



‘Powerful Knowledge’, Inequalities and Widening Participation

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Overall argument

- Our understanding of the nature of knowledge frames how we understand the educational processes involved in a socially-just education
- Central project: how do we develop a vision of an inclusive, transformational higher education system rather than a elitist, reproductive one?

Underpinning research

This argument brings together four strands of joint work:

A previous ESRC funded project:

Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project (see McLean et al 2018).

A book on teaching in higher education

Reflective Teaching in Higher Education (Ashwin et al 2015).

And two Centre for Global Higher Education projects:

Project 1.6: Pathways to Personal and Public Good: understanding access to, student experiences of, and outcomes from South African undergraduate higher education (see Ashwin and Case 2018)

Project 3.3: Understanding Knowledge and Student Agency (UKSA) Project

Broad theories of knowledge

- **Conservatism** – knowledge as timeless, universal and independent of social context.
- **Instrumentalism** – it is what we can do with knowledge that matters
- **Constructivism** – knowledge as socially constructed and reflecting power struggles over what counts as legitimate knowledge.
- **Social realism** – knowledge as socially constructed and fallible but with an objective structure
(Muller 2000, Young 2008a, Wheelahan 2010)

Conservatism and the taken-for-granted nature of knowledge

First: the humanist case for education subsidies is flimsy today because the Internet makes enlightenment practically free. Second: the humanist case for education subsidies was flimsy all along because the Internet proves low consumption of ideas and culture stems from apathy, not poverty or inconvenience

(Caplan 2018, p.242)

Instrumentalism: Generic competencies

- The key purpose of higher education is to provide the next generation of professionals;
- This can best be approached by enabling students to develop the generic competencies that employers and society value;
- This will lead to both individual prosperity and economic development.

Instrumentalism and the educational process

- Just because we can describe a practice in terms of generic competencies, it does not mean that this is what actually at stake in this practice;
- We can describe the same practice in terms of as many generic competencies as we have the imagination to generate;
- Skilful practices are based on our knowledge, our understandings of particular tasks, our interactions with other people and things, and the setting we are in.

Constructivism: Student centred learning

- Four key characteristics (Ashwin 2020):
 1. Central focus is on students' active construction of learning.
 2. Teacher's role is to construct an environment that provides students with opportunities to meet their needs and to work with other students.
 3. Emphasizes the active choices of the student about what and how to learn and their responsibility for making these choices.
 4. Involves a shift in power from the teacher to the student
- It recognizes the student and their learning as a key actor in the learning process. This is an important step in challenging teacher-centred view of HE.

Constructivism and the educational process

Three key elements are missing from this account of the educational process

1. The central role that engagement with specialist knowledge plays in the educational process;
2. The importance of this knowledge in defining the expertise of teachers;
3. The role that educational institutions play in providing access to this knowledge.

This obscures the deliberate educational act of helping particular students to gain understanding of particular bodies of specialist knowledge

Social Realism: Powerful knowledge

- “*Powerful Knowledge* refers to what the knowledge can do or what intellectual power it gives those who have access to it. *Powerful knowledge* provides more reliable explanations and new ways of thinking about the world” (Young 2008b, p.14).

Social realism and the importance of curriculum

- Bernstein's (2000) notion of the 'pedagogic device' can be seen to relate to three versions of knowledge:
 - Knowledge-as-research;
 - Knowledge-as-curriculum;
 - Knowledge-as-student-understanding
(see Ashwin 2014 for an exploration of these distinctions).
- Knowledge is transformed as it moves between these three forms.
- Emphasises the power struggles as knowledge is transformed into student understanding

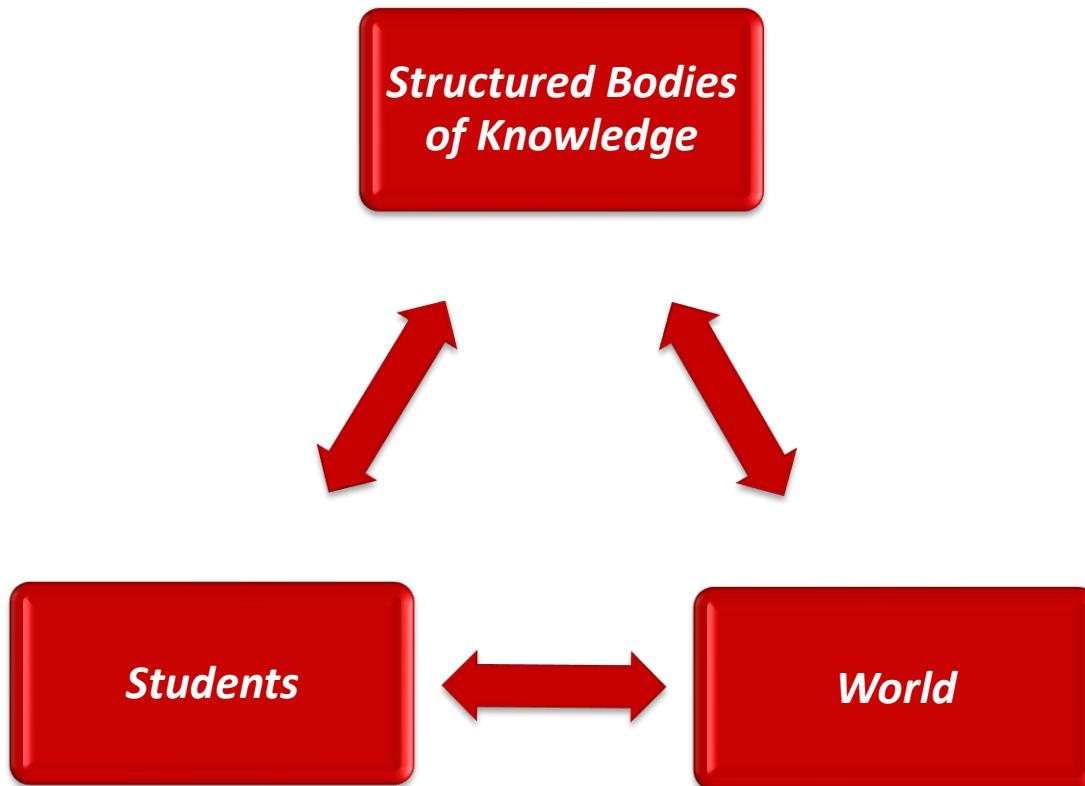
The educational implications of social realism

- Educating students is about designing ways in which particular students can develop an understanding of particular bodies of specialist knowledge (Ashwin et al. 2015 based on Shulman 1987).
- Education transforms students' sense of self through their engagement with specialist bodies of knowledge;
- Students relate their identities to specialist knowledge and the world, and see themselves implicated in knowledge;
- This does not always happen – it requires students to be intellectually engaged with their courses and to see it as an educational experience. This is dependent on both students and the quality of their educational experience (Ashwin et al 2016)

There is no destination with this discipline...There is always something further and there is no point where you can stop and say 'I understood, I am a sociologist'. ... The thing is sociology makes you aware of every decision you make: how that would impact on my life and how it could impact on someone else. And it makes the decision harder to make (Esther, Selective, Year 3, Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project).

Discipline	Studies	Least inclusive Account	'Watershed' account	Most Inclusive account
Mathematics	Wood et al. 2012	Numbers	Models	Approach to life
Accountancy	Sin et al. 2012	Routine work	Meaningful work	Moral work
Law	Reid et al. 2006	Content	System	Extension of self
Music	Reid 2001	Instrument	Meaning	Communicating
Geography	Bradbeer et al. 2004	General world	Structured into parts	Interactions
Geoscience	Stokes 2011	Composition of earth	Interacting systems	Relations earth and society

The transformative power of education for students



Implications social realism for educational processes 1

Ensuring educational programmes are well designed and based on evidence-informed views of:

- who the students are;
- how and why the knowledge, which students are offered access to, is important and powerful; how it enables them to understand and change the world;
- who students will become through their engagement with this knowledge; how they will contribute to society including, but not limited to, their employment;

This is difficult, **collective**, intellectual work, which involves on-going dialogue and experimentation (Ashwin et al 2015).

Implications social realism for educational processes 2

This means different degree programmes produce different kinds of graduates. For example, the four Sociology degree programmes we looked at:

- Community – criminal justice professionals
- Diversity – enlightened individuals
- Prestige – influential sociologists
- Selective – public service professionals

Diversity offered the most socially-just curriculum and pedagogy.

(McLean at al 2018)

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