

'Theory' and 'practice' within HE professional education courses – integration of academic knowledge and experiential knowledge.

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Reflective and experiential pedagogies are associated with less formal ranges of knowledge and ways of knowing than traditional models. This paper makes an initial exploration of some issues concerning the integration and articulation of these various types of knowledge, and in particular, looks at the 'theory-practice' relationship. The information comes from a literature review undertaken as the first part of a professional doctorate concerned with personal epistemology and post qualifying social work students. In this context students are all practising professionals and so the terms 'students', 'learners' and 'practitioners' are used interchangeably.

We can look first at the relationship between professions and universities with regard to knowledge and ways of knowing. The intellectual tradition of the university historically values the explicit, the scientific, and discipline-based theory. Knowledge is pursued for its own sake, through patient scholarship and the challenging of presently accepted ideas and theory. The problem is that this traditional approach adheres to a hierarchical model of knowledge where the knowledge and skills of application and practice are of a lower order than the knowledge seen to lie in the theories and techniques of the disciplines. Seeing practice as mere technique, subordinate to theory and lacking the status of true knowledge, is seen by many as a weakness of this technical-rational model, inhibiting rather than enhancing professional development (Usher and Bryant 1987).

Subsequently, professional education is seen to move away from this technical-rational or 'technocratic' model to a 'post-technocratic' model as defined by Bines and Watson (1992), i.e. one that is primarily concerned with professional knowledge and action and process. The shift in emphasis is from academic to professional development, encompassing a practitioner's theories-in-use, knowledge for practice, and the skills required to use reflection, observation, analysis and evaluation to develop practice. Boshuizen *et al.*'s (2004) review confirms that the trend for professional education is to see knowledge as an active entity within experiential, intuitive judgment-making rather than rule-based, rational reasoning. In pedagogic terms, traditional didactic approaches focusing on content are replaced by more reflexive, pragmatic and experiential approaches, which place the individual learner at the heart of an active learning process.

As a result, post technocratic approaches bring different types of knowledge and ways of knowing into higher education. Based on work by Schön (1983) and others, Usher *et al.* (1997) explain that it has to be recognised that there is knowledge *in* practice rather than simply knowledge *for* practice. Eraut (1994) identifies this knowledge in practice as process knowledge (skilled behaviour and deliberation) and personal knowledge (impressions and experiential interpretations), which alongside a third category of propositional knowledge (theories, concepts and propositions), together create professional

knowledge.

The learning processes in this post technocratic approach necessarily tend to be interpretive and inductive (Nixon and Murr 2006), encompassing 'being' and a personal ethical stance (Margetson 2000; Tynjala *et al.* 2003). Thus the associated knowledge and ways of knowing emerging from these experiential and reflective learning processes are necessarily subjective and reflexive, and thus challenge higher education's traditional systems and hegemonic valuing of discipline-based objectivity.

The notion of applying 'theory to practice' (using disciplinary or propositional knowledge in and for practice) is apparent within both technocratic and post technocratic approaches but the actual processes differ considerably. A technocratic model allows simple passive application or an instrumental use of theory, i.e. via replication or rule-based prescriptions. However, this is not seen as adequate for the task. Eraut (1994) shows that in a practical context theoretical knowledge has to be adapted to suit the particular demands of each practice situation. The argument is that theories, even those deriving from empirical facts, are not suited to provide immediate guidance for activity and always require transformation before they can provide orientation for practical activity (Bromme and Tillema 1995). Instead, a practitioner is seen to work by actively "integrating, tuning, restructuring theoretical knowledge to the demands of practical situations and constraints" - that is by "fusing theory and experience" (*ibid.*, p. 261). The point is that this process involves practical reasoning, interpretation, understanding, association and judgment, which a technocratic approach does not always account for.

The post technocratic approach actually views the theory-practice relationship holistically rather than as opposing elements. In social work, Thompson (1995) sees the relationship between theory and practice as a direct parallel with that between thinking and doing, the two are inseparable. The question for him is not 'how do we apply theory to practice?', rather it is, 'how do knowledge and thought influence or inform our actions?' This holistic view of theory and practice as already integrated thus requires a reflective, critical questioning approach in order to unravel the various parts and answer the latter question. Reflection, as a process, is thus seen as a tool for making the connection and processes, as well as the elements, more evident. It should allow identification, examination and articulation of process, personal and propositional knowledge as well interpretations, reasoning and inductive understanding.

Thompson (2000) explores the relationship of theory and practice further and explains how the creative process of critical reflexivity, because it is not about finding the 'right answers' in a predefined body of knowledge, actually generates answers which can be considered as new professional knowledge. The practitioner can be thought of as a theorist here because reality is not a 'given' in any absolute sense and so the individual develops and constantly adjusts and modifies a framework for understanding reality – in other words, a theory.

A number of arguments are raised in opposition to this idea of practice-based generated 'theory'. One that is raised frequently is that a knowledge base associated with practice

and reflection is too relativistic because all its forms of knowledge production are considered equally valid and reliable. In response, the role of propositional knowledge is offered as a 'solution'. Brookfield (1995, p.30) notes that if personal knowledge is to be more than anecdotal then it needs to be tested, analysed and viewed against formal research and theory. Other responses concentrate on the role of criticality within reflective and reflexive processes. Taylor and White (2001) argue that although the complexity of multiple ways of knowing demands different forms of validation, this does not have to encourage an 'anything goes' form of relativism. Rigour can be achieved through reflexivity because it critically analyses what authority was used to claim knowledge. Knowledge is not just a resource to be deployed; rather it is a topic worthy of scrutiny.

'We can assert that by acknowledging multiple accounts and by analysing how they are constructed to warrant particular claims and to undermine others we can in fact achieve a more rigorous approach to professional practice.' (Taylor and White 2001, p. 54)

For Noble (2001) the theory-building stage adds a critical dimension as it puts personal reflections into a theoretical framework. Critical reflection allows students' exploration of their practical reasoning, thoughts and emotions, and gives them an opportunity to explore their own knowledge process and learn to trust it as a site of legitimate knowledge and a basis for reflective practice. In so doing they can partake in generating new professional knowledge while at the same time lending a sense of coherence and continuity to their learning process as they become both the subject and object of their own experiences

Another concern is associated with the "decentralisation of both knowledge and authority from the lecturer to the students" (Trevithick 2007, p.245). Again, Noble (2001) counter argues that in moving towards an approach that encourages students to speak from their own positions does not mean uncritically affirming the role of student-as-expert, instead it means using the student's experience as a means of exploring how knowledge is constructed, taught and used.

So, the question now emerges whether higher education institutions (HEIs) are fully aligned with a post technocratic model for their professional education programmes. A key point made by Eraut is that all types of professional knowledge should be considered equal.

"All kinds of knowledge are necessary to professional performance; and they should therefore be accorded parity of esteem in higher education." (Eraut 1994, p. 100)

Nevertheless, we can ask whether true parity be achieved within university systems for these different types of knowledge and ways of knowing. As the issues of warrant and validity concerning knowledge are the realm of epistemology we might question whether we, our institutions, and our students have a sound enough epistemological perspective to deal effectively with the implications of a post technocratic educational model. If more traditional technocratic views regarding the nature of knowledge and learning are apparent in underlying institutional hegemony and personal belief systems, they may

have wide ranging implications. We can explore these in turn.

To begin looking at epistemological implications from an institutional perspective Bines and Watson (1992) note that the gradual upgrading of professional education from certificate to diploma and then to degree level raises unresolved questions about the relative status of knowledge bases that make up the curriculum. The post technocratic model thus,

"...has a number of 'disparate elements', due to both continuing differences of opinion and practice within professions and professional education, and the particular political, social and educational contexts within which the model is currently being developed." (Bines and Watson 1992, p. 16)

University strategies, policies and regulations can reflect a technocratic model as the more dominant but 'hidden curriculum' in certain areas, e.g. assessment criteria or academic writing styles. This does not provide programme providers and leaders with clear messages for coherent curricula design if the programme is supposed to be following a post technocratic pedagogy. McCormick and Paetcher (1999) state that the requirements of a professional educational context do not allow learners to just create or recreate private knowledge, but, understandably, there will be tensions as multiple narratives and subjective interpretations do not lend themselves to assessment via independent academic standards (Bourner 2003).

In Hager's (2001; 2004) view a new paradigm of learning as process rather than as product (i.e. a post technocratic model) may be emerging but it is far from being widely recognised or supported. In his view, HEI's are still firmly entrenched in the traditional model, which, in particular, sets up the theory-practice hierarchy and dichotomy, focusing on developing and assessing individuals' mental capacity and propositional knowledge. He also notes that the dominant learning as product view has remained very resilient but relies on some basic assumptions. It takes for granted that the products of learning are replicable, remain relatively stable and familiar, and are widely understood; that they can be placed in the curricula and passed on to students, and their attainment measured and compared. He notes that this traditional view of learning can be thought of as socially acquired habitus, consequently,

"...change is possible only to the extent that the wider social forces that transmit it are themselves altered." (Hager 2004, p. 6)

To continue the theme of epistemological implications by now looking at an individual and personal level, Goldstein (1993) argues that there is a need for students to be aware of the influence of their own personal constructions regarding knowledge otherwise post technocratic educational processes can founder. In his view, some conventional modes of thinking and problem-solving in use by students, for example wanting prescriptions for practice or rejecting or reifying theory, are potential barriers to reflective learning. Eraut (1994, p.39) sees a major problem for students who have an ongoing dominant conception of learning as one that involves the explicit acquisition of externalised codified knowledge. For them, personal life, education or work experience may have taught them to devalue their own observations and appraisal of the world. Usher (1985) observes that adult students seem only too ready to pursue the 'scientific' rather than the personal in

the sense that they are often reluctant to accept their experience has any meaning from which they can learn. Allied to this the student can often see the university or college as a very formal institution concerned with the transmission and assessment of abstract knowledge. The figure of authority, perceived in the theory, the teacher, or in the assessment system, then becomes a,

“...seemingly solid wall of certainty and truth against which use of subjective experience crumbles”. (Usher 1985, p. 61)

Fisher and Somerton (2000) show that although a modernist, didactic pedagogy is now questioned and challenged, it remains not only a hegemonic tradition but also one actually preferred by many students to a reflective or holistic approach due to their more traditional educational backgrounds, which set their preconceptions about knowledge and learning. Similarly, Fook (2002) observes how her students do not like it when they do not use formal theoretical labels for ideas in discussion; they feel their conclusions do not have the same authority or value as formal theory and therefore do not count. Trotter and Leech (2003) notice that students have a reluctance to acknowledge or value their own knowledge and ideas due to a lack of confidence about their personal theoretical perspective. Furthermore, Nixon and Murr’s (2006) review demonstrates that there is a belief in an implicit hierarchy of knowledge which blocks the dissemination of professional knowledge created through practice learning.

Aligned with these epistemological considerations it is noted that students’ engagement with written articulation of the theory-practice relationship is found to be particularly troublesome, but also pivotal to their success. Within the academic context there is a requirement to write in a particular style, and so it is not what a student thinks or does but the way he or she writes about it that counts (Eraut 1994, p.30). Corben and Hull (1994) show that professionals need to ‘crack the code’ of academic writing and be able to use it, but they come to courses with a wealth of experience and contexted knowledge and skills which some find difficult to utilise and develop in an academic environment. Many still believe in an ‘academic essence’ which remains out of their reach but there appears to be a perception that in developing a critical distance from the subject they are being required to move out of the real world.

Nevertheless, many assessment systems are designed to enhance theory-practice integration. Ford *et al.* (2005) note from their research with social work degree students that the processes of dynamic, iterative thinking between formal knowledge (theory, law, research), practice experience and the professional self (including values) are strongly encouraged by a range of vehicles, even formal written assignments. However, the challenge of integrating theory with practice is noted by Leinhardt *et al.* (1995, p. 403) as “neither trivial nor is it obvious how this integration should be accomplished” and they clarify the problem as follows. Professional knowledge acquired in practice tends to be procedural, specific, and pragmatic. Using it is about executing, applying, and prioritising. On the other hand, professional knowledge acquired in academia tends to be declarative, abstract, and conceptual. Using it is about labelling, differentiating, elaborating, and justifying. In this sense “technique is not reducible to concept” as each vary by location, type, generality and the nature of their principles (Leinhardt *et al.* 1995, p.403). Bourdieu

(1990) sees this as an ongoing tension between the logic of practice and the logic of the theorisation of practice. The former is contextual and situated, tacit and embodied, whereas the latter is centred on generality, abstraction and logical reasoning. Hager (2000) agrees that practice is situated, embodied and contextual whereas theory is general, abstract and logical, and these differences are fundamentally opposed.

The impact on students is that they are too often left to sort the problem out for themselves (Eraut 1994) and it proves extremely problematic for them. Watson *et al.* (2002, p.11), in particular, observe the difficulties associated with academic assignments which aim to integrate theory and practice, and note that every year social work students fail them for a variety of reasons, but basically by misunderstanding how to evidence theory, research, ethics, etc., in their practice through academic writing. They also recognise that generally there is not a great deal of formal guidance or support about how to complete the work, or explanation about what they need to do to pass or what standard is required. This results in confusion for students about what is really wanted and frustration about the seeming lack of clear guidance about how to tackle this type of assignment. Similarly, Duncan (2007) notes that when competent social workers are asked to produce written analyses of their work, their confidence in their own abilities to theorise and make underpinning knowledge explicit seems to evaporate. Many anxieties appear to inhibit social workers when it comes to making explicit the theoretical rationale for their interventions to a wider audience and expose their work to rigorous analysis and criticism from outside commentators. Trevithick (2007) argues the need for a precise practice language as well as a coherent framework to help students link theoretical and practice knowledge, but notes that these are not forthcoming.

Further investigation of the literature shows that very few operational frameworks exist for students to help them integrate theory and practice in academic written work, or, indeed, to align the objective and subjective processes and elements. So far I have found none which meet the standards of reciprocity and parity between theory and practice as noted above. There are obviously a number of experiential / reflective cycles and models, and guides to 'reflective writing', for example as explored in Rolfe *et al.* (2001) which can provide a measure of help. Watson *et al.*'s (2002) text does offer practical advice on how to write reflective academic assignments and shows ways to articulate the application of theoretical considerations to practical social work. However, the level of parity for all types of professional knowledge, as advised by Eraut (1994) earlier, is not adhered to in the text and students are advised not to analyse theory, rather to analyse how they used theory in their practice, or how policy or research informed their planning and decisions.

Walker's (2008) textbook shows social work students how to understand the links between theory and practice by either: a) deductively explaining a theory and then showing how it might relate to an issue in social work practice or b) inductively considering a case study or situation and showing how theories might help to understand it. He emphasises the importance for students of understanding the limitations of theory and the disagreements between them, also that theory must be coupled with values, reflection, analysis, and a critical stance; but he does not explore a reciprocal exchange

between theory and practice. Indeed, authors like Novak (1995) may state that it is not only the case that theory informs and can modify practice and that practice can and should inform theory too, but students seem not to be provided with explicit guidance on whether this is acceptable, and if it is how to articulate it validly.

This task to provide explicit guidance for students can start at an institutional or programme level if certain epistemological issues are addressed. As seen earlier, problems occur if standards and criteria for assessment in this context are presented as 'objective' and 'given' with knowledge seen as something 'external' (i.e. a technocratic model), because these are inappropriate to the use of reflection and experience (Usher 1985). However, if a broader view is taken, the task of allowing the theory-practice relationship to be articulated fully for assessment need not be restrained by a product-constrained view of learning or a technical-rational hierarchy of knowledge. QAA (2008) generic qualification descriptors cover standards of criticality, analysis and synthesis, allowing a focus on process based content understanding rather as well as declarative knowledge. An example from level 6 (H level) states: 'appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge' as a specific requirement. Here the nature of knowledge appears to lose any objective properties (i.e. the idea of absolute truth) it might have been associated with, and the issue appears to be more about engaging with any type of knowledge critically and actively.

Consequently, and as there are a number of ways of warranting claim, the idea of using standards of criticality for each type of professional knowledge appears a valid one. Fenstermacher (1994) makes a suggestion. He notes that claims to practical knowledge cannot be subject to the same scrutiny as claims to formal knowledge (i.e. being valid, generalisable), but one can offer 'good reasons' (rather than evidence) for doing or believing something. 'Practical reasoning' of this sort, he explains, aligns with Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, a deliberative reflection of the relationship between means and ends. This is a different language, but, he argues, one well suited for addressing some of the demands for warrant within this type of discourse.

From a learning development stance, the task to provide explicit guidance for students might start with a clear understanding of the nature of what is required. From the discussions above we can see that students will need to know how to "particularise abstract theories and abstract principles from particulars", as Leinhardt *et al.* (1995, p. 401) suggest. These authors see that true integration of practice and theory involves examination of the knowledge associated with one location (the subjective) while using the ways of thinking associated with the other location (the objective). For example, a particular piece of pragmatic knowledge can be understood explicitly and declaratively, it can be described with respect to an abstract set of principles and it can be adhered to significant conceptual ideas. It is about making the situational, intuitive and tacit more explicit, formal and examinable; and vice versa. The specific conventions and techniques of expository discourse (i.e. the procedures for describing and arguing for an interpretation or for presenting claims and counterclaims) need to be explicitly uncovered for the practice-theory relationship. To show how practice examples and illustrations support generalisations and how knowledge becomes an object for questioning and

learning from experience, and thus reorganised to enable new thought and action (Glaser 1999), is a complex but not impossible learning development objective. Indeed, many learning development centres (e.g. Nottingham Trent for LearnHigher) and specific Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (e.g. Write Now) are dealing with writing issues such as these.

From the literature I would conclude that personal belief systems regarding knowledge and knowing (i.e. personal epistemology) also appear to be relevant in looking at how to provide explicit guidance to students. Those studying personal epistemology focus on how an individual develops their ideas about knowledge and knowing and uses them in developing understanding of the world.

“This includes beliefs about the definition of knowledge, how knowledge is constructed, how knowledge is evaluated, where knowledge resides and how knowing occurs.” (Hofer 2002, p.4)

The most appropriate way that personal epistemology might be used though needs further consideration. Although there is a wealth of research that measures and assesses students' beliefs or stages of epistemological development, the appropriateness of traditional concepts of personal epistemology and its research methodologies are now being questioned for a post technocratic approach (e.g. O'Brien 2002; Niessen *et al.* 2008). There are less prescriptive and more subtle and integrated ways to use epistemology as a pedagogic tool. For example, Usher (1985) has found that enabling students to initially understand and articulate their underlying and deep-rooted conceptions of learning and knowledge allows them to use experience more productively and develop a deep approach (as opposed to an anecdotal one). Hearn (1982, p.112) maintains that the topic of theory and practice should be addressed within social work education, although this does not necessarily mean that social work courses should be dominated by lengthy investigations into epistemology and the sociology of knowledge. Patel's (2003) underlying strategy is to ask students to consider how knowledge is established through epistemology and why we trust certain epistemologies and not others. His device is to ask students directly, “what knowledge do you trust?” By getting students to question knowledge claims in the discipline they can start acting as owners of the discipline knowledge. By surfacing personal constructs students can begin to see themselves in the process of knowledge generation, questioning and learning.

In respect of this I would contend that the challenge for learning development is not a case of measuring or assessing students' personal epistemological beliefs or stages of development. Rather, developmental support in this context appears to be about making students, ourselves and our teams explicitly aware of the epistemic issues regarding the various types of knowledge and ways of knowing apparent on the course, and having appropriate, specifically designed and integrated developmental support available. An academic literacies approach (Lea and Street 1998) can be seen to be relevant here too, as it considers the process of writing at the level of epistemology, social/disciplinary practices and discourses. From this perspective it is possible to see that key issues concerning knowledge, knowing and writing can be made explicit within the course structure itself for all concerned.

In summary, we can see a significant shift from a view of knowledge and knowing within a technocratic model to one within a post technocratic model in professional education. However, the new model is not predominant and both models can be apparent in various educational situations. This produces significant tensions for students, especially for assessment. The challenge for learning development here may be to look at the deeper issues to do with the origin, nature, limits, methods, and justification of knowledge in an institutional as well as a personal or individual framework. O'Brien (2002) argues that epistemological understandings for student issues, assessment and curriculum design should have a more central place within the dialogue of new pedagogies. The question of how we conceptualise and articulate knowledge continues to challenge both our epistemological and pedagogical understandings and as such needs to be placed centrally within any support and development of learning.

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