Teachers’ Perceptions of Autonomy and Its Relation to Higher Education

Shi-Yu WANG¹,a,*; Dong-Xue QIAO¹,b

¹Chengdu University of Information Technology, Chengdu, Sichuan, China
aroma3wysy@126.com, b775083548@qq.com
*Corresponding author

Keywords: Teachers Autonomy, Teaching Professionalism, College Education.

Abstract. It is found that the college teachers’ autonomy could be better understood through the process of reflection since “teaching is always contextually situated” (Barfield et al, 2001). In this paper the relationship among college curriculum development, college teachers’ academic enhancement and teacher autonomy will be discussed. On one hand, teachers should reflect on the process of teaching and learning environment, and should be inclined to engage in lifelong learning. On the other hand, teachers should have commitment to promote the needs of the students; they should independently exercise autonomy and equip them with the awareness of common factors which affect teaching methodology and acquisition of knowledge by the students.

Introduction

In a presentation conference of European Network for Teacher Education Policies, Snoek (2009) states that there are many concerns about the quality of teachers available in the profession. It has led to stricter and explicit definitions of the minimum standard that teachers should meet in the course of his teaching. The definition also emphasizes on knowledge base that a teacher is required to possess and use in the classroom. Likewise, teachers have to live up to the high expectations of society with respect to their professionalism. However, Evetts (2006) & Freidson (2001) argues that professionals need to control their own work given the ideal-typical character of the knowledge and skills they use and their right of discretion in conducting themselves in the classrooms. These are some key aspects of defining a professional in education. College teaching requires professional judgment and the use of professional intuition (Atkinson and Claxton 2000), which cannot be standardized under any rules. This raises the question whether the curricula of college teachers’ training in higher education can prepare teachers for meeting with those wider expectations. ‘The available evidence suggests that the main driver of the variation in student learning in the universities is the quality of the teachers’ (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Based on a large scale survey on factors influencing learning outcomes of pupils, Liu (2015) suggests that the quality of teachers has a larger impact on the learning of pupils than the quality of the curriculum, the teaching methods, the college building or the role of parents. Liu (2015) has explained how visible teaching involves teachers deliberately, intervening to ensure changes in their students' thinking. This requires teachers to be clear about the learning intentions, know when each of their students is successful in attaining those learning goals, have knowledge of the students’ understanding, and provide a progressive development of challenging designs and opportunities for students to develop learning strategies based on surface and deep levels of learning.

There is agreement that one of the most important factors of college learners’ attainment is the quality of teaching and it is the teacher who makes the difference. However, not every researcher agrees on one model of teachers’ professionalism or how to improve the quality of teaching. As a result, the way to approach the latter statement is dependent on the kind of model of teaching professionalism implemented. It also depends on autonomy given to the teachers in the learning environment.

This paper insists that college teachers’ professional development is the basis of every successful university or higher education system."Professional learning requires the capacity to learn and draw lessons from experience and balances complementary dimensions of action and reflection along with autonomy and networking” (Altrichter & Krainer 1996). For Stenhouse, it is to be achieved.
through the “continuous extension of competencies through systematic self-study” (Stenhouse 1975) and especially their adaptation to constant change.

‘Professionality’ is a term introduced by Hoyle (1975), who uses it to identify two distinct aspects of teachers’ professional lives: professionalism and professionality. Hoyle (1975) differentiates between status-related elements of teachers’ work, the called professionalism, and those elements of the job that constitute the knowledge, skills and procedures that teachers use in their work, namely, professionality.

It is likely that two models of professionality exist: restricted and extended (Hoyle, 1975). The characteristics used to illustrate these two hypothetical models created what may effectively be seen as a continuum with, at one end, a model of the ‘restricted’ professional, who is essentially reliant upon experience and intuition and is guided by a narrow, classroom-based perspective which values that is related to the day-to-day practicalities of teaching. But at the other end of the continuum, they reflect a much wider vision of what higher education involves, valuing of the theory underpinning pedagogy, and the adoption of a generally intellectual and rationally-based approach to the job (Evans, 2007).

It is observed that the policy makers have integrated every day college practice with the broader contours of the education policy in framing different aspects of professional development. The policy makers visualizes a broader continuum role for the teacher which makes them members of modern professional organizations performing teaching role in the field of higher education. Therefore, concepts such as the “reflective practitioner” or the “college as a learning organization” are frequently mentioned and the teachers’ roles in standard processes are emphasized. This additional emphasis on secondary roles is also promoted as part of the modernization of the teaching profession. They include teachers as researchers, as receivers of feedback from colleagues, as innovators, as active colleagues, as collaborators of principals, and as manifesting what is sometimes called “teacher leadership” (European Commission 2010: 191).

Professionalism as described by Snoek (2009) asks for a close interconnection and link between professional autonomy, competence and trust. He adds that the role of professionals in their service to clients (like the service of teachers towards parents and pupils/students) asks for professional autonomy, which needs to be compensated by public trust based on the rigorous use of an ethical code and not the height of their incomes makes the work of teachers worthwhile, but the quality of the learning of their students (ibid.).

Consequently, if policy makers for example, just find some proper methods to train teachers and provide them with teaching materials without allowing them to exercise any kind of independent thinking, they will not be competent. Therefore, teachers need autonomy, which means that society has to trust teachers otherwise the situation of mistrust prevails in the system.

Are Teachers Professionals?

If teachers have limited autonomy, one cannot determine if teachers are professionals or not. Even though that everyone in teaching thinks that teaching should be a profession and all teachers wanted to be considered as professionals, yet not everybody in teaching recognizes the importance of autonomy in securing professional status, as they do not necessarily exercise autonomy or even do not have any autonomy.

One way of looking at the professionalism of teachers is by comparing them to classical professions like those of doctors or lawyers and to identify similarities and differences (Snoek, 2009). Used these classical professions as ideal examples, typical characteristics are derived which could be used to separate between professions and non-professions and to identify similarities or differences with other occupations. In this approach, the focus is on identifying categories for occupational classification (Gewirtz et al. 2009), where the classical professions are considered as archetypes of ‘true professions’.

Typical attributes are (Snoek, Swennen and Van der Klink 2009):

i. Professional autonomy, through professional monopoly of the members of the profession who have control over their own work.
ii. Control over entry requirements to the profession and the further professional development of the individual members.

iii. Professions also have the power to judge, and subsequently even to exclude, members who do not keep to the professional standards and ethical code of that profession.

Snoek (2009) claims that when the teaching profession is held against the framework of characteristics of the classical professions, the conclusion can be safely drawn: teaching cannot be regarded as a true profession. Teachers do not control the entrance to their occupation; they have no freedom of establishment, but are employed by colleges.

Over the last decades the term ‘new professionalism’ has been broadly used to refer to the work of members of various occupations that cannot be regarded as classical professions, such as teachers, social workers and civil servants (Eraut 1994; Evans 2007; Goodson and Hargreaves 1996). Although the meaning of the concept ‘new professionalism’ is somewhat blurred and varies from author to author and context-to-context, there are some general characteristics.

Several researchers (ibid.) mention the strong emphasis on output requirements initiated by the government and not by the professionals themselves. There certainly is the case for improving quality of teaching and teacher training in higher education in which national governments enforce change and innovations by laws and accreditation procedures of colleges and higher education institutions (Eraut 1994; Evans 2007). In connection to the notion of accountability, assessments of professional performance have entered many occupations to gain detailed insights into the contribution of professional activities to achieve the intended outcomes. There is now more pressures on teachers to focus on established goals and aims, test children and monitor learning more closely (Hattie 2009).

The concept of professionalism does also emphasize the improvement and innovation of work and the continuous renewal of concepts, methods and tools (Evans, 2007). Professionalism gives way to new forms of relationships and collaboration with colleagues and stakeholders moving away from the traditional professional authority and autonomy (Hargreaves 1994; Whitty 2008) . There has been an increased attention (and resources) to professional development and lifelong learning of professionals throughout their careers.

As a result, college teachers have only limited autonomy over their work. In many countries there exists no ethical code for teachers, and the academic level of the teaching professionals remain poor (Verbiest 2007). Most of these standards have been improved by national governments, similar to the Saudi context, with limited or no involvement of teachers (Snoek et al 2009).

The recognition of greater powers for teachers is essential to ensure that they (college teachers) properly carry out their duties and do their assignments. The low degree of power and autonomy assigned to the teachers in the drafting and planning of the teaching methods and contents lie in conflict with the larger sphere of their responsibilities to become more aware of the aim pursued by teaching beyond their own knowledge area. The teachers understand their role as individuals in the system rather than as components involved in a collective mission. As a component, they can better relate their own expectations within the context of students’ learning outcomes (Ingersoll, 2007).

**Teacher Professional Identity & Autonomy**

Recent research into teachers’ careers, thinking and professional practice (Day, Stobart, Sammons, & Kington, 2006) suggests that a resilient professional identity is supported by a degree of autonomy in how teachers practice and the extent to which they are allowed to exercise their professional creativity and develop their craft. The impact of this professional ‘working space’, which is the freedom to research and move from a method to another to seek the adequate teaching elements to their individual learning context, rests upon Stenhouse’s conception. It is about that teachers can serve as active agents, engaged in exploring the ambiguity of teaching, the areas of debate and contention. In contrast to the medical model of research informed practice, the role of the teacher researcher is not to solve problems definitively but to know more about them (Hall, 2009).
Hence, the starting point is not on the self but in the learning environment, since it is there that the teacher can identify the areas of challenge and cognitive dissonance, where things stop working or produce unintended consequences. These problems are the grit in the oyster that motivates teachers to undertake inquiry and the pursuit of greater understanding becomes part of professional practice and identity.

The impact of this professional ‘working space’ appears that it is important both in terms of how effective teachers feel themselves to be and their motivation to remain in the profession. This can be expressed in the observed difference between experienced teachers ‘crystallised’ expertise and expert teachers ‘fluid’ expertise (Berliner, 2001).

Berliner (2001) points out that it is not necessarily the amount of time teachers have spent years on teaching is important, but the extent to which they have developed ‘fluid expertise’ and in order for teachers to be professionals, they need to have fluid expertise because it crucial for their autonomy. As a result, without such expertise they cannot exercise autonomy, as they cannot be trusted. However, for some teachers, years of experience in the classroom make them competent in a limited way, which is ‘crystallized expertise’, who are not able to adapt and change or respond the learners’ needs as quickly as needed and therefore, they are limited in their professionalism to keeping order, discipline, explaining but in fact are not professionals.

References


