Entering Professional Practice in the New Work Order: A Study of Undergraduate Students and Their Induction into Professional Work

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Abstract

This article draws on the transcripts of focus group interviews held with three groups of students, all in their final year of four-year Bachelor degrees. All had completed the professional experience requirements for their course. One group comprised education students, one group comprised nursing students, and the third was studying engineering. All were studying at the same university. Common across all three professional areas, the new entrants' experiences appear physically, psychologically, and emotionally, confronting. In addition, it seems that the power relations that structure workplace practices (including the performance assessment regimes in place in many workplaces) often structure the student-practitioner's behaviours in ways that can either conflict with the students' sense of themselves or go unacknowledged. The study indicates that students need to be provided with opportunities to explore these aspects of professional work. By making these dimensions of their practice explicit and open to interrogation students can be better assisted to develop and sustain reflective and ethically grounded professional practices.

Introduction

Beth: One other important thing is, in the workforce, you are dealing with your boss and your boss's boss and the company's wishes – or the government's wishes – and what the company wishes is what you have to wish.

What meanings do university students give to their professional workplace experiences? This paper grew out of a small-scale study of students' experience of their mandated professional work placements. The main data collection for the study involved the conduct of three focus groups held at the University of Canberra in 2000[1]. Each focus group was made up of students in their final year of undergraduate study in each of the Schools of Teaching, Engineering, and Nursing. These three Schools were chosen because each had a period of workplace experience as a compulsory component of their Bachelor degree course. The students who took part in the group discussions had completed the workplace experience component of their course. The numbers involved in each group discussion were:

Nurses	6	(4 female, 2 male)
Engineers	6	(2 females, 4 males)
Teachers (Primary)	7	(7 female, 0 male)

Each 90 minute focus group was taped and a transcript made. When quoting from the transcripts I have given the students names. These are not the students' real names but are, I hope, a small gesture towards an acknowledgement that each student who participated is a real person, with their own unique life experience to draw upon. In spite of space constraints I have also attempted to provide some lengthy extracts from the transcripts in order to give the participants some voice of their own.

All those involved were under the age of thirty and most had entered the university from school. All were graduating at the end of the semester and all reported that they had had paid work during their period of study. Employment experiences ranged from holiday work in sales or hospitality to regular part-time work. In addition, at the time of the focus groups, the teaching students were all eligible to work as relief teachers and the nursing students were able to get casual clinical work through the hiring agencies that operate in their occupational domain.

Finally, it should be stressed that the sample from which the following observations are drawn is small: In all, only 19 final-year undergraduate students participated in the study and no follow-up work was possible with this group of students. The following observations are therefore offered in the spirit of a contribution to discussions of how best to prepare students for professional practice given the changes that have taken place in work practices. The paper does not provide an analysis of the specific ways in which professional work practices have changed over time.

The focus groups

Setting the scene

In an attempt to ensure that each group was, as far as possible, focussed on the same questions, each session commenced with an opening preamble, read to them by the interviewer (see Figure 1). This preamble aimed at getting the participants to focus on their work place experience in ways that avoided inviting simply theory/practice dichotomies between what they learnt at university (often represented in terms of theory/irrelevant) and what they learnt in the workplace (practical/relevant). The introduction of Wenger's notion of 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1999) was used to encourage discussion that was premised on an understanding that each of these 'communities of practice' – university and workplace – were valid in their own terms.

This study aims to look at your learning experiences when you are part of the particular **community of practice** that is the workplace where members of your particular profession practice.

All of us are members of a variety of communities of practice.
You, for example, are members of the university community, which is one particular community of practice. In this community you are positioned as students.
Your family and friendship networks also form communities of practice that have their own, often un-stated, codes of practice.
Many of you will have had experience in workplaces where you are positioned as workers - in part-time and casual jobs, for example.
In your practicum or field work placement you will have found yourself a member of yet another community of practice'. In this case you will have been positioned as a novice professional practitioner.

This study assumes at the outset that learning and identity formation - your sense of yourself - takes place in all these different 'communities'.

The researchers are trying to better understand how the ways you learn, and the kinds of learning that takes place, when you are 'in professional practice' differs, or overlaps, compliments or contradicts, what you've learnt about your chosen profession in other settings - particularly in the formal study setting of the university.

We are not asking you to evaluate which kinds of learning situations are best. The researchers start with the assumption that different kinds of learning experiences are necessary. What we want to explore is what you learnt from your practical experience in a professional setting.
You may, for example, have learnt things about yourself or others that you hadn't expected, or there may have been aspects of the actual work that people in your profession do that took you by surprise, or you may have found that you knew more than you thought!

To help focus your thoughts I plan to put two fairly open-ended questions to you. I will also present you with a little vignette that presents something of an ethical dilemma and will ask you to reflect on that dilemma in the light of your own 'in the field' experience.

**Figure 1: Professional experience project:
Preamble for each group interviewed (read aloud to each group)**

Question 1: Ways of knowing/learning (the epistemology of practice)

Drawing on your recent experiences, can you describe how what you learnt about teaching/nursing/engineering during your professional placement differed from, or reinforced, what you had already learnt at university? Do you feel you were able to mesh the different approaches to learning about teaching/ nursing/ engineering together?

Question 2: Identity formation (the ontology of practice)

Did your period of practical experience change your views about what it is to be a teacher/nurse/engineer? Can you draw on specific incidents from your placement that either particularly confirmed or challenged your view of what it is to be a teacher/nurse/engineer?

Figure 2: Professional experience project: Focus questions

Teaching

Scenario: A student teacher is completing professional experience in a school.
The student has been attentive to sessions with the associate teacher regarding guidelines and expectations for lesson planning. The lesson for Thursday was a challenging one and the student put a good deal of hard work into preparing for it.
Implementation of the lesson, from the student's perspective, went smoothly in some areas but presented some problems in at least two aspects. The student was, therefore, very surprised and upset when the subsequent feedback from the teacher was highly negative and suggested that the student had not put enough work into planning.

Engineering

Scenario: A student engineer is completing professional experience in a workplace. The student has been attentive to sessions with the supervising engineer regarding guidelines and expectations for the work to be undertaken on a particular project. In informal discussion with the supervisor, the student raises a number of ideas for development of the project. As each idea is presented, the supervisor quickly finds something wrong with it. The problems identified by the supervisor are usually like: "it will take too long" or "it will cost too much". The student becomes silent, there are no more ideas proposed.

Nursing

Scenario: You are working on a medical ward during your final clinical placement.
You are called to assist an RN to complete a bed sponge on an elderly woman you have cared for in the past. You go behind the curtains and you see that the woman is totally exposed and appears very embarrassed at being in this undignified position.
The RN asks you to hurry up and help to turn the patient so the bed can be changed. The woman grabs your hand and begs for your help.

Questions (all groups)

1 What kinds of learning might a student (teacher, engineer, nurse) develop from this experience?
2. What could happen next?
3. What should happen next?

Figure 3: Professional experience project: Vignettes

The focus group questions

Two sets of questions were presented to each group. The questions are set out in Figure 2. Each question was read to the group and about 20 minutes of discussion was allowed for each set. As far as possible the interviewer, after reading the question, remained outside the discussion except to invite comment from more silent participants and seek clarification when an answer appeared to require it. This strategy was employed to minimise the effect of participants' picking up real or imagined cues from the interviewer about what answers were being sought (minimising the 'compliance effect').

In addition, in an attempt to get students to discuss ethical dimensions of their practice each group was read a brief vignette (Figure 3).

Recognising yourself in your practice

As Gee, Hall & Lankshear (1996) point out, new entrants to professional practice must be inducted into the 'Discourses' of their profession and become a person able to 'be and recognise certain kinds of people' (that is, they must be able to enter into the community of practice that is engineering or teaching or nursing, and recognise themselves in that practice).

That each of the different professions in the university have different Discourses built up over time, through different historical trajectories, is significant in understanding the ways in which induction into the professions has developed. The different practices of each profession, its recognition and claims to standing and status in the society and within the university, all emerge from these historically different locations and trajectories (the 'sociology of professions' is a broad topic and has been explored by, among others, Broadbent 1997, Hanlon 1998, Larson 1977, Popkewitz & Simola 1996).

The strength of specific professional 'Discourses' during the modern period, and the extent to which universities instilled them, is demonstrated in a longitudinal Australian study conducted 1965-1982. This study, by Anderson and others (1987), showed that at that time students within one professional 'discipline' in one Australian university graduated with more in common, in terms of what they knew, their beliefs and attitudes, even their political orientations, with others preparing for that profession in other universities than they did with other groups of students at their own university.

It is apparent that many domestic students currently combine work and study and as a result have less time to spend on campus than they did in the past. For example,

those who took part in our focus group discussions reported a range of work/study combinations. It can be assumed, therefore, that students are less exposed to the socialising and cultural effects of the university and of their discipline than Anderson and his colleagues reported for the period 1965-1982. It is possible that engineers still leave university thinking more like engineers in other universities than they do teachers or nurses at their own institution. What we do not know, however, is whether those engineers (or teachers, or nurses) graduate with as common or as clear a view of their professional role as they once had.

The following description of one student's experience indicates that, for at least one student in our small study, there was little reflection on the nature of his chosen profession during his course. In addition, he appears to have experienced university as a rather isolating place and his reflections say as much about his induction into the Discourse of university study as it does about his induction into engineering practice:

Daniel: I had absolutely no idea what an engineer was or what one did. All I knew at the end of school was – I was interested in electronics, good at maths, physics, that sort of thing. I wanted to take it further at uni, and electronic engineering was a degree and – I'd tell people – you know, in my first year, 'I'm studying electronic engineering' and they'd say 'Oh, so what does an electronic engineer do?' – and I'd stop – and I'd say 'Actually, I haven't got a clue' [laughter from group].

And that was the most important thing I got out of work experience – is that you actually got first-hand experience in what they did and you thought 'Wow, this is how it really works' and I think what would have been very valuable is if somewhere in first year – not necessarily gone and had to do work experience seeing as you wouldn't be very capable, you wouldn't know anything, but just to be put in an engineering place for a week – just to observe, just to see what goes on. Rather than you're just wading through maths and physics and tons and tons of work and finally, after 3 years, you get to go and get some experience. And right up to that point – 3 years at uni and I wasn't actually sure that I wanted to continue.

I didn't know I wanted to be an engineer really because I didn't really know what it was about – so it was good for me in that it provided me with – that motivation was there – but a lot of the time – I guess it's the same anywhere, at any university, the place

> is filled with academics and they're up in the clouds with their research and theory – and a large percentage of your classmates are sort of anti-social, and just sit there and – you know – locked in the basement and doing their thing [laughter from group].
>
> It's a surprise to find its not like that – there are actually normal people out there in the workplace – you can go, on Friday lunchtime, down to the pub and have a beer and a good laugh with.

Daniel's words appeared to ring true for the other students who participated in the study. The laughter noted in the above extract carried with it a sense of recognition among others in the group and it appeared that many of the students shared Daniel's experience of university as socially alienating and theory-laden compared to the people-laden workplace. The things they identified as what they were least prepared for in the workplace, and found both the most difficult and most rewarding, centred around relationships: Engagements with superiors, colleagues, 'service' staff, clients, students and parents, patients. Daniel captures the flavour of this with his reference to encountering "normal people out there in the workplace…". I will return to this dimension of their workplace experience later.

The power reality of workplace hierarchies

Another dimension of 'recognising yourself in your practice' relates to coming to terms with issues of power and status in workplaces. Peter, another engineering student, gives one slant on the issue of position in the "pecking order":

> **Peter:** I thought I'd probably be right at the bottom of the pecking order – but even walking in, straight away, there was this definite level between who was an engineer and who was a tech and there was this surprising – this whole respect your elders thing – you know – there was mutual respect there, but the fact that you could go and ask a fellow who had been working there ten years and who was 50 years old, sort of thing, you could go and ask him – **say** to him – I want this made, and I want this made, and have it done by this time, sort of thing, and that was a bit of a surprise to have that – like throwing that weight around straight away – so the interaction – uni doesn't teach you a lot of the people skills you need. I think you can only get that through experience.

The teaching and nursing students, on the other hand, commented on the lack of respect or authority sometimes accorded them. Their position in the "pecking order" was constantly reinforced:

> **Anne:** ... often you aren't valued for your opinion on things whereas you might provide the same information as a doctor – but it just doesn't carry, it's not as credible because you are a nurse.

Or more tellingly:

> **Anne:** That scenario reminds me of when I was talking to one of the RNs [Registered Nurse] in our ward who was a very experienced RN who was doing a round with some of the doctors … and he [the doctor] was looking at a wound that was rather sloppy and messy and he actually picked at the wound with his fingers and then he went on to the next patient and he didn't wash his hands. And the RN said 'I should have said something but I just couldn't' … and there's times I felt I should have said things, but as a student I felt that my position there was as the lowest of the low …

Whatever position in the hierarchy the students find themselves in, the realities of workplace power relations must be dealt with. Responses must be made. On what do students base those responses? What, in their professional education program, best equips them to understand these processes and what equips them to have some choice over which practices they support and which they fight to change?

The physicality of practice

Workplace practice is invested with physicality. I have already referred to the people-laden nature of the students' reports of their workplace experiences (above). The nursing students in the study also talked about their workplace experience as a series of "reality shocks". This term nicely captures the sense in which many aspects of workplace practice must be experienced in the actual context of day-to-day practice. These "reality shocks" do not just assault the intellect. Practice is about bodies. Bodies in action, and reaction, to other bodies. In different ways – ways that reflect the nature of their chosen professions and the different degrees of analysis and reflection on their practice that each group brought to the focus group situation – the transcripts from all three groups in this study indicate that all the participants had to make some accommodation to these difficult physical and emotional realities.

Daniel's discovery that workplaces include "normal people" who you could, on Friday lunchtime, go down to the pub with "and have a beer and a good laugh" localises and personalises Daniel's experience by placing it in a context that emphasises its human dimensions. But sometimes it is the sheer physical reality of other bodies and other emotional needs that is confronting to the student practitioner. Student comments in the focus groups again and again pointed to the fact that nothing 'in theory' (in what the university teaches) could have prepared them for the reality of the up-close-and-personal nature of practice:

Jane: Like I think the first shower I gave to a patient was the biggest shock for me. I was only thinking of how I'd feel about it, and what I would do, and not how the patient would feel. I think that was the biggest shock for me and I guess that is like that for every new procedure for me. Inserting a catheter the other day was a big shock for me and how the patient would respond to what I was doing.

Researcher: What, that the patient was stressed?

Jane: Yeah, just them feeling completely just I don't know

Other participant voice: In your hands, really …

Jane: Yeah, yeah just completely dependent on me. That type of degree of dependency you hadn't expected.

And later:

Matt: Another thing I thought, you can learn a lot in uni and think about things but in this placement I have just had this is the first time I have seen people die. I've seen like three people die so far in the last three weeks and you can talk about it in class – and we have. I mean it's not that it is worse or any better, it is just different – you just don't know how you are going to react to it or not react to it, it just looks different than you imagined. Yeah I mean it is good to talk about it to a certain degree but it still doesn't prepare you till you actually see it to know what it is like. [Murmurs of agreement].

And it is not just those in the 'caring' professions who must come to terms with the reality of other people. Engineering students also reported that dealing with other people was the thing they were least prepared for:

Kate: Another thing I found in my work, some skills you learn at work that you don't learn at uni so much is communications skills with clients – cause I have to do a lot of clients – and then team members as well. At uni you do team members who are on the same level. At work you have to work with team leaders and that – and you have to communicate properly with them.

And later:

Ben: And uni presents nice little problems in a nice little environment and you get in the real world and it doesn't behave like that – problems aren't defined properly, they're all open-ended, you start doing systems the way you think it's working and then the users come back and say 'no, no – we want to do it this way' and so you have to start from scratch. I mean – I learnt, before I jump in, go see the users and see what they want, exactly what they want**.**

Although the intensity of this dimension of their work was greater for the teaching and nursing students it is no less real for the engineers. It was, however, less explicit (teachers and nurses know this is part of the job even before they experience it). For the engineering student, the tacit nature of this dimension of work is reflected in the way Kate describes it, rather vaguely, as about "communication skills" and Ben assumes the problem can be fixed in future encounters by making sure that requirements are clearly spelt out before he starts. Ben's communication strategies may be fine 'in theory' but they miss the messiness of most actual decision-making processes and the degree to which people cannot always be clear about what they want because of competing needs/desires, competing priorities, or the operation of unstated power dynamics that invest some people in the communication encounter with 'voice' and silence others.

Nor is it only the bodies of those who are practiced upon that are on display. Here are several of the nursing students in the study talking about how patients respond to them as gendered bodies rather than as professional practitioners:

John: I think it is a little bit more difficult for males because when you walk into that room and everyone, well sometimes they presume you're a doctor or something else and when you tell them you are one of the nurses looking after them they go 'Oh okay' and then after a while they can deal with it. It is just that initial reaction most of the time … I think that sort of put me off in a sense that everyone thinks 'What are you doing in this profession' and I guess that just gets on you

after a while, you start to look at yourself, 'What am I doing in this profession', you know? [Laughter from group] … and you start to wonder, you know, if you might have been better doing something else.

Alice: Why do you say - like in a critical way – 'why didn't I do something better?'

John: No – they don't put you down – it is just that initial reaction as if to say you don't belong in this profession. I am expecting a woman to come in.

Matt: You must be gay! [laughter]

Jane: I think nursing is very like that – some of the comments I have received from male patients – oh my god!

This is closely related to the embodied nature of those who are 'practised on' (patients, students, clients). It is about the extent to which others position the student as a professional practitioner (engineer, teacher, nurse) or as a gendered individual (as male or female) and the status accorded to each identity construction. It is also about how the students experience the fact that their bodies are always on display.

Another dimension of the physicality of the practitioner is reflected in the descriptions of the actual hard physical work of teaching and nursing and the difficulties faced in performing all the tasks that must be done in a day/shift. This speaks to the embedded nature of practice. Practice does not happen in a vacuum, it happens in specific settings within work cultures built up over time. Here is Jill, one of the teaching graduates:

Jill: … it's the everydayness of teaching – everyday is different and full-on – constant demands of the children in the classroom but also the parents, the meetings, all the administrative matters – for example, what do you do with all those signed notes they've had to bring to allow them to go on an excursion or whatever …

… you really have to work hard at taking care of yourself – things like just going to the toilet during the day – it's like you have to remember to do it ...

> … the biggest challenge was doing this every day. I'd worked at uni, but never like this – getting up every day and doing the same thing, but always changeable … it's managing your washing and your cooking – all of that. In shorter pracs you just put your life on hold for the two weeks, or whatever, but now you have to manage both your personal life and your professional life simultaneously – that was probably the most demanding thing I had to learn.

It is interesting to note that the question of balancing a working life and a private life featured large in the talk of the teaching and nursing students but did not enter into the conversation with the engineering students. Assuming that balancing work and personal life is at least as problematic for young engineers as it is for young teachers and nurses, what are we to make of this? Why is it that this, along with the matter of workplace relationships, appears to be a tacit and private matter for the engineering students? It can only be assumed that this has something to do with the gendered nature of certain kinds of work (irrespective of the actual gender of the individuals performing it). Engineering appears to still represent a 'masculine' occupation, while teaching and nursing still appear to be 'feminine' occupations. As a 'masculine' domain, the personal appears to have little place in engineering. As a result, the personal is not something that is, or can easily be, explicitly discussed in relation to questions about the nature of the engineering students' professional roles or practices except in the rather ambiguous and politically neutralised rhetoric of needing good communication skills and team skills. This silence is another dimension of the power relations of workplaces in that it keeps certain aspects of the workers' 'being' outside the domain of the workplace and 'privatised'. In this way the social and personal costs of current workplace arrangements are made 'illegible' (Sennett 1998, p.10).

Living the 'old' and the 'new' simultaneously

It is apparent that workplaces and work practices have changed significantly in recent decades. But new workplace practices displace, rather than replace, more established practices. Multiple practices co-exist in specific locations (Luke 1996). Restructuring organisations does not change their practices and work culture at a pen-stroke. The new is introduced into the existing structures and practices with complex, and often contradictory, effects.

Workplaces become an amalgam of the established and the new. As a result, often two (at least) competing sets of expectations can be placed on the new entrant simultaneously. When, for example, a beginning nurse is expected to demonstrate 'efficiency' in the delivery of medical services and procedures whilst at the same time demonstrate the (highly feminised) attributes of good manners and a 'caring attitude'

two sets of contradictory expectations can be said to be operating. Similarly, contradictory demands are placed on beginning engineers whose professional education has been empirical and abstract but who need, also, to demonstrate an ability to translate technical problems in terms of clients' needs and company 'bottom lines', or they need to demonstrate an ability to operate within an apparent culture of intellectual openness but, also, be highly competitive.

In addition, for teachers and nurses, older gendered employment practices still impact on new entrants: teachers and nurses are still expected to demonstrate a strong service ideal and accept relatively poor pay and conditions. On this point the focus groups provide an excellent example of the way cultural expectations contribute to what Ball (2000) calls the 'fabrication of self'. In the discussion with engineering students there was a long digression by the students into a conversation about former students who were now earning in excess of $100,000. By contrast, the teaching and nursing transcripts are riddled with references to their caring and sharing role, constructed by the participants in very idealistic terms ("opportunities to practice holistic nursing"; "incorporating co-operative learning strategies"). The engineering students in this study appear to have moved to construct their identities in the terms required in the emerging 'provider services' (Sassen 1991) sector of the service economy. They discuss work in terms that construct their sense of selves as workers as highly individualised, highly mobile, and highly flexible. The teaching and nursing students, on the other hand, appeared to remain embedded in modernist identity structures even though the conditions of their employment were changing rapidly. These changes were exemplified by such employment practices as the flexible work schedules, short-term contracts, and accountability regimes already encountered by the students in their roles as relief teachers or agency nurses as well as in their professional work experience placements.

Teacher 'performativities'

Teaching students in this study reported developing lesson plans that showed an understanding of the latest curriculum policies (for their university supervisor) but then adapting their classroom practice to accommodate what they saw as the more conservative practice of their supervising teachers. Students in the study referred to this as "playing the game". Students have, of course, always 'played the game' in this sense. However, in recent years structural and cultural changes in both the university and in professional workplaces make this 'game' more multi-layered.

'Playing the game' is essential for those subject to performance-based forms of assessment of professional practice (Ball 2000). These assessment regimes, with their emphasis on demonstrating a pre-determined set of separate skills and competencies,

encourage an emphasis on performance rather than an emphasis on practice. They discourage students from using the professional practice experience as an opportunity to test different approaches, develop a range of repertoires, or reflect on workplace issues such as the power dynamics they encountered.

It could be argued that performance-oriented assessment more closely matches current workplace practices with their emphasis on 'quality service' and 'performance enhanced' management practices. They therefore better prepare students for the world of work – they ensure 'work ready' graduates (see, for example, Ramsey 2000). But as Ball (2000), Fournier (1999), Gee, (1996), Sennett (1998) and others point out, this 'performance-enhancing' language reflects the kinds of surveillance systems being introduced into workplaces that re-locate responsibility for supervision away from management and on to individual work teams or individual workers.

The teaching students in this study provided an excellent demonstration of this process in action when they discussed one important (for them) aspect of their workplace experience – that of the assessment of their teaching against a pre-defined, and lengthy, list of generic teaching competencies. The significance of this assessment is considerable, in part because the students understand that school-based assessments are important to their employment prospects. Staffing decisions are increasingly school-based and school principals use professional work experience programs as recruitment tools. Professional experience programs therefore allow employers of graduates to 'try out' potential recruits (often for up to 12 weeks) without incurring any salary costs. To get the first contract after graduation, students need to perform well (and be perceived to have performed well by those in the workplace) during their 'practice run'.

The teaching students in this study demonstrated that they understood this practical reality but they also experienced the competency-based assessments used to assess their performance as arbitrary and unfair:

> **Joan:** … we said we needed a translator when we were doing ours [assessment reports] because I'd read them before I went on prac and thought 'Oh dear'. My associate wasn't able to fill it out and she even came to the workshop here [the university] on how to fill all the forms out. And it was just phenomenal and then we sat with the Level 2, and she said 'Oh no, you've interpreted these wrong, it actually means ...' And we went 'Oh but the indicator says this' and the new person says 'No the indicator means this' so we ended up with 3 or 4 different opinions of what each indicator on some of them meant. And so it comes back to, it's just too ambiguous.

Sally: But if I had any advice for anyone just starting out in teaching I'd say read those [the lists of competencies] and talk to your associate teacher about them now and don't wait till the end, and talk about this because the associate teacher is the one ticking it, if you know what their interpretation of them are, then you know what to do to reach them.

Joan: So there you go, teaching to outcomes, teaching to the test.

Jill: … she [the associate teacher] asked me to write my own report and I said no – and I should have because I just got tick, competent, in every box or whatever – and she wrote 'good at this' and she had been bragging to the other teachers about how good I was and yet on my report it says 'good this', 'good that'. Not fantastic, not loved it. It's so hard, it's so subjective and it so depends on who you get.

Here the students come very close to confronting the power relations embedded in the competency-based assessments. In these new regimes the 'centre' (in this case a 'partnership' of university and employer representatives who have developed the competency statements against which the students are assessed) set vaguely worded criteria and leave the supervising teacher and the student to work out their meaning.

This is not so far removed from the 'team work' approach now widely adopted in factory production in which teams of workers are set productivity targets and the team has to work out how to meet them. Gee, Hull & Lankshear (1996) provide an excellent case study of this approach in a computer components factory in the USA to illustrate how this process both disciplines workers and relocates struggles over control of work practices away from managers-workers (collectively addressed) and 'outwards' to the work teams. In the work environment made possible by these new regimes of control, individual (and individualised) workers struggle with other individual (and individualised) workers over workloads and pace of work rather than with management. In the extract quoted above we see Joan, her associate teacher, and the Level 2 teacher all struggling over the meaning of the assessment criteria while the agencies who want the assessment carried out (the university and the Department of Education) no longer need to be involved in face-to-face inspection and assessment of students' abilities.

Conclusion: The new conservatism?

This short article can only touch on the various physical, emotional and psychological demands placed on students as they cross that liminal space between being a student

and being a professional practitioner. And there are no simple answers to the moral and ethical realities confronted by students as they make this transition. Nevertheless, I would like to give both the first and last word to Beth, the engineering student quoted in the introduction:

> **Beth:** One other important thing is, in the workforce, you are dealing with your boss and your boss's boss and the company's wishes – or the government's wishes – and what the company wishes is what you have to wish.

What we hear in Beth's realist appraisal of her professional role is confronting for those involved in the preparation of professional practitioners. One reading of this comment merely sees it as a realistic assessment of the neophyte's position. While this might be true, I would wish to argue that it is a sad thing to hear that a student is starting her professional career already so pragmatic and accepting of the pressure to conform to the existing practices or dominant discourses in her field.

Another, more disquieting, reading of Beth's 'realism' is to see it as the harbinger of a new brand of professionalism. A brand that has left behind the modernist discourse of professional service and adopted a new understanding of the whole idea of service (of who one's professional expertise is offered to, and why). This new professionalism is at odds with notions of professional practice handed down to us from the modern period in which professional service was linked to the meritocratic ideal of universal provision of one's professional expertise to all in need of those services.

It may be that this new professionalism better reflects the needs of corporate Australia. Within the context of this emerging professional ideal, 'communication skills' and 'teamwork' are key strategies. But as this article has tried to demonstrate, concepts such as 'communication' and 'teamwork' can ring rather hollow. Such concepts provide no real purchase on the ambiguities and messiness of real-life, day-to-day, practice in contemporary workplaces. Not only are they often empty of content but they actively work to displace the human (the embedded and embodied) dimensions of work. In doing so, they act to make opaque and inaccessible the power relations that structure work. They are, in short, part of the radically conservative agenda that Richard Sennett (1998, p10) identifies when he talks about the new capitalism as an 'often illegible regime of power'.

The engineering students who participated in the focus groups, in the absence of structured learning opportunities that make explicit the power dimensions of much that is experienced in the workplace, showed a tendency to construct their

experiences as private matters to be 'coped with' rather than public (political and ethical) issues that impinge on how they can and should act in their professional roles. The nursing and teaching students appeared to understand the political and ethical dimensions of their professional experiences better than the engineers but the study drew attention to the fact that existing power relationships often had negative effects on their perceptions of themselves as professional practitioners and on their perceived 'degrees of freedom' to act in ways that they understood to be ethically appropriate or in the best interests of their patients or students.

While it is dangerous to extrapolate from accounts of experiences gathered in one small study, what the students who took part in these focus groups said suggests that a lack of explicit attention to the ethical, social, and historical, understanding of their own profession in the education of those being accredited to take up professional roles may conspire to ensure that students can more easily be incorporated into work practices that reinforce existing power relations and valorise individual competition and individual performance. Such a challenge to the ethical base of professional practice has the potential to undermine public confidence in the professions and undermine the ideal of making a contribution to the public good that has been the hallmark of claims to professional status in the past.

Endnote

[1] The research project from which this article is draw: 'Hidden Meanings: Cross-disciplinary analysis of student learning in the professional practicum' was undertaken at the University of Canberra in 2000. My thanks go to the grant recipients for allowing me to use the transcripts from the study. I was Research Associate for the project and conducted the focus groups. The research was undertaken with the assistance of a University of Canberra Research Grant. Holders of the grant were:

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