

“PROFESSIONALLY SIGNIFICANT COMPETENCIES AS A CORE CHARACTERISTIC OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE”

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Annotation: In this article, the main characteristic of professional competence is mentioned.

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Professional and practice-based learning is a process which manifests itself in many different forms. It differs by personal characteristics of the learners, levels of their professions, fields of practice, intentionality of their learning, and formalisation of the learning activities. Notions of competence have entered this diverse practice in many ways. The question is whether conceptions of professional competence have helped the practice of professional and practice-based learning. In this chapter it is argued that this is indeed the case. Although various attempts to implement competence-based professional learning programmes were heavily criticized, later developments in competence theory and research gave new insights which emphasized the integrative meaning of competence within professional practice. It helped in mapping professional fields from a domainspecific as well as a generic behavioural perspective. The eight core characteristics of professionalism are: Competence, Knowledge, Conscientiousness, Integrity, Respect, Emotional Intelligence, Appropriateness, and Confidence. By finding ways to strengthen each of these attributes, you can become confident to act professionally wherever you find yourself working.

Professionalism

Professionalism is a powerful quality. It allows you to fulfill your role to the best of your ability. It helps you to impress and inspire others. And it gives you a deep sense of satisfaction and self-worth. What's more, professionalism is something that everyone can aspire to from day one of their career. In this article we explain what professionalism means today, and show you how to act and feel like a professional – wherever you work. What Is Professionalism?

As the saying goes, «Professionalism is not the job you do, it's how you do the job.» Professionalism involves consistently achieving high standards, both visibly and «behind the scenes» – whatever your role or profession. Some sectors, workplaces or roles have

particular «rules» of professionalism. These may be explicit, such as an agreed dress code, or a policy for using social media. Other rules and expectations may not be written down, but they can be just as important – such as what is regarded as professional behavior at meetings, or even how people personalize their desks. It pays to be observant, and to ask for clarification if necessary. «Fitting in» is a big part of professionalism, as it's a way to show respect, attention to detail, and a commitment to upholding agreed practices and values. However, «being true to yourself» is just as important. True professionals don't follow rules mindlessly, and they know when and how to challenge norms. They're also flexible, and they find their own ways to do things – while still maintaining high standards. The concept of competence is probably as old as humankind. Homo sapiens have always been desiring to master skills and to find ways to solve practical, professional and scientific challenges. Certain individuals always received the prerogative to perform certain activities which had a highly symbolic meaning. The attribution of authority was originally strongly related to tradition but that gradually moved to cognition and ability. In the current meritocratic society, people are generally allocated to jobs based on educational achievement and their profile of capabilities and other personal characteristics. The drive of individuals to learn to perform in certain fields of activities, however, never changed, and is to a large extent based on eagerness to master certain skills, become independent and get recognition. This is very well visible in babies and toddlers when they want to turn in their cradle, crawl on the floor and walk in the room, stimulated by their parents who are cheering when the first steps are taken. Young children constantly move around until they are able to do what they desperately want at the end of the day: to gain independence; or: to become competent. For gaining an independent position in society nowadays, individuals need to pass through formal education trajectories and complete examinations. The higher the education levels students achieve, the higher their chances of getting a good position at the labour market and an appointment in a better-paid and stable job. Independence, however, is a relative notion. In society, people are interdependent by definition, but individual ego development is necessary for getting a personal identity in the first place and a professional identity later in life, for which recognition is needed, by getting an appropriate education qualification, and subsequently by being appointed in a job, being promoted, rewarded, and having a career perspective. Development opportunities are the top priority of graduates from higher education and considered to be a major labour condition. Because of the massification of education, it became an industry. And because of its limited innovation capacity, it somehow alienated from society. Getting a diploma became a goal in itself, many educational institutions were not well-aligned to societal demands anymore, and became pedagogical islands. Sometimes this process is called the 'diploma disease', but it can also be named the 'competence crisis', as the big issue was whether graduates who were qualified really were able to perform according to standards in the profession and expectations in the working situation. Having a college degree was no guarantee for being able to perform well on the job or in society in general.

The disconnection between education and the labour market was the main cause of the competence movement (Grant et al, 1979). Therefore, professional associations began to articulate performance requirements and develop competence profiles with which candidates had to comply to enter the profession. Educational institutes reworked their curricula to adjust them to what was expressed as being important by professional associations and industry organisations. However, as the concept of intelligence, the concept of competence was multi-dimensional, and various conceptions of professional competence emerged. Sometimes, the concept was praised and, at other times, it was

cursed because of the differences between its intrinsic meaning, quality promises and disappointing application and results (Mulder, 2011). Nevertheless, at present, the concept of competence is institutionalized, for instance in the European Qualification Framework, and thereby in national qualification frameworks of EU member states, where competence is seen as the ability to apply knowledge and skills at a certain level of independency and autonomy (Mulder, 2012). It is also used in education or training profiles for certain professional groups such as medical specialists, and in the design of educational programs, especially in vocational education and training. Although these applications are quite straightforward, different theoretical insights have developed, which contradict one another on several dimensions. Certain authors stress the importance of the integral nature of the concept of competence, while others separate knowledge, skills and attitudes. Another major issue is the distinction between competence-oriented and competence-based education which has major implications for the extent to which principles of competence development are implemented in education programs.

In this article, the concept of competence is placed in the context of professional and practicebased learning. This learning is a process which manifests itself in many different forms. It differs by personal characteristics of the learners, levels of their professions, fields of practice, intentionality of their learning, and formalisation of the learning activities. Notions of competence have entered this diverse practice in many ways. The main question in this chapter is whether conceptions of professional competence have helped the practice of professional and practicebased learning. To link the concept of competence to professional and practice-based learning, the chapter commences with a review of the historical roots of the concept of professional competence, which are related to competence motivation, human intelligence, professional performance and professional education. This description will show that the concept of competence was used in the context of learning and performance from the outset, and that competence and professional and practice-based learning are intrinsically related to one another. The next section, on competence and professions, will make that even clearer. Various professional fields are selected, in which competence profiles have helped to improve professional and practice-based learning in terms of learner assessment, selection, education, training and development. The fields which are selected are management, human resource development, medicine, and purchasing. This selection is not meant as being complete but serves as an example of ways in which the competence movement has entered professions and professional development. This section is concluded with a description of an attempt to capture all competence in one behavioural competency framework, which can be used for implementing processes for professional and practice-based learning and self-reflection and development. The link between competence and professional practice however differs by the way in which competence is defined. Three broad approaches of competence and professional development are distinguished here:

1. Competence and behaviouristic functionalism, which stresses the importance to specifically determine the discrepancies between actual and desired competence, leading to training of sometimes miniscule skills; an important pitfall of this approach is fragmentizing learning;
2. Competence as integrated occupationalism, which is visible in the present qualification frameworks and competence-based education approaches in which it is stressed that knowledge, skills and attitudes should be integrated in the curriculum, teaching, learning and testing;

3. Competence as situated professionalism, which indicates that competence only gets meaning in a certain context; an important pitfall here is holism, when details of competence are covered under generic expressions of abilities of people, which may be sufficient in personal development processes, but not for professional certification purposes (Mulder, 2011). Although these three different approaches have different implications for professional and practice-based learning, we contend that in all three there are strengths and weaknesses, and that they can be combined in practice. The optimum mix depends on the purpose and the specific context of the professional learning, which can vary from learning to change winter tyres to leading an open heart surgery team. Related to the latter, there is another fundamental difference in the relationship between competence and professional practice which has important implications for professional and practice-based learning, which is the difference between generic competence and task-oriented competence. An example of the first is the communication capability of a medical expert, whereas an example of the second would be the ability to make the right diagnosis given a series of certain medical examinations. Again we contend that both are important in professional practice and for professional and practice-based learning.

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