Are Professors Professionals? A Fresh Look at this Question

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Abstract   Are university educators professionals? Whether or not university educators should be regarded as professionals is an important question that has an impact on a number of issues including job satisfaction, societal status and salary levels. This paper examines the need to classify this group as a profession and the consequences of that classification, or lack of it, by analysing the traditional views of the concept founded in the twentieth century and then exploring a new way to consider the question based on the realities of the twenty first century.

Keywords   University Educators, Professional Status, Education

1. Introduction

Teaching is the essential profession, the one that makes all other professions possible [1].

This quote provides a somewhat felicitous introduction to this paper as the question of whether university educators should be viewed as professionals, skilled or semi-skilled craft persons or otherwise, is important not only to university educators themselves but to the whole of society.

University education is an important pillar of society. The continued development of society and its prosperity depends to a significant extent upon the graduates that universities produce and a university education is the foundation for nearly all professional careers. The skills and attributes of the graduates that universities produce are directly attributable to those that educate and train them [2]. On this basis the question of whether we regard university educators as professionals becomes important in terms of the trust that we place in these educators to mould the future strength and credibility of other professions in areas such as medicine, law, accounting and architecture. One may reasonably ask questions such as 'Can a non-professional person be expected to develop another professional?' and 'What are the implications if non-professionals are tasked with creating other professionals?' It also has implications towards the quality of the graduates that university educators produce. The question is also important in terms of the view that university educators have of themselves and has long term consequences for the successful continuation of the sector.

2. The Importance of Professional Status?

Professional status classification has a myriad of consequences, many of which may not be immediately obvious [3]. Professionals are given a particular status in society [4]. They are regarded as 'experts' in a particular field of knowledge as they undergo specified training to gain that status as well as continued training in order to maintain their position and currency. Professionals also help to mentor other professionals.

Professionals are regarded as providing a quality service because of the position that they hold, which benefits the whole community. Being a member of a profession is about 'rasing the bar' to a level which is above those services offered by people who are semi-skilled or who have a trade certification, or who have no qualifications at all [5]. The high level of services provided, which are guided by a code of ethics, to a particular standard are linked to the altruistic, selfless nature of the professional (a key concept discussed later in this paper) which are designed to benefit society. In effect a member of a profession operates under a particular 'state of mind' which governs every thought and action that they take in upholding the highest technical and ethical standards [6].

Members of a profession report higher rates of satisfaction in the work that they undertake[7]. This is key to ensuring the success of the profession, especially with regard to teaching, as it not only serves as a method to attract people to the profession itself but also as a method of retaining those people already within the profession. This is discussed by Langdon [8], who indicates that satisfaction with your profession and the social status in which your profession is held is a key criteria in retaining members of the teaching profession. Dissatisfaction with your profession leads to higher rates of resignation which has long term

consequences for any profession. Dinham and Scott [9] emphasise how a professional's perception of their position in society is critical to retaining well qualified members for the duration of their careers. Satisfaction also appears to be important as it leads to higher productivity and less absenteeism, which has both individual and organisational benefits [10].

Members of a profession engage in professional development. As Jarvis [11] indicates:

the professional is one who continually seeks the mastery of the branch of learning upon which his occupation is based, so that he may offer a service to his client.

Continued professional development is one of the key features and benefits of being a professional as it exposes participants to new knowledge and ideas in their field of expertise [12]. It provides an opportunity for participants to gather together with like minded people to explore new ways of dealing with current and emerging problems and issues in ways that are entirely different to 'in service' or vocational based continuing learning opportunities [13]. Indeed Hoale [14] argues that methods of keeping knowledge up to date other than those associated with professional development are significantly less effective.

Professionals receive a higher salary compared to those engaged in non-skilled positions or 'craft' based positions [15]. In a materialistic society, this fact alone may be reason for some to consider becoming a member of a professional group, although it should be weighed against other relevant factors such as altruism and the code of ethics as already discussed. Professionals also tend to have shorter periods of unemployment [16]. The aspect of altruism is particularly relevant when discussing professionalism in the field of both school and university educators, who receive a substantially lower salary than many other professional groups, have limited opportunities to increase their salary through productivity or bonuses, and are locked in to a defined salary scale by their employer regardless of expertise or performance. Most educators choose to teach based on a passion for their subject area and the satisfaction received through passing on this passion, rather than being motivated by financial gain.

3. 'Professional' Definition

To define 'profession' is to invite controversy [17].

The notion of whether any individual, occupation or industry can be classed as a profession/professional is a problematic, complex and often emotive one [18]. The term 'profession' is used in common conversation by a variety of different users in a variety of different contexts. Other variations of the term such as 'professional', 'professionalism' and 'professionalisation' are also used and may or may not have a similar meaning depending upon their contextualisation. A simple dictionary definition of any of these terms will be of limited use as the understanding of

these terms varies quite considerably depending upon the contextualisation the terms are used within. We could start with a basic definition as provided by Goode [19], who states that a profession is "a body of abstract knowledge and an ideal of service" but in order to understand the question 'Should university educators be classified as professionals?' posed in this paper, it is necessary explore the term further and to define the term in as clear a way as possible.

The term 'profession' gains its origins from the Latin word 'profiteor' which means 'to profess.' On this basis, at its most simplistic level, a professional could be someone "who claims to possess knowledge of something" [20] or who professes to have a better understanding of a particular topic than others [21].

Beginning as early as 1915 [22], but primarily from the 1930's a more sophisticated and sociological way of analysing the term professional and the formal notion of classifying people as members of a profession began to attract a lot of attention. Collectively these early attempts were known as the *trait* model and included the following six elements:

1. A skill based on abstract knowledge
2. Provision for training and education, usually associated with a university
3. Certification based on competency testing
4. Formal organization
5. Adherence to a code of conduct
6. Altruistic service [23].

These basic six elements have been the subject of much further and often more detailed exploration throughout the twentieth century [24].

4. Twentieth Century Models of a Profession

The professions are a group of occupations the boundary of which is ill defined [25].

With an emphasis in the twentieth century, there has been extensive discussion in literature around the characteristics of a profession [26]. Numerous writers have attempted to construct comprehensive and exhaustive definitions of a profession. In each of these instances the models espoused contain a number of elements (which often varies widely) which must be satisfied in order for any individual to claim membership of a professional group. The following examination of a number of these different models will reveal that for the most part they are arbitrary and nebulous and in the end may serve no real value as arguably even some of the oldest professions may not meet all of the required definitions of any of the following examples of the historically proposed models of professionals [27].

Take for example the frequently cited example of Brennan's [28] model of a profession which includes seven elements which all must be satisfied for any individual to claim that they are a member of a profession:

1. An organised body of intellectual theory constantly expanded by research.

2. An intellectual technique.

3. A close-knit association of members with a high quality of communication between them.

4. A period of long training.

5. A series of standards and an enforced statement of ethics.

6. Applications to the practical affairs of man.

7. Active influence on public policy in its field.

Whilst such a straight forward and relatively short list may initially seem quite comprehensive and complete it raises more questions about its operation than it solves. For example, in relation to point 4 it may be reasonably asked 'How long is *long*?' Is it for example 3 months, 12 months or 4 years or longer? Could society accept that a professional body prescribed that a period of only a few months constituted *long* on the basis of this point or would *long* be expected to amount to several years? In relations to point 6 it may be reasonably asked 'What are the practical affairs of man and who determines if this has been met?' Would it be the close-knit association of members specified in point 3 or would it be the more wider society and exactly what are these *practical affairs*?

This seven point model from Brennan is not the only model which has been proposed, there are many others including a more detailed model provided by Hoale [29]. Attempts to define the concept are perhaps not assisted by Hoale, who provides a much more comprehensive list of fourteen characteristics of a profession. These are:

1. Conceptual characteristics.
2. Mastery of theoretical knowledge.
3. Capacity to solve problems.
4. Use of practical knowledge.
5. Self-enhancement.
6. Formal training.
7. Credentialing.
8. Creation of a subculture.
9. Legal reinforcement.
10. Public acceptance.
11. Ethical practice.
12. Penalties.
13. Relations to other vocations.
14. Relations to users of service.

It could be argued that the list of characteristics provided by Hoale is rather vague and indeterminate. Just as the list provided by Brennan gave rise to a series of questions about it, so does this list from Hoale. One may reasonably enquire from this list in relation to point 7, 'Who determines what credentialing is required?' Is it the public, is it a government, is it the subculture mentioned in point 8 or someone else? Further, point 10 raises the obvious question 'How can public perception be measured? Is it via the social standing that member of a profession are accorded? Is it via the level of remuneration accorded to members or a profession or by some other method?

Leggatt [30] provides another attempt to define the concept of profession, this time with just five elements. These being:

1. Practice is founded upon a base of theoretical, esoteric knowledge.

2. The acquisition of knowledge requires a long period of education and socialisation.

3. Practitioners are motivated by an ideal of altruistic service rather than pursuit of material and economic gain.

4. Careful control is exercised over recruitment, training, certification and standards of practice.

5. The colleague group is well organised and has disciplinary powers to enforce a code of ethical practice.

This model of profession from Leggatt does attempt to provide more detail with each of the five elements that it lists, but leaves any reader wondering how even established professions such as medicine and law may be able to satisfy point three. How could such levels of altruism be measured? Could it really be claimed that every member of medicine and law could satisfy point three or is it enough that the majority of a profession can satisfy this element?

Lieberman [31] acknowledges the problem, and begins his discussion of the issue, of adequately and universally defining the concept of a profession, when he states:

...(that there is) no authoritative set of criteria by means of which we can distinguish professions from other occupations.

Although, curiously, Lieberman [32] then moves onto suggesting that there may be some universally agreed upon characteristics which would have to be included as the basis of any definition. These he states include:

1. A unique, definite, and essential social service.

2. An emphasis upon intellectual techniques in performing its service.

3. A long period of specialised training.

4. A broad range of autonomy for both the individual practitioners and for the occupational group as a whole.

5. An acceptance by the practitioners of broad personal responsibility for judgements made and acts performed within the scope of professional autonomy.

6. An emphasis upon the service to be rendered, rather than the economic gain to the practitioners, as the basis for the organisation and performance of the social service delegated to the occupational group.

7. A comprehensive self-governing organisation of practitioners.

8. A code of ethics which has been clarified and interpreted at ambiguous and doubtful points by concrete cases.

One can observe that the list of eight characteristics provided by Lieberman contains many of the elements outlined in the models provided by Brennan and Hoale, albeit in a much more detailed manner.

The differing models of defining a profession as described above are just some of the multitude which exists. Many others which have similar or even radically different

approaches exist. Take for example the work of Abbot [33] and Hall [34] who list the systemic qualities of professionals or Freidson [35] who focuses on the knowledge aspect of the term.

Examining these models becomes problematic because of the questions raised about the level of detail required to satisfy each of the criteria listed. It is doubtful that university educators could satisfy every element of any of the models listed above. Indeed it may even be that many of the so called 'established professions' would experience difficulty in satisfying some of the listed models. For university educators, particular areas of concern include the lack of an identifiable knowledge base as it relates to specialised training, adherence to a code of conduct and the autonomy of the profession.

5. University Educators and the Term Professional in the Twenty First Century

The problems of answering the question posed at the beginning of this paper 'Should university educators be classified as professionals?' appear fairly obvious. First in order to answer the question one must understand what the criteria of assessing a profession are. The discussion above indicates the inherent problem in undertaking this task. The difficulties of dealing with the differing available definitions, unless a universal consensus as to a new definition could be reached, appear insurmountable. Therefore this paper proposes three ways in which to deal with the question:

1) One may attempt to address all of the literature provided and come to a new or more realistic definition/understanding of what constitutes a profession in the twenty first century.

2) One may view the question as a dichotomy. That is two separate professional roles. The role of the person as a member of the professional knowledge area they represent and the role of the person as a professional educator.

3) One may view the problem as moot as differences between professions and other vocations do not really matter.

5.1. Professional Redefined

Given the discussion above around how the definition of the concept of a profession [36] has occurred during the twentieth century and how this has failed to result in a comprehensive universally agreed upon model, I am reluctant to offer a new model as it will inevitably lead to further criticism and debate around the issue. However it is certainly evident that to date there is a lack of genuine consensus as to how to solve the problem of which occupations are a profession and which are not [37]. This is of course an arbitrary question. As society has changed and the nature of work itself has changed, including a move from what may have been the more popular and traditional relationships of employer and employee or master and servant, so too has the nature of the profession changed.

At the very least it should be self-evident that all of the definitions proposed earlier in this paper appear to be too ambiguous and too complex to be of practical value. Perhaps quite arbitrarily, it may be that the definition of a profession can be solved with just two simple criteria. These are an autonomous governing body and an identifiable body of knowledge.

5.1.1. An Autonomous Governing Body

An autonomous governing body which controls the criteria for admission (credentialing) is essential to the identification of a profession as a separate and unique body. This body must be separate from government control and have the power to admit members based upon prescribed qualifications, set standards of practice, set continuing learning requirements, deal with matters of discipline or breaches of standards of practice and expel members who fail to uphold those standards.

Whilst there are several established bodies which represent university educators across the globe who have worthy aspirations [38], such as the American Association of University Professors [39], the Canadian Association of University Teachers [40], the Association of University Teachers from the United Kingdom [41] and the National Tertiary Education Union of Australia [42], these bodies do not satisfy the requirement of an autonomous governing body. Primarily many of these bodies have a basis as a trade union and membership is not required in order to practice within the group nor is registration compulsory and in fact in many instances registration may not be encouraged by the employer.

It is universities themselves which prescribe the criteria for employment at their individual institutions and these criteria can vary between different institutions. In relatively few instances would a university educator be required to undergo any systematic form of instruction about how they would conduct their classes or undertake formal degree courses in this area. Indeed while one of the core functions of a university educator is to teach, very few have any formal training in pedagogy, they merely rely on their in-depth understanding of the body of knowledge they are conveying to students. Therefore the quality of instruction or teaching varies greatly between individual educators and between institutions. University educators are employees of their respective institutions, unable to work as sole traders or to even form partnerships which are common with some types of professions such as lawyers and accountants.

5.1.2. An identifiable Body of Knowledge

This requires an understanding that the tasks performed by individuals in the practice of their profession are based on a body of knowledge which is specific to that group. For university educators this would specifically relate to the nature of teaching or pedagogy. It could also include the notions of the psychology of learning, proxemics, kinesics

and curriculum. Evidently this knowledge base exists.

This new definition of a profession could well be criticised as being over simplified, but it does contain features attributable to every definition that has been proposed throughout the twentieth century. Based on these new simplified criteria it is evident that university educators fail to meet the definition of being classed as a profession. Unless university educators are compelled to belong to an independent governing body they could never meet even the most basic definition of being classified as a professional. This is a problem which has also plagued school teachers for much of the twentieth century [43].

5.2. A Dichotomy - Two Separate Roles

The question of whether or not university educators are member of a profession may be complicated by the fact that these educators represent two distinct groups [44]. That is they represent the occupation from which their knowledge is derived from and the occupation of teaching. Take for example, a scientist who teaches at a university. He or she would be a representative of the scientific discipline which they profess to have an expert knowledge of, such as biology, chemistry or physics (of course their knowledge may be even more specialised such as organic or inorganic chemistry or particle or optical physics) as well as a member of the occupation of teaching. Each of these occupations would therefore need to be judged against the stated criteria for determination of whether or not it met the required criteria for being a profession.

It is submitted, not withstanding the problems of a universal definition outlined above, that if we examine some of the more accepted professions, we are likely to find that there is a significantly improved chance of an individual meeting the traditional definitions as compared to simply examining a person in the role of a university educator. So a university educator is more likely to be declared to be a professional because of their established connection with a field such as medicine or law or accountancy. Of course if an individual could meet the existing criteria for both occupations they could be considered to be a dual professions. For example a person might meet the definition as a doctor as well as in their separate role as a university educator in the field of medicine.

5.3. A Professional? Who Cares Anyway?

The issue of whether any individual person is a professional has both advantages and disadvantages. Earlier in this paper some of the advantages, such as improved job satisfaction and higher rates of salary were discussed, however as Burbules and Densmore [45] suggest this question may simply cause more trouble than it is worth. Indeed Burbules and Densmore [46] state that the question of professionalism is "both tenacious and seductive" and wastes a large amount of time that could be more productively spent.

One must ask 'Is it critical that my role be defined as professional?' and 'What are the consequences if I am not declared to be a member of a profession?' Ultimately it may simply be an arbitrary or ideological label which society seeks to place on an individual who occupies a particular role [47]. This label can of course, and does of course, change via the passage of time. So whilst skilled tradespersons, such as plumbers and carpenters, may not currently meet any of the theorised definitions of professionals in time this could change. That is, either the definitions themselves may change or the nature of the work and the associations to which these skilled workers currently belong could change.

6. Conclusions

Whether university educators should be considered to be members of a profession and the consequences of this determination has been the focus of this paper. Many people think that they understand teaching or the role of university educators because of their extended exposure to a classroom as students at sometime within their lives. However few have such a prolonged or direct exposure to established professions such as medicine, law and accountancy. Hence what members of these professions do on a day to day basis remains somewhat of a mystery for most and this in turn contributes to the esteem in which members of these professions are held.

This paper has suggested a number of different ways of examining the question of the status of university educators including the traditional definitions from the twentieth century, redefining the concept of professional, viewing the problem as a dichotomy and ultimately discussing the question of whether this status is really relevant or not. These approaches have produced mixed results. Evidently, universities educators will always struggle to be defined as a profession because of a lack of autonomy.

Ultimately, whilst university educators may not meet any of the traditional and often theoretically challenged definition models, they "exhibit high levels of the attitudinal attributes associated with professionalism" and therefore the answer to the question remains moot [48]. However if university educators and university institutions intend to promote themselves as the creators of other professional groups it would appear necessary that the question cannot remain moot for much longer. One of the ways in which the question could be swayed towards the conclusion that university educators are professionals is to have employers mandatorily require their employees to undertake some type of formal education in pedagogy and/or curriculum such as that which could be obtained by undertaking a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education or a Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

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