Higher Education and Learning Dimensions of the Knowledge Society Discourse

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Focus of the presentation

• The knowledge society discourse in general

• Learning dimensions of the discourse - challenges posed for higher education
Intellectual starting points

• “Concepts have histories. They also have homes.” (Peters 2007, 17)
• Concepts as intellectual devices open different perspectives to social phenomena
• Concepts meet in public policy fields as performative ideologies (not as academic or theoretical perspectives)
Knowledge society & knowledge economy

- Role of knowledge is increasing in industrial production

- **Knowledge society** in a double sense
  
  - the sources of innovation are increasingly derivative from research and development (new relation between science and technology <-> the centrality of *theoretical* knowledge)
  
  - the weight of the society -measured by a larger proportion of GNP & a larger share of employment- is increasingly in the knowledge field (Bell 1973)

- “in the new, informational mode of development the source of productivity lies in the technology of knowledge generation, information processing, and symbol communication.” (Castells, 1996)
Knowledge Society as a social theory

- The relationships between labour and property (capital) no longer provided the intellectual insight necessary to describe, understand and explain modern societies.
- ‘Modernization essentially involves multiple and necessarily unilinear processes of ‘extension’ and ‘enlargement’ (Stehr 1994).
- In the idea of the knowledge society exceptional is the quantity of knowledge (and information) produced daily and the use of information technologies in the data-intensive processes.
- The modernization processes within the knowledge society are processes of extension rather than social transformation.
Knowledge Society as a discourse (1)

• Knowledge Society creates an imaginary social space in which everything related to knowledge or knowledge production can be included & interconnected (individuals, organisations, business enterprises or societies)

• Knowledge Society describes the current situation in which the knowledge society is both the objective of policies and debates & an agent promoting policies and debates concerning its’ potentials

- the term itself is a social and political actor when discussing the goals of the societies
Knowledge Society as a discourse (2)

- Both media, national & international higher education policy makers & HEIs are eager to show the importance of higher education institutions in a world where knowledge has become one of its most important production factors.

- The term is used widely all over the globe with different meanings, but

- Is also a contested concept both academically and politically.
Two topics in the knowledge society discourse

• ‘World class’ (research) universities?
  – “World-class should mean an established record and sustainable ability of creating new knowledge and sound evidence of contribution to economic prosperity, enhancement of competitiveness, and an effective role in the empowerment of students and citizens.” (Sadlak & Cai 2007)
  – Introduction of status hierarchies

• Public or private nature of knowledge?
  – Commodification of research & teaching: who should pay for the education?
  – Ownership of innovations?
Parallel concepts

- **Information society**
  - use of ICT

- **Learning Society**
  - life-long learning & ’learning how to learn’

- **Knowledge Economy**
  - neo-liberal economic thinking
Communication or Confrontation?

- Knowledge Society, Knowledge Economy, Learning Society
  - different basic assumptions
  - Sociology, economics & education
  - confront each other in higher education policy making field
  - are translated into different policies
And what about higher education?

- **Mode 1 knowledge** has been produced within autonomous disciplinary contexts & governed mainly by academic interests of a specific community.
- **Mode 2 knowledge** is produced within the context of its application:
  - transdisciplinary research
  - characterized by heterogeneity
  - more socially accountable and reflexive than Mode 1 knowledge

- **Triple Helix**: previously isolated institutional social spheres of university, government and industry have become increasingly intertwined.

- **But** these give too monolithic picture of higher education institutions.
Higher education and the needs of knowledge society

• Technical innovations & social innovations
• Knowledge production and innovations
• Differences according to disciplines
• ’drizzly rain of ideas’ instead of ’innovation thunderstorms’
• Teaching and learning and workplaces
Knowledge society and HE (1)

• Changes in teaching and learning
  - broadening of curriculum
  - students approaches to learning
  - learning as acquisition? Learning how to (continue to) learn?
Knowledge society and HE (2)

- Transformation of universities and higher learning
  - parallels to Mode1/2 discussions ?
  - analogies to ‘triple helix’ ?
  - example of work-based learning
HE and the needs of the knowledge society (1)

- Teaching and learning and legitimisation of knowledge
  - distributed sites of learning (including the workplace)
  - challenges for HE and others
  - disciplinary norms and values being questioned?
  - role of academic staff changing (facilitators/ navigators)
HE and the needs of the knowledge society (2)

• Workplaces as sites of learning?
  - political and power issues in the workplace
  - overarching accounts ‘hide’ complexities
  - high performance work practices or low-skill?
Challenges for HE in promoting learning for, and in, globalized knowledge societies

• “….the real world of work is ..a lot more about concrete problems…which …are seldom so kind as to divide themselves into disciplines.” (Gourley, 2008)
• Learning to use field knowledge in practical situations is a major challenge needing critical questioning (Eraut, 2007)
• Producing innovative graduates?