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**Extra Curricular Activity Required  
Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Educational Knowledge**

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*In the social sciences, the progress of knowledge presupposes  
progress in our knowledge of the conditions of knowledge*  
Pierre Bourdieu

Reference of published version:

Maton, K. (1999) Extra curricular activity required: Pierre Bourdieu and the sociology of educational knowledge, in Grenfell, M. & Kelly, M. (Eds.) *Pierre Bourdieu: Language, culture and education* (Bern, Peter Lang), 197-210.

**Introduction**

Questions of how educational knowledge is selected, organised, distributed, transmitted and evaluated are crucial for a reflexive and critical sociology (Musgrove 1968; Jenks 1977). However, after a short period of intense interest in the 1970s, this area of study has again become marginalised within British sociology (Young 1988). This paper aims to critically examine Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual-methodological framework as a basis for empirical research into the changing structure of educational knowledge. As such, it is a modest attempt to bring these questions to light once more. I begin by outlining unresolved problems within existing sociological approaches to educational knowledge, and then briefly illustrate how Bourdieu's framework provides a means of overcoming these. Given the already voluminous literature on the advantages of Bourdieu's approach (Swartz 1997), the third and main part of the paper focuses upon exploring directions in which this requires further development.

The impetus for this critical encounter with Bourdieu's ideas arose within (ongoing) empirical research into the rise of cultural studies as a taught academic subject within post-war English higher education. This addresses why cultural studies has occupied specific institutional sites within higher education at particular moments, and how this is related to its characteristic forms of educational knowledge and practice. It thus takes its inspiration from Young's proclamation that:

'It is or should be the central task of the sociology of education to relate the principles of selection and organisation that underlie curricula to their institutional and interactional setting in schools and class-rooms and to the wider social structure' (1971b: 24).

**The sociology of educational knowledge**

This programmatic statement was central to the 'new sociology of education' (NSOE), an attempt in the early 1970s to problematise, sociologise and radicalize the study of educational knowledge (eg. Young 1971a). However, 'this programme,

whatever else it produced, did not produce what it called for’ (Bernstein 1990: 166). I shall now very briefly analyse its main approaches using Bourdieu’s conceptions of ‘externalism’ / ‘internalism’, and ‘objectivism’ / ‘subjectivism’ (see Figure I).

*Internalism*

Prior to the NSOE, the dominant approach to the curriculum was the philosophy of education tradition (eg. Phenix 1964; Peters 1967) which analysed academic subjects in terms of their development into ‘indisputably logically cohesive disciplines’ (Hirst 1967: 44). By objectifying the internal structuring of educational knowledge, subjects became sociologically and historically decontextualised, a critique made by the NSOE. However, whilst Young and others proposed a rejuvenated sociology of *knowledge*, it became instead more a sociology of *knowing*. Phenomenologically inspired, this interpretative sociology mainly comprised empirical studies of classroom interaction (eg. Keddie 1971; Esland 1971). Whilst highlighting the actively constructed nature of curricula, such subjectivist accounts tended to overemphasise the possibilities for radical individual change and abstracted classroom practices from wider structural relations. Similarly, histories of school subjects (eg. Goodson 1983, 1985), focusing upon struggles between subgroups within disciplines, neglect their wider social, political and economic contexts. Thus the tendency to internalism was less replaced than displaced, from within knowledge to the classroom or professional subject association.

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**Figure I**

**Main approaches within the sociology of educational knowledge**

	<b>Internalist</b>	<b>Externalist</b>
<b>Objectivist_</b>	Philosophy of education	Neo-Marxist theories
<b>Subjectivist</b>	“Sociology of knowing” and school subject histories	(Idealist policy studies)

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*Externalism*

These internalist approaches can be contrasted with more theoretical, largely neo-Marxist accounts of education (eg. Sharp & Green 1975; Bowles & Gintis 1976). From the late 1970s, various correspondence, reproduction and hegemonic theories focused on the effects of social relations of power upon the curriculum. Changes in educational knowledge were viewed as resulting from changes in the needs of *external* interests, such as bourgeois domination, the state, or industry. Although subsequent work criticised these theories as overly simplistic and developed less objectivist accounts (eg. Giroux 1981; Apple 1982), they still tend to refine rather than supplant this externalist tendency.

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### *Summary*

Although Young's claim that there are 'virtually no theoretical perspectives or research to suggest explanations of how curricula ... arise, persist and change' (1971b: 24) no longer holds true, existing approaches remain limited. Taken *as a whole* they highlight the active construction of curricula in concrete institutional settings and wider contextual relations of power. However, these dimensions have largely remained separately addressed, paralleled by a division between empirical and theoretical work (Whitty 1985). Thus an empirically applicable, conceptual framework is required which brings these together to address internal and external, structural and active dimensions to the development of academic subjects.

### **Bourdieu's framework and the higher education curriculum**

Although Bourdieu has written extensively on education (eg. 1971, 1976, 1988a), this has often been abstracted from his wider approach (Wacquant 1993). The possible contributions and limits of his framework for studying educational knowledge have thus yet to be fully appreciated. My aim here is thus to both briefly illustrate its usefulness and provide the basis for considering limitations inherent in this approach.

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### *The university field*

By viewing higher education as a relatively autonomous social field which refracts external pressure according to its own logic and structure, educational knowledge becomes neither a wholly autonomous sphere (internalism) nor a mere reflection of dominant social interests (externalism). Its relations to external influences depend upon its position within the field - one thus needs to chart the location of academic subjects within the structure of the *institutional field* of higher education, a dimension missing from previous approaches. Studies of universities, however, enumerate their attributes in the form of ideal types or models (Tight 1996). Bourdieu's 'field of struggles' highlights the hierarchy and competition usually left implicit in such accounts and provides a purchase upon the internal structure of higher education. Institutional characteristics (eg. socio-demographic student profile, qualification portfolio) are then neither static nor neutral attributes but the basis for competing principles of hierarchisation. (Such vague notions as institutional 'academic drift' and 'vocational drift' can, for example, be understood as the impact of the play of forces between these principles upon differing institutional positions). One can thus trace the development of an academic subject within this structured set of power relations. For example, cultural studies can be crudely characterised as having typically occupied positions in the dominated pole of the English university field (Maton 1998).

### *The disciplinary field*

Having positioned the subject, the form it exhibits requires characterisation. Developing Bourdieu's analysis of cultural production (1993a), one can describe 'autonomous' and 'economically heteronomous' poles of the field of disciplinary discourses. Academic subjects traditionally accorded higher status are typically organised according to internal criteria of legitimation; they proclaim 'pure' knowledge untainted by external interests. On these criteria, subjects appealing to notions of 'relevance' are lower status, 'impure'. This captures the familiar (but usually static) polarity between the 'liberal' and 'vocational'. In these terms, cultural studies represents 'social heteronomy': opposed to both the liberal and vocational, it is typically legitimated as representing the interests of dominated social groups outside education (Maton 1998). These low status position-takings can then be related to the dominated institutional positions such subjects typically occupy. Thus one can ground a subject within the social conditions of its production, highlighting the complex social and institutional framework which authorises and sustains educational knowledge.

### *The production and consumption of academic subjects*

In order to trace the rise of academic subjects, one also needs to set the field in motion - higher education is an *evolving* system of positions. From Bourdieu's perspective, the emergence of and forms taken by cultural studies would be viewed as subversive strategies reflecting its dominated institutional positions. Thus academic subjects are more than an internal movement towards 'logically cohesive disciplines'; they comprise strategies, located within a dynamic field of struggles, through which agents compete for the right to define legitimate educational knowledge. In terms of cultural consumption, for Bourdieu the emergence of an academic subject involves the meeting of such strategies with the expectations of a particular fraction of potential students, highlighting changes in the 'audience'. This is crucial for post-war English higher education where the principle of student choice has predominated

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during educational expansion. Bourdieu posits a homology between the educational and social fields such that, for example, dominated positions within education are occupied by dominated social groups. Although rather vague, it highlights the need to relate (external) social structures to the (internal) structure of higher education.

### *Summary*

Bourdieu's 'methodological relationalism' overcomes the previous exclusive focus on the structuring of knowledge (philosophy of education), classroom interaction (phenomenology), state or capitalist relations of production (neo-Marxist approaches), enabling one to begin to interrelate these various dimensions. This necessarily simplistic illustration, however, also begins to reach the limits of his approach. I wish now to highlight two main interrelated limitations (implicit in the above):

- (i) it cannot adequately describe the *form* of educational knowledge and practice; and
- (ii) these are viewed as epiphenomena of the play of positions within a field, obscuring their structuring significance for the field.

Both of these have significant implications for operationalising Bourdieu's concepts within empirical research. Whilst I should reiterate the empirical origins and methodological intent of this discussion, to show how these issues originate in Bourdieu's approach rather than the specificity of my object of study, I shall focus upon excavation - as Bourdieu often quotes, it is getting hold of the difficulty *deep down* that is most important. Attempting to point out a blindspot is also word-intensive, so here problems are highlighted rather than solutions provided.

### **Bourdieu's approach and curricular activity: a critique**

#### (i) Conceptualising curricular activity

In order to chart a subject across different institutional contexts and over time, one needs principles of description enabling one to state 'this is the same', 'this is a variation', 'this is a change' (Bernstein 1990: 170). However, the concepts Bourdieu develops in his studies of education, such as 'pedagogic authority' and 'cultural arbitrary' (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, 1979) cannot generate empirical descriptions of specific forms of educational institutions, curricula or teaching practices.

Turning to Bourdieu's more general conceptualisation of fields, it is an 'unconscious relationship between a *habitus* and a field' (1993b: 76) which provides the principles underlying actions. Practices are structured in accordance with the structuring of the habitus of agents or institutions; to describe practices, one must conceptualise the structuring of a habitus. However, within Bourdieu's approach any given habitus is described only in terms of its outcomes, the practices to which it does or does not give rise (as relations amongst possible practices). The concept thus merely adds another layer, albeit more delicate, subtle and insightful, of ethnographic description. As Bernstein states, we cannot replace habitus by X, i.e. the description of its internal structure:

'Putting it crudely, there is no necessity between the concept or what counts as a realization. This means that once an illustration is challenged or an alternative interpretation given, there are problems' (1996: 136).

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What is missing is a means of moving from an empirical description of curricular practices to a conceptualisation of the principles underlying these practices (and vice versa) in a *non-tautological* manner.

Bourdieu acknowledges the possibility that ‘habitus’ could lead to circularity and ad hoc explanation (‘why does someone make petty-bourgeois choices? Because he has a petty bourgeois habitus!’), and claims to avoid this by being ‘keenly aware of this danger’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 129). However, this (itself an ad hoc explanation) leaves the question of whether, if we envisage habitus as X, Bourdieu ever describes X other than in terms of its realisations, enabling comparison with W, Y, Z.

I should emphasise that in focusing critically upon ‘habitus’, I wish to *build upon* and *apply* Bourdieu’s ideas, rather than discredit or displace. Most importantly, I question not the *function* of habitus within Bourdieu’s theory, but its *form*. Bourdieu has extensively discussed the role habitus plays in overcoming false epistemological dichotomies (1977, 1990). My question here is whether ‘habitus’ *as a methodological tool* (which is how Bourdieu describes his concepts) is applicable in empirical research *as it currently stands*. For the temptation is to rest with the concept as it stands. As Boudon argues, the success of relational approaches in anthropology and linguistics led many to view this as due ‘only to a change of approach in the metaphysical sphere’ (1971: 102); i.e. as *envisaging* the object of study relationally. Boudon distinguishes this intention to analyse relationally from its implementation, which requires conceptual tools enabling objects to be studied *as relational systems*. In this respect, ‘habitus’ is a highly perceptive and heuristic metaphor, highlighting something of significance. As a methodologically operational concept, however, it remains more of a black box; ‘habitus’ cannot currently enable the analysis of the structuring of practices as a relational system (Bernstein’s ‘X’) and so requires elaboration.

### (ii) The structuring significance of curricular activity

The second limitation (and basis of the above) is that Bourdieu views educational knowledge as epiphenomenal and having no structuring role in the development of academic subjects. The basis of this can be found in Bourdieu’s notion of the ‘arbitrary’. His basic argument is that the practices of intellectual fields obscure the arbitrary nature of their knowledge base and hierarchical structure of power; through symbolic violence their basis in social structure is misrecognised. The main aim of analysis is to reveal the arbitrary nature of the content of the field. Bourdieu thus holds an ‘absolute substantive theory of arbitrariness’ (LiPuma 1993: 17): cultural contents and practices are viewed as *historically* arbitrary - any educational practice/text could have served the same function within the field’s evolution. A field analysis of curricular change, therefore, need not analyse the structural history of educational knowledge. (For example, in *Homo Academicus* Bourdieu focuses upon the struggles within the academic game rather than their resultant forms of knowledge and practice). This, I shall argue, reintroduces externalism and offers only a partial methodological relationism.

### *The social and epistemic relations of knowledge*

To clarify this argument one can conceive of knowledge as having *two* (co-existing but analytically distinct) sets of relations, highlighting that knowledge claims are

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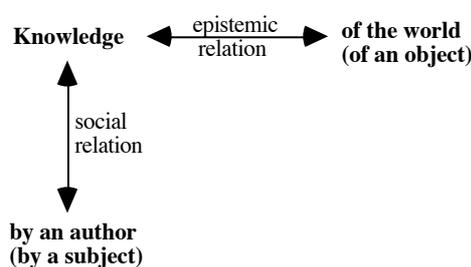
simultaneously claims to knowledge *of the world*, and *by authors* (see Figure II). These I have elsewhere termed (Maton, forthcoming) the:

- (i) *epistemic relation*: between knowledge and its proclaimed object of study (that part of the world of which knowledge is claimed);
- (ii) *social relation*: between knowledge and its author or subject (who is making the claim to knowledge).

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### Figure II

#### The Epistemic Relation and the Social Relation of Knowledge



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From this perspective empirical studies of educational knowledge require means of relationally analysing *both* its epistemic relation (or ‘form’) *and* its social relation (or ‘function’). In these terms, however, Bourdieu’s approach enables a relational analysis of the *social* relation of knowledge only.

This follows from Bourdieu viewing the principles which underlie the structuring of knowledge as embedded within the field’s power relations: ‘*the space of positions tends to command the space of position-takings*’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 105, original emphasis). In other words, the form of educational knowledge reflects the relational positions of actors. Basically, actors are held to be inclined towards conservative / subversive strategies, depending upon whether they occupy dominant / dominated positions, respectively, within the field (1988: 128; 1991: 7). The *form* of pedagogic discourse adopted is arbitrary and contingent upon what has historically been associated with dominant / dominated positions. For example, the structure of cultural studies as educational knowledge (eg. its anti-canonical stance) would be understood as a subversive strategy reflecting its dominated position within the higher education field.

The *function* of educational practices, as strategic ‘position-takings’ based upon interests, is thus abstracted from their *form*, which is described only in terms of being oppositionally defined to other possible position-takings. As the form taken by any knowledge claim is arbitrary, the structure of the epistemic relation is irrelevant; it is merely historically contingent upon prevailing power relations in the field. Bourdieu’s approach thus analyses only the *social* relation of knowledge. It provides a *sociology* of knowledge, and not an analysis of knowledge itself; more a theory of

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*power* than of *knowledge* or *pedagogy*. If Bourdieu captures *homo academicus*, what escapes his net is the significance of the latter's curricular activity.

This has the unhappy effect of reintroducing externalism within field analysis and tends towards social reductionism. Where 'externalist' approaches relate knowledge directly to power relations external to the educational field, Bourdieu's approach, whilst mediating such field-level external pressures through the 'relatively autonomous' field, relates knowledge to the relational positioning of its author within the field (the social relation). The structure of what is said is unimportant; it is who says it that matters; he analyses 'who', 'where', 'when', 'how' and 'why', but not 'what' (Bernstein 1996: 175). Bourdieu thus replaces macro-externalism with meso-externalism: knowledge reflects relational positions; the structure of knowledge itself is arbitrary. Thus, in attempting to transcend the internalist / externalist dichotomy, Bourdieu tends to (albeit a far more refined) externalism, throwing the internalists' baby out with their bathwater. Such an analysis is, I would argue, only half the story. Are the positions occupied by different forms of knowledge nothing more than the reflection of power relations? Are not some forms of knowledge more epistemologically powerful than others? Bourdieu's approach suggests otherwise. By considering the structuring of practices as arbitrary, he denies them any structuring significance for the field as a whole.

In effect, Bourdieu fails to carry his methodological relationism far enough. A full methodological relationist approach requires a means for relationally analysing the *epistemic* relation - the internal structuring of knowledge ('X') - to complement (*not* displace) Bourdieu's analysis of the social relation. This is more than the relational structure of position-takings; it is the relation of knowledge to its constructed object of study.

This limitation of Bourdieu's work, it should be noted, was intended as a transitory phase:

'The notion of interest ... was conceived as an instrument of rupture intended to bring the materialist mode of questioning to bear on realms from which it was absent and on the sphere of cultural production in particular. It is the means of a deliberate (and provisional) reductionism.'  
(1988b: 1).

As Bourdieu's approach becomes increasingly dominant within Anglophone sociology, the danger is that this 'provisional reductionism' will become institutionalised and so crude idealism replaced by social reductionism - forms of knowledge reduced to epiphenomena of power relations. Sociologies of knowledge, when left by themselves, tend to relativism. What then is required is more attention to curricular activity itself.

## Conclusion

An account of the changing structure of educational knowledge entails at least four levels of analysis:

- (A) social relations of power and control
- (B) institutional field of higher education
- (C) structuring of educational knowledge and practice

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### (D) active construction of meanings within educational contexts

Existing approaches focus upon: C only (philosophy of education); the effects of A on C (neo-Marxist theories); or the shaping of C by D (sociology of knowing). This ignores the institutional field of higher education (B) and its interrelations with A and C. Using Bourdieu's approach one can analyse the structuring relations of B on C. It is, however, only a starting point as it provides more a sociology of power than of knowledge (C), and so needs to be developed. One means of complementing this with an analysis of curricular activity is Basil Bernstein's work (1975, 1990, 1996; see Maton 1998). By *combining* the strengths of these two approaches, a firmer theoretical and methodological basis can be provided for a rejuvenated sociology of educational knowledge.

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### Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to Madeleine Arnot and Rob Moore for their helpful comments on an earlier version of Maton (1997), which this paper develops. This research was funded by an ESRC studentship.

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