Teaching – craft or profession?

Professions are hard to define exactly and it remains a contested term. Academic analysis of the question tends to recognise a number of key attributes of a profession that set it apart from other roles and occupations. Professions have standards for entry, early career formation and on-going practice that are set by members and leaders of that profession rather than through legislation or government policy. These standards are set drawing on an agreed body of knowledge and/or principles, again agreed and maintained by members of the profession. They are framed with reference to a code of conduct or ethics. The whole is overseen by a professional body formed of members of the profession and governed by experienced and expert members, elected by and answerable to the membership. In the UK these bodies usually have a legal status conferred by grant of a Royal Charter.

The teaching profession first set up a chartered professional body to oversee teaching in the 1840s. Unlike many other professions, where membership of such bodies is an unquestioned and valued part of professional identity, The College of Preceptors (later Teachers) never quite achieved that central status (Chapman, 1985). It had some success over the centuries in fostering innovation and raising standards; it established one of the first training colleges for teachers at a time when the value or need for such training was in doubt. However its charter fell short of the authority of those in other professions and the power to set vital standards for entry or progression stayed firmly in the hands of policy makers, not expert practitioners. After nearly 200 years, that may be about to change.

Controlling standards

The last two decades have seen radical and rapid changes to the conditions of entry into teaching. On 17th March 2016 a White Paper entitled Education Excellence Everywhere proposed the most revolutionary step yet. The Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) was a compulsory qualification for those teaching in the maintained sector until 2012, when state funded Academies were given the same freedom as Free Schools to employ teachers without QTS. Now QTS is to be replaced by a ‘more academic’ qualification. This will take longer than previously and judgements as to its award will be made by head teachers and Teaching Schools. No detail of how this is to be quality assured or regulated is available at the time of writing.

The same White Paper confirmed support for a Chartered College of Teaching. This body will be governed by an update to the Royal Charter which was conferred on the College of Preceptors/Teachers, granting the power to award the status of Chartered Teacher. Potentially this heralds an unprecedented boost for the autonomy of teaching. There is an opportunity to create standards for teaching practice that are owned and governed by a member-led teaching body. Once established, there is also the possibility that such a body could quality assure initial entry into the profession as currently happens in other professions.

A key factor which sets teaching apart from other occupations generally viewed as ‘professions’ is that the entry requirements, and those for further career formation, for the profession are controlled by policy makers or government bodies, not by bodies owned and run by members of the profession with autonomy from government. The Chartered Institutes found in accountancy,
engineering, management etc and the Royal Colleges of medicine are the best known of such bodies. Until now there has never been an exactly equivalent body for teaching. In recent years, however, in discourse relating to recruitment and retention of high calibre teachers, interest in the development of an equivalent for teaching has been growing. It is difficult to pinpoint where such ideas begin but discussion of the possible role for a profession-led body with these powers in recent times appeared in a review of its education policy, following widespread consultation including with the College of Teachers, by the Conservative party in 2007 when in opposition. It surfaced again in the public domain in the recommendations of the Education Select Committee in 2012 – it is important here to note that a Select Committee is a House of Commons Cross Party body, and its role is to scrutinise and hold government to account. Some discussion in print and social media conflates the select committee with government which is to misunderstand its remit.

The idea might have remained just that if the Prince’s Teaching Institute (an independent education charity providing subject based professional development for teachers), galvanised by some of its headteacher participants, had not taken up the role of ‘honest broker’ and set up a consultation across the profession to develop a blue print for a member-led body (Prince’s Teaching Institute, 2014). Over a two year period, action moved out into the profession with teachers and others in education involved at every step. Careful lobbying also garnered widespread support from political parties and unions. This resulted in a Department for Education consultation led by the Liberal Democrat Minister, David Laws, a proposal for implementation from a coalition of over 100 thought leaders in teaching and teacher organisations, including 5 major Unions, and a commitment in the Conservative Party 2015 election manifesto to support an independent College of Teaching, a commitment which took shape in The Secretary of State, Nicky Morgan’s, 2016 White Paper (ibid).

For the chronology of recent events in the history of the College see http://www.claimyourcollege.org/the-colleges-history/ (accessed 16th May 2016).

Developing professional knowledge
Teaching is a complex practice, involving as Ted Wragg observed, as many as 1000 individual interactions by the teacher over a typical school day (Wragg, 2000, quoting Jackson, 1968). If there was one, reliable, repeatable, universal method guaranteed to produce effective learning then it would have been defined and replicated by now. In place of the one size fits all model, there is a nuanced web of practices that vary depending on the context. Teaching and learning are social and cultural practices which are shaped by who is learning, what, where and when. That said, this does not justify an entirely organic approach where the decisions made on curriculum, pedagogy, behaviour and all the other elements of practice are entirely based on opinion and anecdote (Sharples, 2013).

Here I want to look at what a body of shared professional knowledge might look like when there is no one right answer but many options, some of which are highly suspect but more than one of which have clear value, which may be highly sensitive to context.

One option would be to follow a highly diversified approach, similar to that taken by the National Board for Professional Standards in Teaching in the US. Over a six year period they developed highly specific standards for a range of subjects in different phases (see Cordingley 2016 in this volume). This raises issues of practicality as well as value – the process of developing and maintaining such standards is complex which makes it time consuming and costly. The original US model was
government funded. Setting up a similar model in the UK was estimated by McKinsey to need £30 million of funding (PTI, 2014). Moreover the adoption remains far from universal, even after 27 years, the number of teachers taking up the US NBPST standards and seeking accreditation against them is a small percentage of the profession.

Another option is to seek to distil the essence of sound and effective practice in teaching. This is the model more closely aligned to the Australian teaching standards. The focus is much more about the kind of teacher you are and the culture in which you operate (Cordingley, ibid.) This model is potentially more powerful and more sustainable. Building on this it is possible to codify a common epistemology for teaching – how you know being as important as what you know. Is teaching practice adequately analytical, is there a focus on improvement and development? When an intervention or innovation is planned, is there engagement with a relevant evidence base (gathered within and beyond the school) to inform the design? Is the result monitored and evaluated through meaningful collection and examination of the evidence of development of learning?

Is the heart of a profession as much in how it recognises, builds and mobilises knowledge as what the particular ideology or knowledge base may be?

**The Nature of Evidence**

Commentators on an evidence-informed approach in teaching commonly make comparisons with other professions – particularly medicine and science (Goldacre, 2013). These comparisons often assume a level of certainty and consensus that do not exist even in those disciplines. However what those disciplines do have in common, which arguably teaching lacks, is a respect for evidence. It is not enough in science or medicine to adopt a practice because there is a popular theory doing the rounds, or because a hospital down the road has done it, or because a colleague recommended it. And yet as Sharples articulates in his review, (ibid) all too often decisions on policy and practice in schools are made on just such justifications.

When offered a theory or recommendation for practice the first questions should surely be, what examples are there of this in practice and what evidence is there that it worked? Closely followed in the case of education by what were the exact circumstances in which it worked and how to they relate to our context? One of the issues dogging the relationship between policy, practice and evidence in teaching is that it is impossible to guarantee that a particular resource, tool or method will replicate perfectly between teachers or classrooms. Time and again the evidence, where it exists, shows that often subtle differences in implementation can make the difference between learners benefiting and little or no gain (EEF, for example). Even text book publishers will admit that simply using their books is no guarantee of success (Maughan et al., 2015). As with the Shanghai Maths programme which has gained so much attention in the UK, it is the whole cultural practice around the use of the texts, and their development by teachers, that contribute to the success.

The result is that the practice of teaching must also be one of scholarship. There is a need to understand first that there is a body of knowledge to be accessed, and then how to access the relevant parts and apply them meaningfully and effectively. As Campbell (2016) sets out in this volume, this is not a straightforward process and there are many interdependencies for this to work. First and foremost is that this kind of engagement in on-going professional learning is a legitimate and necessary part of being a teacher.
There has been an active lobby in recent months for all teachers to be given access to academic journals in education. Whilst this may be desirable to some, there is a question as to whether this represents a meaningful or efficient way to mobilise knowledge to inform practice. Journal papers are written for a very different purpose. They are a very mannered form, designed for the sharing of knowledge among a research community and used to judge the success and standing of the authors and the journal. Each paper is one part of a web of knowledge – hence the value of the citation rate – and cannot on its own give a complete picture of the whole, or even, given the word limit, of the details of the study being reported. It is not unknown to find two or more papers which appear to report on similar intervention studies having entirely different outcomes. So accessing individual papers is a high risk way to interrogate the evidence base unless you have a lot of time to do a detailed review. Given the workload of teachers is this even a reasonable expectation? As Campbell argues there is a need for intermediaries who can consolidate and translate the evidence base in order to reveal where the balance of evidence points and what the important variables are to manage when trying to put this into practice.

Another challenge with the evidence base in education is that it is rather partial. That is not to say that there is little or no evidence, but that the evidence available may not address the issues most challenging or urgent to those who teach. The voice of the practitioner in shaping and driving the research agenda is something of a whisper.

**Defining excellence**

In a landscape of differing opinions and philosophies of teaching, is it even possible to bring teachers together under one professional banner? Bennett (2016) in his blog for the TES suggests not. However an EU funded project involving teachers in 7 countries suggests otherwise. The *Policy for Educator Evidence in Portfolios* (PEEP) project (Sage et al., 2014) looked across a very varied landscape of teacher education, standards, policies and practices. By moving away from highly specific standards and focussed on professional principles the teachers and researchers were able to distil an essence of effectiveness in teaching. Their conclusions echo those of the Cambridge Primary Review. Assessment of the portfolios hinged on three central questions – can teachers explain what they do, why they do it that way and how do they know it is working? The coherent rationalisation of practice, backed by an evidence informed, scholarly mindset, underpins all. The benefit to learners drives everything – and this goes beyond high stakes test score which are a necessary variable but not sufficient on their own to capture the full achievement of teacher or taught.

So excellence in teaching is not a set of facts, or even skills, it is a way of thinking and working. There is no one right way to do it and all that really matters are the successful outcomes of those being taught. The ways of earning recognition for practice in PEEP have much in common with the methods used to award the highest levels of excellence in the University system.

One route that could be explored for the process of becoming a Chartered Teacher could be to develop the PEEP model. Whilst this must not be about writing a thesis, the methods have something in common. However for this to work, and to work at scale, as Cordingly points out (ibid) the process must become part of the everyday practice of teaching, inform the day to day and emerge from it. The practice recorded must start with a genuine developmental goal for the individual teacher, support them in the pursuit of that goal and use the material generated *en route*
as the basis for the accreditation. If the process becomes an administrative burden or divorced from immediate development of practice, it will have failed.

**Next steps**

The challenge now for a renewed and transformed College is to prove its credibility and win the support of teachers. It does not have to be all teachers at once, but it must be a viable cohort to sustain and grow a major new presence in the education landscape. Initially those who join will be those who share the vision and have the passion to make the College a reality. The potential prize is great – a profession-led model of effective teaching build by a community of teachers committed to the best possible outcomes for each learner, embodied in a respected and authoritative College that stands for all that is great in teaching. The challenge to teachers is to put aside their differences, take courage and claim the College they deserve.

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References


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