

Occasional Address

University of South Australia Graduation Ceremony

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Pro-Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, colleagues, graduands, and family members and friends here to witness the graduations and celebrate the achievements they mark, I am pleased and honoured by the opportunity to address you this afternoon.

In 2007, Professor Richard Elmore from Harvard University rather provocatively described teaching as a profession without a practice. By that he did not mean that there is not a practice of teaching but rather that it does not have a key feature of professional practice. He went on to say, “Within a true profession an individual does not have autonomy over its body of knowledge and its practice”.

Professor Ben Levin from the University of Toronto illustrates the difference in a humorous way. He asks how we would react if we were on a plane and the pilot made the following announcement. “Passengers, we are about to land. Now, the standard way to land a plane is into the wind but today I propose to investigate the alternative. We could consider this to be a piece of action research in which you can all be observers. I will be interested afterwards to hear what you thought of the experience ... if we are, indeed, in a position to discuss it.”

Elmore says that professions have a shared body of knowledge and practice that must be mastered and implemented within agreed and non-negotiable norms. We expect airline pilots all to do the same thing. We similarly expect medical practitioners, accountants, engineers and so on to act in accordance with standard professional practice. We understand that their practices will change over time as knowledge advances and we know that some will be ahead of the pack in developing and leading the change. We do not, however, expect capricious variation in practice.

In teaching, a claim of professional status is often taken to be a licence for idiosyncratic practice. That undercuts teachers' claim to be professionals, at least in Elmore's terms. It also undervalues what educators currently know about appropriate practice and the systematic strategies they can use collectively to modify their practice.

To some extent this reflects the history of teacher education. My mother's older sister completed primary schooling in Queensland and then became a 'pupil teacher'. She worked in a school as an apprentice and finally became a teacher herself. There are people in the UK pressing now for a return to this kind of school-based teacher education or, as I would prefer to describe it, school-based teacher training. This not only values practice over theoretical understandings, it also assumes all wisdom lies in current practice.

The alternative would be to see teaching, as the Carnegie Report, *Teachers for a New Era* describes it, as an 'academically taught, clinical-practice

profession'. There are two particular features of this view that I invite you to reflect on.

One is that there is a body of academic knowledge about professional practice that can be taught and learned. There are things that we well know. They are based on substantial bodies of research that ought to guide common professional practice among teachers.

We know, for example, a great deal about how to teach young children to read. Failing to take account of that research and indulging in idiosyncratic choices of other practices not sustained by a strong research base should be seen as malpractice, not the exercise of autonomous professional judgement.

Practice in the teaching of reading is a good case in point. It does not always reflect the well-established knowledge base. It is sometimes shaped instead by current fads, adopted almost on a whim. The new Australian English curriculum does reflect the best research-based knowledge relevant for professional practice.

I use reading only as an example. The same point about there being a well-established knowledge base for professional practice applies in many other areas too.

Remember the Carnegie Report's description of teaching as an 'academically taught, clinical-practice profession'. I invited you to reflect on two features of this view of teaching. One, that I have just discussed briefly, is that there is a

body of academic knowledge about professional practice that can be taught and learned. The other, to which I turn now, is that teaching is a clinical practice.

It is a practice based not only on accumulated research evidence but also on teachers' use of systematic evidence on students' current levels of understanding. It uses this evidence as a diagnostic basis for individualising learning for students.

We know that there are large differences among students, far too large for lock-step progression of whole classes at the same rate. The best performing Year 3 students are above the average of Year 7 students. The worst performing Year 7 students are typically below the average of Year 3 students. Treating a class as a group moving in unison impedes the development of the best students and consigns those who slip behind to confronting new material without an adequate preparation to deal with it.

The alternative of personalised learning that takes account of students' current progress is viable.

When I was head of the work on education at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris, we commenced a series of international comparisons of the educational achievements of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science through the Program for International Student Assessment. The acronym is PISA. If you want an indication of the impact of this work, google 'PISA'. You will find that the first site returned is

the OECD website. It comes in ahead of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the city of Pisa.

The first PISA data were gathered in 2000 and showed Finland to be the outstanding performer among the then 29 OECD countries. Everyone then wanted to know how Finland did it. The Danes, in particular, were interested to see that Finland was at the top in achievement but only in the middle in expenditure per student while Denmark was near the top in expenditure but only in the middle in achievement! Some Danes at the time said that they should get more for what they spend or spend less for what they get.

The Finns had no simple answer to why they had done better than anyone else but they were able to describe the things they had been doing over a 20-year period to improve their education system.

They used to group students by level of achievement to reduce the differences among students within classes. They abandoned that practice. They used to force students who had not done well enough to repeat a grade, to have a whole year of their school life over again. They abandoned that practice.

There are no special education teachers in Finland. All teachers can deal with the full range of student performances and needs. Teachers have to be well-prepared to work in this environment, of course. All Finnish teachers complete a six-year program of study before they begin teaching.

In reflecting on their what they had been doing, the Finns said that they had removed all the means by which teachers and schools could pass their problems to someone else.

To achieve this, their teachers are well prepared in the knowledge of the subjects they teach and in appropriate pedagogical practices. They know what to teach and how to teach. Theirs is a clinical practice that uses data on student progress to shape the next steps for each student.

The Finns have no national assessments of the kind we have in NAPLAN but that is because they have a clear, shared understanding of the learning entitlements of students and the achievement standards that are expected. That is one feature of the Finnish system that Australian teachers like but it is only part of the Finnish picture.

Teaching is a highly regarded profession in Finland. It is more difficult to enter teacher education than medicine in Finnish universities and, as I said, it is a six-year course that they enter.

Some of you graduating today are well on in your careers. Others of you are about to take the first steps in your professional practice. I would encourage all of you to keep informed of developments in the academic knowledge that underpins your practice.

A well-known academic educationist who had spent a day visiting a school was asked, over coffee at the end of the day, what he thought. He said that he

was very impressed by the practice that he had observed but that he was now asking himself “Will it work in theory?”

In your professional lives you may certainly join others who will ask of academic learning whether it will work in practice. But learn to ask as well of practices that you see and that others might commend to you, whether they will work in theory. Learn to use the evidence accumulated from research to guide your practice and to use evidence you gather yourself on individual students to shape their learning opportunities.

Yours is an academically-based, clinical-practice profession. I wish you stimulation and satisfaction. And I congratulate you on the achievements that are being honoured here today.