

# Personal Experiences of Learning to be Professional

## Introduction

Altogether, in addition to the example, twenty people submitted stories that showed how their understanding of what 'being professional' meant had been deepened by one or more significant experiences. The candid insights that were shared were both helpful and interesting, raising a number of issues, including:

- Understanding professionalism is not merely a semantic matter of finding a succinct definition.
- Professionalism exists or is lacking in a very diverse range of contexts, such as the individual, vocational, societal, temporal and moral.
- It is a complex set of skills, abilities, personal attributes, attitudes, ethical positions, practices, traditions and communal expectations, with numerous dimensions.

As one might have expected from the title of the invitation and the topic of the conference, responses contained two threads: learning and professionalism. Many (but not all) stories concerned challenging or difficult experiences, and it is perhaps the first thread (learning) that accounts for this:

- The title of the story topic may have implied that the authors were probably more professional now than they used to be some time ago, and therefore that their experiences were likely to have been more problematic in the past.
- When one is beginning in a career or a role, one is vulnerable, prone to evaluation, self-critical and more inclined to make mistakes.
- Human nature (?) is such that people tend to be more preoccupied with things that do not go well than with the many things that are successful. From high-scoring Olympic gymnasts to people who are being quality assured or assessed; from those in professions where mistakes can be costly to those who are just perfectionists by nature, there is a 'quest for zero defect', as one major company used to advertise on satellite TV.
- Much learning is uncomfortable but all the more effective for that.
- The sample offered by way of illustration was particularly negative in several aspects.

It would also be interesting to debate whether levels of professionalism are in fact higher now than they used to be! But that is perhaps a question for a different forum.

After reading the stories and trying to identify the key points arising from them, Russ tabulated them under:

- **situational** features of the episodes: concepts relating to the *circumstances*
- **processes** involved: what kinds of things *were going on*
- **attributes** of professionals *themselves*

Dr Jenny Willis, meanwhile, produced what could aptly be described as a highly professional analysis, using techniques applied in the context of her Fellowship. Emerging themes and Eraut's trajectories illuminated the findings from the stories in a powerful way. The presentation speaks for itself.

Those who have an interest in examining this whole question further will be keen to know about Jenny's forthcoming seminar as a SCEPTRe Fellow, 'Defining Professionalism'.

Drawing from Barnett, Eraut, and Knight and York's theories of professional learning, she will consider the themes that emerged from student narratives of their professional training year, and from the annual survey 2007/8. Given the infinite permutations of individual learning trajectories, Jenny will ask how learning outcomes can be defined and assessed fairly. She will demonstrate a tool she has designed to maximize the professionalism facilitated by the PT year.

**SCEPTRe, Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> May, 1230-1330**

### Postscript

In the weeks since the conference, reflections on the issues continue. Another insight arose in the unlikely setting of a garden centre shop. The angle is simple but powerful: being *professional* means *taking something seriously*.



A light-hearted aside, but a serious point!

## The stories

### A personal story about learning to be professional: moving between professions

- **Context in time, location and stage in your life and career**

I had had a change in career from nursing to education, following a period of work-related ill-health and stopping to look after my children. I knew what nursing was and I knew I had been a skilled practitioner in that role, but becoming an educator was completely different. I had learnt on the job, studying for the FAETC (Further and Adult Education Teaching Certificate) followed by PGCE.

- **What happened?**

I attended a job interview for a post that involved working in staff development in the NHS. I drew partly on my nursing background but also relied on my more recent experience in education to say what I would bring to the job. At one point in the interview, I was asked what the difference was between the FAETC and the PGCE. I hadn't thought about it until then, but I said confidently that I saw the PGCE as a professional qualification that allowed me to draw on a wider appreciation of policy and theory, that it wasn't simply a case of learning survival skills in teaching. I saw the faces of the interview panel brighten up with approval. This idea of having a 'professional' qualification seemed to have struck a chord. I did get the job, and have been left ever since with continual reflection on why this was so significant.

- **What I learned, and how**

Although my immediate learning was about the weight that being a professional carries in the workplace, I was also struck by the potential power of it. Not being a seasoned educator, I worked hard to justify my position and to earn trust. I needed to expand and develop my knowledge of the new context in which I was working and find ways to link my new practice with the theories and policies I knew about. However, despite all of this, much of the time the job required me to draw on myself and my personal resources: transferable skills of getting on with people, having respect for others and writing reports. I learned that being professional means knowing how to use the resources at your disposal, knowing how to base your practice on up-to-date, accurate and relevant information, and knowing your limitations.

- **Lessons for educators**

Being professional is much more than having an established body of knowledge at your disposal. It is about a way of working, an attitude, a responsibility. Educators should ensure that their students are enabled to recognise what they personally bring to a professional role and how they can handle themselves within the role.

- **5 key words**

<b>Power</b>	<b>Use of resources</b>	<b>Application of knowledge</b>	<b>Use of self</b>	<b>Trust</b>
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## **A personal story about learning to be professional**

### **Context**

I have learned incrementally over several years what 'being professional' means, through a variety of experiences in different occupational sectors. Before coming into higher education I worked as assistant editor on a weekly magazine, cabin crew on long-haul flights, dental surgery assistant, education administrator and careers adviser.

### **What I learned, and how**

My job in magazine journalism used and developed my communication and self-management skills, all learned informally on the job. I selected articles of general and local interest, typed, edited, proof-read and made page layouts. At the time there was not a computer in sight and manuscripts were typeset manually. All the front-of-house, printing and production processes were under one roof, so there was much personal interaction with the editorial and production team. The use of electronic forms of communication and production have since transformed this job. However the attributes I gained then have subsequently served me well, particularly in writing my book as a single author, published by Routledge in 2007.

In my next job as cabin crew, professionalism in serving airline passengers took a strong customer focus: an emphasis on clear, helpful communication and service to passengers, getting them safely and comfortably from A to B. I learned the importance of body language, self-presentation and inter-cultural communication skills.

After several years raising my sons these skills transferred to a part-time job as dental surgery assistant. The patients I was dealing with here were like my passengers – sometimes irate or nervous, in need of reassurance, clear communication, safety procedures...

To cut a long story short, I have learned that the level, range, type and complexity of 'skill' that I use might change with the personal or professional context, but it is possible to transfer key competencies and attributes from one experience to another, gaining success through the 'life-career journey'.

### **Lessons for educators**

- Make 'graduate attributes' visible and comprehensible by expressing them as behavioural competencies, and show students how such behaviours are effective for success in study, work and life in general.
- Provide learning, teaching and assessment opportunities in the curriculum for integrated personal, academic and career development, and for practicing professionalism.
- Encourage students to identify their Self-MAPs – i.e. each individual's unique possession and combination of **Motivation**, **Ability** and **Personality** factors.
- These Self-MAPs map onto the demands made by different opportunities in different ways. The dynamic between **Self** and **Opportunity** generates and modifies **Aspirations** and leads to **Results** (ref. **SOARing to Success** approaches).
- The SOAR framework can enable students to identify and develop those aspects of professionalism that are both generic and specific requirements in terms of employability attributes.

### **5 key words**

<b>Behavioural competencies</b>	<b>Graduate attributes</b>	<b>SOAR framework</b>	<b>Self-MAP</b>	<b>Opportunity</b>
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## **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- **Context in time, location and stage in your life and career**

I had just qualified as a social worker after three years pre-qualification experience and two years of professional education and training. My first job was back in the London Borough that I had grown up in and in a team covering part of the large council housing estate where I had lived as a child until leaving home. So, I was 'coming home'... but as a professional social worker.

- **What happened?**

One of my early cases was of a young man who was in the large psychiatric hospital that served this part of London. I had his name and some recent file papers as background to his admission. The task at this stage was to make contact and explore the options and plans for his discharge and reintegration back into the community. So, I wrote to him and made arrangements to visit him on the ward to begin the process of initiating a working relationship and to gain his perspective upon his situation and future aspirations. When I turned up at the hospital I found my way to the ward and was directed to where Joe [not his real name] was waiting for me. As I approached he looked at me and said 'hello ... , do you remember me?' I was surprised and puzzled. I looked at him and thought again about his name... and then it dawned on me who he was. I recognized his face and his name and I was immediately carried back over twenty years to memories beyond professional boundaries into my own childhood and family. Joe had lived with the family next door to my own and had grown up at the same time. At that time Joe was simply part of another 'problem family' that had been moved by the council next door to us. However, our paths had gone in completely different directions and he was now, as he was then, in a very different world.

- **What I learned, and how**

I learned that the boundaries between the personal and the professional are not as clear as we often like to pretend they are. My role and tasks as a professional in this relationship needed to deal with the memories of my own childhood that were exposed by this unexpected encounter. These memories had, and still have in writing this, a profound impact upon my sense of my family's history and my own place within that history. It is a uniquely powerful experience to have one's own family referred to in the social work file notes of the family next door and to read about how we were viewed by Joe's family social worker! All of this experience was of value in my professional actions and judgments then and remains so now.

- **Lessons for educators**

Professional actions, values and judgments are not based solely upon technical expertise or knowledge. The professional's personal and life experiences are an intrinsic aspect of being 'a professional' and education processes should enable students to explore the personal knowledge, skills and values that they bring to continuing development.

- **5 key words**

<b>Memory</b>	<b>History</b>	<b>Boundaries</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Power</b>
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## **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- Context in time, location and stage in your life and career

Trained as Health Visitor and received theoretical underpinning of practice with long periods out in the field under supervision of practice tutor. Little experience of Child protection issues in practice although had theoretical input at University

Working as a qualified Health Visitor in a semi rural area. Having a very varied caseload in terms of client age, gender, background, ethnicity. Several families on the child protection register.

Previously worked as a Teacher, Nurse, Midwife so considered myself to be a 'professional' with an awareness of responsibilities, procedures, accountability, autonomous practice and having a sound knowledge base.

- What happened?

Report of serious injury to one of children on caseload with resultant removal of all children from family and police investigation into the injuries.

Subsequent Child Protection Conference, writing of statements and a difficult Court case at which I was required to give evidence. This was a daunting and emotionally draining process for which there had been no preparation but where I was expected to act in a professional manner.

Having to talk about a client when they are present in the room knowing that what you say is likely to influence future decisions re their children.

Fortunately my note keeping was appropriate and I believe I presented myself in a professional manner.

- What I learned, and how

The difficulty in developing a client-professional relationship which allows a degree of closeness whilst maintaining a professional distance.

The importance of accurate record keeping.

The difficulty in knowing what information can be shared with other professionals.

The need for support from senior managers when writing legal reports or statements. Not to assume that a professional qualification and resultant autonomy prepares you for the daunting accountability of possibly doing it wrong!

The need for reflective practice within the context of clinical supervision. Not being afraid to say 'What I could do better next time'

- Lessons for educators

People who are going to be placed in difficult situations in their professional lives need to have the opportunity to practice in a safe environment. It is not enough to have the theoretical knowledge which underpins our practice, we also need to have the opportunity to have a go, make mistakes, reflect on our actions and replay the situation. This to be done with the knowledge that what we are doing is not hurting anyone but may prepare us for a similar situation in real life.

The need to relate theory to practice and practice to theory

More use of simulation as an educational tool.

The need to teach reflective practice

- 5 key words

<b>Reflection</b>	<b>Simulation</b>	<b>Record keeping</b>	<b>Clinical supervision</b>	
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### **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- **Context in time, location and stage in your life and career**

When I first trained as a careers adviser, I thought professionalism meant helping students to reach the stage where they could identify an achievable career goal and write an action plan of how to get there. I used one model of careers guidance, which was a strategic and planned approach to decision-making. However about 3 years into the job I realised that this approach did not seem to work with some students who were very resistant to narrowing down their options and writing an action plan with achievable goals. These students seemed to prefer to go with the flow and see where life would take them. They preferred to allow their career to develop by seizing favourable opportunities as they presented themselves. In terms of their careers interview they wanted me to come up with more possibilities to help them keep their career options open for longer rather than helping them to narrow down the career areas which would suit them. I always felt quite uncomfortable with these students because the model which I was trying to apply to them did not fit and they rejected it as too much of a straight-jacket.

- **What happened?**

I attended the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator qualified users course in 2003. This qualified me to use the MBTI personality type indicator with students and to help them relate their personal preferences to possible careers. During this course I realized that people with a 'Perceiving' preference rather than a 'Judging' preference would rather keep their options open for longer and explore more possibilities instead of aiming for closure too early on in the career decision-making process. I also discovered that they may prefer to be reactive rather than proactive, so may prefer to wait and see what exciting opportunities present themselves by sampling different types of jobs before narrowing down their focus on one specific career. This helped me to understand why some students do not aspire to a concrete career goal but prefer to explore a range of possibilities. I now try to adapt the model of careers guidance which I use to the individual's personal preference rather than use a one size fits all approach.

- **What I learned, and how**

I learnt that although it is useful to have a model of guidance, which I was taught during my professional course, I still need to adapt the model to suit individual preferences. I learnt that I need to adapt my approach depending on not only the needs of the client but also their personality. I learnt that being a professional means taking every opportunity to understand more about the motivations and values of people and continually observing my own behavior to make sure that I am responding in an appropriate way. I also learnt that I need to understand myself better in order to know how my own behavior affects other people. The MBTI has helped me significantly in this regard and it is a tool which I often use with students to help them gain a better understanding of themselves and of other people.

- **Lessons for educators**

It is important to teach models but also make clear to students the need to be adaptable and to take into account individual preferences. Continuing professional development means taking every opportunity to learn more about ourselves which in turn gives us a better understanding of other people and how to esteem people who are very different to us. Educators need to help us to realize that every individual is different and we will need to vary our approach accordingly.

- **5 key words**

<b>individual</b>	<b>adaptable</b>	<b>self-awareness</b>	<b>personality</b>	<b>motivation</b>
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### **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- **Context in time, location and stage in your life and career**

Some key events in my progression from being a probationary teacher to Deputy Head, predominantly in inner London comprehensive schools, all schools in areas of social deprivation, between the years 1975 and 1995.

- **What happened?**

My first year of teaching: I have an acting Head of Department, some thirty years older than me, who did not want this position. As a Germanist, she has no interest in my subject, French. There are no text books, so I produce all my own teaching resources; as the most junior member of the department, I have no fixed teaching room; I have all the most difficult groups and the worst balanced timetable.

Forward seven years, and I am appointed Head of Department to 15 teachers, plus language assistants, whose pastoral roles range from Deputy Head to Head of Year. Two of the department, one West Indian, the other from Central Africa, have just been through an acrimonious Grievance Procedure against each other, based on allegations of racism. Staff absence is high and student disaffection exacerbated by this.

Seven years on, during my first week as Deputy Head of another school, a Senior Teacher rushes to me in a state of acute distress to reveal that he has just knocked down a pupil on the level crossing, and later I deal with the suicide of a senior colleague during the summer vacation. In addition to my own teaching and managerial roles, I carry the workload of three Senior Teachers who report to me but who are on long term leave following breakdowns.

- **What I learned, and how**

In each of these situations I was driven by commitment to my students and took a personal delight in trying to motivate them through my efforts and enthusiasm. Resilience and perseverance had to be accompanied by pedagogical skills and creativity. My professional role did not end when I returned home or at weekends and holidays.

Many of the same qualities and skills were necessary for working with and leading colleagues. As a probationer, the freedom to sink or swim under my own efforts was a blessing in disguise. By assisting the HoD, who could not set up a tape recorder, with her oral examinations, I gradually introduced her to new ways of teaching. As Head of Department, I had to balance ignoring micropolitics with challenging matters when they became 'unprofessional' e.g. when the Head of Year continually failed to attend meetings he deemed beneath his status. As Deputy Head, I became counsellor to my staff, Jill of all trades and a more mellow human being.



- **Lessons for educators**

On reflection, my career illustrates the interdependency of Eraut's learning trajectories. These combined in differing permutations according to my level of seniority, but throughout my experience, it was the challenge and value of work that motivated me and that I sought to instil in others; support for pupils and colleagues was crucial if they were to develop the confidence to inspire commitment.

- **5 key words**

Challenge	Commitment	Confidence	Learning trajectories
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Many years ago before any professional guidelines about confidentiality were taught as standard on careers guidance courses I interviewed an unemployed mutual aid philosophy student here at LSBU. I have an interest in philosophy as well and even though he seemed a bit strange and perhaps a bit of a loner we had a good rapport. That changed when he began asking questions about overseas work specifically in Holland. What then came out was that he was gay (which would'nt in itself have been a problem) but also that he was attracted to young boys and wanted to go to Holland because of its more liberal lays on such issues.

I was shocked and must have shown this. The interview terminated shortly afterwards. The moral dilemma I was left with, of course, was whether to report what this guy had said to the authorities. In the end I decided not to break client confidentiality because although this guy had talked about a predilection he hadn't admitted to doing anything illegal but I still sometimes wonder if that was the right decision.

These days guidance professionals are taught to raise the issue of confidentiality at the beginning of the interview with a formula along the lines of "your interview is confidential as long as you don't reveal anything that might cause self harm or harm to someone else."

The irony though is I strongly suspect if I had been using that formula in my interviews at that time this guy would not have revealed what he did.

## **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- **Context in time, location and stage in your life and career**

My journey into teaching has been varied to say the least – after qualifying as an accountant, I went into "industry" working for Paul Smith (who invented "Who wants to be a Millionaire") and Pearson PLC (publishers of the FT). This was followed by a series of venture capital backed "projects" in restaurants, retail, financial services and then e-learning. After selling the e-learning business, the principal of our FE College partner asked if I would speak to her students...she wasn't going to take no for an answer. The students seemed to enjoy the talk and to my surprise so did I and so my teaching/mentoring career was born – switching people on to finance.

My formal training in teaching is I am afraid limited to a FETEC qualification which I thought would be a good investment. It has made me much more aware of the learner perspective. And this is crucial when explaining finance – the combination of numbers and jargon makes them very fearful and unconfident.

- **What happened?**

I had been running courses for Companies, Universities, and individuals for about 4 years and felt I had perfected my material.... to make it fun, interesting and engaging for the

learners. I also felt I had done well to introduce props, anecdotes, team exercises to make the sessions lively.

The event happened during an afternoon session. In the class were a number of students for whom English wasn't a first language. I noticed that one of the more engaging and lively students had gone quiet and withdrawn – I got a bad feeling that I had upset her but how?

As the class ended I got a very frosty comment and she left – I sent her an email later to say I was really sorry if I had upset her...it turned out that my “innocuous” banter had been misinterpreted which combined with her father being ill, had made my comment seem like I was making fun of her.

- **What I learned, and how**

I learned one can never be too careful about how sensitive people are about their numeracy and also “losing face” in front of the class. Fortunately it has happened before or since – however I am now even more sensitive to this issue.

- **Lessons for educators**

The lessons for educators who are involved in enterprise training are as follows:

- to be super aware how sensitive people are about their level of numeracy and ability to deal with number
- the importance of building confidence in the classroom (universal)
- ensuring learners feel supported and not undermined with humour
- an awareness of how little finance awareness some learners have and how sensitive they are about this.
- the need (related to point 4) to ensure enterprise finance training builds very slowly and that jargon and principles are clearly explained.

- **5 key words**

<b>finance</b>	<b>confidence</b>	<b>jargon</b>	<b>enterprise</b>	<b>business</b>
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## **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- **Context in time, location and stage in your life and career**

Looking back I feel a lot of resentment at what could be characterized as my professional beginnings, my 'baptism of fire' so to speak.

Prior to commencing my new role, I had never had any reason to question my own professionalism; I was confident in my own skin, accepting of my strengths and weaknesses and happy with what I had achieved both personally and professionally. To me being professional was all about being true to myself, trying to be the best I could in whatever the circumstances – be they good or bad - and I can honestly say to achieve what I had, I had experienced extremes of both.

Looking back, I realize now that there were a lot of external factors, things I couldn't control that were adding potentially to my personal and professional demise. But more importantly, what I also realized was that I myself had to accept the fact that there was a lot more I could have done to improve the situation. Unfortunately, at the time I wasn't privileged to the benefit of hindsight and my motivation to inspire and influence those around

me, to succeed in the face of adversity, was beginning to falter. I was about to 'call it a day', 'cut my losses' whilst I still could and whilst I still had some sense self belief intact, something upon which I could rebuild my self confidence.

- What happened?

I started my new job a week earlier than my line manager had expected. When we first met I got the sense that not only was my early start unexpected but more significantly it wasn't me that she was expecting, she certainly didn't try to hide her disappointment and confusion. She made no attempt to introduce me to the school staff and we didn't get together as new colleagues might do to discuss my new role and what was expected of me. I was provided with a very cramped desk in a very unwelcoming office in which I was informed by my new colleagues that I shouldn't be surprised if I was met with some distrust and resentment by those teaching staff I somewhat naively thought I'd been employed to support. I so wanted to make a good impression, but how could I, when I'd already been tried and found guilty for what the teaching community perceived to be a top down, aggressively imposed senior management decision, that undermined not only what they did and how well they did it but more importantly their 'raison d'etre'!

It was no surprise then that I found doors closed, emails unanswered and a general lack of support.

- What I learned, and how

I am still a little resentful, because I felt that the community in which I was earnestly trying to do my best was not 'playing ball', it didn't give me a chance and it certainly wasn't supportive of my efforts. I had reason to believe that our values didn't match, or was it something just as simple as we were just having difficulty communicating to each other. At the time I didn't quite understand what was happening, what I did know was that I had begun to lose faith in myself and I can honestly say that for the first time since puberty my self identity began to falter – I felt quite lost and alone.

- Lessons for educators

I'm happy that I didn't cut my losses and run, I was almost on the cusp of doing so but was very lucky to find a role model, a guide, someone whom I respected and felt respected me.

I persevered, I took my time, I allowed people to get the measure of me and equally in return, I learned to be accepting and respectful of them... I have been rewarded with the fruits of my labor, I find doors are no longer shut, emails are answered and on one or two occasions I can say hand on heart that I thoroughly enjoy my job.

In some ways I consider myself to be very lucky, I have been rewarded with the virtue of patience and this has served me well – some things take time, they can't be rushed, the same goes for being a professional, it's a nurturing process – which needs time and devotion, it can't be taken for granted. These are reflections of my professional beginnings; they are reflections of what I feel it is to be professional, to be accepting, but not dismissive, to acknowledge and understand the experiences that shape us because they are significant and they do have a part to play.

It puts me in mind of the story of the Phoenix; who upon rebirth embalms the ashes of its former self as a testament to the journey through which it has come to be.

- 5 key words

<b>Start</b>	<b>Past</b>	<b>Understanding</b>	<b>Patience</b>	<b>Time</b>
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## **Story about learning to be professional**

### **Context in time, location and stage in your life and career**

In the normal scheme of things I guess I am not far off the end of the working part of my life but I have a deeply held belief that we never stop learning and we are immersed in the experience every day of our lives. So I deliberately picked an incident that has just happened to me to illustrate the point.

### **What happened?**

Yesterday I was invited to a business lunch at a local performing arts college. As I arrived I was met by the principal's secretary and told that before lunch I would spend an hour in an audition session for level 2 students. Their teacher was choosing two students to represent the institution in a national competition formed around singing a song from a Stephen Sondheim musical. About 20 students sat around the edge of the studio and one by one they were called to perform the song they had rehearsed. They spoke briefly to the musical director to explain how they wanted him to play the piece on the piano, then walked to the middle of the room, composed themselves and addressed the panel of three judges explaining the piece they were going to sing and act. After they had finished the chair of the panel and musical director with great sensitivity, humor and knowledge, gave their feedback and drew out of the student, through their expert questioning their perceptions and analysis of their own performance – a process of deep analytical reflection with guidance on how to improve. All the students benefited from this public conversation.

### **What I learned, and how**

I have used this example to draw out the idea that good professionals when they are engaged in their professional work use the opportunity to share their experience, expertise and reasoning as a medium for facilitating the learning of other professionals. Although I observed this behaviour in an educational context I have experienced it directly or observed it in many other professional contexts.

### **Lessons for educators**

In the example I chose, it was about creating an authentic environment for professional action and learning, creating the conditions and expectations for novice learners to engage in a professional way with the experience, and the professional teachers treating students with the respect accorded to a professional performer through a professional conversation grown directly from their professional activity. Through an expertly constructed feedback conversation students were able to benefit from the wisdom of the experienced professionals.

### **Some general observations**

- good professionals are also good teachers – they educate and share their experience and expertise through their professional conversations and actions and they communicate in ways that a novice, colleague or client can understand
- in educational institutional settings, learning to be professional involves learning in authentic performing professional environments where expectations are as demanding as they would be in any real world professional setting
- lessons which illuminate what being professional means can be transferred from one environment to another (you don't have to be a teacher of music, a doctor or lawyer to appreciate their professionalism) because of the way they demonstrate, reveal and communicate it.

## **Being Professional**

I believe that you learn much about being professional when you catch yourself being quite the opposite.

### *Context:*

At age 40, after working as a software engineer in the UK and Germany, I started my own consultancy business and struggled through year one. Then halfway through a small 7-day contract my customer asked me if I could write a database for them.

### *What happened?*

I said “Yes, of course” even though I had never written one.

This was not particularly unprofessional as I was an experienced software engineer and had written much other technical software – just not a database! How hard could it be?

I phoned a friend who could write databases and gave him a specification. A few weeks later he said he had a first version to demo and I duly organised a meeting with the customer.

We arrived at the venue and as my friend started the laptop I extolled the virtues of the system “we” had developed (it was my company and my contract after all).

My friend then demo'd the system and it was truly awful. It was poorly designed and crashed almost immediately. Embarrassment all round.

I had to apologise and somehow recovered the situation. I took over the database development and built the company on what, a few years later, became a huge national project.

### *What I learned*

It was a major realisation for me that blind optimism and bullshit is no substitute for planning, control and quality testing in a professional organisation.

From that day on, nothing was delivered from my company without at least some form of quality control. We eventually became the smallest company at the time in the UK to get the ISO9001 certification for Quality Management.

Quality and Standards (and no bullshit) became embedded in our professional culture.

### *Lessons for Educators:*

Use real-life stories of not being professional to demonstrate more clearly what being professional really means. Discuss whether my “yes of course” was unprofessional (as I did not mention my lack of database experience) or just “entrepreneurial”.

### *Keywords:*

Quality, standards, bullshit, culture, embarrassment

## **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- **Context in time, location and stage in your life and career**

In the mid-eighties, about 18 months into my first academic appointment, a lectureship in physics at a leading quasi-polytechnic in Australia. I was in my early thirties at the time.

- **What happened?**

I was asked to do a small consulting job by my then Head of Department, checking an OHP manufactured by a big name company against Australian Standards specification. It was a different firm, a commercial competitor, who had requested the tests. The OHP failed to meet standards in several significant aspects of optical performance and electrical safety and my report reflected this in considerable detail.

- **What I learned, and how**

While no-one had explicitly alerted me to the 'political' aspects of the situation, it was pretty clear that I was being relied on to get this right. It was the first time I was being paid for work of this kind, so it had an 'edgy' reality that hadn't prevailed in anything I'd done previously. It prompted a level of attention to detail and double-checking that I hadn't been accustomed to in earlier work I'd done in my PhD or in teaching. There was a sense of accountability and risk that had me do these measurements with extreme care, despite the fact that it was fairly tedious and uninteresting.

- **Lessons for educators**

Good to make the tasks that people are doing in their learning 'real' rather than 'pretend'. If the reports are going out to an external agency which is relying on the proper conduct of an agreed process, students may be more likely to approach the relevant undertakings in a professional way.

- **5 key words**

<b>Accountable</b>	<b>Consultancy</b>	<b>Risk</b>	<b>Real</b>	<b>Contract</b>
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### **On being a professional**

There was an unexpected snowfall on 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb 2009 that made the roads unsafe to drive along. Many GPs and practice nurses were prevented from getting to their surgeries to see their patients. In some places, ambulances were unable to get to the sick at home. At the same time schools and nurseries were closed, providing another dilemma for those GPs and practice nurses and practice managers who suddenly had to look after their children – did they risk driving on unsafe roads in their cars to attend their patients, with their own children as passengers?

In our practice we held a series of telephone conversations to decide what to do. Some were able to get to the surgery without danger. They provided information for patients about our hastily devised emergency plan, through an answer machine message and verbally at reception. Others, including myself, stayed at home and was sent the telephone numbers of those patients who needed attention that day. I had telephone consultations that mostly resulted in simple 'holding' advice for that day, but for some I was able to continue previous conversations about long-term plans that were as helpful as if we had actually met. Using a NHS secure computer I was able to send sensitive information arising from these

consultations to be cut and paste into the patients' notes. Either myself or other members of the team called back those who more sick and would ordinarily have been visited to check that they were not deteriorating. We got good feedback from patients of our ability to respond to the unusual weather conditions.

For me this illustrates something about what it is to be a professional primary care practitioner or manager these days. It is not acceptable to ignore our responsibility to patients, but on the other hand it is not acceptable to put ourselves or our families at risk. We relied on trusted relationships within the team, lateral thinking, flexible working and competent information technology to safeguard both.

### **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- Context in time, location and stage in your life and career

Observing a telephone conversation that my father was having with a student candidate for the Dentistry programme at the Medical College of Virginia, before I entered university (for the first time).

- What happened?

The secretary had mistakenly switched candidate envelopes. A candidate had gotten the wrong letter, and was calling to see if he had gotten into the post-graduate Orthodontics programme. It was early one Saturday morning, and he called my father at home.

My father said no, that the candidate had not gotten into the programme and said he was sorry about the mix up. Then, a few minutes later, the chap called again... and asked why? My father explained that there were only a limited number of places etc. While on the phone, he was reserved and evenly spoken, but when he got off the phone he remarked that this chap would never get into the programme at the Medical College.

- What I learned, and how

I learned that while the first phone call had been admissible, the second phone call had obviously broken some tacit code of knowledge. I learned that professional and personal behaviour were separate, and professionals did not accept having the distinction broken. My father was a member of the state and national professional organisations for Orthodontics, and was very sure of his ground regarding this tacit code of professionalism.

- Lessons for educators

Somehow, this candidate had 'crossed the line' of calling a professional at home and assuming he had the right to take this inquiry into personal territory. At home, my father was not the Chair of the Department, and would not accept this blurring of roles when a 'candidate' into the profession made demands. The candidate would most likely have been a practicing dentist, and yet had been caught out by standards that he had failed to observe because he had been anxious about the place. It may have been a momentary lapse, but he paid a high price for this lapse. Tacit knowledge is a powerful professional tool that needs to be recognised, perhaps most especially during post-graduate doctorate study where professionals will expect the highest standards of behaviour to be observed.

- **5 key words**

<b>tacit knowledge</b>	<b>professionalism</b>	<b>personal behaviour</b>	<b>post-graduate study</b>	<b>Dentistry</b>
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## **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- **Context in time, location and stage in your life and career**

After finishing my Master's degree, I stayed on at the College to work as a Teaching Assistant: The College didn't have permanent professors, only visiting ones, so the TAs were the primary point of contact for students. This was the first job I'd had, as I'd gone straight from undergrad to Master's. In addition, it was in Belgium, so I also had to contend with broader adjustments to my life.

- **What happened?**

The TAs were all drawn from previous cohorts of students, and so a key issue was how much one was an ex-student and how much a member of the teaching staff. On the one hand, we all had first-hand knowledge of students' situations and concerns; on the other, we had to run seminars, support assessment and organize academic administration. Added to this, the town where the College was located was small and the TAs lived very close, so naturally, there was a lot of socializing with students, while the visiting professors were (both metaphorically and literally) rather distant.

- **What I learned, and how**

During my two years as a TA I learnt a lot about being a professional. Firstly, I became aware of the need to think about how to manage the different needs of different groups: a lot of time was spent trying to work out whether I should be representing students' interests to professors, or professors' interests to students. Secondly, I came to value the importance of collegiality: I built up a very strong working relationship with my fellow TAs and we made significant strides towards improving our structural position within the College (not least in the recognition of the desirability for us to be research-active, rather than just minions). Thirdly, I learnt about knowing when not to say anything: not everyone needs to know everything, a lesson that caused some colleagues much difficulty! Finally, I learnt that many of the skills I'd developed as a student could be applied in a work environment: preparation, presentation, discussion were persistent themes during my time at the College.

- **Lessons for educators**

Essentially, we need to learn how to appreciate the situation in which our students find themselves: as a student, I didn't understand what TAs really did, and I tried to address that when I became a TA, by talking honestly about what I did and what I was planning to do.

In any educational environment, honesty has to be central – no one gains from hiding things away, or in misrepresenting events: our role as educators is to help our students understand the world around them and it's no good lesson to then work against that.

### **The Meaning of Being a Professional**

It was my first case. "She just wants a bit of advice on having her bitch spayed", Susan, our efficient receptionist, had said. Funny how you do not feel any different. From student to veterinary surgeon – the right to put MRCVS after your name. One minute an observer, watching someone else diagnose, treat, reassure, believing that you would have done everything in the same way, and the next minute responsible for your own cases.

At least I knew all about spaying bitches. I had read the book and done one at College! "You don't need to worry. Unless you are intending to breed .... it makes sense .... and the risks with modern anaesthetics are small ....", I heard my voice confidently stating. The owner was interested in the technical details – yes, it did involve removing both ovaries and the uterus, and, yes, it was different in people. A tubal ligation avoided the big surgery of a hysterectomy, and retaining the ovaries prevented premature menopause.... I heard a knock. Looking at the clock, I realised in a sudden panic that my five minutes of advice had



turned into a 20-minute discussion on reproductive physiology. Susan poked her head round the door. "Are you alright, Stephen?" I could see the anxious look, and the tension. I had been told it took a lot to ruffle Susan, but I could imagine that the accumulating crowd in her waiting room was on the way to doing that! "I'm fine: I think we're finished. You just need to make an appointment for the surgery." I gave the dog a final pat, and smiled at her owner.

I learnt a lot that day. I was a veterinary surgeon, but not required to provide unlimited client education. I knew a little about a lot, but I had a lot to learn about controlling and closing conversations. I was part of a team and my actions could make or spoil the day for others. They felt responsible to me, and I felt responsible to them. I did not feel different, but that was because I was not different. I was still doing my best to solve problems, as they presented, and learning from each to better handle those which came later.

And I never knew if my first client was contemplating a tubal ligation, or just had an academic interest in the subject!

## **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- **Context in time, location and stage in your life and career**

About four years ago, in my early thirties, I experienced a pretty horrendous few months involving two family bereavements, personal illness and work-related stress, all of which made me realise that I had lost direction in life and career, and needed time out to reflect and re-orientate myself. Having already used some self-coaching techniques that I'd picked up from a couple of books to get me through this bad patch, I decided to train to be a coach myself.

- **What happened?**

To complete my Certificate and Diploma I had to coach myself, setting some specific goals and working on action plans to achieve them. One of my goals was to develop my career in a way that was more congruent with my personal values. To do this, I modelled several professionals and tried to employ the attributes and behaviours that I admired in them for myself. It was a great opportunity to rethink how I presented myself and how I wanted to feel when I was at work, and I did a great deal of reading on the topic as well as talking to colleagues and friends about what 'professional' behaviours looked like. This study also coincided with my being asked to run workshops on PDP that focused on developing students' professional skills for work placements, and these were a useful way to test out ideas as well as seeing what worked for my students.

- **What I learned, and how**

It was through this combination of personal development and a change of teaching style that I started to realize how well PDP and coaching techniques could be used to develop professional skills. I also developed a much clearer sense of 'who' I wanted to be at work and how I wanted people to see me. My confidence in my own professional abilities increased enormously and I was able to steer a much stronger career path, including setting up my own business and starting to work with private clients. Not only has gaining a clearer idea of what it means for me to be professional helped my day to day work, it has given me a fruitful seam to mine for sharing with others.

- **Lessons for educators**

Coaching-led approaches to teaching can really encourage the independent learning that many universities seem keen to foster

Students want to know what will be expected of them in the workplace – it's a big unknown and a source of anxiety for many

Developing an awareness of what it means to be professional can be a highly individual process. This focus on the individual can be much more productive and meaningful, as well as more motivational; students can feel that it is okay to pursue the career path they want to, and not the one they feel they ought to.

- **5 key words**

<b>Confidence</b>	<b>Individual</b>	<b>Exploration</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Coaching</b>
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### **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- **Context in time, location and stage in your life and career**

Before I started teaching, I had been working as a nurse and had been operating under the code of conduct set by my professional review body, the Nursing & Midwifery Council. Being professional meant working in such a way as to respect individual's beliefs, values, religion and also using a moral and ethical code that would 'do the patient no harm'. My first post was in a college of nursing, starting work as an unqualified tutor, involved in supporting pre-registration students in clinical practice. I was waiting to go on my PG Dip.Ed. Diploma.

- **What happened?**

The department was going through a major change as, that very month a new cohort had started, which was seen as pioneers as it was the new Project 2000, diploma level students. This innovative programme was among the first to start in the country, intended, for the first time, to locate nurse training in Higher Education Institutions rather in hospital's school of nursing. My presence was resented as I was seen as 'unqualified' despite the fact that I had an honours degree in nursing and was specifically appointed to teach on the new programme. What was 'unprofessional' was the fact that my colleagues used to block any attempt by me to get some teaching done and even when I wanted to see the students on the wards, the administrator sent out a memo to the wards announcing my arrival as 'unqualified tutor'. I struggled to make sense of my new environment. I wanted to do a good job, but was sent to Coventry on a regular basis. I was very hurt by this approach which lasted for about 8 months.

- **What I learned, and how**

As the months went by, I learned to cope with this rejection. Following my teaching diploma a year later, I came back to face the same team of staff, though by now they could not use the 'unqualified' label to discriminate against me. By then, I had learnt how to deal with such situations and also used the legitimacy of my new role and status to assert myself. I learnt to value my colleagues and the students. I recognized the fact that their 'unprofessional' behaviour was in fact their coping strategy and they had felt threatened by a newcomer.

- **Lessons for educators**

I think that educators may mistakenly protect one group to the detriment of another. So whilst they were seen to be 'protecting' the students from an 'unqualified' tutor, they had also inadvertently created an environment that was not conducive to community membership. It had seemed closed shop, exclusive. Attention must be given to the demystification of teaching practice, reflection, the identification and nurturing of the 'personal' in both staff and students.

- 5 key words

<b>Values</b>	<b>Beliefs</b>	<b>Autonomy</b>	<b>Caring</b>	<b>Respect for individual</b>
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### **A personal story about learning to be professional**

- Context in time, location and stage in your life and career

I had recently had a complete change of career, I was new to my job and wanted to impress. Previously I had thought being professional was about being well-dressed, punctual, reliable and doing your job to the best of your ability. Those attributes are still important factors to being professional but I have since realised it is more than that.

- What happened?

I was asked to deliver a session to over 100 students at relatively short notice on a subject area I was not completely familiar with. I agreed to do it as I wanted to be helpful. I managed to 'wing-it' and delivered an ok session, but I did not feel happy about short changing the students I was asked to teach.

- What I learned, and how

In wanting 'to please' I made compromises at the expense of the students. I should have been assertive and expressed my concern that it was not professional to deliver sessions to students without having the necessary expertise – by doing this I was compromising myself and the students. To be professional you should not try to convince people into thinking you know what you are talking about - being professional means having the relevant knowledge and expertise.

- Lessons for educators

Many of us 'wing-it' on a daily basis – being professional is about not having to.

- 5 key words

<b>Credibility</b>	<b>Respect</b>	<b>Accountable</b>	<b>Dependable</b>	<b>Self-disciplined</b>
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## Example Story – ‘First step on the professional ladder’

### Context

When I started teaching, I had the tacit view that professionalism meant, simply, being paid for doing something in a really expert way. The dimensions and range of the expertise were not questions that I asked myself at the time. My first position was in a Middle School, where I was to teach a range of subjects and have responsibility for a class. My training (Postgraduate Cert Ed) had, however, been in general education and modern languages.

### What happened

The school was a particularly quirky and innovative one in the sense that it aimed at a child-centred education with no prescribed texts or written curriculum guidance. How I got the job remains a mystery. There was no staff handbook or formal induction process. I struggled to make sense of my new environment. I wanted to do a good job, but lacked any detailed knowledge or support. Every day I seemed to contravene some principle of the school's, for example the rule about the students having different shoes for indoors and outdoors, or the proscription of spelling practice. I felt like an ignorant newcomer at an exclusive golf club. The production of teaching materials from scratch was hard, too.

### What I learned

As the year went on, and thanks to considerable help from my wife, many hours of anxious planning and preparation, and a great deal of trial and especially error, things began to make more sense for me and for the students. They were willing and entertaining and we established a constructive rapport that sustained morale generally. I still look back on that learning experience with a mixture of affection and resentment. It is clear to me now that being professional means not only ***having a set of attitudes and training***, but also:

- ***in-depth knowledge of a particular field***
- ***constructive reflection on practice***
- ***rigorous induction and monitoring procedures***
- ***the earnest desire to ‘get it right’***
- ***being a member of a strong, disciplined, expert community***
- ***having some positive engagement with the ‘clients’***

### Lessons for educators

The implications for educators include, I think, that attention must be given to focused knowledge-acquisition, demystification of practice, reflection, the identification and nurturing of personal will, the development of skills conducive to community membership, and ongoing learning on the job (especially at the outset). This requires a combination of attributes for both learning and being.

An afterthought that occurs to me is that the very word ‘professional’ is one for which the meaning is contested by powerful and incompatible forces. Given the prevalence and general acceptance of greed, self-interest, cheating and the use of illegal and unethical practices by experts in the fields of professional banking, politics and sport, who is genuinely entitled to the description ‘professional’?

### Key words

<b>motivation</b>	<b>expertise/demystification</b>	<b>support</b>	<b>community</b>	<b>clients</b>
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