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Making ‘professionalism’ meaningful to students in higher education

Anna Wilson^{a,b*}, Gerlese Åkerlind^b, Barbara Walsh^b, Bruce Stevens^b,
Bethany Turner^b and Alison Shield^b

^a*Oxford Learning Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 1PT, UK;* ^b*University of Canberra, Canberra ACT 2602, Australia*

With rising vocational expectations of higher education, universities are increasingly promoting themselves as preparing students for future professional lives. This makes it timely to ask what makes professionalism meaningful to students. In addressing this question, we first identify aspects of professionalism that might represent appropriate aspirations for higher education, in particular the development of professionalism as a transformational rather than acquisitional process. We then report on an empirical study aimed at examining current students’ understandings of professionalism, and identifying what they commonly notice *and* do not notice about professionalism. Finally, we give examples of curriculum interventions designed by subject convenors in response to these findings.

Keywords: professionalism; generic skills; graduate attributes; vocational purposes

Introduction

... the notion [of] professionalism ... it’s so mysterious ... I think because it’s used a lot, so that it equals an empty signifier. (Undergraduate student, International Studies)

The perennial question of the purpose of higher education is reflected in changing expectations of the attributes of university graduates. That is, beyond the specifics of acquired knowledge, how does university education change and develop the individuals who engage in it? What are the reliable benefits that a university education brings, irrespective of the field of study, and who are the beneficiaries?

Partly in response to such questions, universities are increasingly active in promoting higher education as an experience that develops generic and transferable understandings, skills and behaviours alongside disciplinary learning. The life-changing aspects of a university education are increasingly being analysed and codified, with the ‘added value’ of a higher education articulated in statements of graduate attributes or generic skills (see e.g. Barrie 2007).

This shift towards more explicit identification and description of the gains in non-declarative knowledge has been accompanied by (and possibly contributes to) a

*Corresponding author. Email: anna.wilson@learning.ox.ac.uk

concurrent shift in emphasis from more socially oriented attributes, such as good character and leadership, towards more vocationally oriented attributes intended to enable graduates to function effectively in the workplace.

Unfortunately, this shift in emphasis runs the risk of creating a mechanistic, tick-box approach to 'skills acquisition' from university study, rather than a focus on ontological transformation or the formation of character and identity. Indeed, recent research (Tymon 2011, 10) has suggested that students may 'be more concerned with instrumental or economic views of employability' than genuinely seeing the value of developing particular skills or attitudes.

The task at hand, therefore, for those seeking to rescue a more liberal purpose for higher education, is to find ways of turning the acquisition of graduate attributes and generic skills into a meaningful and potentially transformational process. In the following, we describe how such a process may be understood in relation to the graduate attribute of 'professionalism'.

Professionalism: shared and contested meanings

Sociological research into the notions of professions and professionalism, and the attractiveness of being a professional, offers a way to explore the possible (and changing) meanings of professionalism. In the following, we draw on this research to identify key aspects of professionalism that might be the focus of learning and teaching activities aimed at increasing students' understandings of and capacities to embrace/develop their own professionalism.

Early research into professionalism emphasised legitimacy and autonomy (Foucault 1973, 1980), with professionals seen as autonomous individuals exercising appropriate conduct. Subsequent authors recognised that professionals go further than simply exercising appropriate conduct, however, and instead are also responsible for its definition. That is, professionals 'determine the ways of thinking about problems which fall in their domain' (Dingwall and Lewis 1983, 5).

As well as developing profession-specific practices, professionals are also commonly 'extensively engaged in dealing with risk, with risk assessment and, through the use of expert knowledge, enabling customers and clients to deal with uncertainty' (Evetts 2003, 397). This common element of the need to exercise judgment based on specialist knowledge, which is itself often founded in 'abstract concepts and formal learning' (Freidson 2001, 34–35), means that clients and the community must place trust in professionals.

Some researchers have emphasised the positive aspects of this need for trust. As Evetts (2003, 400) puts it, '[p]rofessionalism requires professionals to be worthy of that trust', requiring the development of a sense of responsibility and service. In many cases, these may be codified into a set of ethical guidelines or codes of conduct, although they may remain implicit and assumed.

The existence of a profession also implies the existence of professional communities. Professionals recognise each other and define their profession through 'similarities in work practices and procedures, common ways of perceiving and interacting with customers and clients' (Evetts 2003, 401). Evetts (2012, 9) characterises professional relations as 'collegial, cooperative and mutually supportive', and notes that the norms of conduct within the profession may also serve to encourage such relations and discourage excessive intra-professional competition.

It should be noted that other authors (e.g. Abbott 1988; Larkin 1983; Larson 1977) have identified a more self-interested conception of professionalism, in which the professional community is seen as operating somewhat like a cartel, promoting its own self-interests, protecting its occupational monopoly and safeguarding the power and status of its members. The trust invested in them by clients is exploited rather than respected. This, however, is a version of professionalism that we, the authors, would prefer our students did not develop.

Drawing on this literature to clarify what we *do* hope students will learn in relation to professionalism, we might thus identify three core components that together define what it means to be professional:

- (1) exercising specialist knowledge and skills with judgment;
- (2) identifying as a member of a community based on shared practices and values, where the norms of acceptable practice and values are determined within the community rather than imposed from without; and
- (3) having a sense of responsibility and service, based on a belief that what you and your professional community does is of genuine value.

Professionalism should mean behaving according to these underpinning ideas and values, within the specific context of a particular profession and its associated norms.

These three components highlight the interaction between rights and responsibilities that characterise professionalism:

- The possession of specialist knowledge confers the right to make judgments and decisions, but also the responsibility to make them wisely and for the benefit of those they affect.
- Membership of the professional community gives the right to have a say in the norms and values of that community, but also the responsibility to act for the good of that community (e.g. by acting according to its values, or by pushing for changes that result in better practice).
- A sense of genuine value of your work gives the right to try to influence the behaviour of others, but also the responsibility to do so only to improve their lives, and to work to the highest standards.

The questions to be addressed in the teaching and learning of professionalism are, then, whether students' understandings incorporate these different components of professionalism, whether they infer the relationships between rights and responsibilities that apply in their context, and how curricula can be devised to foreground these issues.

Professionalism features strongly in the rhetoric of the university in which the research described here took place, which has a focus on education for the professions. However, although 'professionalism' is listed among the generic skills that it claims are developed in all its graduates, the university does not prescribe or even describe definitions of the term. This may give the impression that professionalism, as has been noted about graduate attributes in general, is simply 'one of a list of labels' (Tymon 2011, 5) that actually mask a lack of shared understanding (Barrie 2007; Tymon 2011). However, it does allow for flexible, context- and subject-dependent interpretations which may share a common structure but differ in emphasis and detail.

Our research was conducted with undergraduate and graduate coursework students in four disciplines: pharmacy, psychology, public relations and international studies.

These disciplines sample a wide range in the possible meanings and emphases of professionalism in different professional fields.

In the areas of pharmacy and psychology education, professionalism is typically an explicit and reasonably well-defined goal, although the definitions adopted in these areas may differ (see e.g. American Pharmacists Association-Academy of Students of Pharmacy and the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy Council of Deans 2000; Elman, Illfelder-Kaye and Robiner 2005). Public relations provides a contrasting context for which notions of professionalism are less well-defined – although there have been recent attempts to promote a unified vision of professionalism in this field (Grinig 2009). Finally, the field of international studies offers a context in which the notion of a single professional community, and hence norms of professional conduct and values, is not immediately evident.

In addition, the varied characters of the disciplines themselves – from health, business studies and social sciences; from less to more clearly vocational; and from a single traditional discipline focus to inter- or trans-disciplinary studies – ensures a heterogeneous student cohort.

Thus these four fields offer contrasting contexts in which to both identify shared ways in which professionalism is understood and examine some of its context-dependent aspects. By investigating variation in students' understandings of professionalism, as well as what is commonly not understood, academics may be able to better target learning and teaching activities to focus on what is important in their field.

Method

We based our approach on a modification of that used by Åkerlind, McKenzie and Lupton (2013) to improve learning and teaching of threshold concepts:

- (1) identification of concepts worthy of intensive curriculum design attention;
- (2) action research into variation in students' understandings/misunderstandings of those concepts, using an approach influenced by the ideas underpinning phenomenography (Åkerlind 2012); and
- (3) design of learning activities, influenced by a variation-theory perspective on learning (Marton 2007) to address the poorer understandings identified in stage 2.

To foreground the pedagogical implications of the research, an important aspect of the method (as with Åkerlind, McKenzie and Lupton 2013) was bringing subject convenors from the four disciplinary areas together with two educational researchers/developers to design and conduct interviews with students from their courses.

Expressing their understanding of professionalism was not expected to be easy for students. Consequently, interviews were designed around a concrete scenario (specific to each subject, see Table 1) in which students' actions and the thinking behind their actions could be explored. Interviews were semi-structured, based around four core questions developed by the subject convenors and educational researchers/developers. Our methodological and theoretical influences suggested that questions that asked students to focus on concrete examples of their own experiences, which they themselves identified as illustrating or being important to their beliefs about professionalism. Thus all students were asked:

Table 1. Details of the interviews.

Field/subject	Level of study	Trigger scenario	No. of students interviewed
Pharmacy	Masters	Industry placement	9
Clinical psychology	Masters	Clinical placement	6
Public relations	Final year undergraduate	Organising a public event; pitching for a client	6
International studies	Final year undergraduate	Research project	5

- (1) Think of a situation during [trigger scenario] in which professionalism was important.
- (2) What made professionalism particularly important here?
- (3) How do you know when you are being professional in this situation?
- (4) What are the potential consequences of not being professional in this situation?

Follow-up questions asked students to elaborate on what they meant and to provide further concrete examples or illustrations from their own experience. In total, 26 interviews were conducted (see Table 1). (Throughout the following, quotations from interviews indicate the subject area and an interview identification number.)

Completed interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed by the two educational developers/researchers. The analysis used an iterative process of repeated readings and comparisons of transcripts, identifying general themes and searching for similarities and differences in views across the group of transcripts as a whole. The two researchers initially worked independently. The resulting preliminary analyses were compared and integrated.

The outcomes were then presented to the subject convenors as a group for feedback. (One of the four convenors was unable to attend this meeting because she was on sabbatical at the time.) The convenors were asked to become familiar with the transcripts of students interviewed in their own subject area before the combined analysis was presented. The convenors supported the proposed outcomes and their cross-disciplinary nature.

This approach relies on students' accounts of their beliefs and actions, rather than direct observations of students in context. In such circumstances, it is possible that a student may be telling the interviewer what s/he thinks the interviewer wants to hear, or what s/he thinks s/he ought to think and believe. However, even if this does happen, such accounts cannot incorporate elements of professionalism that students are not aware of or do not see the importance of. Thus although the data cannot be assumed to reflect the frequency with which a particular understanding of professionalism is held, they do present a reliable picture of the range of ways in which professionalism is understood within our interview sample.

Results and discussion

Students' understandings of professionalism: signifiers versus signification

There was substantial variation in the sophistication of understandings of professionalism, even among students at Masters level. This variation was often initially hidden by

use of common terms such as expertise, appropriate behaviour, trust and respect – but the interview questions that asked students to describe why professionalism was important in a given context and possible consequences of behaving (un)professionally revealed different underlying understandings of those terms.

While there was broad agreement on the outward signs or *signifiers* of professionalism, it became clear that students held significantly varying understandings of what professionalism actually means or *signifies*.

Four commonly recognised elements, serving as outward signifiers of professionalism, emerged from the interviews:

- (1) expertise;
- (2) commitment to and quality of work;
- (3) good conduct (including appearance, comportment and treatment of others);
and
- (4) ethics.

However, the varying degree to which students were aware of the deeper meaning of professionalism created significant variation in how they described and understood each of these elements. Some students did not appear to relate them to an underlying purpose; they focused on the signifiers themselves, as if professionalism lay solely in the acquisition and display of specialist knowledge, skills and practices. In contrast, other students connected these outward signs to the provision of a valuable service that could improve the lives of others and to ideas of autonomy, community and identity, suggesting that developing professionalism might be part of an ontological transformation. Such students gave significantly more nuanced and contextually dependent descriptions of appropriate practice and conduct.

In general, less sophisticated understandings of each signifier positioned the element as (1) externally determined and not open to question; and (2) pre-determined and uniform in application. Students with such understandings tended to focus on transactional benefits and consequences to themselves and/or their business. More sophisticated understandings emphasised (1) internalisation or integration of internally and externally-determined aspects; and (2) contextual sensitivity, relativity and use of judgment. These more sophisticated understandings incorporated an awareness that behaviour and choices might impact on themselves, their peers *and* their clients, and a concomitant sense of responsibility.

In a few cases, students were themselves conscious that the term lacked real meaning to them, despite (or perhaps because) of its dominant position in the university's rhetoric:

I guess it's just really a word to me. I don't know too much about it ... really I have no real understanding of the word other than it's in my unit outline. (International studies 1)

I just think of development days, you know, throughout work or whatever else. It's like yes, you know, get people together and we can talk about how good it is to be professional and such, but what does that actually mean? ... the notion professionalism ... I think because it's used a lot, so that it equals an empty signifier. (International studies 5)

These students were not unaware of the *signifiers* of professionalism, and were able to describe professional behaviours such as appropriate conduct and dress, yet as these excerpts show they felt that it was a term to which they struggled to assign a deeper

meaning. Such comments highlight the need to help students see beyond buzz-words and find real meaning and relevance to their own studies.

In the following, we examine each of the four commonly recognised elements of professionalism described above, and show how students' understandings of them varied depending on their understanding of the underlying meaning and purpose of professionalism.

Expertise

Almost all the students interviewed spontaneously referred to the need for specialist knowledge as part of the defining characteristics of professionalism. However, this expertise was varyingly understood as (1) having a set body of knowledge applicable in all contexts; or (2) the ability to combine knowledge with judgment and self-awareness in response to unpredictable situations.

Expertise as certainty

For many students, professionalism meant complete mastery of specialist knowledge and/or skills, with this mastery ensuring that professionals know the right answer and the right action for all situations. For example,

constantly knowing what's going on, being able to, I guess, answer every question that's thrown at you. (Public relations 5)

professionalism is having ... complete confidence in a certain field or ... a certain subject matter, and feeling you can answer any questions on the subject, and have an unbiased yet correct answer. (International studies 3)

Such conceptions were often associated with a sense that there was a correct, externally determined way in which knowledge and skills should be applied:

you're using the skills that you've learnt through your course, so whether it's pharmacy practice or pharmacology or technical skills that you've learnt, and you're applying them appropriately and how they're supposed to be applied. (Pharmacy 2)

A slightly more sophisticated version of this conception of expertise allowed for limits to one's own or the profession's knowledge. For example,

[it's important to] know that you might not always have all the information, and don't think that you should, because if there's ever something – if they say they've been using a cream for ages but it hasn't been working, then I would say, well I don't have the answer to that ... refer them to their doctor or whatever. (Pharmacy 3)

In each of these cases, there is an underlying sense of a static body of 'correct' knowledge and skills, of which the professional might have more or less mastery, but which gives rise to a 'correct' approach, answer or procedure in any given situation. That is, for these students, knowledge *removes* the need for judgment.

Expertise as judgment

The sense of potential certainty (however distant from presently achieved knowledge) is in marked contrast to the views of another group of students, who saw an intrinsic

uncertainty or multiplicity of possible viewpoints and referred to the need to make judgments. For example,

there are always multiple arguments in a discussion; there are always multiple points of view. (International studies 2)

using professional judgement, so you're not basing your decisions or your advice on information you don't know anything about. (Pharmacy 2)

For some of these students, awareness of multiple perspectives was matched by a need for awareness of one's own potential bias:

it's self-reflexivity, being aware that you may not be right or that you have certain biases. (International studies 2)

What can be seen in the more sophisticated views is both the sense of uncertainty highlighted by Evetts (2003) and an awareness of the responsibility to make judgments. That is, expert knowledge is seen as *enabling* rather than removing the need for judgment.

Commitment to and quality of work

Although not as omnipresent in the interviews as reference to expertise, many students described aspects of professionalism that connect with notions of pride in work, commitment and aiming for high standards.

In general, commitment and quality of work was varyingly understood as (1) being seen to work hard and meeting externally determined (and externally judged) standards; or (2) taking pride in one's work, judging its quality oneself, and making those judgments according to internally determined standards.

Quality as externally determined

For some students, the standards that they worked to were driven solely by the external expectations and common practice of the profession:

working within a set standard perhaps, that others have done before you. (International studies 2)

you get an understanding [of expected standards] if you examine others' works – and not to say they're all correct, but if that's the general way in which people gather appreciation of certain things, then it sort of becomes more common and more expected. (International studies 3)

The quality of work was also to be judged by others:

if you're meeting their expectations – if you're getting done what they want you to do then they're sort of going to see you as professional. (Public relations 6)

If students had their own opinion, it was subjugated to these external judgments and requirements:

maybe not the outcome I want, but the outcome that's required. (International studies 3)

Quality as internally determined

For other students, the standards they aspired to had become internalised, so that investigating the standards of authority figures was no longer necessary:

I know what a crap report looks like and I know what a good one is. So I'm relating the reports that I know to be of good standard and quality to what's professional (International studies 4)

For these students, it was important that they valued their own work – as one international studies student put it, professionalism is 'meaning what you're doing'. This enabled students to judge their own work:

... I put hours upon hours into it. It really was something that I cared about and I was really interested in. I feel that that was a really professional piece of work because I put my heart and soul into it. (International studies 4)

to ensure that when you are working, that you are working at your best, because if you're not putting a 100 per cent into it then there's no point coming to work, I guess ... you want to deliver the optimal care, basically, so if you're not giving it your best, ensuring that you are delivering the best care for each patient, then you should be reconsidering why you're doing it, I guess. (Pharmacy 7)

These examples show how more sophisticated conceptions of quality incorporate both the need to take responsibility for judging one's own work and a genuine belief in its value.

Good conduct

As with expertise, almost all the students interviewed referred to the way in which professionals appeared to and/or interacted with clients and patients as a key element of professionalism.

Again, as with expertise, conduct was varyingly understood in terms of (1) predetermined and uniform standards of behaviour applicable in all contexts; or (2) sensitivity to different contexts and client needs, with the ability to flexibly adjust behaviour appropriately.

Appropriate conduct as predetermined

At its least sophisticated, professional conduct was limited to using appropriate dress and personal appearance, followed by language use when interacting with clients. But what really marked the least sophisticated view was that the underlying purpose of appropriate conduct appeared to be limited to generating respect from clients and helping them identify you as a professional.

if you're liaising via email it's how you're writing in your email; you've got to have a sort of professional presence. For example how you might sign off – you wouldn't just write ta, you'd say kind regards. (Public relations 8)

Using appropriate language is important. So if you're talking to a patient, you're not using doctor speak, you're using common but professional terms and things like that that separate you from being someone who's off the street. (Pharmacy 2)

given that ... they don't know you personally ... what someone sees straight away is the attire, is the look. You look neat and tidy and that gives off the vibe of professionalism, and then the manner in which you speak to them. (Pharmacy 1)

Appropriate conduct as contextual

Whilst all students thought that personal appearance and language use was an important aspect of professional behaviour, substantial differences emerged between students in the reasons why dress and language were seen as important to professionalism. A more sophisticated understanding of professionalism positioned the purpose of appropriate conduct as generating trust, not just respect, as this increases the chances of clients benefiting from your advice and being willing to provide all the personal information needed for informed advice.

From this perspective, appropriate conduct went beyond simply following a set of externally determined norms to include adjusting to the situation and needs of the client:

So you have to take on board that every situation is different. You often have to individualise your care, and how you approach different people, with different cultures, that sort of thing. (Pharmacy 7)

if someone's very sensitive, you gauge how to approach the patient and where to talk to them and what tone to talk to them. (Pharmacy 7)

Some students described conduct in relation to interactions with colleagues, reflecting a sense of collegiality. For example:

... in a team setting, perhaps a number of suggestions are brought up, and you really want to do something your way, but in this context it's perhaps better to go with someone else's idea, and being professional means stepping back and saying, okay, their idea is better for the greater good, it's better for the whole team. (Public relations 5)

These more sophisticated views show an understanding of the need for client/practitioner relations characterised by trust and sensitivity, and intra-professional relations characterised by cooperation and mutual respect, as well as the need to exercise judgment about what constitutes appropriate conduct in a given situation.

Ethics

Although not mentioned as often as expertise or conduct, ethics were still commonly raised by students as an important element of professionalism. Ethical conduct was strongly related to the patterns of interaction with clients/patients described above.

As with the other signifiers of professionalism, ethics were varyingly understood as (1) governed by fixed, externally-determined rules or codes of conduct; or (2) the product of an integration of personal values with external codes – which might sometimes be in tension.

Ethical codes as externally determined rules

Some students described ethics solely in terms of the written codes of conduct set down by their professional body:

aligning my behaviour and methods with ethical guidelines as governed by the ruling regulatory bodies. (Clinical psychology 1)

that's what separates professionals ... from someone working in retail, I guess. Like they're obliged to do that, like it's by the law. (Pharmacy 9)

if it's an ethical thing, usually a code of ethics is set out to help you follow certain guidelines, make your job more professional, do what you're meant to do and everything like that. (Public relations 6)

Ethical codes as internally determined values

Other students worked to their own internally generated ethical codes, which they felt were as important as (and frequently independent from) the norms of the profession:

The student may know how to behave professionally, but in the real world, if he [sic] doesn't care about that and does the wrong thing, and you say, 'You passed an exam, you should behave', it doesn't make sense ... No amount of books can teach people what to be. (Pharmacy 8)

I know there's code of conducts ... I don't really understand the need for them to be drawn up because I feel that it's instilled in me through other – my upbringing, through life. (International studies 4)

In some cases, students were aware of the potential for conflict between their personal values and what was required of them as a professional. For example,

Let's say ... you've had to do something that may not necessarily be [against] a core value, but it was against something that you wanted to do. Perhaps you would assess that privately and go, well, if it doesn't affect my core values, it doesn't affect the grand narrative of what I'm about in life, I'll do it even though I'm against it. I'd say that that was professional because you're doing what's required of you. But being professional is different to what is necessarily right or wrong ... [If] you do something to be professional, to uphold [an] agreement with your supervisor or ... organisation, it might still be wrong, but you could be professional in the way that you do it'. (International studies 2)

This set of excerpts shows that students with less sophisticated views saw ethical codes as both determined by others and removing the need for them to make judgments, whereas students with more sophisticated views saw their own value systems as contributing to decisions about appropriate behaviour. Where internal and external values were in conflict, judgment needed to be exercised in a context-dependent way.

What professionalism signifies: impact and identity

As is evident from the above analysis, students showed greater or lesser awareness of the need for autonomous judgment in relation to their own practice and conduct as professionals. Strongly linked to this variation were two other recurrent themes in their reflections:

- (1) scope of impact of professionalism; and
- (2) professional identity.

Scope of impact

There was significant variation in students' awareness of the scope of potential impact of their actions as a professional. This variation was particularly evident in comments on the purposes and consequences of professional or unprofessional behaviour. One aspect of this was the notion of representation – students varyingly understood professionals as representing themselves, their business or organisation, or their profession as a whole. The resulting expanding awareness of the impact of professional behaviour is illustrated in the following examples:

So you've studied, you've got experience, you've gotten to a position where other people turn to you for ... advice ... So I think to be a professional is that you've gotten yourself to a place where you are respected and acknowledged for your position. (Psychology 4)

Well you're representing the company ... [it's] your responsibility that the company is talked about in a positive way ... you need to remain professional so your company looks professional. (Public relations 3)

they see you as not necessarily an individual person, but as a pharmacist representative of your whole profession. They might lose trust in the profession and not seek advice, from not only you but from other health professionals. (Pharmacy 1)

Accompanying awareness of the broader scope of potential impact of professionalism is a sense of belonging to (and hence representing) a community, and also an increased awareness of the responsibilities that come with professional status and the possession of specialist knowledge.

This variation in awareness of scope of impact was also clearly evident in comments relating to who might be affected by one's professional activities and judgments, with some students focusing on themselves as benefiting financially or through status, while others focused on their potential to improve their clients/patients' situations:

To me it [being professional] means being valued for what you do and also having that value shown possibly, maybe through money, so if you're paid for your services. I'm trying to think of anything else that it means. I think that's basically all. (Clinical psychology)

You're always thinking about how you can improve the lives of your clients, how you can help them, how they can make changes to better themselves. (Clinical psychology)

When students were asked to describe potential consequences of *not* being professional, the same variation in scope of impact emerged, from a focus on consequences to one's self to consequences to clients/patients:

you might end up getting deregistered and lose your career and lose all of what you've worked for. (Clinical psychology 3)

for you not to be a professional, you may cause harm, both physically or emotionally, and that's the number one thing that you don't want to do. (Clinical psychology 2)

For those focused on benefits to clients/patients, a subtle but significant distinction emerged between those who saw themselves as benefiting clients by *advising* them as to the best course of action versus *empowering* them with the information needed to make their own decision. For example:

when we're providing advice, we are essentially giving the patient information to choose what they should use ... you need to offer them options. ...each patient is an individual. Give them the options to choose what's most suitable to them. (Pharmacy)

I think that you can't actually force anything on anyone. I think the best thing is just to make sure they understand, can weigh up their options, the pros and cons. (Pharmacy)

A focus on empowering rather than advising clients/patients was rare in the interviews. This might be because it requires not just a focus on benefiting clients but a positioning of them as an equal, not a lesser, partner in decision-making. This requires a valuing of clients' knowledge of their own personal circumstances and life values, not just a valuing of professional knowledge.

Professional identity

The final aspect of variation which emerged from the interviews relates to whether students experience themselves as developing an internalised sense of professional identity, forming part of their larger personal identity, or whether they experience their professional identity in an externalised way, as separate to their larger sense of personal identity. For some students, the development of professionalism meant the development of an external persona to be adopted in work-relevant situations:

they've got to put on their garb and ... get into that zone of professionalism. (International studies 5)

as soon as I'm at work and with patients, you need to change face. (Pharmacy 3)

at work you can remain neutral for some things but outside of work you can just do whatever you want, because I don't think many people would recognise you from the company. (Public relations 3)

For others, developing professionalism represented a personal transformation, through which the values and norms of the profession are internalised and thus cannot be discarded:

it's not something that you just put on. You either are professional or you're not. I guess it's not an act that you have to play, so it's not something that you can really switch off. (Pharmacy 1)

being professional is almost a lifestyle. It's in everything you do. (Public relations 4)

Summary: commonality and variation in understandings of professionalism

The findings show that while students used common language to describe the external signifiers of professionalism, this masked considerable difference in understanding of what professionalism might signify.

Less sophisticated understandings were marked by:

- a focus on externally determined criteria and requirements;
- a belief that possession of expert knowledge creates certainty and removes the need for judgment;

- a limited sense of the impact of one's actions, leading to a limited service ethic;
- a focus on the rights rather than responsibilities of a professional; and
- a view of the development of professionalism as the instrumental acquisition of knowledge and skills, coupled with the creation of professional identity as an image or persona adopted in the workplace but separate to one's personal sense of self.

In contrast, more sophisticated understandings were marked by:

- a focus on internally generated criteria and their integration with professional norms and standards;
- an awareness of multiple perspectives and contextual variation, with the possession of expert knowledge enabling judgment;
- a genuine belief in the value of the service being offered;
- a focus on responsibilities to others, including clients/patients, the workplace and the profession as a whole; and
- a view of the development of professionalism as a personal transformation involving a change in values and identity.

Thus students with less sophisticated understandings may be missing all of the core components described in the introduction that characterise professionalism as a special type of behaviour.

Implications for teaching and learning

The outcomes of this research have significant implications for teaching and learning of professionalism. They illustrate how variation in students' understanding may be hidden from teachers by use of common terms and a shared focus on the external standards and requirements of professional bodies. The findings also demonstrate what it is about professionalism that students with a more sophisticated understanding notice, that students with a less sophisticated understanding do not.

In response to the interview findings, the subject convenors worked to develop curriculum interventions to address the underdeveloped aspects of many students' understanding of professionalism. Illustrations from psychology and public relations are presented below.

Example curriculum interventions

Clinical psychology intervention

To help students become aware of the importance of self-awareness and judgement in professional expertise, the psychology convenor introduced a 'Reflective Paper' exercise as part of the subject assessment. Students were asked to 'comprehensively assess yourselves along each of the [clinical case formulation dimensions presented in the literature] ... : developmental lines, defence, affects, identifications, relational patterns, self-esteem and pathogenic beliefs'.

The value to their future clinical work of reflecting on themselves was emphasised and students asked to use their self-assessment to identify any 'potential counter transference risks' with future clinical patients, plus particular patient groups with which there might be ethical issues or potential risks.

Public relations intervention 1

To help students become better aware of their own personal values and the importance of integrating this with external professional codes of ethics, the public relations convenor refined a class exercise she had previously used based on a provocative public relations campaign by an animal rights group, PETA. Students were asked to analyse the ethics of the campaign, which likened the ongoing slaughter of animals for human consumption to the Holocaust.

Students were presented with two ethical models from the literature, ‘utilitarianism’ and ‘deontology’, and asked to analyse the campaign objectively using these models. They were often surprised to find that this emotionally distressing and, for many, offensive campaign met these ethical criteria. They were then asked to analyse their own personal values, personal ethics and sense of professionalism in public relations campaigns, and consider whether the campaign met their personal ethical criteria.

Public relations intervention 2

The public relations convenor is also a member of the advisory group for a program, Mindframe, which works with journalism and public relations educators to help educate students about how to portray mental illness and suicide responsibly through the media and other fora. As the variation in public relations students’ understandings of professionalism became clear, the convenor realised that the Mindframe project in which she was already involved offered a fantastic context in which to simultaneously highlight the need for flexibility and professional judgment in conduct in different contexts and to emphasise that the actions of public relations professionals have social impact and influence.

The convenor developed a case study based on a real incident in which the singer of a headlining band committed suicide at an all day concert by jumping off a lighting tower in front of her fans. The students were asked to workshop this scenario from a range of different perspectives. If they were the event organiser – what would they do? Who would they brief, and how? How would they involve the media? How would they inform the fans? Would the event continue? If they managed the band’s sponsorship – what would they do with the sponsorship? How would they manage it? How would they relate to friends and family? What narrative would they prepare for the media and other commercial partners? What kind of language would they use?

Conclusions

Our research has reinforced, from a student perspective, the core elements of professionalism that emerged from the introductory review of literature:

- (1) exercising specialist knowledge and skills with judgment;
- (2) identifying as a member of a professional community based on shared practices and values; and
- (3) having a service ethic, based on a belief that what you and your professional community does is of genuine value.

But disturbingly, our research also demonstrated the degree to which students in higher education may have only a limited awareness of these aspects of

professionalism, not just at undergraduate but also at postgraduate Masters level. The interviews with students showed varying understandings of the underlying purpose and meaning of professionalism (what it signifies), overlaid by a focus on the outward signs of professional behaviour (the signifiers), such as dress, language and abiding by codes of conduct.

Less sophisticated understandings of professionalism included a limited awareness of the nature of professional expertise, quality, conduct and ethics as being (1) externally determined and not open to question; and (2) pre-determined and uniform in application. Students with such understandings tended to show a narrow focus on the transactional benefits and consequences of professionalism to themselves and/or their business, and to describe professionalism as an external persona they adopted in work-relevant contexts.

More sophisticated understandings of professionalism emphasised (1) internally determined, or an integration of internally and externally determined, aspects; and (2) contextual sensitivity, relativity and use of judgment. These more sophisticated understandings incorporated an awareness that behaviour and choices might impact not only on the professionals themselves, but also on their peers and clients. There was a concomitant focus on autonomy and responsibility as a professional, and an overall experience of professionalism as a part of their self-identity, relevant to all aspects of their life.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are that educators need to be wary of over-emphasising external standards and signifiers of professionalism in their teaching. Opportunities for students to engage with discussions of the meaning and purpose of professionalism, and to explore the potential impact of their actions on others, need to be presented. In addition, curriculum design to encourage a sophisticated understanding of professionalism should include:

- multiple perspectives and areas of uncertainty in knowledge and applications of knowledge;
- opportunities for student self-evaluation and exploration of personal standards for work quality;
- illustrations of contextual variation in appropriate professional conduct;
- opportunities to explore the relationship between external codes of ethics set by professional bodies and students' own personal codes and values;
- discussions of how what might at first appear to be externally determined norms, practices and values are the result of both explicit and implicit cooperation and negotiations among members of a professional community; and
- reflection on when professionals choices and decisions are being made, together with explicit consideration of their scope of impact.

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