Economics imperialism and the ‘new educational paradigm’

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Paper presented at the Centre for Lifelong Learning Seminar, 3rd June 2010

Introduction

“The history of educational thinking in the twentieth century”, argues Keiran Egan (2008, p. 26), “prominently involved a bizarre war between those who were ‘subject-centered’ and those who were ‘child-centered’, between traditionalists and progressivists”. Both approaches, he argues, are inadequate. With regard to the subject-centred traditionalists, he suggests (p. 21) that the “richness and abundance of understanding that should have come to all students from literacy through an education in the classics had too often descended into dry pedantry”. Note that here he is talking about the successful students, and not the alienated and those that failed. He describes the child-centred progressivists as achieving “similar, and even worse results—not so much pedantry but ignorance so extensive that there has been nothing to be pedantic about”.

Egan’s charges about the main ideas which have dominated educational research and policy, and which shape how we think about education, compel us to confront the big questions about education: What is the purpose of education? What is knowledge and what is the relationship between knowledge and education? To what extent and in what ways do the answers to these questions vary depending on whether we are looking at primary schools, secondary schools, colleges, universities, and workplace education and training? In this paper, I explore the relationship between dominant ideas about education and knowledge as well as dominant ideas about education and the economy, through an exploration of some recent trends in education policy. I argue that the war (or perhaps tug-of-war) between the two main ways of thinking about the curriculum is in part caused by inadequacies of both of them, as well as inadequacies with the ideas about knowledge which underpin them. The tug-of-war is also in part caused by (but also contributes to) unrealistic ideas about what education can achieve for societies and economies. I further argue that that while learner-centred curricula and social constructionist ideas about knowledge are popularly associated with progressive politics, an examination of some key policies internationally shows how they are implicated in neoliberal approaches to education policy internationally.

Knowledge, education, and society

Traditional subject-centered approaches to education have tended to see subjects as handed down by tradition, and learning these subjects as the main aim of education. The culture represented in these subjects is believed to transform and enrich individuals. But this view of education has been the subject of much criticism. Reformers from the nineteenth-century onwards argued that the knowledge being taught in schools was inappropriate and irrelevant. As education started to be accessible to more than the traditional elites, the traditional curriculum came under increasing fire. Large numbers of learners dropped out, were alienated, or failed. Politicians and some industrialists argued that this type of education caused economic decline (Hough 1991). Raymond Callahan,
writing about educational reform in North America at the beginning of the twentieth century, pointed out how strongly popular contemporary sources argued that education should not be concerned with ‘culture’ or a ‘gentleman’s education’ which was of no used in the business world and was not, according to these sources, “desired by the mob” (Callahan 1962, p. 50). The result has often been tracked or streamed systems, which preserved a classical education for the elite, providing vocational or practical alternatives for the rest (Young and Muller 2010).

In place of the traditional subject-centred curriculum, for over a century reformers have made attempts to create more ‘relevant’ curricula. ‘Child’ or ‘learner-centred’ approaches have tended to start either from an emphasis on the everyday knowledge of the child or from a consideration of the utility of any particular curriculum content in the projected life of the student. Learner-centred approaches have been influenced by ideas about learning from psychological research on cognitive development, including the idea that children learn naturally, easily, and pleasurably if left to their own devices, and that learning is the re-construction of knowledge (Egan 2002; Moll 2002). Education should be shaped around learners’ interests and inclinations, and this, it is believed, will enable them to be active constructors of their own knowledge, instead of passive recipients (or memorizers) of inert knowledge. Existing bodies of knowledge are not the starting point of designing a curriculum, although invariably they do still feature in various ways.

Both subject and learner-centred curricula, and different compromises or hybrids, have taken different forms across different levels and sectors of education systems. In some instances some policy mechanisms support the one while others tend towards the other within the same curriculum. ‘Subject-centred’ approaches have tended to hold stronger ground in senior secondary schools and universities, and particularly in elite education. ‘Child-’ or ‘learner-centred’ approaches have been more prominent in adult education as well as lower levels of school systems. They have also been prominent, albeit in a particular form, in vocational education, and in particular in competence-based training, which focuses on competencies derived directly from analysis of jobs and workplace tasks, as well as on ‘core skills’ and ‘essential skills’ which are supposed to be transferable, and see knowledge as something which at most may ‘underpin’ some of these skills, but is not the starting point (Wheelahan 2010).

Although the subject-centred curriculum has been much criticized, child- and learner-centred approaches have also experienced problems. Egan (2008) points out that while learner alienation, drop-out, and failure is usually discussed in relation to an assumed subject-centred approach, in fact learner-centred curricula are in many instances the orthodoxy in schools of education, have been attempted in different forms for over 100 years, and have not solved these problems. They have not heralded the end of social stratification, nor have they been linked to any clear evidence of increased social mobility. Some researchers argue that they entrench inequalities (Muller 2001; Young and Muller 2010). Egan (2008) suggests that it is the failures of both approaches, as well as an inability to think outside of them, which leads to the periodic swings between an

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1 For example, curricula may be formally specified in very open ways, say through learning outcomes, in broad thematic areas, but examinations in specific subjects lead to an implicit syllabus, and therefore teaching of subjects.

2 As Michael Young points out (2008) this may be a key factor in perpetuating the idea education systems primarily produce inequality by forcing everyone to learn knowledge which favours elites (knowledge of the powerful), and less often produces a focus on how elites prevent others from acquiring powerful knowledge, or at the least, ensure that their own children have continued access to it.
emphasis on more traditional approaches to subjects, and attempts to make the curricula designed specifically to be relevant, more relevant, or relevant in better ways.

The swinging pendulum is often associated with left and right wing politics, although this association is rather simplistic, and is part of what I will be contesting in this paper. Very broadly, swings towards subject-centred curricula are often associated with the right, and presented as backward looking—to a glorious past or golden age of classics. Advocates of ‘child-’ or ‘learner-centred’ approaches have been more often associated with the left, presented as new and forward looking, even though by now the ideas are well over 150 years old.

**Thinking about knowledge**

Ideas about the purpose of education, and ideas about what curricula should look like, inevitably have a theory of knowledge which underpin them, even when it is not articulated explicitly. Underpinning the ‘war’ between subject-centred and learner-centred education is another war, between two broad schools of thought with regard to knowledge. The first school of thought, most strongly found in logical positivism and its empiricist parallels in the social sciences, is described by Young and Muller (2010) as invoking an ‘under-socialized epistemology’. Knowledge is seen as sets of verifiable propositions and the methods for testing them. This idea is ‘under-socialized’ in the sense that the social production of this knowledge, in particular historical and social contexts, and within the boundaries of particular disciplines, is implicit or taken for granted. The second school of thought, most strongly exemplified by post-modernism and social constructionism, is described by Young and Muller (2010) as ‘over-socialized’, because the propositional character of knowledge is downplayed or denied, and epistemology is reduced to the question ‘who knows?’ (or, in the ‘pragmatism’ of John Dewey, ‘what good does it do us?’)

Many analysts suggest that over the past thirty years or so, over-socialized, social constructionist, and relativist perspectives have had the upper hand, particularly in the sociology of education, but also more broadly across the humanities and social sciences. Paul Boghossian (2007, p. 2) for example, argues that

> Especially within the academy, but also and inevitably to some extent outside of it, the idea that there are ‘many equally valid ways of knowing the world,’ with science being just one of them, has taken very deep root. In vast stretches of the humanities and social sciences, this sort of ‘postmodernist relativism’ about knowledge has achieved the status of orthodoxy.

On the other hand, those within this broad school of thought tend to argue that positivism and empiricism are dominant (as extensively documented by Rob Moore 2009). This duality perhaps becomes more understandable if we take on board Moore’s explanation that positivism and social constructionism/postmodernism are two halves of

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3 John Dewey was, of course, a highly prolific philosopher whose views shifted substantially, and cannot always be pinned down; his pragmatism has been described as a “broadened positivism which is exclusively concerned with experience” (Parodi 1951, p. 230). However, Novak (1975, p. 181) argues that “He himself was an unrestricted relativist. This viewpoint molded his theory of knowledge and his conception of the nature of truth. He regarded truth as relative through and through; it did not possess any objective quality.” This follows logically into his idea of curriculum, that “When education is based in theory and practice upon experience, it goes without saying that the organized subject-matter of the adult and the subject specialist cannot provide the starting point” (quoted in Wheelahan 2010, p. 114).
the same coin. Moore (2009) cites a range of theorists⁴ who have contributed to elucidating the insight that social constructionism and positivism are both based on ‘foundationalism’. ‘Foundationalism’ is the idea that true beliefs are built on “certain foundational terms or propositions that do not in turn derive their own justification from any other terms or proposition” (Rob Moore 2004, p. 157). Only such knowledge is non-social, and therefore true. Social constructionism assumes that because knowledge cannot be absolutely certain, and based on an absolute foundation, it must be relative, and no knowledge can claim precedence over any other knowledge. In other words, positivism and social constructionism are located at opposite ends of the same theoretical plane:

Only positivists and their post-modernist critics insist that for knowledge to be knowledge it must be outside history, though of course they then draw precisely the opposite conclusions as to its actual possibility.

(Rob Moore and Young 2004, p. 248)

This insight, I suggest, may be important in understanding the seemingly unresolved tug-of-war in educational reform, as well as finding a way of stepping back from it. I turn later to the notion of ‘social realism’, to consider what it offers as an alternative which focuses attention on what is neglected by both: the nature of knowledge in terms of the internal structuring of symbolic forms and its relationship with education.

But first, let us return to the tug-of war between the different positions of knowledge and the approach to curriculum which they tend to lead to, and explore their political affiliations, which is a key concern of this paper. Social constructionist, relativist, and postmodernist approaches to knowledge, like learner-centred curricula, tend to be supported by those concerned with human rights, democracy, equality, and social justice, and tend to be presented as new and forward-looking. There are, of course, strong left-wing opposing voices, that argue for realist approaches to knowledge (although not, of course, for the caricatured positivism that social constructionists define themselves in opposition to). Many left-wing thinkers have taken issue with post-modernism and social constructionism (for example, Hill et al. 2002; Callinicos 1989; Harvey 1990). Similarly, although perhaps harder to find, there are left-wing supporters of subject-based curricula⁶. But what is notably absent from much commentary is a right wing notion of learner-centred curricula⁷. John Lea (2008), for example, in a finely argued and nuanced discussion of political correctness and the politics of higher education in the UK and USA, clearly articulates both the left and right wing variants of subject-based approaches to education, and left and right wing realist approaches to epistemology. But he suggests that relativist approaches to knowledge, captured in particular as multi-cultural and learner-centred approaches to curricula, are exclusively associated with the left.

⁴ For example, Abbott, Gellner, Fay, Niiniluoto, and, perhaps surprisingly, Bourdieu and Popper.

⁵ As developed in the writings of John Beck (2008; 2002), Jeanne Gamble (2004a; 2004b), Rob Moore (2004; 2009), Joe Muller (2009), Leesa Wheelahan (2010), and Michael Young (2008; Young and Muller 2010), who in turn draw substantially on thinkers such as Emile Durkheim, Basil Bernstein, Randall Collins, and Andrew Abbott.

⁶ Gramsci (1986; 1971) is usually seen as an example here, although this is contested.

⁷ Despite the presence of libertarians such as Hayek who emphasized the individual and implicit nature of knowledge (Wainwright 1994).
Young and Muller (2010) suggest, though, that this is not the case, and that the increasingly instrumental focus of education policy has many affinities with social constructivist and postmodernist views of knowledge and truth. An examination of recent education policy documents internationally, as well as documents from influential international organizations, suggests that learner-centred, skills-based curricula are increasingly the default position internationally, at least in terms of how curricula are described, and what kinds of reforms are proposed. Organizations with strong ‘free market’ interests, such as the OECD, are enthusiastic proponents. How should this be understood? Should we, as Lea (2008) implies, stop thinking in terms of left and right wing political positions when we think about knowledge and the curriculum? Or are we some kind of pragmatic settlement between left and right, and between subject- and learner-centred approaches? Is it plausible that groups with mutually conflicting social goals have found an approach to educational reform that satisfies them both? Should left wing educationalists be alarmed that their ideas may be being co-opted, and engage in fights to reclaim ‘authentic’ learner-centred curricula? Or can they feel that their ideas have, finally, been embraced by society in general?

The promises of the knowledge economy and the ‘third way’ suggest an affirmative answer to the last question, because these ideas suggest that different social classes can come to share the same interests. As Lin (2001, p. 13) enthusiastically explains,

> Since labourers become capitalists by acquiring human capital or, at the minimum, since capital is conceived as being shared (however unequally) by the capitalist and the laborer in production and exchange, the worker’s acquisition of human capital is now in the interest of both the capitalist and the laborer. The confrontation and struggle between classes becomes a cooperative enterprise – ‘What’s good for the company is good for the worker, and vice versa.’

The ‘third way’ as a political movement of centre left (or perhaps more accurately, ex-left) political parties suggests that “efficiency as the market defines it and justice as socialists have conceived it can be reconciled” (Callinicos 2001, p. 109). This idea, Callinicos suggests, is “the most politically influential ideology both in the advanced capitalist countries and in the leading Third World states.” It is premised on the notion that improved education and training will improve competitiveness of industries, but at the same time that it will enable “market interactions lead to a greater initial equality of income, lessening the need for subsequent redistribution” (Stuart White in Callinicos 2001 p. 48). This, as Lauder and Brown (2009) explain, is linked with the idea of the ‘knowledge economy’, which claims that the boom and bust business cycle could be abolished through a new stage of capitalist development that would lead to a fundamental shift in power from the owners and managers of capital to knowledge workers. Individuals who invested in education could become knowledge workers, and would not only be financially rewarded, but would gain power, greater autonomy, and creativity. Both the ‘third way’ and the knowledge society are propositions which place education at the centre of questions of economic competitiveness and social justice (and perhaps because of this, perhaps, seem attractive to those who work in education).

**NQFs and outcomes-based curriculum reform**

The recent spate of outcomes-based curriculum reforms, the recent enthusiasm for outcomes-based national qualifications frameworks, the ever-growing focus on competency-based training in reform of vocational education, and associated policies ideas such as lifelong learning, all seem to be located broadly within a ‘third way’ type perspective, and usually invoke the idea of the knowledge economy. At the same time, all
embody a learner-centred approach to curriculum. These policy ideas, argued by some supporters to represent a ‘new learning paradigm’, appear to be increasingly dominating the policy agenda of international agencies.

There are inevitably substantial differences between education policies of various countries (and again usually substantial variation between policy rhetoric and the reality of actual education institutions and systems within countries). What these approaches appear to have in common, and what perhaps leads to the invoking of the notion of a ‘new paradigm’ is an emphasis on learner-centredness, an attempt to create a basis for awarding qualifications which is broader than what is learnt in education institutions, and attempts to describe what learners should know and be able to do in order to be awarded a qualification (and to ensure that curricula align with such descriptions). The notion of learner-centredness invoked frequently goes beyond curriculum and pedagogy, and extends to the organization of education: the idea is that individuals should be supported in choosing appropriate education programmes, and moving across education and training systems as well as countries. National qualifications frameworks present ladders of qualifications described in terms of learning outcomes. Creating such ladders seems to suggest that individuals are free to climb up them over the course of their lifetime, free to choose and select the learning that is relevant to them.

Rather extravagant statements are made about this ‘new paradigm’. For example, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, Cedefop, suggests that

> Learning outcomes form part of an innovative approach to teaching and learning, which some have identified as part of a new learning paradigm. Learning outcomes are the focus, and provide a key role in organising systemic aims, curricula, pedagogy, assessment and quality assurance. Increasing use of learning outcomes is expected to have profound implications for making systems more learner-centred, organising institutions, curricula and for the roles and training of teachers and trainers.

Cedefop (2009, p. 11)

The Commonwealth of Learning and SAQA (2008, p. 44) argue that qualifications frameworks represent ‘new notions of knowledge’, and a ‘new hierarchy’ in which “education providers are no longer the leaders and standards-setters, and content (or inputs) is no longer the starting point”. Learning outcomes, according to Steven Adam (2008, p. 8), play “a fundamental role in the enormous but embryonic process of European curricular reform”. Adam goes on to suggest that learning outcomes are being used for “multiple applications”, including “the development of new style national qualifications frameworks, lifelong learning, credit transfer and accumulation requirements, recognition needs and quality assurance purposes.”

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8 See for example (APEC Human Resources Development Working Group 2009; OECD 2007; Commonwealth of Learning and SAQA 2008; Cedefop 2008; Lythe 2008; Sellin 2007; Coles 2007; Coles 2006; Bjornavold and Coles 2007; Allais 2010).

9 So, for example, there are many different ways of developing and using national qualifications frameworks (Raffe 2005; Allais, Young, and Raffe 2009, vol. 44; Allais 2007; Tuck, Hart, and Keevy 2004; Young 2005). Further, although learning outcomes are described as a key and essential tool in bringing about the ‘new paradigm’, but on the other hand, it is widely recognized that term ‘learning outcomes’ as well as the word ‘competence’ is used in different ways in different countries and contexts (for example, Cedefop 2008, Bohlinger 2007, Brockmann, Clarke and Winch 2008).
Like earlier child-centred approaches, this ‘new paradigm’ is positioned against traditional approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. So, subject-based curricula are criticized from both a social justice perspective and an economic perspective as being outdated, irrelevant, and causing a ‘mismatch’ between the skills produced by education and training systems and those required by the labour market. Typical of this approach, the problems are attributed to a focus on ‘content’, at the expense of ‘learning how to learn’ or ‘skills and competencies’, as can be seen in the following two examples, the first discussing the ‘backwardness’ of European education institutions, and the second making a similar point about education in Bangladesh:

The fact that the speed of discovery is such that the quantity of available information doubles every 10 to 18 months (varying by discipline) and that much of what is taught in schools is, by definition, outdated seem not to matter. (Murgatroyd 2010, p. 260)

The prevailing delivery—the age old and traditional school-based teacher-centered approach—has not been replaced by the learner-centered approach. The system has not been adapted to accept learning as a free exchange of ideas within a wider frame of flexible curriculum, and trainees are not given the opportunity to decide on either their own learning needs or the time and medium of learning. (Titumir 2005, p. 147)

The solutions—teachers as facilitators, skills-based approaches, learner-centeredness—are, far from being new, reforms which have been consistently attempted in education, and in fact dominate much educational thinking. What may be new in the present round of reforms is an increased emphasis on the link between the ‘traditional’ approaches to education and economic backwardness. A particular target is the functioning of education institutions, and their relationship to qualifications. The recent reforms, particularly national qualifications frameworks, hope to change the traditional roles of educational institutions, and traditional systems of issuing certificates, diplomas, degrees, and so on, whereby qualifications are linked to the completion of specific learning programmes. This traditional approach is seen as giving education institutions an unfair monopoly on the issuing of qualifications. From a social justice perspective, the emphasis here is on elite institutions unfairly refusing to recognize the knowledge and skills of workers and disadvantaged people, thus exacerbating inequality as the skilled but unqualified fall behind the qualified, and denying individuals entrance to educational institutions and credit for existing knowledge. From an economic perspective, lack of recognition for skills and knowledge obtained on-the-job or through informal learning leads to what a World Bank report on Bangladesh describes as ‘a serious wastage of skills within the whole economy (cited by Ian Moore 2008).

10 Egan (2002) and Muller (2001) both discuss the tendency for learner-centred and progressivist approaches to be presented as ‘new paradigms’, and Moore (2009) makes a similar point about relativist approaches to epistemology.

11 Although even this is not particularly new—see for example (Moore and Ozga 1991; Callahan 1962; Egan 2002; Grubb and Lazerson 2004; Wolf 2002).

12 The outcomes and lifelong learning rhetoric emphasizes how people can and do learn all the same things in the course of work and everyday life, that the learning which happens in formal education is the ‘tip of the iceberg’, and that the focus of policy should be on giving people certificates for competencies they already have (for example, Singh 2005; Cedefop 2008b). It is likely that in all countries there must be some individuals who don’t get jobs because the skills that they have are not formally recognized (although
In addition to this, it is asserted that traditional qualifications do not provide sufficiently clear information—to learners, so that they can make clear choices about whether or not they should invest in education and training, to employers, so that they can know whether or not to employ individuals who have specific qualifications, and to the governments who fund education. The low status of vocational qualifications in many countries is seen as a concern from a social justice point of view in countries where predominantly disadvantaged learners are enrolled in vocational education, and from an economic point of view because it could discourage learners from enrolling in more ‘useful’ programmes. Recognition of qualifications in other countries is also a concern from an economic perspective.

Another problem which the new learner-centred approach hopes to solve is what are seen as rigidities in the management and delivery of education, which are linked conceptually to the rigidities of the subject-centred curriculum and teacher-centred pedagogies. Education systems are described as ‘supply driven’, which in this case seems to mean that it is education institutions which determine what is taught. In many countries, particularly in vocational education, this is associated with centralized state provision.

Outcomes-based curricula reforms, outcomes-based national qualifications frameworks, and competency-based training are being introduced to solve these problems, and introduce a ‘new learning paradigm’, so that, finally, education can achieve its tantalizing promise of challenging inequality, by delivering what individuals and industries need, and capturing what they have learnt more transparently. In other words, the ‘new learning paradigm’ is the education policy solution for the realization of the ‘third way’, in which markets can work together with social justice, or, as Tony Blair put it, we can achieve the economic policy of free market but with strong emphasis on ‘values’ (cited in Callinicos 2001, p. 45).

**Win-win?**

As is generally the case with ‘win-win’ policies, the reality appears to be rather different. There is little comprehensively available researched information about the ‘new learning paradigm’, despite the rapid spread of national qualifications frameworks (over 100 countries involved at the last count (Allais 2010). This lack of research may be in part because of the newness of qualifications frameworks per se. Competency-based training, though, has a longer history as a way of reforming vocational education. It is hard to find convincing evidence of its successes, and there is much evidence of contestation and difficulties with implementation13. There is also much research pointing to problems of earlier manifestations of learner-centred reforms, particularly for disadvantaged learners14. The small research base on national qualifications frameworks suggests that so far they have limited successes even in their own terms, and that where there are successes, they are most likely to be found where modest frameworks are introduced

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13 See for example (Wheelahan 2010; Guthrie 2009; Loose 2008; Buchanan et al. 2009; Wolf 1995; Wolf 2002)

14 See for example (Muller 2001; Egan 2002; Berstein 1977; Taylor and Vinjevold 1999; Taylor 2000)
which do not have an over-emphasis on learning outcomes separated from learning programmes, and which have reasonably strong education systems to begin with (such as in Scotland, France, and Malaysia). My point here, though, is not to consider the empirical evidence about the ‘success’ of these policies, but rather to contest what counts as ‘success’, what education is, and demonstrate conceptually how this policy approach undermines what it could be.

There are many conceptual problems with the ‘new learning paradigm’ gospel. For example, as Grubb and Lazerson (2004) point out, in their discussion of the ‘education gospel’, there is a contradiction between the argument that education is supposed to solve social and economic problems plaguing modern societies, and the mistrust (or contempt) with which education institutions are regarded. Education is seen as a magic bullet:

Recent research reinforces the view that human capital not only plays a critical role in economic performance, but also brings key individual and social benefits such as better health, improved well being, better parenting, and increased social and political engagement.

(OECD 2007, p. 7)

But education institutions are seen as inflexible and clinging to narrow self-interested practices. Education is both the problem and the solution, but it can only be the solution once the practices of the people who staff education institutions completely change. Various other contradictions could be pointed out. I will focus here on one of the key conceptual weaknesses: that the new and dominant approach to education reform which is captured in the ‘new learning paradigm’ is based on a notion of labour markets, economies, employers, and, in short, capitalist economies, which is implausible.

De Moura Castro (2000) discusses the strong national training institutions established in Latin American countries mainly through payroll levies. He argues that they had “financial stability, comfortable budgets and a long-run perspective” (de Moura Castro 2000, p. 252), that they were successful and prestigious, in some instances far more so than the schooling system in their countries, and that they trained several generations of highly skilled workers. However, these workers worked in industries nurtured by import substitution policies. Economic crises as well as the responses of governments (such as choosing to join free trade agreements) led to the collapse of these industries. Skilled workers overnight had no industry to work in. Education cannot solve the structural problems of economies, which are caused or exacerbated by economic policy, political relationships, and power relationships between countries (Chang 2007).

The rhetoric about outcomes, competencies, qualifications frameworks, and lifelong learning enabling education and training to make a major contribution to economic development ignores the trend towards ‘deskilling’ which has dominated 20th capitalism. It also ignores the substantial body of research which interrogate whether education causes or follows economic growth (for example, Lauder and Brown 2009; Lauder 1997; Brown, Green, and Lauder 2001; Brown and Lauder 2006; Brown and Lauder 1992; Brown and Ashton 1987; Brown 1999). Further, as Lauder and Brown (2009) compellingly demonstrate, the promise of the knowledge economy has been manifestly broken. Instead,

only a minority has benefitted, while the majority is being confronted by routinisation created by intense global competitive pressures and a resulting labour market for high-skilled, low-waged work. Routinisation has been
Lauder and Brown’s ‘digital Taylorism’ is echoed in Christopher Newfield’s (2010) idea of the ‘cognotariat’, which captures the systematic stratification within ‘knowledge workers’ as a class or group, as well as the development of a structural basis for this stratification through proprietary knowledge. And Chang (2007) shows how current power relationships in the world between rich and poor countries, including things like the intensification of intellectual property rights and so-called ‘free trade’ are making it increasingly difficult for developing countries to follow similar paths to those which developed countries followed.

Much like what ‘third way’ policies look like in reality, current education policies are dominated by an expansionist rhetoric about social issues but, I suggest, their logic derives from neoliberalism as well as the conceptual tools of neoclassical economics.

**Economics imperialism**

Fine and Milonakis (2009, p. 66) characterize ‘economics imperialism’ as “marked by the common property of attempting to reduce as much as possible of the non-economic or the social to the optimizing behaviour of individuals”. In order to understand the logic of their notion of economics imperialism, I start by briefly drawing on their overview of the development of economics as a discipline (Milonakis and Fine 2009).

Classical political economy (including Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and other ‘founding fathers’) was concerned with understanding the capitalist economy. It drew on historical and social analysis and used inductive as well as deductive methods to analyze the functioning of markets and the nature of profits. The economy was treated as part of a wider social and historical milieu. Political economy in this sense tried to be a sort of unified social science (although of course at this point the disciplines were not developed in the forms that we know today). The history of economics as a discipline, punctuated by a few key struggles focusing primarily on methodology, has seen a consistent move away from this broad approach, and towards the growing prevalence of deductivism, methodological individualism, and the specific notion of marginal profits. As Fine (2001) shows, neoclassical economics starts by removing ‘society’, and paring its analysis down to individual free agents (*hominès economici*) conducting sensible transactions with each other each in their own self-interest. It ignores institutions and society—or sees them simply as collections of rational self-interested individuals, ignoring the complex relationships between institutions, structures, and individual agents that history, sociology, psychology, political economy, and other disciplines explore (Chang 2007; Chang 2002; Fine 2001; Fine and Milonakis 2009; Milonakis and Fine 2009; Fine 2010). Other schools of thought within economics, although not part of the mainstream, such as institutionalist economists and traditional political economy, instead regard the market as only one of the many institutions that make up the capitalist economic system (Chang 2002, p. 546).

Milonakis and Fine (2009) thus describe the development of neoclassical economics as a triple reductionism:

- First, the key analytical building block is reduced to the utility maximizing individual. Collective agents and structures, not least classes and institutions, are replaced by an
extreme notion of representative individuals as the basic unit of analysis. The economy is treated as a simple consequence of its aggregated elements.

- Second, the economy is reduced to market supply and demand in the absence of consideration of other ‘non-economic’ or social factors, as if market relations could prevail independently of broader social contexts. In other words, the economy is the market.

- Third, economic analysis is based on principles that claim to be universal across time and place. Even where terms like ‘profit’ and ‘wage’ are used, the assumption is that these are the equivalent of reward systems in other societies.

They describe how, over time, the technical apparatus associated with neoclassical economics became perfected and fully accepted within the discipline, and associated with an impressive and intimidating array of complex mathematical models (which are premised on the reductionism described above). Economics came to define itself as ‘the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses’. Thus, as Fine and Milonakis (2009) point out, having first developed tools of analysis by the exclusion of much social reality, economics turned outwards to apply these tools to these excluded areas of society. Having started by developing notions which did not claim to have empirical content—the utility maximizing individual, choice, efficiency, and other concepts such as equilibrium—economics imperialists could argue that these concepts had wider application than just to ‘the market’.

Proponents and critics alike, argue Fine and Milonakis (2009), have labeled this as the extension of economic analysis to subject matter beyond its traditional borders as ‘economics imperialism’. Fine and Milonakis’ account, though, points out that while economics imperialism implies a dualism between economics and other subjects, this could be about subject matter or method. The borders of economics are not clear, and how they could be defined in principle as well as how they have been defined in practice and over time are both matters of debate. They therefore explore different manifestations of this phenomenon over time. Two major trends in economics imperialism are relevant to understanding recent trends in education policy.

The first is largely associated with self-proclaimed economics imperialist Gary Becker, who explicitly attempted to apply the neoclassical technical apparatus to the social sphere and treat all other aspects of society as if they were markets. Becker was the first to extensively develop the notion of ‘human capital’. Initially there was substantial resistance to this notion, as it was generally accepted that education cannot be compared even analytically with a physical asset with productive potential (Fine and Milonakis 2009, p. 35). Many studies have pointed to serious deficiencies of this notion conceptually, as well as severe difficulties in actually measuring the ‘capital’ obtained through education, and the rates of return obtained or obtainable from it. Nonetheless, this notion has come to dominate educational thinking, and has facilitated seeing education through the lens of neoclassical economics, as individuals must decide what human capital to obtain for themselves.

The continued (and apparently increasing) pervasiveness of human capital was not reflected in other serious economics imperialism ‘successes’, as the early economics imperialism

\[15\] For example (David Ashton and Green 1996; Blackman 1987; Phillip Brown and Lauder 2006b; Vaizey 1972; Lapavitsas 2005; Phillip Brown and Lauder 2001; Dunk, McBride, and Nelsen 1996; Fine 2001a)

\[16\] As seen in the quote from the OECD above, which uses ‘human capital’ as synonymous with education.
imperialism was criticized even from within economics as seriously over-extending the notion of rational choice\textsuperscript{17}. Partly, this was dealt with by attempts to bolster and widen this notion, but without losing the notion of rational choice at the core. But largely, attempts to treat the world and all society as a perfectly functioning market were not successful. More recently, though, economics imperialism has had more successes. The key move within economics as a discipline which has facilitated this is acceptance that markets are imperfect, due to information asymmetries and transaction costs. With this move, economics is able to address society, institutions, and structures which were written out when it narrowed its focus to look at the economy as the market. However, this move must still be understood as imperialist. It does not re-examine societies and markets using the tools and insights of, say, sociologists, but rather, defines social entities as emerging as a result of and as a response to the existence of market imperfections, especially informational ones. In other words, as Fine and Milonakis (2009) explain, economic and social structures, institutions, customs, habits, culture, and apparently non-rational behaviour are explained as the “rational, possibly collective, sometimes strategic, and sometimes putatively path-dependent responses to market imperfections”. With this move, mainstream economics readdresses the social, allowing itself to appear more attractive to the other social sciences (institutions and history are seen as mattering), but keeping the same core ideas: the economy as supply and demand in the market, methodological individualism and marginal utility, and the universalistic nature of these concepts. The shift is that individuals are now seen as optimizing their utility in recognized conditions of historically evolved market and non-market imperfections\textsuperscript{18}.

**Economics imperialism and the ‘new educational paradigm’**

I suggest that the current emphasis on national qualifications frameworks, outcomes-based curriculum reform, competency-based training, and lifelong learning makes sense when seen as part of a rewriting of education according to this narrow economic script. The learner-centered education system makes sense as a market in which individual learners purchase ‘bits’ of learning, as and when they are required. Inadequate information is a problem for purchasers, though—for learners who are purchasing ‘human capital’ in the education market, for employers who are purchasing ‘capitalizable humans’ in the labour market, and governments which want to contract the development of ‘human capital’. Governments intervene, and, using the language of learning outcomes, try to increase the ‘transparency’ about educational qualifications, and at the same time, try to break down a monopoly on provision, to create the possibility of contracting new suppliers. They may even intervene to provide individuals with funding or vouchers, thus ‘leveling the playing field’.

Neoliberalism as an argument that markets work perfectly may have lost ground, even before the recent economic crisis, but neoliberalism as the doctrine that markets can fail, and therefore the main role of governments should be to improve how they function, may perversely have gained ground. This later neoliberalism (which Ben Fine has labelled ‘post-Washington consensus’ neoliberalism, but perhaps could also be called post-crisis neoliberalism) fits well with learning outcomes, qualifications frameworks, and competency-based training, which seem to provide the tools to expand education

\textsuperscript{17} Although arguably a remnant of its colonizing of the social sciences can be seen in the continued (although contested) presence of rational choice theory within sociology.

\textsuperscript{18} Behavioural economics even goes so far as to acknowledge that choices are not always (and frequently not) rational, but this is not addressed as a challenge to the tools and ideas which are built on the notion of the utility maximizing individual, but rather seen as something to be added on to it.
provision (and therefore lifelong learning) without dramatically increasing state expenditure or the creating of new state education institutions, through relying on competition to improve efficiency, and the state to create the appropriate regulatory environment and mechanisms. Learning outcomes, qualifications frameworks, and competency-based training models appear to provide the tools through which government can become a buyer of educational services instead of an operator of training or a governor by means of hierarchical or administrative controls, or a supplier of a service. The role of government is to establish rules for purchasing training, and to control or regulates quality of services offered—in other words, creating surrogate markets for services previously provided by the public sector, or, in the case of countries which have never had strong provision of education, for services which the public sector does not feel able to expand into.

Neoliberalism has centrally argued that the “state cannot be assumed to be an impartial and omnipotent social guardian, but should rather been seen as an organization run by self-seeking politicians and bureaucrats who are limited in their ability to collect information and execute policies but are also under pressures from interest groups” (Chang 2002, p. 540). Similarly, recent education policies suggest that self-interested lecturers and teachers run education institutions in their own interests, ignorant or ignoring the needs of industry and of individual learners. In both ideas what is assumed is that *homo economicus* will always try to do the least work possible for the most money, thus maximizing individual utility. Forcing civil servants or educators to function either within markets or as if they were within a market will, it follows, force them to be more efficient and responsive.

State reforms in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom since the 1980s are a clear example of this broad approach to neoliberal government. Collectively referred to as ‘new public management’, reforms in these countries were originally focused on the creation of quasi-markets in education and health, as well as generally increasing contractualization in the state. This involved privatizing state entities, as well as breaking state entities into smaller units, and forcing them to compete through contracts (Hood 1995; Pollit 1998; Phillips 1998). Qualifications frameworks and competency-based training emerged in these countries as part of the broader new public management reforms to the state (Young 2009; Phillips 1998). As I have demonstrated (Allais 2007), the NQF in South Africa, although located in a powerful discourse of democracy and access, was also introduced by a state with a strong liberalization agenda. Many developing countries are adopting outcomes- and competency-based approaches (primarily in vocational education), using similar kinds of models (Allais 2010). The specification of outcomes is supposed to open up markets, and ensure that new providers can emerge, as well as provide a means of holding existing providers to account, without the state having to play a central role in delivering education.

Learning outcomes, competencies, national qualifications frameworks, and lifelong learning seem to have become ‘magic concepts’ in education policy because of how well they fit in with the dominant discourse of the magic of the market and the ineptitude of the state, and redescribe education as process of individual utility maximization.

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19 Although these types of policies do in fact often lead to new state regulatory institutions.

20 Novoa (2002, p. 135) draws on Bourdieu (2000) in positing the notion of the spread of ‘banalities’ around the world, which become universally accepted as truth, and are then transformed into ‘magic concepts’ which provide solutions. I suggest, though, that they are not so much ‘banalities’ as economistic ways of thinking about education.
I suggest that this is likely to have several negative consequences. This suggestion draws partly on empirical research, but is primarily a conceptual point. As Novoa (2002) and others have pointed out, the notion of ‘employability’ redefines unemployment as a learning problem that can and should be solved by individuals. What is particularly pernicious about the ‘new learning paradigm’ approach is that, like ‘employability’, it is set up to blame individuals who fail to ‘take advantage of opportunities’, fail to ‘invest in themselves’, and fail to climb the qualification ladder.

The new learner-centred policy approach draws attention away from economic problems—governments which don’t want to, for example, intervene in labour market policy, or feel compelled to sign tariff agreements or privatize state enterprises—and blames education and training (and particularly, teachers) as well as individuals (who have failed to become sufficiently ‘employable’) for economic woes. At the same time, the solution is based on the entrepreneurial zeal of education institutions (or would-be institutions), and the need to build, develop, and sustain educational institutions is undermined. When economic success is not achieved, despite the new changes to education, and education institutions and teachers will still be blamed (they resisted the changes, did not implement them properly, and so on).

Loose (2008) argues that one of the biggest problems with the promotion of competency-based training in developing countries is that these countries have been in desperate need of the creation of an effective training system—the development of institutions, programmes, and curricula. These are just the things that competency based training does not address: it provides “the definition of competencies and the methodology for assessing them, but it failed to provide the “T” in CBET, a learning process as the basis for the creation of training itself” (Loose 2008, p. 76, emphasis in original). This means that the role of government is not focused on actually building and developing education institutions. As de Moura Castro (2000) argues, training in many technical areas requires long term investments, expensive equipment, and large groups of teachers with many years of education and training. Similarly, expanding education in developing countries requires building education institutions. For most African countries, secondary school is still an elite option. Reliance on the market to expand provision may in fact, ironically, make it impossible for education to be responsive to the needs of the economy or society. ‘Rolling back the state’ obviously has different effects where state provision was very weak in the first place. This is why it is concerning that in most instances, developing countries seem to be adopting a stronger notion of the role of outcomes and qualifications frameworks precisely because they don’t have the existing institutional base (Young 2010). Sadly, as De Moura Castro (2000) points out, governments which are not strong enough to repair institutions often have enough power to destroy them.

A problem which dogs outcomes- and competency-based approaches is that in order to provide sufficient clarity to the range of possible users (thereby improving information in the ‘market’), outcomes documents tended to become both very narrow and very overspecified—long detailed documents providing detailed assessment criteria and range statements for narrow and highly specific tasks. Even where this is not the case, the process of designing the learning outcomes frequently leads to arcane and complex disputes over terminology that become increasingly opaque to people not involved in the processes—and in the process belying the aim of increased transparency.21

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21 For example, Markowitsch and Luomi-Messerer (2008) show the process of shifting terminology and contested interpretations that lay behind the (still to be interpreted) levels of the European Qualifications Framework.
The English National Vocational Qualifications and the South African National Qualifications Framework provide particularly stark demonstrations of the problems which this type of model can lead to. In South Africa, the National Qualifications Framework was premised on a model which relied on the specification of standards through learning outcomes and the accreditation of providers in the context of weak or uneven provision; unsurprisingly, the standards became lengthy and unwieldy, new provision did not emerge, and existing education institutions were burdened with additional bureaucratic requirements. Outcomes-based qualifications frameworks for vocational education in Mauritius and Botswana, and for workplace training in Mexico, experienced similar problems. One clear lesson is that, in terms of delivery and management, the reliance on the market to deliver, and the state to regulate is unlikely to lead to new provision precisely because education is a highly specialist activity, requiring trained specialist teachers as well as (particularly in vocational education) equipment. This is why, as de Moura Castro (2000, p. 263) points out with regard to vocational education, “all industrial countries—with absolutely no exceptions—operate large public training systems financed from regular budgets”.

**Progressivism and social constructionism support economics imperialism**

But if my analysis is correct, why do these policies, or at least the broad policy approach, have support from progressive educators? Why is it cloaked in the language of empowerment and social justice (albeit limited notions of both concepts)? Why, in short, is it popular with educationalists, and not just neoclassical economists? To explore this, we need to return to the debate between subject- and learner-centred curricula. One of the flaws with the neoclassical economics version of education is that it denies or ignores the body of accumulated knowledge which has formed the basis of education systems. But this is precisely the same position as that which informs the progressive learner-centred curriculum, as well as the social constructionist ideas which underpin it.

Fine (2001; 2002) argues that an important reason for the co-existence of postmodernism and neoliberalism is that they both respect one another’s territory in a double sense—conforming where they overlap, but not engaging whether they are mutually inconsistent. They are both heavily concentrated on individual subjectivity (neo-liberalism emphasizing consumer and entrepreneurial sovereignty, and postmodernism the construction of identity). The state is perceived negatively by both—as an instrument of inefficiency and oppression respectively, although they reach this conclusion from very different perspectives. On the other hand, neo-liberalism, especially in its academic version, is entirely unconcerned with the meaning of things—in consumption, for example, with the nature of the consumer and the consumed—in complete contrast to postmodernism, which is exclusively preoccupied with meanings, excluding material reality. I would add to Fine’s list, that educational institutions are perceived negatively by both of them, as backward and monopolistic.

What Young and Muller (2010) refer to as an ‘over-socialized’ approach to knowledge, and Moore (2009) calls ‘standpoint relativism’, including post-modernism, social constructionism, and relativism, as well as progressivism and learner-centred curricula, all emphasize the role of the individual, individual choice, and the individual constructing their own knowledge. Given that this is the key analytical unit of neoclassical economics, this creates a useful common ground. Other conceptual similarities are a de-emphasis on structure (including the structure of knowledge and the structure of educational institutions), and a distaste for hierarchy. These flawed but extremely prevalent ideas, I
suggest, leave education as essentially open to colonization by neoclassical economics, because they disown any real or meaningful claims to speciality: they empty education of its specificity by abandoning a notion of the acquisition of knowledge as the main purpose of education, and the notion that knowledge needs specific institutional structures for its development and acquisition, particularly if it is seen as desirable to increase participation in both these activities.

Progressivism and social constructivism, two of the key ways of theorizing about education particularly popular with left wing educators and theorists, have enabled the redescription of education as a process whereby individuals are forced to constantly purchase their own retraining in order to attempt to be employed, and they have enabled this redescription to be seen as empowering. Thus, we have the free market fantasy of individuals freely and rationally acquiring their chosen human capital, assisted by the state, which uses its regulatory power to ensure that the same information is available to all agents. And we have a new version of Illich’s deschooling fantasy (Illich 1970) in which learning is not constrained by institutions, and individuals are free to choose from a wide range of learning possibilities when and how it suits them. What neither of these fantasies take account of is firstly, what the necessary conditions are for the acquisition of knowledge, and secondly, how and why institutions would actually emerge to offer such learning, and how they can be sustained.

This explains why, despite the popularity of subject-centred approaches among traditional conservatives, the learner-centred and social constructionist approach has been able to reach a better settlement with modern capitalism—or neoconservatives—than the traditional approach. It is precisely the withdrawal of a claim to knowledge, and the lack of a notion of the acquisition of knowledge as at the heart of education as a human activity which leaves education open to be colonized by economics. If education is not about something specific, it can be defined by stakeholders or interest groups, or redefined as a generic ‘service’ to be contracted in.

The problems that this type of approach lead to, just like earlier learner-centred reforms, are likely to experienced most starkly by disadvantaged people. Elite education, whether public or private, tends to stick with traditional subject-based curricula, and tends to have strong institutions with strong professional staff. It is therefore protected against an approach which hopes that marketization will ensure that education provision occurs, because institutions do not need to be created.

The problems that this type of approach lead to, just like earlier learner-centred reforms, are likely to experienced most starkly by poor people, people in poor countries, and people enrolled in vocational education programmes. Elite education, whether public or private, tends to stick with traditional subject-based curricula, and tends to have strong institutions with strong professional staff. It is therefore protected against an approach which hopes that marketization will ensure that education provision occurs, because institutions don’t need to be created. Intensifying the marketization of education systems in wealthy countries may well lead to new inequalities as fewer people can access good institutions, and gaps between institutions may increase. But in poor countries where there is little provision to start with, and weak professional bodies, an approach which underemphasizes the need to build such institutions (and the difficulty and long term nature of such an endeavour) will have more serious consequences. Similarly, weaker sectors of education systems, where institutions and the professional capacity and identity of educators is weaker, will be more affected. Vocational education in particular is where the greatest emphasis in policy change seems to be, in terms of National Qualifications Frameworks, outcomes-based approaches, or competency-based training
approaches. This may be because there is a history of a focus on competencies in vocational education, and because relationships between vocational education and labour markets are already expected to be much closer than those between general education and labour markets). The ‘new educational paradigm’ places additional expectations on this sector, at the same time as introducing policy mechanisms which make it ever more likely to become even weaker.

Learner-centred curricula, in blurring boundaries between different kinds of knowledge, and not making the acquisition of explicitly defined subjects the explicit purpose of education, generally lead to greater difficulties, not greater success, for disadvantaged learners. They also point out that the popular perpetuation of social constructionist ideas may mean that youth inherit social derision towards knowledge from their parents and the media, and may fail at school for lack of trying hard enough to master something so derided:

> Even as specialist knowledge grows apace at the cutting edge borders, the education systems may be fail to produce enough highly specialised practitioners of the future because the young have inherited the popular wisdom that the prize is not worth the effort.

(Young and Muller 2010, p. 21)

The rhetoric of outcomes-based qualifications and lifelong learning suggest that it is primarily lack of recognition for existing skills which is a barrier to lifelong learning, linked to the analysis of rigid entrance requirements (and also to the inflexibility of education institutions, which are structured around education as something that happens prior to work, and are unable or unwilling to offer courses more flexibly). But this diagnosis leaves unexplored what are surely much greater barriers to learning, such as the simple lack of educational institutions in many countries, as well as fees. This in itself may be linked to inflexibility—if there are few institutions and few qualified teachers, ‘flexible offerings’ maybe an unheard of luxury. Morrow (2007) suggests that in this sense, a focus on lifelong learning may come at the expense of basic education in countries where policy makers have very limited budgets and existing institutional resources. Focusing on the ‘inflexible’ and ‘conservative’ education institutions as the main obstacle to ‘lifelong learning’ may also result in less scrutiny being applied to industry—for example, practices such as work intensification, lack of time off, and lack of leisure and leave time.

Finally, the more that is expected of educational institutions (and vocational education in particular, which usually takes its students from those who have not succeeded in general education, is expected to perform miracles), the less likely they are to be able to achieve any of their diverse goals. Egan argues that

> schools can be quite good institutions when they concentrate sensibly on intellectual education, but they are less good at developing the whole person or producing good citizens or ensuring parenting skills ….That so many problems that the young face today are urgent and desperate still doesn't make the school an adequate institution to deal with them, but in trying to deal with them, however ineffectually, schools guarantee that they will not accomplish the traditional academic job adequately either.

(Egan 2002, pp. 135-136)

I have already mentioned Egan’s (2002; 2008) descriptions to the point that the failures of learner-centred reforms tend to swing back towards new variants of traditional
subject-based reforms, and vice versa. It is possible that the recent emphasis in recent international policy on international assessment tests such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMMS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) can be seen as one manifestation of this swing, with the emphasis on learner-centred and skills-based approaches swinging in the other direction. (International assessments, although in some sense focusing on ‘outcomes’, and providing measurable targets for governments, are criticized as being likely to lead to increasingly narrowly specified traditional subject-based curricula, as well as the many other of the much observed problems which emerge with an over-emphasis on examinations and very rigidly specified curricula, such as alienation from learning and lack of conceptual mastery. See for example Sahlsburg (2006) for a statement of learner-centred approaches as the required alternative to what he describes as the problems of the international assessment movement). As Egan (2008, p. 33) argues, internationally there are two radically different sets of criteria for the same institution, one set “driving us centripetally toward a common-core academic curriculum, the other set driving us centrifugally toward diversity and difference based on individual needs”. It seems likely that both trends, instead of compensating for each other, will drive each other ever more strongly.

Start from somewhere else?

I have suggested in this paper:

- that the tug-of-war between the two main ways of thinking about the curriculum, and the history of swings between the one and the other, as well as the attempts to form compromises between them, are partly based on the inadequacy of both of them in their own right;
- that the ideas about knowledge which underpin both of these approaches are inadequate;
- that while learner-centred curricula and social constructionist ideas about knowledge may have progressive origins, and are popularly associated with progressive politics, their consequences are anything but progressive: they have facilitated an economics imperialist conquest of education, whereby the tools of neoclassical economics have been used to redescribed how education is thought about in policy internationally.

It seems unsatisfactory to end without suggesting what the alternative approach could be. Although I don’t have space here to elaborate, I will point out briefly the direction in which I think we should look. Rob Moore (2009) argues that ‘we need to start from somewhere else’ if we want to resolve the conflict between ‘positivist’ and ‘social constructionist’ approaches to knowledge. We need to step away from notions of foundationalism, acknowledge and analyse the social ways in which knowledge is developed, but also take seriously the idea of knowledge as a structured organization of symbolic ways of thinking about the world. The emerging social realist school of thought referred to above offers an attempt at doing this, by offering a more productive notion of knowledge from which to think about education.

22 For example, David Gove, current UK Minister of Education, while still shadow-Minister in the then opposition, is quoted in The Times as saying, “I am unashamed traditionalist when it comes to the curriculum. Most parents would rather their children had a traditional education, with children sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England, the great works of literature, proper mental arithmetic, algebra by the age of 11, modern foreign languages. That’s the best training of the mind and that’s how children will be able to compete” (Thomson and Sylvester 2010).
A social realist approach to knowledge explains the *differentiatedness* of knowledge (Young and Muller 2010). Knowledge areas, as organized forms of symbols, are structured in part independently of how we acquire them, affected by the internal logics of what Moore (2009) calls the problem field, including the subject and tools of analysis, as well as by the institutional field—the actors and the interests which they represent.

Knowledge areas differ in their internal coherence, their principles of cohesion, and their procedures for producing new knowledge. The boundaries between school and non-school or everyday knowledge are not arbitrary. Boundaries between different areas of knowledge can and do shift (as we have seen above within economics as a discipline, as well as in its relationship to other disciplines) but they are not arbitrary.

It may not be straightforward to determine which subjects should be taught in which kinds of educational institutions. Even more complex, given the inherent limitations of time, is the process whereby experts in relevant disciplines select the appropriate content from each subject. This does not mean a return to the ‘traditional’; it is precisely the acknowledgement that knowledge is constructed and that it changes that means there are difficult choices to be made about which bodies of knowledge to teach. But bodies of knowledge must be the starting point from which curricula are defined, and these difficult choices need to be argued out and decided on. A common critique of traditional subject-based curricula is that they lead to memorization of ‘inert facts’, instead of mastery of concepts. A common critique of learner-centred curricula is that they lead to vacuous and superficial curricula, because concepts cannot be taught outside of a body of knowledge. This is because approaches to knowledge which do not differentiate ‘information’ from subject knowledge do not reveal concepts. It is only through bodies of knowledge that education can enable the acquisition of facts and concepts, because concepts are part of bodies of knowledge, and derive their existence and meaning from them.

School, Bernard Charlot (2009) eloquently argues, is a place where the world is treated as an *object* and not as an *environment* or *place of experience*. The problem of pedagogy, he suggests, is controlling the relationship between the object of thought and its referents in life’s environment, and introducing the pupil to intellectual worlds made up of objects whose meaning does not derive primarily from a relationship with the world as it is experienced. Charlot suggests that while there are instances in which drawing from everyday life can be a useful pedagogical strategy, it can also create new obstacles because it can hide the special meaning of school activity. He suggests instead that the role of the teacher is to create *distance* between the everyday world, to enable learners to leave the subjective world of their emotions, feelings, experience and view the world as an object to be thought out. Further, ways of thinking which are acquired in education are systematized because objects must be seen in the relations that they maintain with other concepts, and not by a direct connection with a referent, as is experienced in the world of experience. This is why, as Muller and Young (2010) argue, the relationship between teachers and students, while in no way inherently authoritarian, is inevitably hierarchical and involves professional authority, derived from teachers’ grasp of the knowledge area which they are teaching.

This is why knowledge which can be obtained through education is often not directly practically useful, or easy to learn, and learners need to be introduced into it in a sustained way, gradually acquiring greater levels of conceptual depth and breadth. Mastery of extensive specifically chosen facts, concepts and principles requires uninterrupted, extended, well-planned, and structured educational programmes. It cannot be disaggregated easily, as learning needs to be sustained, sequenced, and systematic. A
good curriculum must take as a starting point careful thought about how the body of knowledge or subject in question is organized. Obviously there are other key questions—such as the developmental needs of young learners, or how work is organized, and the relationships between the body of knowledge and its application. But decisions about which bodies of knowledge (subjects) to teach, and what content to select from them, must be a key starting point.

Charlot explains that it is through the processes of distancing and systematization that an epistemic Self emerges, which is able to see the world as an object of thought. He argues, therefore, that this specific educational activity cannot be understood as a simple imposition of the rules of the ruling classes; it has value as a specific and elaborate form of relating to the world. The implication of his argument is that this specific activity, which is the essence of education, cannot have a narrow one-to-one relationship with the labour market, or with the economy. There is a fundamental contradiction between the universalizing possibilities of school, and the exclusionary tendencies of capitalism, which mean that the two will never fit neatly together. He also argues that it is also a mistake to overvalue this activity, and to undervalue other valuable ways to relate to the world, to others, to oneself, and to other activities that are worth being carried out and perfected in a human lifetime. Paradoxically, allowing a far more limited role for education than the multiple goals expected of our education institutions today, and seeing it as an activity which is intrinsically valuable, may be the best way of ensuring that education contributes to society.

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23 This does not imply the detached, asocial, disembodied epistemic agent which is the target of post-modernists, but simply the self as engaged in the act of thinking and learning about the world as an object and the sets of concepts which have been developed to make sense of this world.


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