

Nurse tutors' tales of transition: a clash of legitimation codes? (0204)

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Introduction and background

Building on the sociological approaches of Bernstein and Bourdieu and the philosophical ideas of critical realism, Karl Maton's concept of 'languages of legitimation' focuses attention on the bases of the knowledge claims made by disciplinary custodians for carving up and retaining intellectual and institutional spaces within education, including claims to status and resources. These languages are themselves the empirical realisation of underlying legitimation principles whose settings reflect the legitimation codes operative in particular contexts at particular times. In the sociology of higher education, Maton's Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) provides a framework for critically analyzing knowledge claims and institutional practices (Maton 2000). Informed by Maton's work, recent research in higher education in Ireland indicates that academic nursing and nursing academics occupy a marginal and conflicted position in the academy, as they attempt to negotiate academic identities and establish nursing as a legitimate presence in academia (McNamara 2010a 2010b, McNamara & Fealy 2010). These difficulties are exemplified in discourses that continue to construct nursing as a discipline unsuited to academic study, ambivalence on the part of nursing academics about the academic role, and nursing academics' difficulty in clearly articulating the distinctiveness of their disciplinary knowledge.

Method

Building on this earlier empirical work and informed by Maton's Legitimation Code Theory, we deployed the biographical narrative interpretive method (BNIM) to conduct interviews among a purposive sample of new nursing academics who were appointed to Irish higher education institutions as part of the wholesale transfer of nursing education from the health to the higher education sector in the period 2002 to 2006. In the paper we report on selected findings from these BNIM interviews.

Findings

Interview data from thirteen informants reveal themes that both reflect and confirm Maton's legitimation principles of autonomy, density, specialization and temporality. While nursing academics had personal autonomy in their new role, they experienced poor positional and relational autonomy in the way that their discipline was perceived by other academic disciplines and in the way that their academic subject retained a strong vocational and instrumental orientation. With a lack of a critical mass of scholars in the discipline, nursing academics also encountered dissolution and fragmentation of effort and unreadiness on the part of some to pursue individual scholarship. With a focus on the everyday and always reactive to the exigencies of health service demands, some nursing academics seemed unable to conceptualise and theorise their disciplinary domain at a sufficiently high level of abstraction, indicating, in Maton's terms, high semantic gravity, and contributing to a lack of clarity and consensus on the proper focus and scope of academic nursing. Combined with a tendency to decentre clinical practice as an object of inquiry, this suggests a field populated by agents unsure of their both their nursing and academic identities. Data also revealed an inward and backward orientation on the part of

some nursing academics, with a tendency to invoke past practices and identities to inform present activities and future planning. In summary, many nursing academics experienced a sense of rupture, unreadiness and lack of belonging and their initial and protracted floundering as new academics reveals much about their formation as educators, their previous and current working environments and about nursing as a discipline.

Discussion

This study examined the experiences of neophyte nursing academics as they negotiated a new career trajectory and a new identity within the academy and critically examined their experiences with reference to Maton's Legitimation Code Theory. The arrival of nursing in the academy in Ireland coincided with major structural reforms in the Irish higher education sector and was greeted by responses that varied from ambivalence and puzzlement to suspicion, derision and hostility. Through depth interviews with nursing academics, our research examined the position of nursing in the academy in Ireland, including how these responses to nursing, and the culture and context in which they arose, interacted with nurses' previous professional socialisation and intellectual formation to shape their emerging identities as academic nurses. We argue that the position that nursing academics and nursing occupy in the academy remains contested and is a function of the interaction of interrelated sociological and epistemological factors, including the occupational status of nursing, the nature of nursing work, the gendered nature of caring, and the structure and content of nursing knowledge. Moreover, academic nursing in Ireland is unlikely to prosper without strong academic leadership and the critical reflection made possible by considering the questions raised by our analysis of nursing academics' languages of legitimation and their underlying generative principles.

Conclusions

While our findings raise fundamental questions for both academic nursing and nursing academics, they also have import for other academic disciplines, particularly disciplines that may find themselves in a marginalised or contested position in the academy. Maton's Legitimation Code Theory provides an important resource for analysing institutional practices in higher education and for studying issues like disciplinary development and academic identity. Given the uncertainties and vulnerabilities that attend to institutional reforms across the higher education sector, disciplines which risk marginalisation in higher education would benefit from the sort of critical self-examination that Maton's Legitimation Code Theory affords.

References

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