



The Constant Transformation and Re-configuration of Educational Knowledge Through the Internet - Lessons from Norway

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Abstract

This essay explores the transformation and re-configuration of educational knowledge, where Norway occupies the position of a case and the goal is to develop concepts that are generative and might be applied to other countries. In order to understand changes in educational knowledge, the Internet and technological advances are important. The main theoretical perspective developed draws upon and transposes Burawoy's understanding of public sociology into the field of education. In general terms therefore, the goal is to generate and develop concepts that enrich an understanding of educational knowledge and its socio-cultural constitution. In traditional terms this might be called a sociology of educational knowledge.

Introduction

What has been happening in Norwegian education? Different governments have introduced a long succession of national education reforms (Fauske, 2004). They have covered further education through 'Reform 94' (Reform 94), primary and lower secondary schooling in 'L97' (Curriculum 97), higher education through 'Kvalitetsreformen' (the Quality Reform), a reform of teaching practices and most recently, St. meld. nr. 30 and www.kunnskapsloftet.no signalise, a move to increase competence among teachers and pupils through new curriculum plans in primary and secondary schools. It is possible to argue that these reforms are indicative of a more general malaise in Norwegian education (Telhaug and Volckmar, 1999). Løvlie (2003) has described the malaise as a crisis in education's self-understanding as a discipline; threatened as it is by other more independent disciplines such as psychology, organisational studies and sociology, it has neglected its true cultural-political task, to educate pupils to independence and full citizenship. Instead of enlightenment and *bildung*, educationalists have sought to implement education policy in a largely uncritical manner (Solberg, 2003). The malaise can also be understood in more general terms as examples of the following: weak school leadership, below-standard teacher training, bullying

in the school-yard and the poor performance of Norwegian pupils in the international PISA tests (Dale and Wærness, 2006). The malaise extends to educational research, as noted by a committee appointed to assess Norwegian educational research:

There is a risk that the funding structure of national research programmes and national evaluations can lead to a too conformist and instrumental research that restricts research of a more questioning and critical character (Norwegian Research Council, 2004: 135).¹

The malaise thesis asserts that Norwegian education needs medicine in the form of reforms reaching into every 'nook and cranny' of educational practice and research. In response there has been a call for more competent teachers and research on their professional practice (Hovdenak, 2005; KUPP, 2004; Hole, 2005; *Program for Praksis Rettet* FOU - Research and Development Programme in Educational Practice, 2005-2008; Lillejord, 2005).

An alternative thesis is that education reforms have become fashionable, following trends in other fields and countries to introduce large scale reforms (Røvik, 1992). The European trend towards harmonisation of higher education is a case in point.

It may be, and this is the argument of this essay, that the patient has been falsely diagnosed, not in fact suffering from a general malaise or lethargy. Nor is it necessary to chase after the fashionable, as demonstrated by Norway's refusal to take part in international school tests for many years. A different conceptualization of what is happening in Norwegian education is proposed; one that takes as its point of departure the view that a constant re-configuration and transformation of educational knowledge is taking place (Payne, 2002). And the product, re-configured and transformed educational knowledge, is being used to justify and support the implementation of these very policy reforms, changes in professional practice and different forms of learning and assessment.

Accordingly, this essay shifts the focus to the constitution of educational knowledge and its use by different actors, such as researchers, politicians, civil servants, civil society, teachers and pupils. The country chosen for our argument is Norway, but our contention is that the concepts introduced and developed possess generative value for other countries. We propose a sociology of educational knowledge in the spirit of Bourdieu (1996:2), where actors are immersed in different fields of practice (- each field possessing its own logic and set of dominant concerns):

While it is no doubt true that agents construct social reality and enter into struggles and transactions aimed at imposing their vision, they always do so with points of view, interests, and principles of vision determined by the position they occupy in the very world they intend to transform or preserve.

Secondly, the work of Burawoy (2005) in a neighbouring discipline - sociology - is drawn upon and transposed to conceptualise a division of educational labour and how this is connected to the following knowledge generating questions:

- Educational knowledge for whom?
- Educational knowledge for what?

Thirdly, in answering these questions, it is our contention that the role of the Internet is central to an understanding of the constant transformation and re-

configuration of Norwegian educational knowledge. Actors have to keep in mind that knowledge produced will no longer remain in the form of printed books, reports or textbooks: it can be, and increasingly is, digitalised and communicated through the medium of the Internet. This has implications for educational alliances/coalitions by different actors in different fields of educational practice and the networks that result.

Developing an alternative conception of Norwegian educational knowledge

To conceptualise educational knowledge we draw upon Burawoy's (2005) presidential address to the American Sociological Association, where he contended that sociologists have tended to downplay their public role, undervaluing not only the importance of public statements but also the need to make connections with the different groups and members of civil society. We transpose and develop his concepts to understand the field of Norwegian education. Thus, where he conceptualized and promoted what he called public sociology within the wider field of sociological knowledge, we shall develop a concept of educational knowledge in a public sphere located within a wider field of educational knowledge.

The bulk of his address concentrated on conceptualizing public sociology. He identified a *traditional* public sociology where sociologists write in national newspapers, so that:

The publics being addressed are generally invisible in that they cannot be seen... The traditional public sociologist instigates debates within or between publics, although he or she might not actually participate in them (Burawoy, 2005: 7).

In addition to this invisible public he identified a visible public, namely *organic* public sociology, 'in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public.' (2005:7) In many senses this is the view of the sociologist as activist or partisan, where the goal is to strike 'up a dialogic relation' where the topic is a conversation about 'values or goals that are not automatically shared' (p9) by the sociologist and members of civil society.

The knowledge generated in the practice of traditional public sociology and organic public sociology are however not the only possible forms of sociological knowledge. Burawoy identifies three other kinds of sociological knowledge: policy sociology ('to provide solutions to problems that are presented to us, or to legitimate solutions that have already been reached'), professional sociology ('that supplies true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions and conceptual frameworks') and critical sociology ('to examine the foundations – both explicit and implicit, both normative and descriptive – of the research programs of professional sociology'). These three kinds of sociological knowledge, along with public sociology, are not to be thought of as mutually antagonistic and autonomous, but exist in a relationship of organic solidarity where each type can derive 'energy, meaning, and imaginations from its connection to the others' (p15). They constitute what Burawoy calls a 'division of sociological labour'.

For each of these types of sociological knowledge, it is possible to identify a corresponding type of education knowledge in the field of education. Education policy knowledge covers not only the efforts of civil servants producing policy documents but also the labour of research institutes and educational academics who undertake commissions for the Norwegian government and its departments or local municipalities. One example would

be the commissioned report by Haug (2003), which presents the results of the many researchers engaged in evaluating the 1997 national curriculum reform. Professional educational knowledge covers knowledge of the field of practice most familiar to educationalists, namely schools, teaching and teachers. Six main topics can be identified in the Norwegian context: educational psychology, history of education, educational philosophy, special needs, didactics/classroom studies, socio-cultural understandings of education (Norwegian Research Council, 2004: 108-114). Others, such as school development and school leadership, can be incorporated in or across these six topics. Critical educational knowledge examines the normative and descriptive foundations of professional educational knowledge. Erling Lars Dale, in his work over the last 30 years, has been an exponent of critical education from a theoretical standpoint inspired by Adorno. One example is his recent book (2006), *Oppdragelse i det Refleksivt Moderne* (Upbringing in the Reflexive Modern). Critical educational knowledge also includes what happens outside of the schools, on the streets, in leisure time, what might be called informal education (Dobson et. al, 2006).

For the last of the four types of educational knowledge the term public education, which would be a direct translation of Burawoy's term public sociology to the field of education, is unsuitable. Public education has associations with the manner in which schooling is organized, in terms of public as opposed to private provision. The somewhat unwieldy term *knowledge belonging to education publics* is therefore proposed because it covers the multiple publics in civil society in which educational knowledge can be found: newspapers, radio, television, the debates of local and national politicians, parent association meetings, the meetings of school boards (governors or their equivalent). Accordingly, the knowledge belonging to education publics can be traditional and for invisible publics, as in the columns of newspapers, or it can be organic and visible, connected more directly to members or groups of civil society in a role of advocacy. Hanslien (2005) researched a semi-professional football team in a middle sized Norwegian town. He explored how players were educationally socialised into the club and its ideology. This was an example of organic and visible knowledge and constitutive of an education public, where the communicative distance between his research and the players was small and the research identified and strengthened the club's inclusive culture.

The four types of educational knowledge constitute a division of educational labour, each occupying a distinct field of practice with its own logic. The division of labour is revealed if two questions are asked:

- Education knowledge for whom?
- Educational knowledge for what?

In answer to the first question, critical educational knowledge and professional educational knowledge are for an academic and practitioner audience, while education policy knowledge and knowledge belonging to education publics are for an extra-academic/extra-practitioner audience. In answer to the second question, professional knowledge and policy knowledge are instrumental and entail a dialogue about means, while critical educational knowledge and the knowledge of education publics are reflexive and entail a dialogue about ends. The table below illustrates these different positions:

For whom? For what?	Academic/practitioner audience	Extra-academic/extra-practitioner
Instrumental knowledge	Professional educational knowledge	Education policy knowledge
Reflexive knowledge	Critical educational knowledge	Knowledge for education publics

Table 1: The division of educational labour

Put simply, the question ‘for what?’ is about the Weberian distinction between technical and value rationality, while the question ‘for whom?’ is about the degree to which educational knowledge should be hermetically sealed as knowledge for knowledge’s sake. Students undertaking teacher training are an interesting case. They are concerned with acquiring instrumental knowledge of the profession (for what?), and yet they do not constitute members of the profession because they are still members of the extra-academic/practitioner group (for whom?). It is therefore possible to identify groups with mixed interests, incorporating different aspects of the division of educational labour.

Coalitions

In Burawoy’s (2005: 18) presentation of the sociology field, a ruling coalition between professional and policy sociology and a subaltern mutuality of critical and public sociology’ was identified. He argued that this reflected the manner in which instrumental knowledge, supported by government money and power, spoke louder than reflexive knowledge, especially in the USA. Is there a ruling coalition in Norway between two of more of these four types of educational knowledge?

Telhaug (2004: 434) is of the opinion that critical, theoretical ‘insight has lost terrain in relation to practical insight and competence’ favoured by educational policy makers and the teaching profession. He also argued that Norwegian educational researchers have received steadily more funding for commissioned research, but what they have produced is of ‘a more descriptive character’, lacking in critical insight. In other words, an alliance can be identified between professional educational knowledge and educational policy knowledge, with educational researchers as willing supporters.

This alliance is evident in Lillejord and Fevolden’s (2005) book *Kvalitetsarbeid i Skolen* (Ensuring Quality in Schools) where the first author is an academic in a teacher training institute (Bergen University) and the second author is a highly ranked civil servant in the Norwegian Ministry of Education. They write about the manner in which professional knowledge of schools is increasingly influenced by national quality criteria proposed by policy makers in an educational directorate (Utdanningsdirektorat) established in 2004. They propose that a paradigm change is taking place:

While teaching and learning have not been considered problematic until now and regarded as the responsibility of teachers and pupils, the learning process has increased in significance, and the school as

organization is given a part of the responsibility for its quality (Lillejord and Fevolden, 2005: 14).

And this change is connected with:

Through the national quality assurance system the opportunity is created for administrators and politicians to exert a decisive influence over what is taught and not the least what is learnt (Lillejord and Fevolden, 2005: 113).

Quite simply, the reforms of the 90s covered structural changes, such as reducing the starting age for school from 7 to 6 years, whereas quality and learning outcomes are now in focus (Lillejord and Fevolden, 2005: 126). Nevertheless, from the perspective of educational knowledge there is a line of consistency despite the purported paradigm change, connecting professional educational knowledge with educational policy knowledge.

The transformation and re-configuration of Norwegian educational knowledge

When the move is made from the analytical to the real world it is possible to find examples of the different types of knowledge merging and combining in different ways. This process indicates the perpetually changing character of educational knowledge in response to the actions of politicians, civil servants, academics, teachers, pupils and parents. As a result the four kinds of educational knowledge outlined above are transformed and re-configured to suit the needs and desires of these different actors. Through the examples that follow, the argument will be made that an important driving force in this process is the arrival of the Internet. Burawoy's otherwise inspiring theorisation of the field of sociology has little to say precisely about the role of the Internet and its implications for sociological knowledge. Such a disregard for the Internet must be avoided when it comes to conceptualising knowledge in the educational field (Payne, 2000).

However, this is not to mean that a form of technological determinism is taken to be the main or even the sole driving force in the constant re-configuration of educational knowledge. European pressures towards standardisation (the Bologna process in higher education) and neo-liberalism (the concern with cost-effectiveness and the principles of effective management in schools and other educational institutions) are important in this respect (Green, 1999). Secondly, taking account of the role of new technologies in educational knowledge must not mean that technology is regarded solely as a tool for the communication of knowledge; it can also be indicative of a form of cultural expression in itself, such as resistance or agreement, and as a source of new socio-cultural relations (Løvlie, 2003: 13). Accordingly, new technologies give rise to new social bonds.

With these points in mind two examples will be presented to illustrate in particular, the driving force and socio-cultural role of the Internet in the transformation and re-configuration of the four kinds of educational knowledge outlined above.

Example 1. The Introduction of national tests in Norway

In the wake of poor performance in PISA 2000 and PISA 2003 (OECD-PISA, 2001, 2003, 2004) educational policy knowledge offered national tests as the

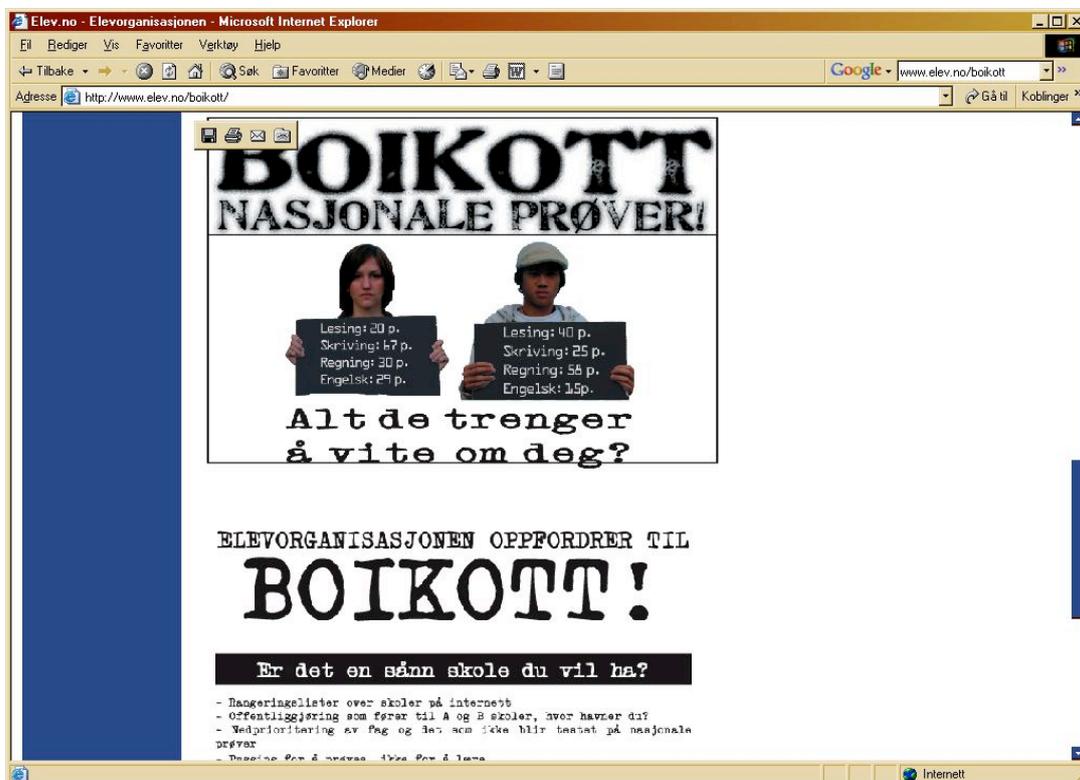
antidote and a means of improving the standard of education. Take for example the formulation in the government report (St. meld. no. 30: 4.5.2):

The Ministry of Education's intention is that (the results of) national tests are to be a part of the final grades in some of today's common, general subjects.

From the perspective of critical educational knowledge, commentators such as Løvlie (2005:3) argued that increased use of testing in schools will have the function of ensuring control and system loyalty by both pupils and teachers. But, they will have little time for dialogue, care and solidarity.

National tests were trialled in 2004. But this was not without opposition in the form of pupil boycotts. A pupils' organisation mobilized support through its web page www.elev.no and through an action entitled "Pupil Action Against National Tests", arguing among things that national tests would lead to a public ranking of schools and teaching to the test, rather than teaching with the goal of learning. Teachers joined public appeals against the tests (www.utdanning.ws, 06.04.05). These forms of defiance and the appeals from different groups constituted knowledge belonging to what has been termed knowledge for an education public. It was knowledge of an organic, visible character, demonstrating the voices of different groups in civil society, but it enlisted what Buroway calls the invisible medium of the newspaper, along with the Internet, which, as noted, he chose not to consider.

Thousands of pupils boycotted the tests in 2005 (*Stavanger Aftenblad* newspaper, 27.1.05). The mathematics test for the 10th grade was leaked, so that its validity was threatened. Here is the web-page used by the pupils' organization in their appeal to boycott the national tests:



Title: Pupil boycott web-page

The Minister of Education both before and after the January tests expressed her opinion of events on the radio and in different media. For example in a statement to the press (<http://odin.dep.no/odinarkiv/norsk/bondevikII/ufd/pressem/045051-070008/dok-bu.html>, 20.1.05) it is possible to read the following:

Pupils who choose to boycott the national tests must be clear that such an action can have consequences for their progress in subjects and also their final grades.

Academics at a national conference on national tests (*Nasjonale Prøver – Veivalg og Utviklingsmuligheter*, 8-9th Feb., 2005), along with research funded by the Education Directorate (Lie et al. 2005) provided further resistance to national tests:

Despite several of the tests having undoubted diagnostic potential... 40-60% of teachers answered that the tests did not provide them with new information about their pupils (Lie et al., 2005: 22).

The current Minister of Education has indicated that there will be no national tests in 2006, but they will be introduced once again in autumn 2007.

The example of the introduction of national tests in Norway illustrates the manner in which knowledge for education publics is constructed in and through the use of the Internet. The Internet in this sense is both a driving force in the events above and a contextual factor making possible a set of socio-cultural relations and alliances. Thus, actors in this field of practice (knowledge for education publics) enlisted the support of professional knowledge (national conference), responded to policy knowledge (Government report) and drew upon critical knowledge (the research that was against the 2005 tests), so that the dominant alliance between policy knowledge and professional knowledge, identified by Telhaug (2004), was averted on this occasion. What counted as educational knowledge was transformed and re-configured through the struggles between the different actors in educational publics.

Example 2. The educational researcher in Norway and the media

Telhaug (2004), as noted above, criticized educational research for being descriptive and not producing enough critical knowledge. This might reflect the funding structure of educational research by the Norwegian research council among others, where professional knowledge and educational policy knowledge are given high priority. In the following example it is precisely the conditions and possibility of critical knowledge that are in focus.

On 2nd May 2006, Dobson (<http://demo.hil.no/sd/index.html>, 08.03.07) published a video-lecture on the public page of Lillehammer University College website at 10 am. The topic was a piece of research undertaken on the educationally valuable implications of Norwegian High School celebrations, what are known in Norway as *russ* festivities. They run between 1st and 17th May every year throughout Norway. Participants drink, party and dance for a large amount of this time. The regional national broadcasting channel (NRK-Oppland) saw the video lecture and had a radio interview and television interview with the author on the same day, and also published an article on the NRK main web-page.

For the next two weeks the author was interviewed on different national radio programmes (P1, P3, P4, Kanal 24, NRK Sami radio, Oslo student radio),

appeared on national NRK breakfast TV and the national independent TV2 breakfast TV. NTB (news agency) and the main net research paper in Norway (www.forskning.no), Other net newspapers also carried interviews and reports of the research findings. Print newspapers carried reports and High School students were interviewed by journalists to see if they agreed with the researcher. The media coverage ebbed out with a full page article by Dobson and Hausstätter in a national daily 15th May 2006. ²

The caption for several of the interviews and articles was “Russ er sunt” (To be a *russ* is healthy). This provoked debate because the main assertion was that *russ* revelry was the source of educationally valuable and healthy experiences. Dobson’s goal (and also together with Hausstätter in the newspaper article) in terms of the question ‘educational knowledge for what?’ was the production of critical educational knowledge of a reflexive character.

It is important to note how the validity of the critical knowledge proposed faced challenges in civil society. It was reported on television and in newspapers that *russ* revelry might have tragic consequences (a *russ* girl was raped by two other *russ*). It was also argued that the American prom tradition might be a less costly alternative for youth (article in *Aftenposten* newspaper (4.5.06).

The research findings were “condensed” from the video-lecture and a journal article upon which the lecture was based (Dobson et al., 2006) to the 5 topics listed below:

- self-development and learning from the rite of passage experience, despite the normal view that students were merely looking for an excuse to drink and party in public,
- care of others in a positive socially inclusive activity, in opposition to the normal view that youth are narcissistic and uncaring,
- peer learning as opposed to teacher-pupil hierarchal learning,
- learning on their own premises as opposed to learning within the school institution and according to curriculum plans,
- it is a planned normlessness and the High School students learn from the year long planning before 1st May when the annual celebrations begin.

This series of media engagements provided an example of the manner in which critical knowledge formed an alliance with knowledge in education publics. The question introduced earlier, ‘for whom was the educational knowledge produced?’ can be answered by looking at the main participants in the education public. First and foremost it was the *russ* High School students throughout Norway who heard about this research and discussed it. They were not invisible, but organic and visible in the terms of Burawoy. Secondly, parents of the *russ* participated in the education public along with teachers, police and health workers.

As in the first example, the role of the Internet played a crucial role in the communication and constitution of educational knowledge as it was transformed and re-configured to suit the needs of different actors. It was a driving force and also a contextual factor supporting a set of socio-cultural relations and alliances. On a general level the Internet strengthened and intensified a societal process commonly known under the term the *society of the spectacle* (Debord, 1995). Accordingly, the number of viewers increased when knowledge was exhibited in the fashion of a spectacle on the Internet, radio, television and in printed media.

On a socio-cultural level, the Internet-supported networks connecting media professionals, such as journalists, with education researchers/academics, teachers, civil servants, politicians, pupils and members of civil society, such as parents. Moreover, members of civil society could make their own Internet mediated networks e.g. e-mailing to each other about the *russ* spectacle and its coverage in different media.

The networks created opened up for greater public participation and a plurality in knowledge for education publics. The concept of networks answers the 'for whom' question of education knowledge, covering both the academic/practitioner and the extra academic/practitioner audience. With respect to the 'for what' question of education knowledge, referring to education knowledge that is instrumental or reflexive, the Internet was able in this example to support a critical, reflexive knowledge.

Conclusion

The focus throughout this essay has been on Norway as a case. However, the concepts we have developed possess, in our opinion, generative potential, so that readers will be able to apply them to their own countries and assess their suitability. This is especially the case with respect to *Table 1* depicting the division of educational labour and its different fields of practice and knowledge.

Norwegian education is not suffering from a malaise, nor should it be conceptualized on the basis of fashionable educational reforms and what they entail. Instead, it has been argued that Norwegian education should be understood in terms of the constant transformation and re-configuration of what counts as education knowledge in different situations. Moreover, the presence of the Internet cannot be ignored as both a driving force and a contextual factor supporting existing and emerging socio-cultural relations between different producers and users of educational knowledge. Accordingly, educational knowledge's four components, identified as professional educational knowledge, education policy knowledge, critical educational knowledge and knowledge for education publics have to come to terms with the presence and socio-cultural potential of the Internet:

- Alliances: the Internet makes possible different alliances between these types of knowledge, for different interests and different goals. Respectively the 'for whom' of academics, pupils, parents, politicians, civil servants, teachers and the 'for what' of instrumental and reflexive knowledge.
- Networks: the Internet makes it possible to constitute new networks, joining media professionals with education researchers, civil servants, politicians, pupils, teachers and parents.

This is not to mean that the Internet is the sole influence on the transformation and re-configuration of educational knowledge. International processes such as the Bologna process in higher education seek to develop a common set of standards in Europe and exert a pressure on education policy knowledge, in the direction of new-liberalism and the marketing of education as a commodity (Karlsen, 2005).

Secondly, the transformation and re-configuration of the four types of educational knowledge also depends on the shifting interests of different actors. Thus, in the spirit of concepts proposed by Bourdieu (1996), each type of knowledge constitutes its own *logic and field* of practice in which different interests *struggle* for influence, domination and control over what counts as legitimate knowledge, both in terms of 'for whom' and 'for what'.

The concept re-configuration has much in common with Elias's (1986) concept of figuration. Firstly, like Elias, we are talking of the inter-connections, or networks, between different actors who represent different interests. Secondly, it is possible, in the spirit of Elias, to map and follow transformations over time in the interests and actions of the actors. However, in opposition to Elias, we have focused upon the question of educational knowledge, how it is constituted and under what conditions it gains support and legitimacy.

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¹¹ All translations from Norwegian have been undertaken by the authors.

² Regional NRK radio and regional NRK TV (2.5.06). Net newspapers (www.nrk.no - 2.5.06, www.forskning.no - 4.5.06, NTB - 3.5.06, helseogarbeid.no - 4.5.06, Bergen net student newspaper - 5.5.06, Aftenposten net edition - 4.5.06). Radio interviews (P1 - 3.5.06, 8.5.06, 9.5.06, P3 - 6.5.06, Kanal 24 - 4.5.06, radio Nova - 4.5.06, NRK Sami radio -11-5-06). Print newspapers (GD - local daily - 6.5.06, national daily Dagbladet, little note in national daily VG - 4.5.06). National breakfast TV (NRK 1 - 9.5.06, TV2 - 10.5.06)