

Starting With the Task: Rethinking the History of Nineteenth-Century Professional Education

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How does one go about writing the history of professional education? What constitute the central issues that might give it focus and coherence? These questions arose for us in the course of writing about the professions in nineteenth-century Ontario.¹ Our aim was to trace the development of a number of occupations and thus we included detailed studies of lawyers, doctors, clergymen, and, less extensively, dentists, engineer-surveyors, teachers, and others. But rather than treat these occupations independently or serially, we wanted to present them in comparative perspective, as well as to write about the *idea* of "profession" as it evolved between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. Professional education was an indispensable element in this story: then, as now, a mix of general education and craft training was a critical requisite of professional status. But in order to reconstruct that past, we had to come to grips with the distinctive histories of different kinds of occupations, and with the records of a large number of institutions, including several theological schools, medical schools, and universities. Each of these had generated a large volume of primary source material that presented a major challenge just to absorb and synthesize.

We soon realized, moreover, that we were dealing with dramatically different pedagogies. The conventional means of learning craft skills in the nineteenth century was through apprenticeship. In Ontario, for example, law students learned their trade almost exclusively in that way, as did engineers and surveyors. In other occupations, by the last quarter of the century at least, there was a mix of classroom work and learning on the job, although the latter occupied far more of the student's time. Dentistry and pharmacy from the 1870s on provide two examples of this pattern. In medicine, on the other hand, the role of apprenticeship declined steadily after 1850, to be replaced by a combination of classroom instruction *and* an increasingly sophisticated system of clinical instruction: that is, by small-group learning in hospitals at the bedside, under the tutelage of practitioners who were also professors in the

¹R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar, *Professional Gentlemen: The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Studies Series and University of Toronto Press, 1994). The examples we present in this article are mainly drawn from the book, which includes extensive documentation. Thus, although we have included some key references, we have not attempted to give full documentation here.

medical schools. Clerical education, at least for Anglicans and Presbyterians, was different again. Compared to any of our other occupations, ministers were "schooled": they spent far more time in classrooms than did any other aspiring professionals. Normally a B.A. or its equivalent was required, and then three or four years in theology. By the 1890s, only medicine came close to requiring that amount of classroom training, and it did not require a prior arts degree.

Faced with a complex institutional framework, a variety of occupations, and strikingly divergent methods of training nineteenth-century professionals, we had to find some means of imposing order on our own material. But that problem, in turn, exposed the importance of the issue with which we began: was there any such thing as "professional education" to be studied or written about as a genre in itself?

In answer to that question, most of the historical literature offers an implicit "no." Studies of professional education tend to deal exclusively with one occupation and with the institutions that serve it. Rarely do comparative studies cut across occupations or pose questions that penetrate beyond the particular. Instead, we have histories, good and bad, of medical education, legal education, theological education, engineering education, and so on, but nothing that treats professional education as a distinctive educational form, or that approaches it as a branch of educational, rather than of occupational, history.²

Fortuitously, at the same time as we were worrying these problems of coherence and focus, we were also finishing a piece on professional work in which, using diaries and other pertinent sources, we had sketched out the work routines that preoccupied doctors, lawyers, and clergymen in their daily lives. We were interested in the variety of tasks that routinely engaged them, and in the daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythms of their work. And this focus on work came to form the basis for our arguments about professional education. We had described certain tasks, and we then began to ask, how did students actually master these tasks—how did they *learn how* to do the work that would frame their careers?

Once posed, that question may seem obvious. Few would dispute that the primary purpose of professional education is to socialize neophytes into

²There have been in recent years a handful of influential books that have attempted to approach the study of professional occupations comparatively, but they are not particularly concerned with the subject of professional education. See for example Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Samuel Haber, *The Quest for Authority and Honor in the American Professions, 1750–1900* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Bruce A. Kimball, *The "True Professional Ideal" in America: A History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992).

occupational roles and identities, and to help them learn the array of skills required to practise an occupation successfully. But once the problem was articulated in that manner, we could ask comparative questions, and most important, come to terms with a confused literature.

In the first place, beginning with “learning how” helps define what the subject matter is, and what it is not. Much of what passes for the history of professional education, for example, consists of institutional histories—of schools, colleges, or faculties.³ These histories may be detailed, but their emphasis falls on internal politics, faculty appointments, external relations, the ideas that shaped an institution’s particular ambience, its great men (or, perhaps, women). Some attention is usually paid to the development of the formal curriculum—at least the major shifts. But such histories tend to be thinnest on the fundamental *raison d’être* of the institution: training students to practise. There is nothing wrong with institutional histories *per se*, but they do not tell how students “learned how” because they are intended for other purposes. Nor is writing an institutional history the same as writing the history of even one form of professional education, be it theology, medicine, or anything else. Such studies provide a backdrop for a study of professional education but not the thing itself.

Besides institutional histories, many books and articles offer an intellectual history of professional education, or to put it another way, of “learning about.” There are now major Canadian historical studies exploring developments in theology, and a rich international literature on the intellectual history of medicine and law.⁴ These works deal with what professors thought and taught,

³See for example Brian J. Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy: A History of Theological Education at Knox College, Toronto, 1844–1994* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995); C. R. Young, *Early Engineering Education at Toronto, 1851–1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958); A. A. Travill, *Medicine at Queen’s, 1854–1920* (Kingston, Ont.: Faculty of Medicine, Queen’s University, 1988); George Rawlyk and Kevin Quinn, *The Redeemed of the Lord Say So: A History of Queen’s Theological College, 1912–1972* (Kingston, Ont.: Queen’s Theological College, 1980). A major recent contribution to the history of higher education, including professional education, is A. B. McKillop, *Matters of Mind: The University in Ontario, 1791–1951* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Studies Series and University of Toronto Press, 1994).

⁴See for example Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991); A. B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelli-*

the “academic” content students were supposed, or likely, to learn in classrooms—in medicine, for example, learning about anatomy, physiology, biology; for the ministry, learning about theology, church history, church polity. Most intellectual historians are not, of course, primarily concerned with what is taught in classrooms. Still, one may make plausible deductions: what Ontario university professors like George Paxton Young or John Watson thought or wrote was probably what they taught. In nineteenth-century Canada the link is even more direct, since books on theology or medicine often came from lecture notes and/or were written as texts for the author’s own students.⁵

The emphasis on “learning about” has its uses and its own validity—to study the academic content of a professional field is necessary for understanding professional education. But it also tends to reduce professional education to little more than a footnote to intellectual history. Worse, it deflects attention from the central purpose of the enterprise: it fails to address the question of how to learn to apply academic knowledge to informed practice, which is the whole point of “learning about” in professional education.

Presbyterian ministers, to take just one example, had not only to study theology but learn to *deliver* an effective sermon. They had not only to learn *about* their pastoral duties, but how to carry out an effective pastoral visit. They had not only to be familiar with church polity, but to acquire the “people skills” associated with the management of a small organization. Because whatever else ministers did in the nineteenth century, they were, above all, preachers, pastors, and managers. Yet the skills associated with these tasks, like most work skills, could not be acquired through formal instruction alone. They were grounded not only in “knowledge about,” or in what contemporaries called the “science” of a craft, the science of theology or medicine or law, but in what was often called the “art” of practice: that is, the ability to apply the “science” to the particular case, to make judgments, mobilize intuitions, deploy rhetoric, weigh alternatives about what works and what does not in any given circumstance—a kind of ability that is largely honed through practice.

gence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1979), and *Matters of Mind*; Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839–1918* (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989); John Harley Warner, *The Therapeutic Perspective: Medical Practice, Knowledge and Identity in America, 1820–1885* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986). For the international literature in law, see the introductory chapter in vol. 1 of *Essays in the History of Canadian Law*, ed. David H. Flaherty (Toronto: The Osgoode Society and University of Toronto Press, 1981).

⁵See Jennifer Connor, “To Advocate, To Diffuse, and To Elevate: The Culture and Context of Medical Publishing in Canada, 1630 to 1920” (Ph.D. diss., University of Western Ontario, 1992), 114ff.

The formal curriculum in Ontario's two Presbyterian theological colleges, however, laid heavy emphasis on academic learning: systematic theology, Church history and polity, and two or three ancient tongues. Far less time or weight was given to homiletics or pastoral care. How, then, did Presbyterian theologues "learn how"? Once that question becomes the central focus, it directs the gaze from the institution or the prescribed course of study toward a bundle of activities that constituted what might be described as the "hidden curriculum" of "learning how"—activities not included in the formal curriculum but which theologues routinely engaged in nonetheless. For example, one of the prime elements in any good professional programme is the observation of exemplary practice; and theological students in Toronto and Kingston took full advantage of the ample opportunities offered for it. They visited the city churches two and even three times on a Sunday to watch some of the best preachers in the province, whether of their own churches or others. Students at both Queen's and Knox also organized their own missionary societies, which provided them with a means of running public prayer meetings, distributing tracts and other literature, and staffing outlying mission stations on Sundays.

Even more important, there was the convention of sending senior students out as home missionaries for five or six months in the summer, often to very isolated locations, where they had to preach regularly week after week, engage in all sorts of pastoral work, and learn the techniques of extracting money and commitment from struggling congregations. This practice did not have its origins in pedagogical motives; rather it was the ad hoc response of a colonial church to a desperate shortage of ordained men. And when historians notice it at all, they are concerned with writing about mission work rather than professional education. Yet home missions were a crucial training ground for generations of Presbyterian theologues. The experience could prove a trial by fire. As one Queen's theologian put it, "Students going into the mission field are often placed in the most trying circumstances. Generally they are perfect strangers to the places to which they are sent; as a rule these places have had no regular services, perhaps none at all, for a long time previous. The people have become careless, and it will require much ingenuity and skill to arouse them."⁶ The inexperienced, in other words, were sent to what was one of the most difficult ministerial tasks of all—organizing a new congregation, or resuscitating one that had been without a minister for months or even years—and almost always without experienced counsel within reach.

Even in the best accounts, these activities usually get short shrift. After the

⁶*Queen's College Journal*, 12 February 1876, 2.

institutional history, after the description of the formal curriculum or internal politics, we are given paragraphs, or perhaps a chapter, pigeon-holing them under some such rubric as "student life." We would argue, however, that beginning with the task and working backwards to "learning how" retrieves these experiences from their marginal, or "extra-curricular," position, and makes them a central element in understanding the professional education of Presbyterian theologues, and similarly of other sorts of students.

Starting with the task has a second major advantage. It not only directs our attention away from institutional and intellectual history but it also provides an antidote to certain fundamental biases in the literature. One of the most evident appears in the assessment of apprenticeship as opposed to academic instruction. Throughout the nineteenth century, as we have already suggested, the nature of the worksite itself shaped most forms of professional education. Most histories of professional education, however, are written by professors who teach in professional schools or who work in history departments—written, in other words, by teachers. And teachers have an inordinate faith in the efficacy of classrooms over worksites. Thus among historians of professional education, the value of apprenticeship has generally been viewed with suspicion or scepticism, and this is especially the case in law.⁷

Why this should be so is not clear to us. The diaries and similar records left by law students reveal a thorough and systematic initiation into lawyers'

⁷See for example Robert Stevens, *Law School: Legal Education in America from the 1850s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 24. Blaine Baker, in a reassessment of legal education, gives apprenticeship no close attention and concludes that it would be "an overstatement . . . to say that apprenticeship was the heart of its [the Law Society's] training operation"; see his "Legal Education in Upper Canada, 1785–1889: The Law Society as Educator," in *Essays in the History of Canadian Law*, ed. David H. Flaherty, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 86. We consider this a wayward judgment. From 1797 to 1889 all law students spent nearly all their time for a full five years learning in this way. See as well the approach in the earlier chapters of C. Ian Kyer and Jerome E. Bickenbach, *The Fiercest Debate: Cecil A. Wright, the Benchers, and Legal Education in Ontario, 1923–1957* (Toronto: The Osgoode Society, 1987), for example, p. 35, which generally denigrates learning through office practice and its advocates; and D. G. Bell, *Legal Education in New Brunswick: A History* (Fredericton: University of New Brunswick and D. G. Bell, 1992), chaps. 2 and 3. On the other hand, for a sympathetic treatment of nineteenth-century learning through apprenticeship, see William Johnson, *Schooled Lawyers: A Study in the Clash of Professional Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), and Raymond Cocks, *Foundations of the Modern Bar* (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1983).

routine tasks. Students learned in the office to do the paperwork of the profession by observation, imitation, then trying it on their own. They learned to work in the Division and County Courts. They travelled up to Toronto for terms, not just to observe the superior courts but to conduct some of their principal's business in those courts. As they matured they dealt with clients and conducted their own cases, under their principal's supervision. They spent whole weeks assisting at the assizes. They learned, moreover, in an environment marked by both intimacy and sociability—by the relationship between a principal and one or two students, on the one hand, and the professional sociability that surrounded the courts, on the other. When Archibald McLean was appointed a judge of the Court of King's Bench in 1837, he took Sandfield Macdonald, his student, with him on his first assize circuit. Wrote Macdonald of that experience,

I am not aware of any advantage to a student surpassing that of going [on] the Circuit, for besides its general lucrateness, it . . . extends greatly the sphere of one's acquaintance, makes him familiar with the forms and customs of the Court, by observing the system pursued in conducting the variety of suits then tried and determined and enlarges his knowledge of the several Townships and districts through which he travels.⁸

Few students were fortunate enough to have that kind of unique opportunity. But their work routinely took them into the courts and thus brought them into contact with the webs of sociability the courts entailed. One does more than simply make contacts or new acquaintances when one "hangs around" work-sites; one acquires knowledge, techniques, and values through listening to and watching professionals at work and play. Given the prevailing assumption that learning to lawyer was about the art of practice, in sum, there seems to have been a remarkable congruence between the skills students needed to acquire and the skills they actually learned. The challenge is not to make the case for apprenticeship but to explain what circumstances undermined that assumption.

We also suspect that there was a good deal more close supervision of law students than some contemporaries were prepared to admit and some historians have recognized. Students may have been left on their own to read for examinations or to figure out the "whys and wheretofores" of legal doctrine, though not even that can be assumed to have been common. But mistakes in the office could be costly in time, money, or both. "I do not know what I am to do with young Fitzgerald," wrote Adam Wilson to Robert Baldwin in 1842; "when he is here he either does so little that it is of no service to us or does that

⁸George W. Spragge, ed., "A Diary of 1837 by John Sandfield Macdonald," *Ontario History* 47, no. 1 (January 1955): 11.

which is expensive to be undone—he knows nothing of the profession and requires in the simplest matter to be instructed.”⁹ Whatever else it was, an apprenticeship was an economic relationship in which clerks were engaged in productive work, and therefore there were inevitably areas of close supervision, even if more general guidance was lacking.

The quality of the experience was almost certainly uneven—the diaries we have used make that quite clear. But equally clearly, apprenticeship was seen as an effective educational tool not only in law but in other occupations as well. Its virtues were obvious enough to the mid-century Kirk that Synod attempted to add a full year of it to the theological programme, and failed only because of the shortage of ministers. In some respects, indeed, it might be argued that compared to students in law and medicine, the Presbyterian theologian was at the greatest disadvantage. The law student worked under the guidance of his principal. The medical student learned to practise in an increasingly structured and supervised system of clinical education. Students in theology might be taught how to craft a sermon in a classroom, or come to imitate good examples through observation, but much of the rest came through unsupervised trial and error. One tried a sermon out in this hamlet or that, and either it worked or it didn't; one made a pastoral visitation on one's own and said the wrong thing, or the right thing too earnestly, and learned the lesson or didn't. There was no one there to correct mistakes or counsel the student toward improved techniques.

Beyond that, there is also an evaluative problem arising out of the sources themselves. Ontario's schools and universities have left a massive paper trail behind them but much of it consists of calendars, announcements, statements of intent, and other like materials. We know the titles of courses that students were required to take, the sequences, the hours of instruction, the examination questions. Our assessments of what was going on in schools, or in professional education, are largely based on sources such as these.¹⁰ We know far less about the actual experience of learning and teaching; it remains very much a black box. But that in turn affects our ability to evaluate the relative merits of formal instruction vis-à-vis self-study and learning on the job. By the 1870s there was

⁹Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, Baldwin Room, Baldwin Papers, Adam Wilson to Robert Baldwin, 31 December 1842.

¹⁰And these sources can be misleading. An example from the twentieth century is the discrepancy between the number of laboratory hours in pathology set out in the calendar for medical students at the University of Toronto in 1923–24, and the actual learning experience, which was “one half that stated in the curriculum”; see University of Toronto Archives, Office of the President (Falconer Papers), A67-0007/086, “Medicine, Faculty of—Appendix to the Dean's Report” (1923–24), 30 June 1924, Report of Department of Pathology and Bacteriology.

much complaint amongst both lawyers and students about the inadequacies of both self-study and apprenticeship. But such is sometimes the case with professional education today, as it was with other forms of professional education in the past. "Thus I have completed my collegiate course," wrote a young graduate of Knox College in 1854, "yet my feeling is that I require to begin it rather than finish it."¹¹ And in his study of general practitioners educated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—in recognizably modern teaching institutions—S. E. D. Shortt has drawn attention to "what was uniformly viewed by its recipients as an inadequate medical education."¹² What needs to be done, then, is to focus on the task, and on "learning how," and then to assess pedagogies on their merits rather than assume the superior efficacy of some "one best system" of professional education.

By starting with the task, we began not only a new line of inquiry into nineteenth-century professional education, but also a new way of probing the origins of pedagogical differences between occupations. Just as lawyers had to learn to draft a will, write and present a brief, or master the highly technical rules of court procedure, so medical students had to master anatomy, the diagnosis of a wide range of illnesses, and surgery. None of this, needless to say, could be done simply by reading textbooks, and traditionally these tasks had been learned by apprenticeship. Over the course of the nineteenth century, nonetheless, apprenticeship was gradually eclipsed in medicine, to be replaced by a relatively sophisticated system of group clinical instruction. Medical historians almost without exception welcome this shift; but rarely do they ask why it arose, and never, to the best of our knowledge, why a dramatic new pedagogy of practice emerged in medicine and not in other occupations. This neglect is in part due, we think, to the endemic parochialism which assumes the history of professional education to be *sui generis* for a given occupation rather than a genre of education cutting across particular groups and jobs. It is also due to the whiggism that is commonly found in the literature, a point we will return to. The moment one begins to attempt comparative work, in any case, these differences cry out for analysis. And once one reflects on the requisites of learning the task, plausible answers begin to take shape.

¹¹University of Western Ontario, Regional Collection, Rev. James Rennie Papers, Diary, 8 July 1854.

¹²"'Before the Age of Miracles': The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of General Practice in Canada, 1890–1940," in *Health, Disease and Medicine: Essays in Canadian History*, ed. Charles G. Roland (Toronto: Hannah Institute, 1984), 126.

Although the hospital was already an integral part of medical education in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Britain, it was still supplementary to apprenticeship.¹³ At the hospital students could witness demonstrations of anatomy and “walk the wards” listening to, and observing the work of, a consulting physician or surgeon. Except for the handful who could afford to apprentice themselves to a consultant, practical experience for most students was largely to be obtained through apprenticeship arrangements which did not include access to the hospital. But as advances in surgery and new techniques of diagnosis increasingly made the hospital dissecting room and bedside experience with a wide range of cases all but indispensable, students flocked to the large hospitals and to the schools that began to be attached to them. As a result, new pedagogical techniques developed which included not only observation and demonstration but supervised individual and small-group instruction. Apprenticeship in medicine, in other words, did not decline because it was simply “an idea whose time had passed” but because medical students began to learn *in crowds* at a relatively few large hospitals. This presented prominent consultants, private teachers of anatomy, and hospital trustees with new economic opportunities but also new pedagogical problems. Innovation was a prerequisite if the virtues of apprenticeship—hands-on experience—were to be reconstructed on new terrain. Contemporaneously, in some of the traditional artisan crafts, apprenticeship was dying out because technological innovation and the reorganization of manufacturing not only made it less necessary to master a skill, but made the learner redundant in the production process. In the case of medicine, innovations in physic and surgery shifted the main locale of medical education to the hospital and threw up new ways of mastering skills.

The special character of that new terrain, however, played its own role in fostering pedagogical innovation. One cannot, generally speaking, conduct experiments or learn by trial and error on the clientele of a lawyer's office, or on one's parishioners. The laity has limited tolerance for beginners' blunders; confidence dwindles and people go elsewhere. That is also true of a physician's paying patients. When you rush to a doctor's office with a broken arm, you do not expect that the first attempt to mend it will be made by an apprentice. If

¹³For medical education in Britain, see Charles Newman, *The Evolution of Medical Education in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957); M. Jeanne Peterson, *The Medical Profession in Mid-Victorian London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), chap. 2; Irvine Loudon, *Medical Care and the General Practitioner, 1750–1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chap. 2; Thomas Neville Bonner, *Becoming a Physician: Medical Education in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, 1750–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), passim.

one falls into the clutches of the modern teaching hospital the situation is somewhat different; still, everybody is in the same boat: patients are poked and probed by the rawest recruit, gawked at by a crowd of students following a physician through the wards, and operated upon by those still learning their craft, all in a suitably democratic manner, without regard to the patient's wealth and social standing. Dissections are carried out, in the main, upon those who have volunteered their bodies.

This is not, however, the social environment within which either anatomical or clinical education in medicine developed. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, only the poor with no other recourse committed themselves to the hospital; only the friendless or the destitute died there; only the unclaimed were eligible to be turned over for dissection. The subjects which students practised upon at the bedside, exercised their growing surgical skills upon, and learned their basic anatomy from, were not the sick or the dead indiscriminately, but the sick and dead *poor*. In a riveting study of the origins and subsequent history of the English Anatomy Acts, Ruth Richardson has lifted the veil on the social meaning entailed in this relationship, and we ourselves have explored elsewhere its significance in nineteenth-century Ontario, but neither study reaches beyond dissection to include the living hospital patient.¹⁴ It is a subject that deserves further attention from some suitably dyspeptic historian. Here we simply want to draw attention to the fact that the critical learning laboratory for nineteenth-century doctors was of a profoundly different character than that for lawyers, ministers, or indeed most other professional men. Behind the walls of the hospital, the blanket of reticence and dignity could be turned back, and the patient's "confidence" in a physician discounted. Demonstrations and learning by trial and error could go on without damage to reputations and without fear of suits for malpractice. We mean all this in no denigratory spirit; but we also believe it important to recognize that what is often considered a model pedagogy of practice developed within a unique social context. Had doctors had only paying patients, instead of the objects of charity to learn on, the outcome might have been different.

As we intimated a few pages back, the problem with the history of professional education is not simply occupational parochialism but also a potent strain of

¹⁴Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Penguin Books, 1988); R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar, "'Beyond the Measure of the Golden Rule': The Contribution of the Poor to Medical Science in Nineteenth-Century Ontario," *Ontario History* 86, no. 3 (September 1994): 219-35.

whiggism. Even good historians tend to assume that present arrangements represent the "one best system" and that history is an account of progress toward that goal—progress toward formal classroom instruction and, above all, the university professional school. Neither calls for explanation; both are taken as a kind of norm, and it is deviation from the norm that needs to be explained. It is a particular vice of those who write as members of one or another profession but it also mars the work of historians of the university, who sometimes find it hard to imagine that legitimate forms of training might (or ever did) exist outside its walls, and who can, on occasion, thus produce not only truncated but bizarre accounts of the development of professional education. In accounting for change, moreover, both sorts of historians tend to adopt uncritically the rhetoric of late nineteenth-century reformers eager, for a wide variety of reasons, to reshape existing arrangements.¹⁵

Starting with the task provides an alternative means of interpreting these changes. It allows one to ask if shifts occur because of changes in either work routines or the conceptual demands inherent in the task. If not, where do we look for explanations? If the links between the universities and professional education began to tighten in the late nineteenth century, for example, why did it happen? Who were the stakeholders and what were the forces that contributed to it? It is not at all clear that the reorientation of medical education which created the university faculties of medicine in late nineteenth-century Ontario had anything to do with either the nature of doctors' work or the inadequacies of existing provision for medical education; it had much to do, on the other hand, with new enthusiasms about basic research in the biological sciences (research that was almost entirely irrelevant to practice, it must be emphasized), with the ambitions of a small group of researchers to obtain a more secure place in the academy, with overcrowding in the profession, and with the imperial ambitions of the provincial university.

We have made that argument elsewhere and will not pursue it here at any

¹⁵The most thought-provoking reassessment of professional education in recent years has been done by Donald Schön in two influential books: *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987). In the former book Schön begins with a review and critique of the positivist assumptions, pervasive today, underpinning the model of professional education which began to take hold in the late nineteenth century. A good Canadian example of the problem is to be found in McKillop, *Matters of Mind*, chap. 3. McKillop deals well with professional education once it is ensconced in the universities. But his hand is much less sure when he considers its earlier modes, which were carried on outside them. Nor does he bring much critical analysis to bear on the question of why an expanding range of professional education was lodged in the universities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

length.¹⁶ But consider the case in law. If apprenticeship was seen in the middle decades of the nineteenth century as the most efficacious means of training law students, why did the Law Society found a Law School in 1889? Was it because a handful of forward-looking school promoters triumphed over a reactionary lot of lawyers who could not see beyond the traditional ways of doing things? We think there are more plausible explanations. Some have to do less with the nature of the task than with the attempt to restrict the number of entrants. Beginning in the 1870s, the Law Society began to introduce ever more rigorous programmes of self-directed readings for law students and, concomitantly, ever more rigorous examinations. Before then it had been rare (though not entirely unknown) for students to complain about their educational arrangements; after that, however, objections multiplied in the pages of both the lay and the professional press. The reason, we suspect, is that higher examination standards, more required reading, and an increase in the number of examinations during their term of articles all made it more difficult for students to master the material and pass the examinations through self-preparation. It also made the informal instruction traditionally offered by their principals less efficacious. To meet the new demands, some leading lawyers began to argue that more formal methods of instruction were not only necessary, but long overdue.

But other answers may lie in the changing nature of lawyers' work itself. During the last half of the nineteenth century there was a remarkable growth in the number of lawyers in Ontario and in their dispersal into the countryside in search of places where they might make a living. Because of the more restricted nature of their business, their students would not be exposed to the wide range of activities available to earlier generations or to the round of court appearances and other formal duties routinely experienced by our mid-century diarists. Numbers and dispersal, in other words, made such gradual socialization into the law less efficacious.

An even more important factor may have been changes in the work routines in the law office itself. In the debate over the establishment of the school, one opponent conceded, in passing, that "the use of shorthand and typewriters has taken from the students much work, by some called drudgery, but withal, work which was rich in instruction."¹⁷ The editor of the *Canada Law Journal* drew

¹⁶See R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar, "The Reorientation of Medical Education in Late Nineteenth-Century Ontario: The Proprietary Medical Schools and the Founding of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto," *Journal of the History of Medicine* 49, no. 1 (1994): 52–78.

¹⁷*Globe*, 2 January 1889, 5. See also the comment in Bell, *Legal Education in New Brunswick*, 110–11, note 46.

attention to related changes, noting that the impact of the school would "detract materially" from the value of the student "as an office assistant," adding that "young lawyers and paid clerks will probably find themselves in greater demand."¹⁸ That trend may well have been already under way, even in smaller law offices. As the amount of business expanded, one can at least speculate that lawyers might have come to prefer the experience of a newly qualified lawyer and a paid clerk to the help of an inexperienced student. A reasonable level of profitability, moreover, might have allowed that preference to compensate for the relatively cheap labour of the articled clerk. Even if such changes had been confined to offices in the county towns and in Toronto, where most lawyers were located, they might still have reduced the volume of opposition to a compulsory law school.

Our own analysis of developments in the town of Brantford, Ontario, hints at the same development. In 1861 the census listed twelve lawyers and fourteen law students; twenty years later, there were twenty lawyers but still only fourteen law students. The rise in the ratio of lawyers to students might be due to many things but it is suggestive nonetheless. At the end of the century, in any case, the evidence is more conclusive. At a meeting of the Osgoode Legal and Literary Society, one speaker remarked that articled clerks had, for all practical purposes, ceased to be useful, and he threw the blame on the Law School, which tied up so much of their time. Replied another,

practitioners were apt to look back to some 15 years ago, when the student was part of the office machine, and did a great deal of routine work, copying etc. Now the student was of little use in the office. This change would have taken place even if there had been no school, owing to the adoption of the principle of large firms with junior partners to do the specialized work of modern practice and to the introduction of the shorthand writer and typewriting machine.¹⁹

In the larger world beyond the confines of the professions, technology and the reorganization of the workplace were reducing the efficacy of apprenticeship and promoting the transfer of skill-training to schools of various kinds. Less could be learned in the shop; the production process undercut the role of the apprentice, and learning a craft became something that was more likely to happen in school. And so, perhaps, in the case of law. Although apprenticeship was not abandoned, its declining economic value encouraged those who had formerly opposed classroom learning to acquiesce in the new departure at Osgoode Hall.

¹⁸*Canada Law Journal* 25 (1 October 1889): 455.

¹⁹*Globe*, 3 February 1899, 9.

Starting with the task, in sum, not only encouraged us to ask new questions but allowed us to work comparatively across occupations, without the presuppositions built into the existing literature; to compare and contrast different modes and styles of professional education; to account for these different modes within an historical context; to explain why change occurs rather than simply to chronicle the steps toward “the one best system”; and even to assess, comparatively, the efficacy of the different pedagogies. We are not saying that it must be an exclusive focus or that it can answer all the questions. What it did for us was to give us the leverage to treat the history of professional education as a distinct genre, rather than a subset of the histories of individual occupations or institutions, and more important, to treat professional education in a way that seems more consonant with the historiography of education generally. But we would also argue that the study of professional education *must* focus, centrally, on how people in the past learned to practise their crafts. To do otherwise is to reduce the term “professional education,” and indeed, the history of professional education itself, to an oxymoron.