Authoritative Knowledge in Higher Education. How Complexity Challenges our Assumptions and Opens Alternate Possibilities (0043)

Osberg Deborah [1], [1]*University of Exeter, Devon, United Kingdom*

Abstract

In this paper I argue that complexity offers an alternative to universalist and relativist understandings of "authoritative knowledge." With complexity, authoritative knowledge is powerful *not only* because it is more true (the universalist stance) *and* because it is historically more favourably positioned (the relativist stance) but *also* because of its position on what could be termed the "cutting" edge of a knowledge "front." Knowledge in this position (and regardless of whether it is personal or public knowledge) is "powerful" to individuals and society *because it brings something radically new into the world*. I argue, further, that such a position is achieved when *existing* "bodies" of knowledge are brought into productive inter-*action* with each other. I explain how this understanding of authoritative knowledge implies that HE institutions can be understood as institutions of (dynamic) re-acculturation rather than "knowledge monopolies" where only certain forms of knowledge/culture can be produced and disseminated.

Outline

The idea that some knowledge is "authoritative" (having the power to command) implies not only that knowledge is *fundamentally* unequal (differentially powerful), but also that education is necessary *to lessen the gap* between authoritative and non-authoritative knowledge. Higher Education, in particular, is supposed to address this gap and this is the case regardless of whether the authoritative knowledge produced and disseminated in HE institutions is understood to be "academic" "professional," "technical" or "civic" in nature and bearing in mind that not all forms of HE are concerned with the cultivation of *professional* expertise and authority. Some forms of HE (e.g., liberal arts colleges) are also concerned with the cultivation of *a certain kind of citizen*; one who is cognisant of the main intellectual achievements of Western civilisation (see, e.g., Hutchins, 1936) and who is capable of critical, deliberative, civic engagement (see, e.g., Barnett, 1997; Delanty, 2003; Giroux, 2003; Rowland, 2003). In this sense, it is possible to understand HE not only as a form of enculturation into and perpetuation of already established *specific fields* of authoritative knowledge and practice but also as a form of enculturation into an already established (authoritative) *way of interacting* with *various* fields of knowledge through reading, writing, thinking, speaking, acting. HE is supposed to shape the knower/citizen into someone who can *speak with authority*. In this sense, to *not* engage with the bodies of knowledge produced and disseminated by various forms of HE, is to be somewhat lacking in authority either professionally or as a citizen.

This interpretation of the position of authoritative knowledge in HE has become somewhat problematic since the postmodern critique of knowledge has suggested that the assignation of authority has little to do with the "truth" or "universality" or even the relative usefulness of knowledge but is an effect of social processes that build and reflect unequal power relationships (see, e.g., Lyotard, 1984). In this regard Biesta

(2007) has suggested that HE can be understood as constituting "a kind of knowledge monopoly" (p. 478) in that it defines (through its degree structures etc) what counts as authoritative knowledge and what in the wider society is seen as authoritative.[1] For this reason, Biesta suggests that HE's "knowledge monopoly" can be understood as "a direct threat to democracy" (p. 478).

To address this problem of authoritative knowledge in HE, Biesta draws on Dewey's pragmatism to argue that HE's "knowledge monopoly" is a threat to democracy *only* if we assume there is a single valid way of seeing and understanding the world. He argues that a Deweyan framework—which makes it possible to accept the situatedness of all knowledge—"allows us to ask questions about the relationships between different knowledges and worldviews" and that this makes it possible for HE to adopt "a reflective approach towards the production of scientific [authoritative] knowledge and the role of science [authoritative knowledge] in society" (p. 478). This, so he argues, implies that HE's "knowledge monopoly" can make an important contribution to the "the democratization of knowledge and can thus support the development of … the *knowledge democracy*" (p. 478, emphasis original).

In this paper I draw on complexity theory to make a different argument about HE's contribution to what Biesta calls the "knowledge democracy." I argue, first, that with complexity it is possible to understand the "power" of authoritative knowledge in an emergent (or temporally irreversible)[2] sense (Osberg & Biesta, 2007) rather than (only) in a spatial (or temporally reversible)[3] sense (Osberg, Biesta & Cilliers, 2008). With a spatial understanding of knowledge the universalist and relativist epistemological positions are polarized: *either* it is necessary to pit one body of knowledge against another in a contest for "highest authority" *or* we must consider all knowledge to be fundamentally equal and accept that it is *only circumstance* that makes some bodies of knowledge more powerful or authoritative than others (see also Bernstein, 1983). With complexity, authoritative knowledge is powerful *not only* because it is "more true"[4] *and* because it is historically more favourably positioned but *also* because of its position on what could be termed the "cutting" edge of a knowledge "front." Knowledge in this position (and regardless of whether it is personal or public knowledge) is "powerful" to individuals and society *because it brings something radically new into the world*. Furthermore, from a complexity perspective, such radical newness (genesis) can only be achieved when one existing "body" of knowledge is brought into productive relation or interaction with another existing "body" of knowledge.

Drawing on some ideas from Prigogine and Stengers (1984) and Derrida (1990), I argue that this understanding of authoritative knowledge becomes possible through the notion of "undecidability" (Derrida, 1990). With complexity, undecidability is the condition of possibility of the irreversible forward directionality meaning making (Sandbothe, 2001) and hence the condition of possibility of *all* knowledge generation.

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[1] Note that Biesta (2007) describes "authoritative knowledge" as equivalent to "scientific knowledge" and he contrasts this with "everyday knowledge" which, so he argues, has less power than science because (and he uses Bruno Latour to argue this point) its networks are not as big, long and strong as those of science (p. 477).

[2] Ontologically *active*, in motion towards an open future.

[3] Ontologically *static*, where everything, including the future, is already given.

[4] It is "more true" *not* in the universalist sense of the word, but in an *emergentist* sense.

In placing undecidability at the very centre of the notion of authoritative knowledge, complexity (and deconstruction) can theorise this concept as a dynamic point of articulation between different *but equal* positions ("bodies" of knowledge). With this understanding the knowledge "front" (i.e., the notion of knowledge having an irreversible forward directionality) is not understood in terms of progression along a linear scale (as the notion of "scientific progress" usually implies). It is, rather, a point of dynamic articulation between multiple (equal) bodies of knowledge that are in a continual process of emergence.

This understanding of authoritative (powerful) knowledge as a *form of genesis or irreversible directionality* challenges the idea that HE institutions are "knowledge monopolies" into which people are encultured and opens the possibility to theorise them as "knowledge democracies" within which new *forms* of knowledge can continuously emerge. This implies that HE institutions can be understood as institutions of (dynamic) re-acculturation rather than places where only certain forms of knowledge/culture can be produced and disseminated.

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