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Professionalism in a knowledge society:

The academic drift of professional education in the "new" professions

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Abstract

A central argument in this paper is that a greater emphasis on knowledge and epistemological cultures is needed to understand the challenges of professionalism in modern globalized knowledge societies. A knowledge society is not simply a society of experts or an increasing production and flow of knowledge, but rather a society into which knowledge cultures have spilled and woven their tissues into society as a whole (Knorr Cetina 1997, 2001). We live in a world of increased reflexivity mediated by expert systems. Individuals engage with the wider environment and with themselves through information produced by specialists which they routinely interpret and act on in everyday life (Giddens 1990). The democratisation of knowledge has been accompanied by a growing contestability of knowledge claims. As more and more actors are being drawn into the field of knowledge production, the self-legitimation of the older knowledge elites becomes less certain. Professionals do therefore not just need knowledge as a basis for carrying out their tasks; they also have to a much greater extent to defend their professional practice scientifically towards other professional groups as well as the lay audience. The paper discuss the extent to which the move of professional education in the semi-professions from a vocational apprentice based model to an academic model institutionalised as part of higher education may be considered as part of a new professional project that serve the demands of the 21st century societies.

Introduction

Professional education in the "new" professions has been upgraded to higher education and theoretical and abstract codified knowledge has become more central. Curriculum has moved from a craft model towards an academic model like in the traditional core professions. Even though some of the professional organisations have advocated this type of academic drift, others have been more reluctant. The process may also be considered as a result of state educational policy and international policy trends. However, the aim of this paper is to discuss the rationale behind the academic drift. I will argue that the academic drift of education in the new professions could be is a way to keep up with the demands in a modern knowledge society. Moreover, a greater emphasis on knowledge and epistemological cultures is important to understand the challenges of professionalism in our societies.

The development of the professional curricula in the Norwegian college sector links to a more general debate on professionalism in a knowledge society. Sociologists have returned to the concept of professionalism to understand the challenges of knowledge based occupational groups. However, a knowledge society is not simply a society of experts or an increasing production and flow of knowledge, but rather a society into which knowledge cultures have spilled and woven their tissues into society as a whole (Knorr Cetina, 1997). We live in a world of increased reflexivity mediated by expert systems. Individuals engage with the wider environment and with themselves through information produced by specialists which they routinely interpret and act on in everyday life (Giddens, 1990). The democratisation of knowledge has been accompanied by a growing contestability of knowledge claims. As more and more actors are being drawn into the field of knowledge production, the self-legitimation of the older knowledge elites becomes less certain. Professionals do therefore not just need

knowledge as a basis for carrying out their tasks; they also have to defend their professional practice scientifically towards other professional groups as well as the lay audience to a much greater extent. Moreover, knowledge is not just a utilitarian means to an end; it also is the very basis for professional identity. Before I address these implications of a knowledge society more closely, the academic drift in the new professions will be examined.

Academic drift in education of the new professions

Until the 1960's higher education was in general restricted to universities and specialised university colleges. Shorter vocational oriented programmes as teacher training, engineering and nursing was mainly the responsibility of other types of educational institutions and the corresponding occupations were not considered as real professions. To meet the increase in the number of applicants as well as demands for qualified manpower a more diversified higher education system composed of long and short programmes, vocational as well as academic were developed in many countries in Western-Europe. As a part of these reforms educational programmes on secondary or intermediate level as well as Government Service programmes were upgraded to higher education. Most countries developed a dual or binary system and short vocational programmes became part of colleges separated from universities (Kyvik, 2002a; Teichler, 1988).

The college sector was in most countries initially composed of many small specialised institutions who mainly gave two or three year vocational programmes in a restricted field like nursing, engineering and social work. In several countries these specialised institutions were after a while merged into multidisciplinary centres located according to geographical criteria. In the UK such institutions were established already in the 1960's.

In Norway the reform is especially related to the college reform in 1994 when 98 specialised colleges were merged into 26 state university colleges. It is an international trend that the difference between the university and the colleges sector has become more blurred. In the UK the polytechnics and several colleges of higher education became universities in 1992 (Kyvik, 2004).

Today there are significant differences between countries in the extent to which there is a clear distinction between a university and a college sector, the relative size of the sectors and with the respect to which sector programmes are organised. In the US most short professional programmes are part of universities. In Europe teacher training is most frequently become part of universities, while shorter technical programmes, engineering and economic administrative programmes compose the core of the college sector (Kyvik, 2002a, 2004).

In Norway the integration of shorter vocational programmes into higher education institution has been described as a transformation from vocational school to university (Kyvik, 2002b). The relationships between the traditional vocational programmes and the occupational sector have become weaker. It has also bee a tendency that requirements for relevant occupational practice to enrol have been reduced, and theoretical parts of curriculum have increased at the expense of more practical elements. According to Kyvik (2002b:60-62) six different processes of academic drift may be identified:

1. *Increased institutional status*: It is an international trend that institutions with a low reputation try to increase it by imitating the educational- and research profile of institutions with higher reputation.

2. *Vertical development of educational programs*: Two years programs have been extended to three years and undergraduate programs has been supplemented by masters and PhD's.
3. *Horizontal development of programs*: Introduction of traditional university programs in colleges.
4. *Increased emphasis on theory in vocational programs*: A common development in several countries, and may be interpreted as a response to development of the knowledge bases of the professional fields.
5. *Development of research activity:* This is the most important type of academic drift in the college sector.
6. *Introduction of a common appointment and reward structure:* A common academic appointment structure for universities and colleges has been an important element in colleges' strategy to gain higher status.

The six processes identified by Kyvik show that the academic drift of professional education in the college sector is a multifaceted phenomenon. In some fields like nursing and teacher training the professional organisation has considered the academic drift as an important strategy of their professional project. The process is also a result of state higher education policy, international policy trend. However, the rationale behind these processes has to do with the challenges professionals are challenging in a modern knowledge society.

Implications of a knowledge society

The concept of knowledge society refers to the growing social relevance of scientific knowledge and reflects the great optimism of the early 1960's in this respect (Stehr, 1994). A large number of theories have been introduced to grasp these processes and

changes. They are often characterised by a language of strong ideological overtones and the perspectives are at least to some extent incommensurable (Brint, 2001; Ungar, 2003). Nevertheless, it is commonplace that that scientific-professional knowledge is becoming more important in the economies of advanced capitalism and that knowledge penetrates into all spheres of social life.

Below different perspectives on the knowledge society are presented. Even though the perspectives are based on different understanding of knowledge, they are not mutually exclusive. The latter perspectives may be considered as a broadening of the former.

Knowledge as a utilitarian mean

A sound part of departure is Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1999 [1973]), a pioneer contribution in the field. He claimed that theoretical knowledge have become the 'axial principle' of development. Bell emphasised that the post-industrial society is a knowledge society in a double sense: first, the sources of innovation are increasingly derivative from research and development; second, the weight of the society – measured by a lager proportion of Gross National Product and a larger share of employment- is increasingly in the knowledge field (Bell, 1999 [1973]:212). In the post-industrial society, knowledge, not labour is the scour of value. He emphasised a utilitarian perspective by claiming that "knowledge is part of the social overhead investment of society". Bell's concept of theoretical knowledge distinguishes itself by its ability to transcend time and place and therefore has a general relevance. He also accepted the traditional understanding of application of knowledge is a linear process (Stehr, 1994: 66-69). The traditional linear perspective on knowledge production is that scientific knowledge is developed independent of society (ivory tower) and then afterwards applied in a practical context into technologies and innovations. Bell's

concept of knowledge corresponds to the perspective which was the basis of the traditional view of professionalism as a value system. Based on scientific knowledge doctors have 'exact knowledge' on how to treat us when we are ill.

Mode 2 knowledge production

More recent developments in the sociology of scientific knowledge challenge the traditional view on knowledge. Gibbons and his colleagues (1994) addresses these issues by introducing the concept of Mode 2 as a new mode of knowledge production as an alternative to the traditional disciplinary university Mode 1 knowledge production. Mode 2 knowledge is produced in the context of application and it is transdisciplinary. Composition of knowledge production teams is heterogeneous; organisations are divers and change over time as requirements evolve. Social accountability permeates the whole knowledge production process and increases the sensitivity of scientists and technologist to the broader implications of what they are doing. In addition to peer review processes which characterise Mode 1 additional quality criteria are added through the context of application. The context speaks back, to use a phrase form their more recent book, and therefore contribute to more socially robust knowledge (Nowotny, Scott, & Gibbons, 2001). They emphasise that although the quality control process in Mode 2 is more broadly based, it does not follow that it will necessarily be of lower quality. Mode 2 knowledge production is not the same as applied research; and this type of knowledge is not less theoretical, abstract or codified than Mode 1 knowledge. The relevance criteria are, however, different since is not just internal as in traditional university disciplines.

The point here is neither to go into the discussion whether Mode 2 actually is a new type of knowledge production nor the role of the university in Mode 2 knowledge

production (Godin, 1998; Jacob, 2000). What is important is that the concept of Mode 2 rejects the assumption of the traditional sociology of science that knowledge and society be considered to be external to one another and also rejects the linear understanding of the relationship between science and its application. Mode 2 also brings into focus the double meaning of *discipline*, not just referring a field of knowledge but also to that fact that all types of organisation of knowledge production have a disciplinary function (Whitley, 2000). This does not only imply that we have to bring together knowledge form different fields to solve practical problems. The concept of transdisciplinarity implies that new types of knowledge production which breaks with the traditional academic one have to be developed to cope with important challenges in our society (Wallerstein & al., 1996). Finally, the perspective of heterogeneous organisation of knowledge production implies that more attention should be paid to knowledge production networks across formal organisational structures. Even though the concept of Mode 2 is ambiguous and not very precise, it opens up for interesting perspectives on the development of professional knowledge. Just as Mode 2 knowledge production professions are based on multiple disciplines and the context of application constitute the professional knowledge fields.

Reflexive communication

The development of a Mode 2 knowledge production is related to massification in research as well as education. The implications of knowledge being more spread through society than ever before and has to a great extent become publicly available do not only imply an increasing number of experts. As emphasised by Giddens (1990) we live in a world of increased reflexivity mediated by expert systems. Newspapers are for example full of references to science. Individuals engage with the wider environment and with themselves through information produced by specialists which they routinely

interpret and act on in everyday life. The democratisation of knowledge has been accompanied by a growing contestability of knowledge claims. As more and more actors are being drawn into the field of knowledge production, the self-legitimation of the older knowledge elites becomes less certain (Delanty, 2001: 5). As emphasised by Ulrich Beck (1992) the risk society is characterised by a widespread loss of scientific legitimacy and a growing calls for the accountability of science and technology.

The fact that professional knowledge and lay knowledge are less separate than the case used to be does however not imply that we can not distinguish between knowledge producing practices in terms of epistemic gain. It does not follow from the fact that all knowledge is socially produced and that there is no absolute truth, that that we can not discern epistemic gain (Muller, 2000:152). Delanty (2001:5) emphasises that knowledge is more than information and expertise. It is the capacity of a society for learning, a cognitive capacity that is related to the production of cultural models and institutional innovation. As emphasised by Giddens (1990), in a knowledge society social actors have greater capacities for self-interpretation of action. New cognitive fields are established which have a reflexive relation to knowledge. Whereas Giddens emphasises reflexivity embodied in institutions and particular expert systems, Becks stresses reflexivity as a critical force in society as a result of the collapse of the rationality of science (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994). Drawing on both these conceptions of reflexivity as well as Habermas theory of communication Delanty (2001: 154) argues that the role of the university is not merely the transmission of an established body of knowledge but rather reflexive communication in terms of inclusion of as many voices as possible in the construction of knowledge.

From a rather different point of departure Nowotny et al. (2001) ends up in a somewhat similar position using the term *agora* to describe the public space where

science and society co-mingle. Just as in the city-states of ancient Greece, agora is a space in which different perspectives are brought together including market and political interests as well as social movements. Nowotny et al. emphasise that contemporary agora is not an unstructured formless post-modern space occupied by 'the mob' but rather a public space of a highly articulate, well educated population.

According to Zigmund Bauman (1987) knowledge workers have moved form a *legislator* to an *interpreter* role. A "legislative role" of intellectual work is based on a belief in universal valid knowledge. Based on a post-modern view of the relativism of knowledge he claims that the new strategy of intellectual work is characterised by the metaphor of the "interpreter" role. Instead of being oriented towards selecting the best social order, this strategy is aimed at facilitating communication between autonomous sovereign participants. The reason why I point to Bauman's metaphors in this discussion is not to claim that scientific and lay knowledge has the same status. Even though Bauman stresses that that Holocaust is a central fact of modernity and not just an accident, he nevertheless argues that the promise of modernity needs to be redeemed. Intellectuals are never only power hungry experts in making. According to Bauman interpretation can however not be translated directly into legislation (Beilharz, 2000:81).

Bauman's two metaphors *legislator* and *interpreter* makes it quite clear that in a time of reflexive modernity and in the agora professional legitimacy is no longer based on the status of professionals. This does not mean that we have no trust in professionals, but professionals have to prove that they are trustworthy to another extent than previously. Even doctors who still have some of the legislator role left also have to be an interpreter. When we go to see a doctor we generally trust that he or she has a greater competence in medicine than most lay people. Nevertheless patients may have confronted several knowledge sources for example on the web. They may therefore

come up with several competent questions and suggestions for treatment. Moreover, there are alternative experts in the field. Alternative medicine is a heterogeneous field, but in some fields they provide treatments which may be more appropriate than traditional medicine. Even though the suggestions from patients and alternative experts often may be inappropriate, doctors have to be an interpreter and argue why. Patients will not just accept that the doctor always know the best. These issues really challenge the old professions like medicine.

The binding role of knowledge

So far I have argued that an abstract codified body of knowledge is an important basis of professionalism. The traditional positivistic perspective on scientific knowledge which was part of the traditional understanding of the basis of professional legitimacy and legislation may no longer be defended. The fact that there is no absolute truth, do not imply that all types of knowledge have the same status. Professionals have lost their legislative role, but based on their professional body of knowledge they have an important role as interpreter. In such a perspective the professional organisation do, however, not play an important role. According to the traditional perspective on professionalism trust was based on guilty knowledge but also collegial quality control delegated to the professional association. Professional socialisation was to a great extent based on the collegial association.

I do not claim that professional association no longer play any role, but mobility and modern life style tend to undermine traditional stable values and communities. Moreover, what is the basis of professional identity in a knowledge society characterised by increased reflexivity and erosion of the legislative professional role? I think we again have to focus on the role of knowledge as a basis of professionalism. Knowledge is not

just a basis of professional judgement; it may also play an important role as the basis of identity (Jensen & Lahn, 2005; Knorr Cetina, 1997, 2001).

According to Karen Knorr Cetina the most profound changes in modern societies is the expansion of object centred sociality. We relate to several objects in a emotional way. Think about young people's relationship to their Mobil telephone and MP3 player. While integration the social sciences only have focused on human bounds formed through normative consensus, Knorr Cetina argues that integration based on knowledge objects may create communities 'in thought' (Knorr Cetina, 1997). Like many sociologist of scientific knowledge, she takes her examples from the laboratory focusing on how researchers work in practice. She argues that such knowledge settings are no longer limited to science. She has analysed traders applying the same perspectives, arguing that 'the market-on-screen has a presence and profile in its own right'. The market on the screen is a knowledge object in the sense that it is signalling what it still lacks and the traders interpret these signals (Knorr Cetina & Bruegger, 2002).

Knorr Cetina describes knowledge objects as the goal of expert work and also what they are interested in, attracted by as well as seduced and attached to. Experts' relationship to knowledge objects is however, not only emotional bounds, it is also dynamic and ambivalent. The relationship is characterised by the notion of lack and a corresponding structure of wanting. One could say that 'objects of knowledge structure desire, or provide for the continuation of the structure of wanting' (Knorr Cetina, 1997:13). The concept of 'lack' is essential because that is the underlying dynamic that implies a continually renewed interest in knowing. Moreover, she stresses the 'unfolding ontology', it implies an understanding of knowledge as never final; it appears never to be fulfilled. Knorr Cetina discusses the concept of 'knowledge objects' in a very abstract

and theoretical way. It is however developed as a descriptive concept. A way of understanding it is to think how we as knowledge workers relate to knowledge.

Jensen and Lahn (2005) have analysed nursing students' relationships to knowledge and conclude that students' interpretation of the concept of care works very much as a knowledge object in Knorr Cetinas sense of the term. Historically, when nursing were established it was very much considered as a religious calling. Later the Nightingale image and clinically training came to dominate. Recent years, partly as a result of secularisation, a theoretically based knowledge core based on an ethos of care rather than medical science has been developed. A new curriculum for nursing education has been implemented defining nursing as a unique discipline and care as the core concept. The central question is whether students find these rather abstract philosophical theories useful and appropriate as a basis for occupational practice. Based on interviews with students Jensen and Lahn find that students first find the abstract, decontextualised world of theory challenging. Nursing theory is described as dry, irrelevant and boring. They find however a shift in students perspectives during the last year of study. The 'back-and-forward looping between theoretical input and practical experience' that characterised the nursing programme seems to stimulate students and made them see the relevance of nursing theory. Students underlined the moral worth of self-related motives and concerns. The ability to preserve every patient as a unique person was emphasised. Professionals are not just committed to knowledge in general. Knowledge objects and the professional 'wanting structure' gives direction for where too look for solutions. As Jensen and Lahn conclude: abstract forms of knowledge 'offers the possibility of ensuring professionalism as a socially responsible and vital life form'.

Implications for the professional curriculum

One of the basic arguments in this paper is that one of the implications of the knowledge society is that theoretical knowledge has become a more important basis of occupational competence. The increase of the proportion of theory and abstract codified knowledge in the curriculum in the new professions reflects this general trend. This does not imply that practice should not be part of the professional curriculum. Practice or practice like situations are important to understand the relevance and implications of professional theory. This is for example the reason for the introduction of problem based learning in medicine. From this perspective practice is an aim to improve students' theoretical understanding. Secondly practice is a way to develop professional skills that only or mainly may be learned in supervised practice. Practice is also important to learn the dimensions of professional work that Schön (1987) characterises as artistry.

Based on the perspectives on knowledge society three main arguments why theoretical knowledge has become more important for professionals may be distinguished:

1. *Utilitarian argument*: theoretical knowledge is needed to perform and understand more and more tasks in our society (Bell)
2. *Interpreter role*: professionals have to be able to defend their judgement towards other experts and lay audience. Scientific knowledge is the very basis for knowledge claims (Bauman, Giddens)
3. *Identity and motivation*: Knowledge has become the very basis of professional identity and motivation (Knorr Cetina; Jensen & Lahn)

The first argument is based on the traditional role of professionals. Knowledge is a mean to solve practical problems in an appropriate way. The need for such type of knowledge

has increased in many professional areas. An important question is how much of every type of knowledge is needed. There is no straight answer to such questions, the challenge is however that professionals will always need to update because they have to specialise and because of the development of knowledge and technology.

The interpreter role argument is somewhat related, but not necessarily. From a utilitarian perspective it may be sufficient to be able to handle specific techniques, while the interpreter role requires the ability to argue and give appropriate answers. It may also require more knowledge about alternatives. I think the role of primary school teachers may serve as an example. While teachers in primary school was the most highly educated except form the priest in many rural areas a generation ago, today primary school teachers in some schools experience to be the least educated compared to the pupils parents. It may be argued that primary school teachers today need an education on Master's level not because it will improve classroom teaching, but that it is important as a basis of the interpreter role towards parents and the general public.

Finally, what is the implication of the argument of the binding role of knowledge? I think this perspective to a greater extent should be considered as an important point of departure in curriculum design. While the utilitarian, but also to some extent the interpreter argument is based on a concept of knowledge as equal to information, the concept of knowledge objects bring into focus the emotional basis of knowledge work. The quasi philosophical concept of care may be the reason why nursing students identify with their field of knowledge. Such identification with an indefinite knowledge object may be essential for the way they relate to knowledge in occupational practice. One of the reasons why social workers consider theoretical knowledge to be of much less importance in professional work than nurses (Heggen, 2003) may be the lack of well developed knowledge objects.

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