

## Book Review

**Maton, K. (2013).** *Knowledge and knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education.* London & New York: Routledge

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In her chapter, “Bernstein and empirical research”, Sally Power (2010) utilises Dowling’s (1999) categories of disciples, vulgarisers, exploiters, and heretics to qualitatively differentiate approaches to the use of Basil Bernstein’s work:

*Vulgarisers reproduce but with only a weak (or superficial) grasp of his work. Disciples also reproduce, but they have a strong and deep grasp of his work. By contrast, heretics also have a strong grasp of his work, but use it to produce, rather than reproduce, new conceptual structures. Exploiters produce new conceptual structures, but with only a weak grasp of his work. (p. 241)*

In *Knowledge and Knowers* there is a rich and deep engagement with Bernstein’s ideas as well as significant developments so, in Dowling’s terms, Karl Maton acts as both disciple and heretic. Maton acknowledges that his work extends and integrates concepts from established approaches. He utilises Bourdieu’s concept of *field* for example but identifies its limits: “field theory is an unfinished conceptual revolution: the framework does not reveal the organizing principles of practices, dispositions and fields” (2013a p. 20). The core of the theoretical work, its central foundation, is developed from Bernstein’s theories of codes and knowledge forms (Bernstein, 2000) which “provide templates for enabling analytic power in substantive research” (Maton, 2013a, p. 20). Maton’s development is rich, layered, and highly imaginative and, while somewhat overwhelming at times, as we move through an array of gazes, lenses, waves, altitudes, latitudes, clusters, constellations, and cosmologies, the book certainly establishes the credentials of some of the key concepts of Maton’s legitimation code theory (LCT) and the important research it has generated.

Maton sets the context for a social realist theoretical position in the opening chapter where he outlines the “blind-spot” and paradox within the sociology of education in relation to knowledge and educational research; “Knowledge is described as a defining

feature of modern societies, but what that knowledge is, its forms and effects, are not part of the analysis” (Maton, 2013a, p. 2). Constructivism in particular, Maton argues, has helped establish a generic view of learning focused on the intrinsic characteristics of the learner; mental processes, states of consciousness, and cultural identities. This is part of what Maton terms the *subjectivist doxa* prevalent in the field of educational research where knowledge is reduced to knowing and expressions of power. Maton’s work on the other hand, and in alignment with other recent publications espousing realist theories of knowledge (see for example Young, 2013, Moore, 2013, and Rata, 2012), reemphasises the object of learning – knowledge itself – focusing on its inherent structures and characteristics of legitimation within fields of production and recontextualisation, and the effects of these dimensions of knowledge on teaching and learning. As Maton suggests, “how the forms taken by educational knowledge may enable or constrain cumulative teaching and learning remains relatively under-researched” (Maton, 2013b, p. 9). Maton’s book *Knowledge and Knowers*, makes a major contribution to rectifying this blind-spot. The book introduces the conceptual framework of LCT that Maton claims “enables knowledge practices to be seen, their organizing principles to be conceptualized, and their effects to be explored” (2013a p. 3). The book also acts as a compendium for the impressive proliferation of empirical work that this approach (LCT) has inspired in a relatively short space of time.

The chapters chart the development of the theory, each chapter introducing new concepts illustrated through key studies which focus on varied “problems” within social science from varied disciplinary areas such as cultural studies, secondary-school music, and English. In this way the theoretical concepts are nicely exemplified and elaborated through empirical examples, reinforcing Maton’s assertion that there is a continual interrelationship between developing theory and empirical data: “data speak back to the theory, demanding clarifications, refinements and new developments” (2013a, p. 15). The central theme of cumulative knowledge building is exemplified in the structure of the book itself as the conceptual framework unfolds. The book then realises one of Maton’s aims to move the “polemical and inventive” (p. 9) concerns of much social realist literature towards providing a means for the analysis of knowledge, its organizing principles, properties, and effects.

Maton makes it clear that “LCT is a practical theory rather than a paradigm, a conceptual toolkit and analytical methodology rather than an ‘-ism’, and sociological rather than philosophical” (2013a, p. 15). The book focusses on two of five dimensions that make up LCT theory in its current form: Specialization and Semantics. The other dimensions – Autonomy, Density, and Temporality – remain less developed. Each dimension explores “different organizing principles of practices” (2013a, p. 19) and comprises a set of concepts. The studies focussed on Specialization provide extremely useful concepts for making visible aspects of the processes through which knowledge is legitimised in various fields: specialization codes, the epistemic–pedagogic device, knowledge–knower structures, and gazes and insights. This work in particular extends Bernstein’s theory of knowledge structures to include the practices of actors in various processes of legitimation. The dimension of Semantics also includes extremely useful concepts such as semantic gravity, semantic density, and condensation.

Specialization is elaborated most clearly through chapters focussed on tertiary-level cultural studies and secondary-school music. The concept of legitimation identifies four codes through which knowledge becomes specialised and legitimated: knowledge, knower, elite, and relativist. These codes act in various combinations with resulting varied strengths of classification and framing. Secondary-school music's problem of uptake in the UK is therefore revealed as a problem of combined codes in its legitimation. The analysis suggests that music exhibits an elite code, one requiring both specialised knowledge and specialised knower dispositions. This provides some insight into the structuring of knowledge within that subject and why students may be reluctant to choose music for senior study in secondary school.

Semantics is explored through studies of secondary-school English and the application of the concepts of semantic gravity and semantic density. Maton talks of strengthening and weakening semantic gravity as we move from abstract or generalised ideas and to concrete cases/examples. He suggests that insightful responses move in semantic waves – weakening and strengthening the semantic gravity from the abstract (*weaker* semantic gravity) to the particular (*stronger* semantic gravity) and back again. Student exemplars from an Australian secondary-school English assessment are utilised to illustrate the concepts and to make visible just what it is that differentiates student responses that we recognise as high-achieving. The studies show how planned curricula aimed at building cumulative knowledge do not necessarily succeed due to a blind-spot; the significance of knowledge–knower structures within the learning process:

*one feature constraining cumulative learning may be a mismatch between the cultivated gaze that the students are expected to demonstrate ... and the lack of cultivation offered. The minimal guidance and limited models offered ... meant that students not already capable of recognizing and realizing the requisite gaze ... were disadvantaged. For such students, assessment largely measured pre-existing dispositions. Ironically, far from being authentic learning or representing a journey, these forms of pedagogy offered students limited opportunities for learning and left many where they began. (2013a, p. 122)*

The implications for pedagogy in this chapter (chapter six) are amongst the most compelling in the book.

LCT contains significant developments emerging from the work of two of the world's most important sociologists – Bourdieu and Bernstein. As Maton suggests, LCT is a sociology of possibility and this elaboration of a rich, densely layered, conceptual “toolkit” for considering education problems is very welcome. Maton suggests “little can be said of ‘knowledge societies’ and ‘the information age’ until more is known about forms of knowledge or information and the processes of their creation, reproduction, transformation and change” (2013a, p. 216). Research that explores the organizing principles of different forms of knowledge is motivated by a social justice agenda. Social inclusion and achievement for all learners can be enhanced as our knowledge about knowledge and knowledge building is enhanced. This book certainly helps us move towards realising this aim.

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