

A new research role for higher professional education

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Lectureship 'Pedagogy of vocational and professional
education'^(*)
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World Congress Action Research
Groningen, August 21-24 2006

The foundation of the lectureship 'Pedagogy of vocational and professional education' is the concept of the 'school as career centre'. Core values are: talent-based learning and independent and critical thought. Our participants innovate their practices according to the this concept using action research. The development of a new research identity is not self-evident, however. Therefore, we initiated a participative action research aimed to develop an understanding of our own 'pedagogy' and to help them develop a research identity. Our research question is: how can we improve their professional development as action researchers and consequently their innovative practices?

Introduction

In 2001, higher professional education received a research function by law. This new research role is incorporated into so-called lectureships. In these lectureships, which are analogous to university chairs to some degree, experts in specific fields function as intermediaries between higher professional education and the networked knowledge society. Their role is to 1) develop and distribute knowledge, 2) provide human resource development for teachers, 3) improve the curriculum, and 4) support innovation in business and non-profit organisations. This contribution presents the preliminary results of a participative action research in the lectureship *Pedagogy of vocational and professional education*. The aim of this research is to help professionals in this lectureship develop a research identity as part of their professional development and as such constituent for their innovations. Our research question is: how can we improve their professional development as action researchers and consequently their innovative practices? We present first an overview of the Dutch debate about the new research role. Then we will focus on our own Institution and its HRM policies on research. Third, we describe the School as Career Centre and our translation of its design rules into our lectureship. Then we give a historical account of our lectureship, followed by an outline of the action research we, the professor and senior researcher, conduct and of how we try to help the professionals in our lectureship. We conclude with some general remarks about the new research role for higher professional education.

Dutch debate on the new research role

The new research role is highly debated in the Netherlands. At the end of the eighties, when colleges for professional education merged into the institutions they are today, the first proposals for this new role were made. It lasted another ten years before the required research skills of 'the new teacher' were firmly put on the agenda and it will take at least another ten years before one can speak of a 'research tradition'. Although most agree that this new research role has the potential to add value to the Dutch knowledge economy, there is no consensus yet on the role itself. What kind of research best fits professional education? What are the consequences for designing the research practice and for the required research skills of this new teacher? Roughly, two positions emerge. These reflect the Modes 1 and 2 research as observed by Gibbons *et al.*: '[...] in Mode 1 problems are set and solved in a context governed by the, largely academic, interests of a specific community. By contrast, Mode 2 knowledge is carried out in a context of application. Mode 1 is disciplinary while Mode 2 is transdisciplinary. Mode 1 is characterized by homogeneity, Mode 2 by heterogeneity. Organisationally, Mode 2 is more heterarchical and transient. In comparison with Mode 1, Mode 2 is more socially accountable and reflexive. It includes a wider, more temporary and heterogeneous set of practitioners, collaborating on a problem defined in a specific and localised context' (2005, p. 3). Some find in this latter definition a decisive argument for Mode 2, while others prefer the university-like Mode 1.

The debate is not just internal to the world of professional education, but universities participate in it as well. Institutions for professional education desire the possibility for their staff to gain a Ph.D., which is traditionally only accessible for university staff. This ambition raises a lot of eyebrows in universities and when an institution for professional education posted an advertisement for the recruitment of some twenty Ph.D. candidates, universities responded quickly with the establishment of professional doctorates. This professional doctorate, as it exists in Australia and Great-Britain since twenty years, is not an official Ph.D. (one does not have the right to call oneself 'doctor' but one may write 'PD' behind one's name). With establishing trajectories of two to three years for applied research in the fields of professions, universities try to remain in control over, and to preserve the privilege to assign, academic titles. Professional education responds with pointing out the academic merits of its professors and claims its efforts can only succeed if their staff have access to academic titles as well.

Furthermore, the Dutch government participates in the debate. Criticism increases as the lectureships, once considered free havens for the development of a research tradition, are evaluated: results have been made, yes, but a lot of money is invested and taken away from the primary process of education. It is time, so it seems, that lectureships are held more and more accountable for their actions; this decreases the freedom they had in the past and only time will tell whether this accountability demand came too soon.

In conclusion it is safe to say that the lectureships are instrumental in establishing a research tradition, but also that the debates are still ardent and complex.

Policy review

Our own Institution has not chosen an official standpoint in this debate yet and the professors are free to shape their own research. Mode 1 and 2 go hand in hand. However, there are some indications for a preference for Mode 1. For instance, a course is being developed with substantial attention for the 'scientific method' and in recruitment a Ph.D. will become more important.

In an early strategy document (Haagse Hogeschool, 2002) the 'Knowledge Institution' is defined in terms of student-based education: teachers require new competences for developing new educational designs and their core competences do not include research. Research is isolated in lectureships, concerned with innovation of education and establishing a research practice. The aim is to build an infrastructure that facilitates reflection on innovative performances, learning from these reflections and creating a culture in which reflection and learning are positive experiences. In a vision statement (Haagse Hogeschool/TH Rijswijk, 2004) the Institution expresses its desire to be a partner in regional socio-economic issues. The realization of this vision demands an increase of the quality of education via the implementation of the above mentioned infrastructure. To enable lifelong learning for students education must be innovated; lifelong learning for staff requires 'competence management' and 'professional development'. As new teachers' competences are mentioned: research, didactics and external orientation. A Ph.D. is considered an important asset and plays an increasing part in both recruitment and professional development. For the supporting staff 'attention' is mentioned but not explained. In HRM further professional development of employees is central and made operational in Personal Development Plans, portfolios, career counselling, coaching and a multidisciplinary environment. As a 'Regional Knowledge Institution', our Institution wants to generate and circulate knowledge and develop innovative teaching behaviour via lectureships. What strikes is that knowledge production is based on external questions and problems; the possibility of the Institution to learn from itself is not mentioned. In a later HRM policy document (Haagse Hogeschool/TH Rijswijk, 2005a) an internal orientation becomes more apparent: staff will share knowledge and experiences both within and outside their departments. For the organisation to renew itself, employees will have to increase their sense of responsibility so that chances for pro-activity and creativity increase. Professional development is coined as more responsibilities and initiatives in sharing and storing knowledge and in learning on the job. In the new culture, talent is of the utmost importance (this suggests that it has not been that important in the past) and congruence in student and staff approach is required. In an education policy document (Haagse Hogeschool/TH Rijswijk, 2005b) this approach is described largely in terms of a new concept for the pedagogy of professional education. This concept is similar to the 'school as career centre' (see below). An employee

satisfaction evaluation (Van den Broek and Zijlstra, 2005) shows some relevant indications for the status of research in our Institution:

1. a 'collegial atmosphere' as personal achievement largely surpasses a contribution to the 'Regional Knowledge Institution';
2. employees express little need for schooling in the five core competences defined by policy: educational and professional flexibility, innovative capacities, self-management, relational sensitivity and collaboration;
3. employees express their personal development desires as: personal competences and capacities (35%), domain specific expertise (29%) and teacher competences (20%; 16% answered 'unknown');
4. 48% of staff thinks their knowledge and qualities are well used, 51% says that there are sufficient opportunities for personal development, 15% says that there are sufficient facilities offered to develop *new* qualities.

In this monitor no specific questions were asked about research. We think this demonstrates that the link between a research identity and professional development is not self-evident in our Institution yet.

School as Career Centre

The core *Pedagogy of vocational and professional education* is the conceptual framework of a new architecture for vocational and professional education (Geurts 2004; see below). This architecture, 'the school as career centre', provides guidelines to transform institutions of professional education from suppliers of standard curricula into providers of service for tailor-made professional development. The founding values are recognition, acknowledgement and appreciation of *talent* as the guiding principle for choices ('forward mapping'), and *independent and critical thinking* that serves informed, democratic and participative choices.

Our Institution stated a vision that resonates highly with the 'school as career centre', but mostly in terms of its bachelor. However, educational innovations cannot be successful without professional development, since professionals give form and content to the innovations on the work floor. The new orientation the 'school as career centre' provides is, we believe, not only quintessential for a modern professional pedagogy for students, but it offers exciting prospects for the professional development of employees as well. If talent and independent and critical thinking are at the core of student pedagogy, they should also be at the core of HRM. Although the learning and choices of students and staff are not similar (age and experience matter), they are best served in a learning climate which is congruent for both; in fact, this is also stated in policy (see above). The professional development of staff offers new opportunities and possibilities, because the new architecture opens the discussion about the divide between education practices on the one hand and management and control on the other. A school cannot make the transition to new education

without fundamentally transforming its organisation. Therefore, we decided to translate the seven 'school as career centre' design rules into the design of our lectureship and define them in terms of professional development.

Our initial design was as follows. First, our *tailor-made guidance* in the development of new research competences consists of helping participants in our group research their own innovations. The confrontation of their practices with their personal wishes and concerns regarding the 'school as career centre' provides the research questions. Second, *construction learning* generates new knowledge as researchers reflect on practical experiences and look for connections with existing know how. Third, *personal guidance* is offered by creating a fruitful tension between direction and self-direction: in line with the general choice for action research, we chose a critical friend approach (cf. McNiff and Whitehead, 2006). Fourth, *formative and summative evaluation* serve to make the findings productive for the professional development of the researchers, our Institution and the theorising of the lectureship: the knowledge produced must be accurately formulated. Our critical friend approach and the research group as validation group (cf. McNiff and Whitehead, 2006) function as formative evaluation. Summative evaluation involves accepted publications in relevant journals. Fifth, the development of the *new role*. The researchers added the role of knowledge workers to their executive duties and chose action research as a means to better innovate their practices. Furthermore, in order to develop research skills and develop successful innovations, the new professionalism must be recognized and acknowledged by the Institution. This requires a *light organization* in horizontal and vertical professional communities and networks. And finally, principles of the *learning organization* assure that practice (doing), reflections (thinking) and decisions (choosing) are coupled tightly.

Evidently, the last three points largely depend on the broader institutional environment. As stated above, the link between a research identity and professional development is, however, not self-evident yet. In practice, policies are not focused on learning from own experiences and there is no clear-cut connection between a vision on innovation and innovative activities. Therefore, we chose participatory action research as a method to both implement and improve our lectureship as a research group. In the next section we will present a historical account of our lectureship interwoven with the development of our own action research.

Historical account

Our lectureship serves two goals: 1) the conceptualisation of the 'school as career centre' via 2) action research into innovative practices. This choice for Mode 2 research is based on the ambition to make practical knowledge explicit and productive. Its closeness to the problems practitioners encounter (cf. Gibbons *et al.*, 2005) can provide insights into innovation processes in general and implementation of the 'school as career centre' in particular. These insights serve the professionals in our lectureship, our Institution and a broader public.

The lectureship in its current form started in January 2004 and finishes in December 2006. People with an interest in the subject and an ambition for research were invited to apply. The nine people who did were all accepted. They all wished to use the concept of the 'school as career centre' in their own innovative practices. In the course of time two people left: one decided she did not want to do research and one had personal motives to resign.

The first period can be characterised as a joint search for a common ground and a common language. The goal was to build good practices via research, *i.e.* to develop concepts to frame and interpret practices. Participants struggled to formulate their research questions, to describe their daily work accurately and to link their specific goals to the subject of the lectureship ('school as career centre'). The output of this period is a publication in which all the projects and concepts are described. However, the research role is relatively new to professional education and many methodological questions remained. To help the researchers with these, the professor (Jan Geurts) appointed a senior researcher (Floor Basten) to provide practical assistance. Since Floor missed the beginning of the lectureship and learned from Jan about the struggles so far, her first efforts were rather trial-and-error and took the form of distributing literature and delivering workshops. For the participants, who varied in backgrounds and research experience, these oscillated between too simple and even insulting, and too complex and alien to daily practice. The result was a clearer picture of the research potential. Still, we were unsatisfied with the progress: it was the summer of 2005 and no empirical or field research had been done. In order to better structure our help and support, we decided to start an action research into our own pedagogy, closely related to the content of the lectureship. Our research question was: *how can we help the researchers in our group develop their research identity as part of their professional development and so help them improve their innovation practice?* The underlying values are congruent with those of the 'school as career centre': talent based professional development and independent and critical thinking. Floor started a research diary in which she kept notes of individual and group meetings. Together we wrote articles about our action research and asked our researchers to reflect on and complement our writings.

To speed things up, we decided to divide the research process into two cycles: a small part of the overall research in a first cycle and the rest of the research in a second cycle. This is the second period. The first cycle was to enable the researchers to gain research experience. We noticed that waiting for questions was unproductive and decided to reinforce our role as critical friends by participating in the research projects. The first cycle is finished and all researcher produced reports with preliminary results in January and February 2006. Our participation was limited to extensive feedback on these results. Some researchers shifted their focus or changed it all together. The current projects are:

1. Maarten examines how learning circles can function as a context for

professional education. In learning circles students help each other identify competences they need to develop and write their Personal Development Plans. The execution of the plans takes place in learn-and-work-communities, courses and assignments, and in the workplace. What are the desired roles for students, tutors and workplace coaches?

2. Hans wants to know how assessments can contribute to mapping student learning and development in the direction of their future professions and how our Institution can provide education that meets these demands.
3. Thea develops a routine for demand-based work in her unit 'Quality and Education'. How can she help her colleagues reflect on their work?
4. Rolf researches whether the project 'Social Work 2008' has succeeded in its aims to create a more adequate link between education and profession and to implement educational, didactical and pedagogical innovations. Professional development of employees is crucial; how can their learning be supported?
5. André focuses on competence-based education and learning on the job. He monitors four pilots of regional full-service offices that aim to improve relations between education and small and middle-sized companies in the metal industry.
6. Maya focuses on her role as project manager concerned with developing an integral approach for part-time education.
7. Janke manages assignments from (non-)profit organizations for students in professional and vocational education. She develops testimonials for students, teachers and contractors to register their learning experiences.

In the third and current period the researchers work on the second cycle. In this cycle, our participation is intensified. We composed a reader about action research with examples of the different roles an action researcher can take and distributed the book *All you need to know about action research* (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006) as an example of the action researcher as learning professional. The latter is an outcome for some, while others wonder how they produce valid knowledge from their own learning. They chose the position of the outsider.

Action research: how we try to help

How did we support the researchers in the development of their research skills and attitudes and strengthen their new role of knowledge producers? We started with the *research trade*. The efforts in the first period resulted in a conceptual framework and research questions, but left methodological matters untouched. Floors appointment can be seen as a first intervention. The trial-and-error strategy that followed was not necessarily effective for learning research skills, but it did produce a positive effect in that some appreciated this fuzzy period because it appealed to their creativity; for others, however, this

period was too long. This period of muddling through has had both positive and negative results. The decision to put our own pedagogy to critical scrutiny was rather a backstage affair in that it helped us define and develop our roles more clearly. We hesitate to say that we helped our researchers other than in being role models in our own struggling with action research and in giving practical advice on demand. Our initial strategy was indeed demand-based, but we noticed that waiting and doing nothing until the questions came meant that none were asked. The concerns raised in the validation group were too fundamental to discuss in the little time we had, but our *laissez-faire* strategy did not result in researchers seeking our help in between plenary meetings. They did, however, discuss these matters between themselves. Were we too far away? The second intervention was to come closer by participating in their research projects. Researchers say they appreciate our inputs and co-operation. Most of them make more appointments for one-on-one discussions and show increasing progress: they make remarks about their learning and new insights, and their products show improvements. We therefore think our participation helps.

What we further observe is that it is not just about research techniques. The framework for participative action research as described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) helps to describe other findings. First, doing research is a *social, participatory and collaborative process*. Participants develop their research identity by sharing experiences and asking each other critical questions. They demonstrate their skills to each other and receive feedback. They are critical towards each other; when work below a certain quality is delivered, they do not hesitate to say so. Most of them say the plenary discussions in the validation group gained quality with the presentations of the preliminary results. These offered concrete subjects to discuss. Peer feedback is appreciated and valued. However, reviewing all papers takes a lot of time and not all projects are interesting for everybody. Clearly, the 'school as career centre' is not a one-dimensional model and it allows for a diversity of projects, but their interconnectedness is not sought and it is not a group effort. Collaboratively learning to do research is not self-evident yet, maybe because of our initial efforts to support individual development. It hinders, however, the group and thereby individual progress and learning and we have to find a solution. We have some ideas about this and will discuss them below. A point of consideration will be the group dynamics. This includes our own role as participants in this lectureship as well. For instance, Floor noticed that her criticism is sometimes considered 'knife sharp' and 'impatient'. On the other hand, her honesty is valued and her feedback trusted. Her challenge is to remain productive in her criticism. Jan is concerned with the conceptualization of the 'school as career centre'. His focus on the content deflects his attention from the process. His challenge is to have an open eye for the restraints researchers experience.

Second, and relating to the last remark, researching their practices and sharing new insights, researchers also uncover restrictions in their work: the knowledge produced does not always fit dominant policies or culture and the innovations seldom fit existing structures. This can result in tensions. Therefore, it is also

emancipatory, critical and reflexive. Some participants experience dilemmas when their usual practices are confronted with their new role. How do I interview people on a project I supervised? How can I evaluate a policy I am supposed to implement? How can I judge my colleagues critically without endangering my career opportunities? These dilemmas are all the more tangible, for while other lectureships work with external assignments, the researchers in our lectureship find themselves in a double role as they operate as both practitioners within and researchers of their Institution.

Third, we note that, while exploring their knowledge and interpretative categories, researchers mostly advance practical knowledge. Therefore, the focus on *development of theory and practice* remains a concern, especially in light of the summative evaluation. For knowledge to be productive, it has to be communicated in terms of existing bodies of knowledge (theory) and new knowledge (adding to theory). As McNiff and Whitehead (2006) state, actions researchers have to make a claim for knowledge and we agree. Appreciation for theory increases, however, the more participants try to interpret their practices and relevant processes. Still, most feel uneasy about the publication, since they estimate that their research does not meet scientific standards. The body of evidence is too small, because their projects are only a small portion of their daily work. Other projects interfere demanding immediate attention, as is normal in education. This fragments the research process.

It has also been reflexive for us. The comments of one of our researchers on a draft of one of our papers was that we steer more than they notice. In a one-on-one discussion the same researcher asked when they as researchers started to participate in our action research. This made us think: are we able to appreciate them as subjects the same way we ask them to appreciate their colleagues as subjects? Are we co-creating a research group or are we implementing a new pedagogy using old pedagogy? Just how 'participative' is our participative action research really? How to continue? Based on the reflections above, we want to focus on collaboration, the role of the context and on theorizing. Our plan is to drop the individual publications and instead produce a book about educational innovation collectively, in which all researchers present their projects as cases. This will provide opportunities for a group effort and generate sufficient empirical evidence as well. As co-writers we all decide on the structure of the chapters and define the variables that make the findings comparable. As professionals we all have ample experience in how to operate within our Institution, which is exemplary for educational organizations in general. As action researchers we all generate knowledge about the 'school as career centre' and provide a theory on how to implement it. In sum: we all will work on the book *together*, give way to describe *the role of the context* in innovating education, and *incorporate the findings in literature* about both the content and relevance of the innovations and the innovation processes themselves.

Concluding remarks

Learning to do research was not a self-evident activity for the researchers in our lectureship. We helped them to develop a research identity by increasingly structuring our pedagogy. Now we participate in their research projects. Whether this is a desirable situation remains to be seen. Will they use their research skills after the end of the lectureship? Will our Institution appreciate and support this? And will the organizational structures facilitate their innovative practices? Is there enough support for and innovative potential in our Institution to embrace and carry out the 'school as career centre' concept and its consequences for staff development? The new research role demands both the development of reflexive skills in a technical-instrumental sense, *and* the development of a culture (and especially ethics) that invites, constitutes and supports this role. The new research professional demands integral attention. Without technical-instrumental assistance, research will not produce useful knowledge. Without a research culture, activities in the context of lectureships risk being isolated and incidental. Without ethics, a research identity cannot be integrated into daily practices, for the strong emphasis on praxis touches the question what values and norms one lives as a professional; this can only be answered if there is room for dialog between colleagues and for participation of those researched.

Notes

(*) In the Dutch name 'Pedagogiek van Beroepsonderwijs' the word 'beroepsonderwijs' refers to both vocational and professional education. Since our action research takes place in an institution for professional education, we refer in this paper to the latter only.

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