

Chapter 3

Funds of Knowledge and Epistemic Authority in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how knowledge networks of academics shape epistemic authority in higher education institutions. The issue is addressed with the approach of funds of knowledge (Bensimon, 2009) and social network theory. Social networks (of collaboration, influence, friendship, etc.) have been mainly approached with an emphasis on their actual structure and the relationship between position in that network and other features. However, little is known about how those networks of ties affect how knowledge is embodied, encoded, and enacted within higher education institutions at the interpersonal level. Rather than examining the specific qualities of any researcher's fund of knowledge, the authors focus on showing how the approach of funds of knowledge can be operationalised by social network analysis to investigate epistemic authority and epistemic change in research agendas. Knowledge networks are described as epistemic conduits, and the challenges of research in this topic are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The university was and continues to be a compelling force in providing necessary training, among other things, to its community. Apart from the academic expertise espoused by its members to the rest, its function of being a knowledge-based centre to the community at large contributes to

creating a learning region wherein the benefits of the university extends beyond its students—for instance, by providing jobs and markets through the attraction of possible companies and other institutions to its vicinity, with such institutions having the chance to further upgrade its members' training as can be offered by the university. This, in turn, contributes to the overall socio economic

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development of the region as clearly exemplified by this multiplier effect (Publications editor and Full Professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Malaysia).

Yes, I agree that universities are elements of cleavage because there is a huge lack of participation in the construction of a holistic and connected knowledge. What I understand is that the construction of knowledge is done in ways that are compartmentalized, disciplinary, rather than multidisciplinary, which may lead to cleavage, competition and dissection (PhD student at the University of Porto).

Universities privilege certain ways of knowing: academic and competition-driven ways basically. Unfortunately it is not until very late in one's university training (PhD level, more or less) that one can get to develop more personally driven ways of knowing, e.g. through research training. Universities are (usually) old institutions that carry a slow-moving, slow-shifting culture with them, so it is a great struggle for them to keep up conceptually on an institutional basis, even if individual professors are able to. In other words, they are much more likely to stick to, or reproduce, time-honored ways of approaching subject X or Y. Individuals may be identifying new ways on a personal basis, but it takes a long time before these might get institutionalized. There are many ways of knowing in the world. Universities really only cater to the dominant ones (Higher education researcher, publications editor and assistant professor at the Center for International Education, University of Massachusetts-Amherst).

What do these excerpts¹ have in common? Each one of them seems to offer a different way of thinking, of making sense of the role of universities as places where knowledge is created and disseminated and where the nature of knowledge

is at stake. Yet despite of the differences there is something common to the three excerpts. All of them entail rationalities based on networks, diversity and processes (cognitive and institutional) of creating knowledge.

This chapter analyses the issue of epistemic authority regarding the creation of knowledge from the point of view of social network theory and analysis. In this chapter, it will be contended that: 1) the approach of funds of knowledge is an appropriate device to explore the processes of creation and adoption of knowledge by researchers in higher education institutions; 2) social networks are at the same time the site in which these funds arise, grow and change and a component of those dynamic funds.

The claim of this chapter is that emergent processes of knowledge creation – in terms of epistemic states – are highly shaped by the social and knowledge networks in which academics and researchers are engaged. The primary focus of this work will be on knowledge creation. Thus, instead of focusing on the vehicles of distribution of knowledge and scientific outputs (Goldman, 1999) the emphasis will be on the role of knowledge networks – seen as epistemic conduits. Social networks (of collaboration, influence, friendship, etc.) have been mainly approached by focusing on their actual structure and the relationship between position in that network and other features. More recently, there has been an increasing interest on the effect of that network structure, but not on the content of those relations. It is based on the latter that we will look at epistemic authority and at the funds of knowledge of academics using a social network approach.

Knowledge – and social science about it – has to be understood in its cultural, political and economic contexts, but does not reduce to any of those. Why? A possible answer is that we are experiencing a transition period within the academic world, in which scholars put aside both manichean

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