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The pedagogic device: the relevance of Bernstein's analysis for VET

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Abstract

This paper explores the relevance for VET of Basil Bernstein's analysis of the structuring of knowledge and the framing of pedagogic practice. Bernstein argued that education was not a passive relay for external power relations. Pedagogic practice is an important structuring mechanism for power relations in the way in which knowledge is classified and framed. Towards the end of his life, Bernstein argued that the 'official' recontextualising principle in education was derived from 'genericism', itself based on new concepts of work and life. He says this is a socially empty concept, and results in identities constructed as market identities in which actors recognise themselves and others in the materialities of consumption. I apply Bernstein's analysis to VET policy in Australia.

Introduction

This paper explores the implications for vocational education and training of Basil Bernstein's analysis of the structuring of knowledge and pedagogic practice, which is encapsulated in his concept of the 'pedagogic device'. Bernstein's key insight is that the structure of knowledge and pedagogic practice is just as important as the content of knowledge in shaping subjectivities, and in reproducing or transforming power relations. The struggle over the pedagogic device between governments, government departments, and other 'official' agencies expressed through 'official' curriculum and pedagogic discourse on the one hand, and teacher education departments, teachers, and researchers on the other, is a struggle over the human soul, based on notions of human nature (Morais and Neves, 2001).

At the centre of Bernstein's (2000) analysis is the pedagogic device, which consists of the pedagogic code and the rules that mediate its enactment. The pedagogic code refers to the way in which knowledge is *classified* and *framed*. The enactment of the pedagogic code is mediated through the pedagogic device, which refers to the way in which the classification and framing of knowledge are united in pedagogic practice, and the distributive, recontextualising and evaluative rules that regulate this process. Bernstein's analysis is useful for VET because it provides insights into the way in which the official structuring of VET pedagogic discourse and practice is a relay for power, and the impact this has on identity. While Bernstein has been widely used in Australian research in schools, and to a lesser extent in higher education, his approach has not, to my knowledge, been used in VET. The only exception to this is Robertson's (2004) work on online technologies in VET, where he used Bernstein to explore the way in which relations of power and control are embedded in the structure of pedagogic practice.

The classification of knowledge & identity

The classification of knowledge refers to the way in which knowledge is defined in different fields and how these fields are distinguished and insulated from each other. Bernstein (2000: 6) argues the way in which knowledge is classified "carries the message of power" because it represents and maintains (or transforms) the social division of labour. The specialisation of different fields of knowledge is maintained by the strength or weakness of boundaries and the degree of *insulation* between them. In

other words, knowledge can be strongly or weakly classified. Identities are formed in and through these boundaries, and defined by the *space* between them. The way in which knowledge is classified expresses power because it defines ‘what matters’ and the way in which it is defined, and as we shall see, who has access to it.

Bernstein distinguishes between singular forms of knowledge and regions of knowledge. The former describes the academic disciplines, while the latter describes education that is oriented to a field of practice rather than a singular body of knowledge. Singulars (academic disciplines) are strongly classified and internally oriented, with strong boundaries between them and other areas of knowledge. Singulars are specialised knowledge structures or discourses which have a unique name (for example, physics or sociology), with specialised languages with rules that stipulate what is included as knowledge, and how knowledge is to be created, specialised texts, rules of entry, and rewards and punishments (Bernstein, 2000: 52). Socialisation (and hence personal identity) is expressed through a commitment to loyalty to the academic discipline, to its ‘otherness’ and as a consequence, identities and orientations are focussed inwards (Bernstein, 2000: 54). While knowledge has been historically defined in universities by the disciplines, these boundaries have been increasingly challenged more recently (Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons, 2001).

In contrast to singular forms of knowledge, regions of knowledge face outwards towards the field of practice, through, as Bernstein (2000: 52) explains:

“... recontextualising singulars into larger units which operate both in the intellectual field of disciplines and in the field of external practice. Regions are the interface between disciplines (singulars) and the technologies they make possible.”

The classification of knowledge within regions is weaker, because the principle of selection and translation of knowledge (the recontextualising principle) is the field of practice and not the structure of knowledge itself (and its disciplinary classification). Beck and Young (2005) distinguish between the ‘old’ regions represented by the traditional professions, and the ‘new’ regions represented by new vocationally oriented higher education and, I would add, VET. They use Bernstein’s analysis to argue that strong forms of inner dedication in professional identity in ‘traditional’ regions arose because of the historical links between the professions and their knowledge bases (the singulars), their emphasis on *collegiate* autonomy and collegiate control over training and admission to the profession, through defining the boundaries of their knowledge base, the development and enforcement of codes of conduct, and socialisation within the profession, or in other words, “*the creation of a professional habitus*” (Beck and Young, 2005: 188).

So in both the disciplines and traditional regions of knowledge the way in which knowledge is classified leads to inner commitments, an inner calling or dedication to the field of knowledge itself in the case of the former, and the field of practice in the case of the latter. In contrast, Bernstein (2000: 59) explains that the current human capital discourse within the ‘official’ education and training fields is based on a new concept of work and life in which every area of life is perpetually transformed, and that the concept of trainability is now the key principle governing the construction of curriculum and pedagogy. Rather than specific knowledge and skills, the new paradigm calls for ‘generic’ competencies (in VET) or ‘graduate attributes’ (in higher education). He explains that the process of perpetual re-formation “Is based on the acquisition of

generic modes which it is hoped will realise a flexible transferable potential rather than specific performances” (Bernstein, 2000: 59). He says that in this way knowledge is divorced from knowers, and “from their commitments, their personal dedications” (Bernstein, 2000: 86). Bernstein (2000: 59) explains that the generic capacities to be taught and ‘trained’ cannot be considered independently of the vocation or occupation for which individuals are preparing, because it is this that provides their *identity* and the *context* they need to make sense of these ‘meta-thinking’ and ‘meta-learning’ strategies. He explains that:

“...the ability to respond to such a future [perpetual ‘trainability’] depends upon a capacity, not an ability. The capacity to enable the actor to project him/herself *meaningfully* rather than *relevantly*, into this future, and recover a coherent past. This capacity is the outcome of a specialised identity and this precedes ability to respond effectively to concurrent and subsequent retraining...It is not a purely psychological construction by a solitary worker as he/she undergoes the transitions which he/she is expected to perform on the basis of trainability. This identity arises out of a particular social order, through relations which the identity enters into with other identities of reciprocal recognition, support, mutual legitimisation and finally through a negotiated collective purpose.” (Bernstein, 2000: 59)

The new principle governing the way knowledge is classified is oriented outwards, but to *markets* and not to a field of practice, and this severs the link between the regions and disciplines and changes the relationship between knower and knowledge. The knowledge and capacities ‘that matter’ are oriented to the market, and to the market’s demands and accountabilities because markets endure while knowledge and occupations change. Bernstein (2000: 59) asks if identities are to be formed in and through markets, then:

“...how does the actor recognise him/herself and others? By the materialities of consumption, by its distributions, by its absences. Here the products of the market relay the signifiers whereby temporary stabilities, orientations, relations and evaluations are constructed.”

Ball (2003: 217) explains that this leads to the development of subjectivities in which individuals are:

“...encouraged to think about themselves as individuals who calculate about themselves, ‘add value’ to themselves, improve their productivity, strive for excellence and live an existence of calculation.”

The framing of knowledge & identity

Framing is concerned with the ‘how’ of knowledge and refers to the locus of control over the selection, pacing, sequencing and evaluation of knowledge, and can also be strongly or weakly framed. Strongly framed knowledge is knowledge in which students have little or no control over the selection of knowledge in the curriculum, and its pacing, sequencing and evaluation, while in weakly framed knowledge, students have much greater control over their own learning process. Different aspects of pedagogic practice can be strongly or weakly framed, with for example, strong framing over the way knowledge is evaluated (or assessed), and relatively weak framing over the selection, pacing and sequencing of knowledge. If the selection of knowledge is strongly framed, this means that the teacher, curriculum body, or in the case of VET, the Industry Skills Council (and in higher education a similar role is played by professional

bodies), has selected the knowledge ‘that matters’ in the curriculum, and often the way in which it is paced, sequenced and evaluated.

The way knowledge is framed gives rise to an instructional discourse, which is embedded within a regulative discourse, or the dominant discourse. Dewey (1938: 17) explains that educational theory historically has been marked by the opposition between those who believe education is developmental by helping individuals to realise their inherent capacities on the one hand, and on the other, beliefs that individuals must be changed from without through “overcoming natural inclination and substituting in its place habits acquired under external pressure.” Each frames knowledge differently depending on their underlying assumptions about human beings. The former is less concerned with comparisons and more focussed on individual development, while the latter is more concerned with ranking and selection and comparison against external benchmarks. Commonwealth Education Minister Brendan Nelson provides a very good example of the way regulative discourse is embedded in the framing of knowledge, through his insistence that schools grade students against national criteria which includes failing grades, *and* that students be *ranked* within their *class* (and not the state) by quartiles. He explains in a radio interview that: “The nature of life itself is that all of us are being compared to one another” (Nelson, 2005). He went on to say that parents are looking to schools to foster discipline and to explicitly teach values – that is, discipline and values *external* to students.

The regulative discourse is embedded in VET through the discourse of ‘employability skills’ through commodifying the emotions, ethics and trust of employees and expressing them through *behavioural* competencies to be taught and assessed (Mounier, 2001). Chappell *et al* (2003: 9) explain that workers:

“...are being asked to internalise sets of general behaviours or dispositions seen as essential in the new work order. New vocational outcomes appear to be focused as much upon the characteristics, identity and orientation of the person as on skills and knowledge as more traditionally understood.”

Distributive, recontextualising & evaluative rules

The classification and framing of knowledge is mediated through *distributive* rules which define and distribute access to different knowledges; *recontextualisation* rules, which are the rules that determine what knowledge and skill is to be selected from the field in which it was produced and translated to pedagogic knowledge and practice; and, *evaluation* rules, in which acquirers (students) demonstrate they can produce the required ‘text’ called for by the implementation of the pedagogic code (in other words, students implicitly understand the assessment process and how to produce the ‘right’ outcome).

Distributive rules

Bernstein (2000) argues that everyday knowledge is distinguished from theoretical knowledge (structured through the academic disciplines) by the role each plays in society. He argues that the disciplines constitute the site for the not-yet-thought. They structure the relationship between knowers and knowledge. In support of this, Young (2003: 102-103) explains that disciplinary knowledge is distinguished from everyday knowledge, because disciplinary knowledge consists of concepts “shared by a community but not tied to specific objects or events” which enable us “to ‘*make connections*’ between objects and events that are not obviously related”, and also enable

us “to ‘*project beyond the present*’ to a future or alternative world.” The disciplines allow us to create knowledge that transcends the particular context in which it was created, and to think the not-yet-thought.

Bernstein’s argument is not against the disciplines; rather it is against the lack of democratic *access* to the disciplines. He is not arguing necessarily for the current disciplinary configuration, because his argument is a social and not an epistemic argument (Moore and Maton, 2001). He argues that the distributive rules distribute access to the unthinkable and the not-yet-thought by the way in which they regulate access to disciplinary knowledge, and this occurs through class background. Students who come from families rich in cultural capital who are comfortable using abstract reasoning and other culturally acquired capacities for success in education are much more likely to have access to disciplinary knowledge at school and beyond school (Teese and Polesel, 2003). In this way, the distributive rules distribute access to different kinds of knowledge, different ways in which knowledge can be used (to think the unthinkable), and different forms of consciousness.

I think that there are epistemic as well as social reasons why *all* students need access to the disciplines, including in VET, because all students need access to the way in which knowledge is classified, and the principles that generate knowledge in fields relevant to their vocation. For example, even though CBT focuses on underpinning knowledge when it is related to occupationally specific requirements, much of this underpinning knowledge is drawn from complex bodies of knowledge, and students need to know how these complex bodies of knowledge fit together if they are to decide *what* knowledge is relevant for a *particular* purpose, and if they are to have the capacity to transcend the present to imagine the future. Underpinning knowledge is more complex than that which is needed to demonstrate competence in a particular area. Students may need access to the *principles* underpinning bodies of knowledge, so they become skilled in using those principles to select appropriate knowledge in their field. They need access to the basic structuring principles within the disciplines, knowledge of the way in which the disciplines construe their objects, and the methods that are used to create new knowledge. In other words, the *specific content* is less important than the *structures* of disciplinary thought. This gives students (as workers) greater *autonomy* by not being restricted to knowledge others have determined as necessary for particular contexts, but also access to the unthinkable. However, *Training Package Development Handbook* stipulates that ‘underpinning knowledge’ in units of competency “should only be included if it refers to knowledge actually applied at work” (ANTA 2004: 5). This leads to an emphasis on *specific content*, rather than an introduction to disciplinary knowledge. Muller (2001: 144-145) argues that students need access to a ‘style of reasoning’ that characterises disciplinary knowledge. He contrasts empirical knowledge with disciplinary knowledge in this way:

“...our empirical knowledge, those ‘observation sentences’ which we know because they correspond to encounters with sensuous reality, are easily understood across contexts, cultures, even languages. They are relatively easily translatable. As long as one has been in that situation, one will know what the person is talking about. Not so the sentences within a style of reasoning. These are generated as intelligible and interesting only from within that style of reasoning; And to understand them – to be a communicative recipient – requires first sharing that style of reasoning...”

Recontextualising rules

The way in which knowledge is classified and framed differentially shapes consciousnesses and identities through the way in which access to knowledge is distributed, but also through the recontextualising rule or the recontextualising principle. This is the principle that governs the way in which knowledge is selected from the field in which it was produced and translated for the purpose of transmission and acquisition.

When knowledge and skill is selected from the field in which it is produced and implemented (say physics or plumbing) and recontextualised (in curriculum), it is always selected according to assumptions about what is important, what students need to know, and what they need to do. This is exemplified both through the official and hidden curriculum, and both structure the curriculum as practiced. Neither the field of physics production or plumbing practice can be reproduced in its entirety in the curriculum, and there *must* be a process of selection which is used to *delocate* knowledge from the field in which it was produced and practices and *relocated* in curriculum (Bernstein, 2000: 113-114). The recontextualising principle mediates the way knowledge is classified through disciplinary or non-disciplinary frameworks, and the way in which it is framed through competing perspectives about human nature and the purpose of education. When knowledge is *selected* and *reshaped* through curriculum, it is always through principles that differ from the way in which it was produced.

The struggle over the pedagogic device is always clearest over the recontextualising principle. On the one hand, we have the ‘official’ recontextualising field, which consists of government education departments, and curriculum and policy developers, and on the other, we have the pedagogic recontextualising field, which consists of teacher education departments, researchers and teachers. The clearest example of this conflict in Australia at present is between Commonwealth Education Minister Brendan Nelson and teacher education departments, exemplified through the ‘literacy wars’, the ‘back to basics’ campaign, ‘plain language reporting’, criterion and norm referenced reporting, and the current parliamentary review of teacher education. In VET the official recontextualising principle is expressed through policy that seeks to subordinate TAFE (particularly TAFE teachers) by stipulating *what* will be taught (industry-derived units of competency), *how* it will be taught (work-place or simulated work-place training), and how it will be assessed (assessment guidelines in training packages, and the requirement that ‘industry’ be consulted in developing assessment). However, even though the state has imposed high levels of control over VET curriculum, this control is never absolute, because of the way in which teachers (and teacher education departments) recontextualise the ‘official’ curriculum in their classrooms.

Evaluative rules

The evaluative rules also help shape identities and consciousnesses through regulating the way in which students demonstrate that they can produce the ‘required’ text. The evaluative rules may be strongly or weakly framed. Weakly framed evaluative rules do not always favour students from non-middle class backgrounds, because they may not be able to recognise the implicit rules buried within them. Singh (2001) argues that weakly framed pacing and sequencing of knowledge and strongly framed assessment favours working class students by giving them as much control over their learning as possible, while making the goalposts absolutely clear.

Students can respond to the evaluative rules to the extent that they can recognise the kind of knowledge required and realise the required outcomes. That is, recognition and realisation rules are at the level of the acquirer, while the way in which knowledge is classified and framed, and the distributive and recontextualising rules are mediated through struggles between the official recontextualising field and the pedagogic recontextualising field.

Students vary in the extent to which they have internalised the ‘rules’ they need to be a ‘successful’ student. This variation is, Bernstein argues, associated with social class background. Students need to have both the ‘recognition’ rules and the ‘realisation’ rules to be ‘successful’. Students need to *recognise* the *type* of knowledge they are dealing with. For example, students need to be able to recognise that they are now studying physics, or at another time, chemistry. Or, students need to be able to distinguish between studying literary theory or sociology. This is not just a question of identifying and understanding specialised knowledge, but also of understanding knowledge in its context and decoding it. Thus the word ‘unit’ in an educational context refers to a measure of educational attainment. In physics and chemistry **the** unit is the standard of measurement such as Centigrade or Fahrenheit for heat or in other scientific contexts it refers to the SI unit, the international system of units. In gambling a unit is the smallest bet on a totalisator, in law a unit is the smallest share in a unit trust and in building a unit is a self-contained residential premises within an agglomeration of residential premises. VET students need to know if they need to use tools from physics or mathematics if they are studying electronics, and if they are studying welfare, they need to be able to choose from and synthesise psychology and sociology. Current VET policy makes this difficult because it limits the extent to which curriculum can focus on the structuring principles of the disciplines.

Conclusion

The implications from the above analysis are that VET reinforces class divisions through differentially distributing access to ‘unthinkable’ knowledge, because it does not allow students access to a ‘style of reasoning’ represented in disciplinary knowledge, and consequently, focuses on specific content rather than the generative principles that underpin disciplinary knowledge. The state is increasing its control over the principle used to recontextualise knowledge from the field in which it was produced to pedagogic practice, and in VET this occurs through control over qualification outcomes, curriculum approach and assessment. However, this control is never absolute because teachers recontextualise curriculum in their own classroom in ways they think important. The struggle over the pedagogic device is a struggle over the human soul and human identity, and this is expressed through ‘official’ imposition of genericism, which is oriented to markets and not vocations or fields of knowledge, and thereby breaks the link between and basis for ‘inner commitment’ to fields of practice and disciplinary knowledge. This paper argues that VET students should have access to disciplinary knowledge, and that pedagogic practice should be framed to give students as much control over their own learning process, while making sure that the outcomes students need to achieve are explicit and clear. Bernstein has much to offer VET.

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