The relationship between knowledge and competencies in higher education curriculum

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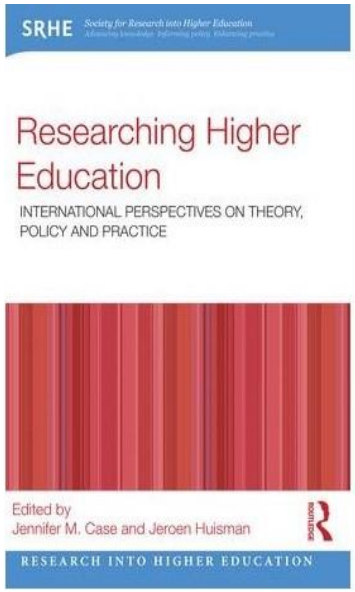
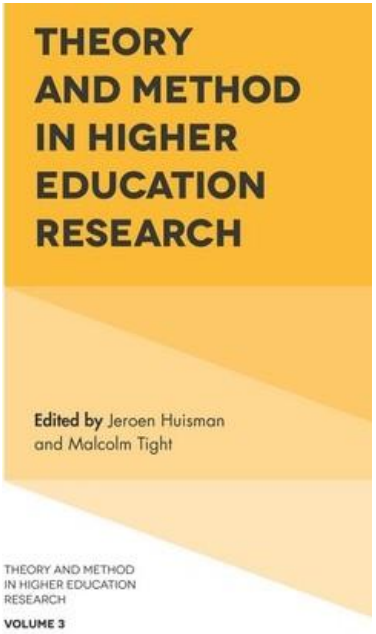
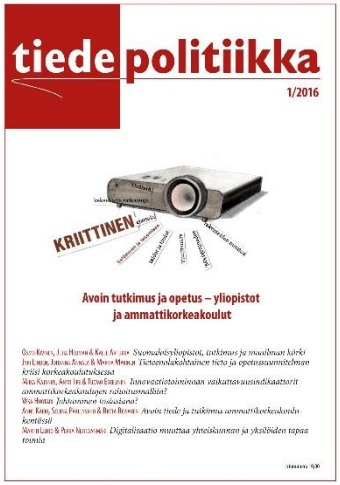


Annala, J., Lindén, J. & Mäkinen, M. (2016) **Curriculum in higher education research.** In J. Case & J. Huisman (Eds.) *Researching Higher Education. International perspectives on theory, policy and practice.* SHRE & Routledge, 171–189.



Lindén, J., Annala, J. & Coate, K. (2017) **The role of curriculum theory in contemporary higher education research and practice.** In Tight, M. & Huisman, J. (eds.) *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research,* Vol 3. Emerald, 137-154.



Lindén, J., Annala, J. & Mäkinen, M. (2016) **Tieteenalakohtainen tieto ja opetussuunnitelman kriisi korkeakoulutuksessa.** [Disciplinary knowledge and the crisis of curriculum in higher education] *Tiedepolitiikka* 41 (1), 19-28.

Why it is important to discuss about knowledge and its position in curriculum?

- (Scientific) knowledge and access to it is a precondition for democratic society (Basil Bernstein)
- Link to the skills and competences ideology > the educational and critical role of universities
- Fundamental question in ongoing (competence-based) curriculum reforms in higher education and vocational education in Finland

Knowledge triangle (EU) and competencies

- Education, Research and Innovation - Strong link btw higher education, labour market, wider society, European economy

Knowledge, skills and competencies (Delors Report 1996)

  - Learning to know
  - Learning to do
  - Learning to be

- Competencies as integrated synthesis of all three <u>or</u> as one part of the triangle, as social accomplishments and attributes
- Learning outcome is an instrument to describe competency

(Caspersen, Frølich & Muller 2017)

Mode 1 and Mode 2

(Gibbons et al 1994)

- **Mode 1 knowledge** more traditional forms of knowledge building and research in universities, which is hierarchical and specialized
- **Mode 2 knowledge** is associated with industry, innovation and government, emphasizing knowledge development in interdisciplinary collaboration and the applicability and usefulness of knowledge

Universal changes in the balance btw the two?

(Yates et al. 2017, 19; Young 2013)

Why mode 1 knowledge is challenged?

- Lack of trust towards inward-looking science and disciplinary knowledge to solve the “big problems” – applicability is central
- Linguistic turn and social constructivism have questioned if the knowledge is value-free
- In working life, not so much space for theoretical knowledge, instead generic and applicable competencies are required and valued

(Wheelahan 2010)

Have knowledge slipped away from the hands of academics

…to working life, industry, politicians?

the knowledge of the powerful - what is behind certain choices?

Karseth and Solbrekke (2016, 221) describe this as a "drift away **from longer term needs of the society**, such as ensuring for the provision of important centers of knowledge and research, **to more immediate work to meet market needs**."

Have knowledge slipped towards or away from students?

Demonstrable ‘expected learning outcomes’ to be defined in curriculum, concretize the aim to move from teacher-/content-centered approach towards student-/learning-centered approach (Lindblom-Ylänne et al, 2006; Trigwell & Prosser, 2004)

With an increased concern over the efficiency and immediate usefulness of studies and the outcome of the students’ learning may turn students as pawns to be in the service of the employment market (Karseth & Solbrekke, 2016)

Fundamental educational dilemma

Knowledge in curriculum are related with the dual tasks of education

- **To transmit** knowledge, competencies, skills, professional and disciplinary identities to the next generation
- **To free** the new generations to discover something new (that was not even anticipated in curricula)

How this is possible to happen? (Young 2011)

Attempts to free students

1. Traditional way of getting students to have a relationship with ‘sacred’ knowledge
   - pedagogical gaps when knowledge is understood as **contents** only, or when teaching and knowledge is understood as separate
   - have not succeeded to guarantee democracy and access to knowledge
2. Activating student’s intrinsic motivation and potential through progressive pedagogy
   - Overestimated trust to learning technology and active learning methodologies
   - Curriculum as shopping basket, cherry-pick, following intuition and interest instead of the inner logic of knowledge

Knowledge and competence in curriculum – problematic issues

(e.g. Wheelahan 2010; Annala et al 2016)

- Students are debarred outside the knowledge because of too straightforward or standardized learning outcomes
- Knowledge is taken away from its broader meanings, relations and logics
- Learning outcomes and assessment criteria are overplayed
  - Goals may focus too much on
    - detached actions or theoretical facts
    - generic skills without disciplinary knowledge or
    - contextual competencies at present
- **In higher education, the starting point may be more important than the end point (McKernan 2008, 2010)**

Alternative approaches to competencies and its relation to knowledge and knowing

- Making difference btw **linear** competenc**e** and **dynamic** competenc**y** (Mäkinen & Annala 2010, 2012)
- From generic skills and graduate attributes towards powerful knowledge and knowing
  - Critical and analytical thinking and reasoning
  - Research skills and epistemic access to knowledge creation within a discipline
  - Oral and written communication skills (Wald & Harland 2019)
- Emphasis on student's process of coming to know, encounter with knowledge (Barnett 2009)

Powerful knowledge

Refers to conceptual, abstract and esoteric knowledge which is different from contextual, everyday knowledge (Bernstein 2000; Muller & Young, 2019; Wheelahan 2007)

- **What for is higher education needed if we do not take this seriously?**

All the students in higher education should have access to powerful forms of knowledge and through that, to the important discussions in the society (Shay 2013)

Towards powerful knowledge

Understanding the relativity of knowledge, the inner logics of knowledge

Understanding the broader contexts and **consequences of own ‘competent’ actions** (Biesta 2007, Himanka 2018)

Few practices to consider in curriculum development

- Attention to the dynamic competencies at the level of study modules
- Attention to broader goals, yet having focus on learning processes and contextual factors, which are taken into account also in assessment (supporting learning to understand and student's ownership)
- Instead of unrealistic wish list, attention to generic skills/attributes well suited to the disciplinary context
- Emphasis on the relationality of knowledge and creating curriculum supporting powerful knowledge

THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWING IN COMPETENCE-BASED CURRICULUM NEEDS MORE ATTENTION

Thank you for you attention!