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1995

What tradies know about what tradies know: an exploratory study of the views of trade instructors about knowledge and knowing

Colin H. Ducker
University of Wollongong

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Declaration of Originality

I certify my authorship of the thesis report submitted today entitled:

What tradies know about what tradies know:
An exploratory study of the views of trade
instructors about knowledge and knowing

in terms of the University of Wollongong Course Rules set out in the
Postgraduate Calendar.

Colin H Ducker

30 June 1995

Abstract

This study began in observations about an apparent tension between the views held by trade instructors and the curriculum and instructional formulations with which they work in the vocational education and training setting. Three research questions emerged: Do trade instructors use frameworks or systems of beliefs, values, attitudes and feelings that guide their approach to knowledge and knowing? What are the main typologies that underpin these frameworks? Do the views of trade instructors embody characteristic ways of presenting or perceiving reality? These questions guided a systematic search for understandings of the ways trade instructors construe knowledge. It involved uncovering, clarifying, and authenticating the ways in which they interpret and give meaning to knowledge and knowing.

The trade instructors in this study portrayed a strong commitment to a typology based on a practical-theoretical dichotomy. They presented 'practical' knowledge as the essence of what constitutes valued and valid knowledge. This is a concept that has breadth and complexity. Essential characteristics of practical knowledge are captured in terms such as 'craftsmanship', for it enables the tradeworker to perform with mastery, excellence and proficiency across a variety of settings, and within the full tutelary spirit of the trade. It outcrops in the tangible processes, materials and outcomes of the trade and these act as the primary referents for what counts as valid knowledge. Because the dominant context in their lives is the skilled trades, these trade instructors derived significant aspects of their views from the nature and practices of work in the skilled trades, including the notion of lineal descent as the process for acquiring valid knowledge.

In seeking theoretical development, the study moved through several major phases: the systemisation of existing theories and research; an in-depth and intensive study with a small number of trade instructors to expose constructs that underpin their views; and a survey of a large number of trade instructors to explore the extent to which the constructs are shared by other trade instructors.

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Dr Michael Wilson was my supervisor. He was the consummate supervisor - rigorous and incisive, supportive and empowering, generous with his time and his intellect. His commitment to the research effort and to my candidature was principled and unerring. Any attempt I make to represent my appreciation for his efforts always will be inadequate.

I am very grateful to the tradies who worked with me and supported this study - the greyhound, wild billy, the old bloke and all the rest of them. I feel privileged to have been able to gain some insights into who they are and to project, through this thesis, something of what they're about.

I thank, most sincerely, Dr Ken Russell, of the Faculty of Informatics. His responses to my dilemmas about data-manipulation and statistical treatments were meticulous and erudite.

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The staff and the graduate students of the Faculty of Education and the Graduate School of Education provided a stimulating and invigorating context within which to work. They created the ferment of scholarly excitement that promotes the research endeavour.

Many of the senior staff of the TAFE institutions in the Illawarra region and the Australian Capital Territory facilitated my work. I thank them all and hope that this thesis vindicates their trust in me.

The members of my family shared the process of my study and gave unending support. Throughout it all, and well beyond, Camille was my mentor, my counsellor and my first-best friend.

C.D

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