

Locating post-16 professionalism: public spaces as dissenting spaces

Carol Azumah Dennis (1)

Introduction: what do teachers talk about when they talk amongst themselves?

Post-16 professional identities emerge through the negotiation of axial tensions between professional aspiration and policy embodiment; between policy requirements and professional commitments. In these spaces practitioners comply with policy, but their compliance is outward, superficial and strategic.

This article explores these negotiated spaces through an online chat room hosted by the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)*, the 'World's biggest teaching community. Where teachers can get together [to] offer support, healthy debate and a whole lot of inspiration'.

New discussion threads are opened or closed on the *TES* site daily. At the time of this enquiry there were 114 different forums on varying subjects, attracting in excess of 2,800 different contributions. My analysis focuses on a thread entitled '*Should we keep the [professional body] in business?*', a forum focused around whether post-16 teachers should comply with the legislative requirement to pay membership fees to a state-sponsored professional body (2). My analysis starts with the opening of the thread in May 2010 and ends with its closing in December 2012. This discussion thread attracted 225 contributions, substantially more than the 60 contributions to the next most popular strand.

The data – which feels like a series of overheard staffroom conversations – allows me to gain an insight into what teachers talk about when they talk amongst themselves (in the absence of managers and educational researchers). What I am exploring

is how tactical resistance or superficial compliance becomes critical defiance and dissent.

What is wrong with a 'professional body'?

In 2002, the professional body for FE teachers had a voluntary membership of about 2,000. In 2007 new regulations made membership mandatory for all teachers working in post-16 provision. Individual membership fees, initially paid for by government on behalf of teachers, by 2012 were required from members to enable the professional body to become self-financing. Teachers felt bullied into membership; some 47 per cent opined that they had joined against their wishes. Ironically, an organisation charged with protecting the professional interests of post-16 teachers required them to be passively compliant in response to policy imposition.

In rejecting mandatory membership of a professional body, contributors were not rejecting the idea of themselves as professionals. They questioned the credibility of the professional body and the validity of conferring professional status through such membership. An underlying and implied interrogations: who defines and what bestows professional status?

'I have myself been graded as 'outstanding', grade one, by both internal and external OfSTED inspections, who again regularly assess my abilities and competence. Yet even had I been graded as 'inadequate', grade four, I would still have been entitled to join the professional body, confirming my professionalism.' TES Forum, Crackers (3)

'I know I'm a trained professional and so do my colleagues. Perhaps they realise we are, in fact, recognised as professionals without needing this unnecessary additional tax on our chosen vocation?'
TES Forum, Healthy Teacher

The teachers who rejected the professional body coalesce around a particular view: teachers who had undergone a period of academic qualification, who were respected by colleagues, who had demonstrated their commitment to developing valued classroom practices – sometimes to the detriment of their health and wellbeing, teachers who were in many instances poorly paid on insecure hour-by-hour contracts – were further imposed upon by the requirement that they pay a fee to a legislatively derived organisation to which they felt no allegiance.

Who confers professional status?

'Teachers of arts and crafts, languages, book clubs, family and local history, skills for life and so on, know that their efforts bring satisfaction, pleasure and wellbeing to hundreds of thousands of people.'
TES Forum, DiOxide

This contribution conveys an embodied, experiential rather than an argumentative, truth. The contributor is arguing for a notion of teaching and learning that is not predicated upon the contribution it makes to the economic good. It is instead valued for the 'satisfaction, pleasure and well-being' it brings. New Labour's Skills for Life policy is an intriguing reference here. Between 2001 and 2010 Skills for Life exemplified New Labour's ideas about education as shifting from adjunct to direct focus for economic policy. Literacy and numeracy provision were recast as strictly vocational, an economic good predicated upon global competition between states. Its grouping along side curricular subjects associated with the liberal arts is both striking and casual. I suggest it marks a blasé refusal of policy-predicated determinations. That is, despite the entire weight of policy defining literacy and numeracy as skills required for global competition, the writer of this letter and her co-signatories blithely associate Skills for Life with the liberal arts, subjects that, if valued at all, are valued for entirely different reasons.

This is an emotive space. And contributors return to the thread's central theme: professional body membership was neither a necessary nor sufficient pre-requisite for professional status. Such membership could not compensate for other, more pressing concerns, such as the terms and conditions of service.

'[We are] the lowest of the low in the college hierarchy. 'The professional body' may try to tell you otherwise, but the reality is that teaching is much like serving burgers in a fast food outlet. That is: lowest cost to operate.' TES Forum, Healthy Teacher

My reading of this thread is based on following the divergent lines of argumentation that determine the oppositional stance taken. Amidst these exchanges professionalism emerges as something that was self-derived, negotiated between professionals or a body of practitioners and the public. It was not something that was bestowed by policy. Nor for the experienced or qualified teacher was it located within policy-directed behaviour.

The focus of contributors' protest is a specific policy requirement, but at times their line of vision broadens. A casual resistance to the idea of education as handmaiden to the economy changes to connect the space of post-16 professionalism to discourses around equity, inclusion and social justice.

The space is an openly campaigning one. This is the text of a letter that later appeared in a national newspaper. It is posted in the forum in an attempt to gather more signatories.

'Opposition to the [mandatory membership of a professional body] fee is additionally symptomatic of a general malaise: the degradation of pay, conditions and pensions; the casualisation of part time and agency staff; issues of career development, pay differentials and promotion for women, Black, disabled and LGBT lecturers; the widening gulf between ; lecturers' pay and executive salaries; and the glaring inconsistencies in the wider sector's professionalism agenda with school teachers and HE lecturers.' TES Forum, Joel Petrie (4)

What emerges is a distinct sense of professionalism that is somehow preserved even when a teacher leaves his/her institutional moorings. In the following reference a teacher without her actual teaching being observed is graded as inadequate for not having the required paperwork with her on an unannounced observation. When informed she would be disciplined for gross professional misconduct, she decided to resign her post.

'I set up the classes privately, took the students along and almost immediately was taking home twice my previous hourly rate plus no hours of paperwork and no hassle from 'Management' (who were really just a bunch of uber administrators

suffering from OCD). As for the other post, I am whittling down the hours each year and hiring the halls privately. The students are happier and I feel more enthusiastic than I have in years. By September, I will only teach (a group of seriously disabled students to whom I feel very loyal).’ TES Forum, Entrepreneur

There is no scope for verifying or refuting the reliability of the narrative here; the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the actions or reactions are not, in this analysis, significant. It is the independence of professional identity and the idea that even the physicality of the classroom can shift to accommodate the professional scope of the teacher that furthers my line of argument. Teacherly commitments to public service remain (in the form of commitment to the most vulnerable students) alongside a refusal to comply – strategically or tactically with the administrative burden that she sees as imposing on her professionalism.

Space for manoeuvrability: from strategic compliance to open dissent

I locate teacher professionalism rather than define it. I have acknowledged that while successive waves of educational reform have reduced teachers’ scope for manoeuvrability from strategic compliance to tactical resistance, discussion of teaching nonetheless continues in, within and through the public sphere. Teachers engage in extended analytical debate in order to rally support and solidarity, to raise awareness of their concerns, and to cultivate the persona of an activist professional. What this implies is that there are professional spaces beyond those scripted by policy. In these spaces, those who represent themselves as teachers are openly critical, defiant and dissenting. They extend their pedagogic focus to explore what it means to be a professional, how their professionalism is conferred, and the implications of their professionalism. I suggest professionalism might reasonably be located within these spaces.

In these public professional spaces, post-16 teachers can and do resist – and in doing so locate their professional selves in spaces that are neither strategic nor tactical, but openly critical, defiant and dissenting.

Notes:

1. This is a shortened version of a research paper that has been published elsewhere: Dennis, C. A.

(2015) ‘Locating post-16 professionalism: public spaces as dissenting spaces’ in *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 20 (1), pp. 64-77.

2. The discussion revolves around the mandatory membership of the Institute for Learning (IFL). To maintain focus on professionalism (rather than the rights and wrongs of a particular organisation, the IFL) I have used the term ‘professional body’ throughout.

3. I have used pseudonyms rather than names as they appear in the thread. Although the material is available in the public domain, in recontextualising it here I have sought to offer some degree of anonymity.

4. The author’s name is included here as the text was published in a national newspaper and since the initial full publication of this paper the author has consented for his name to be included.

References:

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