On knowledge and curriculum

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British educationalist Michael Young considers that there is a curriculum crisis within education.[1] Despite the current times being ubiquitously described as a 'knowledge age',[2] Young suggests this crisis actually concerns knowledge, in particular our lack of understanding of the affordances of different knowledge forms and the issue of student access to these different forms.

Young's recent arguments are of particular interest because of the key role he played in the major critiques of the curriculum in the 1970s.[3] Most interestingly, he now considers that the ideas developed at that time and subsequently have been unsuccessful in solving the key problem they identified – the persistent educational underachievement of certain groups in society. Nevertheless, the ideology critiques of that time revealed important truths for education, key amongst them the fact that a curriculum is socially constructed and not some form of immutable scripture. A curriculum cannot be ideologically 'neutral'. It can be complicit in the reproduction of inequality in the way it might represent or exclude matters of class, gender, sexuality, culture and ethnicity, for example.[4] The critiques of the 1970s and following went beyond the curriculum to question the very nature of knowledge itself. Much knowledge is now considered 'Western' rather than universal to all cultures – knowledge relativism. However, as Young now argues, an awareness of these issues, as significant as they are, only takes us so far towards knowing how to reshape the curriculum. If the current curricula are revealed to be classist, sexist and Eurocentric for example, then *what* are we to teach and who decides? Since these questions are very complex to confront head-on (it can lead down the dead-end path of epistemological relativism), we have become understandably distracted by focusing almost exclusively on pedagogy – the learner and learning – omitting the other key element in the equation – *what* is being learnt. This shift in focus to the learner and learning has occurred at the expense of continuing the development of our understanding of forms of knowledge, the effects and affordances of these forms, and *what* is most important to make accessible to students. This shift has created what Karl Maton terms 'knowledge blindness'.[5]

One example of the knowledge blind-spot is the New Zealand Curriculum. It does not specify a common core of knowledge that *all* the country's students have a right to access. Curricular content is a decision largely devolved to the local level, which is seemingly very democratic[6] as this encourages the curriculum to be developed around student interests and their pre-existing 'funds of knowledge'. But, as I will argue below, *what* we learn – particularly knowledge *structured in a particular way* – has a major effect on our development as thinkers. We need a national conversation about the type of knowledge that should be taught in schools.

A second key idea, that I will not have space to pursue here but is important to mention in passing, is that it is vital for discussions to be had about what common knowledge we want our schools to include as societies become increasingly diverse. The great sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) suggests that pluralist societies need a 'collective representation' – a common imaginary of their shared values – to bind them together. Education is the major societal institution for creating such collective representations. Increasing localisation and the knowledge blind-spot makes this task increasingly difficult, to the growing detriment of society in general.

Despite increasing concern being voiced by writers worldwide and in New Zealand about the importance of knowledge (see the 'Further reading' list below) an ethical alternative for curriculum development based on a sound *theory of knowledge* has yet to eventuate. The *dominant narrative* creating the blind-spot (learners, learning, and knowledge relativism) is difficult to dislodge. As with any blind-spot, it is difficult to see!

In the remaining sections of this short chapter I provide some further examples of the knowledge blind-spot and I suggest where we might begin with a *theory of knowledge* to act as a countermeasure to the knowledge blindness. It is very important to note at this point that the knowledge-led approach being argued for here is not a return to the past with didactic accumulation of 'knowledge as facts', but rather a reassertion the significance of academic knowledge as the fulcrum for what happens at school. Knowledge at school needs to emphasise the conceptual, while being put to use in active modes of learning; the integration of *knowing that* and *knowing how*.[7]

Blind-spots

An intriguing example of the knowledge blind-spot, somewhat ironically, is to be found in John Hattie's well-known and influential book *Visible Learning.* The emphasis in this book is clearly on pedagogy, and Hattie appears either to take knowledge as a given or assume its secondary significance when he states 'it is less the content of curricula that is important than the strategies teachers use to implement the curriculum so that students progress upwards through the curricula content'.[8] This seems quite an extraordinary statement given that progress in learning depends on increasing conceptual understanding enabled by the sequencing of specific concepts and content that students encounter through their teacher. Pedagogy becomes somewhat incidental or even 'empty' if the content of the curriculum is of little conceptual value or if its sequence is muddled or misunderstood.

A further example of the knowledge blind-spot is the language now used to talk about education. It reveals the pedagogy obsession mentioned above, and the absence of knowledge specificities, and even the absence of the teacher. Gert Biesta has analysed and written about this and has coined the term 'learnification' to describe it. He argues that the problem with this new discourse is that it distorts education's very essence: 'The point of education is never that children or students learn, but they learn *something*, that they learn this for particular purposes, and that they learn this from someone' (italics in original).[9]

Numerous other examples can be found of the knowledge blind-spot, not least the course descriptions of many teaching qualifications. The obsession with pedagogy at the expense of understanding the significance of knowledge itself can also be seen in the disestablishment of curriculum specialist advisors, both those within the Ministry of Education and those available to teachers. Generic pedagogical and culturally informed professional development is now considered sufficient to assist teachers at work.

In a more recent off-shoot of the learnification discourse called '21st Century Learning', the knowledge blind-spot is also visible. Knowledge is displaced by the new centrality of 'generic competencies' and the idea that it is more important to learn *how to learn* than to learn anything in particular (Biesta's learnification mentioned above). Knowledge (often confused with information) is seen as constantly changing so of little significance for the curriculum.[10] In Cynthia Scott's reviews of the 21st century education literature, the terms 'skills', 'information' and 'competencies' feature far more frequently than 'knowledge'.[11] In another UNESCO publication titled *Curriculum in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges, Tensions and Open Questions*, there is little mention of what knowledge a curriculum might contain beyond generic competencies.[12] In most of this literature we are left wondering through what knowledge content these new skills and competencies will be developed.

Towards a theory of knowledge for curriculum development

Young has argued that before we can theorise a curriculum, we need a theory of knowledge. In this final section I introduce two ideas that can assist us with beginning to realise that aim.

I have already alluded to the first idea above – *the differentiation between curriculum and pedagogy*. By thinking of these two aspects of schooling as having a different purpose we can begin to see more clearly the importance of each and how they should interact. The curriculum should indicate the disciplinary concepts, progression of concepts, and content that all children should have the right to encounter. Pedagogy, on the other hand, is about motivating and engaging students by how the knowledge is presented, including opportunities for students to 'make knowledge their own' through use and application. Teachers are not always subject specialists to a sufficient degree for deep curricular development and so may need to engage with specialist research. However, teachers are pedagogic experts with the key task of reshaping academic knowledge for engaging use in the classroom.

The second idea is called *knowledge differentiation*, and this concept can help us move beyond the idea that what is selected for curriculum inclusion will always need to be somebody's subjective or political decision. This argument suggests there are actually intrinsic dimensions in knowledge (structural dimensions) that give some knowledge more 'power' to explain the world than other sorts of knowledge. This can help us make the decision about what to teach in a reasonably objective way. Knowledge differentiation refers to the difference between two sorts of knowledge that exist in the world and that go under a variety of names such as 'formal' and 'informal'; 'academic' and 'everyday'.

While the dominant learnification discourse alluded to above has gradually weakened the boundaries and distinctions between these two types of knowledge, Young's argument now is that this is a mistake. The knowledge only schools can provide access to is knowledge that is *structured differently* from everyday knowledge, and that has *a different purpose* from general informally acquired sociocultural knowledge. We need to differentiate these knowledge types because it is this different structure of academic knowledge that provides unique cognitive affordances that informal knowledge does not. It is the 'epistemic structure' of academic knowledge, its structured coherence, that is pivotal for cognitive development.[13] Put simply, this type of knowledge is the means for us to learn to think abstractly; the key to educational success and the possibility to think beyond the confines of our own context and experience. We need to be sure the balance between sociocultural knowledge (making a school an inclusive, diverse and welcoming place) and academic knowledge does not dislodge the key purpose of the school: initiation into the realms of abstract thinking. We need to make sure there is a balance of each type of knowledge in the curriculum and that the different affordances of each are clear. Each type must be fit for purpose.

Conclusion

In contradiction to current educational orthodoxy, Young argues that 'curriculum theory must begin not from the learner but from the learner's entitlement to knowledge'.[14] This is a social justice concern. The curriculum needs to provide *access* to the historically evolved funds of knowledge that a society decides all its young people need access to. Coming to know and understand this 'academic' knowledge develops *the intellectual means* for the next generation to build on and modify that knowledge, and from that foundation, to create new knowledge. Populating a curriculum with everyday knowledge and experience will simply not provide that possibility. As argued above, it is the special inherent epistemic structure of academic knowledge that provides the means for students to learn how to objectify and critique their own circumstances.[15] This is the beginning of education's power for interruption and political change. Developing a theory of knowledge should enable us to think more critically about what it is we need to include in the curriculum. Questions about what to teach 'have no "once and for all" answers; societies change, so every generation has to ask those questions again - and they are not easy'.[16] But awareness of different types of knowledge, the varied affordances they offer, and of the differentiation between curriculum and pedagogy can assist us with the challenging process of deciding what knowledge we should focus on in school and how we should decide. As to the question of *who* decides, the authority comes from the knowledge itself, knowledge that is developed, recognised, tested and warranted in communities of scholarship and practice around the world. These are specialist communities and, in partnership with teachers and policy makers, they should lead the discussion about what should be taught in schools.

Further reading

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Young, M., & Lambert, D. (2014). *Knowledge and the future school: Curriculum and social justice*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.

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1. There are a number of definitions of 'curriculum' but for Young and for this discussion curriculum is taken to be a theoretically derived set of curricular principles elaborated through subject concepts and indicative content for teaching. Ideally a curriculum will be derived from a theory of knowledge and a theory of curriculum with indicative implications for pedagogy. In this way it is much more than a syllabus. See Young, M. (2013). Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: A knowledge-based approach. *Journal of Curriculum Studies,* 45(2), 101–118.

2. For example, 'knowledge-led economy', 'knowledge capitalism', 'global knowledge economy', 'knowledge society', 'catching the knowledge wave', etc.

3. The original 'movements' in educational studies in the 1970s were known as the New Sociology of Education (NSOE) in the United Kingdom and Critical Curriculum Studies (CCS) in the United States. Today we have critical studies, critical pedagogies, culturally responsive pedagogies, etc. Michael Young became influential as the editor of the NSOE-informed 1971 collection *Knowledge and control: New directions for the sociology of education*. London, UK: Collier-Macmillan. For notable examples of CCS scholarship, see Bowles, S., and Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America. New York, NY: Basic Books; Apple, M. W. (1979). Ideology and curriculum*. Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

4. Of course it is accepted that education can only do so much in countering the inequalities of wider society. See, for example, Snook, I., and O'Neill, J. (2010). *Social class and educational achievement: Beyond ideology. New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 45(2), 3–18.

5. Maton, K., and Moore, R. (Eds.) (2010). *Social realism, knowledge and the sociology of education: Coalitions of the mind.* London, UK: Continuum.

6. 'Choice' and 'relevance' are key concepts used to argue for devolution of curriculum to the local level. This is the 'free choice' ideology of neoliberalism.

7. Winch, C. (2017). *Teachers' know-how: A philosophical investigation*. Oxford, UK: John Wiley and Sons.

8. Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. New York, NY: Routledge, p. 159.

9. Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), p. 36.

10. Young (2013) draws our attention to the differentiation between concepts and content within a discipline or subject. He argues that concepts are relatively stable while concrete and material realisations of those concepts may be constantly evolving. A teacher may choose varied *content* to illustrate and elaborate central concepts.

11. Scott, C. L. (2015a). *The futures of learning 1: Why must learning content and methods change in the 21st century?* [ERF Working Papers Series, No. 13]. Retrieved from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002348/234807E.pdf; Scott, C. L. (2015b). *The futures of learning 2: What kind of learning for the 21st century?* [ERF Working Papers Series, No. 14]. Retrieved from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002429/242996e.pdf; Scott, C. L. (2015c). *The futures of learning 3: What kinds of pedagogies for the 21st century?* [ERF Working Papers Series, No. 15]. Retrieved from http://unesdoc. unesco.org/images/0024/002431/243126E.pdf

12. Amadio, M., Opertti, R., and Tedesco, J. C. (2014). *Curriculum in the twenty-first century: Challenges, tensions and open questions* [ERF Working Papers Series, No. 9]. Retrieved from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002294/229458E.pdf

13. Rata, E. (2016). A pedagogy of conceptual progression and the case for academic knowledge. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42(1), 168–184.

14. Young (2013), p. 101.

15. Rata, E. (2017a). Knowledge and teaching. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(5), 1003–1017; Rata, E. (2017b). Connecting knowledge to democracy. In B. Barrett, U. Hoadley, J. Morgan (Eds.), *Knowledge, curriculum and equity: Social realist perspectives* (pp. 19–32). London, UK: Routledge.

16. Young (2013), pp. 101–102.