

Trials and tribunals: epistemic insights operating in the design and approval of degree courses in UK education [abstract only]

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Abstract:

This paper reports one aspect from a larger study of the processes involved in course development and approval of courses in higher education institutions (HEI) in the UK (Pountney, 2014). It examines curriculum development, as the activities and processes by which degree courses are designed, reviewed and updated on an ongoing basis, within institutional and national requirements. One subset of this involves the institutional processes that take place when new courses are 'approved' and existing courses are granted 'licence' to continue. These practices are examined by means of an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) of one higher education institution in the UK to illuminate: the nature of teachers' experiences of curriculum making; the basis of curriculum development practice; and how curriculum reproduction and change takes place.

Drawing on social realist epistemology the study applies Bernstein's knowledge code theory to the data to develop an external language of description (Bernstein, 2000) for curriculum development knowledge by means of a two-step analysis: 1) making visible the underlying principles of the two forms of curricular coherence (Muller, 2009) at play; and 2) gaining access to the epistemic insights operating when courses are planned and approved. In step one the notion of curriculum coherence is derived from the literature as central to curriculum knowledge practices and I distinguish in the data two divergent orientations to curriculum making: coherence as evaluation; and coherence as heuristic modelling. This model of curriculum making is explained by means of the legitimization of academics' curriculum autonomy (Maton, 2013). Varying strengths of positional autonomy - *who says what counts?* - and relational autonomy - *according to whose principles?* - are differentiated (Maton, 2005). Panels, committees and boards, which have the authority to approve course specifications, are shown to operate as interpretive bodies, activated through social processes, in which the goal is collective design. Furthermore, expertise in designing and approving the curriculum, as the basis of this curricular authority, is seen to be ill-defined and to operate as a form of social integration, or consensus.

The theorisation of the epistemic insights, working to shape understandings of the purpose of the curriculum, partly explains why the texts that teachers create for the institutional approval process are poor representations of their pedagogic intentions. Furthermore, the planning for new courses is seen to be vulnerable to the external influences on the curriculum, such as employability, and the underlying organising principles that operate in the curriculum-making process (Pountney and McPhail, 2017). The findings throw light on the knowledge structures and coding orientations of curriculum development knowledge itself, and what constitutes legitimate 'know how' as well as 'know that' in designing the curriculum in these contexts.

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