

Editors' Introduction

New Accountabilities in Professional Work is a special issue that consists of four articles that discuss the need for new conceptual and methodological frameworks to capture what it means to be a professional in today's society. The focus is on the new accountabilities that are emerging at the intersections between changing knowledges, practices and responsibilities in professional work. All the articles use the signature as an entry point to explore these new accountabilities.

This particular theme emerged from a discussion at an exploratory workshop financed by the European Science Foundation to bring together scholars from different countries to explore how processes of change in the intersection between knowledge and society are affecting professional work within different fields and perspectives.¹ At this event, the focus of attention was on how globalization, new modes of knowledge production, new regulatory regimes and increased economic-political pressures are transforming professional work. Seen together, these shifts bring about new intersections of professional knowledge and responsibilities that call for a reconceptualization of professional knowing and professionalism. Furthermore, interesting questions emerged as to whether exploring the practice of signing may be useful in the study of professional expertise.

Taking a bird's eye view of the dynamics of professional expertise, three approaches that currently inform contemporary research were identified: (1) A classic sociological outlook helps to explore the social construction of professional expertise. It highlights how the credibility (*ethos*) of such expertise is constantly being renegotiated at the intersection of social structures and forces, and it also underlines the altering social missions of the professions. (2) A discursive perspective puts the contemporary and distributed power struggles in the forefront. It also highlights the public appeal (*pathos*) of professional expertise. This helps to explore discursive configurations in relation to the social recognition of such expertise. (3) A socio-material approach, by contrast, focuses on the epistemic principles (*logos*) of professional expertise, and the ways in which these are renewed at the intersection of generative symbolic economies and the knowledge ties of the professions.²

These approaches offer rather distinct outlooks, conceptual apparatuses and analytical tools for the study of the dynamics of professional expertise in changing societies. They all move beyond static notions of professionalism represented, for example, through "trait theories" and the notion of stable mandates. They also underscore professional expertise as a relational and constantly shifting entity. However, a point of departure was that these three models may in themselves be in need of renewal, because their different ways of depicting professional expertise may not account sufficiently for the fleeting, the distributed, the multiple and the complex characteristic of the current situation.

¹ See <http://www.esf.org/coordinating-research/exploratory-workshops.html> for a more in-depth report from the workshop.

² For a more in-depth review of these approaches see: Strand, T., & Jensen, K. (2012). Researching the current dynamics of professional expertise: Three analytic discourses, In: M. Vukasovic, P. Maassen, M. Nerland, R. Pinheiro, B. Stensaker & A. Vabø (Ed.), *Effects of higher education reforms: Change dynamics* (pp. 59-78). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

So, how might a focus on the signature improve their potential? What material and symbolic functions does the signature perform? And how may a focus on the wider ecology of signing deepen our understanding of the altering social missions, public appeal, and knowledge dynamics of professional work? This special issue aims to explore these questions through four articles. The authors use cases derived from various professional settings, including medicine, teaching, nursing, and new family care arrangements. Drawing on examples from these diverse fields, the articles explore the multiple acts of signing, the roles the signature might play, what the practice of signing “does” and what effects it might produce.

The first article, written by Silvia Gherardi and Paolo Landri, draws on examples from medicine and teaching. The authors discuss how the signature can serve as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty and distributing accountability. By adopting terminology from Bruno Latour, they suggest reading signatures as professional “factishes” and—through this—promote a view of the signature as a distinctive trait of professional expertise, a new and powerful symbol of professionalism. In the second article, Tone Dyrdal Solbrekke and Tomas Englund take new signing practices for admission to the teaching profession as a point of departure to identify and critically discuss tensions and contradictions between the logics of professional “responsibility” and “accountability.” The authors illustrate the embedded consequences of signing processes for teacher professionalism. In the third article, Nick Hopwood uses examples drawn from an ethnographic study of a residential child and family health service, to illustrate the critical role the signature plays in contexts characterized by diffuse accountability and shared epistemic work. Who signs what and for what purposes is a central theme of this contribution. In the final article, Karen Jensen takes signatures and practices of signing as a point of departure for exploring and understanding nurses’ work with non-knowledge as a new responsibility. She focuses on how the signature stimulates community formation and through this plays a key role in facilitating the enrolment of nurses into their new roles and responsibilities.

Together these articles illustrate how signatures are used by professionals to verify their practice or confirm a procedure and to specify accountability and responsibility. They help to stabilize the unstable and have multiple forms of instantiations, such as written signs, digital modes, symbols or drawings. As signatures represent significant moments in the professionals’ material enactment of accountability, the authors all demonstrate how the signature and the larger ecology of various practices of signing constitute a useful point of entry to investigate the new accountabilities in professional work. First, the signature serves as “a tracing object” when studying the emergent transformations of professional expertise. Second, the signature is a point of entry when examining the multiple accountabilities that professionals juggle and negotiate, balancing the fine lines of responsibility amongst a growing number of actors and agencies. Third, a focus on the signature helps to explore the strategies employed by professionals in order to sign or not to sign, when to sign, and how to make the signature work in particular ways. Hence, this special issue illustrates how new professional accountabilities can be viewed through the lens of the signature. The editors of this issue hope that these articles will generate discussion and encourage researchers to engage in the further explorations of this approach.

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