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From Professional to PhD Student: Challenges of Status Transition

JACQUELINE H WATTS
Faculty of Health and Social Care
The Open University, London, UK

Being a professional stems not only from external regulatory and eligibility guidelines, but also from an individual's willingness to internalise and apply the values and insight gained during their training. Increasingly, professionals are expected to undertake ongoing education and training that is now seen as an integral component of professional practice that can respond effectively to changed requirements in the practice environment. In some arenas the enhancement of professional practice skills and knowledge has become associated with higher level academic study and so in recent years we have seen an increase in the numbers of experienced and highly skilled professionals, already with postgraduate qualifications, return to education to follow doctoral study, in some cases sponsored by their employer. This article debates the challenges for both students and their supervisors presented by the transition in status from highly respected authoritative professional to new, and often uncertain, research student in the world of academia.

Professional identity

Hoyle and John (1995) identify a number of features of professions and these include the possession and use of expert or specialist knowledge, the exercise of autonomous thought and judgement, and responsibility to clients and wider society through a voluntaristic commitment to a set of principles. These features, they argue, characterise all professions and have the advantage of being independent of any particular model of occupational organisation.

Becoming a professional involves the undertaking of professional education and training that are founded on a broad base of learning and culture that serves as a professional apprenticeship. Aspects of professionalism are commonly learnt through a process of role modelling and observing the practice of colleagues that can be understood as a community of practice. The choice made by some highly experienced professionals to undertake doctoral study and become members of a research community, either on a full or part-time basis, has the consequence of requiring them to gradually become full participants within academic culture through acquiring a range of research skills and re-learning 'how to be a student'. This status transition is potentially stressful and challenging because the certainty of one's place in a professional hierarchy has been replaced by the uncertainty often associated with being a novice academic researcher. Despite this, there may be some advantages for research students who bring a range of professional skills to their study.

Professionals in the role of academic researcher

Given that most professions have a minimum level of academic attainment as a significant component of entry criteria, many doctoral students with professional qualifications are likely to bring a number of transferable skills to their study. These include project management skills, good organisational skills and the life skills of balancing competing demands on both personal and professional time. Added to

these, they are likely to be highly motivated to complete their study with, in many cases, the research topic based on an aspect of their professional practice. These skills characterised as attributes of maturity, positively equip students to negotiate the range of complex academic tasks of doctoral study.

For some doctoral students from a professional background, however, the challenges presented by 'becoming a student again' are significant; these should not be underestimated by supervisors, who may be expecting a display of all-round confidence and knowledge from the student that comes with expert professional credentials. The utilisation of existing skills in new ways, for example in relation to high-level academic writing, is challenging. So too can be the requirement to develop enhanced critical thinking skills that question assumptions and established positions. In respect of the former, Caffarella and Barnett (2000) argue that students experience receiving feedback on pieces of writing as stressful, particularly where they perceive that their knowledge of the field is as strong, if not stronger, than that of their supervisors. These authors highlight the importance of personalised face-to-face feedback but recognise that this is often both highly emotional and frustrating for students. Additionally, in their professional role, the student is trained to be a problem-solver but as a PhD student they have to become a problem-seeker. Considerable efforts on the part of supervisors are needed to persuade these experienced students that they do not 'know' all the answers.

Whilst the focus of this discussion is on the traditional research doctorate, it is relevant to note that in recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of 'taught' professional doctorate programmes offered, particularly in the areas of health and education. These programmes that Lester (2004) labels as 'practitioner doctorates' are characterised by a structured and guided programme of learning that culminates in a research project that is supervised in ways similar to those commonly applied to the research doctorate. Wellington and Sikes (2006) identify the opportunity for an in-depth focus on an area of professional practice as a prime motivating factor for students undertaking this type of higher level study and this can also be a motivating influence for those choosing the more usual research doctorate.

Professional practice, theory and the research project

Doctoral students that come from a professional practice background are likely to bring to their study a well-developed outline of their research project that often is connected to a particular area of their practice. Such projects, aimed at developing practice in the professional context, are a form of 'action research' (Wellington and Sikes, 2006) that, in the academic context must conform to high level scholarly work that is ethically, theoretically and methodologically robust. Developing a questioning approach to all aspects of the research project is particularly important for the professional 'doing' research as their prior expectations about the meaning of findings might be difficult to shift, making the doctoral study process one of reinforcement rather than one of critical exploration.

For researchers who are steeped in their own particular area of practice, the requirement to interrogate theory, as a starting point for framing the research topic, may be experienced as challenging and, for some, threatening. In this context there is a propensity for theory to 'feel' threatening because it is produced by others who

claim to be experts at generating valid knowledge that is relevant to practice. Within academia theory is privileged whilst within professional cultures expert competence is a matter of intuitive craft knowledge, tacitly acquired through experience and ongoing training. Phenomenologically speaking, from the perspective of the professional, 'theory' is what outside researchers say about their practice after they have applied their special techniques of information processing. As such, it is often remote from their experience of what occurs in practice. To bow to a 'theory' can be to deny the validity of one's own experience-based professional craft knowledge, contradicting their experience of themselves as a source of expert knowledge. The 'theory construct' thus implies a threat to the student's professional knowledge and status from the academic community, the very community that they are striving to join. The student is thus left in the swampy ground between the comfort of their professional realm and the uncertain territory of academia. With this in mind, the importance of the supervision relationship in ensuring that the student progresses towards their goal cannot be overstated.

The supervision relationship

Lee (2008) offers a conceptual critique of five dimensions of the supervision role identifying functional aspects (project management), enculturation (encouraging the student to become a member of the academic community), critical thinking (encouraging the student to question and analyse their work), emancipation (getting the student to question and develop themselves) and developing a quality relationship whereby the student is inspired, nurtured and cared for. These features are usually enacted within a hierarchical relationship as part of an apprenticeship model with the supervisor taking charge of both the style and pace of the process. When the doctoral candidate is also an expert professional in their field as well as student, the supervision relationship is likely to be more one of peer interaction. This can, however, be problematic when, for example, the supervisor is in the position of having to provide critical feedback on the student's work in their efforts to help the student to positively engage with the process of scholarly writing. Recognition by the supervisor that their critical and functional responsibilities have the potential to 'derail' the relationship is useful because it suggests that a peer approach will always be subject to fluctuating role tensions that are often informed by the stage of the student's candidature.

The issue of pride on the part of the student in this context merits discussion. Whilst the student may be willing to acknowledge the challenges they face in their study, they may not be so readily able to make the psychological transition from expert to novice. For some, this is a matter of pride presenting their supervisors with the challenge of developing an appropriate relationship against a background of different professional tensions. The supervisor is required to gently 'bring down' the student from their professional pedestal, as a process of status 'deconstruction', in order that they can progress as a researcher. For this to be done effectively and sensitively the supervisor must first recognise the student's potential vulnerability in the learning role. There should also be recognition of the possible pressures on the student of being sponsored by their employer. Making progress towards successful completion is another type of accountability for the student, in terms of how they are seen both by their employer and by professional colleagues. The prospect of failure carries implications on a personal and professional level.

Given the potential for difficulties in the supervision relationship arising from a fluctuating hierarchical framework, it is reasonable to echo Deuchar's (2008) reflection on supervision styles. He critiques how the supervisor role as one of facilitator, director or critical friend is shaped by the effect of both contradiction and congruence. This is useful in developing understanding of the ways in which supervising the 'professional' doctoral candidate is a different enterprise from that associated with guiding and supporting other, often younger and less experienced, students. Key to this is recognition on the part of the supervisor that the transaction of 'power' (Cornforth and Claiborne, 2008) within the relationship is a flexible construct subject to the changing dynamics and stages of the candidature. In the early phases, for example, with an exchange of knowledge and ideas, the supervisor role is one of critical friend that functions as part of the mutuality of learning. In the later stages, however, as the candidate moves towards completion, a more directive and hierarchical approach that eclipses the professional authority of the student is more appropriate and, in some circumstances, is essential to enable the student to submit their thesis.

Conclusion

Whilst the literature has debated a range of concerns connected to teaching and learning within postgraduate research education, there has been very little discussion of the particular issues related to supervision of the 'professional'. What emerges from this commentary is that the complex process of doctoral supervision is further complicated by the dimension of a student who is a respected professional and 'star performer' (Sambrook et al, 2008) in their field of practice. The potential for professional skill and knowledge tensions within the supervision relationship have been highlighted suggesting that an underpinning criterion for success is the requirement for supervisors to be sensitive to strategies that can help competent professionals deal with the challenge of role transition. An early recognition of the potential vulnerability of the student will shape sensitive supervision practice that takes account of the student's prior expertise but also of the need for enculturation in confirming the student's new academic researcher status.

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