

Professional responsibility in higher education: a response from the “swamp”

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Introduction

I am most grateful to this particular community of scholars (Tomas Englund in particular) for inviting me to be discussant; I regard it as an honour. My initial knowledge of higher education, which began more than 30 years ago, was as consumer, as student, rather than provider, and though I was an active citizen, in the sense of being involved in student politics, since then I have served a rather lengthy “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie 1975), completing graduate studies in four different institutions, in three different countries. Subsequently, I have worked in higher education for almost a quarter of a century, thus in many respects I have first-hand experience of the manner in which what the academic community rather grandly terms “social movements” (Castells 2000, 2004) have impacted on higher education institutions, and, of course, on the lives and work of those who inhabit what are frequently labelled pejoratively “Ivory Towers”. However, I hasten to add, I do not regard myself as an *expert* on higher education, since I have not formally studied or written about its cultures, politics and policies, although I have written about aspects of it, particularly regarding reform of initial teacher education (Sugrue 2006). From the point of view of being discussant, therefore, I do not have an Olympian view of the current challenges to the university sector. Rather, I come to the task with an Aristotelian lens – a *phronesis*, a practical wisdom distilled from my ongoing apprenticeship, but I

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regard myself as a lay person among experts. My comments therefore are constructed as citizen of the higher education system. I like to think that my comments therefore will contribute to an opening up of spaces and dialogue – a sort of agora of ideas that may create some ripples in the higher education pool.

Aims of Symposium

It is important to begin from the perspective of what the papers set out to achieve or address. The aims set are: To analyse the role of higher education in fostering civic and professional responsibility, but from perspectives that have as their default position to “serve the public interest by creating an educated citizenry rather than being adaptive to consumers and give priority to entrepreneurship ...”.

This agenda has remarkable resonance with Robert Reich’s recent book, *Supercapitalism: The Battle for Democracy in an Age of Big Business*, where he identifies what he regards as contemporary “truths” that are disturbing for us as citizens. Having made important distinctions between what he terms Democratic Capitalism and Supercapitalism, his general thesis is that as a consequence of this shift where many more citizens have become investors and consumers, we have contributed to a pendulum swing that has “swung too far in the ... direction – toward a society driven mainly by consumers and investors, one in which the idea of the common good has all but disappeared” (2008, p. 126). Consequently, in a general way, he avers: “the choices we make in the market don’t fully reflect our values as citizens” (2008, p. 127). The first point I wish to make therefore is that, while we may rail against this turbo-capitalist climate, it could not take hold as it has done, without the active, silent and passive collusion of individuals as investors and consumers. The conflict therefore between citizen and consumer resides, in the first instance, within each one of us. It is important to acknowledge also that such pressures are evident in the secondary school sector, where, in many instances, a more instrumentalist practice and mindset has taken hold, frequently illustrated with the anecdotal statement: “if it’s not relevant for the examination, then I don’t want to know about it”, as representative of the mindset we have created among learners, and even among those learners who are often regarded as the high achievers, the most successful as measured by examination criteria. Thus, from a programme – curriculum and teaching and learning perspective, significant conditioning of higher education students has occurred before they ever grace the halls of academe. Additionally, mass higher education has increased competition for places in the most sought after

professions, thus among these high performers, a set of expectations has already been created, one of which runs – “I’m a high achiever, therefore the world owes me, I am entitled to a greater share in the spoils”, rather than “I want to make a contribution”. While I have no wish to create an oppositional either/or set of propositions, achieving synergy between competing interests is more challenging depending on the external climate. Consequently, breaking such habits is doubly difficult in a consumerist oriented society where the goal of the enterprise from the consumer’s or student’s perspective, cannot be assumed to be character and good citizenship, rather than the status of a well-paid position with potential for further career advancement.

At a recent conference in Ireland which was opened by Lord Paul Bew, a historian who was a major (behind the scenes) advisor to David Trimble during the protracted negotiations that eventually led to the signing of the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998; his reward, one assumes, has been elevation to the House of Lords, the upper house in more ways than one. On the evening that he opened the conference in Ireland last June, he spoke at some length about the role of higher education, or more accurately, the university, reflecting a protracted debate in which he had participated earlier that same day in London. You could say therefore that having tried out his ideas in the Metropolis, he was now testing them further on the *natives*, or the rustics! His point was this – that traditionally the university had been something of a safe haven for the eccentric among the upper-middle classes, the *mad genius* (the harmlessly insane rather than the criminally insane) for whom the university as a space became a sanctuary where social misfits could hide away from the real world, and yet, according to certain criteria, usually determined by their peers, lead a scholarly but productive life. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that universities were labelled ivory towers, or even elitist. I remain to be convinced that there existed a previous golden age in the life of universities when appropriate attention was paid to one of the key concepts discussed in Tomas Englund’s and Tone Dyrddal Solbrenke’s papers – “social trustee” professionalism. Rather, when universities catered for a small, and by definition therefore, a social elite, privilege concentrated among a minority, and often as self-regulated professions, it is not by accident that George Bernard Shaw declared early in the 20th century: “Professions were/are a conspiracy against the laity”. As the 20th Century progressed, and the rise of the professions, as Donald Schön has amply demonstrated in the early chapters of *The Reflective Practitioner* (1987), the claims of professional knowledge and expertise were found wanting on epistemological grounds, while the opening up of universities to a significantly greater proportion of the population

has changed the dynamic considerably. However, to suggest that there has not been a lost golden age in the life of universities does not in any sense render the key question addressed in these papers any less legitimate or timely. Rather, there is a sense in which each generation has to re-assess this question within the prevailing policy climate.

In this sense, as I read these papers, a number of general features are striking to the outsider that are worth remarking. Two of the papers are Norwegian (Solbrekke and Karseth) while the other two are Swedish (Englund, Ljunggren and Unemar Öst –Örebroean even!). Inevitably, therefore, and particularly among a small group of researchers who have been collaborating for a number of years, there is a taken-for-grantedness that is somewhat troubling. First, there is, not unexpectedly or not surprisingly a Scandinavian almost consensual view about higher education, which on closer scrutiny seems to be more exclusively focused on the university as opposed to the full range of higher education institutions. I would have thought that there is an over-arching responsibility regardless of location within this panoply of provision to educate for a professionally responsible life as citizen that is a responsibility shared by all educational institutions, while of course it is legitimate to confine the conversation to particular sectors of higher education. However, in doing so, without adequate recognition that such confined discussion is sectoral and partial, the old charge of elitism may be levelled at such discussions. At a time when it is generally thought that mass higher education is a reality, and in a climate where policy rhetorics espouse lifelong learning, a more broadly based discussion would reasonably be expected to seek continuity with the period of compulsory schooling, its general aims and processes regarding that much used term – *Bildung* – even if in higher education it takes on more specific dimensions that arise from more particular focus on professional responsibility. Has there not been a kind of assumption that general education (frequently understood as coterminous with compulsory schooling) focuses more on education for citizenship, but that beyond this the focus shifts to professional education that traditionally has been perceived as having more to do with professionalism rather than citizenship? Even if this has been assumed or taken-for-granted, it is entirely appropriate to question the assumption. Of course it is possible to argue with some justification that the two are intimately related, but if in practice priority is accorded to one over the other, then becoming a professional in a sense trumps becoming a citizen; it is assumed that citizen formation in many respects has largely taken place by the end of compulsory schooling. Consequently, this opens up a somewhat different conversation which is – have more traditional forms of university education in its professional schools focused on professional education or preparation at the expense of a more

broadly-based education that hold the interest of a professional group in productive tension with being a good citizen and contributing to the *common good*? Is there an unarticulated assumption in these papers that somehow in the past this was the case? The Tone Dyrdal Solbrekke paper in particular suggests that when asked, students in professional schools have a general empathy towards what one might call this dual mandate, but personnel in professional schools don't necessarily honour this learning readiness or openness. If this is the case, then it may be necessary to look beyond professional schools to interrogate the policy climate in which formal and informal socialisation processes are enacted. It is quite possibly the case also that when societies were more stable and value systems more widely shared, and, as a consequence, socialisation processes more uniform and thus also more taken-for-granted. In social circumstances where this is no longer the case, clearly educating for professional responsibility and productive citizenship need more attention than in the past. Consideration of these matters, give rise to other connected concerns. The first of these is audience.

Audience?

For whom are these papers intended – who are their primary audience? Since they are to be published as a special issue of a Scandinavian journal then that is a clear indication of intent. However, in the global context of competition, sustainability and interdependence, and increasing electronic access, there is a potentially much wider audience than what may be termed the home crowd. Given the substance and quality of the papers, this wider audience is important. Take Berit Karseth's paper for example, one reason it is worthy of attention is because the early part in particular paints a comprehensive picture of the manner in which policy-making at the European level, within the Brussels bureaucracy, is already impacting on national policies. Since Norway is something of a maverick in a European context, sufficiently self-satisfied and financially secure to remain outside a very enlarged EU, yet signed up to the Bologna agreement and an OECD member, it is ideally placed to keep an eye on Brussels so to speak, while it may be simultaneously a good example of the manner in which the hidden pressures or persuaders who lurk in international organisations shape mindsets and national policies. There needs to be much greater awareness within national borders of the extent and manner in which international 'social movements' are increasingly impinging on our lives. For example, Malcolm Skilbeck produced a report for the Higher Education Authority in Ireland in 2001 called: *The*

University Challenged. A Review of International Trends and Issues with Particular Reference to Ireland. However, apart from university Presidents and Bureaucrats, as opposed to academic researchers, to the best of my knowledge, there are no appointments in education schools or faculties in Ireland whose responsibility it is to interrogate higher education as a field of study. Consequently, there is a lacuna in the education field that this group of scholars represented here has considerable potential to provide leadership in; to foster cross-national or international research and critique. Given the often precarious or marginalised space occupied by schools of education or faculties within the university setting – what David Labaree captured in the title of his book of a few years ago – *The Trouble With Ed Schools* (2004) – there is potential for education faculties to provide leadership within institutions that fosters closer relations with other faculty membership with potential to enhance often prejudiced perceptions of contributions to scholarship etc. This conference, and the centre for the study of professions (in Oslo College of Education) are creating the kinds of spaces and opportunities that increasingly are necessary to understand and make sense of the changing world, while creating the conditions also to enable individuals to work collaboratively in the shaping of the future- to become agent, actor and activist rather than consumer of a world created by others. This brings me to another consideration.

Public Intellectual

Edward Said in the Reith Lectures broadcast by the BBC in 1994, spoke eloquently about the role of public intellectual in contemporary society. His provocative considerations pose important challenges to more traditional notions of academic-researcher, what you stand for, and how you represent that in the public domain. He makes an important distinction between professionalism and being an intellectual. Regarding the former he states:

By professionalism I mean thinking of your work as an intellectual as something you do for a living, between the hours of nine and five with one eye on the clock, and another cocked at what is considered to be proper, professional behaviour – not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable, hence uncontroversial and unpolitical and “objective” (Said 1994, p. 74).

If nothing else, such comments draw attention to the contested nature of terms the meaning of which is often taken-for-granted. By contrast with the rather limited manner in which he uses the term professional, he describes the intellectual, not as representing “a statue like icon” but:

... an individual vocation, an energy, a stubborn force engaging as a committed and recognizable voice in language and in society with a whole slew of issues, all of them having to do in the end with a combination of enlightenment and emancipation or freedom (p. 73).

His comments suggest that beyond the relatively tiny group of celebrity academics (you can contribute your own list here!), with the collapse of the public sphere more generally, there is need to find common cause, to connect with others, while advocating the necessity also for individual agency. In the absence of such a collective meeting of minds, it is unlikely that the present trajectory of universities, their leadership, policies and politics will be transformed, or turned away from a more commercial consumerist path. As a first step, however, and as a means of extending the current situation, perhaps extending the conversation to include concern regarding the role of researcher and academic within the university milieu and beyond, may lend some additional traction to this important topic. In this regard, I was struck by the number of papers at the recent European Educational Research Association Conference, hosted in Gothenburg, that focused on the identity formation of lecturers/researchers within higher education in a policy climate where increasing performativity, measured in terms scholarly publications and the consequent set of practices that are created, often to the detriment of the quality of teaching, as status and promotion are increasingly determined by research income earned by successful academics. In such circumstances, being a public intellectual, often dissenting from consensus or disrupting more populist ideas that are part of the *Zeitgeist* of our time, is unlikely to be rewarded. However, it does give rise to broader questions about where responsibilities of a researcher lie, and how academic freedom is exercised within the academy in the first instance, but increasingly also in public spaces as part of an ongoing process of re-creating the public sphere.

I have had the opportunity of both reading this collection of papers and of hearing the authors make oral presentations. In my role as discussant in the past, I have been struck by the difference between the written and the spoken word – I have had the benefit of both. Inevitably, as a consequence, there is an element of improvisation in my comments as I navigate between the written and spoken scripts, with

the additional proviso that I hope too much is not lost in translation as you attune to my Hiberno-English!

General Comments

Two issues strike the reader pretty immediately. One of these I have briefly mentioned in passing above – namely a taken-for-grantedness. What are the cultural assumptions that underpin these papers regarding the role of higher education in Norwegian and Swedish society in the first decade of the 21st century? As part of this taken-for-grantedness, there is the subject positioning/career trajectories of the authors. In a project that is ongoing at the University of Barcelona where a life history approach is being used to document the identities and the ongoing (re-)formation of scholars – researchers, the nature of teaching and learning in higher education is also being investigated by others. Arguably, therefore, putting the dynamics of higher education under the microscope is an idea whose time has come, and the authors of these papers are, in many respects, pioneers, at the vanguard of this new and emerging research initiative. Of course, such a pivotal position also imposes some professional responsibilities – that in many respects are a mirror image of the question at the heart of the papers – in what ways is it possible to further the field of research and knowledge generation in higher education, while simultaneously contributing to and shaping in Platonic terms – *the good life* – making the world a better place for all. In many respects the Carsten Ljunggren and Ingrid Unemar Öst paper suggests that current practice can be radicalised or transformed by individual choice making. However, my sense is that while it is important to assert the agency of actors, such agency is limited, paralysed even by asymmetrical power relations.

A note on terms

Another observation that strikes the reader is the plethora of terminology, with expected commonalities and differences. In this regard, probably democracy, citizenship, the common good and professional responsibility are the most commonly shared, but it largely remains hidden as to how the individual authors are working with these terms. In some instances of course, this is legitimate, since what fits inside these conceptual place holders is being actively discussed, but on other occasions my impression is that there are consensualist assumptions at work that need to be more self-reflexively scrutinised.

Seeking new directions?

As a set of papers, all four are worthy of close reading and contribute in various ways to contemporary debates, and have their own integrity. They deserve and reward close reading. Rather than comment on minutiae, what I attempt to do as an alternative is to pose a number of questions that occur to me as I read and listened to the presentations. My challenge is how can the authors address these questions from within the perspectives they espouse, or perhaps in taking up these concerns re-configure their perspectives.

Mass higher education

This is a new or relatively recent phenomenon. Increasing access poses challenges to traditional programmes, and the assumptions that underlie them regarding teaching, learning, assessment and standards. Perhaps political correctness silences issues about dumbing down on the one hand, and grade inflation on the other. The papers are silent on these related matters. Is this because they are not relevant to the context or are a silenced or marginalised aspect of the discourse, one that remains unspoken in this “therapy culture” (Furedi 2004).

Policy making – its intended and unintended consequences

Berit Karseth’s paper quite rightly focuses attention on the Bologna and EU documentation as recommended practices. While the rhetoric is clearly about increasing mobility, common recognition of qualifications etc., the net effect may well be to create a new social elite, that may be good for economic development but have negative consequences for society. Richard Florida has already written about this phenomenon in *The Flight of the Creative Class* – highly educated, mobile workers in the knowledge economy who are “tourists at home” rather than citizens and participants. Consequently, he suggests, we need to “begin to think of creativity as a common good, like liberty or security. It’s something essential that belongs to all of us, and that must always be nourished, renewed and maintained” (2005, p. 269). I am in agreement with him when he states that “universities are the intellectual hub of the creative economy” (2005, p. 251), but will need to work much harder than in the past at opening up creative spaces and possibilities for as many as possible rather than a selected elite. Failure to create a creative leadership focused on social cohesion as well as social mo-

bility will prevent the development of the *hour glass* society, with the attendant inequalities such an image conjures up.

Accountability

There is a sense in which all of the papers to varying degrees, put the responsibility on individual students and academic staff to create a delicate choreography that balances competing interests. However, it is not that easy to separate these legitimate concerns from regimes of accountability within higher education as a means of regulating individuals. In such circumstances, it is legitimate to ask – in what ways may students and academic staff hold others within the system to account, as a means of creating more adequate spaces and opportunities for the more radicalised democratic practices espoused in particular in the Ljunggren and Unemar Öst paper. For example, great store is invested in individual agency, but both from a theoretical and practical perspective, how does power function in the dynamics of these interactions?

Pedagogical practices

Both the Englund and Solbrekke papers raise questions about an appropriate pedagogical repertoire that would be facilitative of the synergies they desire, and seek to promote the legitimate compromises between professional preparation, good citizen and the good society. While deliberative communication clearly has some potential in this regard, is its success or otherwise to be determined arbitrarily or how would we know, recognise or adjudicate on success or failure in this regard, or is it to be constantly open to contestation? Or would the issue be more successfully resolved in a provisional manner by seeking to ensure that dialogue on professional responsibility, broadly conceived, is sufficiently dense and robust – what would the litmus test be? Perhaps there is no end point; rather a necessity for perpetual vigilance.

Responsibility?

Across all of the papers there is a strong emphasis on personal agency, which sometimes eschews the significance of context as a shaping influence. In this regard, and particularly where the radicalised democracy argued for in the Ljunggren and Unemar Öst paper, is it always a matter whereby individuals only are held to account? Put differently, how are

institutions to be held responsible in the creation of working conditions and cultural climates that are facilitative of the kinds of deliberations that are at the heart of what is advocated? If, for example, universities are increasingly encouraged to behave very similarly to private corporations, to secure private funding and to fuel the knowledge economy, and academic staff are judged on their research output, what spaces will be available for dissent, who will create and maintain them, and who will be held accountable for their wellbeing and for upholding traditions of academic freedom? Arguably, a more broadly based notion of *trustee professionalism* would embrace such aspirations, and conceived in this manner, there is potential for collective ownership between students and teachers, while solidarity between both has potential to hold senior bureaucrats to account in this regard also.

The role of the university?

Finally, the core concern – the dual function of citizenship and professional will continue to be a central concern as circumstances alter in a less stable and predictable world. However, in the world of supercapitalism, there is an increasing tendency to commodify knowledge production – and the language used is significant in this regard, with a consequent tendency to characterise students as consumers. At another level therefore, it is significant that increasingly university Presidents for example, and other senior personnel are being recruited by professional consultancy firms that are imbued with private sector norms, with the result that increasingly also universities are being run like private companies, with Presidents operating as CEOs. The external and internal policy environment is being rendered more competitive, and university league tables on a worldwide scale are obvious manifestations of this new environment. Consequently, I suggest to the authors that the future of universities as publicly funded institutions is increasingly being challenged. As mass higher education has become a reality, the private sector is being encouraged to provide it in a more efficient manner in comparison to their public counterparts, thus contributing also to the privatisation of knowledge production and its further commodification. Consequently, while it is clearly important, as the papers demonstrate in a variety of ways, to question and interrogate the integrity of programmes in terms of their aspirations and routine practices, it is the public as taxpayer in the final analysis that will need convincing that higher education in its various manifestations is worth supporting in the long term. Consequently, public perceptions need to be investigated and a public debate fostered and nurtured.

To settle for less, may well contribute further to the erosion of the public sphere, and the common good. Finding common cause with others in this ongoing project of renewal of an inherited tradition is a daunting challenge, but one that requires urgent attention. These papers are an important step in that direction. It is time now to scale up the enterprise, and cultivate the public imagination in this regard. To settle for less is to remain open to the accusation of fiddling while Rome burns!

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