

The formation of higher education curriculum: A case study from a South African History programme.

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The context for this paper is higher education in South Africa where there has been, in the lead up to and since 1994, wide-ranging higher education policy intervention (Badat 2009). In response there has been a small (relative to the focus on schooling) but significant body of Bernsteinian scholarship focusing on the effects of these policies on curriculum in higher education with a particular interest in the implications for knowledge (Breier 2004, Ensor 2002, Moore 2003 & 2004, Muller 2000 & 2008). More recently the Centre for Higher Education Development at the University of Cape Town hosted a Knowledge and Curriculum in Higher Education symposium where papers, drawing largely on the work of Basil Bernstein and Karl Maton, explored the relationship between knowledge and curriculum in specific disciplinary contexts (Carter 2009, Vorster 2009, Lockett 2009, Shalem & Slonimsky 2009, Shay 2009).

As a contribution to this Knowledge and Curriculum in Higher Education scholarship this paper reports on a case study of an undergraduate History curriculum in a South African University. The case study offers a historical perspective on the formation of this curriculum and seeks to describe the particular forms of educational knowledge which constitute this curriculum over time, how these forms of knowledge have shifted and are shifting, and the implications of these knowledge shifts for staff and student identities.

The analysis reveals three periods in the formation of this curriculum since its establishment at University of Cape Town in 1918 to the present. These periods are referred to as History as Canon, History as Social Science and History for the Market. The key research questions are:

- What are some of the key influences on the formation of this History undergraduate curriculum?
- What are the implications of this curriculum formation for the kinds of educational knowledge privileged and the kinds of student identities being promoted?

The primary sources of data collected were faculty handbook entries spanning the period from 1918 to 2008, examination scripts sampled from across the same period and interviews with academic staff. This paper reports on the 'Market' period (see Shay in press for analysis of first two periods).

The data reveals an overall pattern of weakening in both the classification and framing of the historical educational knowledge from the earlier periods (pre-1999). This is evidenced by a weakening of the traditional boundaries of the History curriculum and an attempt to forge alliances with other disciplines in the design of courses with a multi-disciplinary perspective on History. This results in the virtual

disappearance of ‘core’ requirements and a significant expansion in ‘elective’ offerings. I argue that these shifts in the organization and transmission of educational knowledge are an interplay of recontextualizing forces both intrinsic and extrinsic to the discipline. The first is a policy attempt in the late 1990’s to break down disciplinary insulation in order to meet the imperatives of market-responsiveness, inter-disciplinarity and greater accountability. A second influence comes from the field of knowledge production – the intellectual segmentation of post-modernism and a resulting curriculum fragmentation. The third influence is a perceived reduction in the status of History as a discipline in post-apartheid South Africa. This formation process of this period could be characterized as an attempt to shift the History undergraduate curriculum from a collection code to an integrated code (Bernstein 1975 & 2000).

While Bernstein’s code types are useful for exposing shifts in the structure and transmission of educational knowledge, the theory does not fully deliver on its promise with respect to the analysis of the educational knowledge itself and how this knowledge constitutes knower identities. As the organization of the knowledge shifts (from strongly bounded course content to less strongly bounded) and as the transmission of the knowledge shifts (from strong academic control over sequence, pace, selection to more control invested in students), what is happening to the educational knowledge itself? In what ways is the basis of legitimation shifting? Bernstein offers some tantalizing pointers. He notes that in the shift from collection code to integrated code there is a shift from “states of knowledge” (or surface structure of knowledge) to “ways of knowing” (or deep structure of knowledge). He also suggests that the kind of consciousness or identity promoted in an integrated code will be very different to the identity of the collection code with its strong disciplinary loyalty. In the second part of the analysis therefore I draw on Karl Maton’s (2000) legitimation code theory for a more fine-grained analysis of the educational knowledge and knower code shifts of the History as Market period.

The paper concludes by arguing for the timeliness and significance of the Knowledge and Curriculum project given recent calls in South Africa for curriculum reform. A recent ministerial report on the transformation of higher education calls for “epistemological transformation” in the curriculum, that is, “how knowledge is conceived, constructed and transmitted” (Report of Ministerial Committee, p. 89 citing Hall 2006). Such transformations will inevitably result in shifts in educational knowledge. In responding to pressures for change, whatever form they might take, it is crucial that we understand whose interests these knowledge shifts will serve and what kind of student identity is being promoted.

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