Commentary

Who Wants to Be a Professional?

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As I write, we are now well into the year 2000. However, for me there is still unfinished business from some of the interesting presentations given at the 1999 MEXTESOL Convention in Mazatlán.

As a group, it seems evident that the dedicated teachers who attend Mextesol are intent on developing their professionalism. Indeed, it seemed to me to be a key issue (again) at last year's meeting. More than one speaker urged us to look outside teaching for models of professionalism, and we have all perhaps become a little desensitised to the constant urging to acquire more, newer and better skills.

Selling Education

Luckily, perhaps, help was at hand. Koen Van Landgehem in his presentation "The Teacher, The Salesman and The Manager" showed us the similarities between marketing and teaching, suggesting that the profession of marketing not only provides a model but also some of the curriculum for the formation of the teaching profession. However, before accepting the kind offer of the salesman's help, it would be wise to look more carefully at the range of possibilities available, and the parts of a salesman's job that sit unhappily with teaching.

The extent to which a salesman feels responsible to his customers is strictly limited by the benefits which would accrue to his company from his attention to the customer. Teachers, on the other hand, do what their employer asks of them but the responsibility they feel is towards their students. After all this is what their institution exists for, so there is no conflict of interest here. So what is the matter with teachers? Why don't they feel like professionals in their own right? Why do they not receive the respect they feel they deserve? Now I must come clean. If you haven't already guessed, my objective here is to peddle my own favourite model of professionalism. But I also want to sound a warning for teachers about the nature of professionalism: it brings disadvantages as well as status.

Teachers are professionals

Let us start by consulting a dictionary. Webster's New World College Dictionary

gives a concise definition of "profession": 'a vocation or occupation requiring advanced education and training, and involving intellectual skills.....' The lexicographer goes on to give a short list of examples, amongst which appears 'teaching'. So there it is. It's official: teachers are professionals. The definition is good but leaves certain important aspects of professionalism implied rather than spelt out. Firstly, I think it's important to the discussion to accept that professional activities have an uncertain outcome. They are not simply the application in practice of certain procedures, but the application of training and intellectual skills, as indicated in our definition. Secondly, in spite of the uncertainty of the outcome, a professional accepts legal responsibility for the results of their actions.

If we accept these conditions of professionalism, as doctors, civil engineers, architects and lawyers do, teaching begins to look less like a profession. These professions have their meetings, and the participants urge ever more professionalism on their beleaguered colleagues, but it has a different ring to it when the result of an error of judgement brings one before a high court judge, with their legendary remoteness from everyday life and even greater remoteness from the unfortunate professional's area of expertise. What is it that a teacher might do, or omit to do, that would bring them to court, resulting in heavy fines and debarment from the profession? The answer is- nothing. Of course, teachers are prosecuted from time to time, but for abuses of power such as awarding grades for monetary or sexual favours, not for the uncertain results of their teaching activities.

The Architects of Learning

If we still wish to be full professionals, allow me to urge on you the model of architecture, especially in the public sector. The activity is typically financed by a non expert administration, and as the body responsible for commissioning buildings and controlling spending the architect owes the administration the legal duty of care. However, the prospective building users are also due a duty of care, and many architects would argue that the administration which finances the activity and pays their wages do so on behalf of the real clients, the building users. Substitute "university/college" for the administration and "students" for building users and we have a reasonably close parallel for teaching.

I graduated in architecture in Britain in 1974. At that time, the social failure of post-war housing policy was becoming apparent, and the architectural profession accepted responsibility. For some years the profession was publicly reviled, not least by the Prince of Wales. Now, architecture and architects are popular again. All kinds of things acquire status by using the "A-word". We talk about the architecture of computer systems, and politicians who achieve a difficult compromise are said to be the architects of the agreement. These ups and downs are more or less what teachers experience and naturally want to influence, but should not be confused with the legal responsibility carried by other professions.

We have looked at some of the similarities between teaching and architecture, and noted that both share a concern for a relatively powerless party who receives the service but does not directly pay for it. So where do the two professions start to diverge? Both architects and teachers feel responsible for their actions, so how much difference does the

shadow of the law really make? A good way to find out would be to look at the magazines each profession uses in their work. I have to hand a rather old copy of Building Design magazine (November 26th 1993) but it hasn't changed much in form or content over the years. On the other side of my word processor is a Forum (vol 34 no. 3-4 July/October 1996) and a Mextesol Journal (vol.21 no.1 Summer 1997). Let's have a look at them.

Who Reads What and Why

Building Design has the format of a newspaper, comes out weekly, and this issue has 56 pages. The front page main headline carries a story about the successful defence by the profession of the traditional five year full time course leading to qualification as an architect in the face of government attempts to cut the length of and funding for architectural training. There are four critical articles on government development policy, a good many illustrated accounts of recent buildings, including conservation projects (rather more than usual I think), a letters page, an editorial, a liberal sprinkling of product advertisements, and a page of job advertisements. The editorial deals with some burning issue of the moment. Not included in this issue, but a frequent occurrence, are reports of legal cases against architects and pullout technical updates on some aspect of building construction. It is used as a technical resource, an indicator of how government and the law are affecting the practice of the profession, as a source of ideas, and as a guide to the availability of products and jobs. It is, above all, practical in tone and content. I don't think a single reference is made to either a research topic or a theoretical issue of any kind.

Turning now to the other side of my desk, I find the Mextesol Journal and Forum. Both come out four times a year. The Mextesol Journal carries five articles and runs to 81 pages, while there are 120 pages and 35 articles in Forum. What they have in common is a format and presentation not unlike other academic journals. Each has an introductory editorial. The articles are presented and referenced as academic papers, although some of the content is indeed practically orientated. Like other academic materials, one of the purposes of these journals is to signal references to other published material and to feed into new articles. The articles also provide a focus for reflection on both theoretical and practical aspects of language teaching.

I think the key difference signalled by this admittedly superficial comparison is in the urgency and use of the information presented. It is true that architecture also has its academic magazines, published monthly or four times a year, but although they may be interesting, they are not needed to do the job. On the other hand, it would be grounds for a claim of professional incompetence to be unaware of changes in legislation, or problems of a technical nature related to materials or construction methods, or new court decisions defining professional liability.

Taking Responsibility

Perhaps more needs to be said about the general climate in which the design of buildings is carried out. Even a small building is very complicated and very expensive, and is created by a team of people who have probably never met, have substantial differ-

ences in their objectives, and have never made anything exactly like it before. The risk element, is fairly high (the "uncertain outcome" that is referred to at the beginning of this paper as a defining characteristic of professionalism). In the British system the architect is the person responsible for managing the risk. This is done firstly by designing, coordinating and specifying all materials, products and processes in considerable detail. Then comes the drawing up of lengthy and binding contracts between the parties, and finally taking out of professional indemnity insurance. Things go wrong in construction not because architects don't take enough care, nor because they are ignorant, but because the risk is always there and with hindsight it will come out that something the architect did or did not do contributed to the failure. When architects read about a new material, product or technique, they do not think " I'd like to use that in my next building". Instead, a cautious process of evaluation starts. What problems did it solve that can't be resolved by tried and tested means? Was the problem really solved? Has it been proved to be solved? If it fails, how will it fail? What will be the consequences? There is no buck-passing. If something goes wrong, the architect made the choice and must carry the can- not the manufacturer, not the builder.

Maybe as teachers this is not the kind of professionalism we have in mind. We might prefer to look towards the caring professions such as nursing, where knowledge, competence and good intentions are required and acknowledged by a grateful public. But then nurses too have very much the same complaints as teachers- low pay and low status. And if the teachers are the nurses of our profession, who are the doctors? Who puts their career on the line in making decisions about our individual educational patients? On the magazine evidence, the other self image embraced by teachers is that of the academic, selflessly pursuing knowledge, while accepting no responsibility for how that knowledge might in real classroom situations help or harm the individual students in our care.

The Future of Teaching

If we are brave enough to peek into a future where the teacher is a respected, properly paid and legally responsible professional, it might turn out to be less frightening than we may have feared. The key issues, such as of contract and insurance cover would be decided by the teaching profession and their representatives in negotiation with government. Key issues may be catering for different learning styles and multiple intelligences through the provision of self access centers, distance programmes and formalising classroom practices. Learners, or school administrators on behalf of learners, would contract with teachers to provide specified services, defining but also limiting their professional responsibility. Students (or their agents) would also contract to do specified work, and college authorities would contract to provide stipulated resources. Any failure to conform to the terms of these contracts would result in the issue of standard letters developed by the profession, and legal remedies sought by the parties as appropriate.

While the success of any teaching /learning situation can never be guaranteed, the contracts, norms and procedures would protect all parties: students, teachers and institutions. Gone would be "libertad de catedra" as a protection for poorly trained and unprofessional teachers. Gone too the apathetic student, the obstructive administrator

and the moribund institution. Instead, not only teachers, but institutions and students would have the real freedom to fulfil legally defined responsibilities.

Obviously, there is plenty of scope for dispute, and the consequent avalanche of paperwork. But, as everyone wants to avoid extra work (after all they have a contract to fulfil), in reality there will be greater respect and consideration between the parties involved. Innovations would be introduced only after thorough examination by all the professionals affected, and with caution, but with the best possible chance of success. Nevertheless, failures will occur and damages must be paid. Professional indemnity insurance goes with the terrain, but should be seen as a necessity underpinning a system designed to promote maximum success.

For those teachers who may feel threatened by a sudden increase in responsibility, let me look at the current situation critically. Firstly, does your institution really provide you with what you need to do your job? What is your job? Who says so? Who helps you to improve the situation?, Secondly, I think you really negotiate an informal contract of teaching and learning with each student, leaving both you and the student vulnerable to misunderstanding and unfair criticisms. The key issue is, which situation leaves you more exposed, more vulnerable and less respected and less supported?

If you believe as I do, that it matters what happens in and beyond the classroom, and that we are responsible (but not solely responsible) for results as well as having knowledge and good intentions, what is there to be afraid of?