

# Knowledge for VET researchers

## Categorising a social construction

A problematical relationship exists between human experience and the formation and legitimacy of empirical, discursive knowledge bases, as subjectivity underlies the inherent social construction of most knowledge (Russell 1948). Codified knowledge is just an abstraction from social practice, replacing social myths and narratives as a process of social ordering, and promoting specific ideologies as form of codified cultural DNA. From a Foucaultian perspective, the obsession with 'reason' has generated 'disciplinary' knowledge to mediate and order social actors and events (Fledman 1997).

Alexander et al (1991) tabulates over 30 categories of knowledge 'substances', such as practical and theoretical knowledge, that are often the subject of warring dualisms. Stevenson (1998) attempts to categorise knowledge (declarative, procedural or conditional), and reduce knowing to some basis of objective bodies, rather than an active process, a focus on substance not on the action (Billett 2000/1, p. 55). Kerwin (1993) suggests that the pre-occupation with categorising knowledge outcomes, limits the emphasis on exploring ignorance, and fails to emphasise the diverse processes of knowing (Sparrow 1998). Knowledge is something we think and do, not just action, but new meaning formed through 'social' action (Blacker 1995).

Barratt (2000) admits that knowledge is a 'slippery customer' within workplace space in terms of use, generation and validation, while at least codified propositional knowledge was visibly open to debate. Seddon (2001/b) suggests that in terms of organisational and working knowledge, knowledge like labour is a 'fictitious commodity' difficult to pin down as it flows through networks and orders social practice in diverse forms, tacit, 'stickily' located in context, or codified (Jessop 2000, p 65). However, the demise of meta-narratives, privileges the workplace and actor interactions as 'knowing locations' (Law 1998). In such locations local discursive understanding and agency may displace de-contextualised codified knowledge inputs, with 'knowing in a place' as a socially constructed phenomenon (Greene 1993; Fledman 1997).

The FMI framework presents a declarative codified representation of managing. However, 'knowing managing' is likely to be a continuous locally mediated performance, strongly mediated by the legitimacy that management places on processes, as opposed to textual regulation through codification and categorisation.

## Knowledge as process

Traditional epistemological concepts of stability and exclusivity are being replaced in many cases with concepts of transience and inclusivity that underpin the *socially* constructed nature of knowledge (Mayher 1990). Knowing is simply 'belief' arising from virtuous intellectual acts (Zagzebski 1997). As Mayher (1990, p. 79) indicates, "there is no knowledge without a knower", knowledge or knowing is a social product,

an assumption about the way the world works, guiding individual performance, or as a negotiated reality where 'causal assumptions are shared with others' (Sanchez 1996).

Perhaps Nuthall (1999) points us in the right direction by indicating that 'knowledge is as much a process as a substance'. Knowledge only becomes a commodity when it is inscribed, codified and distributed (Lyotard 1984, p. 4). It is the social performances and organisational interactions that legitimise perceptions about causal relationships that are at the heart knowledge creation (Nuthall 1999). However if knowledge is a belief about causal relationships in the environment based on perception, then 'it' must be tied to locations and situations, located in a place and at a time (Mulcahy 2000). Previously viewed as a permanent and exclusive product, knowledge is now seen more as a continual series of transient assumptions about relationships in our environment. Like power, knowledge is a relational quality of process and not an entity. Knowledge is a located societal enactment, where 'knowing is a relational moment or an effect, not a substance' (Law 2000). Knowing, and therefore being is not acquisitional but processual, a practice not a thing. This is a performative view of knowledge and positions knowing, and therefore FMI 'knowing about managing', within practice, at locations and at the time of enactment (Mulcahy 2000/1).