

INTRODUCTION

Learning to be Professional through a Higher Education e-book

Norman Jackson



Professor Norman Jackson is Director of the University of Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education (SCEPTrE) where the primary focus is on educational designs that enable students to integrate learning from discipline study, professional work and other real life contexts. He started out as a geologist and this still influences the way he thinks. He makes sense and meaning of his professional life in education as a 'broker', bringing people, ideas and resources together to add value to what already exists and co-create new things: this e-book for example. To find out more about his interests visit his wiki. <http://normaniackson.obworks.com/>

Summary

This Chapter introduces the concept and purposes of the e-book and the collegial and collaborative values that underlie the enterprise of encouraging people to share their ideas and practices through this medium. It introduces the core theme and some of the areas the book will explore and identifies some of the early contributors and the focus for their contribution. It identifies the wicked problem that all of us who work in higher education, or who are parents or guardians of children share – how do we prepare people for the complexities, uncertainties and huge challenges they will face in their lives. This introduction will evolve as new Chapters are added to the book.

Background

One of the HEFCE objectives for a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning is to 'demonstrate collaboration and sharing of good practice.' This e-book serves three purposes. Firstly it provides SCEPTrE with a vehicle for sharing and disseminating some of the work it has undertaken at the University of Surrey aimed at enhancing and innovating our approach to a higher education which seeks to develop professional as well as academic capability. Secondly, it provides a vehicle for involving others in sharing their experiences and practices of enabling students to begin the journey towards becoming capable and confident professionals. Thirdly, and for those of you who know me you won't be surprised when I say, I see the e-book as a way of stimulating creative engagement 'the ability to use imagination, insight and intellect, as well as feeling and emotion, in order to move an idea from its present state to an alternate, previously unexplored state' Dellas and Gaier (1970).

In my own journey of becoming I have had several roles in higher education which I came to understand as being a 'broker' (Jackson 2003), bringing people with their ideas, worthwhile challenges and resources together to create something that didn't exist before. I work on the

premise that if you create an interesting project formed around an inspiring idea people will contribute willingly and enthusiastically. Furthermore, they will often do so in a creative and unanticipated manner because of their interests and passions. This is the basic premise that underlies our e-book adventure that engages with the challenging and worthwhile question: 'how do we prepare student learners for a future of uncertainty, change and complexity in the professional worlds they will inhabit?'

Our central theme

Our *Learning to be Professional* theme grew out of a conference that SCEPTRe organised in April 2009 which brought together nearly 150 interested practitioners. The conference attracted a number of distinguished scholars as well as many practitioners who generously shared their experiences and practices. During the conference we streamed and filmed many sessions and these were archived on a [conference wiki](#) . After the conference we continued to offer seminars on this theme and we quickly recognised the combined power of live streaming and filming to provide an accessible, immediate and sustainable permanent resource of shared ideas and practices.

The idea of an e-book takes this one step further by providing another way in which ideas, practices and research findings can be shared and made available through the wiki. Our concept for the e-book is of a media-rich environment which combines text, links to other on-line resources (other articles, tools, results, powerpoint presentations, podcasts, filmed practice) and includes filmed author presentations or conversations with the author. John Cowan in his very first Chapter for the book also gave me the idea that we could provide Chapters in both pdf and word format: the latter would enable the reader to annotate the text in ways that would help them relate their experiences to those of the author, and shape the authors ideas in ways made more sense to them. We welcome active engagement with the materials in these ways and the development of ideas through comments posted on wiki pages or new contributions. I have a belief that if the idea takes off new possibilities for user interaction will emerge. Finally, we are hosting the e-book on a wiki for two simple reasons – its easy to use (I don't need any technical skills to maintain it!) and its free!

Being professional

Before we can learn to be professional we need to have some idea about what being professional means. We hold many perceptions some are generic and some are field or role specific. As a generalization we can share the former if we are not a practitioner in the field but understandings of the latter can be very limited if you do not practice in the field. Michael Eraut (1994) explores what this means in his book on developing professional knowledge and competence and more recently in research on how professionals learn to be professional during the early stages of their careers (Eraut 2007). Clearly different disciplinary fields provide a different context for being professional – the professional actions and concerns of a doctor are very different to those of an engineer or lawyer.

But there is also a generic dimension to being professional that transcends discipline specific contexts: both dimensions must be nurtured through the educative enterprise. We can all appreciate Eraut's basic epistemology of professional practice (Eraut 2007 and Table 1) because we all experience this process of comprehending a situation, thinking about it, deciding what to do and acting on our thoughts in our everyday lives. Covey(2004:4) represents this decision making process as a matter of personal choice:

Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In the space lies our freedom and power to choose our response.
In those choices lie our growth and our happiness.

For a professional the space is where we chose or not to chose to act in ways that are consistent with being professional. Furthermore our freedom to choose may well be curtailed by the norms and expectations of what being professional means in a given situation.

Michael's empirical observations of how people learn in workplace settings, either as explicit learning activity or a by-product of work, provides the basis for new and useful tools to help student learners in work situations observe themselves and others, and think about what they are doing and the effects of what they are doing more wisely (Chapter A2).

Table 1 Epistemology of professional practice Eraut (2007)

It involves the professional actions of:

- *Assessing situations* (sometimes briefly, sometimes involving a long process of *investigation and enquiry*) and continuing to monitor the situation;
- *Deciding what, if any, action to take*, both immediately and over a longer period (either on one's own or as a leader or member of a team);
- *Pursuing an agreed course of action*, performing professional actions - modifying, consulting, evaluating and reassessing as and when necessary;
- *Metacognitive monitoring of oneself*, people needing attention and the general progress of the case, problem, project or situation; and sometimes also learning through reflection on the experience.

We are not born with the attributes that make us an effective and successful professional we have to learn and cultivate them, and turn them into habits. What are the things that make us professional and how do we develop the insights, capabilities and agencies that make us effective and successful professionals? What can we learn about the way the habits of being professional are developed in different disciplinary/professional domains that can be adapted to other domains? What sort of experiences enable learners to gain meaningful insights into what being professional entails? The e-book provides an opportunity for sharing diverse and rich perspectives about these questions.

Learning to be professional

Underlying our professional enquiry is the belief that learning to be professional is a never ending process. It begins somewhere in our life course when we decide we want to become a certain sort of person. I decided as soon as I discovered geology in the sixth form that I wanted to be/become a geologist more than anything else. Because of this personal experience I recognise the central importance of wilfulness in driving me towards this goal (Barnett 2005 and Chapter A4). I learnt much while I was at university but my understanding of what being professional meant was limited to the context of higher education teaching. It was only when I started working in a Cornish tin mine that I began to

appreciate what being professional meant as a practising geologist rather than a teacher of geology. The first half of my career oscillated between being an academic and being an industrial geologist but at 40 I became an inspector of higher education and over the next few years migrated into an entirely different professional role losing my identity as a geologist and becoming a higher education developer, researcher and policymaker. There was very little formal training, most of what I learnt was through work or through being mentored. Most of my understanding of what being professional means has come from working with others in the work place, seeing others in action or experiencing the results of people being or not being professional. These experiences colour my beliefs about how we learn to be professional and John Cowan ([Chapter A1](#)) provides us with an fascinating account of his own journey of becoming professional and from his experiences he extracts some basic principles that can guide us towards better educational designs that will help learners on their journey of becoming.

Following John Cowan's line of reasoning it struck me that one change we could aim to bring about in higher education is to try to nurture a cultural change to encourage student learners to treat their studies as work and to make the enterprise a focus for the development of professional attitudes and behaviours.

Worthwhile themes

Here are just a few of the themes I hope we can explore through the e-book..

What does being professional mean? Are there universally accepted conceptions?

The idea of learning to be professional: We know that this is a long and complex journey but what does this mean? How is this journey encouraged and enabled? How do learners shape their own destiny and develop their identity as a professional through formal educational and other experiences.

The idea that direct experience of real professional work environments is essential to learning to be a professional. What are the different ways through which learners' gain such experiences? How do educational designers connect to and integrate such experiences into the curriculum? How do different types of work-based experience help learners' develop their sense of what learning to be professional means?

The idea that experiences other than working in a professional environment might also help learners develop the necessary skills, qualities, dispositions and ways of thinking, seeing and behaving that are necessary to being professional? What evidence is there for such an proposition? How do higher education institutions encourage, support, recognize and value learning and achievement gained through a wider range of experiences? If being professional is restricted to 'work' what do we actually mean by work?

The idea that at the heart of being a good professional there are qualities that can create excellence in any professional practice. We are trying to stimulate thinking and discussion on the qualities needed to be a good professional these include: being able to work independently and with others to think through and assess a situation in a professional context; plan, implement and improvise appropriate

actions; monitor the effects of actions and change them if necessary and learn through reflective processes, both individually and in teams. This is the basic epistemology of any proactive, creative, enterprising self-regulating professional. How do different disciplines seek to combine and integrate learning and experiences from academic, work and other real world contexts?

The idea that a successful educational will develop the agency necessary to be an effective professional: and in a fast changing modern world this agency must pay attention to the will and capability to change and adapt.

And where does creativity fit into all this. How do we encourage people to develop their creative talents in ways that they will be able to draw upon in their future professional lives to contribute to this all important personal agency (Jackson 2008a).

The challenge of assessing professional capability or competency. Are there generic competencies for people who perform a professional role?

The idea that being able to learn through reflection is an essential skill for learning to be professional. How is PDP (Personal Development Planning) being integrated into the learning to be professional enterprise? How is it connecting to and promoting the qualities needed to be an effective self-regulating professional? How do we encourage and support the development of capability in critical self-reflection?

The recognition, in an age where computer and internet-based technology is revolutionising the way we communicate and learn, that **there are many technological aids to help people become professional.** What sorts of tools and technologies are being used to support the enterprise of becoming professional?

These themes will grow as more perspectives are added to the book.

Contexts

Books are written within a set of contexts. A few years ago I came across the now well known '[Shift Happens](#)' videoⁱ which starkly reminds us that we are preparing our students for a lifetime of uncertainty, change, challenge and emergent or self-created opportunity. The sticky message in the video is that higher education is helping learners prepare for a world where change is exponential: we are preparing them for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that have not yet been invented, in order to solve problems that we don't know are problems yet.

We have only to observe the world economy after the 'credit crunch' to see how true these words are and we might now add to this list of uncertainties that fact that in 2009 we are preparing our students for jobs that no longer exist! Somehow graduating students world wide are having to cope with a world where opportunity for employment or work placement has dramatically shrunk overnight. The first jobs students thought they stood a chance of getting are just not there anymore. Somehow, they are going to have to find a very different pathway into their chosen professional worlds to the one that they imagined less than a year ago. They will have to be more resourceful than their predecessors and they will need considerable personal agency and fortitude to secure their own future.

But these difficult first-step challenges are merely the introduction to professional lives that will be full of change. Look at what has happened to the UK National Health Service in the last decade to see the amount of change in the lives of professionals that work in the UK's largest employing organisation. There has been a step-change in the challenges facing doctors and nurses - systemic, regulatory, clinical, technical, managerial, bureaucratic, educational and many more.... Mid career professional – people entering this profession twenty years ago could not have begun to imagine how radically different the service would become.

The majority of our students will have not one but several careers, they will have to change organizations, roles and identities many times and be part of new organisations that they help create or existing organisations that they help to transform. Many will have to invent their own businesses in order to earn an income and or create and juggle a portfolio of jobs requiring them to maintain several identities simultaneously. Preparing our students for a lifetime of working, learning and living in ever more uncertain and unpredictable worlds that have yet to be revealed is one of the greatest responsibilities and challenges confronting universities all over the world. And encouraging our students to be enterprising might be one of the most important things we can do to sustain professional lives that will be so full of change and uncertainty.

Thinking about such things raises different questions to the ones we normally consider when we talk about employability which tend to focus on what we know and understand now, rather than the sorts of skills, attitudes and personal agency that will enable our students to prosper in an indeterminate and unknowable future. In this context the role of universities and professional educators becomes one of searching for and finding better and more effective ways of supporting the development of human agency (Bandura 2001).

Agency is linked to engagement with the situations an individual encounters or chooses to be in when performing a professional role. Engagement is not a set of techniques or mechanical procedures, but rather a way of dynamic *being*, in which the individual employs and associates their knowledge, skills and dispositions in flexible ways in some action to achieve a desired outcome (Ya-hui S 2008). There is purposefulness which is implicit towards the emergent wholer; the relatedness of the parts and the emergence of wholeness are one process. The process of engagement involves the integral, tacit, and non-linear aspects of perception, and the result of the engaging process could be 'a quantum jump' that can never be predicted. Intuition, informed by much experiential knowing may be very important in this process.

At the heart of this personal agency is *the will to learn* (Barnett 2005) and if your goal is to pursue a professional career then at the heart of being is the will to become a professional in your chosen field. This is what Ron calls '*a professional will*, a will to carry one forward into and through a very lengthy and an arduous process of professional formation and professional development' (Chapter A3).

Our wicked problem

The global turbulence we are experiencing in 2009 is a 'wicked problem' (Rittel and Webber 1973) by that I mean that what emerges from all the technical, informational, social, political, economic and cultural complexity is a problem so complex that it cannot be solved through rational, linear thinking because the problem and our understanding of it evolve as new possible solutions are invented and implemented. Wicked problems always occur in a

social context: the wickedness of the problem reflects the diversity of views among the stakeholders on the nature of the problem and the ways it needs to be tackled.

For higher education, preparing people for the complexities of this world is a 'wicked problem' and the higher education experience created by teachers, students and institutions is the evolving solution to the problem. There is no right or wrong answer. We have to continually learn how to do it by building on what works and trying new approaches. We also have to create social learning processes that enable people who care about the problem enough to work together to pool their knowledge resources and creative imaginations to solve it to craft possible solutions from the many possibilities. Problem wickedness demands tools and methods that create *shared understanding* and *shared commitment* and this e-book is both a tool and a method for achieving this aim.

The importance of a life-wide curriculum

I believe that we need to move beyond the obvious that learning to be professional only requires the integration of an academic and a professionally oriented practice-rich curriculum, to explore the opportunities for learning to be professional that a life-wide curriculum offers (Jackson 2008b). Higher education needs to discover how insights, capabilities and agencies that contribute to excellent professional performance can be gleaned from the diverse range of experiences that life has to offer and how this can be recognized and valued within the higher education educative process.

I'd like to try to illustrate this common sense proposition by simply referring to the everyday life of one of our students. Andra is a 22 year old level 1 student from Romania studying Business Management at the University of Surrey. We know her well in SCEPTRe for the way she has got involved in working with us. She is a good example of the sort of student who exploits every opportunity she has for participating fully and actively in enterprises from which valuable personal and professional development can be gained outside as well as inside the academic curriculum. She has also developed the will and capability to reflect on and learn from her experiences and she is articulate in communicating those experiences (she can do this to varying degrees of fluency in six different languages!).

Andra has created a [digital story](#) about her life as a student. So what has Andra gleaned from her life-wide learning enterprise. Her digital story shows us that she leads a very busy life that requires her to organize and manage her time, to juggle many competing demands, requirements, opportunities, study, work and pleasure. She has to think with sufficient complexity to make good decisions about how to organise and manage her life. She is stretching and challenging herself to do new things and taking a certain amount of risk by putting herself in new situations with people she hasn't met before. She enjoys using technology and makes good use of social software like Facebook and wikis to communicate with friends. She enjoys exploiting opportunities to be creative: she has participated in voluntary enterprises where she has worked in a team to give something to the community – effectively creating things that did not exist before and adding social and cultural value to the lives of others. She has experienced what it is like to be involved in the formation of a new organization (the CoLab student enterprise).

Her jam-packed everyday life shows us that she is having to communicate with many different people in many different situations and contexts, in her case in a language and culture that is not her own. Through this she is mastering the subtleties and nuisances of English culture. She is a global citizen a cultural translator mixing with members of her

community and learning from their diverse cultural backgrounds. In this complex communication process she is forming many relationships and many different types of relationship. Her whole life is geared to relationship building, nurturing and sustaining these. She is learning huge amounts simply from the way she conducts and engages with her life and I defy anyone to say that these things are not essential to being a productive, effective and successful professional. But more than this, Andra uses her life to foster who she wants to be. She is the expression of her life-wide experiences and enterprises and her will to be who she wants to be in her case driven by the possibility of managing 'one of the best hotels in the world'. While Andra is exceptional in her level of engagement, she illuminates well the potential for personal and professional development through a life-wide curriculum (Jackson 2009).

In search of an inspiring pedagogy

Ron Barnett coined this expression (Barnett 2004) in his book 'A Will to Learn', but it seems an apt way to begin a project that has at its heart the enterprise of searching in order to discover teaching and learning practices that inspire the participants who are involved be they teachers, tutors, students, placement managers, work place supervisors or mentors. We are particularly interested in the practices that support learners and enable them to become who they want to become. In doing so we believe we stand a good chance of discovering practices that also inspire other educational practitioners.

There are three objectives for the e-book. The first is to encourage fresh thinking about what learning to be professional means in the context of a higher education. The second is to bring together research studies that seek to discover and elaborate the many dimensions of what being professional or learning to be professional means and which provide pointers for better practice. The third is to discover and showcase inspiring pedagogic and curricular practices that are effective in helping student learners begin and make good progress on their journey of becoming professional.

The audience for the e-book potentially includes:

- educational practitioners involved in designing or managing curricula to facilitate development of professional capability alongside academic capability
- people who provide support to curriculum / educational design
- people involved in PGCert/PgDip/MSc teaching and learning programmes who might consider the materials a useful resource
- senior institutional managers who want to inform themselves about leading educational practices in this practice field.

Chapters will be added through four mechanisms:

- Chapters written by the people who are working with SCEPTRe
- Chapters that are commissioned by SCEPTRe
- Chapters written by other CETLs who have an interest in this field of practice who would like to contribute to this dissemination process
- Chapters that are volunteered by other people who want to contribute to the enterprise

Wherever possible we will complement the Chapter with a seminar, stream the seminar live and film the seminar and archive the film on the wiki to provide an accessible legacy.

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If you would like to offer a contribution please contact the editor.

Professor Norman Jackson norman.jackson@surrey.ac.uk

Tel 01483 682050

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Address for correspondence

SCEPTRe, University of Surrey,

Guildford, Surrey

Norman.Jackson@surrey.ac.uk

normanjjackson@btinternet.com

End Note

ⁱ YouTube accessed 13/09/09 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpEnFwiqdx8>

