

Willing to be a Professional

Ronald Barnett

Ronald Barnett, Institute of Education, London

*University of Surrey: Learning to be a Professional conference
March, 2009*

www.ioe.ac.uk



Centre for Higher
Education Studies

Introduction

- The trajectory of professional becoming
- Perhaps a 20-year trajectory
- The medical student's story
 - - a life-wide project
- A professional will
 - - and its formation
 - - and its sustaining (thro an arduous process of prof formation and professional development)

Why do doctors commit suicide?

- We don't know.
- Occupational stress
 - - not just a psychological phenomenon but a social-psychological (higher levels of s in some specialities)
 - - and also a sociological phenomenon
- NB – just a case study ...

Forming a professional will

- A will to go on
- A will to engage with the world
- - in a world of trauma and uncertainty
- Security lay in knowledge and in knowing
- - but now that security has been undermined
- The patients know things – or think they do
- - and want other things from the clinical relationship
- (again, just a case study ...)

Not just a world of complexity ...

- Yes, complexity but there are forms of complexity
- And some forms of complexity are not susceptible to easy resolution
- Professional life is caught in systems that reduce the professionals' autonomy
- - responsibilities but often with reduced power
- & is caught in a 'liquid arena', in which the key concepts of professional life are contested (what is it to be a doctor?)

Willing to be a professional – a nice ambiguity

- So ‘willing to be a professional’ has a nice ambiguity to it:
- Why and under what circumstances might one be willing to be a professional? (Who would want to be a professional?)
- Ideas of future trajectory, of intention;
- But the will is integral to the now of being a professional and to its continuing becoming;
- So the will is not only a matter of past formation but is an abiding presence in being and continuing to be a professional

Forming a professional will – and sustaining it

- The educator's role is just this – helping to form a professional will in such a way that it might be durable
- ‘amid the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’
- components – an integration of knowing, action, and being
- both the knowing and the action will have elements of collectivity; and being too
- but being also has its (life-wide?) interiority; even ultimately a loneliness (‘Loneliness as a way of life’, Thomas Dunn, 2008)

The snare of the ‘community of practice’

- Professions ARE communities of practice
- CofPs provide identity, mutual learning and conviviality.
- They nourish a will to go on.
- But, while necessary, they are not sufficient in the sustaining of the professional will.
- For that requires a will to stand apart from the profession as well as live within it.
- For the full professional is able to critique the profession and help to move it forward.
- The profession may be falling short or may be wrong. So as a community of practice, it cannot be all enveloping.

Elements of a professional will: Dispositions

Dispositions:

- A will to learn; to go on learning
- A will to encounter strangeness
- A will to engage
- A preparedness to listen
- A willingness to be changed
- A determination to keep going.

Elements of a Professional Will: Qualities

- concern (for the intrinsic nature of the profession)
- fortitude/ resilience
- carefulness
- self-restraint
- integrity
- respect for others

Evoking this professional will: aims for professional education

- Coming to understand key strands of contemporary knowledge germane to a practice (will be multidisciplinary)
- Capacities to live in a practice and become part of its community
- Capacities to live out authentically one's practices in a self-monitoring & self-critical mode (even at the cost of self-estrangement)
- Capacities to communicate with multiple audiences

Educational implications

Curricula implications

- An interweaving of knowing, acting and being
 - By oneself and with others
- [NB: we are in the dark here.]

Pedagogical implications

- Ultimately, the student has to teach him/herself
- So an increasingly loose pedagogical frame
- Connecting with a life-wide trajectory?

The will and the other

- The will has to have a care for the other but not yet be bound to it
- Keeping a professional and critical distance
- Internalising external voices – society/ the profession/ clients; but maintaining an interiority, an interior space
- The other can nurture the will – but it can also undermine the will. (Life-wide becoming is a becoming that stands in but independently of the other.)
- So the will needs its internal resources

The sources of the professional will

- Delight
- The language, the poetry, of the moment
- Recognition
- Humour
- Graciousness
- Perceived value
- Perceived effect
- is this enough? Faith? Hope? A necessary flimsiness?

Conclusion

- Discourses: knowledge; competence; learning; community; complexity – all are inadequate bases for forming professionalism; and they are contested.
- We have to bring in the idea of the formation of a professional will – and that for an unknown future. The basis of this formation is unclear.
- Perhaps its nature lies beyond us; perhaps it is necessarily mysterious.
- But still our explorations may yet yield some dividend.



Institute of Education
University of London
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL

Tel +44 (0)20 7612 6000
Fax +44 (0)20 7612 6126
Email info@ioe.ac.uk
Web www.ioe.ac.uk