



From Vocational to Professional Education: Educating For Social Welfare

Smeby Jens-Christian; and Sutphen, Molly, eds.
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015

Book Review

Tags: pedagogical methods | professional education | vocation

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It is not often that edited volumes dedicated to teaching and learning are so easily able to cross the Atlantic. Happily, conference activity funded by the Research Council of Norway provided opportunity for Molly Sutphen of the University of North Carolina and Jens-Christian Smeby of Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences to collaborate with researchers in the field of education. In a series of international conversations, scholars addressed challenges faced by students in professional schools in the fields of education, social work, and healthcare (3) as a result of academic drift and the subsequent institutionalization of vocational programs into higher education (7). The purposes of this well organized, beautifully written, and coherent collection of essays is to identify these difficulties within their historical context, and - in light of current disciplinary methods - suggest recommendations for future development of the education of professionals.

A near-constant defense of liberal arts education as of late has been accompanied since the mid-twentieth century with added pressure of assimilation of professional training in universities, specifically in the fields mentioned above. The professionalization of these programs is complex and the challenges are significant, facts often unknown to other disciplines; professional educators, to name one example, must master a complex knowledge base as well as curricular, pedagogical, and administrative abilities. Central to the success of these tasks within a higher educational setting, writes Smeby in his introductory chapter "Academic Drift in Vocational Education?" (7-25), is the necessity of "perceived coherence" on the part of the students that there are meaningful relationships between both theoretic and applied components of their education (25). But students are not the only ones looking for signs of perceived coherence; the transfer of the locale of professional education has had

implications not only for students, but for faculty and the wider university culture as well.

In Ala Agevall and Gunnar Olofsson's "Tensions Between Academic and Vocational Demands" (26-49), three aspects of the transformation of higher education as a result of the academic drift are identified as worthy of note: cultural changes to university systems as they relate to hiring practices and student population; the way in which the link to the university system has altered perceptions of the professions; and the shift in emphasis of the university culture towards professional programs as a matter of concern, vis-à-vis credentials and training. After tracing generations of welfare professional programs in Sweden (28-30), the authors identify principle ways in which institutions of higher education can combine an academic education with professional mastery (31-35), followed by a case study in a Swedish setting. Subsequent chapters on the benefits of cross-field studies for professional students (Little, 50-69), coherence as it relates to bridging theory and practice (Heggen, Smeby, and Vågan, 70-88 and Laursen, 89-104), assumptions that emerge about and within research-based education (Kyvik, Vågan, Prøitz, and Aamodt, 105-23), use of evidence-based methods (Rasmussen, 124-36), dialogical pedagogies (Sutphen and Heggen, 137-45), and international trends in teacher education (Conway and Munthe, 146-63) are followed by a conclusion by the editors. The conclusion offers recommendations for models of pedagogies of coherence that include: "third space" learning (168-69); increased opportunity for research on practice (169); use of cases as opportunity for reflection on potential workplace experiences (169); greater collaboration between higher education and professional placement (169); and finally, educational leadership that is mindful of fragmentation (169-70).

I am aware that the purpose of a book review in a journal for teaching theology and religion is to consider how it relates to or is useful for those in the fields of religion, theology, and religious studies. I am of the opinion - however optimistic it might be - that any analysis of education or pedagogy might be applied to any field, and this is true for Smeby and Sutphen's edited volume on professional education, for this collection is particularly helpful at explaining some of the tensions that exist within universities and colleges around the coherence of the general education of professional students, and the way shifts in higher education have altered the landscape of the educational system, worldwide. In a liberal arts setting, the reality is that students in religion courses are most often there because the university has determined that the study of religion is essential for their general education; it is useful for both parties to recognize that students are seeking coherence and relevancy and are attempting to bridge theory and practice as much as their professors. . While one might hope that the relevancy of an education in the history or theology of any religion would be immediately obvious, nevertheless mindfulness of our students' majors, disciplinary affiliations, professional aspirations, and desires for coherence can assist the religion professor in shaping her

curriculum in such a way to make that applicability more transparent.

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