



# Academic life in the *measured* university

pleasures, paradoxes and politics

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## **Being and becoming a professional: Restoring history to the education of health professions**

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The conveners of this conference have challenged participants to consider whether the University still acts as an environment for developing engaged, disciplined citizens. In this presentation we interrogate student learning in the health professions and a tendency of educators and students to favor 'forward thinking' technical rationality, where the history of the discipline and its past ways are considered irrelevant. We contend that a pragmatic, forward thinking approach to learning how to 'do' or become 'competent' to practise may stand in the way of becoming critically reflective professionals. As Schon (1983) stated "many [professional] practitioners, locked into a view of themselves as technical experts, find nothing in the world of practice to occasion reflection. They become too skillful at techniques of selective inattention, junk categories, and situational control, techniques which they use to preserve the constancy of their knowledge-in-practice" (p.69). How have some health professions come to be framed in such a way that the histories of their emergence have largely been erased from university curricula, and what are the consequences for how students learn to become professional?

We focus on two professions - occupational therapy and physiotherapy - each with relatively short histories in the academy. While both are at different stages of developing a 'disciplinary mindset' - an attitude that embraces a critical engagement with the historically situated nature of the profession - we speculate on whether the absence of their histories from university curricula (at least in Australia) might help to explain the difficulties students' experience in seeing (and caring about) the layers of connections between theory and practice. In the language of threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003), these layers of connection create 'trouble' for students (Fortune & Kennedy-Jones, 2014) yet it is these very struggles that are germane to becoming professional. We wonder whether developing an historical disposition to scholarship in their pre-professional education, enables students to see the profession as forged through a collision between ideas, practices, people, places and circumstances (Kemmis, 2009). Our view is that a curriculum that embraces and explores narratives about the history of the profession is likely to help students to situate their uncertainties and anxieties about becoming professional - shifting their focus from doing, and (re)producing a practice to being and becoming the sort of practitioners able to recursively and excursively embrace professional quandaries.

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