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A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO EMBEDDING PROFESSIONAL SKILLS INTO MODERN DEGREE COURSES

Abstract:

This article focuses on understanding professionalism and the need to teach students about it, and includes a case study from the Claude Littner Business School (CLBS) at the University of West London. Teaching professional skills to students is of paramount importance as it has a direct impact on their career success. However, embedding it within curricula and making it part of the students' mindset is not so straightforward, as the concept of professionalism may often be affected by public perception. CLBS has employed a variety of pedagogical models and business approaches in doing this, such as horizontal and vertical integration through a spiral curriculum, experiential and reflective learning techniques, and has established HR practices such as onboarding and appraisal meetings, resulting in high submission rates and positive student feedback.

Professionalism in education includes the knowledge, skills and practices to which students must be exposed in order to become successful professionals in the future

Different meanings or perceptions of 'professionalism' are explored in this article, with a unique model presented by the authors to help define and contextualise the concept. The need for professionalism in education (i.e., the knowledge, skills and practices to which students must be exposed in order to become successful professionals in the future) is also investigated, with an analysis of some pedagogical models used to teach and embed professionalism in education. Lastly, it explains how the Claude Littner Business School (CLBS) has successfully followed a multi-dimensional approach in order to embed professionalism into their degree courses. In fact, it has gone beyond merely integrating professionalism in the curriculum to inculcating professionalism through the curriculum.

What is professionalism?

Indeed (2021) has defined professionalism as having the skill, knowledge and confidence to perform a job to the highest standards that might be expected. This means taking a job seriously, being reliable and caring about responsibilities and successes. It could be argued that these attributes are demonstrated through the (development of) 'soft' or 'transferable' skills which are highly valued by employers. There are many definitions of what constitutes soft skills, but those most relevant to professionalism are effective communication, positivity, flexibility, problem-solving skills and leadership.

Public perceptions often affect the definition of professionalism. According to Romme (2016), professionalism can be defined as 'the alignment between the shared purpose (P) of management as a profession, the body of knowledge (K) these professionals have access to, the actual behaviour (B) of managers in terms of actions and decisions, and the expectations (E) of a variety of internal and external stakeholders'. In other words, creating a shared sense of professional purpose and responsibility, learning to see things from different perspectives, developing knowledge and relevant expertise, enabling cross-collaboration and broadening professional networks, while understanding the expectations of society or employers, such as non-financial performance measures, all influence the level of professionalism.

There are many definitions of what constitutes soft skills, but those most relevant to professionalism are effective communication, positivity, flexibility, problem-solving skills and leadership

FIGURE 1 The professionalism formula (Romme, 2016)

The authors' definition of professionalism is that it is the perception that others have of us, and the behaviours and values which inform these perceptions. This is encapsulated in the diagram below.

All the above attributes are measured and assessed by the receiver. It is thus important to assess professionalism according to the context in which it is required. For example, the level of professionalism and the form it takes would be different in a corporate or customer-facing business, compared to a back-office role.

The need to teach students about professionalism

Fox (1992, p.2) stated that '[p]rofessionalism means different things to different people', which is certainly true, but it could be argued that there is a collective understanding of many of the attributes required to be professional in all career paths. For some professions such as nursing, medicine, law or accountancy, professionalism is often built into a code of ethics or regulated by a professional body, which makes it easier to integrate it into curricula. Developing the management discipline into a profession has been an ongoing challenge for many years, and it has been argued that the lack of professionalism and ethics is what led to major corporate scandals like Enron or Worldcom. Business schools around the world have been criticised for failing to educate students on their moral and social responsibilities (Romme, 2019), but this does not mean we cannot integrate an element of ethical professionalism into all curricula. Sullivan (2009) argued that teaching professionalism should not be restricted to a particular segment of the curriculum but should be included throughout the curriculum.

In a study carried out by Brooks *et al.* (2021), students set out the purpose of universities as having three main goals: *To gain decent employment, to achieve personal growth, and to contribute to improvement in society.* This fits nicely into the concept of modern higher education practice which moves from the idea of merely imparting knowledge, to helping students discover how to apply knowledge in the real world once they leave the safety and security of the education sector in order to achieve a successful career. It is evident that teaching professionalism skills fits into the first two of these goals. Students now expect value for their degree in terms of good careers and having the skills to succeed for the remainder of their working lives. It is no longer enough to impart technical knowledge of a topic or subject, the process must also support personal development and career progression. It is in this context that the higher education sector must continue not just to teach professional skills of which professionalism is a large part, but also to embed it as a modus operandi for students who enter the higher education sector.
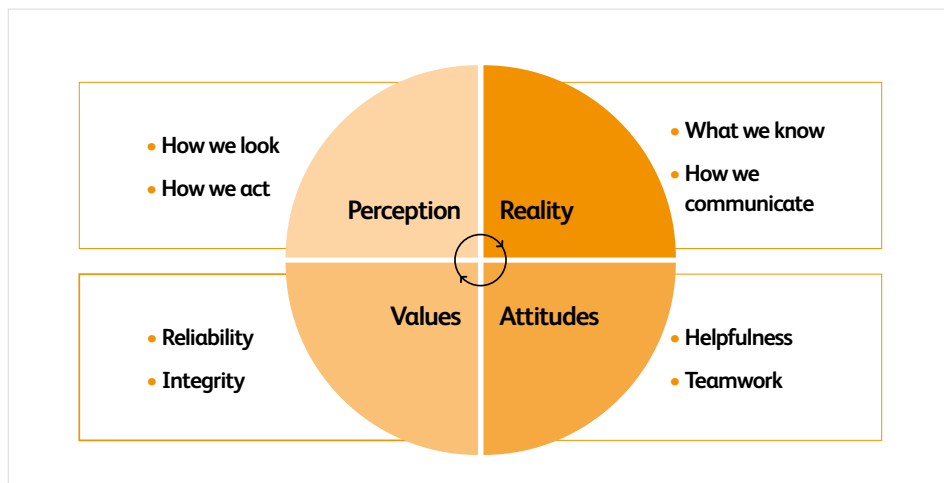

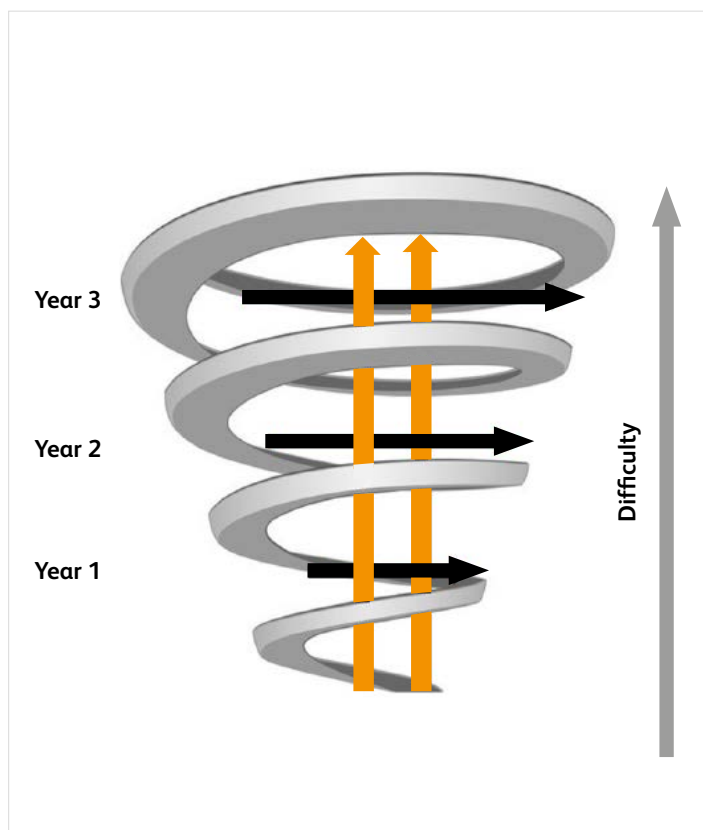**FIGURE 2** Byrne and Weerawardane's Model of Professionalism in Practice

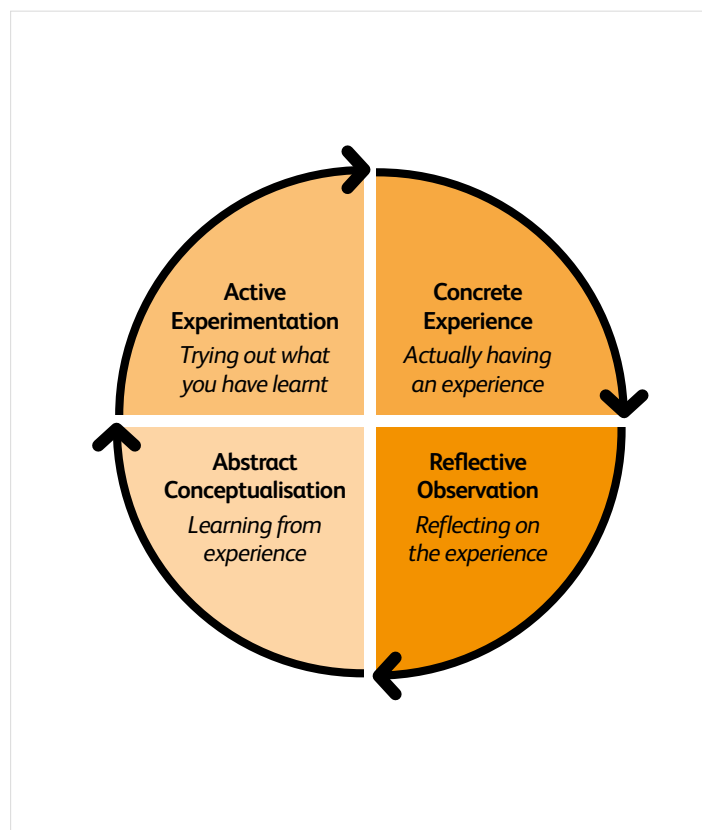**FIGURE 3** Horizontal and vertical strands in a spiral curriculum

FIGURE 4 Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

Models that could be used to teach and embed professional skills

Horizontal and vertical integration through a spiral curriculum

This concept was first introduced by Bruner (1960, cited in Ireland and Mouthaan, 2020, p.7), and has since been applied across various disciplines. In the context of teaching professionalism, horizontal strands in the form of professionalism and professional ethics can be introduced into the curriculum throughout a year across the different semesters, and then these topics can be revisited throughout the different years of the course through vertical strands, which gradually increase in difficulty as the student progresses, hence 'spiralling' upwards. The topics can be embedded either through specific modules solely dedicated to teaching professionalism and ethics, or even subtly integrated into other modules through assessments. The spiral curriculum has been established as a robust model and a sound motivational tool for enhancing student learning, because it 'activates prior knowledge, initiates interest and reinforces learning' (Mattick and Knight, 2007, cited in Coelho and Moles, 2015, p.162). The spiral curriculum empowers students to engage with modern pedagogies, while simultaneously enhancing their experience, and studies have shown that student understanding of the spiral curriculum improve over time, and that they appreciate the benefits of the spiral curriculum (Coelho and Moles, 2015).

Experiential and reflective learning

Experiential and reflective learning are other pedagogical approaches that can be used to motivate students, because they enable them to deepen their understanding and reflect on knowledge through their own experiences. This in turn helps them harness those past experiences to develop and improve their skills. These pedagogical approaches are, therefore, highly relevant to the delivery of professionalism in the curriculum.

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which is a 4-stage process aimed at understanding how new knowledge is acquired through experience and embedded through reflection, could be applied when teaching professionalism. For instance, as part of the curriculum, students could be asked to brainstorm their views on professionalism and how it can be instilled, which would activate prior learning and provide some structure for the task. They could then discuss their own personal 'concrete' experiences relating to professionalism in their workplaces. The students would then be encouraged or facilitated to reflect on the subject and express their opinions through discussion, again using their own experience. Reflecting on those experiences would stimulate their interest in the topic; they would be able to learn from those experiences and be motivated to try out what they have learnt.

This concept of reflective learning was originally introduced to educational development by John Dewey at the turn of the last century, and the idea of 'learning by doing' still has a place in teaching professionalism today (Rodgers, 2002). It has been argued that active learning leads to active reflection which in turn results in reflective practice, which is key to the development of professionalism in students (Ospina Avendano, 2021; Schon, 1991). It is a method for helping students to step back from their learning experience to reflect or critically think about how they can improve their performance going forward. The idea encourages students to remember what they have achieved so far and see development as an evolving process. This allows students to achieve at their own pace and also helps those with different experiences, different goals, and different ability levels to develop their professionalism, again at their own pace and in a manner that suits their individual aspirations.

A case study from the Claude Littner Business School (CLBS):

CLBS recognises the importance of not just teaching professionalism but embedding it as part of the mindset of students undertaking all courses. Although professional skills were already being taught on most courses, following an internal review of all courses in 2020, CLBS decided that it was time to give professional and employability skills a greater emphasis across all subject areas. Therefore, the existing Professional Skills module was revamped, and a new module called Workplace Employability Skills was introduced, with both modules to be delivered in each semester during the first year of study on all courses, when they next go through formal revalidation. The revised module on Professional Skills moved away from the traditional teaching of academic skills and abstract teaching of topics such as presentation skills, leadership and teamworking skills, to increase the focus on the application of these skills in a business environment. The aim was to develop emotional intelligence building on the work of Goleman (2020), and to demonstrate the importance of self-awareness and self-regulation, so that students would be able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, monitor their emotions and remain calm in challenging situations, which are all essential professional traits they would require in the workplace (Peek, 2021). The philosophy was to help students to recognise strengths and weaknesses and to see them as a starting point from which they could develop during the remainder of their course.

The module re-design focused on 3 key areas:

These three areas were implemented using established business practices. To teach students what was required of them, an HR process known as onboarding, which is the action or process of integrating a new employee into an organisation, was used. Onboarding is a continuous process that proceeds after induction and helps to engender professionalism in the employee. Therefore, the first few weeks of the module focused solely on onboarding in terms of university life and linking it to business processes.

The second area was to embed professional behaviour in the students. Through consultations with employers and the course team, it was acknowledged that if professional behaviour such as attendance, timekeeping and teamwork skills were developed, they would improve engagement and in turn improve student outcomes. Therefore, the module focused on introducing the expectations of behaviour, and on showing students that rules are important in business and in life, and that they benefit the student in terms of results and that all businesses had high expectations in terms of professionalism.

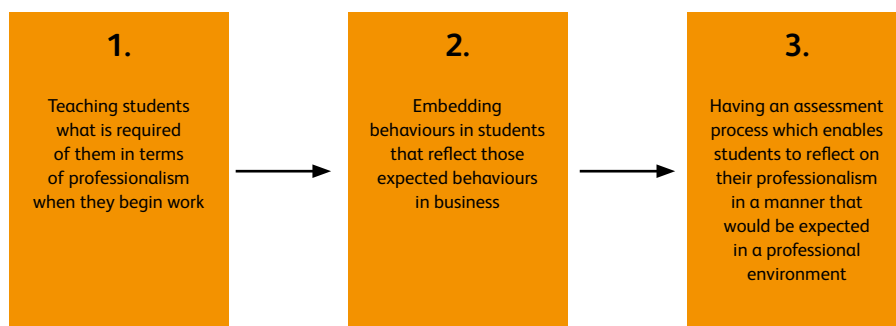**The module re-design focused on 3 key areas:**

1.	2.	3.
Teaching students what is required of them in terms of professionalism when they begin work	Embedding behaviours in students that reflect those expected behaviours in business	Having an assessment process which enables students to reflect on their professionalism in a manner that would be expected in a professional environment

FIGURE 5 Professional Skills module re-design

The revised module on Professional Skills moved away from the traditional teaching of academic skills and abstract teaching of topics such as presentation skills, leadership and teamworking skills, to increase the focus on the application of these skills in a business environment

During their performance appraisal interview, students stated that they felt well-supported and that they were starting to think and act like a professional businessperson. Submission rates were over 95 %, and all students valued the opportunity to reflect on their progress

The final area of focus was on the assessment process, and it was decided to follow a recognised HR process that is widely used in all successful businesses. The assessment was a performance review or an appraisal meeting. The rationale was that the module tutor would be the employer, and would reflect with the student on progress to date, understanding together what the student was doing well (and less well) and developing an action plan to help the student to develop going forward. The aim was to reward the demonstration of professionalism so that there were marks for attendance, timekeeping, engagement in class, the ability to self-reflect and professional perception. All these skills and traits were directly transferrable to the work environment and therefore highly relevant to students. This assessment was not confined to the Professional Skills module, but to all modules in the semester and any previous modules studied. An additional benefit of this form of assessment was that it encouraged the use of critical thinking, which is a key life skill for students. Weerawardane and Byrne (2021) defined critical thinking as the ability to think clearly and rationally, to assess the validity of ideas and understand the logical connection between them. It was therefore important that the performance review process encouraged students to think in detail about the connection between their behaviour at university and their future career aspirations.

In addition to the above, to support the development of professionalism in the curriculum, the authors compiled a tailormade 'bespoke' book on Academic Development and Employability. This book was designed to complement the student journey in the first year of study, covering the essential areas of expected development. It was

given as a signed hard copy to each student at induction and started the process of embedding professional behaviour and expectations on the course and linking it to the skills required in business.

After studying the modules of Professional Skills and Workplace Employability Skills in their first year of study, expectations of the level of professionalism from students would gradually be increased during their subsequent years, for example through other modules such as Business Ethics, and with the professionalism element heavily embedded into various assessments. By revisiting the topic and various aspects of professionalism through such horizontal and vertical strands, students would be able to relate new learning to previous learning, which would further reinforce professionalism. Even at master's level, the school has introduced new modules such as 'Management Skills for Executives'. This module follows a similar approach to Professional Skills, but with a different assessment process. This recognised that students moving to master's level study had not developed these skills in their previous courses and that was preventing them from achieving the sort of job roles that they aspired to do.

Although it is too early to analyse the long-term effect of the new professionalism-related modules in terms of student outcomes, anecdotally there was a much higher level of attendance and much greater level of satisfaction with the course than previously. During their performance appraisal interview, students stated that they felt well-supported and that they were starting to think and act like a professional businessperson. Submission rates were over 95 %, and all students valued the opportunity to reflect on their progress.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is evident that there is a real need to teach and embed professionalism into higher education, as it is a key skill that prepares students for success following the completion of their studies. There are various pedagogical approaches to do so, and the application of some of those approaches/ models have been explored in this paper, although the authors are aware that some institutions may favour other models. The Claude Littner Business School has applied a blend of pedagogical approaches and recognised business techniques to embed and teach professionalism through the curriculum to students who are planning to work in the business sector, regardless of their specific role. This approach encourages students not only to adopt a more professional approach, but also to understand how and why this is important in the business sector, and to gain theoretical but practically-oriented knowledge on universally endorsed management practices.

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Key words

Employability, professional skills, spiral curriculum, professionalism in business, business education