

# **Towards an understanding of service-learning as a pedagogic tool.**

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## Introduction

In South Africa Higher Education (HE) is increasingly being called upon to form partnerships with government and communities at large as part of a new social contract identified as necessary if both global and localised needs are to be addressed (Kraak, 2000). Service-learning (part of the Community Engagement continuum constituting one of the three 'pillars' of HE) has been identified as a tool to develop this new social contract.

The potential of service-learning to act in this way rests on relatively broad assumptions which have not been tested through research. This paper uses a case study drawn from ongoing doctoral research in order to explore the way disciplinary structures impact on the infusion of service-learning in the curriculum and, thus, to begin to evaluate the potential of service-learning to contribute to the development of the new social contract identified above. In the paper, I argue that Bernstein's (1971, 1977) theory of classification and framing provides insights into the enabling and constraining factors influencing the infusion of service-learning in the curriculum.

## Context

South Africa has 23 public higher education institutions divided into three main categories: universities (11), comprehensive universities (6) and universities of technology (6). The university at which the research underpinning this paper was conducted falls within the first category. Further clustering within the HE system categorises the institution as one of the country's five 'research-intensive' universities. This status impacts on the cultural milieu of the institution, an issue I draw attention to in the paper. This institution is an ideal site in which to explore the impact of disciplinary structure on the infusion of service-learning as it is one of the few universities in South Africa which made the decision to adhere to traditional disciplinary structures in the widespread curriculum restructuring processes which followed the shift to democracy. This is important given the focus of this paper on discipline knowledge structures and how they can help answer systemic questions of where, how, when and why service-learning can be infused in curricula.

Curriculum decisions in relation to service-learning infusion possibilities are constituted by actions, intentions and reflections. These are outlined by Connole as aspects of the critical perspective which is the orientation of this research (Connole, 1998). An important focal point in research located in a critical orientation is the acknowledgement of "...the potential for understandings of human action to be distorted" (Connole, 1998:20). It is this consideration which prompts my use of Roy Bhaskar's (1998) critical realist ontology as an underlabouring framework in this study.

The academic structure at the university consists of 39 departments spread across 6 faculties. Biglan's (1973) discipline typology distinguishes disciplines into four categories 'hard pure', 'soft pure', 'hard applied' and 'soft applied'. The paper focuses on a case study conducted in Entomology which according to Biglan's typology can be classified as a 'hard pure' discipline which is characterised as "...cumulative, atomistic structure, concerned with

universals, simplification and a quantitative emphasis” (Neumann et al, 2002:pg 406). This case explores service-learning infusion possibilities using Bernstein’s classification and framing theory bringing to the fore important considerations related to knowledge structures which are consequential in curriculum deliberations.

Bernstein’s (1971, 1977) concepts of classification and framing are linked to issues of power and control. Power is demonstrated by how boundaries between different disciplines are created, legitimated and reproduced to have relative strength or relative weakness. The strength and weakness of boundaries between disciplines is dependent on whether disciplines are insular in relation to each other or if they are similar to each other along a continuum (-C to +C).

Control, on the other hand, focuses on “...legitimate forms of communication *within*...categories” (Bernstein, 2000:5). The relative strength of control within categories such as disciplines is referred to by Bernstein as framing and occurs along a continuum (-F to +F). In essence, framing refers to the internal operation or *how* strongly what counts as legitimate within the discipline is regulated and controlled. The relative strengths of classification (+ -C) and framing (+ -F) are the structuring principles of practices used to help illuminate possibilities of infusing service-learning in curricula.

Using classification and framing as a framework makes it possible to infer that in disciplines where classification and framing are strong, difficulties regarding infusion possibilities may occur. However, further extrapolation may be required. Maton’s (2000) Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) has the potential to uncover underlying principles that generate curriculum, knowledge and discourse structures. This theory comprises five dimensions. Maton asserts that these dimensions bring together sociological and epistemological understandings of knowledge. In this paper the focus is on the semantics dimension since an important factor in infusion possibilities is the relationship between knowledge and its social and cultural contexts. This relationship between knowledge and its context Maton refers to as ‘semantic gravity’. “When semantic gravity is stronger, meaning is more closely related to its context of acquisition or use; when it is weaker, meaning is less dependent on its context” (Maton, 2009, p.46). Strengthening and weakening of semantic gravity is an important aspect to consider for service-learning infusion because semantic gravity can indicate the transferability of knowledge from one context to another.

In a university with a curriculum structure adhering to traditional disciplinary structures, a hard pure discipline like Entomology is expected to display fairly strong classification and framing. Therefore it is reasonable to expect the discipline structure to impact as a constraining factor for infusion of service-learning in the curriculum. However, this is one of two disciplines within the hard pure category in this university that uses service-learning as a pedagogic tool. Maton’s semantic gravity can be used to uncover the underlying principles which enable the department to offer the service-learning honours module called Cultural Entomology.

The Entomology case illustrates how combining Bernstein and Maton’s work could potentially offer insights into complex factors related to the conditions which impact on service-learning infusion in curricula.