# BEYOND THE CONTEXTUAL: THE IMPORTANCE OF THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE IN VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS & THE IMPLICATIONS FOR WORK

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper uses a Bernsteinian analysis to argue that vocational education and training (VET) qualifications in Australia deny students access to theoretical knowledge that underpins vocational practice. Australian VET qualifications are based on training packages, which are the equivalent of English National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Training packages are developed for broad industry areas (such as community services) and consist of qualifications at different levels that comprise 'industry'-specified units of competency. In 2005, 69% of all publicly funded VET provision was based on training packages (NCVER 2006: Table 4). The introduction of training packages caused fierce debate within Australia, particularly around the extent to which they provide students with access to 'underpinning knowledge'. Supporters of training packages argue that they merely specify the outcomes of training and the criteria that are used to assess whether those outcomes have been achieved. In contrast, I argue that training packages *do* shape curriculum and have consequences for teaching and learning, and consequently for the extent to which students are able to navigate the transition between formal and informal knowledge and formal and informal contexts. This argument is illustrated through comparing the current Diploma of Community Services (Community Development) with the Associate Diploma of Social Sciences (Community Development), which was the qualification that existed prior to the introduction of the Community Services training package. The first section of this paper outlines a Bernsteinian analysis of the nature of disciplinary knowledge and its relationship to workplace knowledge and practice. The second section considers the extent to which training packages constitute curriculum, while the third compares and contrasts the two qualifications.

## A BERNSTEINIAN FRAMEWORK

While vocational education was not the main focus of Basil Bernstein's life's work on the nature and structure of pedagogic practice and his later work on the structures of knowledge, nonetheless his work has implications for theorising the relationship between theoretical knowledge and workplace practice, and this has been developed by a number of theorists using a Bernsteinian framework (see among others Young 2006a; Gamble 2006; and Barnett 2006).

Bernstein (2000: xx) argued that democratic access to theoretical and abstract knowledge is a precondition for an effective democracy, because it provides the basis for 'society's conversation'. In following Durkheim, Bernstein argued that such knowledge represents society's 'collective representations' about itself, its values, norms and mores, and is the means through which the 'unthinkable' is thought. Theoretical knowledge allows a society to connect the material and immaterial, the known and the unknown, the thinkable and the unthinkable, the here and the not here, the specific and the general, and the past, present and future (Young 2003).

Theoretical knowledge differs from everyday knowledge because each is embedded in a different system of meaning. Theoretical knowledge is organised as "specialised symbolic structures of explicit knowledge" in which the integration of knowledge occurs through the integration of *meanings* and not through relevance to specific contexts (Bernstein 2000: 160). It is *general, principled* knowledge, while everyday knowledge is *particularised* knowledge, because its selection and usefulness is determined by the extent to which it is relevant in a particular context (Gamble 2006). Bernstein (2000: 157) explains that everyday knowledge is "likely to be oral, local, context dependent and specific, tacit, multi-layered, and contradictory across but not within contexts."

Industrialisation and the growing complexity of society resulted in a more complex social division of labour requiring increasingly *specialised* bodies of knowledge, each with specialised languages and rules that stipulate what is included as knowledge and how knowledge is to be created, with specialised texts, rules of entry, and authoritative speakers (Bernstein 2000: 52). This is the history of the proliferation and development of the academic disciplines. Academic disciplines are strongly *classified* bodies of knowledge because they have *strongly insulated boundaries* between them. Barnett (2006: 144) explains that "Roughly speaking, classification refers to the way in which

knowledge gets divided up and how these knowledge boundaries are sustained or challenged." Classification refers to the 'what' of knowledge, and in pedagogic terms, the way in which knowledge is presented in curriculum.

The way an academic discipline is structured has implications for the way in which it is *translated* for pedagogic transmission. Induction into a particular academic discipline requires *induction into its system of meaning*, which may have implications for the way knowledge is selected, sequenced, paced and evaluated. This is the 'how' of pedagogic practice, and Bernstein refers to this as the process of *framing*. The more hierarchical a body of knowledge (for example, physics) the more likely it is that pedagogy will need to be strongly sequenced because students need to understand what came before in order to understand what comes after (Muller 2006). In the example of physics, the *sequencing* of knowledge is a product of the way in which knowledge is classified because it is related to the epistemic logic intrinsic to that particular knowledge structure.

Bernstein (2000: 113) refers to the process in which knowledge is translated for curriculum and pedagogic practice as the process of *recontextualisation.* Recontextualisation entails *delocating* knowledge from the field in which it was produced and *relocating* it into pedagogic discourse. Different principles are used to construct an 'academic' curriculum and a 'vocational' curriculum. The purpose of an academic curriculum is to induct students into a field of *knowledge* while the purpose of a vocational curriculum is to induct students into a field of *practice*. The principle of selection (the classification of knowledge) and the way knowledge is sequenced, paced and evaluated (the framing of knowledge) will be different in each.

To consider how and why this may be different, we first need to consider the role of theoretical knowledge in vocational practice. The increasing complexity of knowledge, technology, work and society means that the knowledge demands of most occupations is increasing (Young 2006b). Workers are increasingly required to draw on general, principled knowledge to understand the *particular* in the workplace. Young (2006a: 115) explains, that while *all* jobs require context-specific knowledge, "many jobs also require knowledge involving *theoretical* ideas shared by a community of specialists that are not tied to specific contexts". Workers need to be able to transcend *specific* contexts and use decontextualised theoretical knowledge in different ways and in different contexts as their work grows in complexity and difficulty. They need to be able to *access* theoretical knowledge to do so, and this means that *occupational* progression is strongly related to *educational* progression, because education is one of the main ways in which most people are provided with access to theoretical, disciplinary knowledge (Barnett 2006).

Young (2006b: 55) explains that academic and vocational curriculum differ because, "Unlike general academic curricula, general vocational curricula are not shaped directly by the academic disciplines; however this does not mean that they have developed or can develop independently of these disciplines, which played a critical role in the process of industrialisation." He explains that a double process of recontextualisation of disciplinary knowledge takes place: first, by members of professions and vocations who *use* disciplinary knowledge and transform it into *applied* disciplinary knowledge as part of their practice, and second, by a process of *pedagogic* recontextualisation "that takes into account what can be taught and to whom" (Young 2006b: 55).

Barnett (2006: 147) explains that the process of *occupational* recontextualisation of knowledge has implications for the process of *pedagogic* recontextualisation. This is because such occupationally recontextualised disciplinary knowledge has to be related to a field of practice *within* the curriculum. Vocational pedagogy also has to pedagogically recontextualise the field of practice itself and translate it to curriculum, and while many features of practice may have properties that transcend particular contexts, "vocational pedagogy also has to make some accommodation for the *situated knowledge* that is usually closely associated with particular job tasks" (Barnett 2006: 146). Such knowledge is context specific, and not easily translatable outside those contexts. This knowledge is the focus of practical and work-based components of curriculum.

Vocational pedagogy thus needs to face *both* ways, to occupationally recontextualised disciplinary knowledge and to the field of practice itself. As Barnett (2006: 156) points out, these multiple processes of recontextualisation present far more demands on vocational teachers than those teaching single academic disciplines. It also means that the relationship between theory and practice cannot be too tightly specified because, as Gamble (2006: 99) explains, "each refers to a different kind

of knowledge. If the relationship is too direct, there is a danger that one kind of knowledge becomes the other."

In general, knowledge that is strongly classified into disciplinary frameworks, either as 'traditional' academic disciplines or occupationally recontextualised disciplinary knowledge, provides students from disadvantaged backgrounds with more access to abstract, theoretical knowledge than weakly classified knowledge. Knowledge that is strongly classified and framed explicitly signals the boundaries between different areas of knowledge, and the way it is sequenced, paced and evaluated, whereas these relations are rendered opaque in knowledge that is weakly classified and framed. Middle class students have had more access to the way knowledge is classified and framed throughout their pedagogic careers, because of the cultural congruence between home and school (Bernstein 2000). Consequently, the way knowledge is classified and framed in VET curriculum is of considerable importance, because VET students in Australia are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds than are higher education students (Wheelahan and Moodie 2005). In other words, the way knowledge is classified and framed in VET curriculum mediates students' access to occupational progression *and* to 'society's conversation'. The problem is that, in Australia at least, it does not do a very good job.

## DO TRAINING PACKAGES CONSTITUTE CURRICULUM?

This paper analyses the extent to which training packages provide student with access to theoretical knowledge by comparing and contrasting formal curriculum documents for the Diploma of Community Services (Community Development) and the Associate Diploma of Social Sciences (Community Development) respectively. Both are competency-based, however the earlier associate diploma was based on curriculum organised into modules, and competency was *inferred* based on assessment against the broad learning outcomes, including assessment of *knowledge*. In other words, compliance with competency-based training models of curriculum was minimal. In contrast, the training package qualification requires assessment *directly* against the outcomes in the units of competency.

I have used formal curriculum documents because they provide an initial statement about the way in which different knowledge domains are classified in the design, structure and naming of areas of knowledge, and they impose the first process of framing in which knowledge is selected, sequenced and assessed through the program's rules about subject choice and sequencing. However, formal curriculum documents do not fully *determine* teaching and learning outcomes. There is a 'gap' between formal curriculum documents and teaching practice, and teachers recontextualise official curriculum according to principles that they think are important (Bernstein 2000). However, teachers cannot ignore the formal curriculum. They cannot unilaterally alter the arrangement and division of knowledge in the curriculum, because for example, they think that sociology is not important this year, but it was last year. Whilst there may some flexibility, teachers cannot normally change the rules about program structure and subject selection and sequencing. Formal curriculum documents provide the *basis* that teaching staff work from and the framework for recontextualising knowledge in curriculum in their own teaching practice.

There is, however, controversy over whether training packages can be regarded as curriculum because supporters of training packages argue that training packages only specify the outcomes of training and the criteria that are used to assess whether those outcomes have been achieved. Schofield and McDonald (2004b: 2) argue that "Consistent with their outcomes-based orientation, Training Packages are silent on how teachers and trainers should or could design the curriculum to achieve these outcomes." Training package policy states that educational 'providers' and teachers are free to develop a curriculum approach that most suits their 'clients'. This is because learning *outcomes* have been divorced from *processes* of learning. In theory, it should be possible to construct 'subjects' that draw various components from units of competency and recombine and reconstitute these around subjects, if it was thought appropriate to do so.

However, units of competency in training packages are specific. Units of competency include, among other things, elements of competency (that break down the unit of competency into demonstrable and assessable outcomes or actions), performance criteria that specify the required level of performance, required knowledge and skills, a range statement that describes the contexts and conditions in which the performance criteria apply, and evidence guides that describe the underpinning knowledge and skills that need to be demonstrated (assessed) to prove competence (DEST 2006: 117). The *Training*

*Package Development Handbook* says that: "Performance criteria are evaluative statements which specify what is to be assessed and the required level of performance. It is here that the activities, skills, knowledge and understanding which provide the evidence of competent performance are specified" (DEST 2006: 126). A few lines later the *Handbook* (DEST 2006: 126) says that: "Performance criteria must be expressed precisely to enable appropriate training and assessment." Moreover, performance criteria include "the primary context and source of knowledge and the skills that need to be applied" (DEST 2006: 139). The *Handbook* goes on to say that:

> "Units of competency that integrate knowledge into the overall performance specification of the unit and the assessment process advice *should fully include all relevant knowledge as it is applied in a work role*. This supports integrated training and assessment strategies in most cases. A training organisation may nonetheless determine that it is efficient and a supportable learning or assessment strategy to aggregate common knowledge topics from a number of related units." (DEST 2006: 140, emphasis added)

It is clear that training packages *do* shape teaching and learning, and that they constitute an important component of curriculum, because they specify *what* is to be taught and, in broad terms, *how* it should be assessed. The point of training packages was that they would reshape teaching and learning in VET so that it was more 'industry responsive'. They were *meant* to change the what and how of learning. Schofield and McDonald (2004a: 2) say that training packages are more than industry-endorsed products that have replaced curriculum, because they encapsulate "the rules of the VET game." They approvingly cite Gonczi, who says that training packages are a way "of ensuring that what the VET system delivers is what industry actually demands" (Schofield and McDonald 2004a: 2).

Training packages shape curriculum because they stipulate the nature of assessment, and this means that there are limits on the what and how of *learning*, because, as Bernstein (2000: 36) explains "Content is transformed into evaluation. Context is transformed into transmission." Bernstein explains that *evaluation* condenses the meaning of discourses shaping pedagogic practice, because the evaluative rules "regulate pedagogic practice at the classroom level, for they define the standards which must be reached" (Bernstein 2000: 115).

The last quote from the *Handbook* reveals the way knowledge is classified in training packages, and it is not on the basis of disciplinary knowledge. Knowledge is distinguished by the way in which it is applied *at work* and not by *systems of meaning*. While it is possible to aggregate common knowledge for the purposes of teaching, this is primarily as an efficiency measure and because it may be a "supportable learning or assessment strategy", however, the primary *source* of knowledge (and skill) are the performance criteria. Knowledge is *derived* from workplace standards, not systems of meaning.

## COMPARISON OF TWO PROGRAMS

Table 1 shows the structure of the old associate diploma in community development prior to the introduction of training packages, and the training package diploma in community development. It only includes core modules and units and not electives. Both programs are normally two years duration. The associate diploma module titles indicate that disciplinary knowledge has been recontextualised for the community development field, but that it is strongly classified disciplinary knowledge nonetheless. Progression through the program was strongly sequenced. For example, students could not undertake Social Policy unless they had completed or were concurrently enrolled in Australian Society: A Sociological Introduction Parts 1 and 2 and Political Economy and Community Development Parts 1 and 2. The program incorporates 'practice' based requirements through the fieldwork components, but also through modules that integrate theory and practice such as Practical Strategies for Social Change, which came towards the end of the program and required students to participate in, analyse and theorise a social action campaign. Fieldwork tutorials preceded fieldwork practice, so the situated knowledge of the workplace was pedagogised for curriculum. The program 'faced both ways' to disciplinary knowledge and the field of practice through the subjects that faced towards theory and practice respectively and through the subjects that integrated both.

**Table 1: Compulsory Units of Competency in the 'new' Diploma of Community Development & 'old' Associate Diploma of Community Development**

| 'New' Diploma* | 'Old' Associate Diploma** |
|---|---|
| Undertake systems advocacy | Introduction to Community Development |
| Implement a community development strategy | Australian Society: A Sociological Introduction Part 1 |
| Develop and implement a community development strategy | Political Economy & Community Development 1 |
| Develop and implement community programs | Introduction to Study and Community Development |
| Develop community resources | Group and Personal Communication 1 |
| Support community action | Fieldwork Tutorial 1 |
| Support community leadership | Human Rights and Advocacy |
| Develop, implement and promote effective communication techniques | Australian Society: A Sociological Introduction Part 2 |
| Respond holistically to client issues | Political Economy & Community Development 2 |
| Meet statutory and organisational information requirements | Information Access |
| Develop new networks | Fieldwork Placement |
| Work with other services | Organisations, Change and Community Development |
| Implement and monitor OHS policies and procedures for a workplace | Research 1 |
| Undertake research activities | Group and Personal Communication 2 |
| Develop and implement policy | Social Policy |
| Manage research activities | Fieldwork Placement |
|  | Social Action – Analysis of Theory and Practice |
|  | Research 2 |
|  | Fieldwork Tutorial 2 |
|  | Practical Strategies for Social Change |
|  | Fieldwork Placement |

* Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (2005: 123)
** Office of Further and Training Education Victoria (1997: A2 – A3)

In contrast, 'spaces' in the program structure in the training package diploma are defined and distinguished in curriculum through their relationship to work tasks or roles. Knowledge is weakly classified because it does not distinguish disciplinary fields, and nor does it distinguish 'everyday' knowledge from theoretical knowledge. Students are enrolled in discrete units of competency; they don't enrol in disciplinary subjects (or modules), even subjects based on occupationally recontextualised disciplinary knowledge. While students may be constrained in their unit choice and sequencing by way in which the provider chooses to offer them, there are no rules stipulating prerequisites or co-requisites.

Disciplinary knowledge is also weakly classified *within* units of competency. This is clear if we compare and contrast the unit of competency 'Develop and Implement Policy' in the training package diploma, with the module 'Social Policy' in the associate diploma. The module descriptor for 'Social Policy' explains that it explores the "context, development and implementation of social policy in Australia", which includes exploration of "debates surrounding the role of the welfare state and other areas of contention…" It also includes the way in which the "social, political and economic context impacts on social policy formulation, implementation and evaluation" as the basis for "understanding of contextual factors" which then become "the basis for conducting policy analysis as an instrument for empowerment and social change…" The 'Summary of content" includes:

- "The State
- The Welfare State
- Definitions of social welfare
- Models of social policy

- Current social policy debates
- Implementation/evaluation issues
- Community Development Issues."

The assessment criteria, among other things, require students to "analyse underlying assumptions, values and theory of policy formulation", and to analyse economic, social and political factors that influence policy development as well as evaluating "current debates on social policy within a community development context". Students are provided with access to general, principled knowledge as a means of understanding the particular.

In contrast, the unit descriptor for 'Contribute to Policy Development' states that it is about "Developing and analysing policies which impact on the client group and the work of the organisation." There are four elements of competency, which are:

"1. Review existing policies
 2. Contribute to research for policy advice
 3. Provide briefing materials on policy issues
 4. Promote informed policy debate"

There are 11 performance criteria related to the elements of competency. The required knowledge that must be assessed through the performance criteria is as follows:

- "Organisational policies impacting on the worker, the organisation and its target groups
- Government and other policies impacting on the issue under consideration, and the organisation and its target groups
- The contexts for policies, people and the organisation
- Research and consultation techniques
- The limits of the worker's own role and competence and the organisation's role"

The 'essential skills' that students must demonstrate include among other things  "Analysis of evidence and arguments", "Report writing, including translation of complex concepts into simple languages or images" and "Applied consultation and research methodologies". The essential knowledge and skills show that students are introduced to conceptual and theoretical language (for example, "The contexts for policies, people and the organisation") but that such language is delocated from the *system of meaning* or from the theoretical, relational shaping of the concepts. Moreover, 'contexts for policies, people and the organisation' is so ambiguous that it could be interpreted in many ways, including ignoring the way such issues are explored in the theoretical literature that shape policy studies (even policy studies recontextualised for community development). There is no differentiation between the *level* and *type* of knowledge that is required. Broad principles and theories (where they can be identified) are not distinguished from applied concepts, or from contextualised knowledge ("Organisational policies impacting on the worker…"), or from situated knowledge ("the limits of the worker's own role…"). The weak classification and framing of knowledge means that students are not provided with the means to *recognise and distinguish* knowledge and its boundaries. They are not provided with the means for distinguishing between theoretical and everyday knowledge. Students are not introduced to a *disciplinary style of reasoning* that they can then use in other contexts.

## CONCLUSION

While Bernstein's work did not specifically focus on vocational education, he provides theoretical tools we can use in analysing the structures of vocational knowledge, and the extent to which students are provided with the 'recognition and realisation' rules they need to recognise and identify theoretical knowledge and distinguish it from everyday knowledge. Bernsteinian theorists have elaborated the framework provided by Bernstein by exploring the nature of occupationally recontextualised theoretical knowledge (Young 2006b, 2006a), the relationship between the way knowledge is classified and framed in recontextualising knowledge for curriculum (Muller 2006), the relationship between the general and principled and the everyday in vocational practice and pedagogy (Gamble 2006), and the way knowledge can be classified and framed in vocational pedagogy so that it 'faces both ways' to theoretical knowledge and the field of practice as the basis for educational progression and thus for occupational progression (Barnett 2006) and as the basis for participating in 'society's conversation' (Bernstein 2000).

Training packages and the particular model of competency-based training (CBT) upon which they are based disempower workers because they deny workers (as students) systematic access to disciplinary knowledge. Training packages delocate knowledge from the disciplinary frameworks that give knowledge its meaning by tying knowledge to workplace processes and tasks, and in so doing, collapse the distinction between formal (theoretical) and non-formal (everyday) knowledge and the *different* kinds of knowledge that is accessible in educational institutions and in the workplace. Training packages face one way, to the workplace, and not both ways to disciplinary knowledge and the workplace. Unless students have access to theoretical systems of meaning and the way such knowledge is classified and framed, they are not able to *recognise, identify and use t*he general and principled to understand the particular *in a range of contexts*, and nor can they use the general and principled to imagine *alternatives* in the workplace, and in society more broadly. Knowledge is not under their control. This simultaneously denies them *epistemic* access to the structures of knowledge relevant in their vocational field and *social* access to 'society's conversation'. Programs that 'face both ways' such as the associate diploma in community development provide students with the capacity to *recognise and negotiate* the distinction between the formal and the informal, and the means to traverse the boundaries between them.

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Title:
Beyond the contextual: the importance of theoretical knowledge in vocational qualifications and the implications for work

Date:
2007

Citation:
Wheelahan, L. (2007). Beyond the contextual: the importance of theoretical knowledge in vocational qualifications and the implications for work. In The times they are a-changin: researching transitions in lifelong learning: Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference, Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, University of Stirling, UK.

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/28894