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What Counts as Legitimate Knowledge? The Social Production and Use of Reviews

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There are of course major issues surrounding the epistemological status of what counts as a “review” and about what my Foucauldian friends have helped us recognize as the power/knowledge nexus underlying any construction of a field of knowledge and knowing (see, e.g., Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). While these are important concerns, my interest here is not quite so abstract. I want to employ the production and results of a specific commodity—AERA’s annual volume, the *Review of Research in Education*—as an example of some of the ways reviews have specific politics both in how they construct their world and how they are received in determinate fields of power. In the space and time available I can only suggest some issues, the first of which will perhaps be more familiar conceptually to some of you, while the second may ask you to think more structurally about the “uses” of the products of reviews than you might be used to.

I served as editor of two volumes, 21 and 22, of the *Review of Research in Education* (Apple, 1995; 1997). In creating the plans for these two volumes of the *Review of Research in Education*, the entire editorial board had major discussions of what it meant to “synthesize” and “review” an area, especially contentious and politicized areas that were subject to conflicting ideological and epistemological commitments and understandings. With an understanding that the epistemological issues surrounding “what the data say” are quite complex, we sought for ways of demonstrating this complexity to the larger audience. The key to this was finding a mechanism that would enable readers of these books who may not have had either an interest or background in the epistemological debates to sense the issues and to see how they operated in real life. Thus, the editorial board and I chose one specific strategic intervention. We asked scholars with different “takes” on the conceptual and political tensions and tendencies in an area to review similar material. The area was a broad one, “Discourse and Education.”

The results were more than a little interesting. One author, well-known for her analyses of the relationship between classroom discourse and learning, stressed internalist issues (Hicks, 1995). The other, someone also internationally well-known, who had written extensively in the connections between classroom dis-

course and the transformations of identity and social life, constructed the very same area in very different ways (Luke, 1995). “What the data said” was a construction, subtly yet deeply connected to the social and epistemological commitments and conventions of the “discourse community” in which one is situated. This provided a compelling example of how “fields” are constructed, how discourses both construct and are constructed by, political/epistemological moves, even when as in this case the authors shared a broad agreement on “progressive” readings of material.

Yet, sometimes the meaning of “review” is even more specifically social, not only in terms of a discourse community, but in terms of the material conditions underlying the entire enterprise of research, its social utility, and the power relations out of which it is produced. I want to be very specific here. Once again I shall employ a volume on which I worked as my primary example.

Part of the issue concerns the ways that particular knowledge counts in the conversion strategies in which institutions engage. The institutions I have in mind are universities, since by and large the reviews of research on which I am drawing were produced by and for university-based researchers. I want us to think about knowledge as a form of cultural capital (see Apple, 1995). The accumulation of it—or at least of the kinds of knowledge that are recognized as legitimate or high status—enables a university to use this recognition as a form of social capital. That is, it can trade this form of capital on a market to get additional resources, higher rankings, and so on. But this is not a random process. As Bourdieu reminds us, people and institutions exist in determinate and overlapping fields of power (Bourdieu, 1993). Thus, markets over capital exist in *structured* ways, in contexts. For particular kinds of knowledge to *be* a valued form of capital, the knowledge itself must be recognized both within that field of power as important and in the connections between that specific field and more powerful fields as high status as well.

Let me give an example of what I mean here. As in other nations under the influence of neo-liberal ideological commitments (see Apple, 1996), the English government has established an intense competition among universities in terms of research funding and resources. Employing a five point scale, universities are ranked in relationship to each other in terms of their research productivity. Those ranked highest are rewarded with more funding; those ranked lower on the scale witness proportionately less funding. There is immense pressure on each university, then, to increase its research productivity. This has led to a concomitant increase in pressure on academics to write more, to publish more papers in journals, to give more papers, and so on.

Yet, these activities are not valued equally. Publications in juried journals, “new” research, and so forth count much more than other kinds of writing and presentations. On the face of it, there does not seem too much wrong with such a calculus of values. After all, rehashing old work or publishing scattered essays may not be as valuable in the long run as the articulation of “new” ideas and the generation of new data. However, the effects of this kind of calculus have unforeseen consequences in terms of the topics under discussion here. Synthetic analyses that review a field are not seen as equally valuable.

A case in point is the same series of books I mentioned at the outset, the annual volume published by the American Educational Research Association,

Review of Research in Education. Each year AERA publishes an edited volume that is meant to take a general theme of crucial import to the field and provide the research and policy communities with synthetic appraisals of what is known about a particular area and/or analyses of new methodological and conceptual approaches to understanding the complexities involved in a particular area of concern. The volumes I edited were meant to portray both the range of socially and culturally “critical” scholarship that had evolved over two decades of work in education and the kinds of issues that were foregrounded in what had come to be called “critical educational studies.”

Among the issues dealt with were gender and the construction and control of teaching, critical race theory and education, the aforementioned critical discourse analyses of classroom interactions, the political economy of urban education, and a number of other major areas of concern. One of the most important areas in need of synthetic analyses was the growing emphasis on marketization and privatization (vouchers, “choice,” etc.). There was an increasing amount of research on the efficacy and effects of such “reforms,” much of it guided by ideological commitments that had to be sorted through and unpacked. Communities, states, and entire nations were moving toward these kinds of policies and the debates over them were profound nationally and internationally.

A chapter was commissioned to provide an account of the overt and hidden effects of such policies both at the level of schools and at the level of transformations of our public discourse about what education is for and who it should serve (see Whitty, 1997). The chapter itself was truly well done. It illuminated the gains and losses in powerful ways, providing a clear statement that such programs may actually reproduce or exacerbate inequalities. Thus, the results of the chapter’s review of “what we know” could have important effects on real schools and real policies.

However, even though the author spent months on researching and writing the chapter (it was nearly 100 pages in manuscript form), it was not counted as “important” in the competitive rankings in the university awards competition. Critical “reviews”—no matter how sophisticated and substantive—were not “new.” They did not count as recognizable currency in the market. They could not be converted at a high enough price into the other forms of social and economic capital so needed by universities in times of economic crisis in higher education. Thus, the author put his institution at risk by engaging in “low status” activity with little capacity for conversion. No matter how important to the field of education, the social field of power in which academic institutions operated provided a context in which critical syntheses were hardly recognized as being a form of cultural capital.

This is a complex, but deeply problematic situation. But it does make clear that the social meanings of both the review process and product are exactly that—*social*. Reviews can only be understood as “situated”—not only in their status as constructions, but also and profoundly in their relative status in the institutionalized and increasingly marketized hierarchies of legitimate knowledge that now are forming the markets in cultural capital in which many of us participate. A clearer recognition of this double articulation with the social can enable us to understand more clearly the social uses and effects of “reviews.”

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