

Professionalism and Unionism: A Conversation with Adam Urbanski

Susan Goodwin
Discussant

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Goodwin: What is the relationship between professionalism and unionism?

Urbanski: Well, they ought to be one and the same. There ought to be a comfortable marriage between unionism and professionalism. I think basically it boils down to a choice for teachers and for their union, and that is: do they want to be agents of reform or do they want to remain a target of reform? For too long, unionism and professionalism were viewed as two separate domains. And, indeed, teachers committed to either one, but not both together, with some notable exceptions. It seems to me that the combination of both represents a return to the roots of unionism. If unionists also made this a primary concern of theirs, the central issue would be the nature of the standards for their work and how to go about being gatekeepers for those standards.

Centuries ago, trade guilds were established for the purpose of maintaining standards. They even had language in their bylaws saying that any practitioner who became a threat to either the safety or reputation of fellow practitioners, or of the practice, would be recalled. So standard setting and peer review, in my view, are as old as unionism itself. We have also learned through our



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experience here in Rochester in trying to build a strong union—and through the union to build a strong profession, a better profession, a more responsible profession—that the more we promote professionalism, the more credible the union becomes. And the stronger the union becomes, the better position we are in to promote a

more genuine profession for teachers. So I think it's a direction worth pursuing.

Goodwin: What can we expect to see that's different when all this comes about? What characteristics can we look for?

Urbanski: I think that a true indication would be whether or not the public, and especially students and their parents, turn to teachers and to their union for information and analysis about children, about families, and about learning, not just about contractual language. So earning credibility, with those whom we are supposed to serve, would be the first and most important signal to us. That would be number one. Number two would be that there would be a dotted line—not a rigid line—between what is a professional concern and what is a union concern; these concerns wouldn't be separate

domains, not even separate departments within the union, not even separate functions within the union. You could also see what proportion of the union's energy and resources go for professional issues and for promoting the professional growth of its members. For all the rhetoric, if the union focuses substantially more on grievance processing than on professional development of its members, for example, or on seeking knowledge and improving pedagogy, then I think it casts a doubt on the realness of the commitment. Finally, I would say that one clear indication of a genuine concern for professionalism would be an ongoing pattern of clarifying and even creating new knowledge about teaching and learning. That is, not only facilitating for members the use of research or the results of research, but initiating questions for research, validating it, disseminating it, subjecting it to ongoing scrutiny and analysis and interpreting it as the judgment of experts. This means writing about it, having seminars about it, and seeing such conversation at union headquarters as natural as contract negotiations or improvement of economic benefits.

Goodwin: That's a lot.

Urbanski: That's a lot, and while one could make a good argument that this is reaching for the sky, I can feel the sky within reach. We already see evidence of this in some colleagues and even in some groups of colleagues. All too often, these colleagues feel that they must keep a comfortable distance from their union. To make the union a magnet for them, rather than a potential spoiler, would be a cultural change. Now, we're partly along the way to this. We have managed, after more than a decade of effort, virtually fourteen years of effort, to change the culture significantly enough so that most of our members know that the union is not a place to hide. However, that only removes the negative. We have reached the starting point and the question is, "Can we move forward?"

Until now, we had only managed to undo what had been inherited. I do not view the undoing of harm as progress in the pure sense. I see it as restitution to the original point. Progress comes when you move ahead from where you should have started to begin with. If you can catch a glimpse of this cultural change, then that could be an indication. My biggest concern initially was, "Will we be granted the time to accomplish this?" I knew it would take time and I knew that the sequence or the procession of administrations within the union had two or four, at most six, years to accomplish any-

thing, but only four uninterrupted years. I knew that this is not sufficient time for a culture change. So, the breakthrough came when we were able to secure a longer period of time within which to change and model a different world view. And now the question is how to build on it. How to internalize it. For me the real question is no longer what administration is in charge of the union; for me, it is clear now that you can't un-ring that bell. About 50 percent of our members who have come in during this effort, during the last fourteen years or so, have already acculturated themselves to this point of view and they wouldn't settle for a very reactionary or prereform position, or preprofessional orientation. I think the question now is whether we can really hone this agenda to such a point that we would be confident that this process will continue—preferably with partners, but without anyone else if necessary.

Goodwin: The historical restrictors are multiple. One indicator would be when teachers are perceived as producers of knowledge, perceive themselves as producers of knowledge, and when the public and students and those who utilize our services see what we do as intellectual labor.

Urbanski: Let me give you an example of what that might look like in action—at least one variation. It is not the only one because there are so many—that's the beauty of a vibrant profession and of vibrant professional behavior. The beauty is that there are so many cuts on it, so many manifestations of it. Let me give you one example that I would view as significant progress toward the actualization of professionalism. If it became no longer rare to find groups of educators, along with non-educators, who had a stake in the exercise—groups like parents, or maybe community leaders, maybe agency representatives—meeting around the table about a single student, conferencing about that student in much the same way that medical professionals have a conference to determine what the proper procedure would be for a given patient or what happened or what went wrong. If we had such conferences about students, not only to see what went wrong, but also to determine what to do right by that particular student, it would send a clear message to everybody that these folks have a reason to meet around the table and they're meeting around the table about the right thing.

Goodwin: I think there's a tendency to try to answer questions that you think you know the most about and perhaps avoid the questions or the issues that you know

the least about. So perhaps the hardest questions are those about the needs of students.

Urbanski: I think the way to increase the chances that the right questions get raised is to create an environment that is safe for innovation, where failure is not viewed as not having succeeded the first time you tried, but rather as not having tried. For example, to refer again to medicine, researchers do not fear pursuing a path that ultimately leads to a negative finding; they view negative findings as a contribution to the knowledge base. They publicize them and they write them up in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. They get standing ovations at medical conferences because they have discovered what doesn't work and they contribute that to the knowledge base and they don't get punished for doing that. It is recognized as a contribution in itself. In education, we have a guillotine kind of accountability. We essentially or implicitly say to educators, "If you want to try something new, first of all, we probably won't let you, but if we do let you, you better be right, you better have guessed right because if you don't, off with your head. We'll discredit you or we'll fire you," as if negative findings were not a contribution to knowledge. So creating an environment safe for innovation and removing this guillotine form of accountability would result in a greater likelihood of raising the right questions. The questions that we're trying to raise about how do we get all kids to learn well are no less complicated than the questions about curing cancer.

Goodwin: Well, I think probably part of the dilemma or part of the problem in getting a clear and holistic understanding of these issues is that "How do we get all students to learn well?" has never been an essential question.

Urbanski: For those who had the power to make these decisions, it's never been the essential question, pragmatically speaking. It's only been an essential question in moral terms. Ray Marshall, the former Secretary of Labor for Jimmy Carter, once said, "The problem with moral arguments is that they only work with moral people." So, at least for a substantial number of people, this was only a pragmatic question: "Do we need these kids? And if so, do we need all of them?" And the answer, being blunt about it, was—"Let's only educate the ones we need. Why waste our money on educating those that we don't need?"

Goodwin: So then it would stand to reason that the community and some parts of the public would be suspi-

cious of teachers and would be concerned that the time you're speaking of, which is so necessary for professional development and culture change, is really a way for us to evade the issue. And I think that we're continually having to address that concern and that suspicion.

Urbanski: And I would affirm the right to be suspicious and then proceed to tell the community that, in addition to being suspicious, I think it would be a loser to argue that there was no reason to be suspicious of either educators or business leaders who are very involved in education, because all of them and all of us didn't just all of a sudden get religion. The reason we are doing this is because now we view it as in our enlightened self-interest to educate all students. So I would say to the public, "I affirm your right to be suspicious and I urge you to incorporate these dynamics in your understanding."

Goodwin: So then rather than deny history, we ought to utilize history in developing an appropriate and real response to the problems facing education and educators.

Urbanski: Or, to put it another way, the only question more important than why what happened happened is what will happen now.

Goodwin: Well, that's going back to the time element. We don't have time to waste. We don't have time to lose.

Urbanski: I think that we can do both: we can think and we can act. We can engage in an analysis of what happened because it heals the soul to do that. But I also think it would be unwise to use that as a reason not to move forward because every moment we do not act, some child loses out.

Goodwin: Well, perhaps that's why standards are so important to the whole issue because it's standards that move you from a position of having to just have faith in someone to having a way for accountability.

Urbanski: Not only is that true, but I think that's the most tragic mistake we've made in reform so far. We didn't begin with the question of standards. Until and unless there is a consensus about what it is that we want our students to know and be able to do, how in the world could we know what we want adults to know and be able to do? How in the world could we know how to structure schools? If learning and not teaching or ad-

ministrating is the primary dynamic in education, then first we have to have a clear consensus on what we want students to know and be able to do. That is the nature of the enterprise. Then everything else flows from that.

Goodwin: I think that is very obvious, so when the obvious isn't or wasn't obvious, then perhaps that's all we could handle at that point in time. This is a concern to me.

Urbanski: Yes, we took a scenic route to that realization.

Goodwin: So what I'm suggesting is that perhaps we had this idea that we already knew the answer to the question of what students should know and be able to do. We made some major assumptions about that and even went so far as to think that we all probably agreed about what those things were.

Urbanski: I think we were shopping around for the common denominator as the answer. And, whatever was accepted, we considered that a victory.

Goodwin: Well, then talk to me about this. As a proponent of the National Board Certification, it seems that not only do you support high standards for teachers, but that you are supporting this for students as well. So in furthering this endeavor and by observing national activities about standards for teachers and students, it becomes clear that the centerpiece of educational reform is the knowledge base—what we want students ultimately to know and be able to do and to be like. What kind of people do we want to see students develop into?

Urbanski: Let me say several things here because I think they're all relevant and they, together, contribute toward a framing for thinking about that issue. On the one hand, and I've expressed this at the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, it is difficult for me to understand how we could come up with the answer to what should teachers know and be able to do, which is the question of standards for teachers, until we understand what students should know and be able to do. So I think that the development of standards for teachers ought to be predicated on standards for students.

Goodwin: All right.

Urbanski: On the other hand, I agree with Debbie Meier, who says that you cannot teach what you do not model. So all of the attention to student standards, if it is not in a context in which there is huge attention to

teacher standards, undermines the credibility of the concern over student standards. We're back to searching for a good fit between standards for teachers and those for students. And a good fit, at least one that is doable now, is this: At the same time that we are searching for high and rigorous standards for what students should know and be able to do, we are expending energy, serious energy, on what teachers should know and be able to do.

Goodwin: Perhaps the reason that student knowledge hasn't been addressed is that there is an agenda already about what students should know and be able to do, which remains the same. It may be the same as what's been required all along, and that may not be to empower or liberate students; it may not be to produce or create or promote students who are thinkers.

Urbanski: I think that while we were saying there are no standards for students, what we really were saying is that there are no standards for anyone or anything. That we have been in an environment of anarchy where anything goes.

Goodwin: All right. So, since this could be the case or perhaps is the case, who should make the determination about what students should know and be able to do and by what process?

Urbanski: Well, we're struggling with that right now. I would not assign the full ownership of this responsibility to any single constituency. That is, in the process of standard setting, we ought to model what else matters to us: democracy, inclusiveness, participation, truth. And you cannot have this if there are those who have no voice, are just watching, hoping that you will speculate correctly about what's important to them.

Goodwin: Or that you'll do the right thing.

Urbanski: Or that you care enough, or that you know enough. Just caring enough is not enough.

Goodwin: The Rochester Teachers Association articulated and supported consensus as the means for decision-making in schools. Another condition for decision-making in schools was the inclusion of all the relevant constituencies. In terms of national arenas and state arenas—and in the very discussion we're having now—when you establish standards for what students should learn, what's the decision-making process? I'm sure that consensus isn't it, and that worries me.

Urbanski: There is a struggle here between how you create an open framework for legitimate discourse, while at the same time respecting expertise.

Goodwin: I agree. So therefore I am talking about consensus within and across constituencies.

Urbanski: Yes, and I would be satisfied at this juncture of my own thinking about it with a general consensus on what students should know and be able to do and what teachers should know and be able to do, one that leaves some flexibility to add nuances and dimensions that are reflective of the sensibilities of each community.

Goodwin: Now, I have to agree in terms of my own thinking about consensus. I mean, it's a process that I think inherently brings out the best in people.

Urbanski: I think every group seeking consensus on standards ought to have one wall reserved for a huge script on it of three words: "Rigor Without Rigidity." How can you have rigorous standards without making them so rigid that there's nothing left for most folks to do other than to fulfill what some other folks have decided? And, it also brings to mind another important admonition from Grant Wiggins, about the issue of standards and assessments. Grant makes the statement, "The most important consideration in any assessment or test is whether or not it is credible to the test taker, not just to the test giver."

Goodwin: When you start talking about standards—what students need to know and be able to do—what students are we talking about? For example, what's best for students of color? If you are talking about a narrow sense of content, of course there are things that we all have to know. But if you were talking about what do students of color need, you're talking about what do *people* of color need. And that's in a socio-historical context.

Urbanski: But why wouldn't you extend that to the question "What do *all* people need?"

Goodwin: Well, you could; but, I would say the common denominator there would be that everybody needs to know how to think for himself or herself and how do you get a curriculum that supports that? We're even going so far as to talk about a national curriculum that, if anything, has an innate and inherent ability to lock everything together and freeze it as it is.

Urbanski: Okay, let me try to understand this because I truly don't, and I want you to explain it to me. Supposing we rule out the prescriptive list, which is not inclusive, and which favors only one perspective or one experience—

Goodwin: But how do we know whether we're doing that? How do you keep national forums from being majority oriented?

Urbanski: By ensuring that the right people are around the table, that everyone is around the table to make a decision.

Goodwin: Yes, and I'm saying that there has to be an understanding of power and power relations, especially in national arenas. And when I say there has to be an understanding of power, I'm recognizing that nobody's learning about this for the same reason that nobody has learned about unionism. That's not what we learn about.

Urbanski: All right, but I want you to clarify this notion for me so I could understand your meaning. Years ago—I think we were at WXXI studio during a televised program—I stood up and said that the way to make education work for children of color is to make education work, period—to make it work for all children. The best way—

Goodwin: That must mean that what children of color need is the criteria for meeting the needs of all children. When you say that, you're moving the least of us. When the least of us gets what they need, we all get what we need, right?

Urbanski: Absolutely.

Goodwin: But we don't even name that.

Urbanski: If Debbie Meier is right when she talks about habits of mind, that we should put a premium on teaching students how to think, not what to think; how to raise essential questions; how to create their own knowledge; how to see different perspectives; how to work cooperatively; how to—

Goodwin: What does "work cooperatively" mean for Black people? Work cooperatively with white people?

Urbanski: And with each other.

Goodwin: Yes, but so far in our history, the definition of cooperation in relation to white America means to come second. That's how you cooperate if you're Black in America; you come second. Black people know this. We can't say that meeting the needs of white students or people at the top of the socio-historical hierarchy will meet the needs of those positioned below. So, someone who is telling me, "I don't have any plans for you to be second," who doesn't have any analysis of how you consistently end up second, is not helping to transform education. They're not architects. We're trying to enable teachers who *are* the architects of a new way, of a new society. We have to be architects of a new society, and when we're talking about standards, that's not generally what's being discussed. It's more about how do we get a tighter grip on this because we're not going to be number one any more if we don't. This is what the community, what parents are listening for, the creation of a new way, and I think that this is different from what the corporate sector is listening for. Generally, I don't think teachers realize that there are two conversations going on. So, the question may be, "How do you get a process that's not corrupted by the weight of four hundred years of history—of inequity?" That's the question.

Urbanski: That's a tough one. Wrong patterns continue largely for lack of reflecting on them. So, if teachers view reflection on what they do, and the results they're getting from what they do, as a centerpiece of professional development and a centerpiece of assessment, including self-assessment, it may create a habit of reflecting on other behavior as well. And, it may encourage the whole notion of questioning and analyzing what we do.

Goodwin: And, historically, there is so little within teachers' control that it could take us a long time to ever get to this point. Or to ever realize that our role is primary.

Urbanski: Right. But, assessment and growth was always viewed as separate activities from the day-to-day work that we do. And so it meant that it's an added responsibility, it's an added chore, and it, somehow, is removed from the day-to-day work. Now, if we merge the two, if we weld the two, then not only do we get at the right exercise, but it's no longer viewed as an added responsibility.

Goodwin: So, you're talking about enabling conditions for teachers as intellectuals.

Urbanski: I'm talking about the difference between cooking from outside and cooking from within. Sort of a microwave approach to viewing your own performance. And those things that come from within are more lasting, more likely to be real. So, there is a good match here, but it's at the very initial stages.

Goodwin: Do you see the historical predominance of women in the teaching profession as a factor that has contributed to the resistance to the professionalization of teaching?

Urbanski: Yes. Teaching has been historically a woman's occupation. As such, it was exploited. As in other communities made up predominately of women, the expectation was some variation on poverty, chastity, and obedience—with an emphasis on obedience. As women gained rights and a more equal place in society—and as more men entered teaching, the context for self-determination and professionalization of teaching was enhanced. The unionization of teaching then provided a strong impetus for change. A deeper understanding of this historical context helps us to see our struggle over professional wages, professional working conditions, and professional autonomy in a wider perspective.

Goodwin: Reflective of this broader perspective, the Rochester Teachers Association has authored, voiced, and supported a significant number of reform initiatives, new teacher induction, mentoring, accountability, professional support and intervention, and the peer-driven summative appraisal system that you just talked about. This is a comprehensive approach to addressing and effecting change. I think it is multiple approaches and the recognition of the continuum of teacher experience that create potential and possibility.

Urbanski: Because honest reflection is invariably going to result in recognition that some things must change, and if you know that the public admission of that has impossible consequences, you're less likely to reveal your findings. If you know that they will be valued, then you're more likely to be honest about them. So, now, what we're buying, really, is not just a different approach, a different mode, but we're buying into a culture of equity in which education is contextualized.

Goodwin: So how do teachers become change agents and not lose an important opportunity?

Urbanski: Well, they have to have a strong union; otherwise, they will be at the mercy of others, who control their fate. They would not control their own fate. If we want to determine who we should be answerable to, then we will first have to neutralize what we inherited, and that's accountability to the supervisor or the central office administration.

Goodwin: Yes, and that's the wrong order—which is what you consistently say. Response should be bottom up.

Urbanski: I think the bottom-line question for me, the reason I am promoting reform and change and reflection about what we do and promoting balancing of power and authority within our profession, is all tied to the same bottom-line question: "How can we get more students to learn better?" I am willing to abandon any practice that I have inherited or am committed to if it does not promote the goal of getting more kids to learn better; and I am willing to accept anyone else's idea if it, in a fair and equitable way, promotes the likelihood that more kids will learn better. One thing I also know is that this is probably a good match with how the majority of the people who have elected me to speak for them feel.

Goodwin: Then, they know something about you.

Urbanski: They feel something about themselves. Their goal, by and large, is, and I know there are some exceptions, but the majority are in this work precisely because they want more kids to learn better, which they see as the greatest reward. And if real leadership is always in the long run, then you're more comfortable knowing that you're a good match with the bottom-line constitution of the people you represent.

Goodwin: So, what is leadership?

Urbanski: Making others strong. Expanding choices and creating opportunities.

Goodwin: Okay. You said something about it when you talked about your constituents. When they support you, they're supporting something that exists within themselves. So, maybe leadership is a mirror for the best in us or the worst in us.

Urbanski: That's a good way to put it; or the *real* in us. It's about nurturing leadership within others, involving others rather than just affecting others. If I leave you feeling stronger, surfacing some things that were within

you but dormant, and as a result of the symbiotic relationship or the interaction you now feel differently and stronger about yourself, I think that's leadership. There was a study of extraordinary people, not necessarily just successful people, but extraordinary people, to see what common traits they have. And they could find none except for one, and that is that each one of those extraordinary people could recall one time in his or her life, either as a child or as an adult, when someone convinced them of their uniqueness and specialness. This had an important effect on me when I read it.

Goodwin: So, you could have all kinds of teachers, you could have acclaimed scholars like Einstein, and you could just have people who are concerned and have a more basic knowledge base, but the equalizer among teachers would be the ability to make students perceive the uniqueness in themselves.

Urbanski: Absolutely. Good teachers awaken students to something that's within them. No matter how great kids did in my classes, I would say, "If you can do this, then you are capable of more."