

# Educating for professional responsibility

A normative dimension of higher education<sup>1</sup>

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This paper has the politically defined mandate of higher education as its starting point to highlight and discuss contemporary challenges in relation to its normative dimension that are illustrated by examples from Norwegian higher education. A central question in the first part of the paper is whether there has been a change in the public understanding of the normative responsibility of higher education. Is there a move towards an understanding of the main responsibility of higher education as that of providing society with technical expertise and professionals who give precedence to financial interests, entrepreneurial and innovative ideas – at the expense of moral and civic values? In the second part of the paper, it is argued that greater awareness of the normative dimension of higher education is called for – here illustrated with the case of educating for professional responsibility. It is suggested that a teaching approach based on the *model* of deliberative communication provides an appropriate means of increasing moral consciousness of professional responsibility. Students may gain greater ability to see and critically examine the moral and societal implications of their future professional responsibility if issues of professional responsibility are linked to the societal frameworks in which professionals are to operate.

Keywords: normative dimension of higher education, professional responsibility, learning through deliberative communication.

On November 11, 2007, the presidency of the University of Oslo raised three key questions in an editorial in *Aftenposten*, the largest daily newspaper in Norway: “What is the role and purpose of universities

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in the society of tomorrow? What are society's essential needs for new research, even though today's society does not express these needs? What kind of 'general bildung' should our study programmes offer and what should we expect of our students?"

Are questions such as these a matter of public concern? In my view, the answer is yes. Questions concerning the fundamental purpose of higher education, the values establishing the direction for everyday practices in mass higher education institutions, are of great importance to most of us in a late modern Western society. In Norway 50–60% of the cohort attends higher education (Brandt; Aamodt; & Støren 2005). Hence the practices of higher education directly influence the identity constructions of most young adults as they journey towards a work career.

Moreover, the normative priorities set by higher education institutions have an indirect effect on the substance and quality of a society and its social structure and welfare system. The manner in which highly educated professionals understand their professional mandate and live out their professional responsibility in practice has an impact on everyone (Scott 2005). Thus, the choices made for and by higher education, and the direction in which these societal institutions move, can hardly be considered inconsequential. The future of higher education is essential, not only to students and academics, but to society at large – particularly at a time when the identity of higher education institutions, as individual entities and as a group, is somewhat "fluid" (Bauman 2000, Sugrue 2008).

Both nationally and internationally, the most visible change in higher education institutions is the shift from an elite to a mass higher education system. There is also a structural and functional *merging* between the foci in graduate programmes in research-oriented universities and the undergraduate programmes at polytechnical colleges/universities (Brint 2002, Karseth 2006, Skodvin & Nerdrum 2000). The universities are more obviously geared towards the needs of professional work and business life, and university colleges are more influenced by academic values and research claims (Terum 2006). Another emerging characteristic in the field of higher education is the need for each institution to appear as *unique* and *attractive* in a highly competitive higher education market. In the same way that individuals in our time are given the *freedom* to construct their own individual learning trajectories, realise themselves and transform themselves into an interesting commodity for the work market, higher education institutions must create interesting profiles in order to attract enough students as well as public and private funding for research (Kumolainen 2006).

These tendencies are relatively new in academia, at least in Norway. Although the Norwegian higher education system (as most academic institutions) has always been presumed to consist of internally competitive institutions – an internal “battlefield” of different interests (Collett 2000) – the field is becoming increasingly and *directly influenced* by external stakeholders, market forces. Recent years have seen increasing involvement from politicians as well as other stakeholders concerning what the purpose and function of higher education in society should be (Michelsen & Aamodt 2007). Universities have been made more and more *accountable* to *quality* systems defined by politicians and administered by bureaucrats.<sup>2</sup>

The rhetoric of global competition and the idea of efficiency and profitability also challenge the traditional vision and practice of academia at the national level. In the report from the Stjernø committee – Committee for Higher Education which was appointed by the Norwegian government in order to make recommendations for the further development of higher education in a 20-year perspective, it is argued that: “The increasing global competition in trade and industry has further amplified the importance of education and research in the context of the economy and the development of wealth” (Stjernø et al 2008, p. 25, author’s translation).

Although a stronger political focus and public discourses are valuable regarding educational matters because they may represent a useful challenge to the internal debates of academia, it is most important to be alert to the kind of interests that are dominating these *new* voices in higher education. What are the prevailing values underlying the political and public debates that are setting the agenda for higher education?

This article explores the normative dimension of higher education. The discussion is limited to certain central aspects related to societal needs and the mandate of higher education as defined by politicians in public documents. I will present and discuss prevalent tendencies in European higher education and illustrate how these tendencies influence and challenge the normative dimension in the Norwegian higher education system. Then the normative dimension of higher education is interpreted and discussed, in this context, as the development of critical reflection and commitment to professional responsibility.

In the final part of the article, I will suggest didactic reflections and discuss pedagogical approaches that may promote the learning of, and encourage critical reflection about professional responsibility.

## Needs of society and the mandate of higher education

As indicated above, contemporary complex Western societies rely heavily on expert systems and highly specified professions and the functions they perform (Giddens 1991). To a significant extent, therefore, the quality of modern life is contingent on the quality of professionals' work, and the will and ability of professionals to keep themselves updated and adapt to new technologies and continuous changes (Gibbons et al 1994). At the same time, complex structures and cultural challenges in areas ranging from local educational and health care problems to the global environment and terrorism call for professional agents who can act responsibly, and whose actions are rooted not only in advanced knowledge, but also in good judgment and professional discretion. Hence, it is argued, the ability to act in a *professionally responsible manner* in complex, unique and uncertain situations with conflicting values and ethical stances should be at the heart of professional practice (May 1996, Sockett 1993). This also implies that the individual professional, when encountering risk and uncertainty in his or her daily tasks, must employ his or her own capacity for critical reflection and take immediate moral and responsible decisions while at the same time linking his or her personal specialised knowledge to a collective commitment (Bauman 2000, Munthe 2003). However, we know that it can be difficult to convince the "good forces" to work together. Examples of the ignorance of the moral and social component embedded in professional responsibility abound. International as well as national fraud scandals in business as well as science remind us not to take for granted that all professionals live up to the responsibility implied in their *contract* with society. There are physicians who take active part in doping of athletes, and central leaders in business who, spouting a market-oriented rhetoric, legitimise sky-high salaries and options contracts that are perceived by many as unethical.

How, then, do we as a society ensure that we have qualified professionals with the kind of intellectual and cultural capital necessary to make *wise* decisions in light of the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Scott 2005, Sullivan & Rosin 2008)? Higher education has a specific responsibility in this context – a responsibility which is reflected in the politically-defined goal for higher education, formulated for example in the mandate of the Stjernø committee:

Higher education must seek to train individuals for working life and business, to promote the personal development of the students, and to provide them with a good basis for becoming

active members of a democratic society. It will be an important challenge in the future to produce a sufficient number of relevantly and adequately qualified candidates for key occupations in the welfare society in fields such as health and medicine, care services, and pre-school through upper secondary education. At the same time, innovation and value creation in the private sector is dependent on adequately qualified individuals in areas such as science and technology, including candidates at the post-graduate level (Stjernø et al 2008, p. 11, my translation).

Although this definition places strong emphasis on the need for vocational training – training prospective professionals in practical and technical knowledge – it places equal emphasis on the explicit need to promote students’ personal development and ability actively to take on social responsibility. The rhetoric in this political definition of the purpose of higher education finds an appropriate balance between the dimensions of technical skills and the normative moral dimension comprising the moral and societal commitment. This balance is also found in institutional documents, such as in the University of Oslo’s strategic plan 2005–2009:

UiO will offer an education that provides graduates with academic competence of high European standard and gives students a solid foundation for their further development – as *professionals* in their fields and *as members of society*. (p. 9, my italics):

However, the question remains as to how this balance is to be achieved when the rhetoric is translated into practical action. What are the dominating forces and which voices appear to have been given the power to determine the substance of the normative dimension?

### Tendencies in higher education – towards a changed understanding of the normative dimension?

Higher education in Norway in recent years has been increasingly influenced by the European policy of higher education. Concrete changes stepped up as a result of the implementation of the Quality Reform in 2003 (Karseth 2006, Michelsen & Aamodt 2007). This reform has been strongly motivated by political and bureaucratic forces seeking to adapt to general changes in society as well as the needs defined by the labour market, but also comprises a response to internally-defined pedagogical challenges in higher education. It is also a result of the introduction of

New Public Management and represents a follow-up of the Bologna process (Regjeringsnotat 2007a, Michelsen & Aamodt 2007). Thus, key European tendencies and priorities, too, are of interest for the development of the normative dimension in higher education in Norway.

Studies of the Bologna process as well as other studies of higher education in the past decade indicate that even though there are more competitive discourses highlighting the moral and societal responsibility of higher education, particularly among academics, what dominates is the emphasise on the function of higher education in regards to economic development and the idea that higher education institutions should be adaptive to consumers and give priority to entrepreneurship and market orientation (Bologna Declaration on the European space for higher education: an explanation, 2000, Karseth 2006, Olsen & Maassen 2007, Michelsen & Aamodt 2007). What emerges is a discourse of specialised and advanced knowledge without questions related to the moral and societal dimension of professional responsibility. It is hardly out of place, therefore, to ask if there is a political move towards an understanding of the main responsibility of higher education as that of providing society with technical expertise and professionals who give precedence to financial interests, entrepreneurial and innovative ideas – at the expense of the traditional ideals of higher education to foster civic engagement in public welfare (Naidoo & Jamieson 2005). Is the concept of the normative dimension about to be given a new meaning? According to researchers who have studied European higher education, there are signs that the higher education project is in the process of becoming more regulated by economic incentives and common administrative control routines more than by traditional academic values (Karseth 2006, Olsen & Maassen 2007).

What the consequences of such an orientation might be in the long run is difficult to predict. However, the dominant focus on the immediate use value of knowledge may transform knowledge production in higher education from the more contemplative knowledge forms into more “performative” knowledge and “cashable” competencies (Barnett 2000). Within such a context, higher education institutions must offer the student what he or she asks for, while also ensuring that the study programmes concur with the European standardisation that is manageable and predictable. If education is reconceptualised as a commercial transaction, there is a risk that teachers become “the commodity producers” and students as the “consumers” (Naidoo & Jamieson 2005). This may encourage academic teachers to deliver the “commodity” as a pre-specified content that can be passed on to the students and which is measurable within the new credit system and qualification frames (Karseth 2006). Under such conditions, the student disposition generated

may have negative consequences for the development of the necessary components of professional competence; academic and critical reasoning and the dispositions and attitudes required for the moral and societal implications of a professional mandate.

Do we find these tendencies in the Norwegian higher education system? The final evaluation report of the Quality Reform directed by the Rokkan Centre and NIFU STEP (Michelsen & Aamodt 2007) shows that Norway to a large extent has adapted to the curricular standardisation and a common quality system (Karseth 2006, Michelsen & Aamodt 2007). The three cycles; bachelor, master and Ph.D and the shared credit system have been implemented. Many new modules and study courses have emerged alongside new teaching and assessment forms. Also reported is an observed “eagerness” to make higher education more efficient by reducing time of study and increase throughput. Additionally, there is an increased focus on mobility, competitiveness and employability in terms of “producing” “employable” candidates for the labour market (Karseth 2006, Michelsen & Aamodt 2007).

However, of interest in the context of the normative dimension of higher education is whether the structural and functional systems and the pedagogical changes initiated in higher education support students’ learning *both* as professionals *and* civic-minded citizens. Rhetorically, higher educational institutions still define their responsibility as one of encouraging “bildung”, or as Stjernø et al (2008 p. 19, my translation) formulate it:

(...) to formulate a concept of bildung which is relevant for the modern and globalised world and the role academic institutions are to have in it. Implicit in this concept are values such as democracy, human rights, ethical reflection, open and accessible knowledge, free command over communication, rationality, integration.

How is this goal followed up in practice? Do the new frames and teaching methods in higher education encourage students to develop a consciousness of the moral and societal implications of higher education and future professional responsibility?

The findings in the report on the evaluation of the Quality Reform clearly indicate that the reform has led to more structured learning processes, closer follow-up of students, and more varied teaching and assessment forms. These changes are considered an improvement in terms of students’ learning outcomes (Michelsen & Aamodt 2007, Dysthe et al 2006). However, there are also signs that are more worrying. Both students and teachers point to problems with modulari-

sation of programmes and overload of compulsory tasks. A visible consequence of this is evident in the students' approach to learning; to a large extent, they react by doing only what is mandatory. There is a tendency among the students to adopt "efficient study methods" for the purpose of recalling and reproducing the knowledge needed to pass the exams. In other words, there are signs of increased "instrumental" attitudes and approaches to learning. Activities such as critical reading and non-compulsory group discussions tend to be neglected (Michelsen & Aamodt 2007).

The teachers also point to an increased work load as a result of the closer follow-up of students and new assessment forms alongside the rise in administrative and bureaucratic tasks, such as writing reports and applications for research funding. Many of the teachers have experienced that the time available for conducting research has diminished, which in turn leads to a decline in research-based teaching. The time pressure also hinders them from encouraging study activities requiring more time than more "efficient" teaching methods do (Michelsen & Aamodt 2007).

It is too early to draw any conclusions about where this new regulation of higher education and the observed tendencies may lead in the long run in terms of the normative dimension and education for professional responsibility. However, it is appropriate to ask whether the modularisation of study programmes and the emerging credit-oriented curriculum thinking encourage values that serve to bureaucratise educational practice, and link knowledge development and a more productivity and skill-oriented role for students (Karseth 2006). Is it likely that such an orientation promote teaching and learning approaches that integrate disciplinary and technical knowledge education with active civic commitment in broader moral and cultural issues (Delanty 2001, Llamas 2006)?

If the new structural conditions thrust teachers and students into teaching and learning situations that primarily encourage instrumental learning, as the evaluation report appears to indicate, there is a risk that less priority will be given to activities stimulating articulation of knowledge, norms and values - and the ability to reflect critically upon how advanced knowledge can serve the moral and societal interests of society. My argument is supported by the ideas of the Norwegian philosophers Hans Skjervheim and Jon Hellesnes, both of whom stress that normative *bildung* *requires* that we create space and time for dialogues and engagement in practice (1957/2002, 1969/2002).

For higher education to give priority to the normative *bildung*, there must be both a willingness and the structural capacity to make room for the individual student to interact with other peers and

teachers, where the unpredictable and creative may be cultivated, and where reflection and active participation may be encouraged and appreciated. This implies a will to develop a language for moral and professional societal commitment because it is through articulation and communication that meaning is constructed, negotiated and re-negotiated (Taylor 1985, 1989). To make this form for participation and construction of meaning possible, leaders and academics at higher education institutions must both make their own normative decisions and give priority to this. But is that possible within the new contexts and frames of contemporary higher education?

Assuming that individual choices is a result of the dynamic and mutual interaction between the individual and the collective meaning and institutional identity, there will always be room for agency to influence the structural and contextual conditions (Giddens 1991). Therefore, it is claimed, it may always be possible to give priority to what we here define as *bildung*; the fostering of critical and moral reasoning, articulation of knowledge, norms and values. In other words, academics do have a choice to develop learning arenas where normative *bildung* is encouraged. However, this is dependent on how the agents in each local educational institution interpret their normative mission, and how they understand the macropolitical priorities and national guiding principles. An institution that wants to take responsibility for, and govern, its own normative priorities, has to understand its unique culture and create a vision and a goal with which each member of the culture may identify and with which each can associate his or her own personal goals. Yngvar Løchen, the first rector of Tromsø University, expressed similar thoughts in his book from 1987, *Liv og forvitring i vårt samfunn* [Life and the corrosion of our society] when he argued that academic institutions have to create: “a vision that is capable of generating the belief that shared, unified efforts will lead us forward both in terms of internal conflicts and the external goals of our institution” (p. 49, my translation).

Based on my belief that common effort works, I would like to suggest *a few* ways in which the normative dimension could be sustained. However, before doing so, I would like to clarify the link I see between the normative dimension of higher education and professional responsibility. It is worth considering in what ways values such as *civic engagement* and *social responsibility*, defined by Brint (1994) as “social trustee professionalism” may be adapted to the demands of contemporary professionals in democratic societies (Brint & Levy 1999, p. 200). It might be of value to approach the “noble” aims of professionalism in new and creative ways that both resonate with and enlighten contemporary discourses and deliberative judgments in more vital and vibrant ways beyond *slide-rule* decision-making.

## The normative dimension of higher education interpreted as critical reflection and commitment to professional responsibility

When referring to the normative dimension in higher education, we tend to mean the Humboldtian *Bildung* tradition of the German 19th century university with roots in the humanities and critical theory (Ulvik 2007). This is the *bildung* tradition which is associated with the “free” academic or liberal programmes and comprises the *bildung* of a personal and moral development, critical reflection and the capability to evaluate critically and review scientific knowledge and its contribution in society. How, then, may such a *bildung* process contribute to an increased consciousness of professional responsibility (Morgan 1994)?

My suggestion is inspired by the ideas of William Sullivan’s concept *Civic Professionalism* (2005) and the perspectives of the higher educational researcher Ronald Barnett who argues that *bildung* is needed to encourage what he calls *Critical Professionalism*. According to Barnett (1997), *bildung* must help to prepare students for the complex challenges of professional responsibility by encouraging them to see their responsibility as something beyond their local practices. It entails a responsibility for the broader society. In this sense moral and civic consciousness of professional responsibility implies the ability to reflect critically upon your own practice, take responsibility for the individual client while also taking action for the broader societal needs, because, as Barnett claims:

Members of key professions owe their status and social legitimacy to the wider society. (...) they are given a licence to practice. There can, therefore, be no arbitrary limit to their professional responsibilities. If there are public inquiries, debates or controversies, on which professionals have a legitimate voice, then they have a duty to speak out. (...) – not just a right – to speak in virtue of their having a socially sanctioned authority to pronounce within a particular domain of knowledge and action, their voice contributing to the growth of understanding in the public domain (1997, pp. 133–135).

According to Barnett’s perspectives, professional responsibility must be based in a reflective, responsible, professional and competent ability to act; the ability to collaborate with others; being open and willing to listen to multiple and contesting meanings while also being able to critically engage in and contribute to disciplinary and public discourses. This implies that faculties with professional programmes must be re-

sponsive to the requirements of the wider society and work life while also encouraging reflective and critical dialogues about the scientific and moral bases of professional practice including the broader societal and civic responsibility (Barnett 1997, Sullivan 2005). They have to emphasise actions that stimulate students' ability to evaluate critically disciplinary knowledge, but also the underlying ideas and norms of this knowledge. Additionally, students must be given the opportunity to live out a critical attitude in practice (Barnett 1990). They should be helped to see and make up their minds about the implications of the societal contract of a professional mandate; the unwritten *contract* with society that depends on reciprocal trust and good faith between the professionals and the public, which obliges the professionals to dedicate their special and esoteric knowledge to the services of the members of the society before their personal economic interest (Bertilsson 1990, Christoffersen 2005, Freidson 2001, Sullivan 2005). Developing such a critical consciousness of professional responsibility requires arenas in which articulation and qualitative assessments of the nature of the moral obligations in professional responsibility are regularly included in the agenda (Barnett 1997).

However, the moral philosopher Larry May reminds us that living up to the normative ideals of professional responsibility is a challenging task. The complexity of today's society thrusts professionals into a *web of commitments*, in professional as well as private life. Therefore, May argues, in the context of today's complex societal structure, it is necessary to understand professional responsibility as *legitimate negotiated compromises* (May 1996). He argues that professional responsibility as compromise is most likely necessary in the context of plurality, insecurity and the need for flexibility. However, acting responsibly is not synonymous with being *neutral* or *objective*. Neither should one reject moral obligations. Inspired by the ideas of Jürgen Habermas on participative modes of discourse reaching consensus through *communicative action*, May argues that the normative claims of professional responsibility have to be developed in public dialogue and balanced between responsiveness to the needs of others and reasonable expectations of *self-sacrifice*. Such an approach both requires and may develop the ability to regard individual needs in a broader perspective and navigate between multiple obligations, interests and needs. This is the kind of reflection needed in the current professional life which calls for professionals who are reflective concerning the balance between the responsibility for individuals and the broader civic responsibilities, May maintains.

The perspectives of Barnett and May indicate that we have to understand professional responsibility in light of students' and pro-

spective professionals' total life situation. This implies the need to integrate learning professional responsibility with the individual students' personal projects. More concretely, professional education has to cultivate the individual's intentionality of actions by articulating a profession's moral purposes and linking moral action and reasoning with the responsibility for knowing and using such knowledge in the service of the public interests (Hoshmand 1998). Professional responsibility is not learned and encouraged by merely transferring predefined authoritative and universal rules. It is not the traits of professions, formal structures or status that guarantee professionally responsible behaviour. Professional codes of conduct are useful as a starting point, but they have to be enhanced with issues of civic responsibility and ideas of how these codes are to be lived out in practice, confronted by plural discourses embedded in varied situated and cultural practices (Hoshmand 1998, Barnett 1997, Sullivan & Rosin 2008). Therefore, conceptions of professional responsibility should be articulated and critically deliberated on in social practices; examined, de-constructed and reconstructed on the basis of the moral implication of current professional mandates and an *interrogation* of one's own motivation and personal interest (Englund 2002). To engage contemporary students, it is necessary to give serious attention to their professional career interests. Encouraging the students to investigate their own values, preferences and convictions and question these in light of professional judgement may enable them to see more clearly the connection between their professional responsibility and their interests as individuals.

A similar forward-looking perspective can be found in the works of educational philosopher John Dewey, who emphasises the importance of the future, and the utility of education in the sense that the knowledge conveyed must be "in accordance with the thoughts and doings of the people themselves," as Karen Jensen put it in her article on the mass university as a moral "bildung" community (2003).

According to Dewey, morality and identity construction are embedded in the reflective process that evolves when reflecting upon practice; what actually *happens* and what one think *should* happen, whom one *is*, and whom one wishes to *become* in the future, while also reflecting upon *one's personal contribution* within a larger *societal context*. The stimulation of such a reflective process may help students to develop the capability to understand professional responsibility as a specific, relational and social responsibility while also enabling them to evaluate critically the authorised professional ethics of their individual profession. These *externally* defined norms are without doubt important for preventing unlawful or unethical conduct, but blind loyalty to such rules may diminish the capacity of

the individual professional to make reflective judgements (Colnerud 2006, Macfarlane 2004). And since “social and moral responsibility is much more a matter of responsiveness to others in need than it is a matter of rule-following” (May 1996, p. 1), it is important to help students to see and investigate their future specific responsibility both situated as part of a relationship between a professional-client and as part of broader societal responsibility.

## From rhetoric to practice

Arguing for an approach such as that described above is easy. However, to go from rhetoric to practice, is more demanding. The normative ideal of collective values, moral and societal *bildung*, encounters hard competition in a time dominated by ideas of self-promotion, where individual achievements are measured in terms of financial criteria (Komulainen 2006). Yet although there is variation across the different study programmes, there are signs indicating that many students in higher education wish to use their acquired knowledge and competence in the interest of others and for the best of societal interests.

A large survey study among students at the University of Oslo in 1998 and 1999 (Jensen & Nygård 2000), indicates that even though the individual self-orientation is evident, the students’ motivation to use their academic knowledge acquired through higher education to help others, is also apparent. Data from my own study, in which freshmen and senior students from law, psychology and political science were interviewed in 2002 and 2003, also shows that students express a wish to dedicate their competence to do good for others (Solbrekke 2007). The challenge for higher education, then, is to see students’ motivations as a valuable resource for committing to future professional responsibility. How can academics help students to keep their motivation alive and also to further develop it into a continuous motivation for moral and societal contribution robust enough to endure in the complex and contesting claims of professional work? How can we balance between the needs of the more instrumental interests, the ‘productive’ and skilled, flexible and competitive vocationally oriented student, and the need for fostering the moral consciousness of professional responsibility?

Although it is certainly appropriate to raise these normative questions, we know that it is difficult to develop shared ideas that provide a sense of cohesion about the normative dimension in higher education (Sullivan & Rosin 2008). To reach a common agreement on how to do this in practice is therefore a challenging task. Academics have multiple

and diverse perceptions of and meanings about what is good teaching, and there is no extensive tradition for collaboration about teaching. Nor is there a tradition for articulating the normative assumptions, and pedagogical reflections, underlying our curriculum and teaching approaches in daily practice. Nevertheless, it might be worth a try to suggest some pedagogical approaches that *may* foster shared reflection about the learning of a holistic professional responsibility.

My intention is not to argue for *one specific* and predefined pedagogical technique, which could turn out as an instrumentalistic mistake, as Skjervheim would have defined it (Skjervheim 2002). Different teaching approaches create diverse learning contexts and conditions for the development of students' moral reasoning and discretion. Learning and meaning making are always a result of the local practice and the resources the participants bring to and take into use in the concrete situation. Hence, one can never *predetermine* either the process or learning outcome in detail (Hellesnes 1969/2002). Still, I believe it is possible to find some "ways to go about things" which are better than others if the goal is to develop sensitive consciousness and judicious professional discretion. In accordance with social-constructive and socio-cultural learning theories, which emphasise engagement and participation as essential for each individual's construction of knowledge, learning and identity (Vygotsky 1989, Wenger 1998, Wertsch 1991), I will suggest trying out teaching approaches and models that are developed for the purpose of learning to deliberate; to listen to others and to accept, tolerate and learn from the manifold discourses and practices in current societies (Barnett 1997, Barnett & Coate 2005).

## Learning professional responsibility through deliberative communication and participation in practice

The model of deliberative communication I refer to has been developed by Tomas Englund (2002, 2007 and in the following article in this issue). This model was primarily developed for teaching and learning in primary education, but taking into account the context of the specific purposes and disciplinary traditions of the different programmes in higher education, it may be applied in professional programmes as well.

According to Englund deliberative communication is characterised by the following criteria:

- a. Different views are set against each other and arguments for these different views are given room and presented.
- b. There is tolerance and respect for the “concrete other” and participants learn to listen to the other person’s argument.
- c. Elements of collective will-formation are present, in other words an endeavour to reach consensus or at least to reach temporary agreements while also acknowledging and drawing attention to differences.
- d. Authorities/traditional views (represented for example, by parents and tradition) can be questioned and there are opportunities to challenge one’s own tradition.
- e. There is scope for students to communicate and deliberate without teacher control, in other words for argumentative discussions between students with the aim of solving problems or shedding light on them from different points of view.

According to the intention, deliberative communication may encourage students to reason and argue for their own stances beyond merely referring to an authoritative teacher or literature/textbook, and they are trained in listening to the viewpoints of others and their moral considerations. Dilemmas in future work practice may be put on the agenda and discussed in light of a broader societal responsibility. Questions like; what does it imply when we say that professional work is based on trust from society? What does it mean to say that the relation between the needs of an individual and society has to be taken care of? What do we mean by “whistleblowing”? How should a whistleblower act and what should we expect from each individual professional? In approaching such issues, we may create an atmosphere and strategies for looking “behind” the implications of the normative ideals of professional responsibility (Solbrekke 2007).

Deliberating on complex problems is an important intellectual action in which one’s own personal moral stance is confronted and challenged (May 1996). Still, deliberative communication *may* have some limitations. I cannot elaborate on this in this article, but I would like to point to the argument put forward by Carsten Ljunggren (2007) who claims that deliberative reasoning, in its search for universal (though contemporary) valid knowledge and consensus, which rests on rational and cognitive reasoning, *may* tend to neglect the moral and emotional element in each individual’s personal evaluation. It becomes crucial, therefore, to ensure that also the expressive dispositions of action, such

as emotions, will and wishes are also given space, without reducing the intellectual reasoning. One should also be aware of the fact that freshmen students enter higher education with very divergent cultural capital and sets of resources. While some students easily adapt and handle the deliberative way of communication, others need help to get started so that all participants become contributing participants.

Additionally, in the process of learning the implications of a professional mandate, and for the purpose of learning the ethical component of future work, it is important to emphasise the value of access to practice of professional work (Sullivan 2005, Sullivan & Rosin 2008). Findings from empirical studies on moral learning in different professional programmes (Eraut 2003, Solbrekke & Jensen 2006, Tirri 2003) indicate that there must be a balance between learning the academic cognitive/analytical reasoning and the practical dimension in order to learn the moral base of future work. From interviews with psychology and nursing students four factors stood out as particularly critical (Solbrekke & Jensen 2006):

- Theoretical studies in order to acquire the established disciplinary norms and values of their respective profession.
- Participation in academic discourses and discussions with peers and teachers about the core concepts and moral aspects of the discipline underlying their profession
- Collaboration with professional practitioners in practice.
- Face-to-face interactions with the “concrete” patient or client.

To summarise, taking the accounts from these students seriously implies that higher education institutions have to bridge theory and practice *with* the moral and societal implications of the respective professional mandates.

## Concluding discussion and implications for higher education

On the basis of the above reflections, I would claim that a model based on deliberative communication, which also acknowledges and comprises the expressive dimension integrated with students’ access and participation in practice of future professional work, is sensible if the goal is to encourage a *holistic* understanding of professional responsibility. This argument is supported by a number of the higher educational research-

ers currently dealing with issues of the normative dimension of higher education (for example Barnett & Coate 2005, Morgan 1994, Sullivan 2005, Sullivan & Rosin 2008), and not least by Dewey who has inspired so many researchers in the field of education.

In a book published in 2007, with the title *Dewey's Dream* by Benson, Harkavy and Puckett, Dewey's idea of participatory democracy and how knowledge construes in interaction between people while they consciously collaborate to solve problems that may arise if communal systems and values are confronted or challenged, constitutes a frame for the normative mission of higher education. The authors develop valuable perspectives on the responsibility of higher educational institutions to strengthen the bonds between themselves and communities in order to enhance the conditions for participatory democracy. In advancing knowledge by bridging science and practical action, ethical reasoning, analytical competence and skills, they argue that all individuals may be qualified for moral and civic engagement.

The authors exemplify their point with reference to the University of Pennsylvania and the experience of teachers and students who have engaged in collaboration project with communal neighbouring schools (University of Pennsylvania 2007). Some notable consequences of this project they argue, is that teachers as well as students have increased their interest for, and in, action research, teaching and learning. Through this, the participants have applied their specialised knowledge in practice, developed practical skills and increased their moral and societal consciousness. In other words, they have all become more engaged in the principles of participatory democracy. They have developed a capacity for deliberative communication; they have learnt to communicate, interact and collaborate with each others in highly unpredictable ways and they have also broadened their academic horizons through these experiences (Benson; Harkavy & Puckett 2007). These results support the indications in the findings referred to above where students claim that moral development evolves in the encounter between theory and practice as part of a deliberative action.

## Conclusion

The intention in this article has been to (re)conceptualise the normative dimension of higher education within the context of an educational theoretical discourse. I have highlighted some international as well as national tendencies in today's (and tomorrow's) higher education with regards to educating prospective professionals who are able to serve both the interests of clients and the society. From a normative perspec-

tive, I have argued that a central challenge for higher education is to shape institutional and structural frames and conditions supporting educational practices where both collective and individual engagement in critical and moral reasoning may be encouraged and fostered. This is perhaps more important than ever because this normative dimension is something we tend to neglect in the very busy day-to-day practices. Seemingly the normative *bildung* is given less priority when we feel pressured by the claims of increasing the production of student's credits as well as the increased demands for published articles in highly ranked journals. It is not an easy situation when the study time is reduced and study activities are intensified.

However, the faculties of higher education have to be aware of *their* professional responsibility. The contemporary situation requires that some academics have the courage to stand up and steer/direct the priorities and recourses in teaching towards a focus that integrates the technical and disciplinary with the moral and societal aspects. This implies that academics have the will to undertake the difficult job of highlighting the mission of higher education to be something more than merely answering to external demands encouraged by an intensified global and competitive market-orientation. This may also mean that some tasks, such as for instance answering to all kinds of "quality control" assessment systems, have to be critically analysed and rejected if they do not allow us to give priority to teaching approaches that motivate students for both technical and moral education. However, such decisions ought to be based within conscious deliberations on what we mean by the normative mandate of higher education. I have argued elsewhere that graduate higher education seem to prepare students well for the analytical and cognitive claims of professional work, but gives less focus to preparing them for complexity and moral challenges (Karseth & Solbrekke 2006, Solbrekke 2007, 2008). It is therefore time for critical examination of the responsibility of academics to educate prospective professionals for a holistic responsibility based in both disciplinary expertise and moral values. For this purpose, the paper represents a first step which needs to be followed up by more research on the goal and dynamics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's higher educational institutions as intellectually, morally and politically civic institutions that actively engage in the maintenance and development of a genuinely participatory democracy.

## Notes

1. This article is an amended version of an article in Norwegian based on a trial lecture in connection with the defence of Tone Dyrdal Solbrekke's dissertation "Understanding Conceptions of Professional Responsibility" for the Dr.polit degree at the Faculty of Education, University of Oslo September 4 2007. A draft was presented at the NERA conference, Copenhagen, March 6–8, 2008 in the symposium on "Educating towards Civic and Professional Responsibility – the Role of Higher Education" within the Higher Education Network. The Norwegian article was published in *UNIPED 2/2008. Vol 31 s. 5–18*. A revised draft was presented at the 5th Interim Conference of the International Sociological Association, Oslo University College, Norway 12–13, 2008.
2. In the Norwegian context, NOKUT was appointed by the Government in 2001 to monitor the quality of all higher education in Norway (<http://www.nokut.no/sw166.asp>, downloaded April 6<sup>th</sup> 2008).

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