Critical review

The professional without a profession: An entrepreneurial response to supercomplexity in research environments?

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Contextualization

Institutions of higher education and research are subject to a number of exogenous pressures, such as the demands for accountability, internationalization, massification, and supercomplexity. As teaching institutions, they are expected to prepare students to meet the needs of a changing world. And as research environments, they are expected to address socially relevant problems and maintain high levels of academic quality. This critical review is situated in the debates about professionalism and professional identity in higher education and research. The author is responding to Trede et al.'s (2012, p. 365) claim that more research is needed "to better understand the tensions between personal and professional values…discipline versus generic education, and the role of workplace learning on professional identities." By reflecting on her own professional development in light of the existing literature on professionalism, the author's discussion touches on such overarching research questions as, "What makes a professional a professional?"; "How important is having a 'profession' to the development of professional identity?"; "To what extent do individual human agency (including entrepreneurialism) and structural context play a role in shaping both professional identity and professional roles?"; and "How have exogenous demands – such as supercomplexity – shaped demands for individual professional roles within research-producing settings?"

Abstract: *This critical review interrogates both the traditional and the more modern literature on professionalism by taking the author's position as a special advisor in an international research institute in Norway as a point of departure to explore the challenge of professionalism without a profession. By exploring the various criteria that make up "professionalism," this review explores to what extent "professionalism" is directly linked to belonging to a specific "profession," and what non-professionals signify in the context of knowledge production. The author argues that her position as special advisor may not meet the criteria of traditional notions of professionalism, but does represent professionalism in a more modern sense, especially considered in the light of blended professionalism and unbounded professionalism. It is suggested that this type of "professional non-profession" can be seen as an entrepreneurial response to supercomplexity, particularly in research environments characterized as interdisciplinary and applied.*

Introduction

Research environments today are populated by a number of recognized professionals and semi-professionals: researchers, lecturers, project managers, accountants, administrators, etc. These positions have a certain degree of fungibility; for example, an accountant or researcher in one research institute performs much the same function as an accountant or researcher in another setting because there is a shared understanding of what an accountant

or researcher should do. Anyone seeking these positions would have had training to acquire these particular skills. The special advisor position, however, is based on the advisor's own unique skill set and the needs of the employer, and not on a common understanding of what a special advisor should do – which means that such advisors have no guarantee of being able to find a similar position anywhere else, and employers would likely eliminate the position rather than replace the advisor should the advisor leave. This essay interrogates both the traditional and the more modern literature on professionalism by taking my position as a special advisor in an international research institute in Norway as a point of departure to explore the challenge of professionalism without a profession: To what extent can I still be considered a professional? What do positions like mine signify in the context of knowledge production? This critical review of the professionalism literature thus helps fill a lacuna identified by Trede et al. (2012) by using explicit notions of professional and professionalism to examine a specific instance of professional identity and development. I argue that positions like mine do not meet the criteria of traditional notions of professionalism, but do represent professionalism in a more modern sense. I also posit that this type of "professional non-profession" can be seen as an entrepreneurial response to supercomplexity (Barnett, 2001) particularly in research environments characterized as interdisciplinary and applied.

My institutional environment

In Norway, publicly funded academic research is conducted in two main sectors: the university and college sector, and the research institute sector. The university and college sector has a teaching mandate and degree-granting function, and is expected to carry out the bulk of the basic research; the research institute sector cannot grant degrees (although occasionally cooperates with university and colleges in course development and teaching) and is expected to carry out the bulk of the applied research. I am employed at an applied research institute that focuses on the field of peace and conflict. It employs about 60 researchers from various disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. With a focus on "'real world' problems that clearly defy tackling by any single discipline" (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 147) and policy relevant academic output, our institute displays many of the characteristics of what Gibbons et al. (1994, p. 99) call Mode 2 knowledge production, including heterogeneity, contextualization, and generation of knowledge within a context of application, and greater social accountability. Our research is financed primarily through competitive grants from Norwegian funders such as the Research Council of Norway (which award grants on the basis of scientific merit) and the Norwegian ministries of defense and foreign affairs (which award grants on the basis of relevance for Norway), but also such international funders as the EU, the World Bank, and the National Science Foundation. Our written output is primarily academic, but the researchers are also expected to be active participants in public debate and inform public policy. In other words, the institute is highly diversified in terms of both funding sources and outputs.

My role in the institute is to help the researchers navigate the complexity of (i) applying for funding from such diverse sources and (ii) writing to meet the needs of such diverse target groups, as well as to further their own career goals. I comment directly on written texts (both grant proposals and draft articles), and also talk with researchers more generally about the struggles they face in the writing process. Although as a native speaker of English I can (and do) help with language issues, my main focus is on how they present their arguments. In addition to the services I perform in the institute, about one third of my time is spent running workshops on academic writing (mainly at the PhD level and above) at other research institutes and universities. As I explain below, the workshop activities I run are not an official function of my institute or a required part of my position, but rather an income-generating activity for the institute that I developed on my own volition and in response to demand from these external institutions.

To what extent can I be considered a professional?

The discourse on professions and professionalism provides no easy answers to the question of whether or not I, as a special advisor, can be considered a professional – not least because the terms themselves are disputed. Middlehurst and Kennie (1997, p. 52) call features of professionalism "fluid and contested," and Robson (2006, p. 22) calls the word profession a contested concept. Watson (2002) suggests abandoning "profession" and "professionalism" as analytical terms altogether. While abandoning the terms altogether might indeed be tempting for someone who does not seem to fit in, for the purpose of this article, I found it useful to look at some key features of professionalism in the traditional sense and discuss to what extent they are reflected in my work. To simplify the discussion, I sorted the myriad of features, characteristics, traits, attributes, etc., (see, e.g. Crook, 2008; Cunningham, 2008; Middlehurst & Kennie, 1997; Robson, 2006) into three main categories:

1) **Knowledge**: the type of knowledge and skill that the professional is required to have, for example, special, extended preparation or training, particularly preparation that includes an intellectual component.
2) **Attitudes and behavior**: the values that imbue way in which the professional approaches or executes his or her work, for example, emphasis on quality, not mere competence; high level of personal integrity; commitment to service; discretion; trust-based professional relationships; dedication; and autonomy.
3) **Community**: aspects related to being part of a self-policing group, for example, registration and regulation by the profession itself; peer appraisal and review; professional code of conduct; and public representation by a prestigious body, such as a professional association.

Below, I look more closely at each of these categories and compare how my position as special advisor fits in with the criteria described in the traditional literature on professionalism.

Knowledge

The key features of the professional's knowledge and skill in the more traditional notions of professionalism are that it is formalized, specialized, and inaccessible to the laity (see, e.g., Lunt, 2008, p. 76). However, even the traditionalists are quick to point out that mere possession of encyclopedic knowledge is not enough: Freidson (2001, p. 35), for example, argues that while "the knowledge and skill of a particular specialization requires a foundation in abstract concepts and formal learning" it also "necessitates the exercise of discretion." By "discretion" he means that the volume of formalized knowledge is so extensive and complex that being a professional means knowing how to access and use this knowledge to its best advantage in any given context. "Discretion" also suggests that judgment is also required. Eraut (1994, p. 49) writes that "Judgment involves practical wisdom, a sense of purpose, appropriateness and feasibility; and its acquisition depends, among other things, on a wealth of professional experience." Diagnosing and treating an illness, for example, involves formal knowledge of both common and uncommon illnesses, but also an ability to observe a range of obvious and non-obvious signs and symptoms in the patient, experience of knowing what the patient might not be completely honest about, experience of knowing what a likely diagnosis might be, and experience with various treatments.

This type of judgment applies very much to what I do: I read someone's journal article or talk to them about problems related to writing, and then develop a sense of what I think they might need to work on. What differentiates me from, for example, the medical doctor described in the previous paragraph is that although I have a relatively high degree of formal

knowledge (resulting from over ten years of university education), this knowledge is not specialized: I have a BA in women's studies and a graduate degree in political science. For my work, breadth of formal knowledge is more important work than depth of formal knowledge: Understanding the nature of research and challenges of scholarly writing is more important than understanding every word written by the authors I try to help. My formal academic degrees have given me an understanding of academia in general. My knowledge about writing, on the other hand, is far more tacit (see Freidson, 2001, p. 26). I have little formal training in writing, but many years of practice working with researchers – editing and translating their work, talking to them about writing and research, and listening to the types of problems they face.

Freidson (2001) recognizes the importance of tacit knowledge, but he does not seem to associate this with being a professional. For him, it is the specialized formal knowledge that sets intellectual specializations (i.e. professions) apart from "manual" occupations. When I try to place the position of the special advisor into his matrix, I find I have to invent a new category (see Table 1): one that allows for broad, non-specialized formal knowledge and a high level of tacit knowledge.

Table 1. Placement of my position in Freidson's matrix of knowledge required for specializations.

Type of specialization	Everyday knowledge	Practical knowledge	Formal knowledge	Tacit knowledge
Mechanical	High	Low	Low	Moderate
Manual discretionary	Moderate	High	Moderate	High
Mental discretionary	Low	Moderate	High (and specialized)	Low
My position	*Low*	*Moderate*	*Moderate (or high but broad)*	*High*

The traditional conceptions of professionalism view knowledge as very purposeful, specific, and limited: Being a dentist requires satisfactory completion of dental school. Dentists cannot legally practice without this specific knowledge, and the knowledge obtained in dental school will be of little use in any other profession. The idea that one could study one discipline as an undergraduate, another as a graduate, and still perform professionally in a position unrelated to either of these disciplines simply does not register anywhere. Through a traditionalist's eyes, the nature of the knowledge required for being a special advisor would exclude me from the ranks of the professionals.

Attitudes and behavior

Key features of this category are autonomy, trust, and commitment to service. Similar to the concept of discretion described above, autonomy here usually means that the professional is allowed to make decisions based on his or her best judgment, not just on the basis of prescribed procedures (see, e.g., Lunt, 2008, pp. 76-77). My role allows me to exercise judgment and discretion to a very high degree. For example, I created a discussion forum for our junior researchers of my own volition. In my role as a workshop leader, I am completely free to decide the content of my workshops, as well as how many workshops to lead. Trust is important for me in my relationship with my "clients", but it comes from a different origin than that of the traditional professional. Trust for the traditional professional comes from possession of a specialized formal knowledge that cannot be understood by the laity, so

clients just have to trust that the professional is acting in the clients' best interests (see, e.g. Lunt, 2008, p. 76). But the kind of trust needed to submit to a root canal is not the same kind needed to get feedback on piece of writing. When researchers come to me, I assume that they know far more about their subject area than I do. When I offer help, it is often in the form of asking good questions so the authors discover themselves what they need to do next. My skill lies in knowing the right questions to ask – but this is largely a tacit skill. The researcher is a better judge of whether or not I have done a good job than I am because only they know whether the discussion has led to greater clarity in their thinking. In this sense, the trust relationship is similar to that of a coach or mentor: one built on mutual respect and pragmatism rather than possession of a specialized knowledge to which the client does not have access (see, e.g. Flaherty, 2010; Pask & Joy, 2007).

Commitment to service is a third type of behavior that professionals are also supposed to display. Here, commitment to service means a moral commitment to act for the client's good, not the professional's financial benefit. Koehn (1994, p. 179) provides the example of dentists pushing for the addition of fluoride to the water supply that would improve the dental health of their clients and thus reduce the clients' need for dentistry – which would inevitably reduce the dentists' income. In a similar manner, I use a variety of techniques to give academics the writing skills they need to become less dependent on editors – thus reducing the need for them to consult me as an editor.

Community

The area in which I differ most markedly from professionals according to the traditional discourse is that of community. Freidson (2001, p. 20), for example, argues that the whole foundation of professionalism rests on the professional possessing a knowledge and competence that is so different from what other workers possess that the professional community must police itself – an outsider would not know enough about the subject matter or job content to say whether, for example, a doctor was doing a good enough job. I have previously noted that my clients are the best judges of whether I have been helpful, so policing is unnecessary. More important, since my position is unique, there are no other special advisors who could police me.

The question here, though, is to what extent I draw from multiple communities. In terms of professional identity, this is certainly true: there are very clear links between the content of my position and other professions or semi-professions. The most obvious is my link with teachers of academic writing. I connect with other teachers through a membership in the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW), but EATAW does not fulfill the main roles associated with professional regulatory bodies: it does not set standards for how to teach academic writing nor enforce any kind of adherence to standards. It is simply an arena where those interested in the teaching of academic writing can exchange experiences.

I also have something in common with editors. Although not currently an active member, for about fifteen years I was an active participant on Copyediting-L (CE-L), an internet-based community of practice (Wenger, 1998 and personal communication) focusing on copyediting. Here again, this network is only an informal community of practice that has no authority over its members and does not police them in any way.

Thus while two fairly established quasi-professional groups help inform my professional identity, I am not a part of any professional organizations that could be said to have a self-policing function. Moreover, I do not have enough in common with these groups for such a function to even be desirable: Most teachers in EATAW work with undergraduates through

formal degree-granting programs or established writing centers; I work with PhD students and up through workshops that I have designed myself that are not part of any formal program. Most editors on CE-L are freelance or working with a press; I am situated in a research institute. It is thus unlikely that any set of standards set by a teaching or editing association would safeguard the interests of my clients.

This also holds true for policing through a code of ethics rather than a governing body: To which code of ethics should I turn? The one that governs researchers? Teachers? Editors? Therapists? The practical aspects of my work encompass all of these professions, and their codes of ethics do not always agree. Editors, for example, might be more focused on transparency, which might threaten the requirements for anonymity that researchers must adhere to; and when faced with problem students, teachers could naturally turn to colleagues for advice and shared experiences, whereas a therapist has a much greater pressure to maintain confidentiality. The "code" I subconsciously look to is one that has elements taken from all of these areas.

A non-professional or a modern professional?

The above section shows that without a recognized profession, many of the elements of traditional professionalism are difficult to achieve – particularly those related to specialized knowledge and community. Yet, even without a profession, I still "act like" a professional: that is, the attitudes and behaviors expected of a professional are also relevant for me. I, too, emphasize autonomy, trust, and commitment to service. The greatest deviation in this respect is the origin of the trust relationship.

The kind of trust required in my work is seen by some authors as a modern development in traditional professionalism. As clients become more knowledgeable and critical about the services professionals provide, the nature of "trust built on professional mystique is being replaced by trust built on transparency about the nature of professional competence…" (Middlehurst & Kennie, 1997, p. 59). For example, medical practitioners are increasingly faced with patients who have read extensively about their conditions on the Internet and come armed with their own viewpoints. So perhaps in this respect I am simply a modern variant.

The literature on professionalism is rich with descriptions of modern variants, such as the restricted professional, the bureau professional, the regulated professional, the managerial professional, the collaborative professional, the extended professional, the democratic professional, the activist professional, and the entrepreneurial professional (see Cunningham, 2008). But it is particularly Whitchurch's notions of blended professional and unbounded professional that seem to capture salient aspects of what I do.

Whitchurch (2009, p. 408) describes "blended professionals" as demonstrating "an ability to capitalize on a sense of 'belonging' and 'not belonging' entirely to either professional or academic domains, often working in ambiguous conditions." The aspect of capitalizing on simultaneously "belonging" and "not belonging" resonates with the way I establish my credibility with researchers. For researchers to accept my advice on editing or writing, they have to believe that I understand them and am "on their side." In my external teaching, it adds to my credibility that I am housed at a research institute with researchers and not with other editors, and that I work regularly with academics in a variety of fields. Within my institute, I actively demonstrate that I "belong" to the researchers, but not to one group more than another. One way in which I demonstrate this is my physical location: my office is located amongst the other researchers, not with the administration (which is concentrated on a different floor).

The notion of the "unbounded professional" has even greater resonance. Whitchurch (2008, p. 381) describes unbounded professionals as having "a flexible and open-ended approach to their activity" and actively constructing their own job descriptions. My job description is based on my own particular skill set, changing as I add new skills, and because of the resulting nonfungibility, if I were to leave, it is not obvious how (or even if) I should be replaced. Unbounded professionals are also "characterized by their appreciation of the mindsets of others, taking a diagnostic approach to issues that might not be directly articulated" (2008, p. 382). In my work, I encourage scholars to talk about their individual writing process, which is very seldom discussed openly. I tailor my advice specifically to the needs of the individuals I work with, and when I detect an issue common to several people, I address it also at a more collective level, such as through my workshops. Finally, Whitchurch argues that unbounded professionals are "prepared to enter messy, or even dangerous, spaces that others might avoid, working with, rather than being challenged by, ambiguous conditions" (2008, p. 381). My overall mission is essentially to understand and explain the increasing complexity of the research environment and nature of scholarly writing so I can help other professionals (i.e. researchers) navigate their way through it, which requires me to address the ambiguities and complexities that others may try to avoid.

An entrepreneurial response to supercomplexity?

Like most modern developments, positions like mine are not embraced by everyone. Nixon (2001, p. 181) points to "the absurd situation whereby 'non-academics' are given responsibility for developing 'academic' professionalism" in the UK. This presupposes that only academics can understand the nature of academics. Cherry (2005), however, suggests that today's research environment has become so complex that perhaps a different perspective is required. Barnett (2001, p. 24) claims that current university environments are in fact characterized by "supercomplexity," which is when "options present all the time that are logically incompatible." In other words, this is a situation of cross pressures that are not just difficult to understand, but also at odds with one another.

The publication situation at my institute very much represents a situation of supercomplexity. As I describe in the introduction to this essay, we share many features of Mode 2 research environments, particularly a stated aim to reach not only academics, but also user groups (decision-makers and practitioners) and the general public. In Mode 1 research, which is more traditionally academic and homogenous, quality is determined solely through the academic peer review system (1994, p. 8). In Mode 2 research, relevance to the user is more important. Here our institute demonstrates a disconnect between its mode of research (Mode 2) and its way of measuring quality, which is more consistent with Mode 1. Indeed, despite the applied nature of our subject matter, we define academics as our main target audience – which occasionally creates tension with the ministries who fund part of our research. We thus consider publication in international peer-reviewed journals or scholarly books to be the "best" kind of output. Non-academic output is more ambiguous: Although we talk about the importance of dissemination to policy makers, these activities are not explicitly rewarded. In fact, researchers who deliver this type of output exclusively will be considered to be underperforming.

This disconnect between the mode of research and target output can be seen as a result of the pressure for social accountability – that is, the pressure to quantify and justify output – to which both the university and college sector and the institute sector are subject (Ball, 2008; Barnett, 2008; Cowen, 1996; Lunt, 2008; Middlehurst & Kennie, 1997; Power, 2008). Since our institute wants to demonstrate that its quality of research is comparable to that of a university, it makes sense to also measure quality by the same metric – that is, academic

output. Outputs directed at user-groups are not recognized by this metric. Thus while the ethos of the institute would suggest a wide range of outputs, the pressure of social accountability restricts this range.

I would suggest that positions such as mine are a direct and perhaps necessary response to this supercomplexity. This is supported by Whitchurch (2008, p. 383), who finds that newer professionals, like unbounded and blended professionals, are likely to be found in institutions that are forced to respond to change.

I would also take this a step further and argue that my position in particular is not simply a reactive response to supercomplexity, but also an entrepreneurial response. Shattock and Temple (2006) define an entrepreneurial university setting as one in which funding is acquired in a variety of innovative ways based on identifiable and particular market needs. Although not a university, my institute can also be understood in a similar way: The focus is on addressing real-world problems through research that is both fundamental and applied, and we get funding from a wide variety of sources – including international sources and sources connected directly to policy makers (Shattock & Temple, 2006, p. 7). More important in the context of my position is the way I have been given the autonomy to exploit, through offering workshops on academic writing, a particular niche that not only serves our staff, but also generates revenue (Shattock & Temple, 2006, p. 15). By exporting my expertise to other "markets," I not only enrich the institute financially, but also bring back knowledge and experience that can benefit the institute more indirectly.

Conclusion

When I was a freelance editor, working over the Internet for scholarly writers I did not know, it was easy to lament the poor quality of their research. When I moved from a home office to being housed at a research institute, I learned that the problem was not that they did not have anything useful to say, but that they struggled with saying it – at least in writing. I understood this because my physical placement in a research institute allowed me to talk and interact with researchers in a way that working from home did not. Working freelance allowed me access only to the words they could put on paper; working in close proximity has given me access to the entire range of thoughts and feelings researchers have not only about their subject matter, but about the business of putting pen to paper. This changed the way I edited, and changed the way I understood researchers. Over the years I gathered enough knowledge to write a book, develop a workshop, and export my workshop to other research environments.

The haphazard nature of my career development bears little resemblance to what is prescribed in traditional understandings of professionalism. Yet it has given me specialized expertise that I doubt I could have achieved any other way. I have argued in this essay that this kind of unusual expertise can be seen as a response to the changing environments researchers operate in. As research environments become more complex and the pressures that researchers and their institutes face become increasingly incompatible with one another, the need for someone who can understand and move between various environments presents itself.

I have thus argued that my role hinges on (1) the way I negotiate belonging and not belonging to a research environment (blended professionalism), (2) the way I define my own professionalism by shaping my own job description as my skill set develops and my environment changes (unbounded professionalism), and (3) the way I have been able to market my expertise (entrepreneurialism).

The position of special advisor will always be a unique combination of what the institute needs and what the advisor can offer, and thus by definition cannot have a specialized formal knowledge requirement nor a professional association. Yet that does not mean special advisors have no need for a particular knowledge or community – only that they may have to draw from a variety of sources using only best judgment as a guide. Moreover, even a non-professional can act professionally: Autonomy, trust, commitment to service – each of these terms define the way I approach my work.

Gibbons et al. (1994, p. 145) write that "the best institutions respond [to complexity] by finding or designing market niches to exploit the specific range and competence, skills and knowledge they house." This suggests that the position of the special advisor, while not necessarily transferable from research institute to another, can represent not only a response to supercomplexity, but also an opportunity to develop marketable expertise.

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