Theory of professions
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Definition (Oxford Dictionary of English)

Professor (noun)
1. a paid occupation, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification: his chosen profession of teaching, a barrister by profession.
2. an open but often false claim: his profession of delight rang hollow.
3. a declaration of belief in a religion: the declaration or vows made on entering a religious order.
origin: Middle English (denoting the vow made on entering a religious order): via Old French from Latin professio (n -), from profess (intransitive) ‘declare publicly’ (see profess). Sense 1 derives from the notion of an occupation that one ‘professes’ to be skilled in.

The literature on professions

Characteristics of professions (typology)

– Higher education
– National professional associations
– Protected titles
– Ethics codes
– Journals

The ideal professions

– Clergy
– Medicine
– Law

The system of professions (Abbott, 1988)

– Control of knowledge, skills and work tasks is the most important aspect of professions
– Professions are exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases (Abbott, 1988, p. 8)
– Jurisdiction: The link between a profession and its work (Abbott, 1988, p. 20)
Jurisdictional contests

– Professions develop and change as a result of jurisdictional contests
– Jurisdictional claims can be put forward on different arenas
  – The public opinion
  – The law
  – In the workplace

Professional work

– The main purpose of a profession is to offer expert services to treat or solve a client’s problems
– The problems needing expert help are historically and culturally situated

Professional practice

Three acts
  – Diagnostics
  – Inference
  – Treatment

Abstraction

A ‘fitting’ level of abstraction strengthens a profession
  – Defining old problems in new ways
  – Defining new problems in old ways

The model and the dynamics

– The system of profession is a vacancy model
– Each profession keeps jurisdiction over a protected set of work tasks
– The system changes when jurisdictions are opened or closed
– The most important reasons for change
  – New technology
  – Changes in organizations

Disturbances and change

– A disturbance occurs
– Fight for jurisdiction
– The professions negotiate new jurisdictional settlements, stabilizing the system
**Jurisdictional settlements**

- Full control (monopoly)
- Subordination
- Division of labour
- Intellectual control
- Consultancy
- Client differentiation

**Cognitive strategies**

Professions can expand their jurisdiction using different cognitive strategies

- Reduction: Replacement for diagnosis
- Metaphors: Replacement for inference
- Replacement for treatment
- Gradient arguments and prevention

**The information professions**

Jurisdiction: Help clients so overwhelmed by data that they cannot retrieve useful and important information

Two types of professional work
- Qualitative
- Quantitative

**Occupations**

- Qualitative
  - Librarians
  - Journalists
  - Advertisers
  - Academics
- Quantitative
  - Accountants
  - Statisticians
  - ICT/computer occupations

**Characteristics**

- Fast technological development and commodification of knowledge and expertise
- Consequences
  - Older workforce moves on to administration
  - Professionals become experts on how to use the new tools

**Librarians**

- Came into existence because of a change in organizations: growth of public libraries
- Has more or less had an exclusive jurisdiction over the qualitative information field
Work tasks

Jurisdiction: Manage printed material on behalf of a community or an organization

Three approaches
- Education
- Entertainment
- Retrieval (access)

External disturbances

- Taste of the public
- Special/academic libraries
- Technology
  - Microfilm
  - Computers

Technology: Computers

- Important: The result of other professions' work
- Consequences
  - The card catalogue replaced by databases
  - Standardization of cataloguing and indexing

Internal disturbances

- Dewey Decimal Classification (1876)
- Central cataloguing organizations
- Commodification
- Conflicts/lack of solidarity between public and special librarians

Trends

- In general: not much competition
- Late professional schools and training institutions
- Central organizations and services have been important

External threats

- ICT/computer specialists
  - Replacement for treatment
  - Computers are more efficient at information retrieval
Abbott’s view on the information professionals

– The quantitative and qualitative fields are being united
– Lots of different professions/occupations
– None with full jurisdictional control
– Strong vertical differentiation
– An exclusive elite with intellectual jurisdiction over many work tasks

Quote

Many librarians have responded slowly to new information technologies like the Web. Some librarians feel that their value as professionals will be diminished as “virtual libraries” supplant those filled with physical books and periodicals. Many librarians fear that the public will bypass them and go directly to the source via the Internet. The truth is, however, that skills in information organization and access are more and more necessary in this era of information explosion. We have found that the demand for our skills in classifying and organizing information in web sites has grown beyond our wildest dreams, so we believe that you, your sites, and their users will benefit from our profession’s perspective.