PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE FORMATION IN THE AUSTRALIAN EDUCATIONAL MARKET PLACE: CHANGING THE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article, in its consideration of knowledge formation in the market place, will focus primarily on the notion of the *Agora,* but will also consider the implications for the marketing of schooling itself. It will explore the field of practice as the site for the development of educational and educative knowledge that is crafted by those who well understand the purpose to which it is to be put. It positions the discussion in the context of current Australian practice, in particular in New South Wales, by attending to two locations where such knowledge has been generated: The Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools and the Priority Action Schools Program. In its conclusion it cautions against the showy market place of ideas where the gaudy and unwanted are the commodities for sale.

KNOWLEDGE CREATION AND THE EDUCATIONAL MARKET PLACE

On the first Saturday of every month, down by the wharves of Sydney Harbour, there is a Growers' Market. Fresh produce, cheeses, olives, oils, fine fruit and vegetables, organic meats, flowers, tiny cakes and tarts are all set out for those who eschew the banality of the supermarket shelves to sample and buy. People meet, dogs investigate, coffee is drunk in Sydney's balmy weather. Regulars not only buy, they discuss, argue and debate. Points of view are exchanged as much as goods and services; some conversations commence where they left off the month before. This is the market place, the *Agora*, that Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons (2003) so powerfully evoke as a metaphor for knowledge formation in contrast to the disciplined sites of production so characterised by university faculties and government sponsored research centres. The *Agora*, that ancient market place was such a place, where it was not only goods that were traded but was also a site where political, commercial, administrative and social activity occurred. Ideas were as central and vital to the *Agora* as the commodities that were there to be bought and sold. Education, and its emblematic heart, the school, is similarly a site where ideas are developed and traded and where professional knowledge is developed.

For too long the association of Education with the market place has been related to the trading of schooling itself in an environment in which education is treated as a commodity that can be marketed like any other. The current national coalition government in Australia, that has held federal power since 1996, has been a strong advocate of choice in education. It is difficult to argue with Marginson's allegation that the coalition government has been seeking to deregulate the education market (Marginson, 1997:15). Australian parents are being encouraged to make their choices about secondary schooling. They are led to believe that there is a great distinctiveness between schools. But the implicit message is that the distinctiveness is not between schools in general, but between government and non-government schools in particular. As a case in point, the drift to non-government schooling in New South Wales (one of the six states and two territories of which Australia is composed) can be seen reflected in a continuing trend that showed 65% of secondary school age students enrolled in government schools in 2000, compared to 66.9% in 1998, and 67.5% in 1997.

Market theories of education, within this discourse, see the consumer as the beneficiary. But, of course, matters are not so simple. Certainly, individuals can

and do benefit from a market orientation. It has already been widely argued, for example, that elite, prestigious schools can act to support the individual's access to power and status. This can be said to be more to do with cultural capital than cognitive attainment. The student gains membership to a club. Anderson (1993) has further suggested that Catholic secondary education, that caters for the majority of students in the non-government sector in Australia, with its norms of discipline and conformity also give individuals assets which they can take to employment within certain regimes of power and control.

This article, in its consideration of knowledge formation in the market place, will focus primarily on the notion of the *Agora*. Thus, the title of this article carries within it the possibility of changing two perspectives: one of these is that of professional knowledge formation as in the *Agora*, the second more implicitly, changing the educational market place itself.

MODE 2 KNOWLEDGE AND WHY IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR EDUCATION

Knowledge creation is now a matter for significant contestation and debate as the "Knowledge Society" (Stehr, 1994) emerges and develops. Knowledge has assumed the leading role in social and economic change. What counts as professional knowledge is a much more interesting and complex matter than in times gone by, when it was seen that it was the role of academia and dedicated government agencies to develop such knowledge and communicate it to the cognate profession. It is particularly pertinent for those who have an interest and concern for teacher professional learning.

In their initial work Gibbons, *et al*. (1994) developed our understanding that knowledge creation is not exclusively a matter for scientists and academics working in institutions but may be socially produced and distributed in the form of what they coined as "Mode 2 Knowledge". Such knowledge production is concerned with the identification and solution of practical problems in the lived professional lives of practitioners and organizations which are not encircled by the boundaries of single disciplines with their many rules and customary practices. It is reflexive knowledge in that it results from a dialogic process as conversations in the field. They posed the proposition that the production of knowledge and the processes of research were due for a radical transformation. They saw "Mode 1 Knowledge" as founded upon the orthodoxies of discipline based scientific inquiry and driven by the norms and conventions of those disciplines. In a second work (Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons, 2001) they developed their argument, noting that the great sub-systems of modernity: State; Market; Culture and Science itself, once so clearly partitioned were becoming increasingly transgressive. This fuzziness helped to create the transactional spaces in which Mode 2 knowledge could be developed.

Interestingly, the very concept of "fuzziness" is itself deserving of elaboration. A term coined by Kosko (1993) it metaphorically moves us from the black and white of much empiricist science to the shades of grey representing the complexities, nuances and subtleties of the human world. It allows us to develop a greater tolerance for all of the ambiguities lodged therein. Kosko and Isaka (1993) suggested that "fuzzy logic is a branch of machine intelligence that helps computers paint grey, commonsense pictures of an uncertain world" (p.76). It requires the use of practical, but imprecise rules and allows for a myriad of possibilities rather than a set of fixed solutions and "can often better model the vagueness of the world than can black and white concepts" (p.81).

For too long policies in Education have assumed that there are indeed, fixed solutions, that somewhere there is the elusive "best practice" that can be created, adopted and adapted. Just as for a time there was the notion of "one size fits all" in the clothing industry (absurd as that proposition was) there were thought to be international solutions to matters as wide ranging as literacy instruction, behaviour

management and overall school improvement, irrespective of contextual variations. Increasingly, today in Australia, there is a recognition that professional knowledge formation requires input, not only from academia and government agencies but through the investigations and inquiries of those inside the profession itself. It is noteworthy that many writers have recognised the need to develop professional knowledge *with* the field of practice, rather than *for* the field of practice. The prepositional change is not one to be taken lightly. As Gore and Gitlin (2004) claim "We need to work with teachers to explore the limits and possibilities of research for their work as teachers" (p.52). Furthermore, they believe that this is achieved, not only by engaging in joint research activities but also by exposing and analysing the politics of research and the power relations therein. In this way a genuine parity of esteem within the community of practice, with the purpose of improving learning for all, can be achieved.

GETTING INSIDE PRACTICE

So, how do we develop professional knowledge with the field of practice? Oliver Sacks in his preface to *An Anthropologist on Mars* (Sacks, 1995) quotes from G.K. Chesterton's spiritual detective, Father Brown, who when asked of his method for investigating phenomena said:

> (Science means) getting *outside* a man (sic) and studying him as if he were a gigantic insect; in what they would call a dry impartial light, in what I should call a dead and dehumanising light. They mean getting a long way off him, as if he were a distant prehistoric monster; staring at the shape of him… When the scientist talks about a type, he never means himself, but always his neighbour; probably his poorer neighbour. I don't deny the dry light may sometimes do good; though in one sense it's the very reverse of science. So far from being knowledge, it's actually the suppression of what we know… I don't try to get outside the man. I try to get inside. (p.*xv*)

Getting inside in the practice of Education, in particular school education, means getting inside the school itself, working with those most directly concerned with the enterprise: teachers; students; and, their parents/caregivers.

Increasingly, Australian policy makers in the field of Education are acknowledging the power of the kind of professional insight developed within the knowledge creating school. The school, as a knowledge building organization has been discussed widely, notably by David Hargreaves (1999) who first drew our attention to the notion of the knowledge creating school, arguing that schools have within them significant professional knowledge, much of which is tacit and unexamined. But the great fund of knowledge held by practitioners can scarcely be drawn upon if it remains buried beneath the surface. Hargreaves (2003) has since developed his argument, making the case for mobilising and developing the intellectual and social capital held by practitioners into a more coherent and integrated whole. Furthermore he has argued for drawing upon organisational capital in the form of networks and external links in order to inform and improve at both local and regional levels. Importantly, he believes that moving beyond incremental innovation (swimming with the tide) to radical innovation (swimming against the tide) cannot be achieved by central direction, but requires the school itself to be a learning professional life form.

The impact of teachers' practices upon student learning outcomes has now been well documented (Darling Hammond, 1996; Muijs and Reynolds, 2001; Darling Hammond and Youngs, 2002; Rowe 2003). It is the quality of teaching that has the greatest impact upon student learning. However, it can no longer be seen as acceptable that individual "hero" teachers can operate as separate entities within the school. It is essential that those teachers who are identified as having impressive pedagogical practices can and will share these with their colleagues to the advantage

of all. Teachers who make a difference have to be models and coaches who will assist others in making a difference also. Rowe (2003) makes the case for quality teacher recruitment, but the majority of those who are teaching in Australian schools are already employed and may remain employed for many years. For the whole school to improve and not just individual classes under the tutelage of individual teachers it is essential that the professional learning of teachers is shared and problematised; that the educational market place is a vigorous and dynamic one. As Warren Little (2002) has observed:

> Research spanning more than two decades point consistently to the potential educational benefits of vigorous collegial communities… Researchers posit that conditions for improving teaching and learning are strengthened when teachers collectively question ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning, find generative means to acknowledge and respond to difference and conflict and engage actively in supporting professional growth. (p.917).

How then do we go beyond the rhetoric and look to practical examples of professional knowledge formation? This article will discuss two cases: one of a Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, the other of a state-wide equity program where professional knowledge was documented and "traded" in the form of school learning portfolios.

The Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools

Unlike the British Networked Learning Communities the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools is an alliance that has been formed without funding or formal government recognition. It is a loose association of eleven schools in Metropolitan Sydney and includes primary and secondary schools from every sector: Government, Catholic Systemic and Independent. The schools range from those serving the most challenging of communities to those who are wealthy and held in high public esteem. What holds them together is a strong commitment to teacher professional learning and school improvement based upon: developing and enhancing the notion of evidence based practice; developing an interactive community of practice using appropriate technologies; making a contribution to a broader professional knowledge base with respect to educational practice; building research capability within and between schools by engaging both teachers and students in the research process; and sharing methodologies which are appropriate to practitioner enquiry as a mean of transforming teacher professional learning. (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2003a)

Representatives from each school meet four times a year to report upon their projects and discuss matters which might have been particularly problematic for them. As a group, they are re-defining 'evidence based practice' to be a far richer and more inclusive term than that which has been considered and rightly criticised (see for example, Elliott, 2004). They understand that we need first and foremost to be cautious about the term itself. What may at first glance appear transparent, following close and careful analysis may prove to be opaque. Certainly, they believe that the concept "evidence based practice" is a powerful and useful one; however, they also believe that we need to make some important distinctions both in terms of the context in which the phrase might apply, and in terms of the purposes to which it is to be put. As Groundwater-Smith and Dadds, 2004 argue we can characterize evidence as being used for adversarial purposes, in an attempt to "prove" the viability of a particular social practice; or we can conceive of it being of a forensic kind where the purpose is to understand a particular phenomenon with an intention to "improve" the practice. Clearly this is the disposition of the Coalition.

Space does not permit an enumeration of the ways in which the Coalition has made a contribution to the professional knowledge base. In their presentation to the

joint AARE/NZARE Annual Conference Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2003b) reported upon eight studies, over four years, presented to various conferences and professional bodies, all of them having been co-written with practitioners in the field. A number of these studies make particular reference to the engagement of students (usually referred to in the British context as 'pupils') in the inquiry process, whereby they themselves develop a sense of agency regarding the ways in which the school may inquire about the conditions under which they are learning (see in particular Needham and Groundwater-Smith, 2003).

Sharing methodologies has been a particularly strong feature of the Coalition. A case in point is where two secondary girls' schools, one Government and one Independent have been successful grantees in a Federal Government Initiative promoting safe schools. The two schools shared methodologies and findings, thus strengthening the insight and understanding of each of them as they investigated the nature of bullying in the context of girls' schools. The publication *Learning to Listen: Listening to Learn* (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2003a) is a concrete example of the ways in which the schools have pooled their innovative research methods and made them more widely available.

In detailing this work of the Coalition the intention has not been to merely celebrate its achievements, but to point to the ways in which practitioners in the field can contribute to professional knowledge formation in Education. It is an authentic market place of ideas and like any market place it is a site where there are issues and debates that continue from one 'market day' to the next. Furthermore, the Coalition does not eschew research evidence collected by the academy, members will bring to the attention of their colleagues papers that they might have found to be particularly valuable. In common with teachers consulted by Cordingley (2001) for the Teacher Training Agency in England the most valued research evidence was that which is collected through genuine partnerships between researchers and teacher in authentic classroom contexts and derived from rigorous and transparent methods that related to authentic questions to do with teaching and learning.

A second and different example of "getting inside practice" in relation to professional knowledge formation is a New South Wales State Government Program with its reporting mechanism of the school learning portfolio.

The Priority Action Schools Program

The Priority Action Schools Program (PASP), a $A16 million equity program jointly supported by the NSW Department of Education and Training and the NSW Teachers Federation (the teachers' union) was designed to provide intensive support to 74 primary, central and high schools with concentrations of students from low socio-economic status (SES) communities over the 2003 school year. All schools participating in the program faced issues related to low student achievement, behaviour management and attendance as well as serving communities dealing with significant hardship.

The key tenets of the program were to build individual and school capacity through:

- The creation of professional knowledge developed from practitioner research and evaluation processes;

- Strengthened planning, implementation and evaluation processes;

- Whole school approaches to improved teaching practice; and

- Mentoring, reflection and professional dialogue.

The program valued context based action through:

- The involvement of the whole school community in identifying issues and potential solutions; and

- The provision of support to schools to trial and evaluate local solutions.

Importantly, there were provisions for partnerships with:

- The PASP team of senior DET and Union officers;

- Academics/critical friends;

- Other schools and networks; and

- Other agencies (such as health and housing).

The report upon the project cannot be synthesised here in a way that would do justice to its stretch and complexity (for results of the meta evaluation see Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis, 2003). Instead the emphasis will be upon the ways in which the participating schools collected, analysed and interpreted their evidence in the form of a school learning portfolio.

Implicit in the development of a learning portfolio is a recognition that schools are places where teachers learn as do their students. They learn what is expected of them; their craft, their professional responsibilities, their need to develop new strategies in response to new policies; as well as that which arises from their daily interactions with their peers, students and the community. What is less recognised is that schools can also be seen as corporate learning organizations where it is the institution itself that learns, learns to adapt and cope, learns to innovate and learns to be resilient. This perspective was new to many of the PASP schools, but was central to the success of the program.

MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (2004) have focused upon schools as institutions that are dynamic and organic in their nature. Drawing on notions of multiple intelligence and recent thinking about the nature of organisations, they offer a way of looking at schools as living systems through the exploration of the concept of the *'intelligent school'*. For them, intelligent schools are human communities that are continuously developing their capacity for improvement. The intelligent school, then, is a learning school.

The school, its practices and its culture, can be seen then as the unit which can learn and professionally grow. Much previous work has been undertaken regarding the recording of the individual professional learning growth of teachers. For example, Retallick and Groundwater-Smith (1996) sought to provide a rationale and set of processes whereby the individual teacher could document and critique his or her professional learning through the medium of a learning portfolio. The process has now developed further to accommodate to the notions of corporate learning.

Thus the corporate learning portfolio has been defined as: "Evidence based documentation of organisational learning regarding a workplace transformation". PASP schools, over the first year of the program were able to create substantial and impressive portfolios using a wide range of data gathering processes and individual and collective reflections. Portfolios contained a contextual framework that traced the history and social geography of the school and the vision that it had for its students and the community. It outlined the plan of operation that would be the focal point of its PASP project. Interventions ranged from: changes in staffing organization with enhanced mentoring and modelling for less experienced teachers; curriculum change with an emphasis upon a more liberatory pedagogy that would allow for genuine debate and interaction between teachers and students, particularly in areas of literacy and information and communication technologies; through to behaviour management. Both qualitative and quantitative evidence was collected as the work

progressed. Each school was supported by an academic partner and/or critical friend who also contributed their reflections to the portfolio.

Schools met in local clusters and through two Department of Education and Training sponsored residential forums to discuss their work in progress and their results. At the conclusion to the project the portfolios were submitted to the meta-evaluators who analysed their contents as a means of informing their report. Thus schools themselves, with the support of academic partners and various Department of Education and Training Consultants had a high degree of agency in terms of portraying their challenges and solutions. The knowledge that was generated through the school learning portfolios contributed to both school improvement and overall policies and practices. The meta-evaluators, whose task it was to bring this localised knowledge into a larger and more coherent form were, of course, also engaged in knowledge creation – but knowledge derived from practice rather than driven by theory.

Interestingly, several of the schools are members of the Coalition. Their portfolios have been seen by other member schools to have such power that they too are now documenting their development in this fashion, not only in hard copy form, but also as electronic portfolios with all of the multi-media attributes that such a technology offers.

CONCLUSION: CHANGING THE EDUCATIONAL MARKET PLACE

It is clear that Nowotny, *et al*'s conception of the *Agora*, as a market place for the trade and negotiation of ideas as well as goods and services, is a powerful one when we think about the development and exchange of professional knowledge in Education. As well, the more general understanding of schools being in an educational market place is one that requires careful and critical attention.

What this article has sought to do is to develop an argument for the kind of market place that is one where the trade in ideas and practices is robust and conducted in a fair and transparent fashion that allows for the debate and dissent for which the ancient *Agora* was well known. The rates of exchange are clearly understood and the products ones that are worthwhile and desirable. After all, who amongst us has not gone to a market replete with gew-gaws, baubles and trinkets, slight, flimsy, cheap and tawdry – the sort of thing to turn up in tomorrow's garage or car boot sale? There are such market places in Education, cheap, instant solutions offered up to solve intractable problems. Under such conditions the knowledge formation is not of a kind that is carefully crafted from fine materials by those who well understood the purpose to which it is to be put.

While care must be taken not to idealise Australian educational market places it is the case that there is increasingly an understanding that the field of practice must be recognised and affirmed as an equal and respected trading partner; and that local solutions need to be generated to deal with local problems and challenges. It is to be hoped that this trend will continue and that we will not be overwhelmed by the globalised, glossy, shopping mall.

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