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THE EMPTY IDEAL: A CRITIQUE OF *CONTINUING LEARNING IN THE PROFESSIONS* BY CYRIL O. HOULE

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Anyone interested in continuing professional education cannot help but appreciate what Cyril O. Houle (1980) has attempted in *Continuing Learning in the Professions*. He has provided a reference point for future reflection and discussion on the subject of continuing professional education, calling boldly for an approach that will be broadly comparative and take into view the entire occupational lifespan of the individual. I am convinced, however, that educators who wish to follow Houle in approaching the subject not piecemeal but from a comprehensive perspective must be prepared to take issue with Houle's very starting point, his understanding of professionalism.

DEFINING "PROFESSIONALISM"

The term "professionalism" and its cognates is, as Becker (1962) has argued, a symbol, or "folk concept." It is a powerful social symbol, but one that is increasingly obscure and subject to arbitrary usage. As one writer (Barlow, 1980) has put it recently, "in the United States, in the late 1970s, professionalism has come to mean, simultaneously, everything and nothing" (p. 427). For that reason any programmatic discussion of continuing professional education (CPE) must begin by clarifying how the term "professionalism" is being used. Indeed, I would venture the opinion that the success of any discussion of professionalism today is in direct proportion to the light it sheds on what is happening to the word itself as a social, political, and economic symbol.

Houle's initial use of the word is akin to that of Becker. In his opening paragraph Houle sketches a portrait of professionalism as a conception which, he says, had by about 1960 become a "shining symbol throughout the world" (p. 1). Professionalism is, for Houle, first and foremost an ideal which his book is intended to help uphold and maintain.

After describing, in the first chapter the erosion of this ideal, Houle turns in the next two chapters to the task of rethinking the conception of professionalism. What emerges from this discussion is, first, in chapter 2, a focus upon professionalization as a dynamic process. This contrasts with a static notion of professions as inherently and unchangeably different from other occupations. "All occupations seeking the ideals of professionalization are worthy of sympathetic study and . . . no clear-cut boundary separates the professions from other vocations" (p. 27).

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On this view, the question of defining professionalism becomes a question of defining the "ideals of professionalization." Houle appears to address this question in chapter 3, where he sets out fourteen "goals of lifelong professional education." These goals are based upon fourteen "characteristics broadly associated with the professionalization process," characteristics which are, at the same time, goals or ideals.

The fourteen characteristics of the professionalization process are as follows:

1. The conceptual characteristic—Members of a profession should be concerned with clarifying its defining function or functions
2. Mastery of theoretical knowledge
3. Capacity to solve problems
4. Use of practical knowledge
5. Self-enhancement
6. Formal training
7. Credentialing
8. Creation of a subculture
9. Legal reinforcement
10. Public acceptance
11. Ethical practice
12. Penalties
13. Relations to other vocations
14. Relations to users of services

Characteristics number 2 to 5 are further described by Houle as "performance characteristics," and numbers 6 to 14 as "collective identity characteristics."

"Characteristics, by their dynamic nature," says Houle, "can take the form of goals for a professionalizing occupation" (p. 27). Thus Houle starts from a list of characteristics of the professionalism process, equates them without further question to goals of professionalization, and then, taking still another dubious step, equates these in turn to the goals of professional education.

Several questions are raised by this chain of reasoning. Are the goals of the educator who is interested in continuing professional education equivalent to the goals of the profession? Should the educator accept uncritically the goals of the professionalizing occupation, goals which include, in Houle's words, encouraging the public "to become aware of the lofty character of the work done by the practitioners of the vocation"? (p. 61) Second, can one accept uncritically the characteristics of the professionalization process as proper and appropriate goals of the profession itself? Can one, in other words, turn description into prescription without question? Third, how valid are the fourteen characteristics listed by Houle taken simply as description? How were they selected? Do they include all of the important features of the professionalization process? What about autonomy as a characteristic, which Houle has not included, but which many others (Becker, 1962; Freidson, 1970; Goode, 1960; Howe, 1980) have regarded as central.

In answer to the third question posed above, Houle himself implies that his list of fourteen characteristics is somewhat arbitrary in his concession that "many more than fourteen could be identified" (p. 34). Nevertheless, Houle devotes

the whole of Chapter Three to an explication of each characteristic/goal, one at a time, and the rest of the book sets forth an overview of the role of continuing education in relation to these goals. It is safe, therefore, to take these fourteen characteristics/goals of professionalization as a guide to understanding what "professionalism" means for Houle in this book.

It will be useful, I suggest, to view Houle's fourteen characteristics from the perspective of the definition of professionalism proposed by sociologist Terence J. Johnson (1972). Professionalism is not, according to Johnson, an expression of the attributes and inherent nature of particular occupations in contrast to other occupations. It is, rather, a form of occupational control. Johnson is not by any means alone in viewing professionalism primarily in terms of control. In this respect Johnson follows a tradition represented in particular by Everett C. Hughes (1971), who insisted that the professions are in reality groups of people seeking to improve their occupational status and that the ideology of professionalism is one of the most important weapons used in status conflict with other groups (p. 17; cf. Gilb, 1966; Illich 1977; Larson, 1977; Barlow, 1980). Johnson's merit lies in his precise application of this point of view to the matter of defining the term "profession."

A profession is, in Johnson's words, "a means of controlling an occupation" (p. 45), not a type of occupation. More particularly, professionalism is that form of occupational control characterized by the autonomy of the occupational group; that is, the occupational group, or service providers, define the needs of the consumer and the manner in which these needs are attended to. As such, professionalism is a sub-type of what Johnson calls collegiate control, the guild being another sub-type. Alternative forms of control are patronage, in which the client or consumer defines his own needs and the manner in which they are to be met, and the mediative form, in which a third party mediates in the relationship between producer and consumer.

Johnson argues, in a critical review of the sociological literature on the professions, that there has been persistent confusion, in attempts to develop theoretical statements about professional occupations, as to what the object of study actually is, an occupational activity, or the institutionalized form of the control of such activity. The lists of attributes or characteristics of a profession (or the professionalization process), which one scholar after another has developed to define what a profession is, are not, according to Johnson, definitions of occupations at all, but are rather "the characteristics of a peculiar institutionalised form of occupational control" (p. 27).

It is important to point out that Johnson's critique applies both to what Houle calls the "dynamic" approach to professionalism, as well as to the "static" model. Johnson does not make this distinction. In fact, it appears from Johnson's discussion that Houle's distinction is somewhat specious since lists of attributes have been drawn up by advocates of both approaches, including Houle himself. Even if one adopts the "dynamic" model, placing the emphasis upon the process of professionalization, one must define what a profession is in order to be able to describe the ideal towards which the process is supposed to be moving. Johnson's criticism applies to such ideal definitions of a profession just as cleary as to so-

called "static" definitions. Such definitions, both kinds, confuse essential characteristics of an occupational activity and the characteristics of a particular form of occupational control.

Does Johnson's analysis of the confusion between occupational activity and occupational control apply to Houle? To what extent is Houle dealing with learning and occupational controls rather than learning and particular types of occupational activity intrinsically?

THE GOALS OF PROFESSIONALIZATION: CONTROL?

It is apparent that several of the fourteen characteristics of the professionalization process listed by Houle have to do with occupational control. Credentialing is obviously understood by Houle to be a means of occupational control. He points out that "recognition of the need for formal credentialing systems was a key element in the evolution from individualized and unregulated practice to modern professionalism (p. 54)." The ninth characteristic, legal reinforcement, as well as the twelfth, penalties for incompetence, are obviously controlling mechanisms. These three are, in fact, nothing more than controlling devices.

Some of the other characteristics listed by Houle serve as a means of control but have other functions as well. For instance, formal training, serves obviously to prepare candidates to perform the tasks of a profession. But the formalization of the training is at the same time a means of controlling entrance into the profession and, by standardizing preparation, exerting control over how the profession is practiced. Houle quotes Goode (1960) to the effect that a new profession reproduces itself by means of its "control over the selection of professional trainees" (p. 52). Obviously this does not just apply to a new profession.

The creating of a subculture, another of Houle's characteristics, fulfils educational functions, as Houle stresses, but it also is a powerful means of controlling members of a profession. Houle points out that the profession can become "very much like a secret society and may even possess grueling initiatory experiences" (p. 57), and this subculture can become so powerful that it absorbs the private life of the professional person so that "his work becomes his life." In an article on "the impossible profession," psychoanalysis, Janet Malcolm (1980) describes a psychoanalyst who is a member of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute:

> Her entire life was taken up with psychoanalytic concerns; during the day she saw patients, at night she went to meetings at the Institute, and when she and her husband went out to dinner or entertained at home it was always with analysts. Other people fall away, she explained. There is less and less to talk about with people on the 'outside,' who don't look at things the ways analysts do. 'We never seem to tire of one another's company,' she said with wondering satisfaction (p. 72).

"The eleventh characteristic of professionalization," according to Houle, "is that a tradition of ethical practice, sometimes reinforced by a formal code, should be established and then constantly refined in the light of changing circumstances" (p. 63). A code of ethics, which is on nearly every list of attributes

of a profession, is a telling confirmation of Johnson's definition of professionalism as a form of occupational control in which the producer or service provider, not the client, controls the occupation. The reason most frequently given for insisting upon a code of ethics is to ensure that control of the occupation remains with the professional. Only if the profession regulates its own practice in accordance with the highest standards will the profession remain free from outside control and regulation. Interestingly, in his discussion of ethical practice, Houle refers to accounting, which Johnson cites as a prime example of an occupation characterized by patronage as a form of control historically. In other words accounting has generally been client-controlled rather than provider-controlled. Houle's discussion impinges directly on this issue of form of control when he cites conditions necessary for an independent auditing firm to remain independent of the client (p. 65). The implicit assumption is that autonomy is a characteristic of professionalism. Without autonomy as a characteristic of a profession the insistence upon a code of ethics has, in Houle's discussion, lost its distinctive rationale.

To summarize, three of Houle's fourteen characteristics are nothing more than controlling mechanisms, and three more have very important controlling functions. What of the other eight? Only three can be construed as general characteristics which distinguish the work activities, as over against the controlling activities, of certain occupations. These are mastery of theoretical knowledge, problem-solving ability, and use of practical knowledge. We will return to these three below.

Four of the five remaining characteristics have to do with the formal recognition and acceptance of the identity and role of the occupation as a profession, by the public at large (public acceptance, number ten), by other professions and vocations (number thirteen), by clients (number fourteen), and by members of the occupation itself (the conceptual characteristic). These four characteristics may be interpreted as having to do with the legitimacy of the occupation as a profession, the acceptance of its authority, right, and status as a profession. This would be the kindest reading, at any rate, of Houle's discussion of the public acceptance characteristic. The question raised by this characteristic is, public acceptance of what? Houle's answer is that "the general public should be encouraged to become aware of the lofty character of the work done by the practitioners of the vocation" (p. 61). This is not only a characteristic of the professionalization process. What this suggests is that the continuing professional educator is a public relations booster of the profession(s) he works with, dedicated to enhancing its prestige, its status, its "lofty" character. Not surprisingly, Houle tempers this impression by noting that this does not appear to be a "major goal" of either basic or continuing professional education (p. 63). Should it be? Houle suggests that it is better that it be a by-product of efforts to improve performance.

If one adopts Johnson's definitions of professionalism, which makes autonomy the controlling feature, it is possible to understand the pursuit of public acceptance on the part of professionalizing occupations as something other than simple self-advertising of the profession's lofty claims. The profession or would-be profession must convince the public that autonomous control is in the best

interests of the public as well as the occupation. This is the specific meaning of public acceptance. The claim to autonomy has usually been based on the claim to esoteric knowledge. The debate over public acceptance of a given would-be profession or of professionalism itself as a form of occupational control is properly a debate over whether esoteric knowledge is best left in the hands of the experts.

In any case, the four features which I have grouped together as having to do with the legitimacy, authority, and status of a profession all have a controlling function. Efforts to agree on a central mission (the conceptual characteristic) are essential to efforts to control an occupation. The greater the degree of agreement, the greater the control by the leadership. Likewise, Houle's discussion of relations to other vocations and relations to users of service as characteristics of professionalization is a call for control. In both cases, Houle calls for clear definitions of roles and relationships (pp. 67, 70). This call (he is not talking here about one-on-one relations) is followed by a discussion which establishes that clear definition of this relationship is, in fact, extremely difficult, if not impossible. For example, the identity of the "true client" may be uncertain, since many different categories of clients are served by a single practitioner, and each category presents conflicting claims. The resulting relationships may become so complex that, Houle points out, understanding how to cope with them may only be possible after long experience. Such complexity blurs the identity of the would-be profession and with that, its authority and status.

We have now commented on thirteen of Houle's fourteen characteristics. What of the fourteenth, self-enhancement? Houle proposes that "self-enhancement" is a goal of professionalization and, as such, a goal of continuing professional education. But in what sense can self-enhancement be taken as a goal of CPE? Does this means that a course in sailing, or tennis, or karate, taken by a lawyer or doctor for purposes of self-enhancement, is CPE? I suggest that the presence of this characteristic points up a certain arbitrariness in Houle's list, as noted above. This arbitrariness is due in part to the confusion, which Johnson has described, between occupation and occupational control, a confusion to which Houle has fallen victim.

On the other hand, the list is not as arbitrary as it appears at first glance. Ten of the fourteen characteristics have to do with occupational control. In other words, Houle has in effect defined professionalism primarily in terms of the various ways in which an occupational group may seek to control its members. This conclusion, based upon an analysis of the fourteen characteristics, is confirmed by the rest of the book.

CONTROL AND AUTONOMY

Having defined professionalism in the first three chapters, Houle devotes the next seven chapters of the book to a programmatic statement of the role of continuing education is upholding the ideal of professionalism. Chapters four and five focus on the professional as an individual, arguing that continuing education should extend its scope to the occupational lifespan of the individual, and that individual professionals vary widely in their "zest for learning." This

latter argument leads Houle, at the conclusion of chapter five, to a summary statement that points the direction for the rest of the book:

> The two chief concerns of organized continuing education today in all occupations are the same: how to speed up the learning of the majority adopters and how to reach the laggards. Debate ordinarily concerns whether it is better to use the stick or the carrot (p. 164).

Houle concludes as follows: "The remainder of this book deals with the topic of how and by whom the carrot and the stick can be applied."

After three chapters on the providers of continuing education, the design of continuing education, and the evaluation of continuing education, Houle turns directly and explicitly to the issue of "quality control." The purpose of this, the ninth chapter,

> is to identify the major quality controls now being used or advocated and to indicate how continuing education reinforces them. Many previously considered topics will again be reviewed; this time the focus is directly upon quality control, not upon education (p. 269).

Control, then, or, how to apply the carrot and the stick, is a dominant theme in Houle's programmatic statement, if not the dominant theme. In this sense Johnson's definition of professionalism sheds light on Houle. However, there is a profound and striking difference between Houle and Johnson in the way they understand professional control. Johnson has singled out autonomy as the characteristic mark of the professional form of occupational control. Houle, on the other hand, as we have seen, has pointedly not included autonomy as one of the characteristics of professionalization. He treats it as one form of professional practice among others, distinguished by its "entrepreneurial" setting from other settings, collective, hierarchical, and adjunct (pp. 97, 98). But if the control that Houle is talking about is not control by the professional, who then is responsible for quality? Houle appears to be open to a wide range of answers, ranging from government regulatory agencies, to institutional administrations in "hierarchical" settings, to client or lay citizen bodies or review boards. His concern is not with which forms of control are consistent with "professionalism" but with the role of continuing education in "assuring quality" performance by whatever means of control prove effective.

The traditional emphasis upon autonomy as a mark of professionalism has left its mark on Houle's discussion in the form of his emphasis upon the individual. "The primary responsibility for learning," he says, "should rest on the individual" (p. 305). This has clear meaning in the entrepreneurial setting, but has become more and more problematic in some large institutional settings, where initiative is very often out of the hands of the individual.

Houle is correct in recognizing that the term "professionalism" has become associated with institutional settings where the worker is not autonomous. Indeed, he is correct in holding that the term has never been consistently applied strictly to autonomous occupations. Others such as Goode (1960) have held that "thoughout Western history, most professionals have been bureaucrats" (p. 906). But this is not just another fact. The contradiction between the ideology of

autonomy and the bureaucratic reality is the central fact in any attempt to rethink the entire conception of professionalism. It is the problem of the individual who views himself as a professional and yet finds himself within a large organization as an "employee." This must be recognized as one of the fundamental issues facing the professionalizing occupations, and certainly one of the central problems that must be addressed by educators interested in professional education of any kind. According to one unusually perceptive expert in the field of management (Drucker, 1978), this very issue is "likely to be *the* social question of the developed countries for the twentieth and probably for the twenty-first century" (p. 277).

Is the continuing educator simply going to go along with what Lewis Lapham (1981) calls "the national prejudice in favor of institutions rather than individuals" (p. 11), or is he/she going to struggle, question, wrestle with the principles and values which are at stake? According to the sociologist Everett C. Hughes (1963), it is the people in bureaucratic organizations who will be the innovators, working our new formulae of freedom and control. He even ventures the opinion that:

> the professional conscience, the superego, of many professions will be lodged in that segment of professionals who work in complicated settings, for they must, in order to survive, be sensitive to more problems and to a greater variety of points of view (p. 666).

Whether in or out of organizations, however, it is a conflict, a struggle over values, a matter of "conscience."

THE EMPTY IDEAL

It is now possible to identify a more basic problem with Houle's view of professionalism. He has described professionalism as an ideal. But when the reader searches through the book for the substance of that ideal what emerges is a preoccupation with control. What is missing from the book is an articulation of the vision, the principles, the content of the ideal in the name of which control is to be exercised. Control is not an ideal, needless to say, and "quality" without further definition is an empty term.

To be sure, Houle talks about quality. His introductory chapters on professionalism as a concept lead the reader to anticipate that a statement of the "ideals" and the "goals" or the "standards" of a reconstructed vision of professionalism will be forthcoming. Such is not the case. Instead, as we have seen, the goals of professionalization turn out to be mechanisms of control, for the most part—process, not content. The ideal turns out to be empty, and the role of the educator appears to be that of supporting those who claim control, power, and status in the name of professionalism simply because they make that claim. Though Houle decries just such an abuse of the term "professionalism" and calls for standards and criteria to judge such claims, he has contributed to the abuse by giving the impression that better mechanisms of control and more systematic use of the continuing educator will preserve the ideal and diminish the abuse in the absence of an effort to define the values and ideals substantively.

The three goals, of Houle's fourteen, which have to do not with occupational control but with occupational activity as such all have to do with knowledge (mastery of theoretical knowledge, capacity to solve problems, use of practical knowledge. These three goals are not taken up and developed in any significant way in the book except as they are implied by talk about learning in general. Yet the emptiness of Houle's treatment of learning as a concept is suggested by the fact that the only definition of learning, or education, in the book is utterly external: education is "planned changes in behavior" (p. 227). This shallow treatment of knowledge in relation to professionalism is unfortunate since at the heart of the professional ideal are vision and values pertaining to knowledge.

The dyanmic conditions of society in the last half of the twentieth century to which Houle refers are effecting momentous changes in the relationship between knowledge and work, ideas and occupations, and as such, in the way in which the ideals of professionalism need to be articulated. Houle is right that "the entire conception of professionalism must be rethought," but that rethinking process must include attention to what is happening to knowledge, ideas, vision today.

WHAT IS AT STAKE

Why are we agitated over professionalism, after all? What is at stake for those for whom the symbol of professionalism retains positive meaning beyond prestige, status, job security, higher income? I would maintain that what is at stake is the power of vision, of ideas, of belief in the power of thought and reflection, knowledge and reason, applied to human affairs. One cannot talk about quality without talking about values and ideas.

A programmatic statement on the role of the educator in relationship to the professions must address itself to the issue of knowledge, what is happening to knowledge today, what are the sources of new knowledge, what changes are taking place in the way knowledge is organized, classified, categorized, defined, what changes are taking place in what is taken for knowledge, what changes are taking place in the control of knowledge, in the distribution of knowledge, and, above all, what values, vision, and thought are informing that which is being produced and put forth as knowledge by all of the myriad sources dinning into our ears by way of more and more media.

If what adult and continuing education as a field has to offer to the professionalizing occupations is not about vision, new ways of thought, ideas, "research" understood as the search for new insight, new understanding, new ways of interpreting ourselves and our world, as well as new facts, together with critical judgement about alternative visions and insights, then it is a hollow, empty enterprise that should be abandoned. And if it is about critical thought and vision, then it must cherish the place where thought and vision take place, inside each individual human being, where the interactions and transactions we have with one another and the world are registered and take on meaning, significance, value, weight, feeling.

One of the dominant interpreting tendencies today is to associated professionalism with exterior, technical views of knowledge, behavioristic views of learning, exterior measures of performances. The interior realm of human

experience is being excluded from the notion of "professionalism" in the name of objectivity and quality control. But the point of objectivity is the pursuit of truth and to escape illusion, self-delusion, partial and distorted versions of reality. It is therefore a misuse of the principle of objectivity to exclude from consideration the interior dimension of human reality. It is also a betrayal of the ideal of professionalism to abandon the human spirit, soul, place of vision, thought, consciousness, which I have called "interiority."

Autonomy as a professional ideal in the nineteenth century was much more than just a characteristic of the external work setting. Wrapped up in it was a set of values, including lifelong commitment to a "calling", and belief in systematic theoretical knowledge as a liberating force. Along with this, I would maintain, the notion of autonomy carried with it a certain view of the individual human person as agent in applying ideas, thought, and vision to the world (Cf. Bledstein, 1978, p. 87). In demoting autonomy from its place as a characteristic of professionalization without attention to such matters Houle has forfeited the opportunity to come to grips in a fundamental way with the ideals of professionalism. His bow to the individual as the one bearing primary responsibility for learning seems little more than a gesture. It is unconvincing within the total framework of the book.

CONCLUSION

It could be argued that professionalism does *not* stand for an ideal or set of ideals or vision. This is implied in Johnson's definition of professionalism. And according to one of the most careful students of the professions (Carr-Saunders, 1933) professionals "lack vision" (p. 498). Yet I would hold with many others (Gross and Osterman, 1972, Dumont, 1970; Gerstl and Jacobs, 1976), that there is a vision, a set of ideals, embodied in the symbol of professionalism, beyond the narrow goal of self-interest.

One of the ideals for which professionalism has stood, perhaps the leading one, has been the liberating power of knowledge and learning. "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." This idea, sometimes taken in context, sometimes taken out of context, has been understood and interpreted differently at different times and by different professions. At one time it was understood theologically, that is, the knowledge was knowledge of God and his ways in the world, and liberation or freedom was understood as freedom from sin. In the modern period knowledge and freedom have been interpreted in terms of non-theological visions such as John Dewey's "freed intelligence as a social force (1963, p. 55)." Today the liberal vision out of which Dewey spoke has lost its commanding position in American society. It is therefore all the more important that the basic connection between knowledge and freedom be rearticulated in relation to the changed conditions of contemporary society.

> Will professionals in this age of increasing organizational scale and power be able to shift their emphasis from the traditional issue of autonomy from clients to the more crucial autonomy from taskmasters? (Gerstl and Jacobs, 1976, p. 20).

Herein lies the significance of those voices within adult education, such as *Second Thoughts*, published by Basic Choices, Inc., and the National Alliance for Voluntary Learning, which are addressing this question.

Professionalism is a powerful social symbol in process of continuing formation. It is a given, but it is also contingent, and its future shape and the shape of its influence, its "realm", will depend upon how this and succeeding generations envision it, interpret it, and shape it. As Robert Carlson (1977) suggests, "it may well be that a careful search for alternative approaches to professionalization is one of the most important and largely untouched research areas in the field of adult education" (p. 61).

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