

Book review

Knowledge and knowers. Towards a realist sociology of education, by Karl Maton, London and New York: Routledge, 2014, 244 pages, ISDN: 978-0-415-47999-8

Maton is one of the best-known proponents of “legitimation code theory” (LCT), which arises from the work of the British sociologist Basil Bernstein and is heavily influenced by Pierre Bourdieu. The latter’s concepts of *field*, *habitus*, and *capital* have informed the health professional literature particularly that concentrating on the sociology of the professions.

At a first glance, this is not obviously a book about the health professions or interprofessional education. The 10 chapter titles focus on education in relation to the social sciences, mathematics, music, cultural studies, the arts, and humanities. But the text is about knowledge and the knowers of that knowledge with some interesting perspectives on what the author refers to as “knowledge blindness in education”. In other words, Maton suggests that educational researchers have tended to concentrate on the idea of “knowledge as power”, and how and why things are learned, rather than *what* is being learned. Furthermore, knowledge is typified dichotomously, for example, as either hard or soft, pure or applied, abstract or concrete (even perhaps pre-clinical and clinical). Such distinctions resonate with the contrast made between constructivist relativism and positivist absolutism: the quantitative–qualitative divide that may prevent an interdisciplinary and realist approach to evaluation and research. Maton argues that such divisions only describe the features of knowledge and tell us nothing about its structure.

Maton suggests that research into knowledge tends to explore the “extent, intensity, and comparative value of flows of knowledge rather than its forms and their effects” (p. 2), i.e. how knowledge is used and transmitted rather than what it is. Moreover, during the process of learning, new knowledge, and existing knowledge are frequently not integrated so that the former does not build on and inform the latter. This can lead to students’ learning becoming segmented and thus, to use a word in common usage in relation to IPE, siloed.

In health professions education, we see examples of what are here described as hierarchical curricular structures (learning and teaching builds on knowledge introduced earlier, for example, the spiral curriculum) and horizontal curricular structures (knowledge and skills are fragmented with little discussion of the relevance

between courses, for example, how professionalism and ethics relate to the biomedical sciences, or even how early interprofessional learning activities relate to clinical practice). The segmented learning of the horizontal approach inhibits transfer from one context to another. Thus students may *do* interprofessional learning but fail to see its relevance in their uniprofessional courses.

The code theory is difficult to summarise in a short review of this kind. The reader new to this approach will feel overwhelmed in jargon to begin with but persistence pays off. The book highlighted for me a number of concepts that are useful for educators, in particular, the notions of the semantic wave and semantic gravity. Maton draws attention to the trend in professional education for authentic or situated learning, which provides students with access to working environments (he mentions journalism, we can think of clinical settings). Assessment of such learning frequently involves case studies in which students describe and analyse what they have observed in practice. In the health professions, we would hope that students *reflect*. Strong semantic gravity is when the learner remains rooted in a particular case and primarily describes what has been observed without relating this to his/her previous experiences or the wider literature. Weak semantic gravity (and the strong–weak adjectives are in no way judgmental) is when the learner extrapolates to other contexts, compares and contrasts, generalises, and abstracts to past and future cases. High achieving students move between these poles in semantic waves, whereas the weaker ones are too descriptive or too abstract.

The book offers a different way of talking about knowledge and learning, and of reflecting on what makes a meaningful group learning session. Authentic learning environments may only work if students are able to move beyond that particular context and apply the knowledge cumulatively to other situations. But it is important to understand what that knowledge consists of and Maton proposes a way that we can code this. So this book is for those who want to take learning and knowledge in a new direction – you may not agree with everything here but there are certain challenges to the way we do things and potential areas for further research.

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