

Can learning outcomes be divorced from processes of learning? Or why training packages make very bad curriculum

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Abstract

Training packages are based on the divorce of learning outcomes from processes of learning and curriculum. Policy insists that training packages are not curriculum, and that this 'frees' teachers to develop creative and innovative 'delivery strategies' that meet the needs of 'clients'. This paper argues that training packages deny students access to the theoretical knowledge that underpins vocational practice, and that they result in unitary and unproblematic conceptions of work because students are not provided with the means to participate in theoretical debates shaping their field of practice. Tying knowledge to specific workplace tasks and roles means that students are only provided with access to contextually specific applications of theoretical knowledge, and not the disciplinary framework in which it is embedded and which gives it meaning. The paper illustrates this argument by comparing the current Diploma of Community Services (Community Development) with a previous qualification that preceded training packages in the same field.

Introduction

This paper argues that competency-based vocational education and training qualifications in Australia deny students access to the theoretical knowledge that underpins vocational practice, and that they result in unitary and unproblematic conceptions of work because students are not provided with the means to participate in theoretical debates shaping their field. Competency-based training (CBT) is thus a form of 'silencing' because it excludes students from access to the means needed to envisage alternative futures within their field.

The first section of this paper draws on the work of Basil Bernstein, who was a key English sociologist of education from the 1970s till the end of the century, to distinguish between theoretical and everyday knowledge, and to argue for the centrality of theoretical knowledge in vocational qualifications. The second section considers whether training packages shape curriculum, in contrast to training package proponents who argue that they merely specify the outcomes of learning, leaving educational 'providers' free to develop curriculum that meets the needs of 'clients'. The final section illustrates the paper's argument by comparing the current Diploma of Community Services (Community Development) with the Associate Diploma of Social Sciences (Community Development) which was the qualification that existed in Victoria prior to the introduction of the Community Services Training Package.

A Bernsteinian framework

Individuals need to draw on increasingly complex knowledge as a consequence of changes to society, work and technology. Bernstein (2000) argued that fair access to theoretical knowledge was important for democracy because it is the means society uses to conduct its conversation about itself and about what it should be like. This is

why theoretical knowledge is socially powerful knowledge. Access to theoretical knowledge is also increasingly important in work. Young (2006: 115) argues that while all jobs require context-specific knowledge, “many jobs also require knowledge involving *theoretical* ideas shared by a community of specialists” located within the disciplines. Workers need to be able to use theoretical knowledge in different ways and in different contexts as their work grows in complexity and difficulty. This means that occupational progression is strongly related to educational progression, because education is the main way in which most people are provided with access to theoretical, disciplinary knowledge. It also means that all qualifications should provide students with the disciplinary knowledge they need to study at a higher level within their field in addition to immediate occupational outcomes. VET qualifications do not do this because of their current exclusive focus on workplace-specific outcomes.

Bernstein (2000) argued that theoretical knowledge differs from everyday knowledge because each is embedded in a different system of meaning. Theoretical knowledge is *general, principled* knowledge. It is organised as “specialised symbolic structures of explicit knowledge” in which the integration of knowledge occurs through the integration of *meanings* and not through relevance to specific contexts (Bernstein 2000: 160). Students need access to the disciplinary system of meaning as a condition for using knowledge in contextually specific applications. For example, students need access to mathematics as a condition for *understanding* and applying particular formulas, and if they are to use these formulas in different contexts. In contrast, everyday knowledge is *particularised* knowledge, because its selection and usefulness is determined by the extent to which it is relevant in a particular context (Gamble 2006). This is the tacit, context-dependent knowledge of the workplace. Bernstein (2000: 157) explains that everyday knowledge is “likely to be oral, local, context dependent and specific, tacit, multi-layered, and contradictory across but not within contexts.”

Theoretical knowledge organised through disciplinary frameworks is also strongly *classified* knowledge because the boundaries between it and everyday knowledge are clearly defined, and because each of the academic disciplines has a specialised language and strong boundaries that insulates it from other disciplines. In contrast, everyday knowledge is weakly classified because its contextual relevance is of primary importance. The way an academic discipline is structured has implications for the way in which it is translated for pedagogic transmission. Induction into a particular academic discipline requires induction into its system of meaning, which may have implications for the way knowledge is selected, sequenced, paced and evaluated. This is the ‘how’ of pedagogic practice, and Bernstein refers to this as the process of *framing*. The more hierarchical a body of knowledge (for example, physics) the more likely it is that pedagogy will need to be strongly sequenced because students need to understand what came before in order to understand what comes after (Muller 2006).

VET qualifications are more likely to be based on *applied* disciplinary knowledge compared to academic qualifications, because the applied disciplines consist of disciplinary knowledge that has been recontextualised for use in a vocational field of practice (Barnett 2006; Young 2006). VET qualifications also differ from academic qualifications because the purpose of academic qualifications is to induct students into

a body of knowledge, whereas the purpose of vocational qualifications is to induct students into a field of practice and the theoretical knowledge that underpins practice as the basis for integrating and synthesising each. Vocational curriculum shares this feature with curriculum for the professions, so there is continuity between vocational and professional education. While the purpose of academic and vocational/professional education is different, both academic and vocational teachers need to ensure that curriculum provides students with the capacity to *recognise* different types of knowledge so that they can, for example, distinguish between physics and chemistry or sociology and micro-economics. It is essential that these boundaries are rendered visible so that students can recognise and *use* knowledge appropriately.

Vocational curriculum consequently needs to ‘face both ways’ and provide students with access to both types of knowledge – to the theoretical knowledge that underpins vocational practice within a field, and to the tacit, context-dependent knowledge of the workplace. Trying to collapse the distinction between each type of knowledge does violence to both. It also means that the distinction between TAFE as an educational institution and the workplace as a site of learning is important. An exclusive focus on learning in the workplace denies students access to disciplinary systems of meaning, because, generally speaking, students have access only to contextually specific applications of theoretical knowledge in the workplace, and not to the system of meaning in which theoretical knowledge is embedded. This is because knowledge in the workplace is weakly classified and selected on the basis of its relevance. Similarly, an exclusive focus on learning theoretical knowledge in TAFE does not provide students with access to the tacit, context-dependent knowledge of the workplace. *Both* sites of learning are needed. The problem is that in Australia VET qualifications face only one way, to the workplace.

Do training packages constitute curriculum?

The introduction of training packages caused fierce debate within Australia, so much so that Schofield and McDonald (2004c) called for a ‘new settlement’ to underpin them in their high level review of training packages in 2004. Teachers have resisted training packages because of concerns that they downplay the importance of underpinning knowledge (Smith and Keating 2003: 169). In response to the argument that training packages strip underpinning knowledge, particularly disciplinary knowledge, from VET qualifications, supporters of training packages argue that qualifications and units of competency merely specify the outcomes of training and the criteria that are used to assess whether those outcomes have been achieved (Schofield and McDonald 2004c). This is because learning *outcomes* have been divorced from *processes* of learning, and this means that ‘providers’ and teachers are free to develop a curriculum approach that most suits their ‘clients’. The putative problem is that teachers and other stakeholders have interpreted training packages as curriculum when they are meant to be nothing of the sort. For example, Schofield and McDonald (2004b: 2) say that “Consistent with their outcomes-based orientation, Training Packages are silent on how teachers and trainers should or could design the curriculum to achieve these outcomes.” In theory, it should be possible to construct ‘subjects’ that draw various components from units of competency and recombine and reconstitute these around subjects, if it was thought appropriate to do so.

However, units of competency in training packages are specific. They include, among other things, elements of competency (that break down the unit of competency into demonstrable and assessable outcomes or actions), performance criteria that specify the required level of performance, required knowledge and skills, a range statement that describes the contexts and conditions in which the performance criteria apply, and evidence guides that describe the underpinning knowledge and skills that need to be demonstrated (assessed) to prove competence (DEST 2006: 117). The ‘rules’ surrounding training packages and units of competence are that while knowledge must be included, it should be in context, and should “only be included if it refers to knowledge actually applied at work” (DEST 2006: 114). Performance criteria include “the primary context and source of knowledge and the skills that need to be applied” (DEST 2006: 139). The *Training Package Development Handbook* (DEST 2006: 126) says that: “Performance criteria must be expressed precisely to enable appropriate training and assessment.” Furthermore:

“Units of competency that integrate knowledge into the overall performance specification of the unit and the assessment process advice *should fully include all relevant knowledge as it is applied in a work role*. This supports integrated training and assessment strategies in most cases. A training organisation may nonetheless determine that it is efficient and a supportable learning or assessment strategy to aggregate common knowledge topics from a number of related units.” (DEST 2006: 140, emphasis added)

This reveals the way knowledge is classified in training packages, and it is not on the basis of disciplinary knowledge. Knowledge is distinguished by the way in which it is applied *at work* and not by *systems of meaning*. While it is possible to aggregate common knowledge for the purposes of teaching, this is primarily as an efficiency measure and because it may be a “supportable learning or assessment strategy”, however, the primary source of knowledge (and skill) are the performance criteria. Knowledge is derived from workplace standards, not disciplinary systems of meaning.

This collapses the distinction between theoretical and everyday knowledge by delocating theoretical knowledge from the system of meaning in which it is embedded and tying it to specific contexts (Bernstein 2000). It results in weak classification of knowledge because the boundary between the theoretical and everyday is not visible, and weak framing because it does not distinguish contexts of learning by privileging workplace learning, or by stipulating the sequencing of knowledge. It translates knowledge from being general and principled knowledge to particularised knowledge, because its selection and usefulness is determined by the extent to which it is relevant in a particular context. Students thus have access to knowledge in its particularised form, but are not provided with the means to relate it to its general and principled structure and system of meaning.

Moreover, the funding and reporting requirements make it difficult for ‘providers’ to construct subjects or modules by drawing knowledge components from a range of units of competency. While training packages are national qualifications, they are administered by state governments, and some states still fund qualifications on the number of notional hours they think providers need to deliver specific units of competency (Smith and Keating 2003: 153). Funding is thus tied to specific units of

competency. VET providers must also report outcomes to government on the basis of units of competency. The funding and reporting requirements impose restrictions on institutions that mean that in most cases, institutions enrol students in units of competency and not subjects that have been created by drawing together knowledge components into a coherent framework.

Training packages shape curriculum because they stipulate the nature of assessment, and this means that there are limits on the what and how of *learning*, because, as Bernstein (2000: 36) explains “Content is transformed into evaluation. Context is transformed into transmission.” Bernstein explains that *evaluation* condenses the meaning of discourses shaping pedagogic practice, because the evaluative rules “regulate pedagogic practice at the classroom level, for they define the standards which must be reached” (Bernstein 2000: 115).

It is clear that training packages *do* shape teaching and learning, and that they constitute an important component of curriculum, because they specify *what* is to be taught and, in broad terms, *how* it should be assessed. The point of training packages was that they would reshape teaching and learning in VET so that it was more ‘industry responsive’. They were meant to change the what and how of learning. Schofield and McDonald (2004a: 2) say that training packages are more than industry-endorsed products that have replaced curriculum, because they encapsulate “the rules of the VET game” and ensure that VET delivers what industry wants. The end result is that students are enrolled in, taught within the framework of, and assessed on the basis of, units of competency. This is curriculum by any other name.

Community development diplomas before & after training packages

Table 1 shows the structure of the old associate diploma in community development prior to the introduction of training packages, and the training package diploma in community development. It only includes core modules and units and not electives. Both programs are normally two years duration. The associate diploma module titles indicate that it is based on applied disciplinary knowledge relevant to community development, but that it is strongly classified disciplinary knowledge nonetheless. Progression through the program was strongly sequenced. For example, students could not undertake Social Policy unless they had completed or were concurrently enrolled in Australian Society: A Sociological Introduction Parts 1 and 2 and Political Economy and Community Development Parts 1 and 2. The program incorporates ‘practice’ based requirements through the fieldwork components, but also through modules that integrate theory and practice such as Practical Strategies for Social Change, which came towards the end of the program and required students to participate in, analyse and theorise a social action campaign. Fieldwork tutorials preceded fieldwork practice, so the situated knowledge of the workplace was pedagogised for curriculum. The program ‘faced both ways’ to disciplinary knowledge and the field of practice through the subjects that faced towards theory and practice respectively and through the subjects that integrated both.

Table 1: Structure of the ‘new’ Diploma of Community Services (Community Development) & ‘old’ Associate Diploma of Social Sciences (Community Development)

‘New’ Diploma*	‘Old’ Associate Diploma**
Undertake systems advocacy	Introduction to Community Development
Implement a community development strategy	Australian Society: A Sociological Introduction Part 1
Develop and implement a community development strategy	Political Economy & Community Development 1
Develop and implement community programs	Introduction to Study and Community Development
Develop community resources	Group and Personal Communication 1
Support community action	Fieldwork Tutorial 1
Support community leadership	Human Rights and Advocacy
Develop, implement and promote effective communication techniques	Australian Society: A Sociological Introduction Part 2
Respond holistically to client issues	Political Economy & Community Development 2
Meet statutory and organisational information requirements	Information Access
Develop new networks	Fieldwork Placement
Work with other services	Organisations, Change and Community Development
Implement and monitor OHS policies and procedures for a workplace	Research 1
Undertake research activities	Group and Personal Communication 2
Develop and implement policy	Social Policy
Manage research activities	Fieldwork Placement
	Social Action – Analysis of Theory and Practice
	Research 2
	Fieldwork Tutorial 2
	Practical Strategies for Social Change
	Fieldwork Placement

* Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (2005a: Vol 2 of 4, pp. 123-124)

** Office of Further and Training Education Victoria (1997: A2 – A3)

In contrast, ‘spaces’ in the program structure in the training package diploma are defined and distinguished in curriculum through their relationship to work tasks or roles. Knowledge is weakly classified because it does not distinguish disciplinary fields and nor does it distinguish ‘everyday’ knowledge from theoretical knowledge. Students are enrolled in discrete units of competency; they do not enrol in disciplinary subjects (or modules), even subjects based on applied disciplinary knowledge. While students may be constrained in their unit choice and sequencing by way in which the provider chooses to offer them, there are no rules stipulating prerequisites or co-requisites.

Disciplinary knowledge is also weakly classified within units of competency. This is clear if we compare and contrast the unit of competency ‘Develop and Implement Policy’ in the training package Diploma (CSHISC 2005b: 591-596), with the module ‘Social Policy’ in the Associate Diploma (OFTE 1997: A-85 – A-88). The module descriptor for ‘Social Policy’ explains that it explores the “context, development and implementation of social policy in Australia”, which includes exploration of “debates surrounding the role of the welfare state and other areas of contention”. It also includes the way in which the “social, political and economic context impacts on social policy formulation, implementation and evaluation” as the basis for

“understanding of contextual factors” which then become “the basis for conducting policy analysis as an instrument for empowerment and social change”. The Summary of content includes the following topics:

- The State
- The Welfare State
- Definitions of social welfare
- Models of social policy
- Current social policy debates
- Implementation/evaluation issues
- Community Development Issues.

The assessment requires students to, among other things, “analyse underlying assumptions, values and theory of policy formulation”. Students must analyse economic, social and political factors that influence policy development and evaluate “current debates on social policy within a community development context”. Students are provided with access to general, principled knowledge as a means of understanding the particular, and they are invited to participate in ‘society’s conversation’ by participating in debates within their field of practice. These debates involve competing understandings of society and the state, and competing conceptions about human rights (including social rights) and citizenship, particularly when the Social Policy module is considered relationally to other modules in the program such as Human Rights and Advocacy, and the modules in sociology and political economy.

In contrast, the unit descriptor for ‘Develop and implement policy’ states that it is about “Developing and applying policy initiatives in the workplace.” There are four elements of competency, which are:

1. Research and consult with others to develop policies
2. Test draft policies
3. Develop policy materials
4. Implement and review policies

There are 17 performance criteria related to the elements of competency. The essential knowledge that must be assessed through the performance criteria is as follows:

- Principles and practices of policy development
- Relevant policy at national and state level
- Key stakeholders at local, national and state level
- Organisational consultation processes
- Evaluation and review processes
- Organisational business and corporate plans and philosophy
- Funding bodies and their requirements

The ‘essential skills’ that must be demonstrated are:

- Documentation and report writing
- Policy development
- Research and consultation
- Promotion

The essential knowledge and skills show that students are introduced to conceptual and theoretical language (for example, “Principles and practices of policy development”) but that such language is delocated from the system of meaning or from the theoretical, relational shaping of the concepts. “Principles and practices of policy development” is so ambiguous that it could be interpreted in many ways, including ignoring the way such issues are explored in the theoretical literature that shape policy studies. This can give the impression that the principles and practices of policy development have been settled, rather than subject to contest and debate because different understandings of society and citizenship are invoked. It may well be that teachers interpret this essential knowledge as requiring induction into the field of social policy and its debates, but that this interpretation *will* be used cannot be assured as it is widely open to interpretation. The notion that units of competency can be interpreted in unproblematic and uniform ways resulting in commensurable outcomes wherever the program is delivered is clearly not supported. Learning *processes* cannot be distinguished from learning *outcomes*.

There is no differentiation between the *level* and *type* of knowledge that is required in ‘Develop and implement policy’. Broad principles and theories (where they can be identified) are not distinguished from applied concepts (such as ‘Evaluation and review processes’); or from contextualised knowledge (such as “Key stakeholders at local, national and state level” and “Funding bodies and their requirements”); or from situated knowledge (such as “Organisational consultation processes”). Indeed, “Organisational consultation processes” could be interpreted as requiring access to social policy concepts and theories around organisations, or it could be interpreted as knowing how one’s own organisation does things, because that is the way they are done.

The focus in the elements of competency is on *procedural* tasks. Students are not required to evaluate and analyse as part of the elements of competency, and the elements of competency and performance criteria are tied to the specific. For example, the performance criteria associated with the first element of competency “Research and consult with others to develop policies” requires:

- 1.1 Existing organisational, government and other policies relevant to the issue are evaluated to determine their currency and relevance for the organisation and its clients
- 1.2 Appropriate research and consultation which will contribute to policy development is undertaken and documented in accordance with organisational policies and procedures
- 1.3 Relevant stakeholders are consulted throughout the policy development process to ensure relevance and acceptance of the product
- 1.4 Appropriate mechanisms are provided to facilitate open constructive discussion about policy issues and their possible resolution
- 1.5 Policies are developed which reflect the culture, values and objectives of the organisation
- 1.6 Resourcing implications of implementation and review mechanisms are included in policies

The range statement says that “Appropriate research may include”:

- State, national or local level
- Written or oral sources of information

The complexity of policy research is absent, as are the ‘recognition rules’ students need to distinguish between and evaluate formal and informal approaches to research, and between different kinds of information. This absence is not remedied by the compulsory unit “Manage research activities” (CSHISC 2005b: pp. 591 - 596). The elements of competency and performance criteria in this unit of competency are similarly tied to the specific, and the most conceptual statement is one performance criterion, which requires that “Issues related to ethics, validity and reliability are incorporated in research designs”. This does not provide students with access to the debates around research and research paradigms. This is an important absence, because debates about research paradigms are part of broader debates within social science about the nature of society and individuals, and this is one reason why research is so contested in these disciplines.

The titles of the units in the diploma are presented as neutral or uncontested descriptions of workplace tasks or roles. However, *within* units of competency, individuals and groups are described as clients or consumers. For example, the elements of competency within the unit “Undertake systems advocacy” are as follows:

- 1 Obtain, analyse and document information relevant to the needs of clients as a community of interest within the general community
- 2 Work with consumers, service users, services and other stakeholders to develop strategies to address identified needs
- 3 Advocate for and facilitate the implementation of strategies developed to address the needs of clients with specific needs (CSHISC 2005b: 91)

The key debates within community development surrounding the nature of social change, power relations and the human actor are absent. The essential knowledge in this unit of competency includes the requirement that students demonstrate knowledge about the “Structural, political and other social factors which operate to maintain discrimination against clients, consumers and service users”. Students are required to demonstrate knowledge of issues that are relevant to client groups, how these are contextualised by policy, an understanding of the balance between the rights of the community and clients, as well as specific knowledge to do with legislation, policy and stakeholders (CSHISC 2005b: 94). However, none of this is framed in terms of *debates* around these issues, and the fact that individuals are designated as clients, consumers and service users demonstrates that the human actor is defined through a consumer (i.e., market) relation, and that the underpinning philosophy is human capital theory. The range statement lists the strategies that students may be expected to implement in a community development context and this list includes public meetings but it does not include demonstrations or protests, strategies that are permissible within a pluralist theoretical framework, let alone more radical perspectives.

Students are excluded from controversies and debates through the designation of ‘spaces’ in the structure of the training package diploma as unproblematic descriptions of workplace tasks or roles, when they are part of the contests that shape the community development field. Similarly, the insistence on ‘clients’ within units of competency is presented as an unproblematic description of the relationship between community development workers and those with whom they work, yet the conceptual

basis of this relationship as a market relation between consumers and service providers (and hence the diploma) is not made explicit. The conceptual basis is taken-for-granted and rendered invisible as a consequence. This constitutes a process of silencing, with the consequence that students are denied “access to the forms of knowledge that permit alternative possibilities to be thought” (Beck and Young 2005: 193).

Community development students need access to competing accounts of the human actor and their relationship to society and the way these shape practice (often implicitly and tacitly) as a precondition for developing a critical approach to practice in their field. They do not need to be, and cannot be, philosophers or sociologists, because the purpose of their program is to prepare them for a field of practice, but they do need access to the applied disciplinary knowledge drawn from these disciplines as the basis of practice in their field if they are to participate in shaping their field. The content and the structure of the Diploma of Community Services (Community Development) reinforce each other to result in students’ exclusion from key debates in their field.

Conclusion

The basis of VET qualifications is that units of competency must be based on workplace tasks or roles. Knowledge is tied to workplace tasks and roles, and only included in units of competency if actually applied at work. This collapses the distinction between theoretical and everyday knowledge through privileging the everyday. It delocates theoretical knowledge from the system of meaning in which it is embedded and transforms it from general, principled knowledge to particularised knowledge. It results in knowledge that is weakly classified and framed between units of competency in the way ‘spaces’ are defined and insulated from each other, and within units of competency through the specification of underpinning knowledge which does not distinguish between abstract, applied, contextual and situated knowledge.

The weak classification and framing of knowledge means that students are not provided with the means to recognise and distinguish knowledge and its boundaries. They are not provided with the means for distinguishing between theoretical and everyday knowledge. Students are not introduced to a disciplinary style of reasoning that they can then use to consider the theoretical basis of their practice. They are not able to participate in debates shaping their field and this results in unitary and unproblematic conceptions of work because work cannot be problematised. They are also denied access to knowledge they can use in other contexts, including as the basis for their participation in society’s conversation more broadly.

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