

# Civic and professional responsibility in new landscapes of knowledge

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Both higher education and professional work are currently exposed to extensive change processes. The current trends of globalization, massification and market-orientation produce challenges related to integration and cohesion in academic as well as professional life (Becher & Trowler 2001, Chisholm 2000, Olsen & Maassen 2007, Jensen & Lahn 2005, Sullivan 2005). Moreover these arenas are increasingly contested sites, positioned in a tension between multiple and often contradictory demands. As the papers in this issue point out, one effect of the current trends is that a monetary logic of effective production and delivery of pre-defined goods is spreading, with the possible consequence that the democratic and moral dimensions of higher education are undermined. A related effect is that the emphasis given to accountability and to customer-orientation is in danger of shrinking the space for critical engagement and professional discretion. Together with the emergence of a more fragmented and culturally diverse world, these trends make the normative foundation of higher and professional education less obvious than in previous times. Knowledge is questioned, norms and values are becoming more blurred and conventional distinctions between for example the ethical and the technical are increasingly difficult to hold apart. This calls for reflexivity among stakeholders and participants at different arenas and organizational levels.

The papers included in this issue are welcomed contributions to this discussion. I read them to share a concern for how we can enhance the power to shape society from “below” and “within” through people’s actions, thoughts, values and critical citizenship – as a counterforce to external forces driven by an incessant search for economic growth and competitive advantages. Berit Karseth addresses the theme by

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discussing how economic forces manifest themselves in the European qualification framework. Tomas Englund and Tone Dyrdal Solbrekke are both discussing and providing suggestions for how higher and professional education can play a role in revitalizing citizenship and professional responsibility. This is continued in a discussion of how such responsibility can develop in terms of self-reflexivity in the paper by Carsten Ljunggren and Ingrid Unemar Öst. Whilst sharing an interest for powerful discourses that constitute higher education in today's society, the papers also complement each other in an interesting way. Karseth and Ljunggren/Unemar Öst are primarily concerned with an analytical interest in revealing dominant discourses at play and their consequences, while Englund and Dyrdal Solbrekke advocate a more normative interest in what values and deliberative capacities should be fostered in higher education and how they may be supported.

The following comments give emphasis to the issue of professional responsibility and the role of professional education in this regard. This is partly due to my own background as researcher in the field of professional learning. In addition however questions of responsibility are at stake in particular ways in this area. Professionals really feel the pulse of contemporary paradoxes, obligated as they are to simultaneously safeguard collective and individual interests and to operate as representatives for a professional community as well as for the client's or customer's needs. Thus, the issue of professional responsibility is apt for illustrating contemporary challenges to critical engagement. A thematic line throughout the comments is related to the knowledge dimension of critical engagement and responsibility – a dimension I feel is left somewhat unresolved in the present papers.

## The relationship of knowledge to civic and professional responsibility

First, knowledge is in different ways constitutive to both civic and professional responsibility. In a wide sense, knowledge operates as a regulative force that produces the system of reason in which deliberative communication may take place. This happens at the level of societal discourses, as discussed by Ljunggren and Unemar Öst in this issue. However, within academic disciplines or expert communities, the logics of knowledge production and its symbolic expression define the more specific rationale for responsibility and critical engagement (Becher & Trowler 2001, Knorr Cetina 1999, Peters & Besley 2006). Thus, in addition to discussing the general conditions for civic and professional responsibility I would call for discipline-specific analyses

that bring the “what”-dimension of responsibility and deliberative communication to the fore in specific knowledge communities.

Second, knowledge is a main resource for deliberative communication. Discussions and critical investigations take form by way of informed judgements and actions. Especially in a society, which “runs on knowledge” and is characterized by a spread of expert systems into areas of everyday life (Giddens 1990, Knorr Cetina 1997, Jensen 2007) one could argue that induction in domains of knowledge is a prerequisite for critical engagement and individual freedom (Tobias 2005). This raises the question of conditions for participation more broadly, and such conditions are subjected to profound changes in the transition towards knowledge societies. Englund (this issue) points to civil rights as one precondition for participation. However, in a society that operates on the principle of direct and unfettered access to knowledge (Chisholm 2000), the question of access is also related to individuals’ abilities to make sense of the resources provided and to utilize these in critical agency. Participation is increasingly knowledge-demanding. Further, as the general significance of science-generated knowledge is increasing and permeate into other arenas of social life, the capacity to critically approach such knowledge form opportunities for democratic engagement (Jensen 2007). Nurses will need to engage with science-generated knowledge if they are to contest procedures related to evidence-based practice. And the public debate related to climate changes or to immigration will often require informed participants. Higher and professional education is a crucial arena for enhancing these capacities. To provide students with a powerful apparatus for participation however, we probably need to incorporate the general principles for deliberative communication in discipline- or subject-specific enquiries, and vice versa. This calls for the provision of mediating structures of participation between overarching values and concrete problem-solving activities.

This leads to another issue, namely the concern expressed in some of the papers that technical rationality undermines critical engagement and reflexivity. This dichotomy is often brought forward and generally acknowledged in the literature on professional practice. However one might question how valid this distinction is today. The papers in this issue address two versions of instrumentalism that we might benefit from holding apart. The first one is related to ways of governing from “above”, in terms of accountability, standards, pre-defined qualifications, or detailed procedures for practice – for instance as described in Karseth’s paper. This instrumentalism may threaten reflexivity and professional responsibility by ruling out the value of other practice forms and by eroding the time and space available for

critical engagement. The other form is more generated from “within” the practices of professional education and work, for instance related to solving problems or using tools that are ready at hand. This is not necessarily obstructive to critical engagement. In fact it may be seen as a stepping stone for such modes of inquiry. In today’s society, knowledge represented in tools or objects increasingly take the dual form of being ready-to-be-used and in-a-process-of-transformation (Knorr Cetina 2006). For instance, professional standards, communication technologies, and technical devices may take a question-generating character when utilized in professional practice. This duality allows practitioners to move between experimental and confirming modes of practice. As noted by Reijo Miettinen and Jaakko Virkunnen (2005) the well-defined and established interpretations shape the realm of possible and not yet realized representations, thus enhancing further inquiries. Hence, instead of undermining deliberative practice, the technical may inspire and spur critical engagement in ways that may be under-emphasised in professional education. A prerequisite for productive dynamics however is that the interplay between the critical and the confirmative is secured, and that sufficient space for both dimensions is provided.

## Contexts and spaces for critical agency and responsibility

The above described conditions for knowledge-based agency have consequences also when it comes to arenas and spaces for deliberative communication and practice. In conjunction with the emergence of new information and communication technologies, knowledge is increasingly represented in more abstract and symbolic forms. This gives rise to new modes of knowledge distribution that cuts across space and time. Within these network modes of organization it seems crucial to move across institutional levels and boundaries to become a fully recognized participant. Similarly, ideas and values need to enter and to be circulated in extended networks in order to become powerful (Castells 1996). Democratic energy and influence is fuelled not only by the exchange of but also by the mobility of ideas – and this mobility is again a resource for bringing up the different arguments needed to facilitate deliberative communication.

In this perspective the ideas presented by Dyrdal Solbrekke and Englund about the need for creating arenas for deliberative communication in higher/professional education are important. At the same time it seems relevant to question the boundaries of these arenas.

Universities may function as powerful arenas for public debates and critical discussions, and for the fostering of such discussions. But will this be sufficient? If the flow of ideas and arguments is to be secured, one may argue that bringing the public into the universities and to “institutionalize dissensus” is only one part of the story, and that it is equally important to actively introduce the insights produced in educational settings to other networks and arenas. Such arenas may include activities in which different interest groups relevant to the profession meet, as suggested in Dyrdal Solbrekke’s paper. They may however also include more extended networks in which knowledge circulates and are discussed, within and beyond professional boundaries and on national as well as international basis. Thus, in addition to the questions of *how* and *what*, the discussion of responsibility may be supplemented with the question of *where*. Further, as longitudinal studies of practitioners show correspondence between the way students engage with knowledge during education and how they access knowledge in working life (Smeby forthcoming), it seems important to enhance participation in different spaces for communication within the frames of formal education. One aspect of modern professional responsibility is the capacity to link up with other areas and levels of knowledge development while practicing everyday work and the foundation for this agency is laid in the educational programmes.

### What notion of reflexivity is needed?

In different ways all the papers underline the importance of reflexivity for democratic practice and deliberation. This issue is addressed profoundly in the paper by Ljunggren and Unemar Öst, who bring John Dewey’s ideas in dialogue with a discourse-analytical perspective based on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The authors show how self-reflexivity and personal responsibility are constituted in distinct ways relative to dominant discourses of higher education, and how these discourses form a complex web of demands and expectations in which the students are expected to navigate.

Whilst recognizing the need for self-reflexivity in critical citizenship, one may imagine ways of expanding this notion. As practices of higher and professional education to a great extent are related to research and knowledge development, one may ask whether individual practitioners would benefit from engaging in reflexive practices that bear resemblance to the researchers’ efforts. That is, to actively engage themselves in revealing how knowledge, ideas and positions are institutionally and discursively constituted. As discussed by Lynn

Fendler (2003) one risk related to the practice of self-reflexivity is that the enquiries take a self-confirming mode, and serve to justify rather than to contest or elaborate the state of the art. This closure may however be disrupted by extending the focus and object of reflexivity to include institutional arrangements, materiality, networks of relations, and the epistemic origins of the acknowledged ways of thinking and behaving. What are the specific conditions and mechanisms for knowledge production and validation, and how do they create logics of morality? Related claims have been presented by Pierre Bourdieu and Lïc Waquant (1992) in their call for epistemic reflexivity among social scientists. Thus, yet another implication of the “epistemification” of society (Giddens 1990, Knorr Cetina 2006) may be that not only the scientific modes of knowledge production are spreading but also their interrelated forms of reflexivity.

For professional practitioners this brings to the fore a notion of professional responsibility that goes beyond the notion of reflexivity in relation to clients and society. Included are also responsibilities for validating and safeguarding knowledge, for keeping issues open to investigation, and for actively introducing the insecure in the seemingly secure. This may provide the ground for developing a modern form of professionalism which, following sociologist Julia Evetts (2002) is no longer related to full professional autonomy and jurisdiction in a field of expertise but to the possibilities for discretionary decision-making. To be able to cope however practitioners must also learn to care for themselves as learning subjects, by way of developing an active and critical approach to knowledge and by deliberately engaging oneself in a wider space of communicative actions.

The papers presented in this issue give important contributions to this field, as an arena for educational practice as well as for research. By extending the discussions to include the question of how professionals may enact critical agency in complex landscapes of knowledge and an increasingly science-informed world, they will also lay an important ground for further research.

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