

Higher Education Close Up 5: Think Pieces

This is one of four 'think pieces' offered by the Keynote Speakers at the HECU5 conference, which is to be held at Lancaster University 20-22nd July 2010. The theme of the conference is Questioning Theory-Method Relations in Higher Education Research and these pieces are intended to act as the starting point for a conversation about research into higher education, which conference participants can continue by submitting a proposal to present a paper or a symposium at the conference. Further details can be found on the conference website:

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/events/hecu5/index.htm>

Higher Education Studies as a field: are we there yet?

Suellen Shay, University of Cape Town

The Higher Education Close Up conferences held in Lancaster and most recently in Cape Town have distinguished themselves from other conferences in the opportunity they afford the educational development community to critically examine its research practices. HECU 4 asked us to consider *what we know* and *how we know*. These are questions about our knowledge claims -- the theoretical frames of reference and methodological approaches which shape these knowledge claims. Clegg (2009) highlights the importance of these questions given the considerable influence of 'academic development' on the discourses of teaching and learning in higher education. She reminds us of how the history and contexts of academic development as a field of practice have shaped the knowledge produced by this emerging field. Shay, Ashwin & Case (2009) called for an extension of our theoretical perspectives and an openness to different frameworks in order to enrich our understanding of the social processes that make up higher education. One of the assumptions underlying these arguments is that there *is* a field of study, or perhaps more cautiously, an *emerging* field.

This think piece and the keynote which follows seek to push further this interrogation. I start by distinguishing between educational development as a field of *practice* and educational development as a field of *study*, or what we might call higher education studies. There seems to be little doubt about the existence of the former – educational development as a vibrant though vulnerable field of practice brought into existence given the politics of change in higher education globally. As Clegg (2009) points out, different contexts have given rise to different priorities as her comparison of the rise of academic development in South Africa and the UK illustrates. The question is, what about the latter – higher education as a field of study? What is the status of this field? For this I argue we need to look more carefully at our knowledge production and reproduction practices, for example, research publication, curriculum construction and career promotion. These practices and in particular the criteria (or principles of selection) provide an interesting window on the status of higher education studies as a field. These criteria make visible the contestation about what constitutes the basis of our legitimacy.

If the analysis establishes that there is indeed a field, then a further question would be what *kind* of field. Clegg (2009) – borrowing the term from Basil Bernstein – suggests that we might be characterized as a ‘region’ – intellectual fields or disciplines which face outwards towards fields of practice. This is tantalizing but needs further exploration. Though outward-facing, regions have a knowledge base. They ‘recontextualize’ ‘singulars’ or disciplines for the purpose of external practice. We can think of the established regions of medicine, engineering and architecture with firm knowledge bases in the basic sciences, and regions such as social development, education, journalism and media studies which recontextualize from the humanities disciplines. So if higher education studies is a region, oriented toward practice, what is our knowledge base? Haggis (2009) in her analysis of leading HE journals problematizes the way in which the research into student learning has selectively borrowed from psychology and sociology. Her argument is that we need to know *differently* and extend our different ways of knowing.

Part of the challenge in characterizing our field is an inadequate language of description. Drawing on the work of Becher & Trowler (2001), Bernstein (2000), Maton (2000), Muller (2008) and Gamble (2006), in the keynote I develop a conceptual framework for illuminating the basis of legitimation in professional fields of study. The framework starts with the familiar Kolb-Biglan classification of intellectual fields (Becher & Trowler 2001). To this classification the framework adds a finer-grained set of analytical tools which enable the analysis of the differentiated forms of knowledge which constitute these fields, both intellectual and professional knowledge. These tools are drawn from Basil Bernstein’s work on knowledge structures and the elaboration of his work by Karl Maton and Jeanne Gamble. Gamble’s contribution to the framework is particularly significant as it offers a way of theorising practical knowledge (Gamble 2006). Finally the framework accounts for the manner in which these differentiated types of knowledge are selected and recontextualized for the purposes of curriculum construction. The analytical power of the framework is illustrated by drawing examples from professional fields. In the context of a growing trend towards the regionalization of knowledge in higher education – that is, qualifications which are oriented towards the field of practice – the framework makes visible the principles by which curricula are constructed. This framework can in turn be applied to the task of reflecting on our own knowledge production and reproduction practices.

The aim of the keynote is thus two-fold: firstly, the presentation of a conceptual framework for thinking about knowledge and curriculum in higher education, and secondly, the application of this framework to our own field of study. This think piece is therefore a call for contributions which interrogate the basis of the knowledge claims which inform our educational development practice, which seek to explicate and critique the relationship between theory-practice in our work – a task begun by Clegg (2009). As I will attempt to show, we have much to learn from the study of other disciplines and particularly professional disciplines. This think piece is also therefore a call for contributions which offer insight into disciplines, differentiated forms of knowledge, and the construction of higher education curricula.

References

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