What is an E-Learning Professional?

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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by giving definitions of professionals and professionalism. A brief introduction to the characteristics and traits of E-learning professionals in the context of E-learning is also provided. The paper concludes with competences/skills that E-learning professionals need to have; technology, communication, research and practice related skills to bring together experience and knowledge on E-learning into everyday practices.

Keywords*: E-learning, professionalization, open and distance learning, information and communication technology.*

INTRODUCTION

What makes an E-Learning Professional?

An e-learning professional definition comes from the various readings of the literature on what or who is considered a professional? Lindop (1982) suggests the terms 'profession' and 'professional' have semantic overtones and echoes. The word professional is an antonym to amateur (Lindop, 1982). As suggested in her article, Warrior (2002) then conceptualizes amateurs to be associated with 'gentleman', the learned gentry of the time who were wealthy and had time for leisure pursuits as they did not have to earn a living. Amateurs are individuals who participate for enjoyment and derive satisfaction from such an activity.

In contrast, a professional will be paid and in the context of competitive sports, to compete and winning therefore, becomes highly important. Warrior (2002) concedes that, a professional involves some form of regular payment resulting in paid remuneration. Sockett (1985) defines "a profession is said to be an occupation with a crucial social function requiring a high degree of skills and drawing on a systematic body of knowledge". Perkin (1985) endorses Sockett's view that the word professional is used to define a dignified occupation with an element of intellectual training or large mental expertise. Hence, someone working as a lawyer, doctor or a teacher is a professional but they will have distinctive characteristics that distinguish their occupation from another (Hoyle, 1985).

Millerson (1964) suggests there are six common traits to a profession. Firstly, skills based on theoretical knowledge and intellectual training and necessary level of education. Secondly, testing of competences and closure of the profession by restrictive organizations has a code of conduct and thirdly, an altruistic service in the affairs of others. Another categorization of being a professional by Lindrop (1982) involves the following claims; exclusivity, to do something special for society, to profess to have certain socially useful skills and competencies, practices according to standards that are publicly acknowledged, enjoy privileged status and responsibility in the offering of a service to the public, exercise personal judgment, protect the public by guaranteeing certain minimum standards of competence and finally, conduct and merit recognition by way of payment and status. Warrior (2002) goes on to reiterate that these two definitions or claims might appear isolated but have degrees of overlap in practice such as professional identity or status, professional practice, professional development, professionalism and Hoyle (1985) refers to as professionalization. Furthermore, Lindrop (1982) suggests that there is a clear link between the intrinsic responsibilities of individual members of the profession to one another, as well as the extrinsic responsibility of the profession to the public.

Characteristics of E-Learning Professionals

The other characteristics of professionals especially of teaching professionals are that they require organizations (Perkins, 1985) in that Universities are generally well-structured enterprises with sets of regulations for curriculum design, delivery and assessment. There is a hierarchy where a lecturer can progress to senior lecturers, then to principal lecturers, heads of departments, readers or professors. Hence there is a logical career pathway.

The other characteristic of professionals is synonymous with the word "Quality". Quality is synonymous with meeting professional standards through a system of supervision, inspection and control (Carr, 1999). For example, in the teaching profession, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK, identifies two dimensions to quality; "the appropriateness of standards set by the institution and the effectiveness of teaching and learning support in providing opportunities for students to achieve those standards" (QAA, 2001). Therefore, the language of inspections would include quality jargon such as 'benchmarking', 'self-assessment documents' or 'performance indicators as measurements of quality' against which teachers are measured. Therefore, quality and professionalism is inextricably linked.

Interestingly, the idea of quality also, can mean excellence and the idea of excellence, carries a value judgment. The National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) in the UK defines excellence in teaching as innovation in the design and delivery of learning activities, ability to organize courses materials and present them effectively and imaginatively, provision of guidance, a reflective approach to teaching, the ability to arouse curiosity, a commitment, participation in professional activities and research and ability to promote good practice through publications, conferences, workshops and other means (Hillier, 2002). However, when measuring excellence in teaching, the characteristics of excellence identified in policy models of teaching relate to planning, resources and explicit statements of outcomes. Noticeably, when teachers and students were asked their perceptions of their definitions of excellence, teacher's qualities such as enthusiasm, creativity and interpersonal skills were salient. Additionally, students identified oral communication skills as important to excellent teaching.

The other aspect of teaching professionals is that education is not a private matter but rather many stakeholders and interests such as the national interest, the economic needs of society, or the demands of the labor markets have a contributory role in which sometimes, hinders professional discretions that can be bound by a restrictive framework of bureaucratic rules and managerial controls. Hence, these act as a severe loss to professional autonomy resulting in increased stress levels and reduced individual's professional confidence (Thornton, 2000). Professionals too have a commitment to practice which implies that the onus is on a professional to update and attend regular training courses or conferences in order to prevent stagnation of professional practice. Professional development is the process whereby professionals improve their competences for example, by re-skilling, or re-learning and incorporating new modes of teaching. Warrior (2002) concludes by highlighting that professionals have a degree of status and prestige associated with belonging to the education profession. Furthermore, Warrior (2002) argues that a professional must 'practice what they preach' as a moral obligation to the client, the students. This relationship is reciprocal as students must engage with the teacher to benefit fully from the service being provided.

Comparisons between teaching professionals in the UK and Germany

Neal and Morgan (2000) in their article did a comparative analysis on professionalism between the UK and Germany. Their findings are that the growth of professionalism in the UK was due spontaneous activities at the occupational level to secure professional status while in contrast, professionalism in Germany has been "top down" in that the state has played an active interventionist role in the initiation and administration of the professions. They concluded that due to the European Union this has led to changes in the nature and administration of professions in Germany and the UK. In terms of competences in online teaching, Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples and Tickner (2000) identified clear description of roles involved in online teaching. Goodyear et al., (2000) use the term "online tutor" as a preference because this was the term commonly known in the UK and among the English speaking researchers and practitioners. The roles related to online teaching are; content facilitator, researcher, assessor, adviser/counselor, process facilitator, manager/administrator, designer and technologist. Good year et.al., (2000) identified a set of 23 competences associated with the role of process facilitator such as challenging and supporting participants, tolerating ambiguity, respecting privacy of the individuals and group members and so forth. One of the findings of this article is that the list of statements regarding the competences of the online teacher is colored by an educational philosophy of which there is learner collaboration, a democratization of learning activities and roles, inclusiveness and helping learners rake responsibility for, and control of their own learning. However, there is need for further studies as to whether these values apply across all kinds of online teaching or if they are dominant in certain sectors or cultures. Goodyear et al., (2000) concluded that firstly, it is important to recognize that similarities between conventional teaching skills and online teaching skills and secondly, the ways in which "good teaching" is expressed may be very different in the two settings of face-to-face teaching and online teaching.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, four main competences can be described to demonstrate the types of skills needed for an e-learning professional, that is; firstly; technology related skills in which there must be the ability to understand, use and apply technologies in e-learning contexts especially in relation to education. Secondly, communication-related competences refers to the ability to communicate appropriately with a variety of stakeholders in e-learning contexts by using a range of media. Thirdly, research-related competences in which there is the ability to conduct research into e-learning topics using a range of information sources. Finally, practice related competences referring to the ability to bring together experience and knowledge about e-learning into everyday practice (Weller and Goodfellow, 2012).

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