

## Practical Knowledge and the Fiction of Professionalism

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In “Promoting Dialogue on Teacher Professionalism,” Jeannie Kerr argues that the longstanding and recently increasing heteronomy of teaching is due to a misconception about teacher knowledge. According to Kerr (following Richard Bernstein and the hermeneutic line generally), modern epistemology is plagued by a dichotomy “between objectivism and relativism,” leaving us no good way to talk about (among other things) practical wisdom. The idea is that professional practice centrally involves judgment, understood as the intelligent linking of sound generalizations with genuine features of novel, concrete, messy situations. Here knowing and doing come together. As the terms “intelligent,” “sound,” and “genuine” are meant to indicate, the practitioner is trying to get things right. At the same time, getting things right cannot mean abstracting away from the purposive engagement of the practitioner, for it is only within the frame of such engagement that salient features of the novel situation become so. Such a view of practical knowledge is incompatible both with subjectivism (on which view it makes no sense to speak of getting things right) and objectivism (which seeks a description of states of affairs that minimizes the irreducible features of situations and stands independent of our purposes).

I am sympathetic to both of Kerr’s main commitments: her worry about teacher autonomy and her interest in developing a Gadamerian conception of teacher knowledge. Where we differ is over the link between these two commitments, for I cannot see how the latter conception helps address the former worry. Before I go on to explore this disagreement, let me briefly underline our agreements.

Like Kerr, I think that the lack of autonomy in teaching is a big problem. Already in 1932, Willard Waller could speak of the school as “a despotism in a state of perilous equilibrium ... threatened from within and exposed to regulation from without.”<sup>1</sup> The authoritarian tendencies of some school teachers and leaders, Waller explained, were really a matter of protesting too much about their lack of real authority. Among those who undermine the teacher’s authority, Waller lists students, colleagues, parents, alumni, and school board members; and to this, we might add textbook publishers, the media, policy makers, and politicians.<sup>2</sup> So the problem is far from new, but I wonder if even Waller would be surprised by the most recent wave of indignities. From New York to Los Angeles, we are now seeing the rise of “shame lists,” public rankings of teachers according to value-added measures derived from student test scores.

I also share Kerr’s interest in a hermeneutic, neo-Aristotelian return to practical reason. I am alarmed at the technicism overtaking so many practices. Even the professoriate seems content to abrogate judgment about the quality of work to impersonal (and deeply corrupt) mechanisms such as citation indices. Hiding behind the banners of “accountability” and “evidence-based practice” lies a move toward

a crude, know-nothing, input-output accounting mentality and a reduction of practice to facts-plus-technique.

My problem with Kerr's argument lies in the linking of these two commitments, for it is not at all clear how the development of a hermeneutic account of teacher judgment will help with the problem of deprofessionalization and heteronomy in teaching. We philosophers of education, it seems, are prone to imagine that conceptual reform is the key step to social reform, but in this case I think we would do better to proceed on two fronts. We should by all means continue to develop theories of judgment for ourselves and anyone else interested in understanding the nature of practical knowledge. In the meantime, though, we should approach the issue of professionalization in a more sociologically realist, indeed materialist manner. To put my reservation pithily, there is no dialogue about teacher professionalism for Kerr to join. However, pith has its limits, so let us retrace the steps of Kerr's argument to see how she links her two key ideas.

Kerr begins by noting that teaching is heavily regulated from without and thus has still not achieved full professional status. This makes sense given that one of the hallmarks of a profession is self-regulation — internal control over conditions for entrance, standards of practice, and codes of conduct — and that teachers largely lack this control.<sup>3</sup> Then, citing Joseph Dunne for support, she writes that “the kind of knowledge a profession embodies is closely tied to its claims to authority and autonomy.” Let us grant this point as well, while noting its vagueness. The question it begs is, what sort of claims to knowledge have proven instrumental in the securing of professional status? This ambiguity proves fateful for Kerr's argument.

The bulk of her essay is then devoted to locating a conception of teacher knowledge between objectivism and subjectivism. Kerr notes that some have conceived of teaching as an applied science, devoting themselves to the creation of an educational science to be applied. Others have contested this notion, arguing that teacher knowledge is radically contextual and cannot be codified. She writes: “Of central importance is that such an explication of judgment in practice finds a way to navigate a course that moves beyond a detached, objective account of knowledge, yet does not lapse into an arbitrary, subjective, or private account.”

My reply is that if one wants a philosophically satisfying account of teacher knowledge then such an explication of judgment makes perfect sense. If, however, one is attempting to strengthen teaching's bid for professional status, it is precisely the objectivist approach that is needed. Here is how Andrew Abbott puts this point in his classic *The System of Professions*:

The ability of a profession to sustain its jurisdictions lies partly in the power and prestige of its academic knowledge. This prestige reflects the public's mistaken belief that abstract professional knowledge is continuous with practical professional knowledge, and hence that prestigious abstract knowledge implies effective professional work. In fact, the true use of academic knowledge is less practical than symbolic.<sup>4</sup>

The gist of Abbott's fascinating account (I do not have the space for a full rehearsal) is that professionalization is a process by which practices claim and defend turf. The professions represent a dynamic system of jurisdictional maneuvers.

And, as Abbot suggests, one key strategy for seizing or maintaining jurisdiction is the generation of a body of abstract, systematic knowledge. The objection that actual practitioners are unable to use such codified knowledge is beside the point. Jurisdictional control depends on demonstrated command of a body of specialized, detachable knowledge that can be imparted in professional schools.

When Donald Schön proposed that professional education is more like coaching, and professional knowledge more like reflection-in-action, he chose architecture as his prime example. Here then was another practice that had misunderstood itself according to the modern epistemological frame. But this did not stop architecture's bid to professional status. Far from it. It may be our duty as philosophers of practical knowledge to join Schön in rejecting the applied science model of practice, and we may want to draw on resources in Hans-George Gadamer to avoid the relativizing conclusion that some draw from interventions such as Schön's, but we should not kid ourselves that Gadamer's theory of play will help teaching or any other practice succeed in the strange game that is professionalization. Indeed, if we want to level the professional playing field we might do better to offer Gadamerian reconstructions of successful professions, showing how in practices such as law, medicine, architecture, and engineering, no amount of propositional knowledge can make up for a lack of practical wisdom.

If we agree that professionalization is still the goal — and what is interesting about teaching is that it has simultaneously followed a labor model using unions to secure some autonomy — then we need to explore what has hampered us in producing a body of knowledge equivalent to anatomy and physiology in medicine, statutes and cases in law, structural engineering and aesthetics in architecture. And we need to factor in the several ways in which this game has been rigged against teaching. Four come immediately to mind: teaching is a historically feminized practice in a sexist society; because everyone was a student at some point, most see teaching as something anyone could do; because we need an extraordinary number of teachers, professional uplift encounters a strong economic gravity; given the increasing educationalization of social problems, education as our main lever for effecting social change simply seems too important for politicians and pundits to leave alone.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever such a sociologically minded approach ultimately reveals, I am suggesting, it will not show that teaching or any other practice has increased its social status by showing its practitioners to possess practical wisdom. The best doctors possess *phronesis* but this is not why they are driving Lexuses.

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1. Willard Waller, *The Sociology of Teaching* (London: John Wiley, 1932), 10.

2. Notice that while some college teachers do enjoy more autonomy, this fact is thought to earn them a distinguishing title: professor.

3. For these very reasons, teaching was once famously called a "semi-profession"; see, for example, Amitai Etzioni, ed., *The Semi-Professions and Their Organization: Teachers, Nurses, Social Workers*, (New York: The Free Press, 1969). After a time, teaching and the other historically feminized professions were rhetorically upgraded to "helping professions." Despite its cold, detached tone, the

older label is probably more helpful since it underlines the work to be done rather than, as with the newer label, rationalizing it away.

4. Andrew Abbot, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988), 53–54.

5. On educationalization, see, for example, Marc Depaepe and Paul Smeyers, eds., “Symposium on the Educationalization of Social Problems,” *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (2008): 379–474.