

INVITATION TO AN INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON PROFESSIONAL AND OCCUPATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Date: 24th – 26th February 2016

Venue: University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

The Centre for Researching Education and Labour (REAL) at the School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, invites you to a symposium on the political economy of occupations and knowledge. This event will explore the relationship between knowledge, curricula, labour markets, and work. We are seeking contributions from educationalists, labour scholars, political economists, policy experts and others that provide empirical data and/or theoretical reflections on the interface of education and work. The format of the symposium will include keynote speakers to frame the debates, panel sessions where researchers will present submitted papers, and presentations from doctoral students working on knowledge in curriculum and work in specific occupational areas. We welcome participants who do not want to present papers but do want to listen and participate in discussion. As far as possible papers will be circulated in advance. If you would like to present a paper, please send an abstract to the REAL Centre by 31st July 2015. (Kholofelo.Malumane@wits.ac.za).

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The main output of the symposium is a peer-reviewed book edited by Allais and Shalem, which starts to develop models and approaches to hold together the different factors which affect and are affected by knowledge and curricula. The provisional title of this book: Knowledge, curriculum, labour markets and work: understanding what counts. It is the intention of this book to include 3 parts. The first part will examine theoretical work on the relationship between knowledge and work, focusing on secondary and tertiary education. The second part looks at changing conditions in the field of work and cutting edge research on vocational curriculum. The last part will include chapters on curriculum and labor market conditions in different occupations.

The registration fee is R600, which will cover the cost of meals. The symposium will run from midday on the 24th of February to midday on the 26th. For international visitors an optional visit to a game park on the weekend following the conference and/or a cultural tour of Johannesburg can be organized at an extra cost.

What does it mean in curriculum terms for education to prepare people for work?

In an environment of persistently high unemployment, especially among youth, it is widely argued that education must do more to prepare individuals for work. At the same time, business leaders and government officials complain that skills shortage is holding back the development of the country. Yet despite this focus on education, skills, and the economy, there is little agreement about the practical relationship between these spheres. There is no consensus about what knowledge is required at work, or about the best ways of developing such knowledge, and the role of formal education in this regard. There is little evidence to support the frequently espoused view that most graduates are ill-equipped for the workplace, or the prominent place given to education in economic development in many countries around the world. The discourse of low educational levels originates as much from shrinking profit margins in late capitalist economies (Wallerstein, Immanuel, 2013), as from the ever-increasing inflation of qualifications as a result of their role as signaling devices in labour markets (Collins, 1979, 2013).

The rhetorical connection between education and economics seems driven by policy makers' eagerness to maintain the façade of meritocracy, rather than by an attention to the empirical reality of education and the labour market. Political leaders are quick to implement reforms of qualification systems—with the current focus being on learning outcomes and competence statements—while giving very little attention to the more politically difficult questions of improving work conditions and regulating labour markets in ways that benefit workers.

Research on wealthy countries shows the importance of stable occupations if education is to produce such specialized workers (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012). Vocational education and apprenticeships, where they have been successful, have been connected with reasonably well-paying, respected, and protected occupational identities and jobs, and not aimed at narrow tasks in specific workplaces, *or* vague general descriptions of workplace areas. Socio-economic conditions, power relations, and ideology in labour markets and workplaces maintain or weaken occupational identities and roles (Freidson, 2001). As the future of work and of many occupations around the world becomes increasingly uncertain (Collins, 2013; Standing, 2011), our immediate context in South Africa is one of horrendously high levels of unemployment, huge wage differentials by race and gender, dysfunctional industrial relations, and, of course, many problems with our education system (Fine, 2012).

The meaning of 'education' should be the idea of introducing the young into worthwhile knowledge and understanding (Peters, 1998), and that this is worthwhile in its own right, without the knowledge acquired needing to be 'put to work'. This knowledge is also 'useful' in life, including work (Hand, 2010). In addition, specialized work, in any economic system or context, will always need some type and amount of specialized knowledge. Specialized powerful knowledge also maintains and strengthens occupational identities in labour markets (Abbott, 1988; Young & Muller, 2014), something of obvious concern to individuals and occupations. What does it mean in this complex context for education to prepare people for work? The most fundamental question (what should we teach?) becomes even more complicated. Underneath debates about the curriculum today is the fundamental question about the role in curricula of theoretically-based knowledge drawn from large set of empirical evidence or developed through conceptual research on the one hand and the place of everyday, context specific knowledge on the other.

References

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Appendix: The REAL research project into occupational and professional knowledge

The context for this symposium is a research project underway at the Centre for Researching Education and Labour, at the University of the Witwatersrand. We are attempting to investigate relationships between knowledge, curriculum, qualifications, labour markets, and work, in order to better understand what it means in curriculum terms for education to prepare people for work. It is hoping to develop an analytical model to think through the relation between epistemic considerations which are important for design of curricula and political economic conditions which are necessary for creating and sustaining a need for specialized work. We hope, through the symposium, to share the emerging ideas from our research, and to gain expertise from other countries. For our PhD students, we hope that the symposium will facilitate the research journey the students embark on by clarifying the research problem they intend to investigate, unpacking key claims in the field, exposing students to similar research done in other contexts and to interesting methodologies and most importantly by helping them shape a productive conceptual framework.

In order to explore our main driving question (What does it mean in curriculum terms for education to prepare people for work?), we are asking 3 main questions:

1. What socio-economic processes in the labour market and in the broader socio-economic environment enable and constrain flourishing specialized work?
2. What social and ideological factors influence the selection and organization of theoretical and context specific knowledge into a curriculum?
3. What epistemic criteria influence the selection and organization of theoretical and context specific knowledge into a curriculum?

Each of these is further broken into potential sub-questions, which are being considered in relation to a range of different occupations. For question one:

- What are the historical and current changes in divisions of labour across and within occupations that enable and constrain the development of a strong occupational identity?
- Which approaches to industrial development and industrial relations create and sustain a need for specialized work?
- What changes to the nature of work are likely, and what can affect different possibilities?

- In what ways does expertise regulate divisions of labour and in what ways are these divisions regulated by socio-economic factors and/or power dynamics within workplaces? (To what extent ideological factors, to what extent knowledge factors?)
- What does it mean for education to prepare people for work in a context of changing work, and increasing shortages of well-paid and secure work?

For question two:

- What are the differences and similarities in the ways in which knowledge experts and employers think about expertise in different occupational areas?
- To what extent do pragmatic considerations drive curricula decisions (for example, we need shorter qualifications to address labour market shortages)?
- In a context in which stable well-paying respected specialized work is shrinking, what role can education play in preparing learners for work?
- Does knowledge specialization require qualifications that are more directed—how directed, how flexible, what combination works best?

And for question three:

- Is knowledge in the curriculum grounded in substantive worthwhile knowledge that has *intrinsic value* and can be shown to be instrumental for learning other knowledge? What are the justifications for inclusion of different areas of knowledge in the curriculum—do they derive from bodies of knowledge or areas of work or instrumental concerns?
- Do curriculum teach some form of *powerful knowledge*? Do curricula foreground the conceptual structure of the subject and its core concepts, and show relations to disciplinary knowledge? Is practical knowledge underpinned by systematic knowledge and or discrete lists of propositions?
- Do curricula aim to prepare learners directly for work need to be rooted in a pathway to an *occupation*? Alternatively, do they provide theoretical and practical knowledge which is foundational for further study building towards an occupational role?
- Can *epistemic ascent* be seen in curricula? (logical sequence between core and peripheral concepts and progression in complexity of conceptuality and of application of knowledge)

We aim to address as many of these questions as possible across a range of occupations in South Africa, in order to gain insight into differences and specificities, but also to think systemically across different types of education, to strengthen professional and vocational education.