RESEARCH ARTICLE

PROFESSIONALISM IN TEACHING

R. Kasowe¹ and B. C. Muropa²
1. Zimbabwe Open University.
2. Bindura University of Science Education.

Abstract:
This paper intended to unravel what professionalism in teaching entailed. In Zimbabwe, anyone who has gone above “O” level can teach and in fact people are “teaching” in various centres of learning. The issue is ”is teaching a profession or is it simply one of those daily chores which can be done by anyone who has the energy to be with learners?” Our first task was to define what is meant by the phrase, professionalism in teaching. Various explanations of the concept/ practice were given. Professionalism in teaching was identified through an analysis of three areas; namely, the teacher’s competence, the teacher’s knowledge and personal conduct. Reference was made on what various authorities have said on professionalism in teaching. Challenges to be met on the road to professionalism in teaching have also been identified.

Key Words:

Theoretical Framework
Professionalism in teaching at University level is the ability to reach students in a meaningful way, to develop innovative approaches in content delivery, while motivating, engaging and inspiring young adults’ minds to prepare for ever advancing knowledge and skills.

Universities U.K. et al (2004: 1) . A consultative paper on professionalism defines professionalism as follows:
‘Professionalism is commonly understood as an individual’s adherence to a set of standards, code of conduct or collection of qualities that characterise accepted practice within a particular area of activity.’

McGettrick (2005) suggests that the above definition is limited since it leaves out the pioneers and courageous academics who push the barriers of accepted practice. McGettrick (ibid) suggests the following definition of what professionalism is all about. Professionals are a group of people entrusted by the public to work with dangerous modalities in the common good. Why dangerous modalities? If a teacher had other ulterior motives, and is not a professional, he/she would together with students concentrate on issues and activities which might destroy society.

Bottery and Wright (1997) add that the key criteria for professionalism are autonomy and expertise. Professionalism is guided by three essential characteristics. These are Competence, Teacher’s Knowledge and Personal Conduct.

Competence
The characteristic of competence is fundamental in the lecturer’s pursuit of Excellence, Commitment and Discipline. Competence focuses on three important ideas i.e. preparation, lecturer’s knowledge of the subject matter, and well thought out pedagogies /methods. Careful choice of a topic is crucial. A topic is the actual subject under scrutiny. It is the concern under discussion. It is the problem which needs a solution. Any meaningful learning is problematic.
The more challenging the problem is, the more the students want to find out the solution. Hence the importance of careful planning and the ability to come up with topics or issues which motivate learners. A professional teacher has to develop skills to motivate his students. Students should “want” to learn and this is where motivation comes in. A professional teacher has to come up with strategies that will trigger the minds of the students to “want” to learn. A professional teacher looks upon himself as a guide and director of learning. He/she allows students to learn by doing, to learn by being directly involved in the learning scenario. Students learn very little by being passive and inactive. A professional does not talk for the rest of two hours. A professional teacher has to be aware of the adversity of the lecture room, ranging from problems of using appropriate language, cultural barriers and socio-economic differences. Obstacles in the lecture room are there and have to be broken down by individualised
techniques. Darling & Hammon (1988:59) posit that by bridging these barriers, the lecturer will “be better prepared to manage the students and will be able to create an effective learning environment”. It is important for a professional lecturer/teacher to consider the importance of assessment, monitoring and providing feedback. A student needs to know how he/she is performing; hence the importance of assessment. Both formative and summative assessments help the student to grow and move forward to more challenging work.

Teacher’s Knowledge

A professional teacher is one who does not stop reading/studying soon after graduation. A professional teacher is aware that new knowledge is emerging on a daily if not on an hourly basis. There is a need for him/her to be in touch with current material in his area. Having such an attitude to academic life would make a lecturer a master of his area of study. According to Lunenburg and Ornstein (2000) the hiring of competent lecturers presumes that curricular priorities have already been established. Decisions have already been made about how much time will be devoted to each segment of the lecture. A professional lecturer creates more autonomy for himself: thus allowing for a partial release from the constraints constructed by administration, or by unforeseen circumstances e.g. disturbances caused by the holidays and the semester break, late registration by students and the selection of students for the August intake.

Such unforeseen occasions might throw someone who is not competent off the truck completely. McLean & Blackwell (2012), propose that excellence in teaching resides in a reflective self-critical theoretically informed approach. They go on to argue that academic teachers pursuing a reflective approach develop conceptions of teaching which can contribute to improved practice. McLean & Blackwell (ibid) went on to observe that encouraging reflective pedagogy has the potential of engaging academics in making the cultural changes necessary to professionalise and enhance the status of teaching. Although teacher’s knowledge is essential to teacher professionalism, it is only useful if the teacher is able to perform. Performance is the ability to effectively teach the concepts of a given curriculum. A professional teacher educates so that students learn concepts, skills and attitudes and be able to apply them in their lives. Stenhouse, (1974) argues that any knowledge that cannot be put into practise is worthless.

This hands-on approach might undermine the university’s emphasis on good examination results. A quality professional teacher insists on the application of concepts, skills and attitudes within the bounds of students’ lives and that includes taking care of examination demands. Schuck, Gordon & Buchan (2012) have posited that education has become increasingly co modified in recent times. Indeed, the very ascription of the word ‘quality’ to education connotes a product or commodity rather than a process.

Korthagen (2004) goes on to observe that the focus of research on learning has shifted. It has moved away from the process-product approach which tends to match teaching behaviours with learning outcomes. Emphasis now is on the ‘self’ or professional identity of the teacher. The teacher’s role has been transferred from instructor to guide, facilitator or mediator. (Gordon & Fittler, 2004). Kleinhenz & Ingvarson (2004) argued that good quality teaching is indicated by student satisfaction. Implicit in this argument is the link between student satisfaction and student learning.

Compliance with bureaucratic procedures is not a sign of effective teaching in universities. McGettrick (2005: 5) asserts that ‘universities are not at their best when they have become places of compliance, conformity and adherence to regulation and edict. This is the antithesis of the open, creative and innovative environments that are the dream of the reflective and creative educator.’

The other area a professional teacher has to think about seriously is the relation or link between accountability and professionalism. Accountability appears to mean the ability to justify and account for one’s actions to an external person, agency or institution. Professionalism denotes the ability to take responsibility for one’s actions; i.e. to make decisions and judgements based on sound thinking, reflection and knowledge of the context in which one will be operating. Trying to balance these two positions is a mammoth task for the professional teacher.

Personal Conduct

What is it? It is the manner in which the professional teacher carries himself. Conduct is a representation of how well one takes care of himself or herself-from the aesthetics to language and behaviour. Right (2010) observes that a professional teacher is always teaching even when not delivering formal instruction by virtue of being a primary adult influence in a student’s life. As a role model of the youngsters, a teacher must observe punctuality, appropriate tidiness and dress. Scruffy teachers let everyone down!!! Right (2010) describes ethics as the study of philosophical ideas of morality. Ethics is what defines good and bad. Since educational practices do not take place outside of society and are directly related to culture, ethics are an important part of any institution. Going around with
University girls and boys is unethical. Revealing what has been set in the forth coming examination is unethical. Public drunkenness is unethical. Fighting with students, fellow lecturers, spouses, or anyone for that matter is unethical. Why would one do that when society looks upon a lecturer as a wise man? Beating up students or use of language which destroys a student’s self esteem is unprofessional.

A professional teacher is collaborative but not a thorn in the flesh of other lecturers. He should try not to be dependent on colleagues. Such behaviour will destroy his self esteem. A lecturer should be well composed and bubbling with self confidence. He/she will share ideas and materials when appropriate but does not become a burden to his colleagues. A professional teacher does not create personal alliances or feuds with his colleagues.

Clear communication with colleagues and administrators is a mark of professionalism in a teacher. With regard to administrators, the professional teacher is respectful and approachable. However, he maintains his sense of individual integrity. A teacher should be able to feel that his professionalism entitles him to get support and sympathy from University administrators. If a lecturer has a problem with his teaching, there should be measures or procedures put in place to handle such difficulties. A lecturer should not have to feel “alone” and vulnerable if a difficult situation arises. Hall (2011) posits that professionalism definitely cuts both ways in the standards we demand of lecturers and the framework we have for giving them support. Without moral, technical and material support from administrators, a lecturer finds it hard going to maintain his/her professionalism. Good conduct also includes one’s ability to initiate and maintain quality communication with all the parties involved in education. i.e. students, fellow lecturers, university administrators and other stakeholders. It is through quality communication by a professional that initiates understanding whether it be a student attempting to grasp his potential or the professional voicing their displeasure on a newly implemented university regulation.

**Conclusion**

A completed definition of professionalism in teaching goes beyond one’s ability to be prepared for any unforeseen occasions. A professional teacher is trained to handle all situations that requires quick thinking. A professional teacher should be able to discover if the students are being reached in an effective way. He should also maintain good conduct to facilitate quality communication. In short, a professional teacher should be able to take care of himself/ herself.

**References**


Right, J. (2010) “Professional Ethics in Teaching” (extracted 14/05 2011)


ITS-Life- Learning for Teaching. www.itslifejimbutoatasweknowit.org.uk (extracted 14/05/2011)

Professional Standards for Teachers TDA (2011) (extracted (14/05/2011)