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Professionalism: An anchor to the past or a way to the future?

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Abstract

Learning advisors wear a Joseph-coat of many colours. Our work includes elements of both support and challenge as we become motivators, counsellors, teachers and critics to the students we work with – sometimes all in the same session! What prepares us for the challenges these multiple roles bring? How do we deal with this multiplicity? How can we, as a profession, ensure that our work is safe, ethical and, above all, recognised by those we work for?

This paper argues that we need to move to heighten the professional standing of what we do, especially in light of the recent changes in the tertiary sector in New Zealand. It suggests that we can look to the experiences and practices of other helping professions such as teaching and counselling, and explore the need for professional supervision. It presents a brief review of the literature but is primarily designed as a springboard for ongoing discussion and debate as to the future of our work and the role that ATLAANZ might play in determining such a future.

The 2006 ATLAANZ conference marks, almost to the month, the end of my twelfth year as a learning advisor. I started in ‘learning support” with The Open Polytechnic and then moved to the Auckland College of Education. Then, as now, there was no specific training for this work; no particular qualification required. One of the most interesting things about this work is the diversity of people who do it. As I am the membership officer for the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand (ATLAANZ), I can tell you how many learning advisors there are in the association – but that would only approximate the numbers of learning advisors there actually are. Some very interesting questions arise as I reflect back and think forward about the work I do. Who are we? Why do people do this work? How did they get into it? What is the work we do? Are we professionals? If this is so – what makes it so? What role should ATLAANZ play in the development of the profession of learning advising? It is these questions I will explore in this paper.

Who are we?

In 2006 there were 166 learning advisors who were members of the national association ATLAANZ. There must, of course, be others who work in this field but we have no way of knowing this information. Since ATLAANZ was formed in 2000, 281 unique membership numbers have been issued. 2006 saw the highest number of active memberships in our history (See Figure 1).

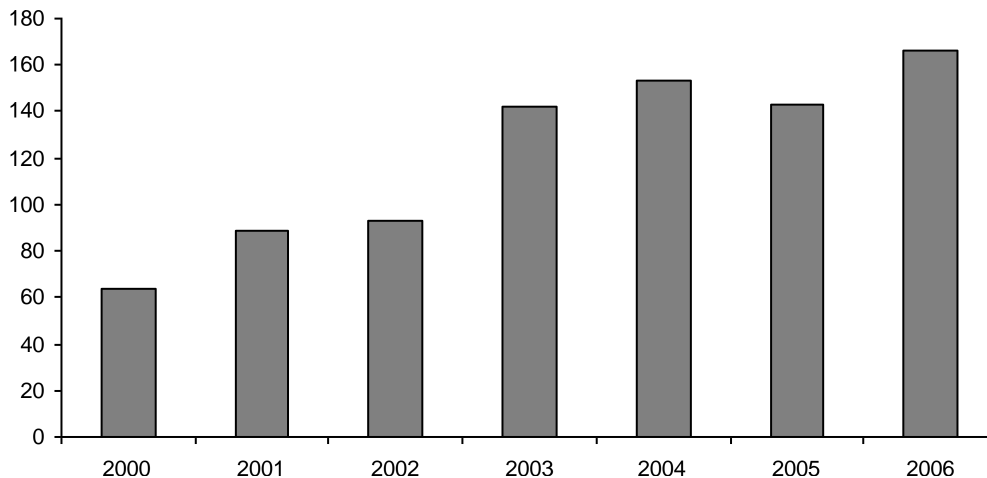

Figure 1. ATLAANZ membership by year

Of the 166 members in 2006, 24 have been members for the entire seven years of the association's existence and 36 were new to the association this year. Beyond these simple statistics we have little other information about our membership. Simple arithmetic would then tell us that 115 people have been members of ATLAANZ but are not now. Retirement would account for some but perhaps there are other reasons for why people come and go as they do. Firstly, as our work contains a 'teaching' element, the reasons for leaving may be similar to those given by teachers who leave in the first few years, citing three main reasons: the job was 'not for them'; the low status of teaching and associated low levels of pay; and, burnout and stress (see, for example, Baldacci & Johnson, 2006; Cosgrove, 2000; Troman, 2000).

As well, it could be related to the whole "finding yourself in your working life" thing. It has been said that people entering the workforce now can expect to have multiple employers in their lifetime (Grimaldi, 2006). This period in history has been described as a time of 'precarious employment' characterised by the rise of temporary and unpaid work as part of a career path (Connell & Burgess, 2006). Most recently the theory of the 'boundary-less career' has arisen, where career choice is strongly driven by market forces. At the same time, however, in an apparent paradox, people must be concerned about the meaning and purpose of what they do and remaining employable rather than being connected to the notion of a single, life-long career (Lips-Wiersma & Mcmorland, 2006). Perhaps leaving learning advising is related to the work we do. This is the next area for discussion in this paper but before leaving this section about *who* we are I would suggest that we don't really know, and that ATLAANZ has a role, perhaps even a responsibility to its members, to find out why people join us and why they leave.

What do we do?

Most would agree that the work of learning advisors contains elements of many things – teaching, encouraging, motivating, coaching, counselling, facilitation, advocacy, research and professional development. We work primarily with students but also with academic colleagues, administration and faculty. An interesting paper by Spillet and Moisiewicz (2004) about the roles of a dissertation advisor (the equivalent of an academic supervisor in New Zealand) struck a chord. The similarity between the roles they discussed, described, almost completely, my work with students. Not my whole job, but certainly a large part of my day-to-day work.

They describe four roles played by an advisor. There were the two support roles of cheerleader and counsellor, and the two challenge roles of coach and critic. As a cheerleader, the advisor provides support and encouragement, demonstrating an interest and belief in the student's work and a willingness to help. Cheerleaders offer time and access, build trust and encourage effort and, with

"frequent acknowledgements that the student is making progress help to sustain student persistence" (p. 249), their role is vital to both the student and the institution.

The counsellor helps students become aware of obstacles and blocks related to their work and provides information to the student on self-management techniques to help overcome these blocks. They focus on the student's 'mental game' by building confidence, maintaining motivation, helping with stress management, challenging old study habits and fostering reflection. They can also encourage the student to normalise their experience and provide a sense of perspective.

In the two challenge roles, the coach directs the work and breaks it into small, achievable steps, connects to the 'big picture' and builds skills to increase the "students' sense of do-ability and can-do-ability" (p. 251). The critic gives students a constructive evaluation of their work, encouraging positive change and empowerment. In addition, the critic develops students' thinking and their voice and ownership of the work through questioning to clarify ideas and ask for explanation, and generating discussion about why the work is the way it is.

All these roles are clearly different, but they are also interdependent with blurred boundaries. For example in the cheerleader role, the advisor builds trust which then enables the critic to be more effective. However, there must be a balance of the roles – too much of any one of them will not lead to positive outcomes for the students. Powerful learning occurs when advisors provide high levels of both support *and* challenge (Spillet & Moisiewicz, 2004).

Working with students is the bulk of what we do – despite the clamour for 'embedding'. But the world of academia is changing. Few of us present at the 2006 conference have escaped the effects of reshaping, restructuring and redundancy. It is not new, of course – I was made redundant from TOPNZ in 1996 – but it is still here. Student numbers in tertiary education in New Zealand are changing as a 'baby blip' moves into the sector. Recently, mature students have become a lesser proportion of the student population (University of Auckland, 2006) and this too may affect our work. The financial commitment of the government to education is coming with more strings attached, most notably about teaching and learning, and retention, and there is a noticeable air of belt tightening. In the past two years we have seen Colleges of Education merged out of existence, several polytechnics facing crippling financial shortfalls, and faculties in many universities shedding staff.

And when the squeeze is on, never for one instant should we forget that we are "fringe" dwellers and in a precarious position, even if we have justified our existence and embedded ourselves to the nth degree, there is every indication that we too will be expected to do more with less.

Our lives *are* impacted by our work. Stress is a large part of our lives and we are as prone to burnout as any other of the 'helping professions'. In the past we have eschewed any relationship between learning advising and student health and disability, striving to ensure that we are seen as academics, avoiding like the plague the word "remedial" and working to dispel the notion of "deficit" in our work. However, this may not always be a helpful way to be. We can probably learn quite a lot about how to be professional from the health and counselling fields and what do they do to stay sane, healthy and motivated, both individually and as professional groups. But are we actually a *profession*?

Are we a profession?

Colloquially, the term 'professional' encompasses notions of commitment, self-organisation, ethics, expertise and status. In his discussion of the status of lecturing, Elliott (1998) summarises the debate around the concept of lecturing as a profession. He notes that to compare professions on the basis of status, autonomy or esteem has "little more than curiosity value" (p. 162) as the concept meets with little consensus among practitioners or the literature. He suggests that lecturers maintain the 'myth' of professionalism because it serves a need related to public confidence and faith in performance.

However Elliot (1998) does suggest “the value of professionality as a notion … may be found in its potential to legitimate autonomy” (p. 164).

Elliot also cites key literature that views professionalism in two radically opposed ways. Firstly, the work of Illich (1973) suggests that the key agenda for professionals is the defence of their profession, which can therefore limit their commitment to those who receive their services. This is in stark contrast to the views of Carr and Kemmis (1986) who suggest that the “distinguishing feature of professions is that the overriding commitment of their members is to the well-being of their clients” (p. 8 in Elliot, 1998, p. 163).

Other literature links professionalism to ethical behaviour (Corey, Corey & Callanan, 2007). Corey et al. note however that although professionalism has a relationship with ethical behaviour, a person can act unprofessionally and still not act unethically. For example, not returning phone calls in a timely fashion is probably unprofessional but is not unethical.
Professionalisation has become a rallying cry for learning advisors. I’ve noted how careful many of us have been to include the word in this conference, for instance. It is blithely and glibly spoken of, but can we truly claim it? If so, why? If not, why not? In comparison to other helping professions we may have some way to go to prove this – if indeed we need to! But I think we can learn from them without competing. With such ambiguity in the literature, perhaps this is another area that needs further debate within our association.

One area of interest to me in all of this discussion of professionalism is the concept of ‘supervision’ – what is this and what role could it play in our work and professional lives?

What is supervision?

Supervision has been a central component of the move to professionalising other groups such as nursing and the clergy (McMahon, 2003). According to Morrissey (2005), supervision “plays a central role in promoting and maintaining best practice” (p. 313) but to be effective it must be based on a shared understanding of what supervision is and the roles each participant plays in the supervisory relationship. Hawkins and Shohet (2000) add that supervision “can be a very important part of taking care of oneself” (p. 5) and that it can help counter the “staleness, rigidity and defensiveness that can easily occur in professions that require us to give so much of ourselves” (p. 5). But what exactly is ‘supervision’?

Supervision comes in many forms and is a debated issue in many ways. Depending on what you read, supervision can be trauma counselling, professional development, reflective practice, mentoring or an apprenticeship scheme. One of the biggest issues in the debate is that if professionalism is truly equated with autonomy, why is there a need for supervision (Grauel, 2002)?

Perhaps we need to reframe supervision as reflective practice (Yegdich, 2002) and move away from the more medical, deficit and power differentiated concepts embodied in the word ‘supervision’. This leads to the notion of self-supervision, a new force gaining strength in other fields, which is “the ability and the desire to question one’s practice” (Hawkins & Shohet, 2000, p. 193) and become aware of our own motives and practices. Yegdich suggests that reflective practice is the process portion of supervision and as such is “unsuitable for those with no experience” (p. 256). She goes on to note that although reflection is useful, it must occur within a supervision framework as “we are unable to be objective about ourselves in a way that others can” (p. 258).

However, McMahon (2003) has noted “‘niggles’ of discontent” (p. 178) about supervision, finding evidence that it makes little difference to practice and that the outcomes, proclaimed in the rhetoric, have yet to be realised. She found in her research that the respondents who participated in supervision benefited from it but how much those benefits made a difference in practice was unclear. She concluded that “while those who receive supervision experience personal benefits, this does not amount to a case for advocating for supervision across the profession” (p. 185) and that many helping

professions are now questioning the need to adopt supervision as a requirement for professional practice.

However, to leave all professional development solely to individuals may be counter-productive and the words of Dewey sound a warning here. If we reduce our work to an individual's artistry and expertise then we are relinquishing the notion that learning advising has a cumulative tradition with a specific, professional knowledge base (Tanner & Tanner, 1987) and so what learning there is will "tend to be born and to die with that person" (Dewey, 1929 cited in Tanner & Tanner, 1987, p. 172). At the very least, their accumulated wisdom will be lost to the rest of the profession when they leave. Again, what role does a professional association need to have to preserve the accumulated wealth of wisdom of its members?

What is the Role of ATLAANZ?

From what I have covered so far it seems that perhaps the real role for ATLAANZ is to help answer the previous three questions: Why do people do this work? What is the work we do? What makes us professionals?

McMahon and Patton (2002) contend that the role of professional associations in the helping professions is a leadership one – where the way forward comes from "within". We must first acknowledge and respect our current stores of knowledge. Second, we must ensure that our association develops a vision for learning advising and that we work toward that vision. We must continue to enable and empower learning advisors across the country and ensure that strong professional networks are built and maintained. Our annual national conference is, I believe, a key and critical element to this. This conference, as it has always done in all the years I have been coming, has re-inspired me, reassured me and restored me to continue to work for one more year. I hope that it will continue to do that for all learning advisors in the future.

I believe we have made a good start in the work of defining our profession and we are to be congratulated for our solid, if modest, beginnings in many areas. We are a small group but contain a great strength of purpose within our number. I have been heartened to see moves toward the development of professional qualifications in our field, the increased use of research related to our practice and the publication of this research, and the gathering of critical data about our past and present practice. I have been moved by the support we have been able to give our colleagues when they have most needed it and I hope we never lose this caring and aroha for others. I have one last plea though – please get involved, respond and debate as it is critical is that we *all* work for the common good. Only then can we move forward and continue to create the profession of learning advising.

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