

## Knowledge-building and knowers in educational practices

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## Introduction

The South African education system continues to be confronted with calls for free decolonial quality education. Sparked by the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student protests in 2015 and 2016, students pushed for the need to re-think and reimagine teaching and learning and the kinds of knowledge(s) that are valued and legitimated in curricula (Fataar, 2018; Heleta, 2018; Maxwele, 2016; Ngcobozi, 2015). Part of realising a more inclusive education system requires paying attention to knowledge-building in practices and intellectual fields. The articles in this Special Issue make a case for research on knowledge-building that deepens our understanding of how to enable newcomers to develop specialised forms of expertise. Knowledge-building (Maton, 2009) connects what is taught to what has gone before. The knowledge taught should have relevance in the contexts in which it is taught and should be able to be abstracted beyond that context. The basis of achievement in practices and intellectual fields needs to be made explicit to students so that their success is intentionally supported. Knowledge-building has implications for students' engagement with

broader societal debates that seek to address the structural and racialised inequality in society. Success in their studies enables them to access graduate studies and feed potentially into the emergent knowledge economy. We argue that understanding how knowledge-building works in practice is an important part of the call for decolonised quality education. We make the case that research into knowledge-building strengthens practices by contributing to their knowledge base. Doing so creates opportunities to extend the horizon of what is deemed to be possible, to envisage change and transform practices, especially when these no longer meet the needs of changing contextual priorities.

The guest editorial team and the authors of articles included in this Special Issue are members of the Special Interest Group (SIG) in Knowledge-building in educational practices. This SIG was constituted at the South African Education Researchers' Association (SAERA) Conference in 2019. The articles in this Special Issue grapple with complexities involved in the teaching and learning of practices (such as critical literacy, literacy, and teaching) and intellectual fields (such as physics). They address different levels in the education system from primary school to undergraduate and postgraduate studies in higher education. They consider how knowledge-building is supported across various settings including formal coursework, informal interactions, and work-based learning. Articles report on findings from studies in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and the United States of America. Some articles in this issue analyse how achievement is supported through interactions between more experienced practitioners and novices during practice-based activities. Several articles use concepts and analytic tools from Legitimation Code Theory (LCT)<sup>1</sup>, a multidimensional sociological approach that enables analysis and transformation of knowledge practices (Maton, 2014). Various authors also draw on insights from decolonial theory, knowledge taxonomies, experiential learning theory, professions and professional judgement, critical literacies, and inclusive education in their articles. We offer a brief discussion on the nature of practices and how relationships between and among knowledges and practices can be understood. We then consider their implications for working with the complexities involved in the learning of practices and in teaching them to novices. We make a case for how research that analyses knowledge-building contributes to a social justice agenda, and we show how the articles in this Special Issue do so.

## The nature of practices

A practice is understood to be “coherent and complex forms of cooperative human activity” in which people engage in recognisable patterns towards a common purpose (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 187). Practices are enacted by communities and supported by institutional structures. The more people participate in the activities of their chosen practice and strive for excellence, the more deeply they come to understand its constitutive activities and the goals of the practice. While the distinction between excellence and mediocrity can be self-evident to

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the articles included in this issue were presented at the Third International Legitimation Code Theory Conference hosted by the University of the Witwatersrand in July 2019.

experienced practitioners, the criteria on which such judgements are made are not always as obvious to novices.

Although MacIntyre's (1981, 2007) view of practice offers explanations of how they are socially sustained, he makes little mention of the knowledge and logics that underpin them. When the knowledge that supports and informs practices is tacit, the grounds for decision-making in practice are not easily noticed by novices. Experienced practitioners may find it difficult to understand why beginners struggle to participate in activities that have become second nature to them (Berliner, 1994). The Specialization dimension of LCT can be used to make the basis of achievement of social practices explicit. This empowers those whose participation in practices have become almost intuitive but seek to support novices as they learn. Its organising principles are derived from a premise that practices are oriented towards some part of the world and are enacted by social actors who participate in them (Maton, 2014). The basis of achievement in practices rests on a consideration of both its relations to knowledge as well as the extent to which successful participation relates to the dispositions of social actors and the specialised ways in which they perceive and think in practice. Together, these enable analysis of how practices come to be enacted in their prevalent forms. They also reveal that knowledge-building works in very different ways depending on the extent to which the basis of achievement lies in the mastery of bodies of specialised knowledge and skill and/or in the development of specialised ways of thinking and making reasoned judgements.

Making explicit the expectations of what is valued across educational practices has important implications for enabling student achievement in more intentional ways. Postgraduate studies in the sciences, for example, are usually focused on inducting a novice researcher into the role of an academic. However, only a small fraction of those who graduate with masters or doctoral degrees continue their scholarly work in academia. Connell and Padayachee's article in this Special Issue grapples with the complexity of what it means to prepare a student for different workplace contexts. They analyse how the focus and demands of assessment tasks shift as students move through their undergraduate physics degrees and into postgraduate research-based degrees. As they progress, students are required to take more responsibility for selecting relevant concepts and procedures in response to increasingly complex real-world problems. Through analysing these shifts, Connell and Padayachee argue that students can be simultaneously prepared for careers in and outside of academia.

### Practices and knowledge

There has been intense debate about how practices and knowledge are related, particularly in teacher education. In their influential paper, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, p. 250) make analytic distinctions between "knowledge-*for*-practice", "knowledge-*in*-practice" and "knowledge-*of*-practice." Knowledge-*for*-practice, they suggest, values formal knowledge produced by university-based researchers. Formal, abstract concepts drawn from different intellectual fields constitute a knowledge base that practitioners receive and must apply in their daily work. A knowledge-*in*-practice stance regards practice as being spontaneous and unpredictable. Knowledge is tacit and emerges in action. There are no principles that guide

what counts as an appropriate decision. Rather, effective practice depends on wise judgement in addressing the challenges and dilemmas that arise in changing and uncertain contexts. In this view, preparing novices for practice involves their spending time in the workplace alongside more experienced others and observing what they do and how they respond to various situations. These two conceptions of the relations between knowledge and practice effectively perpetuate a so-called theory-practice divide. Much attention is then devoted to how this divide can be bridged (e.g., Gravett, 2012; Jeram & Davids, 2020; Walton & Rusznyak, 2020).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle's third conception, knowledge-of-practice, suggests an intricate relationship between knowledge and the knower. As they explained,

[K]nowledge is not bound by the instrumental imperative that it be used in or applied to an immediate situation; it may also shape the conceptual and interpretive frameworks teachers develop to make judgments, theorize practice, and connect their efforts to larger intellectual, social, and political issues as well as to the work of other teachers, researchers, and communities. (p. 273)

This view of the relation between knowledge and practice foregrounds the agency of the knower whose practice can be both conceptually informed and contextually responsive.

Instead of working with static knowledge types (such as everyday and formal knowledge, knowledge for/in/of practice, tacit and explicit knowledge, or theoretical and practical knowledge), LCT's Semantics dimension conceptualises the organising principles of social fields of practice in terms of how meaning relates to their context-dependence and their complexity (Maton, 2019). By avoiding knowledge typologies, researchers can analyse how different forms of knowledge manifest and shift over time in real-world contexts. Langsford's article in this Special Issue, for example, analyses the way in which beginner teachers draw together abstracted concepts from theory to analyse and evaluate the quality of lessons they observe. She identifies the capacity of teachers to articulate the reasons for their judgement as a valued attribute of professional teaching practices. She uses LCT's concept of semantic gravity to show how pedagogic reasoning can be operationalised empirically as shifts between context-dependent and more abstract forms of knowledge. She demonstrates the significant differences occur in the way semantic gravity changes during discussions between cohorts of newly qualified teachers as they analyse a lesson and evaluate its success. Langsford's work reveals the affordances of different pathways through pre-service education and the extent to which they provide new teachers with a shared language of practice and explicit opportunities to articulate their reasoning and judgements in practice.

### Complexity in the teaching and learning of practices

Practices are difficult to teach and difficult to learn. The ways in which the relations between knowledge and practice are understood have significance for the design of curricula that prepare novices for practice. Curricula that adopt a knowledge-for-practice stance emphasise the mastery of bodies of knowledge before expecting novices to apply these insights in the

field. Different bodies of knowledge are taught and learnt separately, with an expectation that connections between them become self-evident in the moments of practice. In contrast, a knowledge-in-practice conception advocates the primacy of learning practice through experiential learning opportunities. Novices are expected to learn what constitutes wise judgement by working alongside experienced practitioners in an apprenticeship model. However, research has suggested that this does not always happen as intended when mentors in practice have neither the time nor what might be called a grammar of practice to articulate the reasons underpinning the ways in which they enact their practices. In a comparative study of various practices, Grossman et al. (2009, p. 2075) have explained that

the ability to decompose practice depends on the existence of a language and structure for describing practice—what we earlier described as a grammar of practice. Without such a language, it is difficult to name the parts or to provide targeted feedback on students' efforts to enact the components of practice.

The capacity to articulate what one is doing and provide a rationale involves different kinds of activity to that of enacting exemplary practices in front of an observing novice.

Since practices are socially constructed, novices become knowers through “interactions with significant others” (Maton, 2014, p. 185). These interactions may include the study of exemplary cases as experienced practitioners discuss with novices the salient features of the case and what makes them noteworthy. However, when knowledge-building processes are not well understood it is difficult to clearly articulate the criteria for successfully completing learning tasks. When expectations are vague, novices have little choice but to learn through trial and error. Furthermore, when the logics that inform decision-making are opaque, students are left to figure out how different bodies of formal knowledge along with their interactions with practitioners and experiences in the field contribute to the coherence of practice (Hoban, 2015). Instead of curricula supporting students' successful entry into the practice, they become responsible for effectively enabling their own development (Österling, 2021). Thus, an enduring challenge of preparation programmes is drawing novices' attention to the ways in which theoretical knowledge and contextual priorities inform how practices are realised in diverse ways. The actions of practitioners can be more visible to beginners than the practitioners' knowledge bases, intentions, and reasoning. This can result in beginners focusing on the visible routines that accompany a practice rather than on the situational judgments made in response to achieving its goals in the contextual realities.

Rusznayak & Bertram's article in this Special Issue considers the preparation of pre-service teachers for classroom practice through work-integrated learning (WIL). Their article reviews empirical research that highlights concerns about the variable quality of WIL in initial teacher education programmes. They argue for a conceptualisation of WIL that explicitly prompts student teachers to pay attention to the pedagogic reasoning of their mentor teachers. This should also involve the restructuring of student expectations and assessments to value how they articulate the grounds for their choices in the design and execution of their lessons. Articulation of their thinking in action encourages novices to consider teachers as knowers who draw on different knowledges to inform their practice. It opens spaces for interrogating

what choices are most appropriate given the content demands, the learners' needs, and the contextual priorities. This article offers an approach to work-based learning that moves it beyond simply acquisition of experience. In so doing, it offers potential for transforming work-integrated learning in pre-service teacher education.

One mechanism for socialising novices into practices is through the provision of both the criteria for success on assessment tasks and formative feedback on their work. Feedback from a more knowledgeable experienced other should ideally show novices where they are succeeding, where they are not meeting expectations, and what they should do differently to achieve more successfully. When knowledge-building is not well supported, students are often "unable to recognize or enact what is required for achievement and [remain] reliant on common sense" (Maton, 2014, p. 107). It is unsurprising in such situations that novices find the demands of learning activities to be arbitrary and the expectations of them confusing. Two articles in this Special Issue consider the demands of assessment practices and what is involved in making knowledge-building visible. In one of them, Mahabeer and Akoo show how university students struggle to make sense of the assessment feedback they are given. Their discussion focuses on students' understanding of the feedback, their emotional reactions to it, and their preferences for specific forms of feedback. In this study, students' perceptions of feedback on assessment tasks reveal a sense of being judged personally rather than having their engagement in the knowledge practices evaluated.

In the other article, Jackson analyses how learners work with knowledge in response to an assessment task. He uses the Autonomy dimension of LCT (Maton & Howard, 2018) to analyse knowledge-building in a high achieving response to a critical literacy assessment task. By analysing how the learners works with the literacy text and contextual realities, Jackson demonstrates that achieving the dual aims of literacy and critical awareness requires students to move beyond the task limits and work with integrating text-based perspectives and real-world insights. The study of how students worked with knowledge in this task makes the implicit criteria of achievement more visible to teachers, who can then, in turn, make requirements for understanding critical literacies more explicit. By making the criteria for success more visible to teachers and learners alike, the analysis offers a potential means of supporting learners' achievement more intentionally.

By way of contrast, Nyamayedenga and De Jager's article illustrates what happens when criteria for success are not clear. The goals of the practice, in this case, effective teaching and learning, become compromised. They consider the teaching practices of primary school teachers in Zimbabwe who are expected to use communicative language teaching (CLT) in a newly introduced curriculum. The recommended strategies expect teachers to use project work in which learners address real-world problems. Interactive tasks should give learners opportunities to explain their understanding of ideas, articulate their thoughts, and express their feelings. The successful use of this strategy intends to support knowledge-building and develop learners' communicative competence. Although teachers have been informed about these evidence-based strategies for supporting learner achievement, they feel ill-prepared to implement them. Nyamayedenga and De Jager show that knowledge-building in a resource-

constrained context was hampered when the teachers themselves did not sufficiently understand the basis of achievement of the intervention. Through the interviews held with the teachers and the observations made, the level of the teachers' preparedness to implement CLT to build new knowledge emerged. Teachers' preparedness to enhance knowledge-building through the CLT implementation in the new curriculum was further hampered by a lack of resources, poor planning, and ineffective introductory workshops. They suggest that to mitigate these challenges, teachers need to be more involved in the national review of the curriculum and the government must be called upon to offer more support on how to implement a new curriculum effectively.

## Knowledge-building as a means of attaining greater educational justice

Knowledge practices and intellectual fields represent the promise of evidence-based interventions that offer hope of building a just society. Knowledge can be alienating if it remains at the level of theoretical ideas divorced from students' lived realities and contexts (Samuel, 2009). Similarly, the study of a series of contextual examples or practices that remain under-theorised have neither explanatory power nor do they transcend common-sense perspectives. Knowledge is fundamental to opening practices to scrutiny, shaping its ideals, and generating criteria for recognising excellence and achievement. However, there is debate about the extent to which knowledge has innate explanatory power (Shalem & Allais, 2019). On one hand, scholars (e.g., Morrow, 2007; Young & Muller, 2016; Wheelahan, 2012) have expressed the view that formal curricula should "privilege systematic, coherent, and generalizable knowledge that provides the best understanding of the natural and the social worlds" (Shalem & Allais, 2019, p. 145). On the other, however, is a view that all knowledge claims are "partial", and they reflect power relations between social groups. From this perspective, curricula that offer pluralism of knowledge are seen to be "more just for those who are not linked to 'powerful structural positions'" (p. 145). Even though knowledge is constructed by social actors in a particular historical context and in response to a particular set of imperatives, it offers explanatory power and has real-world effects that are not reducible to power relations between social groups (Maton, 2014). This includes the power to marginalise but also the power to transform and empower.

Every practice includes activities in which practitioners strive to achieve their goals within the realities of the context in which they work (Morrow, 2007). Carrim (2019) has reminded us that education is not constituted by politically and ideologically neutral structures outside societal struggles for social justice. Although ethical principles and specialised knowledge guide practice, practices cannot be reduced to a mechanical application of skills irrespective of contextual factors. In as much as the practices of teachers, for example, are informed by a knowledge base, they are equally informed by the multiple and intersecting identities of themselves as actors, as social beings, and the opportunities and constraints of the contexts in which they work (Carrim, 2019). Knowledge becomes useful when used by people to participate in broader discussions that impact on their lives and the lives of others, and to

think through their options and actions in response to contextual demands. Without insights from theoretical ideas and evidence-based empirical research, there may be few possibilities of transforming systems in which prevalent practices may be ineffective or exclusionary. Instead of a conservative view of practice in which old-timers pass on their craft to newcomers, insights into knowledge-building opens possibilities for understanding how knowledge can extend the boundaries of practices. This in turn creates potential conditions for practices to be re-imagined and transformed. In this way, practices need not be static and conservative. They can transform as mentors impart their craft to novices.

The intersection of actors and contexts is explored by Cross and Govender<sup>2</sup> in their article in this Special Issue. They highlight the deeply embedded coloniality and Euro modernity in knowledge production in Africa. They suggest that epistemological decolonisation should be our point of departure in scrutinising the kind of knowledge with which we are working, and perhaps most importantly, the kind of silenced epistemologies that continue to be othered and marginalised in African higher education. Drawing on what they term the “intersecting contexts”, they propose a complex framework that accounts for our past (where we come from), our internal existential experiences (looking inward for reflections and personal experiences), and the present (looking outward in responding to our current complex global village as well as using our experience to fashion and shape the future). They suggest that this new framework would be helpful in thinking about alternative, inclusive, and socially just epistemologies and knowledge(s) in the Global South.

Through demands for free decolonised quality education, those who work in higher education institutions have realised the extent to which institutions have marginalised members of increasingly diverse student bodies. Moosa and Langsford’s article critiques the notion that the primary responsibility to assimilate into higher education lies with students. Assimilation cannot be condoned when institutions are structured to advantage students from particular social groups and educational backgrounds. They compare the reported expectations and experiences of a diverse group of first-year students as they enter a higher education institution. Their perceptions and feelings of being included and their experiences of feeling excluded shift from an initial concern with belonging to concerns about the mastery of academic practices. Their research challenges institutions to better support students as they enter higher education.

## Researching knowledge practices

This Special Issue starts to fulfil the aims of the SIG in Knowledge-building in educational practices. It is our collective intention to promote research that makes knowledge-building in practices an object of study. As Winberg et al. (2020) have pointed out, concerns about how education often serves to reproduce social inequalities has led to much research that ignores the kinds of knowledge and knowers that are produced and valued. This Special Issue responds to an observation that generic approaches are increasingly being advocated to prepare students for an unknown future. This includes calls to future-proof students by

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2 We include a tribute to Prof. Michael Cross at the end of this Editorial.



teaching them how to learn generic critical thinking skills. Our collective concern is the way in which these approaches potentially undermine the value of education for developing expertise in specialised practices.

Ultimately, we are concerned that approaches that ignore knowledge disempower students who are learning a practice, especially those with historical and educational disadvantage. Analysing knowledge-building across educational practices make the basis of achievement more explicit to experienced and novice practitioners alike. Understanding how knowledge shapes practice and the ways in which practitioners think enables them to act and mentor novices in ways that are more intentional. The articles in this Special Issue show how research into knowledge-building also offers potential mechanisms for extending the knowledge base of practices. They demonstrate how consideration of knowledge-building creates possibilities for reimagining prevalent practices and transforming them.

## Postscript

At the launch of the Special Interest Group in Knowledge-building in educational practices, Professor Michael Cross was particularly enthused by the need for this SIG and the importance of research into knowledge-building in educational practices. He volunteered to be a committee member of the SIG. It was with deep sadness that the guest editorial team learned of his untimely passing during the Covid-19 pandemic. We are thankful to Logan Govender for ensuring that their co-authored article could be finalised and included in this Special Issue. In recognition of Professor Cross's remarkable contribution to education, the guest editors and editorial board of the *Journal of Education* include the tribute written by colleagues at the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies (AMCHES).

## In memory of Prof. Michael Cross

(11 September 1952 - 6 June 2021)

Professor Michael Cross, or "Prof" as he was fondly known, was the founder and Director of the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies (AMCHES), University of Johannesburg. Previously, from 1986 to 2012, he was attached to the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Professor Cross served in several initiatives, such as the Governance Task Team of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) and the Technical Committee on Norms and Standards for Educators in South Africa. He had been involved in reviews across the continent, including the Tertiary Education Linkages Project (TELP), Finnish Aid to Developing Countries (South Africa, Zambia, Mozambique, Bosnia, Bolivia, and Nepal), Quality Assurance of Postgraduate Programmes in Tanzania and Mozambique, programmes of the Association for African Universities (AAU), and in the development of the Rwanda Higher Education Sector Strategic Plan (HESSP). He was a visiting scholar at Johns Hopkins, Northwestern, Stanford, Stockholm, and Jules-Vernes universities. Professor

Cross received the first Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) award in 2012 as the Most Outstanding Mentor of Educational Researchers in Africa. This was testimony to his great passion for developing young scholars. He was also a co-founder and co-editor of the book series on African Higher Education: Developments and Perspectives with Brill/Sense Publishers and Higher Education Transformation with Sun Press.

Professor Cross authored 15 books, of which 6 were single authored while 9 were co-authored. He also produced 27 book chapters and 45 articles in leading scholarly journals. In addition, he wrote 35 reports on different topics. At a mentorship level, Prof. Cross produced 37 MEd/MA Graduates, 15 PhDs, and mentored 12 Post-Doctoral Research Fellows, including several who were still under his supervision at the time of his passing.

Family meant everything to Prof. Cross; he enjoyed family debates, imparting his knowledge and entertaining family, friends, and colleagues with his unique sense of humour. An avid supporter of Chelsea Football Club, he loved watching soccer and had his own sworn theories about coaching tactics.

Professor Cross leaves behind him a rich legacy of academic networking, friendship, and a commitment to critical scholarship.

May he rest in peace.

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