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The arts and professionals' ways of knowing

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine the potential the arts have to contribute to the education of professionals. We consider the implications of writings about the changing nature of professional knowledge and note that such knowledge is increasingly contingent and contested. Professionals have to acknowledge multiple perspectives, competing truths and manage ill-structured problems. We then go on to discuss the kinds of epistemological challenges the arts can offer to professionals' ways of seeing their role and use examples from the adult education literature to illustrate this in practice. Art, with its emphasis on symbolic and metaphorical representation, its openness to multiple interpretations and its capacity to require us to look at the world differently, challenges narrow interpretations of reality and helps professionals to develop a more inclusive epistemology.

Introduction

This paper explores how the arts can contribute to a specific aspect of professional education, the development of an approach to knowledge that supports professionals' ability to manage ill-structured problems and develop their roles within the competing discourses that Ronald Barnett identifies as a feature of professional life in an age of super-complexity (Barnett, 2008). It does so by bringing together literature exploring the nature of the professional role with literature examining the educational value of the arts.

We begin by discussing Barnett's description of super-complexity and how this may inform critical educational discourses. We then provide a brief explanation of professionalism, and explore how the identity of being a "professional" may be understood in a context of super-complexity. Our paper concludes by beginning to articulate the specific contribution that the arts can have to changing the way professionals understand knowledge and manage learning discourses.

Super-complexity

In recent decades there has been a recognition by the academic community that not only has information been expanding exponentially, thus creating a perceived need for ongoing lifelong learning, but in addition, *systems of knowledge* have been proliferating. Wilson (2010) points out that in the context of supercomplexity, "the fundamental frameworks and models by which we understand the world are multiplying" (p. 369). For those of us who work as educators, this poses ongoing challenges in rethinking how we should prepare learners to engage with the world. Barnett (2011a) claims that "the modern age is replete with challenge, competing values, and unpredictability" (p. 5).

As a consequence, universities must foster new approaches to learning to address the ways in which knowledge systems are rapidly evolving and changing (Barnett, 2000). Curzon-Hobson (2002) argues "gone is the relative monopoly universities once enjoyed over the production, legitimation and dissemination of knowledge" (p.181). New players – such as corporate universities and industry-based research – are shifting societal acceptance of universities as the main purveyors of new knowledge. To survive and thrive in this context, educators who work in a variety of fields, including the professional sector, must critically assess how they will prepare their students to learn in a world that Barnett describes as "radically unstable" (2011a, p. 8).

Professionalism

The literature on professionalism is extensive and there is no consensus about what constitutes a profession. Definitions of classical/ ideal-type professions (Freidson, 2001) have focused on the self-regulatory and autonomous nature of professions; others discuss the growth of new professions, proto-professions and the changing nature of professional occupations, including the loss of those properties of autonomy and self-regulation that were often considered to be central to professionalism (Halsey, 1992; Crook, 2008;

Whitty, 2008). We use the term profession in this article to refer to those occupational categories that are generally perceived as professions by the public, even as we recognise that these categories constantly change. The categories include a wide range of health and education professionals and accountants, lawyers, managers and engineers. In defining a professional, we refer to the possession of specific expertise as a result of high level specialised education and training, usually specified and regulated by a professional, statutory or government body.

Freidson, (2001, p.85) states that “in the case of ideal-typical professional ... the credential testifies to successful training in a specialized, relatively exclusive, school associated with a university.” The training of professionals certainly constitutes a considerable proportion of the adult education undertaken by Higher Education (HE) institutions. These professions do not all necessarily possess the properties of absolute self-regulation and autonomy that define the ‘ideal-type’ profession, but they do have some common characteristics. These characteristics include the exercise of a degree of autonomy and decision making within their normal routines; the need to deal with ethical issues and operate within ethical codes of practice and the need to deal with unclear or ill-structured problems that do not have obvious uncontested solutions. Professionals also tend to work in communities of practice with (often unspoken) norms and values. Barnett (2008), discussing the work of the professional in an age of supercomplexity, draws attention to the loss of a stable professional identity, with all the associated certainties relating to knowledge, relationships and expertise:

Conditions of super-complexity (...) do not permit, even in principle, any kind of technical or systems fix. For conditions of complexity are in essence marked by the question, ‘Who am I?’ or here and less prosaically: ‘What is to count as professionalism?’ Such questions are characteristically open ended or even ‘essentially contested’. Their logic is that, in themselves, they invite contending responses. But, more than that, they are also contingently contested. That is to say, in the contemporary world, with its multiple perspectives and interests – emphasised by globalisation – multiple and contending responses to such open-ended questions crowd in as a matter of fact . As a matter of fact, and not only of logic, the hard-pressed professional is faced with an identity crisis. Is professionalism a matter of being a knowledgeable expert or of meeting clients’ wants or of managing resources efficiently or of entrepreneurial nous? Is it a private, a public, a bureaucratic or a performative mode of being that is called for? (p.195).

So, the literature on professionals suggests that ‘professional’ is a fluid and changing category and Barnett’s contention is that professionals have to operate within these multiple discourses of professionalism. An effective and successful professional needs to understand and recognise how such

discourses construct the multiple and often contradictory expectations placed on him or her and cannot rely on absolute definitions of the role.

It is also clear that the management of ill-structured problems is central to the daily lives of professionals across disciplines. As the certainties that characterised professional knowledge and expertise become ever more challengeable a higher proportion of their work is ‘ill-structured.’ Professionals are faced with a range of solutions to the problems their expertise is meant to address. Multiple, even contradictory solutions could be characterised as right, depending on the perspective taken, the discourses in operation and the ethical framework adopted.

Arts and Professional Studies

It is precisely because professionals have to operate within these multiple discourses and to manage increasingly ill-structured problems, that we believe professional education benefits significantly from the inclusion of the arts. An openness to multiple perspectives, contradictory meaning and the creative processes involved in making meaning are central to critical engagement with the arts and arts education is integral to the development of these kinds of cognitive and affective orientations.

Frequently, professional education is aligned with a culture of credentialism and accountability that fits within a neo-liberal approach to education. At the same time as governments and employers may claim that they want to foster the development of an educated class of professionals capable of thinking critically and in creative ways, the regulatory approach of professional education often focuses on measurable outcomes and performativity – ultimately what critical educators would argue is a technical-rational approach to education. Wilson (2010) points out that while creativity can be viewed primarily as a positive thing, “there are also deep-seated concerns that creativity is being called into service of the economy, with an ‘instrumental rationality’ that recalls Adorno & Horkheimer’s (1944/1979) criticism of the enlightenment ‘project’ (p. 370). Rather than drawing upon creative approaches to teaching and learning to encourage radical critique, the emphasis is on using creativity to enhance economic productivity – thus limiting the parameters of learning to the confines of what works well a competitive marketplace.

Many arts-based educators, such as Elliot Eisner (2002, 2009) would challenge the narrowness of this perspective. Eisner draws attention to multiple benefits accruing from the study and practice of the arts, including the development of cognitive processes such as observation, pattern recognition and an understanding of our own consciousnesses. The development of these kinds of cognitive processes are very relevant to the role of the professional in the age of super-complexity as discussed by Barnett. For the purposes of this paper, however, we are concerned with those aspects of his discussion of the arts and education that suggest to us that working with the arts can enable professionals to develop tolerance for ambiguity and multiple perspectives. This

capacity is essential to the two features of contemporary professional life we have identified – operating within the multiple and sometimes contradictory discourses pertaining to the role the professional seeks to fulfil and managing increasingly ill-structured problems.

Eisner is as concerned with ‘connoisseurship’, with interpreting and experiencing the arts as he is with creating arts. In his discussion of symbolic and figurative processes he argues the arts stimulate the imagination, that engaging with the arts “engenders images of the possible” and “enables us to try things out” (2009, p.5) – in other words it is an experimental process which does not assume a specific end to any journey of discovery, but recognises instead an infinity of possible outcomes. When we engage with or create art we use our senses to make one thing represent another. The implication of this for professionals is that art can break through our preconceptions and enable us to accept that there may be multiple meanings and interpretations of an apparently simple object or situation. Drawing on Dewey, Eisner (2009, p. 77–78) also talks about the capacity of the arts to enable people to develop “the improvisational side of their intelligence” because they need to respond and react with insight to the immediate situation, making judgements as they go along – there is no final rule book to work by. These various elements of arts work, Eisner argues, builds in people a “disposition to tolerate ambiguity, to explore what is uncertain” (2009, p.10) and to expose them to the constructive nature of meaning making, so that they recognise how individuals read the world differently from within their own frame of reference. Professionals need to work closely and effectively with groups and individuals with various and often contradictory world views and value systems and therefore a capacity to accept and identify differing interpretations of reality becomes a central part of the qualities that constitute a successful professional.

In our on-going review of the literature on using the arts in professional education we have found that there is an underlying theme to much of the work in this field that reflects Eisner’s theorisation of the power of an aesthetic education to think and work in a more open-ended way. Educators, with varying degrees of self-awareness, use the arts to develop a more sophisticated epistemological understanding in students – to help them to recognise that knowledge is constructed and that there can be many right solutions. In some cases, this is clearly foregrounded in the work; in others it is more implicit. In this next section we discuss three examples where educators have consciously used the arts to challenge the professionals with whom they work by exposing them to multiple ways of seeing through arts work.

Professional Education and the Arts

Daphne Loads (2010), who uses art workshops with nurse educators, is very explicit about the need for university educators to “hold, examine and develop tolerance for uncertainty” (p. 410). Her participants create collages, masks and drawings as visual metaphors of their work as teachers. She explores the importance of managing competing metaphors about the teaching profession, arguing that this “provides

an antidote to the discourses of certainty and performativity that are powerful throughout the academy” (p.412). In this respect her work suggests that the arts have a degree of radical potential, in that they can make participants aware that their roles can be seen in many different ways, and help them to recognise some of those understandings about teaching that might have been on the “margins of awareness” because they are not central to dominant discourses. Her work has obvious links with the statements made by Barnett about the challenges of managing multiple discourses about the professional role.

Catherine McGregor (2012) uses what she calls “designs for provocation” (p.310) in her work developing community leaders. She makes connections between the kinds of thinking engendered through arts work and critical social theory; her goal is the development of leaders who will be able to construct a more just society. Her work uses narrative texts and film to help leaders explore the different roles that a leader might take and the implications this has for social justice, personal relationships and their identities as leaders. This is not simply about using these texts to illustrate particular concepts or social issues relating to leadership (although this is clearly part of the process). It is about the transformative power of aesthetic engagement; working from the position that knowledge is socially constructed, she argues that “aesthetic modes” invite more “open” interpretation, essentially leaving spaces through which discursive meanings can be taken up, re-created or altered. (p.313). The development of knowledge about leadership becomes, therefore, something that emerges through discussion with others and working with others to develop creative responses (p.313). Though the use of collaborative aesthetic work she helps students to understand that knowledge is not fixed or given and has an important political dimension – her goal is to enable students to understand “the social construction of identity as well as social and political capital and the operation of power” (p. 316).

Finally, Snyder, Heckman and Scialdone (2009) demonstrate that developing artistic approaches to knowing can be valuable for professionals working outside the more obviously uncertain worlds of the professional, such as the nurse, community leader or teacher whose focus is more obviously on the complexities of human behaviour and interaction. Working with information professionals, they adopted studio-based approaches to their work to teach these technical trainees skills of interpretation and critique. Although their trainees were engaged in technical tasks requiring high levels of scientific competence, Snyder et al focused on the importance of engaging in making meaning by reviewing the work of others in the creation of solutions to technical challenges. Developing these skills of interpretation and sharing in the interpretations of others, encouraged the students to recognise that multiple interpretations have value. Snyder and colleagues argue that this will provide a counter to the “more familiar rational, scientific model that currently informs technical professional education” (1923), and help

trainees to see instead the complexities and multiple-possibilities in problem solving.

Conclusion

Just as Barnett (2011b) argues that there are many different directions in which universities can choose to evolve, adult educators involved in professional studies have many choices about how to develop their teaching practices to prepare learners to work in a world characterized by change, fluidity, and uncertainty. All too often it appears that educators working in professional fields are encouraged to take an uncritical stance in their work, perhaps influenced by discourses of employability which present a narrow view of the professional role, or by regulatory and government bodies that focus on competencies that can be measured and easily identified. This can leave educators focusing on short-term learning objectives rather than envisioning the qualities of mind that they want to foster amongst learners who work in a variety of professional contexts. Barnett (2011) argues that there is

a poverty in the idea of 'learning outcomes' in which curricula and pedagogies are so shaped as to instantiate certain skills in students. For such skills are a point of closure when what is now required is a form of learning in which one is continually opening up for oneself, even amid radical doubt (p. 13).

Standardized tests, pre-set learning objectives, and carefully defined outcomes limit the opportunities for learners to develop the capacity to think creatively about their work and to recognize the value of competing discourses or alternative frameworks of knowledge. The arts provide us with a rich resource for reconsidering how professional education should be approached, in order to foster the kinds of learners who will be able to develop their careers and lives so as to not only survive, but also to thrive, in a world characterized by radical doubt and supercomplexity.

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