Knowledge, Policy and Practice in Education and the Struggle for Social Justice

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Chapter 15
Quality, Impact and Knowledge Traditions in the Study of Education

John Furlong

Introduction

I first met Geoff Whitty in 1973 or 1974. At that time I was studying for my PhD at the City University in London, but because its Faculty of Social Sciences was new, it had virtually no books in its library on either sociology or education. What I soon discovered was that if I was quiet and studious and did not actually ask to borrow any books, I could sneak into the University of London Institute of Education (IOE) library and work there undiscovered – I did so every day for more than a year! And it was here, in the IOE library, that I first met Geoff. At that time he was a student at the IOE and was often to be found mooching around the library in the late afternoons. We soon noticed that we had a common interest in the same books and so struck up a friendship; a library coffee shop kind of friendship where we chatted, rather formally at first, about our research and about what we were reading.

The 1970s was the time of the ‘paradigm wars’ in education and Geoff and I found ourselves on different sides of the divide. At that time he was a Marxist and I was a symbolic interactionist, although even then, each of us was curious and appreciative of the other’s point of view. I think it was because of this appreciation of our differences that eventually Geoff and I became such good friends and colleagues and remained so for the next 45 years, working together on a number of projects. My strength was always in analysing the fine grain of empirical evidence; Geoff’s was in providing the bigger picture. The longest project we worked on (nearly 10 years) was the MOTE project (‘Modes
of Teacher Education”), which examined the changing face of initial teacher education in England and Wales as it responded to the hostile challenges of the Thatcher and Major governments (Furlong et al. 2000). But the stimulus for this paper is our much more recent work together on what we called ‘knowledge traditions’ in the study of education. It was to be Geoff’s last major project.

Our research came about as a result of comments made to me by Geoff on the book I published in 2013 entitled Education: An Anatomy of the Discipline (Furlong 2013). It was an ambitious book, trying to examine the university-based study of education across the UK as a whole: its history; its current formation (institutional locations, courses offered, research topics addressed, methodologies used, etc.); and the reasons the discipline was shaped in the way that it was. The fourth and final section of the book was intended to be a kind of manifesto, setting out what I thought universities should contribute to the study of education in the future. At the 2012 British Educational Research Association conference, Geoff gave a paper in which he welcomed the book, even saying he wished he had written it himself, but then going on to roundly criticize it because it focused only on the UK. How do we know, he asked, if the university-based study of education is the same in other countries?

I could see his point, and so in 2015 we began working on a new project together funded by the British Academy in which we examined different ways in which education, as a field of study, is conceptualized in a range of different jurisdictions around the world. Our edited book, Knowledge and the Study of Education: An International Exploration (Whitty and Furlong 2017), includes evidence from seven countries: the UK, France, Germany, Latvia, China, Australia and the USA. Our extended introductory chapter (Furlong and Whitty 2017) draws on those international case studies to develop a synthesis of different ‘knowledge traditions’ in the study of education; knowledge traditions that we found in most of the countries we examined. What our review firmly shows is that rather than being a single discipline, or even a coherent field of study, education is made up of a range of different intellectual traditions, each with its own distinctive epistemological assumptions and methodological predilections and each with its own distinctive relationship to the world of practice. In all of the countries we surveyed, research-based knowledge is riding high at the moment in terms of its knowledge claims, particularly when those claims are based on what we call the ‘New Science of Education’ – a movement that we observed in all seven countries we examined. What our survey also reminds us of is that there
is a rich array of different research-based traditions in education and that there are a number of other rational knowledge traditions that are not, or not primarily, based on research at all.

But what does all of this diversity mean for our understanding of quality and impact in the study of education? Concerns about the quality of educational research are long-standing in this country and internationally as Geoff was himself well aware (Whitty 2006), and there is now an equally strong focus on ‘impact’ – stimulated in part by the demands of research assessment systems (Whitty 2016). But if there are different knowledge traditions, based on different epistemological assumptions and if those different traditions have different relationships to the world of practice, then surely we need equally diverse notions of both quality and impact as well. Should we expect all research-based knowledge and all other forms of knowledge in education to conform to the same quality criteria? As I will argue below, this would seem to be the suggestion of Bernstein and his contemporary followers (Hordern 2017; Maton 2014; Young and Muller 2014; Bernstein 1999, 2000) who insist that academic rigour – methodological and theoretical robustness – is the only route to ‘powerful’ knowledge. Our work would suggest that discussions of quality and impact need to be somewhat more nuanced than that.

The aim of this chapter is therefore to explore these questions by drawing on and extending my earlier work with Alis Oancea on quality in applied and practice-based research (Oancea and Furlong 2007; Furlong and Oancea 2006). That work, which was widely influential at the time, considered the very different conceptions of quality implicit in some ‘practice-based’ traditions such as ‘Action Research’, when compared with traditional academic approaches, such as in the foundation disciplines. With the wider range of different traditions identified in my more recent work with Geoff Whitty, this chapter will seek to present a more inclusive discussion of both quality and impact in the study of education.

Knowledge traditions in the study of education

But what are knowledge traditions? In our analysis, Geoff Whitty and I took a broad and inclusive view of education as a field, seeing it as made up of a collection of different traditions each of which has its own distinctive conception of educational knowledge. Traditionally, disciplines are discussed from an epistemological point of view where debate focuses on questions such as the nature of knowledge, on research methods and on protocols for the establishment of ‘truth’. While epistemological
questions are important, we also recognized that knowledge traditions have a sociological dimension. They are expressed in institutional arrangements (types of institutions, qualifications, lectureships and professorships), in national regulatory frameworks (teacher standards, research assessment frameworks) and in networks (learned societies and journals). Moreover, they change over time as they are challenged, debated and defended. Knowledge traditions therefore have a political life – they are social projects.

In addressing the epistemological dimensions of different knowledge traditions we argued that, following Durkheim, it is helpful to distinguish between those that that are ‘sacred’ (developed and circulated distant from the world of practice) from those that are ‘profane’ (developed and circulated close to education as a field of practice). This is a distinction that Bernstein (1999) also recognizes, characterizing it as the difference between vertical and horizontal discourses. As Hordern (2017), a contributor to our book, argued, for Bernstein vertical discourses are ‘specialized symbolic structures’ that are ‘systemically principled’; they are based on context-independent knowledge and conserved through intricate social formations (such as academic communities) that enable abstract conceptualization, conjecture and hypothesis-building, taking the thinker beyond their immediate experience. By contrast, horizontal discourse is ‘local, context-dependent’, ‘everyday’ and ‘common sense’ knowledge. That is not to suggest that it is not sometimes ‘inflected’ with elements of academic knowledge – ideas that are borrowed, translated, applied; nevertheless, horizontal discourse, for Bernstein, is always ‘contextually specific’, ‘consumed by that context’ and circulated and exchanged through fluid and unsystematic social processes (Hordern 2017).

Drawing on examples from around the world, we therefore proposed that it is possible to identify three broad clusters of knowledge traditions in the study of education. The first cluster brings together those knowledge traditions that foreground academic knowledge; these traditions are often (though not always) distant from the knowledge that circulates in education as a field of practice. A second cluster brings together those traditions that are based primarily in the world of practice, even though they sometimes draw, unreflectively, on disparate elements of academic knowledge. A final cluster includes those traditions that explicitly attempt to bring these very different forms of knowledge (academic and practical) into some kind of relationship with each other. The different examples we discussed in our paper are set out in Table 15.1.
Table 15.1: Knowledge traditions in the study of education

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Source: Furlong and Whitty (2017: 20)

In the sections below, I only have space to provide a brief summary of some of the main characteristics of the different knowledge traditions we discuss in our book.

**Academic knowledge traditions**

In looking at academic knowledge traditions, we again drew on the work of Bernstein to examine what he calls ‘singulars’. As Hordern (2017) explains, these are academic disciplines that have a specialized discrete discourse with their own intellectual field of texts, practices, rules of entry (e.g. physics, maths, psychology) and where there is agreement among the research community on key epistemological questions such as the nature of knowledge, the nature of proof, methodologies, etc. Hordern argues knowledge of this sort is also likely to be strongly distanced from everyday knowledge in the field of practice such as education. Our first example of a singular tradition in education is the ‘Disciplines of Education’ tradition or what the French call ‘Sciences de l’Éducation’. Examples here are of the sociology, psychology or history of education. Epistemological assumptions and methodological strategies are taken from parent disciplines (sociology, philosophy, etc.), and perhaps most important of all, the questions that are to be investigated...
are ‘framed’ by those parent disciplines; they are questions that would be recognized by those working in mainstream sociology or philosophy or whatever. The strength of the approach is what Bridges (2006) characterized as ‘the discipline of the disciplines’ – agreement within a particular community as to what counts as rigorous methodological and theoretical work – and the fact that these agreements allow for the development of cumulative knowledge. The weakness is that because of the fundamentally different theoretical and methodological assumptions made in each tradition, the approach is always, and at best, multidisciplinary not interdisciplinary. It also results in knowledge that is specialist and expert, often distant from the world of educational practice.

Our second example of a singular in education is the traditional conception of educational theory that was, until relatively recently, dominant in Germany (see Schriewer 2017). The approach is distinctive in a number of key respects. In contrast to the Disciplines of Education, the German tradition ‘does not start from “other” disciplines and their perspectives on education, but is depicted as a field in its own right’ (Biesta 2011: 184). The analysis starts and ends with processes that are distinctly educational with core concepts such as ‘Bildung’, ‘Didactiks’, ‘Erziehung’ and ‘Pädagogik’. Perhaps even more importantly, traditional German Educational Theory has not been concerned with influencing the world of practice in a direct way; its concerns historically have been primarily philosophical and ultimately moral with most researchers focusing on what Stokes (1997) would characterize as ‘pure basic research’.

German Educational Theory and the Disciplines of Education are both good examples of ‘singulars’ in Bernstein’s terms; there is strong agreement among the research community on key epistemological questions such as the nature of knowledge, the nature of proof, rigorous methodologies, and so forth. As such they are different from what Bernstein calls ‘Regions’ – these are academic traditions where a number of different singulars are held together by their interest in a common field of practice such as medicine or engineering or indeed education. As knowledge traditions they ‘face both ways’, towards the intellectual fields that make up the discipline and towards the field of practice (see Hordern 2017).

In our analysis we describe two different knowledge traditions that function as ‘regions’. The first and by far the largest research tradition in education is what we call ‘Applied Educational Research’. The approach is highly eclectic theoretically and methodologically, united by a concern
with educationally defined topics such as early years, teacher education or comparative and international education. The strength of the approach is that research questions are taken from the world of practice; there is therefore a far greater chance of the resulting knowledge being directly applicable. The weakness of the approach is that because there is little epistemological agreement among different researchers on either methodologies and theories, the academic quality of research is immensely variable; that lack of agreement also means that the knowledge produced is far less likely to be cumulative.

Our second example of a ‘region’ has emerged, or more correctly re-emerged, in recent years, partly in response to the perceived lack of rigour in the Applied Educational Research tradition. It is what we call the New Science of Education. It is an approach that is increasingly powerful in many countries around the world, promising as it does significant improvements in educational outcomes by finding out ‘what works’ through the application of ‘rigorous research’ – typically defined as randomized control trials (RCTs) and/or systematic reviews. The strength of this knowledge tradition is indeed its methodological rigour, though as Paine (2017) argues, it brings with it a reductive conceptualization of complex educational processes. But its principal weakness is that despite its general orientation to the world of practice, its methods are highly technical in nature and necessarily result in forms of knowledge that are significantly distant from the forms of knowledge that circulate in education as a field of practice. Although its aspiration is to guide practice, this tradition’s way of doing that can sometimes seem to provide expert technical knowledge that reduces the scope for professional judgement and thereby turns teachers into technical functionaries.

Practical knowledge traditions

The language used by Basil Bernstein in his discussion of knowledge traditions is far from neutral. As we have already noted, academic discourse, whether it takes the form of a singular or a region is seen as ‘sacred’; it is a discourse that is principled, that enables abstract conceptualization, hypothesis-building, ‘taking the thinker beyond their immediate experience’. By contrast, the discourse that all of us inhabit in our everyday educational practice is characterized as ‘profane’; it is personalized, localized and always contextually framed. It is ‘sacred’ knowledge that is the most appropriate for the analysis of complex issues
such as education. However, this characterization overlooks the fact that there is an important cluster of knowledge traditions in education that are closely linked to the world of practice – knowledge traditions that have a deep history and are perhaps of growing significance today. These include, ‘Competences and Standards’, the ‘Normal College Tradition’, ‘Liberal Education + Craft Knowledge’ and ‘Networked Professional Knowledge’. Given the limitations of space in this summary, I will touch on only two of these traditions.

The first is the ‘Normal College Tradition’ of teacher education, which has a 300-year history in Europe; it was and remains widely influential in China and to a lesser degree in France even today. As Hayhoe and Li (2010) make clear, the term ‘normal’ in English can only be properly understood with reference to its French roots, where it means ‘setting a moral standard or pattern’. However, this normative emphasis was only one of a range of ways in which the Normal School and later the Normal College was different from the traditional university. Whereas traditional universities have a strong emphasis on value-neutral, specialized disciplines of knowledge, the Normal College Tradition is more morally directed and focused on integrated learning areas. The tradition also has an explicit emphasis on personal nurturing of the student in contrast to the more impersonal environment of the university. And perhaps most importantly of all, rather than focusing on a deep level of understanding and long-term change, the Normal College Tradition focuses on a craft conception of knowledge, on action-oriented field-based knowledge and on the development of high standards of practice. We argue that many of these craft-based assumptions live on, in subtle ways, in the day-to-day practice of some contemporary universities, especially those that have grown out of older teacher education institutions.

Another example of a much more recent practical knowledge tradition is what we call ‘Networked Professional Knowledge’. The intellectual history of this model of knowledge production originates in the work of Gibbons et al. (1994) and what they called the ‘new production of knowledge’ (see also Nowotny et al. 2003; Delanty 2001). Gibbons et al. distinguish between what they call Mode 1 knowledge production, where problems are set and solved in a context largely governed by the academic community, and Mode 2 knowledge, which is generated in the context of application. As such, Mode 2 knowledge, they argue, is more socially accountable and reflexive, more context-specific, more frequently located within individuals themselves and their particular working context than in scientific journals.
Over the last 20 years, authors such as David Hargreaves (1999) and Michael Fullan (2005) have led the proselytization of this approach to knowledge production in education. Instead of waiting for externally produced answers they argue that schools need to take ownership of problems and innovation, seeing solutions as available from within the school system. And they need to collaborate in order to do this. In England, it is hard to overestimate the significance of this new approach to the production of educational knowledge; it forms the background assumption to a host of substantive educational policies – from the development of academies and multi-academy trusts to the development of ‘school-led’ initial teacher education. In all of these innovations it is assumed that networks of schools will increasingly work together, developing a knowledge base for problem-solving and innovation that is more directly relevant to their own situation than that provided by traditional knowledge hierarchies of university-based research and scholarship.

Integrated knowledge traditions

So far we have examined knowledge traditions that are either primarily academic or primarily practical in their genesis, although as we have also noted, in practice the distinctions between these knowledge traditions are far from straightforward. There are, however, some knowledge traditions where academic and practical knowledge are not conceptualized separately; rather, they are both seen as central to the process of knowledge production itself. These we call ‘integrated knowledge traditions’ and they form the final cluster we examined. Again, given the limitations of space, I will consider only two of the four examples we gave in our original paper.

The first example of an integrated tradition is Action Research or what is sometimes called ‘Practitioner Enquiry’ (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2009; Groundwater-Smith and Sachs 2002). The approach is strongly normative in that it takes as its starting point the need to challenge the distinctions between the researcher and the researched. Because the ultimate aim is to improve practice in some way, the context under study is continuously evaluated, and practice, as well as the research design, is constantly modified as the project moves forward. In short, therefore, Action Research is different from other traditions in that it is constituted first and foremost through a particular set of practices. It is those practices that, in turn, have important implications for the forms
of knowledge that are generated – primarily for practitioners themselves. The strength of the approach is that it is a genuinely integrated one. It develops forms of knowledge that are indeed based on systematic enquiry and are often, though not always, informed by theory. At the same time, the knowledge produced is close to the world of practice. It also has a significant potentiality for the capacity development of practitioners who engage in this type of enquiry. However, its weaknesses stem from the very fact that it is practitioners who lead the process: it is they personally, rather than some established epistemic community, who select theories and methods; it is they, rather than other researchers, who evaluate the adequacy of the findings for illuminating their own professional concerns. As a result, Action Research is often less than rigorous in academic terms. And because it is so contextually specific, the knowledge produced is also seldom cumulative.

Our final example of an integrated tradition, ‘Learning Sciences’, is relatively new (ISLS 2009) having emerged only in the 1990s, though it can perhaps best be understood as a development of the New Science of Education tradition described earlier. As an approach it is strongly interdisciplinary, bringing together researchers from a range of different fields including education, computer and information science, cognitive science and psychology, artificial intelligence, linguistics, sociology and anthropology. Learning Science’s most distinguishing feature is that it is a ‘design science’ in ways that make it similar to engineering and computer science. It insists on an engagement with the real world, with empirical investigations of learning as it occurs in wide a variety of settings. The explicit aim of those investigations is to improve learning outcomes by the use of a ‘design-based research methodology’ where interventions are conceptualized, implemented, observed and then revised. In some ways this cycle of development – trial, observation and revision – has something in common with Action Research or Practitioner Enquiry. Where Learning Sciences differs, however, is both in its explicit commitment to draw on particular disciplinary perspectives and in its commitment to ‘rigorous’ research methods. In ways that are similar to the New Science of Education, the research methods used are predominantly statistically based, with a particular emphasis on RCTs. Where it differs from the New Science of Education is that research in this tradition is strongly theoretically framed; the explicit intention is to contribute to both theory and to practice (ISLS 2009).
Quality and impact in educational research

These then are some of the main knowledge traditions we observed in our survey of the study of education in seven countries. Though sometimes organized differently, based in different types of institutions, most of them were observable to some degree in each of the countries we studied (the only real exception was German Educational Theory). But if the field of education is so diverse in its knowledge traditions, how can we really understand quality; and given its importance in contemporary research policy debates, how can we understand impact? In considering these questions, I return to the aforementioned research that I conducted in collaboration with Alis Oancea (Oancea and Furlong 2007; Furlong and Oancea 2006).

The background to this particular project was concern, following the UK’s 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), that insufficient attention had been paid to recognizing the value of ‘applied and practice-based research’; there was a widespread feeling that debates about quality had been almost entirely conceptualized in terms of conventional academic protocols. This was a particular concern for those in the education community, though the implications were far wider and recognized in disciplines as diverse as social work and engineering.

Partly as a result of such criticisms, the 2008 RAE made a specific commitment to ensuring any researcher, including those engaged in applied and practice-based research, should be able to submit their work for review if they considered it to have achieved ‘due standards of excellence’. RAE subject panels were therefore urged to: ‘define appropriate criteria for identifying excellence in different forms of research endeavour, while attaching no greater weight to one form over another; and . . . to make provision to recognize the diversity of evidence for excellent research’ (UK Funding Bodies 2005: para 16). But of course, as previous RAE exercises had demonstrated, simply having the aspiration to ensure ‘parity of esteem’ for all forms of research did not mean that it would happen in practice. At that time there was little current agreement as to what applied and practice-based research actually was let alone any agreement as to how to define its quality.

In order to help prepare the research community for the forthcoming RAE, in the spring of 2004 the UK Economic and Social Research Council commissioned myself and Alis Oancea to undertake a short project to bring some conceptual clarity to different approaches to applied and
practice-based research with a view to developing appropriate quality criteria for the academic, policy and user communities.

The outcome of the project was the development of two key papers that explored the ‘expressions of excellence’ of different models of research including applied and practice-based research. The papers were widely influential, being taken up directly by the 2008 UK RAE education panel, and taken into account by every other UK subject panel as well (UK Funding Bodies 2005). They were also influential in helping to reframe research assessment debates in a number of other countries, most particularly Canada and New Zealand (PBRF 2009; SSHRC 2008).

Expressions of excellence

What our research revealed was that quality in applied and practice-based research was peculiarly difficult to pin down precisely because of researchers’ insistence on mixing different forms of knowledge; mixing their theoretical claims and concerns with practical ones. As a result, though in principle it might be possible to judge applied and practice-based research from a purely methodological perspective, this left out the most interesting part of the problem – their relationship with practice and policy. Part of the task of seeking a more rounded judgement was therefore to see how notions of quality might respond to the diversity of ways in which applied and practice-based research placed their emphasis on the relationship with practice (including policy) and with practitioners and users.

In trying to understand that diversity and possible different conceptions of quality more clearly, we turned to the work of Aristotle (1975) who operated with a distinction between several different domains of knowledge (or of engagement with the world), each with its own forms of excellence that could not be reduced to others. In our account of quality in applied and practice-based research we focused on three such domains: theoresis (contemplation); poiesis (production); and praxis (social action). Within each of these domains, following Aristotle, we argued that there was space for excellence, or ‘virtue’, epitomized by three further concepts: episteme theoretike (knowledge that is demonstrable through valid reasoning); techne (technical skill, or a trained ability for rational production); and phronesis (practical wisdom, or the capacity or predisposition to act truthfully and with reason in matters of deliberation, thus with a strong ethical component). The concept of ‘quality’ we developed therefore recognized: first, that, despite the
fact that each of the three domains (*theoresis, poiesis* and *praxis*) were different and could not be reduced to any of the others, they were still compatible and, in fact, complementary; second, that it was possible to identify different forms of ‘excellence’ or virtue in each of these different domains. We argued that if we adopted this perspective, then the problem in defining quality in applied and practice-based research would not be one of fine-tuning a single set of criteria, but rather, one of capturing the deep distinctiveness of the three domains and of their various ‘expressions of excellence’, while at the same time allowing for compatibility.

To give a little more detail, the first domain of quality we considered was *Episteme* – demonstrable knowledge or ‘contemplative’ knowledge – that is, the type of rational activity that Aristotle calls *theoresis*. Excellence in this mode of knowledge involves developing what we might today call ‘scientific’ knowledge that can lead to ‘judgement[s] about things that are universal and necessary’ (Aristotle 1975). Researchers concerned with epistemic excellence, therefore, see themselves as contributing to the (methodologically rigorous) search for articulated and justified knowledge. Expressions of excellence in this domain might include:

- **trustworthiness** (in different research traditions defined variously as validity, reliability, groundedness, dependability, believability);
- **contribution to knowledge**, building on what is known and contributing to the wider stock of knowledge;
- **transparency and explicitness** so that others may take part in its evaluation though, for example, peer review.

The second domain was *Techne* – technical skill. Here the emphasis is on ‘production’, or *poiesis*, aimed at installing order and increasing human control over underdetermined circumstances. From this perspective, we argued that practice is seen as the pursuit of predefined ends through the careful selection of suitable means; at its best, the process involves design or planning, trial and error and a concern for the efficient use of the resources available. Expressions of excellence in this domain might include:

- **fitness to purpose**;
- **specificity**;
- **concern for enabling impact** (e.g. active dissemination, closer links between researchers and practitioners, etc.);
- **operationalizability**; and importantly the **strategic and economic value** (or the propriety) of the research.

The final domain we discussed was *Phronesis* – practical wisdom, which is concerned with praxis (virtuous action in the public space). From this perspective, the entanglement of research and practice becomes akin to a way of life – it is both personal and moral. Practical wisdom is not a discrete skill, but is embedded in who we are, individually and as a community. As such, the distance between possession and application
of skill that characterized techne disappears: practical wisdom is a way of being and acting in the world, and so it cannot be possessed, forgotten, or ‘applied’ imperfectly; in other words, it cannot be instrumentalized. Expressions of excellence in this domain could include a consideration of: transformation resulting in genuine ethical and educative action; deliberation, reflexivity and criticism, where research contributes to self-reflection and self-development; engagement in and with research, including partnership and forms of involvement of practitioners/participants in the process of research; plausibility; timeliness; and receptiveness – to the practitioner’s viewpoint, among professional researchers, but also to building receptiveness to research among practitioners, policymakers and in the larger public sphere.

The different ‘domains of quality’ we defined are expressed in Figure 15.1.

![Figure 15.1: Domains of quality](source: Oancea and Furlong (2007: 113))

These then were the basic conceptual tools that Oancea and I deployed in our discussion of quality in applied and practice-based research. Our aim was primarily to raise discussion. We did not claim that our approach covered all possible criteria, or that it brought them to harmonious agreement, capable of securing full consensus within the education research communities. Rather, what we put forward was a discursive
tool for catalysing the ongoing conversation about quality, and a way of playing with the possibility of opening this conversation up to perspectives that went beyond traditional oppositions between academia and policy, theory and practice, blue-sky and applied research, and so forth. As a tool, we were very clear that it could not create consensus where it was inherently lacking. Nevertheless, as has already been noted, as a discursive tool, our research was indeed highly productive.

But are these tools still relevant today? And most pertinently, are they relevant to the more recent work that Geoff Whitty and I undertook in documenting not just two or three but a whole array of different knowledge traditions in education that draw on different epistemological assumptions and that have quite different relations to the world of practice? In the final section of this chapter I want to argue that they are indeed still relevant and provide us with some important insights in assessing both quality and impact across the field of education as a whole.

Discussion

I want to begin this final discussion by returning to the work of Bernstein and his contemporary followers. As we noted, there are clearly value positions implicit in Bernstein’s characterization of vertical and horizontal discourses. Young and Muller (2014, 2016) also see vertical discourses as more powerful than horizontal discourses. For a number of years Michael Young (2008) has argued that we need to ‘bring knowledge back in’ to education, especially in the context of the mainstream school curriculum. He uses the term ‘powerful knowledge’ to characterize the sort of subject-based knowledge that has, in his view, too often been hollowed out of the school curriculum in recent years, especially for disadvantaged students. In his more recent work with Muller (Young and Muller 2014), Young has extended these ideas to a discussion of the education of the professions, where, drawing on the work of Bernstein (2000) he has begun to develop a theory of what we might call ‘powerful professional knowledge’.

Young and Muller therefore question the shift away from what Bernstein calls ‘singulars’ (pure disciplines) and even from ‘regions’ (multi and interdisciplinary applied fields like medicine and education) to ‘generics’. Accordingly, they are critical of Gibbons et al.’s work on Mode 2 knowledge and that of Schon and others, who place ‘reflective practice’ at the heart of professional education (Young and Muller 2014,
2016). These they see as examples of horizontal discourses that lack the structure of disciplines and treat knowledge as infinitely pliable for different local and context-dependent purposes. Hordern (2016: 367), who takes a similar position, even implies that they somehow constitute ‘fake’ knowledge that lacks the ‘inherent value’ of disciplinary knowledge forms. This charge resonates with Bernstein’s view that connections between the world of practice and the inherent structures of disciplined knowledge get lost in ‘generic modes’ (e.g. through a focus on ‘core’ or ‘functional’ skills). This, in turn, can make such knowledge open to manipulation by governments and employers and potentially destroy the identities (and autonomy) that professionals traditionally acquire through immersion in disciplinary knowledge. It thereby facilitates a shift from professional education to professional training, which may at least as well be undertaken ‘on the job’ as in the academy.

However, what my work with Oancea would suggest is something different; something more nuanced. Not all knowledge traditions can or indeed would claim to be excellent in all of the three domains we discussed – epistemic, technical and phronetic. While theoretical and methodological robustness are powerfully important in many knowledge traditions, this is not universally so: in other knowledge traditions there may well be other ways of expressing excellence. On the other hand, our work would also challenge the dominant mantra of relevance and impact at all or any cost. As Geoff Whitty himself so powerfully argued (Whitty 2006), some knowledge traditions need to stand outside this discourse and insist that they are judged on their own terms.

So to return to the knowledge traditions that Geoff Whitty and I set out, it is clear that what we called academic knowledge traditions, on the whole, do have the potential to demonstrate excellence in the domain of episteme in terms of theoretical and methodological robustness, transparency, ability to contribute to cumulative knowledge, and so forth. But even so they do vary. As we have already noted, each of the Disciplines of Education, for example, have their own epistemological and methodological criteria; questions and indeed answers are by definition drawn from the discipline or at least framed by the discipline. This is therefore potentially a strength from an epistemic the point of view. At the same time, this approach means that any direct opportunities for use value (techne) or indeed value for people (phronesis) by, for example, drawing practitioners into research design are much more challenging to achieve.

Similar problems exist for the New Science of Education, which, as we discussed earlier, prioritizes methodology. It does draw its questions from the field of practice so that its opportunities for providing
knowledge that is strong in terms of use value are much higher, but at the same time its methodological preoccupations mean that there are only limited opportunities for practitioners themselves to become closely involved in the research process itself. Its potentiality for the development of *phronesis* are therefore more limited.

Applied Educational Research, we argued, is much more open, much more eclectic. Here, because of the emphasis on drawing research questions from the world of practice, and because of the potentiality for multi and interdisciplinary work, it would seem that there are far greater opportunities for using research as a form of personal capacity-building while at the same time providing useful knowledge. But as we also argued, in practice this often comes at the cost of research that is sometimes not as methodologically and theoretically robust as in other academic traditions; this, in turn, has an impact on the ability of research knowledge generated being cumulative.

*Practical knowledge traditions* are by definition very different. As Geoff Whitty and I argued, they may well draw on research-based knowledge but often unsystematically, even unconsciously. They are much more likely to be highly contextually and indeed personally based – they are by definition then ‘profane’ in Durkheim’s terms. But does that mean that by definition they cannot demonstrate excellence in some form? The implication of my work with Oancea is that they can.

Competency frameworks, so long the butt of academic critiques, make their claim for excellence in terms of both their technical value (both use value and economic value) and in terms of their ability to change and develop people. The fact that they have proved their use and their economic value goes some way to explaining their enduring success in so many fields of public life, including teacher education. The issue surely here is not the fact that they are reductive – that is their nature. The question in their own terms is whether the underlying analysis on which they are based is itself robust. Too often in the field of education, competency frameworks have been reduced to a list of behaviours, with the knowledge and judgement behind those behaviours (the phronetic domain) simply expunged from view. But competency frameworks do not have to be like that – indeed in the field of teacher education there are growing numbers of standards internationally that deliberately address these more complex dimensions of professional behaviour, judgement and understanding – see, for example, the Welsh teacher education accreditation framework (Welsh Government 2018). As such they have far greater potential for *phronesis*.
The Normal College Tradition, based on a craft conception of knowledge, is probably the knowledge tradition that is most distant from the forms of rigour demanded by conventional academia. The knowledge and expertise on which it draws is by definition often weak in its ability to demonstrate theoretical and methodological robustness, transparency, cumulative knowledge, and so forth. But at the same time it does have the potentiality to demonstrate strong use value – fitness for purpose, specificity, operationalizability, and so forth. It is also potentially strong in terms of its contribution to *phronesis*, developing the person and their moral judgement. At their best, as Hayhoe and Li (2010) demonstrate, craft-based traditions can therefore represent a powerful form of educational knowledge.

Networked Professional Knowledge is also a form of craft knowledge – situationally developed, context-dependent – but then, crucially, it is shared, critiqued and utilized in different situations during the course of which it is changed and developed. That means it potentially has both use value (*techne*) and personal development value (*phronesis*). Networked Professional Knowledge often draws on academic knowledge as well, though the extent to which this is systematic or happenstance varies. As a result there are often major tensions between knowledge generated in this ‘grounded’ way and what is known through more conventional research. Nevertheless, as a knowledge tradition it does have significant value for practitioners themselves, which explains its popularity and power.

Finally, there are integrated knowledge traditions, which explicitly attempt to demonstrate excellence in two or sometimes three domains, though with different degrees of success. The first example is Action Research. As argued earlier, in Action Research it is the practitioner who is the arbiter of what constitutes a professional ‘problem’ to be addressed and the practitioner who is the lead person in ‘theorizing’ their revised understanding as a result of their intervention. The approach therefore first has the potential to demonstrate technical excellence in that research is tightly focused on practical issues that are of relevance in a particular context. At the same time, it has the potential to contribute strongly to the development of the person, *phronesis*. Insisting that it is practitioners themselves who lead the research opens up opportunities for reflection, deliberation and transformation. At the same time, however, this democratization of the research process means that it often struggles to meet the demands of epistemic quality in terms of methodological and theoretical robustness. And although Action Research projects are very practically focused, because by definition they are contextually
specific, there is often a challenge in making the results of such studies transferrable.

Our final example of an integrated tradition was what we called Learning Sciences, which is probably one of the most successful in potentially offering excellence in all three domains. In this tradition we noted a serious concern with theoretical and methodological robustness and with developing solutions to educational issues that have as strong use value. Because issues are developed iteratively with those working in practical contexts, there is also a much higher possibility of producing solutions that really are practically useful. In some but not all projects in this tradition, there are also possibilities of engaging practitioners in the research process itself, which clearly has implications for the professional and personal development of those individuals.

**Conclusion**

What this reflection of my work with Geoff Whitty has made clear is the need to challenge those who would suggest that there is only one way of assessing quality and impact in educational knowledge. Yes there are canons of rigour within the epistemic domain that are potentially powerful precisely because of their methodological and theoretical rigour. But sometimes that rigour is achieved at the cost of other forms of excellence. What Geoff Whitty and I discovered, or at least reminded ourselves of, was that formal academic knowledge is not the only form of educational knowledge that is worthwhile.

So where does this recognition of greater complexity in knowledge traditions leave us? Does it mean that we should give up on trying to develop forms of educational knowledge that address all three of these major ‘expressions of excellence’? Should we simply say that Action Research is incapable of developing cumulative knowledge? Should we say that the Disciplines of Education model is simply incapable of providing useful knowledge or knowledge that contributes to personal development? Clearly not. For example, Networked Professional Knowledge can become more research-informed, more systematic in the right hands, as authors such as Jenny Gore have demonstrated (2016; see also Gore in this volume). And as current efforts to demonstrate ‘impact’ in preparation for the UK’s forthcoming Research Excellence Framework, the successor to the RAE, make clear, there are things that can be done to ensure that even the most purely theoretically driven research can have an impact, in terms of changed understandings if not directly in terms
of changed practices. But we do need to recognize that these things are difficult – that it is very hard to undertake rigorous historical or philosophical research while at the same time drawing practitioners into the research process itself; that the New Science of Education tradition demands highly sophisticated research skills, which means that it can sometimes struggle to engage practitioners themselves in the research process. Just because they fail to meet this particular test should not be taken to mean that they are somehow flawed.

We do therefore need a much more explicit recognition that there are different forms of excellence in each of the major knowledge traditions that make up the field of education. While efforts should be made in each tradition to understand and face up to their potential weaknesses, we need to recognize that doing it all and all equally is likely to be difficult. That is what our return to Aristotle made clear to Alis Oancea and to me. Excellence in different domains may at times be complementary, but it cannot be reduced to one thing; it does inhabit different domains.

But that of course brings us back to Geoff Whitty’s own approach to the study of education. As the richness and diversity of his biography demonstrates, Geoff recognized the importance of many different expressions of excellence, in his research, in his professional practice and in his management and leadership. Perhaps one of his greatest contributions to our work together was his insistence on reminding me of the complexity of educational processes. He always wanted to add another caveat, another counterexample to challenge my sometimes overly simplistic arguments. Geoff had the ability to recognize and embrace complexity in all of his work while never running away from the pursuit of excellence, however it was defined. And this, in my view, was his greatest contribution to the study of education. It is an example that perhaps more of us should follow.

References


