

## **Widening Participation through Work-based learning; An Epistemological dilemma.**

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The field of widening participation to higher education is a highly politicised one and is predicated on bringing about individual and cultural change by providing routes into higher education for students from under-represented groups.

Different Universities inevitably have different priorities, freedoms and restrictions influencing approaches to widening participation. This heteronomy is central to debates about the power of knowledge and how it is transmitted. This research focuses on current Welsh Government and European Union supported initiatives are aimed at 'upskilling' adults in work through short university accredited courses. It is pertinent to here recognise that the drive to promote widening participation activity is not a wholly philanthropic endeavour driven by a desire to invoke what Friere (1970) described as '*conscientization*', that is, with the aim of raising awareness of social and political contradictions and equipping individuals with the ability to alter power relationships. Rather, it is a response to changing and perceived societal and economic needs (Stuart,2000:32) and the curriculum on offer instrumental to serving these changing needs.

Such manifestations of widening participation activity serve to highlight contemporary epistemological ambiguities inherent in defining knowledge and its transmission. Debates between the Academy and policy makers on the nature and content of university curriculum are central. Pressure on institutions to move away from a reliance on disciplines towards more of what has been described as 'trans-disciplinary' models of knowledge production (Moore 2000:32) that incorporate transferable 'employability' skills raise fundamental epistemological and ontological questions for universities and theorists.

Similarly, no consideration of what constitutes knowledge can sensibly ignore rhetoric associated with the notion of a 'knowledge economy'. For Griffin (1997):

Knowledge as we know it in the academy is coming to an end...(and this represents) a crisis arguably more serious than those of finance,

organisation and structure (Griffin 1997:3 in Beck 2010 in Maton & Moore 2010).

In a theoretical context, Bernstein's (2000) 'pedagogic device' provides conceptual tools for engaging with the influencing factors that determine our consensual understanding of what constitutes knowledge and who constructs and maintains it (Ivinson, 2000). Associated deeply entrenched hierarchies play a central role in influencing pedagogy and what Bernstein terms 'official knowledge'. Philosophically, Kant, Nietzsche and Marx all held that knowledge could not be wholly grounded in external reality but was in part, the product of human thought (Burr, 2003:12).

In a broad sense, understanding has historically been polarised on a spectrum between 'know-how' or instrumental / vocational knowledge and neo-conservative / traditional 'official' knowledge. The traditional imperative or what Moore & Young (2010) refer to as 'neo-conservative traditionalism' (Maton & Moore 2010:16) eschews embedded contextual understandings of what knowledge is and how it is created, in favour of a belief in knowledge as a set of essential and impenetrable truths. The 'technical-instrumentalist' approach apparent in contemporary curriculum offers and in particular, this type of work-based learning activity, is in contrast, primarily concerned with the needs of the economy. The question of how education contributes to the formation of human capital to assist national competitiveness is central. The consequences of this shift of emphasis have challenged the neo-conservative understanding of knowledge and its ontology, questioning its very value beyond instrumental applicability.

Given the above, Young (2008) argues that the question about what knowledge *is* remains largely unanswered. Additionally, although two orthodoxies are for the most part considered as alternative models, both Moore (2000) and Wheelahan (2010) draw parallels arguing that in both neo-conservative and technical-instrumental models, a view of curriculum is related to a particular historical narrative of social change. Indeed, both neo-conservative and technical-instrumentalist models of knowledge put under the scrutiny of relativist, constructivist arguments clearly identify knowledge as a product of social practices.

In turn, postmodern assertions have been criticised as having no theory of knowledge themselves and as having only been successful in exposing power relations within curriculum policy (Moore & Young, 2001).

Moore & Young (2001) go on to argue that any social theory of knowledge should and must allow for the incorporation of objective knowledge that transcends the historical context of its production. An emphasis on the differentiation of knowledge, while recognising the criticality of the social context, is central to what has become known as the 'social realism' approach (Young 2008, Maton & Moore 2010, Wheelahan 2010). Proponents of this model argue that it provides a conceptual framework for bringing knowledge back into debates about curriculum.

Young (2008) presents a dyad of 'powerful knowledge' and 'knowledge of the powerful'. The idea of 'knowledge of the powerful' inevitably brings with it questions on the legitimacy of such knowledge and, indeed, the basis on which it is legitimised (Young 2010). It follows that there is much overlap between 'knowledge of the powerful' and 'powerful knowledge'. A working definition of powerful knowledge is provided by Young (2010), who suggests that:

- ♦ it provides reliable and in a broad sense 'testable' explanations or ways of thinking;
- ♦ it is the basis for suggesting realistic alternatives;
- ♦ it enables those who acquire it to see beyond their everyday experience;
- ♦ it is conceptual as well as based on evidence and experience;
- ♦ it is always open to challenge;
- ♦ it is acquired in specialist educational institutions, staffed by specialists;
- ♦ it is organised into domains with boundaries that are not arbitrary and these domains are associated with specialist communities such as subject and professional associations;
- ♦ it is often but not always discipline-based.

(Young, 2010:5)

For Young (2013), powerful knowledge should not be seen as a straightforward tool for empowerment, but more precisely as 'knowledge with powers' (Young, 2013:196). Taking this to a logical conclusion then, the differentiation in

curriculum available to different university students is in danger of equipping some students with 'powerless knowledge' (an oxymoron acknowledged by Young 2013:196). In Young's own words:

'The extent to which a curriculum is underpinned by 'powerful knowledge' is both an epistemological and a social justice issue' (Young, 2013:196).

To return to an operational level, and in particular Welsh Government Higher Education directives (Welsh Government 2013:7), it is evident that the notion described as 'pedagogies of consequence' (Unterhalter 2010) has been embraced by policy makers. This raises the immediate concern that if only a technical-instrumental curriculum offer is provided through short course work-based learning initiatives then traditional 'general knowledge' remains specialist, insulated and hierarchical.

These are important issues of debate, not least for those whose interests are in the promotion of equality of opportunity in educational policy and systems. We have seen that the tensions apparent in the defining and conceptualising of knowledge have resulted in something of a moving target. This research asks if providing individuals with the capacity to participate more fully in the employment markets thereby equips them with powerful knowledge or is such curriculum an example of the subjugation of the widening participation learner?

More specifically, it is seeking to identify if low intensity engagement with higher education learning has the potential to engender routes to powerful knowledge. Consideration of Welsh Government and HEFCW policy and their manifestations at an institutional level form a further component of the research. The fieldwork component of the research involves focus groups and interviews currently being undertaken with students and academics in consideration of the specific roles of pedagogy and assessment strategies as routes to powerful knowledge.

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