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Knowledge Studies

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Kingsborough Community College – CUNY

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I use an unfamiliar term, “knowledge studies,” to describe the subject of my work because I want to encourage us to reimagine the study of knowledge in a way that transcends the limitations of all academic disciplines. Knowledge is a word people use all the time, but its meaning is elusive, since it is not a thing, but something ethereal and effervescent. One is thought to acquire knowledge by doing course work and reading books. Thus, all courses in all the disciplines and all the books in the library are in some sense expected to convey knowledge. How can knowledge be a subject, when all subjects are knowledge? Scholars in different fields have written on knowledge, but their publications do not cohere as a single literature, since the different disciplines and traditions mean different things by “knowledge.”

Questions about the nature and meaning of knowledge are ultimately philosophical ones. Long before the organization of modern disciplines and educational systems, philosophers have asked what it means to know, and the study of knowledge has remained one of the pillars of philosophy up to the present day. The philosophical analysis of knowledge concerns factuality, truth, justification, evidence, doubt, external reality, and cause and effect. Knowledge is seen as a special kind of belief, and a fundamental question is what criteria differentiate knowledge from other beliefs and opinions. While philosophers may probe the implications and consequences of real world situations from history, current events, or everyday life, their preferred source of examples is thought experiments, in which hypothetical and often improbable scenarios are analyzed for their logical plausibility and implications.

A different and more recent approach to knowledge has been the sociology of knowledge, which focuses on institutional aspects of the construction, development, distribution, deployment, and

perpetuation of knowledge. But what the sociology of knowledge looks at as knowledge may not be considered real knowledge by philosophers, since sociologists look at how beliefs are justified, upheld, and shared, without reference to how they are or whether they can be proved to be factual by logical and analytical methods. Truth is socially negotiated, and expertise is determined by social processes including power rather than objective measures. Philosophers and sociologists mean different things by “certainty.” Philosophers ask what grounds for certainty are adequate and sufficient, while sociologists ask what causes people to be certain of something in a given situation. What criteria do people use to become certain? The question of how knowledge claims are evaluated is not a normative question, as it is for epistemologists—how *should* knowledge claims be evaluated?—but rather an empirical one: how *do* people in a given context actually go about evaluating a knowledge claim?

The most recent and voluminous writing on knowledge is in knowledge management, or KM for short, a subject that gained momentum in the 1990s in schools of business administration and management science. Unlike philosophy or sociology, KM takes for granted issues of belief and certainty and approaches knowledge in terms of information processing models first developed by cognitive scientists. Rather than studying knowledge in general, KM focuses specifically on transferring and sharing knowledge for the benefit of stakeholders in a particular organization, but probably not for the public at large, which would include competitors. Knowledge in KM is viewed as an asset that can and ought to be managed. It is viewed as a means to an end rather than a good in its own right. KM poses an interesting challenge to purer scholarly disciplines that take for granted the value of knowledge as an unqualified good by asking what exactly is the benefit gained from knowledge, and under what circumstances. One wants the benefits, not necessarily the knowledge.

Because the subject of knowledge concerns and cuts across all scholarly and educational disciplines, a special kind of interdisciplinary effort is required to comprehend it effectively. Unlike regular interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity seeks to move beyond the limitations of traditional disciplines altogether and reconstruct knowledge from scratch. Transdisciplinarity is a movement emerging from a growing chorus of scientists and scholars who find that the segmentation of academic

work and curricula into traditional disciplines ill equips us in solving pressing concerns such as global climate change. Transdisciplines recombine the content knowledge of the disciplines into new formations with an aim to see all the angles on a problem at once, analyzing the dynamics between multiple dimensions of reality, unlike traditional disciplines, which can only analyze phenomena from a single level.

Having introduced the multiple disciplinary perspectives and the desirability of a transdisciplinary approach, I want to shift my attention to two forerunners of a proposed transdiscipline of knowledge studies whose writings on knowledge would be foundational to a core reading list. Fritz Machlup and Michael Polanyi had established themselves before World War II as eminent scholars before turning their attention to the study of knowledge after the war.

Machlup was an economist who wrote about many subjects but who became interested in the economic role of knowledge in the post-World War II era. His writings influenced Daniel Bell's and Peter Drucker's famous theories about post-industrial society and knowledge work. His interest in knowledge only grew, and he became so consumed by it that toward the end of his life he envisioned a monumental, eight-volume work on knowledge, only three volumes of which were completed before his death. The project was grounded in economics, but that was only the entry point into his investigation. From there, he used all the tools at the scholar's disposal to explain knowledge from every disciplinary angle: cultural, sociological, linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, etc. Indeed, he envisioned a transdisciplinary approach to knowledge, but was mostly unsuccessful in realizing it, since his ways of thinking about the disciplines was conventional. Because he had such an inclusive approach to knowledge his book satisfied neither the philosophers nor the sociologists and has fallen through the cracks. But he opened the door to transdisciplinarity, and one lasting legacy which evidences transdisciplinary insight is his notion of five categories of knowledge.

An earlier writer, Michael Polanyi, transcended disciplinarity in another way in tackling the problem of knowledge. Early in life he had achieved great distinction as a laboratory scientist before changing his field of interest to other subjects, eventually settling on big picture questions about

knowledge and inquiry especially in science. Although he cites the major philosophers and his work is recognizable to as philosophy (as opposed to something else), he skips past the topics that have traditionally dominated philosophical epistemology and focuses instead on the personal engagement with the world that characterizes discovery. Rather than approaching knowledge as an external phenomenon that must be apprehended by humans, which is the conventional approach, Polanyi began with the outlook and position of the individual learner, prioritizing that person's interests, motives, and thought paths. He analyzed the knowledge creation process from an internal, subjective, and what he called post-critical perspective, which involves Gestalt psychology and the phenomenology of bodily awareness.

Academia in Machlup's and Polanyi's time was at its peak of social influence and prestige as cold war anxieties spurred extraordinary government investment in education and basic research. Traditional academic disciplines flourished and interdisciplinary collaborations were successfully initiated. Over the decades since then, the economics of science and education has shifted dramatically and the value of academic work is no longer unquestioned. Meanwhile, innovations in information technology have made possible entirely new modes of documentation and communication and previously unimaginable global connectivity. Given these changes, the role of knowledge in today's world needs to be re-examined with fresh eyes.