

A new professionalism and the Royal College of Teaching

Jon Coles argues that the teaching profession must now step up and take greater responsibility for itself, and that doing so means establishing a new College of Teaching

Imagine this. A Minister from the Department of Health stands up and begins to speak. Detailing the grave deficiencies of the medical profession and its lack of attention to evidence about effective practice, she sets out her plans for retraining surgeons in traditional practice in preference to the latest vogue for keyhole surgery.

Citing recent research, she argues that traditional methods are best and must be reintroduced. Despite outrage from surgeons who argue that the outcomes will be poor, the common sense proposals are widely welcomed by the public and implemented by hospital managers, using new resources provided for the purpose.

Now again, imagine this.

Citing unspecified 'recent developments in knowledge about the brain' a company starts to market a new product to doctors (let's call it 'Mind Workout') in which, merely by attaching electrodes to the head and body for an hour a day while normal tasks are carried out, it is claimed that patients experiencing anxiety and general low levels of wellbeing can be made to feel better. Despite the absence of any research evidence, doctors find the argument plausible and start to prescribe it for patients, who tend to enjoy doing the activities. As a result, doctors recommend the product to fellow GPs, and a craze for 'Mind Workout' sweeps through the country, with more and more patients being offered it.

Not too long afterwards, the evidence does start to come through. Despite the apparent plausibility of the arguments and even though patients liked it, it turns out that offering Mind Workout to patients isn't any better than doing nothing in terms of tackling the illnesses they face. Nonetheless, its popularity is unchanged and doctors continue to offer it to patients, who continue to be happy.

Finally, imagine this.

In a bid to promote innovation and improvement in medical care, government decides that medical training and development needs to be revamped. Over time, reforms are introduced which mean that there is no longer a requirement on doctors to keep their skills up-to-date or to refresh their training. Provided that they continue to practice medicine, there is no need for further training. The public, recognising that medicine is largely a practical skill, approve.

Later on, there is further simplification. Medicine and surgery have always been learned on an apprenticeship model – they are craft skills and must be learned on the job. So, this model is extended to reduce training time and unnecessary theory, and to get doctors onto wards and into operating theatres as quickly as possible. Any graduate showing the necessary intellectual skills through achieving a good degree will be eligible to move straight into work as a trainee doctor without unnecessary additional training. They will learn on the job.

As a result, the need to have qualifications before working and the need for ongoing professional training are removed. The public is delighted by the good sense of this.

Three ridiculous scenarios which you had difficulty in imagining?

No doubt. But I raise them, of course, because the precise equivalents have happened time and again in education over the last generation. And not to any sense of public disquiet – but to general approval.

Educational practice is too susceptible to political intervention ...

Take the example of early reading. The level of intervention has grown progressively over the last generation from the National Curriculum, national testing, the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy and its various revisions through to the current

government's phonics screening test and support programme.

At each stage, the public and media have tended to welcome government's wise attempts to tackle illiteracy in the teeth of opposition from a recalcitrant teaching profession.

Now, each of these initiatives had, at the least, admirable elements. Democracy itself has a lot going for it and political initiatives have often been responding to public concerns and other evidence. And let us be clear that governments of all parties have intervened significantly.

I should also be clear that history would not be on my side if I argued that government should never intervene. For a long time, educators resisted all outside attempts to influence the curriculum, until finally, following scandals at schools like William Tyndale, that resistance collapsed under huge public pressure. Arguing that only teachers should determine the curriculum is like saying that only doctors can decide what counts as illness. We would soon want intervention in medicine if our ailments were ignored by doctors who claimed to know better.

But when it comes to professional practice – the 'how' of teaching – government has come routinely to make pronouncements of a sort it would never make about medical practice. And, if it did, there is little chance that the public would respond warmly to non-experts telling the experts what to do in their area of expertise.

Of course, you might say that this difference exists because medical practice is just too important to leave to the untrained. People would die if clinical practice were determined by non-clinicians.

But if no-one doubts the importance of medicine, then surely the public doesn't regard education as fundamentally unimportant? Surveys over the last 30 years have consistently shown education to be one of the public's top concerns.

I don't think that the public is relaxed about people who lack important expertise determining practice. I think that the reason is deeper: whereas the public believes that there is such a thing as professional medical expertise, and that doctors have it, there is deep public scepticism that there is such a thing as professional educational expertise at all, or whether really it's just all a matter of opinion.

... educational practice is too often subject to fads and unevicenced innovations ...

It is unfortunately true that teachers and schools are capable of being suckered by fads. Step forward 'brain gym' and 'visual, auditory, kinaesthetic' learning styles: just a couple of things that swept round schools for a time, giving many people a little enjoyment, making a few people a lot of money, but having no visible means of support in the evidence base. They are the educational equivalent of the leach as a universal medical cure – very popular for a period, but with no discernible benefit.

The primary reason why my 'mind workout' scenario is hard to imagine in medicine, promoted by qualified doctors (rather than unregulated quack practitioners), is the same as the reason why medicine has moved beyond the leach. It is the development of a culture of evidence-based practice.

That culture of evidence means that in a room full of doctors, it is likely that if someone promotes a particular treatment or methodology, there will be at least one other person who asks what the supporting evidence for that treatment might be. And if there isn't robust evidence, other doctors in that room will not want to use it. Even if they did want to, their professional standards would tell them not to – and no-one wants to be struck off.

That culture is underpinned by the connection of practitioners to medical research which, unlike in education, appears to the

public to be authoritative, methodologically coherent, well-engaged with practice and clearly communicated. While both profession and public would be confident that doctors are up-to-date with evidence-based practice, the same would not be true of teachers.

There is growing interest in evidence-based practice in education. The work of the Education Endowment Foundation, the Education Media Centre and others in promoting evidence-based practice and public understanding of educational evidence is beginning to make a difference. The Goldacre Report made a passionate case for greater use of randomised control trials. But we are in the foothills.

... and expectations of teachers' training and ongoing professional development are low

Nothing has damaged the development of teaching more than the myth that teachers are 'born not made'; yet it is easy to see how it arises. The interpersonal skills, charisma and humour that characterise great teachers are not given to everyone. But the deep subject knowledge and the skills that those teachers have in questioning technique, planning and preparing lessons, formative assessment, inspiring curiosity and creating diligent students are the hard-won product of training, study, observation and reflection, not a serendipitous outcome of good genes.

Perhaps because education is fundamentally interpersonal, it is very easy for the public to be unaware of the craft and professional skill involved in good teaching. And because everyone has been to school, it is likely that everyone has an opinion. But because those opinions are often based on narrow personal experience, without understanding of the vast range of practice that exists, they are often based on very inaccurate assumptions.

So it is perhaps unsurprising that there is not widespread public debate about the lack of a professional requirement on teachers to maintain and develop their professional knowledge and skill year on year. It is, nonetheless, the only profession I am aware of where there is no such requirement. In order to maintain good professional standing in law, accountancy, engineering and many other fields, a professional must undertake and provide evidence of further professional development each year.

It should be a major source of public concern that it is even theoretically possible that a teacher can go through an entire career without ever being required formally to update their knowledge of their subject or their skills as a teacher. Yet a public which is not convinced of the existence of real expertise is currently unconcerned.

Nor is there (as there is for example in engineering or surgery) any requirement that to become a 'fully fledged' or senior member of the profession, a higher level of knowledge and skill must be achieved. While all new engineers aspire to Chartered Engineer status and surgeons might aspire to Fellowship of the

Royal College of Surgeons, there is no equivalent goal for the new teacher to work towards. In many other professions, achieving that senior professional status is a major motivator for new members of the profession to extend their levels of knowledge and skill.

Institutional weakness in the teaching profession is a major cause of these problems

So, why such major differences between education and healthcare in these vital things?

You will have gathered that I think that the issues I am discussing here are closely connected. Collectively, they point to a major difference between teaching and other professions of vital national importance, including the medical profession. And that is in the relative weakness of the professional infrastructure which underpins it.

While medicine and surgery have their Royal Colleges, engineering has the Royal Academy and professional institutes for each of its disciplines, and accountancy has its institutes, teaching has nothing similar. In healthcare, the function of securing evidence-based practice is doubly reinforced by the existence of NICE, which (amongst other things) reaches clear conclusions as to the effectiveness of treatments, including judging the eligibility of medicines for funding.

These professional institutions play a critical role in creating and sustaining the profession. First, they connect the leading practitioners and the leading researchers, ensuring that each informs the other. Second, on the basis of evidence, they set the standards for entry to the profession. Third, they set out requirements for ongoing professional development and updating, informed by current developments in research and practice.

This provides an infrastructure for the culture of evidence. As part of entry standards to the profession, every professional is expected to be up-to-date and research literate. To maintain membership of the professional body, every professional must remain up-to-date.

Such a body is of direct value to individuals of course, in guiding and supporting their professional and career development. It is also of great value to employers. In most professions, all or virtually all employers actively look for and put a premium on employees with higher professional memberships, because they are confident that achievement of these levels reliably requires a level of skill and professional competence which is of direct value to the employer.

Such a body is also of value to the profession as a whole. It provides confidence to the public about the capability of the profession and of professionals. And where a strong professional body exists, working effectively from the evidence, a government minister proposing changes to practice which are out of line with professional standards is in a very weak position. The standards in force will reflect the best evidence available.

A new Royal College of Teaching will be an important part of the solution

We badly need an authoritative, nationally-respected Royal College of Teaching. It should set and monitor professional standards, promote professional development, oversee the development of the evidence base, require its use in practice, and speak with authority.

Government currently occupies much of this space, largely because nobody else does. But the imperatives which can drive a government are often too short term, reactive to circumstances and dependent on political administration to be the basis for the development of a profession. And no government body will ever command sufficient professional confidence to win over teachers.

Instead, we need an institution established by that large number of teachers who wish to establish and maintain excellence in their profession. It should draw together schools and teachers of all sorts, employers, subject associations, learned societies and leading academics. It should take responsibility for the teaching standards and for setting qualification standards for entry to the profession. It should set standards for continuing professional development and promote high-quality professional development programmes.

Of course, there are risks to this. A body which was weakly governed or took poor decisions would be a liability. But such a

body would not win the confidence of teachers. There should be no mandation of membership: the new Royal College must win the confidence of teachers through the quality of what it does.

The good news is that a large and growing coalition of people is now working to bring the Royal College into existence. The Prince's Teaching Institute brought together a large group of people to discuss the idea, producing an interim report and establishing a Commission to bring forward proposals. That Commission brought forward proposals for consultation, setting out how a Royal College might come into being and work financially and practically.

The consultation on that report is now closing. No doubt, the replies will throw up any number of issues of substance and detail which require more thought and refinement. However, the response has been strong, with much more engagement than in many government consultations.

There seems little doubt that a consensus is emerging that the teaching profession can and must take greater responsibility for itself by establishing a suitable professional body. It may take a generation to get that body to have the strength and status we all aspire for it to have. But all the more reason to start now.

Jon Coles,
chief executive of United Learning

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