

Educating towards civic and professional responsibility

Comments on the future of higher education

Per Gerrevall

Introduction

Four articles are presented, all dealing with the role of higher education for civic and professional responsibility – each with a specific focus, but all based on similar theoretical foundations. First the articles will be briefly presented in what I find a logical order, and then I will discuss some aspects concerning professional responsibility and autonomy, which have arisen during my reading of them.

Professional and personal responsibility in higher education – an inquiry from a standpoint of pragmatism and discourse theory by Carsten Ljunggren & Ingrid Unemar Öst presents an analysis of higher education policy in Sweden. Four more or less distinctly separated policy discourses are introduced and with the help of John Dewey's concepts are discussed in terms of their differing consequences for the issues of self-reflexivity and responsibility. The four discourses are the classic academic discourse, the discourse of Bildung, the discourse of democracy, and the discourse of economic globalization. The authors maintain that there is an ongoing struggle between the four discourses, the aim of which is to hegemonize the discursive field and partially fix the meaning of higher education.

Berit Karseth takes another point of departure in her article *Qualifications frameworks for the European higher education area: a new*

instrumentalism or “*much ado about nothing*”?, where she discusses the development of European and national qualifications frameworks in higher education. A major restructuring process is going on within higher education systems, and the author critically discusses its consequences in terms of instrumentalization versus critical schooling and communication.

Tomas Englund’s article *The university as an encounter for deliberative communication – creating cultural citizenship and professional responsibility* is connected to “the discourse of democracy”. Englund presents in an argumentative way the foundations for a deliberative educational conception, where dissensus provides a starting point for education as communication. Such a deliberative conception could be a way for professional education in the development of students’ competence in professional judgement and responsibility.

Tone Dyrdal Solbrekke in her article *Educating for professional responsibility – a normative dimension of higher education* discusses the conditions for developing professional responsibility. She treats the normative dimension of higher education in terms of the development of professional responsibility. Her article reveals experiences from the Norwegian Quality Reform and, among other things, the module system that has developed in its wake and such consequences as fewer possibilities for developing critical awareness. Dyrdal Solbrekke, like Englund, sees the potential of deliberative communication for the development of professional responsibility.

Comments

I have chosen to take the following aspects of the articles as the point of departure for my comments – the order of discourse when policy meets practice, the descriptors in the new *higher education architecture*, and the development of professional responsibility.

Policy, practice, and order of discourse

The impact of steering documents has always been a feature in debates and together with new ways of governing higher education, where frameworks and general descriptors play a significant role, the importance of a critical attitude from those responsible for educational programmes becomes highly important. The contribution made by Ljunggren & Unemar Öst presents an important analysis of the policy conditions educators have to deal with.

The four discourses presented by Ljunggren & Unemar Öst – *The classic academic discourse*, *the discourse of Bildung*, *the discourse of democracy*, and *the discourse of economic globalization* – are more or less distinguishable. They are presented as four parallel discourses, built up by the following qualities: “Nodal point”, “Myth”, “Master signifier”, “Self-reflexivity”, and “Responsibility” – the later seen both from an individual and an institutional perspective.

There is of course a historical line in terms of the underlying policy texts. The *classical academic discourse* is mostly based on texts from the early 1990s, whereas *the discourse of economic globalization* is based on those from recent years, even if there is evidence of it in the texts from the 1990s. However, another way of discussing the relationship between the different discourses is to start with the struggle described, and to discuss the established order of discourse (for example Fairclough 2003). Karseth’s paper illustrates the relationship between *the discourse of economic globalization* on the one hand and *the classical academic discourse* and *the discourse of Bildung* on the other. Policy documents related to the establishment of European and national qualifications frameworks are dominated by *the discourse of economic globalization*, and resistance is based on all the other discourses.

Policy and practice can be seen as integrated concepts in the discourse analysis. When policy is interpreted in the constitution of professional education programmes the order of discourse can be challenged. Deliberative communication can then be seen as a resistant discourse based on democratic and ethical values. In the light of the analysis made by Ljunggren & Unemar Öst, the kind of educational processes in professional education which Englund and Dyrdal Solbrekke advocate seems to be a necessary development if we want to equip professionals with a competence in ethical issues, and not just knowledge about them.

Qualifications, learning outcomes and professional autonomy

In Karseth’s paper the new qualifications frameworks are discussed. The educational sector (as other sectors in the political sphere) has, in the last decades, experienced a shift from government to governance, and education is to a large extent based on highly standardized sets of objectives, called learning outcomes. These objectives – or descriptors – are accompanied by demands for results in terms of productivity as

stated in the government or ministerial documents, and productivity is measured by the throughput rate.

The management of educational programmes has for a long time been dictated by general objectives outlined in our higher education ordinance or similar documents. The new feature is that these national objectives are to be related to European qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes. These generated many critical questions that Karseth raises in her article, where she also presents a most valuable picture of the development of the new higher education system.

When objectives (or descriptors) are being formulated, there is a force field between the extremes of openness on the one hand and precision on the other. The more open the descriptors are, the greater the possibility for them to be interpreted in different ways. More space is thus left for professionals to interpret them in accordance with contextual or cultural conditions. Correspondingly the more precise they are, the less the amount of space that is left for professional interpretation and, as Karseth points out, “if the descriptors become too detailed there will be no room for taking the uniqueness of the different programmes into account”. Another consequence is that precise descriptors increase the risk of disagreement between different cultures (Kämäräinen and others 2002). One purpose with the global frameworks is to enable mobility, which presupposes that descriptors that are used are mutually recognized.

Learning outcomes are divided into knowledge, skills, and competence, and as Karseth states with reference to the University College in Tromsø, it is most problematical when aspects of knowledge are being separated or filed in different categories. In the Swedish higher education ordinance learning outcomes are correspondingly divided into three different areas: “knowledge and understanding”, “skills and abilities”, and “judgement and approach”. This “filing” of descriptors certainly leads us in the opposite direction than the kind of development that is argued for in all articles, where professional responsibility is seen as a quality developed through a process of deliberative communication.

Most of us have experienced Benjamin Bloom’s (1956) and David Krathwol’s (1964) taxonomies of objectives, where knowledge in general is firstly divided into cognitive and affective dimensions, and secondly these can be organized in separate levels. This taxonomical way of dealing with professional knowledge has been criticized, being as professional acting and judgement is a much more complex matter. Furthermore the idea that knowledge is organized in the same way, independently of subject matter or professional domain, has been greatly challenged. The circumstances raised in Karseth’s article

concerning the development of descriptors in Norway thus appear to be most remarkable – “There were no representatives from academics or the institutional level”. Thus the division we experience in the frameworks in a way appears to be understandable, but never the less totally unacceptable.

There is a more sophisticated management process going on at a parallel level, which is labelled “The Tuning Project”. The purpose of this project is to harmonize teaching and assessment practice according to the European learning outcomes. You could say that educational ideology is created, which contributes to the pressure and reduction of professional autonomy in terms of those responsible for different educational programmes. This kind of performative management makes it even more essential that all those involved in education retain a critical awareness.

One important question that can be raised is what the development, as described in the four articles, will imply for professional autonomy. Professionals within universities have always defended their professional autonomy, with an argumentation that is deeply rooted. However I would say that the arguments are more concerned with the conditions for carrying out research than for developing and providing education. Thus professional autonomy weighs surprisingly light in some educational fields, and the absence of a scientific foundation is striking.

One such area is grading and the European ECTS grading scale. The latter, which in fact is an interpretation scheme, consists of seven levels (five pass-levels and two fail-levels) based on a statistical distribution of grades, with other words a norm referenced scale. (There is an alternative scheme consisting of only pass and fail.) In Sweden there is a government decision that grading should be goal-related or criterion-referenced. It is subsequently up to each seat of learning to make their own decisions concerning the number of grades. A number of higher education institutes – among these Stockholm University – have now decided to use the seven-grade scale but in a goal-related way (Gerrevall & Blom 2008).

You could ask yourself on what grounds this decision has been made. The rationale is, of course, based on the *discourse of economic globalization*, and the seven-grade scale becomes a means to strengthen this discourse. What then creates this order of discourse? Where is the scientific rationale that underlines these changes? What makes scholars willing to adapt to these changes so easily? Science is often about rigour and comparisons, but in this case and without any hesitation grades based on a norm-referenced distribution are treated as being similar to goal-related grades under the banner of mobility. (In other Nordic

countries that have adapted a similar seven-grade scale the transition has been from more grades to fewer, while in Sweden there has been a transition from fewer to more grades). This change has been carried out without any empirical foundation. I wonder if a surgeon would change his or her surgical praxis as easily.

The experiences from Norway, where a similar goal-related scale was introduced as a part of the quality reform, show that grades vary between different subjects, programmes, levels, and seats of learning (Førland 2007). You cannot, for example, expect to maintain a normal distribution of grades from first to third cycle due to the selection of students. This makes the foundations of the interpretation scheme, as suggested in the ECTS user's guide, most questionable. Research into grading practices (for example Karran 2005) also shows a profound cultural dependence.

It is also interesting to see how quickly we adapt to the qualifications frameworks, and the objectives stated in our higher education ordinance. Nationally stated learning outcomes divided under the headings of "knowledge and understanding", "skills and abilities", and "judgement and approach", are now smoothly transferred into local study programmes. There seems to be no room for critical reflection, being as there is very limited time for such a process, and every change must be ploughed through our decision-making bodies. We are kept busy!

The development of professional responsibility

Responsibility is an important theme in all four articles. The dynamic and flexible character of responsibility, as Ljunggren & Unemar Öst interpret the concept within the discourse of economic globalization, stands in contrast to a more or less stable and personally rooted critical awareness that characterizes the other three discourses. This critical awareness could, as Dyrdal Solbrekke and Englund state in their articles, be fostered through a professional education, where dissensus forms a starting point, and where the educational process is built on communicative deliberation and critical ethical reflection. Developing professional ethics or a professional responsibility in line with such a critical interpretation is a delicate matter, which Gill Croona has shown in her doctoral thesis (2003).

In both Englund's and Dyrdal Solbrekke's articles the development of professional ethics and professional responsibility is connected to an educational conception based on deliberative communication. The arguments given in the articles are persuasive, and the needs for

strengthening these normative aspects of professional education are obvious. When you, for instance, examine complaints in the Swedish care sector, a majority of them are related to a lack in the quality of human encounters.

I very much sympathize with the thoughts presented in the articles, and the idea of a more communication-based education. Furthermore, with reference to Croona's thesis (2003) I would like to stress the importance of creating significant educational opportunities for students to learn ethics and gain competence in making professional judgements during their professional education.

Acting with professional responsibility presupposes openness in order to perceive different perspectives, and analytical skills in order to understand underlying interests or values, and ethical or moral competence in order to make sound judgements based on professional agreements concerning ethics or values. These types of processes are based on various aspects of knowledge, and should be dealt with from an integrated perspective (Croona, Gerrevall & Linnér 2008).

It is important, as I understand from both Englund and Dyrdal Solbrekke, that these aspects of education are integrated in the curriculum, and not just treated as a separate study module as one of a number of modules. The challenge lies in developing possibilities for students to gain both greater professional knowledge and professional know how and responsibility throughout their professional education. *One* fruitful way in professional education can be found in authentic ethical or value dilemmas as the basis for a thorough deliberation process. There is, however, a real need for research on these matters and if one is able to demonstrate that it is possible to develop both the knowledge needed and the ability to make sound judgments, then there really is hope.

References

- Bloom, Benjamin (1956): *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: the Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook 1, Cognitive Domain*. New York: David McKay.
- Croona, Gill (2003): *Etik och utmaning. Om lärande av bemötande i professionsutbildning*. [Ethics and challenge. Learning and teaching human encounters in professional education]. Växjö: Växjö University Press. Doctoral thesis.
- Croona, Gill; Gerrevall, Per & Linnér, Susanne (2008): *Kommunikativ kompetens i professionsutbildning. En jämförande studie av studerande i lärarutbildning, polisutbildning och socionomutbildning*. [Communicative competence in professional education. A comparative study of students in teacher education, police education and social studies.] Växjö University: Department of Education. [Unpublished manuscript.]
- Fairclough, Norman (2003): *Analysing Discourse. Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge.
- Førland, Tor Egil (2007): *Nytt karaktersystem, gammel karakterkultur: HF's tiltak for å få sensorene til å bruke skalaen riktig*. Universitetet i Oslo: Den humanistiska fakultet. [A new grading system in an old culture of grading] Powerpoint presentation.
- Gerrevall, Per & Blom, Malin (2008): *Betygen inom sydost – en utredning om betygsskalor inom den högre utbildningen*. [The grading system in higher education in the South East of Sweden – a report on grading in Higher Education]. Akademi sydost: Arbetsrapport.
- Karran, Terence (2005): Pan-European Grading Scales: Lessons from National Systems and the ECTS. *Higher Education in Europe* 30(1), 5–22.
- Krathwohl, David; Bloom, Benjamin & Masia, Bertram (1964): *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. The Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook 2, Affective Domain*. New York: David McKay.
- Kämäräinen, Pekka; Attwell, Graham & Brown, Alan (eds) (2002): *Transformation of Learning in Education and Training – Key Qualifications Revisited*. European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, Thessaloniki (Greece): A Cedefop reference series publication.