

Chapter 4: How Student-Centred Learning and Instruction can obscure the Importance of Knowledge in Educational Processes and Why it Matters.

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Abstract

In this chapter, I examine how Student-Centered Learning and Instruction (SCLI) characterizes teaching-learning processes in higher education. I argue that, whilst SCLI is an important corrective to traditional teacher-centered approaches to higher education, by centering students' learning processes it can obscure the educational character of higher education. I argue that there are three aspects to this that are all related to the role of knowledge in the educational process. First, it obscures the ways in which students are transformed by their engagement with knowledge, second it obscures the importance of the expertise of teachers in designing an environment that provides students with access to knowledge, and third it obscures the role of educational institutions in providing a context in which this transformation can take place. I argue that as a whole the obscuring of the educational nature of students learning processes can have the unintended consequence of undermining a commitment to higher education.

Introduction

Student-Centered Learning and Instruction (SCLI) is an important corrective to traditional teacher-centered approaches to learning and instruction. However, in this chapter I argue that it can obscure the educational character of teaching-learning processes by foregrounding students' experiences of learning processes at the expense of a focus on the role of knowledge. Drawing on the conceptual work of Basil Bernstein, I argue that there are three aspects to this. First, it obscures the ways in which students are transformed by their engagement with knowledge, second it obscures the importance of the subject knowledge expertise of teachers in higher education, and third it obscures the role of educational institutions in providing a context in which students can be transformed by their engagement with knowledge. I argue that as a whole this lack of attention to knowledge can undermine the important role that universities play in making knowledge accessible to students.

Conceptual issues

In this chapter, I consider the way in which SCLI characterizes teaching-learning processes in higher education. This analysis is built around a particular view of the way in which we can

gain an understanding of the social world. Briefly this view is that the complexity of the social world exceeds our capacity to know it and we can only develop an understanding of it by using concepts that simplify what is going on (see Ashwin 2009 for a full argument for this position and an exploration of different ways of simplifying teaching-learning interactions in higher education). From this position, SCLI is a lens that we can use to understand what is going on in teaching-learning processes. There are also other ways that we can simplify these processes that would provide a different account of what is going on. It is important to be clear that the process of simplification means that different ways of simplifying teaching-learning processes focus on different aspects of teaching and learning processes. Different simplifications may overlap in some ways and contradict each other in other ways, which means that it is not possible to synthesize all simplifications together to create a full picture of what is going on. Attempts at such synthesis will lead to oversimplifications of teaching-learning processes. What we can do is to move between simplifications and ask what aspects of teaching-learning processes they foreground and what they put in the background. We can then consider what the consequences of using particular simplifications are: what do they help us to see that we were not able to see before and what do they obscure by the ways in which they simplify teaching-learning processes.

How does SCLI simplify teaching-learning processes?

In considering SCLI, it is important to be clear that it is not a recent phenomenon. Arguments that the learner should be at the center of the education process have been around for at least 250 years (Smith 2010; Taylor 2013). In higher education, its origins tend to be seen as arising from the work of Carl Rogers (1951) and the argument that we cannot teach someone else only facilitate their learning (see Lea et al. 2003; Holmes 2004; O'Neill and McMahon 2005; Paris and Combs 2006; Macfarlane 2015; Sweetman 2017; Harju & Åkerblom 2017).

Klemenčič (2017) argues that SCLI is best seen as a meta-concept that takes on particular meanings when associated with specific fields. She examines its different meanings as a pedagogic concept for individual learning, as a cultural frame for developing communities of learning, and as a lever for supporting learning systems. In this chapter, I consider how SCLI characterizes teaching-learning processes which cuts across these three different fields and focuses on what elements of these processes are placed in the foreground when one considers them from the perspective of SCLI.

SCLI's characterization of teaching-learning processes in higher education highlights four key elements of these processes (see Lea et al. 2003; Holmes 2004; O'Neill and McMahon 2005; Paris and Combs 2006; Biesta 2010; Macfarlane 2015; Sweetman 2017; Harju & Åkerblom 2017). First, the central focus is on students' active construction of learning. Second, the role of the teacher is to construct an environment that provides opportunities to meet the individual needs of the student and for them to work with other students. Third, this emphasizes the active choices of the student about what and how to learn and their responsibility for making these choices. Fourth, this involves a shift in power from the teacher to the student. If we consider this simplification, we can see that the aspects of the educational process that are highlighted are the student, the teacher, the relationship between student and the teacher, the environment in which they are located and other students located in that environment.

The strengths of this simplification are that it recognizes the student and their learning as a key actor in the learning process. This is an important step in challenging an understanding of teaching-learning processes in which the student is treated as an object and the act of learning is seen as synonymous with the act of teaching. In other words SCLI challenges the view that the student will learn whatever they are taught. Tagg (2019) refers to this as the 'instructional paradigm' in which it is possible to work out what students have learnt simply by counting the number of courses they have passed. However, whilst SCLI offers an important correction to these kinds of teacher-centered accounts of the teaching-learning processes, there are some important elements of the educational process that are left out of this simplification. In this chapter I will focus particularly focus on the way in which this characterization obscures the role of knowledge in the educational process.

At this point it is worth commenting on the similarities and differences between the analysis in this chapter and McKenna and Quinn's argument in Chapter 5. McKenna and Quinn identify three misconceptions related to SCLI: the lack of consideration of knowledge, a focus on the development individual attributes at the expense of understanding students' identities, and the focus on students as customers that can develop when SCLI is taken up within neo-liberal discourses. Whilst there are overlaps in the focus of the argument in this chapter and that of McKenna and Quinn, particularly in relation to a focus on the importance of knowledge in the educational process, there is a difference in the underlying arguments. Whilst McKenna and Quinn argue that they have identified three misconceptions of SCLI,

the argument in this chapter is that the ways in which SCLI inevitably simplifies the educational process has the tendency to obscure the important role of knowledge in this process rather than this being a misconception of SCLI. I argue that in relation to knowledge there are three key elements that are missing from this process of simplification. These are the central role that engagement with academic knowledge plays in the educational process, the importance of this knowledge in defining the expertise of teachers, and the role that educational institutions play in providing access to this knowledge. The problem with casting knowledge into the background of the educational setting is that it limits our awareness of the ways in which knowledge changes as it moves through the educational process. Knowledge is key because it is what we seek to generate when we research, it is what we seek to give students access to when we teach, and it is what students seek to gain through their engagement with higher education.

In line with the argument above, a focus on knowledge in the educational process would require an alternative simplification of the educational process than that which is offered by SCLI. One simplification that usefully captures this way of thinking about knowledge is Bernstein's (1990, 2000) notion of the 'pedagogic device'. This brings together the contexts in which knowledge is produced through research, transformed into the curriculum of particular courses, and then changed again as students develop their own understanding of that knowledge. It is important to be clear that for Bernstein the pedagogic device operates at the level of society rather than it being a device that is part of the pedagogic process. Thus it is about the ways in which societies produce research and the 'distribution rules' that govern what counts as legitimate knowledge; the ways in which this knowledge is transformed into curriculum through 'recontextualising rules'; and the ways in which these are transformed in pedagogic practices through the 'evaluation rules' (Bernstein 1990, 2000). What is interesting in the context of higher education is the way in which all three sets of rules can take places within a single academic department (Ashwin 2009).

In separating the ways in which knowledge is produced, transformed into curriculum, and understood by students, the pedagogic device can be seen as highlighting three different forms of knowledge: knowledge-as-research, knowledge-as-curriculum and knowledge-as-student-understanding (Ashwin 2014). What Bernstein makes clear is that the transformation of knowledge as it moves from each of these contexts is not simply based on the logic of knowledge itself. Rather these transformations are the sites of struggle in which different

voices seek to impose particular versions of legitimate knowledge, curriculum and student understanding.

It is important to be clear that the argument in this chapter is that Bernstein's (1990, 2000) framing of the pedagogic device offers a way of foregrounding knowledge in the educational process. However, it is just as much of a simplification of the educational process as that which is offered by SCLI. So what is at stake in the argument in this chapter is not about which of these simplifications allows us to see more. The argument is rather about which of these simplifications allows us to attend best to educationally important issues when students are learning in higher education. Equally, there are clearly other simplifications that could be used beyond the two that are considered here. Thus the overall intention of this chapter is to contribute to a discussion of which kinds of simplifications are most useful to think about particular kinds of questions rather than to propose the definitive way of understanding teaching-learning processes in higher education (see Ashwin 2012 for a discussion of how this can contribute to theory development in higher education research).

Review of the consequence of SCLI's characterization of teaching-learning processes in higher education

In this section, I review the issues that arise from the way in which knowledge is placed in the background of SCLI's characterization of teaching-learning processes in higher education. I argue that in underestimating the importance of knowledge in students' engagement with their educational experience, teachers' expertise, and the role of educational institutions, SCLI can be seen to undermine a commitment to higher education as an educational enterprise. My argument is not that this is a necessary consequence of SCLI, but rather that it is a tendency that is supported by the unreflective use of the simplification of the educational process that is provided by SCLI.

SCLI and the underestimation of the educational importance of academic knowledge in teaching-learning processes in higher education

As I argued above, the central focus of SCLI is on the active processes through which students construct their learning. This means that there is not an explicit focus on what students are learning. A similar process can be seen in the literature on student engagement in higher education, where the issue of what students are engaging with is often left implicit. This is important, because as Ashwin & McVitty (2015) show, the meaning of student

engagement changes when the object of student engagement changes. Similarly, the meaning of learning changes according to who is learning and what is being learnt.

This means that SCLI does not offer a rich sense of the process by which students develop an understanding of knowledge, beyond describing it as an active process of construction that is shaped by the students previous understanding. The tendency to focus on the processes of learning rather than what is being learned is best illustrated by the tendency to describe the outcomes of higher education in terms of generic skills or graduate attributes that students' develop through their learning in higher education. Rather than focusing on the knowledge that students' gain from their engagement with higher education, graduate attributes focus on the generic descriptions of these outcomes that employers value, which will support individual prosperity and economic development. For example, Jackson (2014, pp.220-221) argues:

Enhancing the employability of graduating students features significantly in the strategic agenda of higher education providers worldwide. There has been a gradual shift in industry expectations of graduates from exhibiting academic expertise in a chosen discipline to a commercially aware candidate with a strong command of, and immediate ability to apply, a broad range of skills deemed essential in the workplace.

Whilst, at first, seeing the purpose of undergraduate education in terms of the development of generic skills might look convincing, it falls apart when we examine what this means in relation to specific skills. The issue here is that just because we can describe any process in generic terms, it does not mean that what is at stake in this process is meaningfully generic. After all, we can describe any social interaction in terms of as many generic skills that we have the imagination to construct. For example, Jackson (2014) identifies ten generic employability skills: working effectively with others; communicating effectively; self-awareness; thinking critically; analyzing data and using technology; problem solving; developing initiative and enterprise; self-management; social responsibility and accountability; and developing professionalism. It is quite possible to imagine a single interaction in which the practices of a student can be described in terms of all ten of these generic skills. However, if we do, it does not mean that the student has demonstrated all ten of these generic skills. This is because being able to describe particular practices in terms of particular generic skills is not the same as a student actually demonstrating these skills. A

category error has been made in which a generic description of a practice has been mistaken for the demonstration of a generic skill.

To look at this another way, we can take two of the skills listed by Jackson (2014), communication skills and problem solving skills. In terms of communication skills, we can describe what is going on in different situations, at different times and in different locations in terms of communication skills. However, it does not follow that if a student is good at communicating in English, then they will also be good at communicating in Chinese. The same is true of problem solving. If a student can solve a problem in chemistry, then it does not mean that they can solve a sociological problem. This is because skillful acts of communication or problem solving require knowledge about the subject matter that is the focus of the act; knowledge of the situation the student is in, and knowledge of the people with whom the student is acting. Without such knowledge, these skills are simply empty descriptions of practices. Thus understanding the knowledge that students are engaged with and the understandings that they have developed of this knowledge are central to any educational understanding of their university experiences.

The discussion above highlights how knowledge is important in understanding what students have gained from higher education, it also plays a crucial role in changing students' understanding of themselves and the world. For example, in a longitudinal study examining how students' studied sociology at university, Monica McLean, Andrea Abbas and I (see Ashwin et al. 2014, 2016, 2017; McLean et al 2018) developed a rich sense of how engagement with sociological knowledge changed students' sense of who they were and what they could do in the world. For example, one student told us:

There is no destination with this discipline...There is always something further and there is no point where you can stop and say 'I understood, I am a sociologist'. ... The thing is sociology makes you aware of every decision you make: how that would impact on my life and how it could impact on someone else. And it makes the decision harder to make. (quoted in Ashwin et al. 2014).

This quotation highlights how the students' engagement with knowledge has changed her view of the world and her role in it. This relationship highlights the ways in which these skills are embedded in the knowledge of the discipline rather than being meaningfully generic.

These kinds of changes happen in other subjects too. Table 1 shows studies from a range of disciplines that examined how university students’ understanding of knowledge change over time. The changes fall into three main stages. A basic account focuses only on the immediately visible aspects of the discipline, a middle ‘watershed’ account in which students’ begin to focus on personal meaning and a most inclusive account in which they go beyond personal meaning to see the discipline within a wider context. These changes give an insight into how engaging with knowledge at university changes students’ understanding of their disciplines, the world and themselves. This is a process that is so much more than the development of generic of skills or the gaining of information. It is a process that fundamentally changes who students are and what they can achieve in the world.

Table 1: Structure of students’ accounts of different disciplines (adapted from Ashwin et al. 2014)

Discipline	Studies	Least inclusive Account	‘Watershed’ account	Most Inclusive account
Mathematics	Wood et al. 2012	Numbers	Models	Approach to life
Accountancy	Sin et al. 2012	Routine work	Meaningful work	Moral work
Law	Reid et al. 2006	Content	System	Extension of self
Music	Reid 2001	Instrument	Meaning	Communicating
Geography	Bradbeer et al. 2004	General world	Structured into parts	Interactions
Geoscience	Stokes 2011	Composition of earth – the earth	Processes – interacting systems	Relations earth and society

These kinds of studies show that without a sense of the knowledge that students are engaged with, we cannot develop meaningful accounts of the educational processes that students are part of in higher education. If knowledge is so important this raises the question of why generic descriptions of these educational processes have become so dominant. The argument in this chapter is that SCLI's focus on the learning processes is one reason for this but there are others. For example, a great deal of research into teaching and learning in higher education has tended to involve students from a range of disciplines rather than focusing on students' learning in particular disciplines (see Entwistle 2018 for discussion of the development of one of the fields of research that have informed our understanding in teaching and learning in higher education). The argument here is that whilst generic descriptions can be useful to examine teaching-learning processes across different knowledge areas, it is important to remember to 'bring the knowledge back in' (Young 2007) when we are discussing the educational processes in particular disciplines or degree courses in order to offer a meaningful account of their educational process.

SCLI and the underestimation of the importance of academic knowledge in teaching expertise
As I discussed earlier, SCLI foregrounds the role of the teacher in constructing an environment that meets the needs of the student. There is an emphasis on their role as a facilitator of the students' learning processes. The second consequence of SCLI's simplification of teaching-learning processes is that it underplays the expertise of the teacher and in particular their expertise in making knowledge accessible to students.

Holmes (2004) and Biesta (2010) argue that what they respectively refer to as 'learnerism' and 'learnification' of education has resulted in an over focusing on the learning processes and the experiences of the individual learner rather than an understanding of the relationship between teachers and students. Whilst a key part of these arguments are related to the ways in which this decontextualizes students as discussed by McKenna and Quinn in Chapter 5, this also has an impact on how we understand the educational role of the teacher. This is partly because, as Holmes (2004) and Biesta (2010) argue, there is a tendency to focus on the learning process without any sense of the purpose of that learning. Just as Brink (2018) argues that the discourse of excellence in higher education encourages universities to focus

on what they are good at rather than what they are good for, SCLI encourages us to focus on students' learning but not what they are learning for.

Holmes (2004) and Biesta (2010) argue that SCLI can be seen to imply that the responsibility for whether students have learnt something or not is largely down to the student. SCLI can be seen to suggest that providing that students are active enough and the teacher does not place any obstacles in their way then they will be successful regardless of other factors. There are two important consequences of this. First, as Holmes (2004) argue this gives SCLI an almost oppressive character with any failure in learning being due to the student being the wrong kind of learner or the teacher the wrong kind of teacher. Macfarlane (2015) further develops this argument and explores how SCLI demands that students offer public performances of their understanding rather than engaging in private contemplation. Macfarlane (2015) argues that students lose their right to silence and can be positioned as inappropriately passive if they prefer to work alone. There is also a tendency to underestimate and dismiss as irrelevant the discomfort that students can feel during class discussion.

Second, the positioning of the teacher as a facilitator of learning, whose main job is not to get in the way of learning, undermines the importance of the subject knowledge expertise of the teacher and de-professionalises them (Holmes 2004; Biesta 2010). In particular it loses a sense of what Lee Shulman (1986) termed 'pedagogical content knowledge', the knowledge of how to make particular kinds of academic knowledge accessible to particular students. Pedagogical content knowledge highlights that, whilst teaching can be usefully understood in terms of designing an environment for students, this environment has an educational intention within it. It is about designing ways in which particular students can develop an understanding of particular bodies of disciplinary and/or professional knowledge. This educational approach involves creating an environment in which students relate their identities to their disciplines/professions and the world and see themselves implicated in knowledge.

Harju & Åkerblom (2017) show the importance of this teaching expertise in their exploration of how an SCLI innovation failed to operate in the way that was expected. An attempt to set up a student-led initiative faltered because the students involved wanted to frame their research projects in terms of the language of their everyday practices rather than the specialized language of the discipline that they were studying. The teacher felt that they had

to intervene because students' everyday knowledge would not enable them to frame their research projects in ways that would allow them to demonstrate disciplinary understandings through these projects. Thus the subject expertise of the teacher was vital in understanding which ways of framing these projects would be educationally productive for the students.

Overall, then SCLI's characterization of the role of the teacher as being a facilitator of students' learning underestimates the importance of pedagogical content knowledge in designing an environment in which students can have educationally rich experiences. The underestimation of the importance of teachers' knowledge also can contribute to a situation in which the professionalism of teachers is undervalued.

SCLI and the underestimation of the importance of educational institutions

As well as underestimating teaching expertise, the simplification that is offered by SCLI also puts the importance of educational institutions into the background. In fact Holmes (2004) argues that this goes beyond putting them in the background and encourages an understanding of teaching and learning in which institutions are positioned in opposition to the natural process of learning. Rather than being understood as providing students with a thoughtfully designed context in which they can develop powerful relationships to knowledge, educational institutions are instead positioned as an authoritarian imposition which simply gets in the way of students be able to meet their needs as learners. This can lead to educators and institutions being caught in a trap where if they resist changes towards SCLI, then this is taken as further evidence of their inflexibility and how they distort the 'natural' process of learning. Thus any resistance to the idea of SCLI is read as a signal of an even greater need for a shift to SCLI rather than as a principled concern about a distortion of the educational process.

Bernstein's (1990, 2000) conceptualization of the pedagogic device offers an alternative characterization of the role of educational institutions. It highlights the importance of institutions providing a context in which different actors can come together in order to generate curricula. These processes can be conflictual and are not always inclusive but Bernstein (1990, 2000) highlights how the construction of curricula is a necessary part of the educational process. Knowledge needs to be transformed from knowledge-as-research to knowledge-as-curriculum and is then transformed again by students as it becomes

knowledge-as-student-understanding. These processes of transformation cannot happen without educational institutions.

This is important because a lack of a sense of how institutions are central to the production of these different forms of knowledge can undermine a commitment to formal educational processes. A clear example of this is offered by those who argue that the main role of undergraduate degrees is to signal to employers that graduates are worth employing (Woolf 2002; Caplan 2018). Under this view, mass higher education is seen as a waste of resources because it simply leads to previously non-graduate jobs being defined as graduate jobs without any increase in the quality of the practices of those undertaking these jobs. This view can only gain purchase if we lose sight of the role of educational institutions in transforming and providing access to specialized knowledge. We can see this in Caplan's (2018) argument 'against education'. He argues that there is no societal need for formal education because all knowledge can be meaningfully accessed from the Internet and that people's failure to do so shows that they are simply not interested in gaining access to this knowledge. This highlights how the underestimation of how students are changed by their engagement with knowledge, the underestimation of the expertise of the teacher in designing an environment in which this engagement can be effectively supported, and the underestimation of the importance of educational institutions in providing a context in which knowledge is transformed into curricula can come together to undermine a commitment to the entire educational process.

Bringing together students, teachers, institutions and knowledge.

Thus the outcome of this analysis is that rather than centering the student in the educational process, we need to understand how higher education brings students into relationship with knowledge, the role that teachers play in designing programs that encourage this to happen, and the role of institutions in providing a context in which the curriculum for these programs is transformed from knowledge-as-research to knowledge-as-curriculum and is transformed again into knowledge-as-student-understanding. This highlights that the educational process involves the design of curricula that are focused on providing students with access to knowledge that will transform their sense of who they are and what they can do in the world. To do this, educators need to have a clear sense of who their students are, how the knowledge they will give them access to is powerful, and who it will enable their students to become in the wider lives as well as in their careers. It is clear that students might change in ways that their university teachers do not expect but their teachers should have a sense of what they are

intending to achieve by giving students access to this knowledge. In other words, they have a responsibility as educators to know how they think students will benefit by studying with them. It is also important to be clear that this is demanding work – it does not always work- and teachers need to continually collect, analyze and discuss evidence with their colleagues about how well their approaches to curriculum design and teaching are working (Ashwin et al. 2015). This role is so much more than being a facilitator of learning. It requires students to be active participants in the learning process in the ways described by SCLI, but it also requires teachers who have a rich understanding of how to make knowledge accessible to the particular students that they teach, and educational institutions which can provide a context in which curricula can be produced and students educated.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how SCLI provides an account of teaching-learning processes that obscures the importance of knowledge within the educational process. I have shown how this can lead to accounts of teaching and learning in higher education that fail to take account of the ways in which students are transformed by their engagement with knowledge, that fail to value the importance of teachers' understanding of how to make this knowledge accessible to students, and that fail to appreciate the crucial role that educational institutions play in providing a context for these processes to occur. It is important to be clear that the argument here is not that this is what SCLI intends to do. It is rather an unintended consequence of the aspects of the educational process that are foregrounded in the SCLI account of students' experiences of learning in higher education.

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