

A New Role For Professionals In Higher Professional Education

Floor Basten

Hague Institution for Higher Professional Education

Jan Geurts

Hague Institution for Higher Professional Education

In the Netherlands, a new research role was introduced in higher professional education. In our lectureship participants improve their practices and generate knowledge as action researchers. We started our own action research to better help them. Our question is: how can we help our researchers develop their research identity as part of their professional development and so help them improve their innovation practice? Reflecting on our findings so far, we notice a pedagogy of increasing structure. We believe a research identity involves more than techniques; a research culture (and especially ethics) must be developed if research is to become a tradition.

Keywords: Action Research, higher professional education, school as career centre, educational innovation, research identity

In 2001, higher professional education received a research function. This contribution presents the preliminary results of a participative action research in the lectureship *Pedagogy of vocational and professional education*¹. 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.

A New Research Role

The new research role for higher professional education 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, but it lasted another ten years before the required research skills of 'the new teacher' were firmly put on the agenda. The driving forces are the Lisbon agreement and the desired knowledge economy. Although most agree that a new research role for higher professional education adds value to the Dutch knowledge economy, most disagree on how to fulfil this new role. Roughly, two positions emerge reflecting 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

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

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' (2005:3). Some find in this latter definition a decisive argument for Mode 2, while others prefer the university-like Mode 1. The lectureships are an instrument in establishing a research tradition, but the discussion between Mode 1 and 2 adherents is still ardent.

Our own Institution for Higher Professional Education has not chosen an official position in this discussion yet and the professors are free to shape their own research. Mode 1 and 2 go hand in hand. However, there are indications for an ambition for Mode 1, for instance in renaming the departments 'academies' and in developing a course with substantial attention for the 'scientific method'.

The history of thinking about research can be reconstructed based on policy documents. In an early strategy document (Haagse Hogeschool 2002) the 'Knowledge Institution' is positioned in terms of student-based education. Teachers require new competences for developing new educational designs; 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 questions. For this vision to become reality, the quality of education must increase and therefore the above mentioned infrastructure must be installed. To enable lifelong learning for students education must be innovated, and for staff 'competence management' and 'professional development' are required. Teachers must develop new competences in research, didactics and translation of external processes into their education. A Ph.D. is considered an important asset and plays a part in both recruitment and professional development. For supporting staff 'attention' is mentioned but not explained. In HRM the 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 in 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 increase their sense of responsibility so that chances for pro-activity and creativity increase. Professional development is defined 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 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 core of our lectureship (see below). An employee satisfaction evaluation (Van den Broek and Zijlstra 2005) indicates some relevant issues for status of the new research role:

1. a 'collegial atmosphere' as personal achievement largely surpasses a 'Regional Knowledge Institution';
2. employees express little need for schooling in the core competences defined by policy (educational and professional flexibility, innovative capacities, self-management, relational sensitivity and collaboration);
3. extra attention from superiors for the relationship with the employee and for their personal development are thought to increase loyalty;

4. employees express their personal development desires as: personal competences and capacities (35%), domain specific expertise (29%) and teacher competences (20%; 16% answered 'unknown');
5. 48% of staff thinks their knowledge and qualities are well used, 51% says there are sufficient opportunities for personal development, 15% says 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.

School as Career Centre

The core of lectureship *Pedagogy of vocational and professional education*, which started in its current form in 2004, is a new architecture for vocational and professional education (Geurts 2004; see below). This architecture, summarized as 'the school as career centre' (SaCC), must provide solutions for the new role institutions for vocational and professional education desire: instead of providing standard curricula, they want to provide services for tailor-made professional development. The founding values are recognition, acknowledgement and appreciation of *talent* as the guiding principle for choices, and *independent and critical thinking* that serves informed, democratic and participative choices.

Our Institution has stated a vision on its bachelor that resonates highly with SaCC, but has stated its vision mostly in terms of students. However, educational innovations cannot be successful without professional innovations. This new orientation, we think, is not only quintessential for a modern professional pedagogy for students, but it also offers exciting prospects for the professional development of employees. If talent and independent and critical thinking are at the core of student pedagogy, then they should be at the core of HRD – not necessarily HRM – as well. Although the learning and choices of students and staff are not similar (age and experience matter), they are best served in a learning climate that is congruent for both. The professional development of staff offers new opportunities and possibilities, because the new architecture opens the discussion about the divide between concrete education practices on the one hand and management and control on the other hand. A school cannot make the transition to new education without fundamentally transforming its organisation. Therefore, we decided to adjust the general SaCC-principles for our lectureship in terms of professional development:

1. tailor-made guidance in developing personal competences as the starting point of the new research role: the participants in our research group start from their practice. The confrontation of these practices with researchers' own wishes and concerns regarding the school as career centre provides the research questions.
2. construction: reflecting on experiences in practice and looking for connections with existing know how generate new knowledge.
3. personal guidance 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).
4. 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.

5. new roles: the researchers have – at least in their activities for our group – added the role of knowledge workers to their executive duties and chose action research as a means to better innovate their practices.
6. light organization in horizontal and vertical professional communities and networks: the new professionalism must be recognized and acknowledged by the Institution for the research capacities to develop and the innovations to succeed.
7. learning organization: practice (doing), reflections (thinking) and decisions (choosing) must be coupled tightly.

It is obvious that the last three points largely depend on the broader institutional environment. As stated above, the link between a research identity and professional development is not self-evident. Policies are not focused on learning from internal practices and there is no connection between a vision on innovation and innovative practices. Therefore, we chose participatory action research as 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

The lectureship serves goals: 1) the conceptualisation of SaCC 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 and the fact that it is close to the problems practitioners encounter (cf. Gibbons *et al.* 2005). The history of our lectureship can be divided into three periods so far. 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 professionalism were invited to apply as participants. The nine people who did were all accepted. They all shared the ambition to use the concept of SaCC in their own innovative practices. In the course of time two people left: one decided that 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 idea was to build good practices via research, i.e. to develop concepts to frame practices. Participants struggled, however, to formulate their research questions, to describe their daily work accurately and to link their specific research goals to the subject of the lectureship. The output of this period is a publication in which all the projects are described and all the concepts are defined. However, research activities are not self-evident in higher professional education and many methodological questions remained. To help the researchers with this, the professor (Jan Geurts) appointed a senior researcher (Floor Basten) to provide practical assistance. Since Floor missed the beginning of the research group 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 members of the research group, who varied in backgrounds and research experience, these oscillated between too simple and even insulting, and too complex and alien to daily practice. We did, however, get a clearer picture of the research possibilities. 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 SaCC: 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 enables the researchers to gain experience in doing research. 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 took form in extensive feedback on their preliminary results. Some researchers shifted their focus or changed their projects all together. In this phase a – be it hesitant – research identify can be discerned. The researchers and their 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 demands in the direction of their future professions and how our Institution can provide education that meets these demands.
3. Thea develops a systematic routine for demand-based work in her unit 'Quality and Education'.
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 the relation 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 (profit and 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 will be intensified.

How We Tried to Help: Successes and Pitfalls

One of our aims is to support the researchers in the development of their research skills and attitudes and to strengthen their new role of knowledge producers. Evidently, we started with the *research trade*. The struggle in the first period resulted in conceptualizations and research questions, but left the matter of methodological struggles 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 has produced a positive effect in that (at least some) researchers appreciated this fuzzy period because it appealed to their creativity. According to some, however, this period was too long. On the other hand, the unclear relation between innovative practices and SaCC hindered a smooth progress. We can conclude that this period of muddling through has had both positive and negative results. The decision to

investigate our own pedagogy was rather a backstage affair in that it helped us define our roles more clearly in terms of our action research. 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 advise on demand. Our initial strategy was demand-based. However, we noticed that waiting and doing nothing until the questions came meant that no help was 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? In the second period we came closer by participating in their research projects. This is the second intervention. Researchers say they appreciate our inputs and co-operation. Most of them now make more appointments for one-on-one discussions. Researchers who ask us to work with them frequently show an increasing progress (they make remarks about their learning and new insights during one-on-one discussions and their products show improvement), while those who do not seek our help do not or less. We therefore think our participation helps.

What we furthermore observe, is that it is not just about research techniques. The framework for participative action research as described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) is useful in describing other findings. Doing research is a *social, participatory and collaborative process*. Participants develop their research identity by sharing experiences and asking critical questions. Their interactions support this: they demonstrate their skills to each other and receive feedback. Most of them say the plenary discussions in the validation group have significantly gained quality with the presentations of the preliminary results. These offered concrete subjects to discuss. Peer feedback is appreciated and valued. Furthermore, they are critical towards each other; when work below a certain quality is delivered, they do not hesitate to say so. Collaboratively learning to do research is not self-evident yet, but maybe this can be explained by our initial efforts to support individual development; a further 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' (remarkably enough she received this feedback not from the researchers her criticism was aimed at). On the other hand, her honesty is valued and feedback trusted. Her challenge is to remain productive in her criticism. Jan is concerned with the conceptualization of SaCC. His focus on the content deflects his attention from the process. His challenge is to have an open eye for the restrains researchers experience.

We also 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 the 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.

Researching their practices and sharing new insights, researchers also uncover restrictions in their work: of course, research is fun and important, but 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 managed? 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 researches in our lectureship find themselves in a double

role as they operate as both practitioners within and researchers of their Institution.

It has also been reflexive for us. The comments of one of our researchers on a draft of this paper 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? These questions will be in the centre of our attention for the remaining of our action research.

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 or not this is a desirable situation remains to be seen. Will they use their research skills after the end of the lectureship? Will these new skills add value to their professional development? Will the organization 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 concept 'school as career centre' 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.

References

- Broek, van den and Zijlstra (2005) *Het kompas. Medewerkersmonitor 2005* [*The compass. Employee Monitor 2005*], The Hague.
- Haagse Hogeschool (2002) *Het perspectief. Strategienotitie Haagse Hogeschool* [*The perspective. Strategy Document Hague Institution for Higher Professional Education*].
- Haagse Hogeschool/TH Rijswijk (2004) *Hogeschool OntwikkelingsPlan 2005-2009* [*Development Plan for the Institution for Higher Professional Education 2005-2009*].
- Haagse Hogeschool/TH Rijswijk (2005a) *De Haagse Medewerker. HRM Beleidsplan 2005-2008* [*The 'Hague' Employee. HRM Policy Plan 2005-2008*].
- Haagse Hogeschool/TH Rijswijk (2005b) *Kaders voor de 'Haagse Bachelor'*. [*Frames for the 'Hague Bachelor'*].
- Geurts, J. (2004) 'Herontwerp beroepsonderwijs. Een strijdtoneel' [Redesigning vocational and professional education. An arena], in Breebaart, Geurts and Meijers, *Beroepsonderwijs: van opleidingenfabriek naar loopbaancentrum* [*Vocational and Professional education. From diploma factory to career centre*], Haagse Hogeschool/TH Rijswijk, pp.77-120.
- Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott and Trow (2005) *The new production of knowledge. The dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies*, London: Sage

Publications (8th reprint).

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) 'Participatory Action Research. Communicative Action and the Public Sphere', in Denzin and Lincoln (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, pp. 559-603.

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) *All you need to know about Action Research*, London: Sage Publications.