

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2000 Conference Proceedings (Vancouver, BC,
Canada)

Towards an Holistic Approach to Professional Learning and Development

Geoff Chivers

University of Sheffield, UK

Graham Cheetham

Department for Education and Employment, UK Government

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Chivers, Geoff and Cheetham, Graham (2000). "Towards an Holistic Approach to Professional Learning and Development," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2000/roundtables/10>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Towards an Holistic Approach to Professional Learning and Development

Geoff Chivers

University of Sheffield, UK

and

Graham Cheetham

Department for Education and Employment, UK Government

Abstract: *This paper outlines research conducted by the authors between 1994 and 1999 into the nature of professional competence and how it is acquired. It discusses some of the key results which appear to suggest partiality both in existing models of professional competence and approaches to professional development.*

Introduction

Professional competence is a complex affair which is not easily analysed, articulated or modelled. Previous attempts to do so have often been partial or overly reductionist. These have led to approaches to professional development which tend to ignore important aspects of effective professional performance. Our research examined earlier attempts to understand the nature of professional practice and competence, and the approaches to professional development these had spawned. Alternative perspectives were tested out through extensive empirical work across 20 professions. This included interviews with 80 professionals and survey returns from almost 400 others. The results throw light on the actual requirements for effective practice and provide insights into the mechanisms through which the respondents had acquired the different aspects of their professional competence, whether through formal development programmes or otherwise.

Some Differing Views of Competence and Approaches to Professional Development

Apprenticeship Model

Until well into the nineteenth century professional skills were seen as analogous to those of a master craftsman, and professional training therefore adopted a similar approach. New entrants to a profession typically learned their art through a system of apprenticeship or pupillage. It was often assumed that pupils would also find time to study

suitable books in order to absorb the relevant theory, but this was rarely tested. The training was largely unplanned and unstructured.

Technocratic Approach

By the end of the nineteenth century most professions required candidates to pass written qualifying examinations and began to identify a discrete body of specialist knowledge which entrants were expected to master. Professional practice came to be seen as primarily the application of specialist knowledge, a view characterised by Schön (1983) as “technical-rationality.” This led to a switch in development paradigm from one that focused on the casual acquisition of practical skills to the systematic teaching of underpinning principles and theory.

Reflective Practice Approach

In the mid-1980s, Schön (1983) challenged the foundations on which the technical-rational approach had been based. He questioned the view that professional practice relies solely on the logical application of a body of rational or scientific knowledge and that professionals solve day-to-day problems by making use of the principles and theories they have learned through their formal professional education. He was sceptical also of the belief that practical know-how could be elicited and codified into teachable principles. In its place Schön offered a new epistemology of professional practice which involved ‘knowing-in-action’ (a form of tacit

knowledge), the use of 'repertoires' of solutions to solve problems and, most importantly, reflection. This led to a new approach to professional development, often referred to as the 'reflective practitioner' approach.

Functional Competence Approach

The systems of occupational standards, adopted by the UK, Canada, Australia and others from the late 1980s, adopt a strongly functional approach. They provide detailed descriptions of the tasks that need to be mastered within particular job roles and emphasise the importance of achieving desired outcomes, maintaining that these should be the principal basis for assessing competence.

Personal Competence Approach

Other contemporary competence models adopt a personal competence approach (e.g., Boyatzis, 1982). These focus on the individual, rather than the function, identifying particular attributes, personal characteristics and behaviours which contribute to effective performance.

Need for a New Model of Professional Competence

The literature indicated that each of the above approaches had its own strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, we developed, and empirically tested, what we believe is a more holistic model of professional competence (Cheetham & Chivers, 1996 and 1998). This incorporates functional, personal, cognitive, ethical and meta-competence, and affords a key role to reflection.

Empirical Findings

In addition to offering support for our model of professional competence, our research results support Schön's view of the importance of reflection to professional growth, but challenge some of his other assertions (e.g., the extent to which professionals use tacit knowledge and repertoires of solutions). We found that, in practice, professionals often refer back to the basic theory they have been taught, especially in novel situations, though they also extemporise extensively. These findings have led us to a modified epistemology of practice, which we have named *technically-grounded extemporisation*, along with a new paradigm of professional development. Other findings highlight some of the shortcomings of formal professional development programmes and emphasise the critical role played by a range of informal learning mechanisms. We have organised these mechanisms into a "taxonomy of informal professional learning methods."

References

- Boyatzis, R. E. (1982). *The competent manager: A model for effective performance*. New York: Wiley.
- Cheetham, G., & Chivers, G. (1996). Towards a holistic model of professional competence. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 20 (5), pp. 20-30.
- Cheetham, G., & Chivers, G. (1998). The reflective (and competent) practitioner. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 22 (7), pp. 267-276.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action..* London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd.