Promoting Dialogue on Teacher Professionalism: Opening Possibilities Through Gadamer's *Aesthetic Judgment* and *Play* Metaphor

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In the province of British Columbia where I live and work, teaching is labelled a profession by the government, universities, and school boards; yet, paradoxically teachers are subject to increasing constraints through the imposition of standards of "professional" competence, prescribed curriculum and standardized assessment practices. I would argue that this paradox relates to the way that teachers' knowledge is conceived. As Joseph Dunne points out, the kind of knowledge a profession embodies is closely tied to its claims to authority and autonomy.[1] Therefore, it is important to gain clarity on the nature of teachers' knowledge and how it relates to ideas of professionalism. In this essay I will trace the emergence and historical roots of two competing views on teachers' professional knowledge: the abstract, objective view, and the situated, subjective view. I will show that each view provides a limited orientation to understanding the nature of teachers' professional knowledge, and demonstrates the need to find a conceptual space that moves beyond this dualism. I suggest that Hans Georg Gadamer's notion of aesthetic judgment, combined with his play metaphor, provide such a conceptual space that allows for a better understanding of teachers' professional knowledge, and a more appropriate orientation from which to engage in dialogue on teacher professionalism.

Professionalism, Technical Rationality, and Constraints on Teaching

Teaching children in schools is considered a profession partially based on the idea that the complexity of teaching practice requires deliberation to make appropriate judgments. That teachers *possess* or can rely on a body of *expert* objective knowledge, derived from research and abstract theory, to inform these deliberations has been a widely accepted notion in Western ideas of teacher professionalism in the twentieth century.[2] There is an implicit assumption in this notion that theoretical rigor can mitigate the uncertainty created by dynamic and complex situations.

The idea that teachers' professional knowledge can be understood in this way was called into question in the 1980s by Donald Schön. Schön argues that teachers' knowledge is created in the teaching context. It is therefore attained through knowing and reflecting in action.[3] In this view deliberation and judgment are not derived from a body of expert knowledge, but are based on knowledge that is subjectively derived from teaching practice. A number of theorists have taken up Schön's arguments, but the view that teachers' judgments should be based on expert objective knowledge remains dominant and is currently found in demands for *evidence-based practice*. These rival ideas frame professionalism in teaching in oppositional ways. The dominant view sees professionalism in teaching as based on abstract knowledge of theories and techniques; the challenging view sees it as based on subjective knowledge generated through experience. John Furlong argues that

these rival conceptions of knowledge in teaching frame a current crisis of professionalism.[4] While I would not use the term "crisis," as does Furlong, I would argue that these rival conceptions of knowledge in teaching obstruct necessary dialogue on teacher professionalism by presenting a false opposition.

Teaching has been in the process of defining itself as a profession since the industrial era, when widespread compulsory public schooling was taking shape. At that time, schools were caught in the tension of being an instrument of social policy based on industrialization and its related ills, and also the place where the *classical* view of education, consisting in the development of the intellect and character, should be realized.[5] Locating the primary site of education in the public school, where previously it was primarily enacted in the home and church, led to the need to define teaching practice as capable of holding such a pivotal and responsible societal role. Educators looked to the theoretical sciences to establish a body of expert knowledge on teaching, and accepted the idea that the methods of generating systematic knowledge in the natural sciences could be equally applied in areas such as education.[6] By the 1960s, theoretical scientific knowledge, which enjoyed the aura of respectability, was seen to provide the criteria for this required body of expert knowledge by specifying objective foundations for knowledge in education. Schön's challenge in the 1980s, based on the idea that knowledge is created in context, called these conclusions into question.

Currently, norms of teacher professionalism are established via codes of ethics and standards of conduct and competence. The implication is that codes and standards will mitigate and control uncertainty in teaching practice. The notion that judgment *in* practice needs to be more clearly understood due to inherent uncertainty is not found in this notion of professionalism. Schön argues that the codified approach is based on an inappropriate emphasis on *technical rationality*. He identifies technical rationality as "instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique."[7] A technical-rational orientation to teacher professionalism suggests that lists of standards and codes will provide sufficient criteria to guide practice. Dunne similarly critiques the technical-rational orientation and provides philosophical support to the critique. Dunne draws on Aristotle's distinction between practical judgment as a form of knowledge that is required to address the complexity and moral dimensions of human affairs, and *techne* as a form of knowledge that is required in the production and manufacturing of things.[8] He points out that with *techne* there is an end in mind as one produces something, and makes a plan toward that fulfillment. This contrasts with human affairs where we are often unable to have an end in mind due to human complexity and the moral demand not to treat people as means to an end. He suggests the need for responsiveness to the moral dimensions of situations based on practical judgment and the inappropriateness of an approach to education reliant on *techne*.

Kevin Morrell provides a sociological critique, arguing that scholars have unsuccessfully tried to answer the question of professionalism by listing criteria based on the occupational characteristics of the archetypal professional. This approach is unsuccessful, explains Morrell, since professionalism is a shifting

construction dependent on changing normative notions.[9] Shared societal assumptions and commitments create normative notions of behaviour and action that change over time, and thus change the norms that guide professional conduct. David Coulter and colleagues argue that, ultimately, standards of practice and codes of ethics provide only a basic description of the minimal standards of appropriate teaching, without getting to the heart of the challenges and identifying paths to realizing these standards in the classroom.[10]

So far the analysis of the problematics of technical rationality has centred on the inappropriateness of this type of abstractly imposed rationality, as well as its failure to capture the reality of practice. The problem is more extensive than this. Richard Bernstein points out that technical rationality is not the problem for society — the real problem is domination.[11] This critique is in line with critiques by Kevin Morrell and also Maria Athina Martimianakis, Jerry Maniate, and Brian Hodges. These authors argue that professionalism is not just an individual or group concern over knowledge and standards, but needs to also be understood as a state representation of power reflecting the dominant ideology.[12] In this way, technical rationality is questionable not only because it fails to capture the reality of teaching practice, but also because it may be employed to maintain power relations through constraining accepted forms of knowledge, possibilities for practice, and dialogue on teacher professionalism.

Objective, abstract knowledge founded on standards and codes only provides an illusion of certainty in addressing the complex contexts of practice. It is therefore necessary to refine and better understand judgment in practice and how this judgment realizes teachers' moral responsibility to students, their caregivers, the school and the broader communities. This does not mean disregarding theoretical lenses to understand practice, or failing to appreciate the technical skill required to manage aspects of practice. It does, however, mean that teaching practice needs to be conceived overall as being based on judgment. To frame the challenge a little more clearly we might ask, on what view of knowledge should teachers' professional judgment be based? To get to the heart of this question requires looking to the historical roots of the competing views of teachers' professional knowledge.

Historical Roots: Teacher Professionalism and Rationalist Foundationalism

A more thorough understanding of the nature of the problems of professionalism in teaching is possible through examining ancient, modern and post-modern ideas on knowledge.[13] Noting that some of the following ideas may come across as fairly gross generalizations, and also cover a large territory, the point of this section is to focus on pivotal historic shifts in Western thinking that now influence contemporary realities in Western educational contexts. The search for objective foundations of knowledge based in abstract reason occupied Plato in Ancient Greece and reflects a position of *rationalist foundationalism.* At the core of rationalist foundationalism is a belief that knowledge can only be accessed through reason, and reason exists objectively and is not relative to any sort of context. In Plato's theory of forms the "good" can be accessed through training in abstract, theoretical reasoning. The challenge to this claim came from Plato's student Aristotle. Whereas

Plato portrayed ethics as a subject matter that was part of abstract theoretical understandings, Aristotle marks off ethical knowledge (or knowledge of the good) as its own distinctive area of practically situated knowledge. Aristotle rejects Plato's argument that the good exists outside of any context.[14] By locating the good within particular contexts, Aristotle marks off ethical knowledge as being particular, concrete, and distinctly different from theoretical knowledge. Thus Aristotle's position breaks with rationalist foundationalism.

Since Plato and Aristotle's time, both the aspiration to achieve objective, context-independent knowledge, and the futility of this aspiration, have been recurring themes in Western philosophy. Stephen Toulmin argues that the skepticism concerning the existence of objective foundations of knowledge continued in the sixteenth century with a number of philosophers working in the tradition of Renaissance Humanism.[15] In the modern era of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, also referred to as the Enlightenment, the project of establishing objective foundations for knowledge was taken up by such thinkers as René Descartes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant. These scholars sought to (re-)establish *reason* as universal and as the basis for the justification of knowledge.[16] In the modern era, the idea that knowledge could be understood as oral, particular, local, and timely was marginalized, in favour of an understanding of knowledge as written, abstract, universal and timeless.[17] The results of this shift are profound for Western thought from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries and are entrenched in the positivist view of knowledge generation.

The postmodern era marks a period of questioning the very possibility of objective foundations of knowledge, which was the project of the Enlightenment, and thus challenges foundational assumptions of the modern Western world. Some scholars look to Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work to mark a beginning to postmodern questioning.[18] The work of poststructuralist and other continental philosophers also is understood as being involved in the questioning of rationalist foundationalism at the heart of the modern agenda. Many contemporary scholars working in the tradition of Aristotle have also repudiated the rationalist foundationalism upon which the Enlightenment was constructed, "especially regarding those areas of human enquiry concerned with evaluative deliberation."[19]

An awareness of the grounding of teacher professionalism in rationalist foundationalism provides important context for contemporary educational problems. Furlong argues that the *crisis of professionalism* is based on the questioning of the very possibility of objective knowledge as understood in rationalist foundationalism, which leads to uncertainty in education about the responsibility and autonomy of educators (*ICP*, 25). Furlong states that claims to professional knowledge have traditionally rested on two assumptions about objective knowledge: it obtains validity from the scientific method, and it is supported by theoretical models (*ICP*, 17). Furlong points to the postmodern questioning of the possibility of objective knowledge, and to educational debates about the limitations of theoretical inquiry that remains abstract from practice, in order to argue that public confidence in professional education and in professionals themselves has eroded

(*ICP*, 18). If there is no objective body of knowledge on which to base professional practice, then on what basis does one claim to be a professional?

Furlong also argues that when claims to professional knowledge are in question, the claims to professional responsibility and autonomy are also called into question. Here, professionals are seen to work in complex situations requiring judgment based on expert knowledge. If professionals are without objective expert knowledge, they can be perceived as working in their own interests instead of those of their students (*ICP*, 18–19). The lack of ability to discern whether teachers base decisions on self-interest, in contrast to student interest, calls professional judgment into question and sparks a lack of public confidence.

Taking the view that technical rationality and abstract theoretical reasoning are unable to capture the realities and address the complexities and moral nature of teaching practice, and may be complicit in constraining knowledge and dialogue, there is a need to move beyond this model and develop a conception of judgment and action to direct teaching practice that addresses these challenges, yet is responsive to public understanding and dialogue. A conception of embodied judgment is required. In this view a practitioner is situated and responsive to the contextual factors that condition both deliberation and motivation to action in moral situations. Of central importance is that such an explication of judgment in practice finds a way to navigate a course that moves beyond a detached, objective account of knowledge, yet does not lapse into an arbitrary, subjective, or private account. As Richard Bernstein argues, it is necessary to move beyond the objectivism of the Enlightenment, as well as the relativism that develops from the position that knowledge is purely subjective and thus is characterized as arbitrary or only relative to the interests, norms, and priorities of individuals or groups.[20]

A Conceptual Space That Moves Beyond the Dualism of Objectivism and Relativism

A conceptual space in which it is possible to move beyond this dualism is found in the work of Gadamer. On my reading of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, it is his discussion of aesthetic judgment, combined with his play metaphor, that makes it is possible to move beyond the binary lenses of objectivism and relativism. In his discussion of aesthetic judgment Gadamer brings up the commonality between the notions of *taste* and *judgment*. It is here that I come to understand Gadamer as arguing that there are normative notions that condition our standards and criteria in deliberation, but such notions only make sense from the context in which they arise. Gadamer states that "taste not only recognizes this or that as beautiful, but has an eye to the whole, with which everything that is beautiful must harmonize.… [I]t has normative power" (*TM*, 33). In this way, the context taken as a whole influences how the particulars have the possibility of being understood. It is not an arbitrary or private exercise. Taste and judgment are faculties that apprehend meaning in a specific context — they are intellectual faculties that are able to see the whole and then grasp the universals through the particulars, and the relations of the particulars, making up the context (*TM*, 33–34). In this sense a universal would be an appreciation of this particular instance as falling under a larger common category of

meaning. I believe the idea that we are able to apprehend particulars as instances of universals, in a way that is constrained by an overall appreciation of the context, provides a conception of judgment that is not purely subjective, yet not entirely objective. It is to say that knowing is relative, in the sense of being *located* in personal or social horizons, for example, but is not to say that it is "subjective" in an arbitrary sense.

Gadamer contrasts this way of engaging in aesthetic judgment with an aesthetic consciousness that he explains as popularly imagined in the abstracted museum collection. As he states, "[D]etached from its connections with life and the particular conditions of our approach to it — we frame it like a picture and hang it up" (*TM*, 130). Gadamer offers a pointed critique to the possibility of engaging with abstraction as a way to any sort of truth or understanding. Like the picture hanging on a wall, there is no sense of understanding the picture without the engagement of the person looking at the picture and the meanings that person brings, as well as the history of the picture and the reasons for its appearance on the wall. The coming together of the person and the art is therefore an event in which meaning occurs.

Gadamer's analysis of interpretation as a way to construct meaning in context is extensive and detailed, but it is his phenomenological exploration of the concept of play that illuminates the current topic. Gadamer argues that the notion of play captures what it is to actually experience art. For Gadamer, the experience of a person engaged in *play* with art is not a person standing in isolation confronting a piece of art, but occupies a new space that engages the person and the art.

> When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself.… The work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it. (*TM*, 102–103)

Therefore, as an individual engages in the experience of art, she does not try to completely move into the space of the art to understand what it might mean, nor is she free to interpret as she sees fit by trying to bring the art entirely into her own space. Instead, the person and art come together in a new space based neither on a purely objective view of the art, nor on a purely subjective interpretation.

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer initially employs the notion of play as a way to engage art, but then details a phenomenological exploration of the notion of play itself to provide a metaphor for understanding in context. Gadamer finds that the essence of play is found in the subjectivity of the game itself and not the subjectivity of the players. He shows through language usage that play involves to-and-fro movements that operate beyond the consciousness and intent of those who play. He identifies an openness to possibility within play where true play becomes represented in the spontaneous activity emerging from the players (*TM*, 104). Gadamer argues that play reaches presentation of itself through the players, but the players are not the subjects of play. In his phenomenological exploration, it is the experience of the game itself that is the subject of play.

Through the play metaphor, Gadamer shows how experience decenters the self and the subject and creates a new space based neither on subjectivity nor objectivity of the self. Gadamer portrays experience (*Erfahrung*) as the ongoing integrative process in which what we encounter widens our horizon by overturning an existing perspective. It is not something you *have*, but something you *undergo* to overcome your subjectivity; you are drawn into and changed by an encounter.[21] In this sense, experience cannot be understood as something that can be examined in a detached way, nor as something that produces the individual as the subject of experience. Through the play metaphor, Gadamer highlights that experience can only be understood and interpreted as an event or happening residing in an *in between* space that brings together the self and the subject. Gadamer finds a way to articulate through metaphor that a person embedded in a context, despite lacking "objectivity," does not by default provide a relativistic interpretation through subjectivity.

In Gadamer's writings, the idea that seems paramount is that knowledge comes from an engaged person, embedded in a particular context, always already in the act of trying to understand. This context is marked by a specific place and time, which together inform the meanings that are possible as the person seeks to grasp universals from attending to the particulars, as well as the relation of the particulars, within the context. Knowledge is derived from the person's ongoing engagement in a context, and is equally constrained by that context. Such knowledge is characterized as fluid, changing and never finished, as the context constrains, informs and shifts the possible understandings. Knowledge in this sense is understood differently from the classical Enlightenment view of knowledge as fixed, established once and for all, and held abstractly.

Through Gadamer's notions of aesthetic judgment and his metaphor of play, it is possible to locate a conceptual space that does not position knowledge as either fully objective or fully subjective. Positioning teachers' knowledge in a conceptual space that avoids the dualism of extreme objectivism and subjectivism provides a space in which teacher professionalism can be considered more appropriately. This space rejects abstracted codes and standards as ways for teachers to make sense of practice in context, but also rejects the idea that the understandings of practice are located solely in teachers' purely subjective interpretations. Instead, teachers are embedded in a context, always already in the act of trying to understand — at once constrained by the conditions of the context, but also understanding the context through their own histories, orientations, and refined experience over time. Dialogue on professionalism needs to be concerned with the challenges of this sort of sophisticated engagement, as well as with identifying and cultivating the capacities for engaging in professional teaching practice so understood.

Furthermore, in recognition of the concern over power relations brought up earlier in this essay, conceptions of professionalism are not just an individual or group's concern over knowledge and standards, but also need to be understood as a state representation of power reflecting the dominant ideology. Dialogue on professionalism, while possibly better informed by the conceptual space identified in this essay, should still seek to consider how teaching is constrained through

notions of professionalism in ways that recreate dominant ideologies. It is important to keep in mind the (in)ability of various individuals or groups to have access to and input into the various places where dialogue on teacher professionalism occurs. Dominant notions of accepted forms of knowledge remain in academies, teacher training programs, and other societal institutions and thus can stop the dialogue at key and potentially transformative sites. As dialogue on teacher professionalism moves forward, it is important to engage specific questions concerning how teachers can navigate the uneven terrain of exercising judgment in context, and also to ensure that practitioners are invited into the dialogue that affects their practice so greatly.

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1. Joseph Dunne, "'Professional Wisdom' in 'Practice'," in *Towards Professional Wisdom: Practical Deliberation in the "People Professions,"* eds. Liz Bondi, David Carr, Chris Clark, and Cecilia Clegg (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 13.

2. John Furlong, "Intuition and the Crisis in Teacher Professionalism," in *The Intuitive Practitioner: On the Value of Not Always Knowing What One Is Doing,* eds. Terry Atkinson and Guy Claxton (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2000), 17. This work will be cited as *ICP* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Donald Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987), 25.

4. Furlong, "Intuition and the Crisis in Teacher Professionalism," 18.

5. Kenneth Osborne, "Education and Schooling: A Relationship That Can Never Be Taken for Granted," in *Why Do We Educate? Renewing the Conversation: The 107th Yearbook of The National Society for the Study of Education,* vol. 1, eds. David Coulter and John R. Wiens (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 27–29.

6. See also Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 4. This work will be cited as *TM* in the text for all subsequent references.

7. Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, 3.

8. Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 250.

9. Kevin Morrell, "Re-defining Professions: Knowledge, Organization and Power as Syntax" (paper presented at the fifth annual Critical Management Studies Conference, University of Manchester, July 2007).

10. David Coulter, Dianne Coulter, Mary Daniel, Elaine Decker, Pamela Essex, Jo-Anne Naslund, Charlie Naylor, and Anne Phelan, "A Question of Judgment: A Response to Standards for the Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia," *Educational Insights* 11, no. 3 (2007): http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publications/insights/v11n03/articles/coulter.html.

11. Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 156.

12. See Morrell, "Re-defining Professions"; and Maria Athina Martimianakis, Jerry M. Maniate, and Brian David Hodges, "Sociological Interpretations of Professionalism," *Medical Education* 43, no. 9 (2009): 833.

13. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: The Free Press, 1990). Toulmin points out that there are divergent views on the time periods associated with the categories of ancient, modern, and postmodern. As this is not the focus for my argument I will only provide rough estimations for time periods.

14. Richard Kraut, "Aristotle's Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/aristotle-ethics/.

15. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, x.

16. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 115–117.

17. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis,* 34.

18. Michael Peters and James Marshall, *Wittgenstein: Philosophy, Postmodernism, Pedagogy* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1999).

19. David Carr, "Roughing Out the Ground Rules: Reason and Experience in Practical Deliberation," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29, no. 1 (1995): 140.

20. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism,* 107.

21. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, "Translators' Preface," *Truth and Method*, xiii.