

**The specialisation of autonomy: epistemic insights  
operating in curriculum approval [Abstract only]**

POUNTNEY, Richard <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5672-0811>>

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**Dr. Richard Pountney**  
**Sheffield Hallam University, UK**  
[r.p.pountney@shu.ac.uk](mailto:r.p.pountney@shu.ac.uk)

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### **The specialisation of autonomy: epistemic insights operating in curriculum approval**

This paper reports a doctoral study of the processes involved in course development and approval in higher education (HE). It examines curriculum development as the activities and processes by which courses are designed, reviewed and updated on an ongoing basis, within institutional and national requirements in the United Kingdom (UK). 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 two case studies in order to illuminate the nature of teachers' experiences; the basis of curriculum development practice and its emergence; and how curriculum reproduction and change takes place. The first case study examines cross-institution curriculum sharing involving 12 academics across 10 UK HE institutions, comprising interviews, group discussions and documentary analysis. The second case study took place in one additional institution in two parts: the first part involved 17 academics involved in preparing 12 courses for approval, involving interviews and documentary analysis; the second part took place in the same institution with a further 10 staff responsible for approving these courses and involved interviews, documentary analysis and observations of approval events.

Drawing on social realism this study applies Bernstein's code theory and the pedagogic device to develop an external language of description for curriculum development knowledge. This analysis is differentiated using Maton's Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), and its autonomy dimension, to develop a language of description for positional (PA) and relational autonomy (RA) in course design and approval. I identify curriculum coherence in the literature as central to curriculum knowledge practices and I differentiate two orientations: coherence as evaluation; and coherence as heuristic modelling. It is within these practices at the system level that approaches to coherence are seen to diverge. Panels, committees and boards that have the authority to approve documents, such as course specifications, are seen to act as interpretive communities, activated through social processes, in which the goal is collective design. This operates as a form of consensus in which the approval event is formalised, made accessible by means of a social realist analysis, in which consensus is a process rather than an outcome. A socially real view of consensus as it operates in course approval, therefore, identifies a form of social integration, in which positions taken relative to others in the field, and the principles by which this occurs, is governed by the degree to which curriculum expertise, as the basis of curricular authority can be contested - its autonomy. This separation of authority from expertise extends the concept of positional autonomy to take into account positional relations with regard to both social status and the possession of specialised curriculum knowledge. Furthermore, relational autonomy is differentiated with regard to the identified purpose of the curriculum and the degree of consensus, enabling a conceptualisation of attitudinal relations. This 'positional-attitudinal' typology of curriculum development knowledge practices moves beyond simplistic notions of collegiality, and is made accessible by LCT and the elaboration of the autonomy dimension derived in this study. A theoretical development of the autonomy dimension therefore, is achieved when the autonomy dimension (the autonomic plane) is hybridised with the epistemic plane of the LCT specialisation dimension.

Using this specialisation of autonomy I can analytically differentiate the underlying principles of the two main forms of curricular coherence. I identify a particular kind of epistemic insight (doctrinal) to be operating in the legitimization of course content and structure that reflects a dominant form of curricular coherence that is in essence evaluative. This epistemic insight influences the planning of courses, the attitudes of teachers, and to maintain the status quo in course designs. The effects of this are seen to shape the autonomy of knowledge practices in the curriculum, and this autonomy is differentiated according to forms of authority, consensus, expertise and purpose.

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-what' in designing the curriculum in these contexts. It partly explains why the texts that teachers create for the institutional approval process are poor representations of their pedagogic intentions. Furthermore, these intentions are seen to be vulnerable to the external influences on the curriculum, such as employability, and the underlying organising principles that operate in the approval process. Importantly, this analysis makes visible an alternative (situational) insight that may be better able to realise new forms of the curriculum.