strong applied orientation in its educational mission, it was not funded for research as was the university sector. In that there is an increase in government funds for research by the comprehensive universities, nevertheless they are encouraged to be entrepreneurial and market-oriented in their research activities, not only to secure outside funding but also to forge links with the community in ways not previously envisaged.

Linking higher education more closely with the community provides a variety of possibilities for the educators of professionals as the evaluation of the professional practicum unit for home economics students in the BEd program illustrates. However, when a student talks of her experience in terms of feeling she was "employed as a kitchen hand," it is time to wonder how some professionals view professional practice. To the extent that many undertook training when instrumental thinking dominated and the professional-client relationship was markedly undemocratic, the opportunities to engage professionals in the field in re-thinking professionalism, can be fostered by the

education and community links currently being advocated. In the current mode of economic rationalism there is a sense that education can learn from the corporate way of doing business--considerably less emphasis has been placed on the way education can contribute to professional services in the community.

Yet another perspective of the dilemma is related to an historical turning point in the methodological foundations of educational research and of the social sciences generally, that came with the social movements--peace, women's, conservation, and so on--of the 1960s and 70s. Since the late sixties, when critics called into question the dominant theoretical orientation (structural-functionalist) of social enquiry and the positivistic theory of knowledge that went with it, research possibilities have been enlarged by interpretive and critical approaches. Whereas inquiry within a positivist orientation has an interest in discovering what is "practical" in a technical or managerial sense, research in the interpretive and critical traditions serve communicative and emancipatory interests. Advocates of interpretive and critical research approaches call into question the capacity of positivistic inquiry for dealing with substantive questions of moral or political philosophy such as, how should we live together on this planet. Post-empiricist developments in the philosophy and history of science, social science methodology, Continental hermeneutics and practical political thought have opened up new dimensions for social and educational inquiry. No longer is the professional training of teachers solely dependent on theories and models derived from positivistic-oriented parent disciplines such as psychology, sociology and philosophy. Rather their professional practice is enhanced by phenomenological, hermeneutic and critical insights and by alternative modes of rationality.

At a time when the knowledge industry is tending to be dominated by an attitude of accountability and social engineering, it may be critical that professional practice in education does not become preoccupied instrumentally with skills, techniques and strategies and the means-end criteria of efficiency and effectiveness. Any back-sliding towards one-dimensional thinking deserves to be treated with suspicion. Rather education, like all the professions stands firmly for growth, with the acquisition of skills and the possession of knowledge understood as marks of, and the means to continuing growth. As Dewey says "Government, business, art, religion, all

social institutions have a meaning, a purpose. That purpose is to set free and to develop the capacities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class or economic status" (1948, p. 186). We, like Dewey fifty years ago, cannot escape concern about the inadequacy of moral progress to correspond with our economic and technological accomplishment. The domestic

violence, child abuse, poverty, homelessness, hunger, statelessness, denial of human rights and freedom experienced by so many millions of our population are human problems demanding a human response. As educators of professionals we have a responsibility to these problems in the way we teach for cleverness and in professional practice.

Questions to open the conversation

In light of the dilemmas we found, some questions for educators of professionals emerge:

- * How can we justify the education of professionals for cleverness without wisdom?
- * In what ways might we realise students' awareness to the socially-critical aspects of being professional?
- * How might students come to understand the relationship between knowledge and power?
- * What might inspire students to ask whose interests are being served by a particular social, economic or political practice?
- * Where is our educative courage to seize the opportunities opened up by the business/industry/education connections; to create the forums with professionals already in the field; to engage in meaningful conversation about how we should educate professionals towards a more socially just and human world?

It might just be as Dewey said "Making a living economically speaking, will be one with making a life that is worth living" (1948, p. 211) when we lift our sights from the lowest common-dollar denominator, and value others' being there.

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