Working Towards Professionalism: A Pathway Into The Post-Compulsory Community Of Practice

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Abstract

It is a particularly volatile and unpredictable time in UK Further Education (FE). This article aims to give an insightful and honest account of one pre-service trainee's post-compulsory PGCE (1 year; full-time) experience with close reference to various aspects of professionalism within the FE community of practice, looking at the degree to which the Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) professional standards have been met throughout the year. The paper sheds some light on the positive and negative aspects of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in FE, concluding that professionalism can be defined using both subjective and objective measurements, that individual conceptions of professionalism may or may not overlap with others, and that it is felt some of the LLUK standards have been met more than others in the author's own teaching practice. The training provider was in central London; the teaching placement was in an FE college in south-west London.

Key words
Initial Teacher Education; Standards; Professionalism; Community of Practice.

Introduction
This paper aims to give a personal account of a pre-service post-compulsory PGCE year. In the context of this paper, FE refers to tertiary colleges in the UK that provide a range of academic subjects (for example A-Level and International Baccalaureate qualifications). This was the setting for the teaching placement during the PGCE discussed here.

Professionalism in the FE sector is a topical and contested idea. In an educational context, the word *professional* is usually reserved for school teachers as opposed to those working in FE, and more specifically, in tertiary colleges. In recent years however, there has been a fair amount of activity surrounding the topic (for example, Bathmaker and Avis, 2005; Gleeson et al, 2005; Robson, 2006), which questions just what professionalism is, yet the search for a universally accepted definition yields no positive results. The developments in the sector over the last ten years become strikingly apparent when reading Clow (2001), who states that '*teacher training is not compulsory in FE, in some colleges it is not even a right*' (p. 409) and that '*there is no accepted national or general code of professional conduct*' (p. 410). We know now, in 2012, that both these statements are no longer true.

Some claim that the formation of a professional identity is dependent upon the strength of a '*community of practice*', which is defined as '*a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice*' (Lave and Wenger, 2002: p. 115). The people involved in a community of practice should have a shared knowledge of their aims and objectives. Trainee teachers on the periphery of a community of practice aim to

move towards the centre and full participation, and this is something that Bathmaker and Avis (2005) believe should ideally be explored during teaching placements.

The general concept of professionalism has been defined as '*socially constructed and contested ... meaning different things to different people at various times*' (Robson, 2006: p. 7). This somewhat idiosyncratic view of professionalism is likely to result in some common and diverse views from person to person. Indeed, Lave and Wenger (1991) view professionalism as being constituted by shared meaning and values in practice, claiming that professional identity is a product of lived experience within specific communities of practice.

One major reason for asking whether FE teachers are professionals is because they are sometimes seen as subject specialists as opposed to teachers. Considering that it was only in September 2001 that it became compulsory for all new teachers wanting to work in FE to obtain a teaching qualification, perhaps this is no surprise. Lucas (2004) makes the clear distinction between those working in the sector as either subject / vocational specialists or professional FE teachers, which implies that the two are often not inter-related.

Robson (2006: p. 14) suggests that '*teachers in post-compulsory education are faced with first acquiring specialist knowledge that is directly related to their field of practice and then the knowledge of how to teach it*'. This is in stark contrast to, for example, primary school teachers who are undoubtedly thought of as 'teachers' rather than 'subject specialists'. This is definitely something I can relate to; I completed undergraduate and graduate degrees in Linguistics before embarking upon a post-compulsory PGCE. Thus, I have always felt confident in my own subject knowledge, but not always with my own teaching knowledge.

With these points in mind, this paper sets out to explore my own ideas of professionalism – what it meant to me at the completion of a post-compulsory PGCE and moving into a FE community of practice. The PGCE course undertaken was a generic, full-time programme.

Teaching Placement
My teaching placement was at a large FE college in south-west London, which is one of the largest educational providers in London. Over the year, I taught a wide range of classes which amounted to around nine hours of teaching a week. Four days a week were spent on placement; one day a week was spent at the university provider of the PGCE course. The majority of the lessons I delivered were to whole group A-Level English Language classes, although I also undertook some one-to-one teaching, team teaching and a tutor group. I was given a wide range of responsibilities, teaching a variety of different modules within English Language to a variety of different abilities. I was assigned a mentor at my placement college who advised me on a wide range of issues, as well as providing feedback on my teaching practice and discussing issues such as the ones raised in this paper.

Aspects Of Professionalism Within FE
At the end of a PGCE year, my view of professionalism in the FE sector entails:

1. Adhering to a set of standards defined by a sector skills council

2. Maintaining and widening one's own subject specialism
3. Acting in accordance with one's workplace's policies and ethos

Throughout my PGCE year, the standards I worked towards were those set out by LLUK and Standards Verification UK (SVUK), though these organisations both ceased to exist on 31 March 2011. Their responsibilities were assumed by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and the Institute for Learning (IfL) respectively. At the time of writing, we find ourselves in a transition period where responsibilities are being transferred.

The current LLUK standards (LLUK, 2007) are still valid, and are '*not to be reviewed and will continue to underpin updated qualifications*' (LLUK, 2010: p. 5). Thus, these were the standards I was following during the PGCE year and at my teaching placement. In summary, the overarching standards for teachers in the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) are split into six domains, namely:

- Domain A: Professional Values And Practice
- Domain B: Learning And Teaching
- Domain C: Specialist Learning And Teaching
- Domain D: Planning For Learning
- Domain E: Assessment For Learning
- Domain F: Access And Progression

The details of these six domains are complex and rather lengthy. Each domain is further broken down into three subsets, which are:

- Professional values
- Professional knowledge and understanding
- Professional practice

Within these subsets lies a list of numerous values, each one falling under 'scope', 'knowledge' or 'practice'. On first reading, the standards can seem rather bewildering and unreadable. In the initial weeks of starting my PGCE I tried to interpret and translate the values to make for a more digestible reading, which I could then refer back to over the year. Although this was a self-initiated activity, the interpretations were discussed and refined with my mentor at the teaching placement. This produced the following results:

Table 1: My own interpretation of the LLUK overarching professional standards.

LLUK Domain (A – F)	Interpretation
Professional Values And Practice	This domain provides a general overview of the main values. Teachers should value and respect the importance of learning and their individual learners and should critically reflect on their own practice and collaborate with colleagues.
Learning And Teaching	Teachers should value their learners, taking their individual needs into account. Disruptive behaviour should be managed appropriately and a motivational classroom atmosphere should be built. Teaching and assessment methods should be varied and encourage learner independence.

Specialist Learning And Teaching	Teachers should have good, up-to-date specialist subject knowledge and be enthusiastic about conveying this to their learners. The minimum core (language, literacy, numeracy and ICT) should be considered in all lesson planning.
Planning For Learning	Teachers should deliver lessons that ensure learner inclusion, participation and responsibility. Lessons should be varied and flexible, as well as efficient.
Assessment For Learning	Assessment should be used to aid learner progression, giving learners feedback on their work. Checking learning should be at the forefront of teaching, and a range of assessment methods should be used to do this, including peer- and self-assessment. Differentiation strategies should be used to ensure every learner is included and their individual needs are being met. Records of marks should be kept by the teacher.
Access And Progression	Teachers should encourage learners to use resources within the educational establishment to enhance their learning. Teachers are aware of the boundaries of their role.

The LLUK standards (and my own interpretations) were of great use throughout my PGCE year, supporting the sense that I was acting as a professional and underpinning the development of a professional identity. The standards cover the required aspects of teaching and learning, and are clearly designed specially with the FE sector in mind. Trying to adhere to the standards however, meant that my own measure of professionalism was rather objective – I found myself trying to 'tick boxes' to meet the requirements of a professional teacher. Other objective measurements of professionalism include things such as Ofsted reports and competency-based approaches, which 'measure' a teacher's ability and standard. Although I see the value of objective measurements, I think that subjective measurements could also be used to build a picture of professionalism. These might include assessments, opinions and recommendations from colleagues, managers and students, as well as self-evaluation.

Embracing reflective practice - particularly through the medium of a reflective log kept throughout the PGCE year - supported my growing self-concept and practice as a teacher. I was also observed a number of times (by my tutor at the university provider and my mentor at the teaching placement), and met the criteria that are needed to pass the course. Observations will continue as my career progresses, whether these are from Ofsted or by an FE institution as part of the staff appraisal and development process. However, these observations may not be periodic and the subjective element of maintaining professionalism appears to disappear somewhat. IfL ensures the ongoing Continual Professional Development (CPD) of all new teachers in the FE sector through the 30-hour CPD requirement. This is something the IfL is keen to promote: '*the hallmark of a professional is their commitment to CPD for excellence, from their very first days of practising and at every stage of their career*' (IfL, 2011: p. 7). It must be noted however, that from discussions with colleagues in my placement college, CPD is not considered a particularly important factor to other teachers in this setting.

From further discussions with colleagues in my placement college, it appeared that the objective measurements (the LLUK standards) disappear too. Over the entire year, I did not once hear the standards being talked about or referred to, unless initiated by myself. It is true that I saw my colleagues as professional, but when

asked about the LLUK standards their responses were varied and mostly negative. Some had heard of them but don't know what they are; others had never heard of them and some simply said they sound like some kind of educational quango and there are far more important things to be worrying about. So although these professional standards exist, some of those actually working in the sector do not seem to regard them as particularly important, which therefore makes it difficult to see the existence of a community of practice. These colleagues may still of course, be acting in accordance with the standards, just without knowing it. In addition, it must be noted that many of the colleagues at my placement college would have qualified before 2007, when the LLUK standards came into effect.

At the same time, it could be argued that the very existence of the standards decreases the autonomous nature of teaching, something which a government White Paper (2010) has suggested be increased: '*the best performing education systems in the world…combine high levels of autonomy for teachers and schools…so that professionals both feel highly trusted to do what they believe is right*' (Department for Education, 2010: p. 18). At my placement college, I experienced high levels of autonomy - although the curriculum places parameters around the content of lessons, I have still delivered those lessons according to how I see fit. Robson (2006) also sees autonomy from this viewpoint: '*conventionally, teachers' autonomy still allows them freedom to resolve the uncertainties they are presented with, at least at the level of the classroom, workshop or lecture hall*' (p. 13).

Professionalism also means different things to different people, as there are so many variables that can contribute to its definition. I see it as a concept that is shaped in a multi-dimensional area, in which people occupy slightly different spaces. These spaces may well overlap (when there are shared agreements on what constitutes professionalism), or they might be completely removed from one another. This view concurs with Bathmaker and Avis' (2005) idea of '*forming a personal professional identity*' (p. 48) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) definition of a community of practice, where the assumption is made that '*members have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity, and hold varied viewpoints*' (p. 98). For instance, I consider specialist subject knowledge to be the most important variable contributing to the notion of professionalism in FE; other teachers from my placement college, and other trainee teachers, may take different viewpoints.

My Own Development As A Professional
Through a process that has involved increasing levels of responsibility in a teaching role, the acquisition of teaching skills as well as a lexicon of teaching, a growing understanding of pedagogy and the development of a self-concept as a professional teacher, I believe I forged a pathway into the community of practice that encompasses FE lecturers in the UK.

During the first few months of the PGCE I felt that my subject knowledge was at the required level but my teaching was not - I felt like I was a semi-professional. The idea that teachers can '*never hope to have a full professional status*' was first proposed by Etzioni (1969: p. v), and something that I could associate with at the time. I was meeting the Specialist Learning And Teaching LLUK domain, but not the more general Learning And Teaching domain. As I moved through the PGCE, I felt that my teaching improved significantly and that I was making a journey from the

periphery of my community of practice - a journey from a semi-professional towards a complete professional. I still had my subject knowledge but also had the knowledge of *how* to teach it; and as soon as I started to do this, students demonstrated a deeper level of interest in lessons, and I could plainly see they were actually learning something.

The Planning For Learning and Assessment For Learning domains in the LLUK standards started to make much more sense to me at this point. The whole idea of checking learning suddenly became easier and more natural as soon as I shifted my focus from subject knowledge to teaching knowledge. A major reason for this was when I started to incorporate Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) into my teaching practice. Checking learning had felt like an elusive aspiration at one point, but in using the taxonomy with surface and deep-level learning questions it suddenly became attainable. Using the taxonomy and a variety of questions for checking learning also helped to incorporate differentiation into my lessons, which is another requirement of the Assessment For Learning standard. At this point I felt I was moving from the periphery to the centre of a community of practice, as I acquired the 'tools' and lexicon of teaching, which is what other teachers around me were using. This relates to the idea that belonging to a community of practice involves having knowledge of specific tools and language: '*learning to become a legitimate participant in a community involves learning how to talk in the manner of full participants*' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: p. 105).

Another aspect of teaching that I found difficult was the idea of reflecting in action as well as on action – a concept first proposed by Schön (1983) and another teaching tool which colleagues in the FE community of practice use. When classes were not going so well, when I could see that my students' motivation was dropping and their attention was dwindling I would not know what to do to change the situation. I wanted to be able to implement a change within a lesson rather than having to go away and think about what went wrong. Reflective practice is an important aspect of teaching, and is part of the LLUK Domain A standards Professional Values And Practice, and knowing that I was failing to do this made me think of myself as unprofessional. As I came to the end of the PGCE however, I felt my ability to reflect in action had significantly improved, which presumably was down to the fact that I simply have more teaching experience and was better prepared to deal with a wider variety of classroom situations.

Other instances when my sense of professionalism was threatened occurred when trying to manage disruptive behaviour, which I found a challenge throughout the entire PGCE. Dealing with disruptive behaviour was without a doubt the most daunting and distressing aspect of the PGCE experience. Prior to starting the PGCE I was unaware of the potential for problematic classroom management issues, and one of the reasons I wanted to work in the post-compulsory sector, as opposed to secondary was that I did not think behaviour, with this constituency, would be an issue at all. In hindsight this was rather naïve, and it turned out that I *did* have to deal with it, and often on a day-to-day basis. My ability to manage disruptive behaviour improved as the year continued, though I did still not feel completely confident about dealing with it at the end of the course. In turn, this meant I was not fully meeting the LLUK Domain B standard of Learning And Teaching. Classroom management

strategies are at the heart of the FE community of practice, and acquiring tools such as those is part of my journey into that community.

Within my placement college, I believe I acted professionally. I strived to become part of the community of practice by attending staff meetings, building up a good relationship with my colleagues, and having regular informal discussions with all the teachers in the department about various teaching and learning methods. With reference to the LLUK standards, my relationship with other teachers at my placement met the Collaborate With Colleagues requirement of Domain A. I felt that the whole experience of my placement prepared me well for a career as a teacher and helped me to form my own professional identity.

I felt involved in my college and adopted behaviours that allowed me entry to the community of practice. My placement college welcomed and encouraged me into this community of practice, by giving me responsibility and autonomy. Although my mentor was on hand to help when I needed them, I did not feel as if they were constantly monitoring me - I was given time and space to proceed with my work. I had full access to the office resources, a desk space, e-mail, computer and pigeonhole, all of which contributed to a feeling of legitimate peripheral participation.

The Future Of Professionalism In The Post-Compulsory Sector
From my own perspective, little has changed since Lucas' (2004) conclusion that '*the practices of FE teachers are best understood by appreciating their vocational roots, the historical neglect of the sector by successive governments, and the diversity of teaching and learning found in the sector*' (p. 168). Although I have only spent one academic year working in FE, I can see the reasoning behind Lucas' summary.

I came out of the PGCE feeling well-prepared for life as a teacher, but unsure about the future state of the sector I wish to work in. I felt a strongly developing self-concept as a teacher and as a member of the FE community of practice; however the feelings in my placement college towards the end of the PGCE year are that the community of practice is unstable, partly due to uncertainties about funding. Teachers in the sector are often despondent about the future; concerns are often financially motivated - the removal of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) coupled with the increase in university fees could potentially have devastating effects on FE. The LLUK standards continue to be in operation, but with the disbanding of LLUK as an organisation it is uncertain if this will be the case for much longer.

Summary And Conclusion
This paper has set out my own impressions of forming a professional identity within the post-compulsory community of practice at the end my ITE. All conclusions are therefore purely speculative and further quantitative research would be required to validate these thoughts.

I argued that professionalism can be measured using both objective and subjective measurements, and that because the concept can be so difficult to define, it can be measured in a multi-dimensional space. Thus, one person's interpretation of professionalism may or may not overlap with someone else's. At this moment in time, my own view of professionalism in the FE sector means:

1. Adhering to a set of standards defined by a sector skills council
2. Maintaining and widening subject specialist knowledge
3. Acting in accordance with your workplace's policies and ethos

At the end of the PGCE, I felt I met some of the LLUK standards more than others. The ones that I felt the most connection with were: A (Professional Values And Practice), B (Learning And Teaching), C (Specialist Learning And Teaching) and E (Assessment For Learning). Perhaps more importantly, I undoubtedly felt I was meeting them much more than when I first started teaching, and could undeniably relate to them all, seeing why they are important to teaching and learning. I often use an analogy of juggling when describing what teaching is like to someone else, and this is a view I still hold true to. It is difficult to meet all the standards all of the time, and my feeling is that some are more important than others. One criticism I have of the standards is that they are overly complicated and long-winded. This is the reason I created my own interpretations of them, for my own quick-access benefit throughout the PGCE year.

I believe that all teachers should regard professionalism as hugely important. If we know we are acting professionally and regard ourselves as professionals, then surely that will make us value ourselves and our careers to a high degree, giving us a stronger sense of working within a community of practice.

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