

Karl Maton: Knowledge and knowers: towards a realist sociology of education

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Jennifer M. Case

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Sociology is both a craft and a science – it needs a gaze but one whose vision is made as explicit as possible. ... By making visible the workings of the gaze, we have a chance to make that gaze more widely available. (Maton 2014, p. 147)

In this book, Karl Maton draws together his scholarly work over more than a decade to offer an accessible route into the sociology of knowledge. He locates this work within a corpus that has called for the ‘reclaiming of knowledge (Moore 2009; Muller 2000; Young 2008)’. The lay person might wonder somewhat about this endeavour, given that it might be assumed that education research, if nothing else, would be centred on concerns around knowledge. Yet, as Maton and others have cogently shown, somehow we got distracted. In focusing on valid concerns about, for example, access to higher education and its broader role in reproducing or challenging social relations, we lost sight of what is at the heart of what we do in education. Maton terms this ‘knowledge blindness’.

The key impetus for the work in this book is the sociology of Basil Bernstein (2000), described here as a ‘launching pad for theoretical innovation’. Maton takes the foundational Bernstein concepts and shapes these into a larger and expanded framework. At pains to demonstrate the very cumulative knowledge building that is argued to be crucial for the progress of scholarship, in this book he takes the reader on a close journey through the evolution of this framework, termed Legitimation Code Theory (LCT).

In LCT, Bernstein’s notions of classification and framing are reworked into ‘specialization codes’, which describe the basis for legitimation in knowledge fields. Maton distinguishes both epistemic relations (to knowledge) and social relations (to knowers) from which can be identified a range of disciplinary configurations. Although the powerful shorthand of ‘knowledge code’ and ‘knower code’ disciplines is used at points in the analysis, Maton is emphatic that this does not imply a dichotomy—these code settings lie

J. M. Case (✉)

Centre for Research in Engineering Education, Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Cape Town, Private Bag, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
e-mail: Jenni.case@uct.ac.za

on a two dimensional continuum with infinite gradations—what really matters are the relative strengths of the relational positions.

In this book a steady conceptual progression is accompanied by helpful illustrations in relevant pieces of educational scholarship. A key source is Maton's original research on the field of Cultural Studies in British higher education, but this is also accompanied by further original empirical work and background literature in other disciplinary areas. A particular interest in the book is on the functioning of 'knower code' disciplines, showing that micro shifts in this overall logic (for example from a 'cultivated gaze' depending on immersion in a canon towards a 'social gaze' depending on the social orientations of the student) can have significant impacts both in the arenas of pedagogy and curriculum, as well as in the possibilities for development of an intellectual community.

Bernstein's notion of the 'pedagogic device' is a key consideration for researchers in higher education, where it is too easy to conflate the disciplinary field with that of curriculum. Maton makes a few tweaks to this concept, systematizing and extending it into the slightly unwieldy termed epistemic-semantic-pedagogic device. Apart from this instance, though, I particularly appreciate his move to change terminology where it is potentially problematic, and I think the move from 'rules' to 'logics' underpinning these different fields is a very helpful one, moving to the deterministic feel of 'rules' to the more generative 'logics'.

Something that new researchers often struggle with is how theory and empirical data have to be brought into conversation with each other to produce research findings. In this regard the book makes an important contribution, employing Bernstein's notion of the 'external language of description' to show how a 'translation device' needs to be created to bring theory in conversation with data. Maton also usefully draws on and modifies a scheme from Archer (1995) to point out that there are different layers of theory that get mobilised in a research study—and that high level meta-theories (termed here 'social ontologies') are not able to do the work that is needed to guide an actual analysis.

As much as the framework presented in this book represents an explicit standing on the shoulders of giants, the naming of this enlarged theoretical palette as 'LCT' is an interesting discursive move, worthy of some interrogation. In one sense it is clear that Maton takes very seriously the realist position which sees knowledge as imbued with its own causal powers and properties; here it is potentially helpful for a framework to have its own name which is not the name of any single person. Maton carries this commitment through in the writing in this book; there is a deliberate attempt to background the author and to foreground the agency of LCT, for example, as seen in phrases like these "... there is more to Bernstein's framework than has been built on by LCT thus far... (p. 203), "LCT aims to embrace the greatest range of phenomena..." (p. 213), and so on. Maton also stresses that LCT is not an attempt to be a 'theory of everything' although sometimes its ambitious sweep might give that impression. He explicitly notes that other theories need to be brought into do work alongside LCT, depending on the nature of the study at hand. And he emphasizes that this is no 'radical break' of the sort that is regularly announced in sociology. However, the naming of this theoretical space as LCT does surely signal something. Turning the framework back on itself I would like to suggest that it might be worth asking what this means for the modes of legitimation in this very field. From my perspective this appears as a strengthening of the epistemic relation (a clear signalling of what is 'in' LCT and what is not), but I will leave it to others to take this line of inquiry further.

I have already indicated that—especially for novice researchers—Maton's work is a very accessible way into what can be a fairly daunting terrain. If we are to hope for a greater community of researchers to take knowledge seriously, in a sociological sense, then

we need tools that many can share. Maton has assembled a toolbox where everything is very clearly in its place and the blades are nicely sharpened. On that point of metaphorical flourish, I note Maton's own use of metaphorical terminology across his conceptual framework—we have gravity, density, constellations, stargazing, as well as some terms not mentionable in a family journal. This lends a certain playfulness at times to the writing, which I think should be welcomed. At some points I wondered whether the metaphor might start to run out on us—but like all new terminology so long as we keep to clear definitions we should be fine, and Maton cannot be faulted on his extremely clear exposition. In conclusion then, this monograph is best described as a guidebook—the journey is carefully signposted and there is much encouragement for the traveller—and I expect that its impact on higher education studies is going to be significant.

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