Chapter 15

Knowledges, Discontinuities, Spirals, and Universities

Lorraine Ling
La Trobe University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter is deliberately designed to disturb socially constructed and traditional human linear thinking, and as such, the chapter reflects a spiral approach to the content and the ideas addressed. It involves visiting and revisiting concepts at different levels of complexity and depth. It also involves a dialogue of arguments and counter arguments, which could be construed as one of the themes that spiral across and through this chapter. In this chapter, the statement of Foucault (1980), “Knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting,” is central and is revisited as it is exemplified in discussions of social complexity and supercomplexity, multiple knowledges, knowledge management, and knowledge brokers. In this chapter, the discussion of multiple knowledges is linked with the concept of a university as a social artefact and is explored from the time of Plato to the Idea of a university as expressed in the work of Cardinal Newman, through to the notion of the modern university and the 21st century university. What is eschewed throughout this chapter is the notion that past, present, and future are elements in linear relationship to each other. Rather, they are seen as interactive zones of meaning that make and remake each other in a dialectical relationship as the spiral would implies.

INTRODUCTION: DISCONTINUITY AND DISTURBANCE IN THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

In this chapter there is a focus upon discontinuities, disturbances and the spiraling across time and space, in terms of the way knowledge – in its production, reproduction, transmission and validity – has been treated in universities. This chapter constitutes an attempt to provoke non-linear and radical ways of thinking about modern universities and their place in society, in human minds ordered by clock time. In discussing knowledge as a concept in this chapter, the major focus is upon what constitutes knowledge in a university and in this regard the notions of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge form a linking thread. Mode 1 knowledge focuses upon bodies of knowledge that reside within specific disciplines thus providing the basis for modes of inquiry

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6202-5.ch015
Knowledges, Discontinuities, Spirals, and Universities

and ways of knowing within those disciplines. Mode 2 Knowledge refers to the way knowledge is applied and integrated to solve problems and is thus knowledge-in-use. Both of these modes are discussed as they have been reflected in the different ways that universities have privileged and valued knowledge. The fact that Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge are interdependent and that one must relate to the other is also stressed in this discussion. Through a discussion of knowledge and knowledges and the various models which abound for universities in contemporary times, an examination is conducted in this chapter, of a range of models such as the ecological university, the entrepreneurial university, the authentic university and various others, especially in relation to their roles as knowledge producers.

The oft-quoted statement made by Foucault (1980, p. 154), “Knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting”, illustrates the concept of knowledge being about disjunctions, breaks, reversals, bumps and temporality. Here, the concept of a cut or break is used by Foucault to demonstrate the unpredictable and sometimes serendipitous and spontaneous manner in which knowledge is constructed, transmitted, refuted, transformed and disturbed. This contrasts with the ideas of knowledge being emergent, hierarchical, cumulative or evolutionary. Considering knowledge and the construction of knowledge as a non-linear process disturbs the more traditional modes of thought in which human beings apparently habitually engage, conceived of as a linear progression between past, present and future. Since the inception of clock time, humans have learnt to order their lives and thoughts in a linear, incremental manner – the subject of critique and challenge in this chapter.

We exist in a present shaped by inherent elements of the past; and in the present, we shape and contrive opportunities for the future. Past, present and future are thus interactive, dynamic zones of meaning, subject to recursive movements backwards and forwards across time and space. Social life and knowledge consist of reversals, disjunctions, disruptions and breaks or cuts. History and historians have variously interpreted events across time and space. Foucault (1980), interpreting Nietzsche’s concept of genealogy, claimed that “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things; it is disparity” (p.142). The idea of using genealogy to discuss history as a concept, provides a basis for us to reflect upon knowledge and its construction and reconstruction.

Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things... it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations, the errors, the false appraisals and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and to have value for us. (Foucault, 1980, p. 146)

This notion of history as being a catalogue of discontinuities, accidents, breaks and disruptions links with the way we can perceive knowledge. Knowledge viewed in this way is always reversible, always tentative, created in the moment, the result of clashes and arguments, negotiations and tensions, conflicts and confrontations. Lang (2001) claims:

Meaningful knowledge cannot be simply retrieved from some data base but must be actively reconstituted in the moment, in the context of who the interlocutors are, and what the community’s particular needs are at a particular moment. Knowledge work is dominated by communication and discussion, deliberation, argumentation, debate and negotiation. At the boundaries of the old where clashes of perspectives occur when received wisdom does not quite work, new knowledge tends to emerge (p.45).