

Title: Perceptions of 'knowledge' and identity within professional higher education in New Zealand: Case studies of architecture and accounting (0153)

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Research Domain: Academic practice, work and cultures

Outline:

Changes in New Zealand higher education since the 1980s can be attributed to economic and social developments on a global scale. Such changes were informed by neoliberal discourse which placed greater value on the individual, deregulation, marketisation and competition (Olssen, Codd, & O'Neill, 2004). Higher education, with its unique strategic value to the state in terms of the potential to meet the skills needs of the economy, to produce for-profit research, and as an exportable commodity itself, was massified, devolved, made more accountable and modularised from 1987 onwards.

Given this context it is important to explore the nature of knowledge within higher education. This paper investigates the construction and legitimisation of professional disciplinary architecture and accounting knowledge within a New Zealand polytechnic. This paper restricts itself to findings from thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups with academics and practitioners in relation to knowledge and the construction of emerging professionals and professional identity.

The deregulated New Zealand higher education sector, with ongoing differentiation between universities, polytechnics and private training enterprises, but little differentiation between what they each offer (trades and PhDs for example currently offered across the sector) is monitored by a vast array of agencies and policy. Government policy stipulates the role of higher education is to 'raise the skills and knowledge of the current and future workforce to meet labour market demand and social needs' (Ministry of Education, 2010). Higher education funding forces providers to direct resources to programmes to meet market demand. Funding is linked closely with the success and retention of students, and with student and staff research productivity of certain nature and stature. Professional associations influence curriculum and demonstrate collegiality but accreditation processes can become 'adversarial games' (Walker, 2008).

It is within this context that the education of architecture and accounting professionals is taking place. These disciplines are afforded the 'professional' badge as they privilege a body of knowledge, demonstrate certain standards and behaviours and belong to a community of practitioners. I have chosen to explore the disciplines of architecture and accounting as they exhibit certain characteristics, similarities and have the potential to be mutually illuminative.

The education of these professionals has moved from 'articled pupillage' within practice to higher education since the 1950s. This move was made for a range of reasons: The growing realisation that the practitioner-mentor at times lacked certain 'knowledge' was one. The desire to obtain a credential and status was another (Schön, 1983). There are now variable requirements for emerging architecture and accounting professionals to be involved with practice before graduation in New Zealand.

The shift of these two disciplines to higher education necessitated the pedagogisation of professional knowledge, practical skills and professional dispositions. This process of recontextualisation (Bernstein, 2000) and making the implicit explicit rarely results in a direct transposing of knowledge as there are frequent gaps and additions. This is perhaps more of an issue for 'professional' knowledge as it is difficult to make professional knowledge/skills/dispositions explicit as what we see and 'know' is often the tip of the iceberg (Eraut, 2004).

The development of new professionals has been described as a socialisation process (Evans, 2008; Hargreaves, 2006; Jarvis, 1983; Larson, 1977; Locke, 2001) with new professionals taking on a professional identity which is interdependent with a body of knowledge (Bernstein, 2000; Muller, 2009; O'Connor, 2007). Yet what kind of new professional and professional identity is being constructed in the current higher education context? Is socialisation into the profession possible when closeness to practice is variable?

Initial analysis of data suggests that what counts as 'knowledge' within New Zealand higher education has been influenced by national policy. The introduction of the National Qualifications Framework in the early 1990s mapped learning onto a convenient framework of 10 levels. A common enough development in many education systems, but one that assumes that all knowledge and learning can be

sequenced and parcelled up neatly and that the 'knowledge' of all disciplines and subjects deserve a one-size-fits-all treatment. Professional curriculum is potentially being shaped by policy and political statements (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Becher, 1993; Bernstein, 2000; Yates & Collins, 2010; Young & Gamble, 2006).

The significance of 'skills' in higher education curriculum is a common theme emerging from analysis of data and widens our perception of 'knowledge'. Some specific 'professional' skills are noted by practitioners for their absence. Yet there is a growing inclination to add on 'transferable skills' to curriculum, and this shift to genericism is often market- and policy- driven (Bernstein, 2000; Thompson, 2009; Young & Muller, 2010). Such skills apparently match known situations that graduates will encounter in the generic workplace. Yet such skills are temporary and without context, and graduates will potentially be unable to respond to the more unpredictable and more complex situations if what they are expecting does not eventuate. Professional programmes need to retain control of the workplace skills they teach as they suit the needs of the profession. Graduates from professional programmes risk losing the ability to be 'cognitive beings' and instead become 'acting beings' (Barnett, 2009), a situation that is untenable in the socialisation process of becoming a professional.

Architecture and accounting are said to have quite robust and stable professional identities (Muller, 2009), projected from the profession and maintained through their necessary insulation from state interference. The initial findings suggest that this assumption may be under threat. The nature of the professional contexts of architecture and accounting is changing; whilst the nature of professional knowledge remains fundamentally 'robust and stable', the contexts in which it is used are not (Jarvis, 1983), and its 'insulation' is also being threatened.

What is emerging from my initial analysis is a struggle in constructing new professionals in a higher education context caught in the mire of politics, economics, accountability and surveillance. The value of the higher education experience for new professionals is not under question; the concern is more over the context which makes learning to be a professional difficult, which fails to trust academics and professionals and which places the curriculum under multiple influences. Barriers and constraints emerge and are difficult to overcome. This occurs too at a time when

students are more diverse, more financially- and time-pressured and have been encouraged to view their education as savvy consumers.

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