
CHAPTER 39

The English Teacher as Professional

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INTRODUCTION

A 'professional' is, broadly speaking, someone whose work involves performing a certain function with some degree of expertise. But a narrower definition limits the term to apply to people such as doctors, teachers and lawyers, whose expertise involves not only skill and knowledge but also the exercise of highly sophisticated judgement, and whose accreditation necessitates extensive study, often university-based, as well as practical experience.

This notion of professionalism can be further clarified by contrasting it with others that it is often set in opposition to: concepts such as lay, amateur, technician, academic. Each contrast offers an understanding from a different perspective.

This article explores these contrasts, and relates them to the work of the English teacher.

PROFESSIONAL VERSUS LAY

A 'lay' population is a population that does not belong to a specified professional group. Members of the professional group possess certain skills, knowledge, and conventions that the lay population do not have. Typically, they communicate between themselves employing vocabulary that is not readily comprehensible to a layperson (in our case, examples would be *cloze*, *L1*, *L2*, *ESP* etc.). These qualifications make them into a 'club' for the initiated to which others do not belong: a professional community.

Like many others, the professional community of English teachers has developed means of consolidating relationships between its members and created opportunities for them to benefit from each other's knowledge. It holds courses and conferences: locally or nationally and, increasingly, internationally (IATEFL, TESOL etc.). And it sets up organs through

which members can exchange ideas and publish innovations (journals, newsletters, Internet sites, etc.).

PROFESSIONAL VERSUS AMATEUR

The distinction between the professional and the amateur is based on consistent differences in performance in the field, involving the quality of preparatory and ongoing learning, standards and commitment. The amateur does things for fun, for the love of it: thus someone who knows English may have a go at teaching it, as an amateur, without any particular training or commitment. He or she may do it well, or badly. But the professional cannot allow himself or herself to 'have a go' at teaching or to do it badly.

Professionalism means preparing oneself to do a competent job through learning. This learning may take the form of preservice or in-service courses, reflection on experience, reading, observation, discussion with colleagues, writing, research – the means are numerous. Such learning continues throughout the professional's working life. Similarly, the professional recognises certain standards: of knowledge (of the subject and of its methodology), of dedication and hard work, of behaviour and of relationships with clients (learners, patients) and other professionals.

Some of these standards are, in many professions, maintained through compulsory examinations and nationally or internationally recognised qualifications – this is increasingly true also of English teaching, though not universally. Finally, there is the aspect of commitment and responsibility. Just as the lawyer is committed to doing the best for the client, so professional teachers are committed to bringing about the best learning they can in their classes.

One implication of this is that we may not play around and experiment with our classes, trying out new 'fads' only because they are fashionable or fun for us: We may only try out new things if we are confident that they will benefit our students' learning; compare the situation of the doctor with new treatments.

The distinction between professional and amateur is one of general principle, and may, in individual cases, be blurred or nonexistent. As in many fields, a gifted amateur may outperform a professional. And the amateur may become a professional, provided he or she adopts the professional approach just described. Many excellent teachers in fact began as amateurs, and developed their professionalism over the course of time.

PROFESSIONAL VERSUS TECHNICIAN

The technician, craftsman, or artisan performs certain acts with skill and becomes more skillful as time goes on, through practice. The professional has not only to acquire certain skills, but also to be able to take courses of action that are based on knowledge and thought, as distinct from automatic routines. Beyond this, he or she has to understand the principles underlying both automatic and consciously designed action, and be able to articulate them, relate them to each other, and innovate.

There are, therefore, many jobs that may be done either 'technically' or 'professionally', depending on the way the worker approaches and performs them: An innovative and thoughtful carpenter may be a professional (Adam Bede, for example, in George Eliot's book of that name); a nurse who performs only routine duties as he or she is told may be more of a technician.

The native English speaker is a technician, in the sense that he or she is skilled in speaking English; the English teacher is in principle a professional: He or she cannot only

speak the language, but can also explain why it works the way it does and what different bits of it mean, and knows how to 'mediate' it to learners in a form that they can grasp and learn (for a more comprehensive discussion of this point, see Shulman, 1986). The teacher also knows how to manage classrooms and relationships: Again, these are not just unthinking skills but thoughtfully evolved and flexible sets of professional behaviours. The combination of these kinds of knowledge enables the experienced teacher to make informed and appropriate real-time decisions when – as often happens – different, equally valid principles appear to conflict in a particular situation.

One important implication of this is the professional autonomy of the teacher. Because the teacher has a deep understanding of the principles of professional action, enabling him or her to innovate and to relate critically to the innovations of others, it follows that he or she may not just carry out instructions or adopt, unthinkingly, the recommendations of 'experts'. We ourselves are the experts. We should certainly listen to other people's ideas, but we should adopt them only in so far as we find them acceptable in terms of our own thinking and experience.

PROFESSIONAL VERSUS ACADEMIC

An academic can be defined as a researcher, lecturer, and writer, usually based in a university. According to the contrasts defined up to now, the academic comes under the category of 'professional', and many academics would so define themselves. But there is an essential difference between the occupation of the doctor, architect, teacher on the one hand, and the research scientist on the other. The professional is, first and foremost, a bringer-about of real-world change: The doctor cures patients, the architect designs buildings, the teacher brings about or catalyses learning. Essentially, the professional prioritises real-time action, whereas the academic prioritises thought – though of course the professional also thinks about his or her actions, and the academic acts in order to develop his or her thinking. The distinction is thus one of emphasis and priorities rather than of substance.

The following list summarises the differences, as well as one important similarity.

The Academic

- is primarily occupied in thinking and researching.
- acts (researches) in order to refine thinking.
- is interested in finding out the truth or more information.
- is not an immediate agent of real-world change.
- is evaluated in the short term by his or her publications.
- is evaluated in the long term by his or her influence on the thought and action of both academics and professionals (and sometimes of the lay public).

The Professional

- is primarily occupied in real-time action.
- thinks in order to improve action.
- is interested in finding out what works.
- is an immediate agent of real-world change.
- is evaluated in the short term by the extent to which he or she brings about valuable change.
- is evaluated in the long term by his or her influence on the thought and action of both academics and professionals (and sometimes of the lay public).

The similarity is in the last item: Whatever they do during their active careers, the work of both will be judged ultimately by how they have contributed to their field in a way that can benefit future generations. Galileo would be an example of the first category, Socrates of the second.

An implication of all this is that research and thinking by the academic may not always apply or be relevant to professional practice, just as 'what works' for us may not be for them a worthwhile or generalisable scientific hypothesis. There is, obviously, much for us to learn from one another, but to impose the priorities of the one on the activity of the other is to dilute or actually mar its quality.

Thus, to claim that academic research should justify itself in terms of its usefulness or applicability to real-world professional practice is to deny academic freedom and the joy of discovery for its own sake. And it is, similarly, wrong to imply that professionals should base their professional action primarily on the results of academic research and theorising.

The English teacher is essentially a professional engaged in bringing about real-world change, who may on occasion undertake academic research. The two endeavours are different, but mutually beneficial and equally to be respected.

WE ENGLISH TEACHERS...

Thus, to say that we English teachers are professionals is to imply that:

- We are a community. We are an identifiable group, whose members are interested in interaction with one another for the sake of learning, and also for the enjoyment of exchanging experiences and ideas with sympathetic colleagues.
- We are committed. We are committed to reaching certain standards of performance, and we are aware of our responsibility toward our learners and their learning.
- We publish. We communicate innovatory ideas, whether theoretical or practical, to one another and to the public at large: through in-house seminars, national or international conferences, journals, or books.
- We learn. We do not just teach: We also learn, continually – about our subject matter, about teaching methods, and about many other things that make us better educated and therefore better educators. We read, we listen, we reflect, we discuss.
- We are autonomous. Nobody else can tell us what to do; we ourselves are responsible for maintaining professional standards. In principle, therefore, a professional body should set the requirements for accreditation at different levels and should act as 'gatekeeper', ensuring that teaching is not performed by ill-qualified amateurs.
- We are responsible for training new teachers. It is the professional teachers who should be organising courses and teaching the next generation of practitioners, whether through school-based, college-based, or university-based courses.

... PROFESSIONALS?

English teaching has not yet reached the level of professionalism, as defined here, that – to me at least – seems desirable. Some of the conditions described have not yet been realised, or not to the level I would like to see. There are still too many amateurs around, who think that it is enough to know English in order to teach it, resulting in lowering of teaching

standards; there are too many academics telling us how to teach, and too many 'technician' teachers. Perhaps also there are too many laypersons in positions of authority, taking or causing ill-informed decisions on the management of the learning of English in schools or on teacher training.

But things are moving. In my own working lifetime, I have seen significant progress toward professionalism. Thriving English teachers' organisations now exist in most countries, as do journals and regular seminars and conferences; professional bodies have set up courses and tests to accredit teachers; increasingly, teachers take pride in their work, invest time and effort in it, lecture and write.

References

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