

The Realm of Knowledge

It is still standing — the little red schoolhouse where I, a little girl barely fourteen, began my career as a teacher; still standing, though with sunken roof and broken windows, a solitary reminder of the days of long ago . . . I did not limit the field of instruction to matters Biblical, attempting rather to cover the entire realm of knowledge in art, science, history, literature, and what you will. (Lucia Downing, teaching in 1885)

They haven't moved my room. I'm not in the English wing. So I'm kind of out of the realm. (Joan Frances, teaching in 1988)

Roughly one hundred years separate the experiences of these two teachers. In that time, the context of teaching has changed dramatically, particularly in the relatively new institution of the American high school. The numbers and characteristics of students who attend school, and for how long, the physical and organizational structures, the activities of district, state, and federal policy makers — all converge to alter the context of teaching in secondary schools. What is it like to teach in a high school today, and how is it different from Lucia Downing's time?

One important difference lies in the emergence and adoption of the departmental structure. For between the statements of the two teachers above, quietly but significantly, the location of the 'realm of knowledge' has shifted, and its meaning has altered, in ways that substantially change what it means to be a teacher.

The purpose of this study was to explore that change, and what it means today to be a teacher inside, or 'kind of outside the realm' of knowledge which constitutes the academic department.

From Downing's Realm to Frances' Realms

It was in 1885 that Lucia Downing began teaching in the 'Keeler Deestrick School' in Vermont. At 14 she was young, even for a time when young females were common in teaching. But she had, along with her older sister, passed the qualifying test: an exam which began with Arithmetic and continued through Grammar, Geography, History and Civil Government, and Physiology (all of which she would be expected to teach), and finally Theory and School Management — which involved control of students, 'ventilation and temperature'. The authority who read her exam and certified her entry into the field was the superintendent: 'In our little town, the duties of the school superintendent were not burdensome, nor the position lucrative, and for many years our superintendent was the village doctor, who was probably the best-educated man in town, not even excepting the minister!' (Downing, 1950, p. 28).

At the end of the year it was this superintendent who came to hear and judge the recitations of her students, on a public occasion where pupils were to provide evidence not only of their learning, but also of her successful teaching, in front of

a vast and terrifying audience having assembled — entirely out of proportion to the number of pupils. There were fond parents, and grandparents, and aunts and uncles and cousins thrice removed. (p. 35)

To this end Lucia Downing remembers devising

what I thought was a wonderful set of 'Instructive Questions and Answers' suggested by a *New England Primer* that had come down in our family, but I did not limit the field of instruction to matters Biblical, attempting rather to cover the entire realm of knowledge in art, science, history, literature, and what you will. (p. 33)

The students performed well,

though if I had made a slip and asked the question out of order, the results might have been disastrous. They might have said that Vermont is the largest state in the union, or that George Washington had sailed the ocean blue in 1492. (p. 35)

While Downing may have had doubts about her students' ability to remember their facts out of sequence, she had little doubt about what it was that she — with only the help of a few textbooks — was expected to do: to 'cover the entire realm of knowledge'.

In 1988, Joan Frances described her experience in teaching in the Burton District in Michigan, to researchers with the CRC project on secondary schools.¹ Like Lucia Downing, Joan Frances began teaching while still in her teens: 'it was about my junior year . . . one of the nuns [was] sick, and they asked me would I take over a classroom. They thought I did such a tremendous job [that] I stayed for the week.' Like Downing, Frances found that, at least at the start of her career, 'I think at that particular time teaching was a good profession for a woman.' Also like Downing, Frances described herself as somewhat of a generalist, a reading teacher prepared to cover a variety of subjects: 'My major is in sociology, minor in political science, and I have a master's degree in counseling and reading.' She operates in a manner that bears some similarity to Downing's one-room school: 'I conduct my class a little bit different than the other ones . . . I have five different groups and they all go on at one time.' In her classroom, students go at different levels, and in different subjects, with some working on 'drawing conclusions' and others diagramming sentences, some reading science textbooks and others novels.

There are remarkable parallels between the stories of the two women, in how they chose, began, and conducted their teaching. And many observers have presented a strong case for the argument that remarkably little has changed in teaching over the past hundred years. Sirotnik (1983), reporting on the Study of Schooling's data from over 1,000 elementary and secondary classrooms, observed that in terms of the process of teaching and learning, classroom practice 'appears to be one of the most consistent and persistent phenomena known in the social and behavioral sciences' (p. 17; see also Boyer, 1983; Cuban, 1984; Sizer, 1984).

Yet while much remains the same, the contexts in which Frances and thousands of other high school teachers work has changed dramatically since Downing's time. The very fact that Frances teaches in a 'high school', for example, was an opportunity rare in Downing's time — and non-existent in her rural area. In the decades which separate their teaching, schools have moved fully to a formalized and graded system, with high schools spinning off into separate buildings and growing to what would have been to Downing unimaginable size and complexity.

Downing's recollections are particularly enlightening because she, as a new teacher, came roughly on the 'cusp' of a changing system — at the beginning of a new era in the organization and staffing of schools as well as at a time of dramatic change in what had been a long-standing configuration of knowledge and subjects. And the changes in both categories combine to radically alter the meaning of the term 'realm of knowledge', as departmentalization reifies and literalizes the realms of academic subjects.

Lucia Downing talks about the 'entire realm of knowledge'. In her use the term is singular: an image of the organization of knowledge as a single continuous entity that students (at least some students) would gradually, and partially, come to know. It echoes the unified, but hierarchically linked, model of the subjects in medieval universities, the 'common course of education' which 'offered a unification of the medieval universe of thought', and through which a single master would lead his students (Perkin, 1984). This common course was a pyramidal ladder with the liberal arts at the bottom, theology at the top. Careers were linked not so much to which field one studied, but to how far one had progressed on the ladder. Teachers had typically stopped on a low rung, ministers at the very top; in describing her superintendent as 'probably the best-educated man in town', Downing makes the point that she was 'not even excepting the minister!' (p. 28).

By Frances' time, the dominant model is quite different: the organization of universities, and increasingly of high schools, reflects modern understandings of knowledge as distinct fields, with, in her usage, discrete and plural 'realms' into which knowledge has been compartmentalized. Students choose among the fields, rather than moving up through them. These are separate and separated bodies of knowledge, each specialized discipline with its own 'territory', and populated by its own 'tribe' (Becher, 1989; also Clark, 1987; Geertz, 1983). For Frances, the desired 'realm' is the knowledge territory of the English department, where she would share subject matter in common with her colleagues.

Second, the 'realm' Frances refers to is also the literal territory of the English department: the set of classrooms clustered together in one wing of her school. This realm is external, physical, spatial — a place she can go (or could if time and distance would allow) to be with the other members of her disciplinary 'tribe' and to share materials, ideas, and support. For Downing, the place where the knowledge is located was largely internal; she would 'cover the entire realm' out of the knowledge she herself possessed; in her school there were few materials, only one room, and no colleagues of any kind.

These differences in the use of the word realm, then, point to substantial and substantive differences in the contexts in which these two teachers teach, differences which alter the meaning even of the parallels between them. Being a reading teacher, and a bit of a generalist, is a similarity which epitomizes difference: it creates problems in 1988 which Lucia Downing could hardly have imagined, for Frances has not only to teach her classes, but to fit into the larger system of the comprehensive high school, and the operations of the school have changed substantially. Her place in that system is unclear, since both her formal and professional identification is as an English teacher but her physical location is not. Highlander, far from being a 'little red school house',

is a large urban high school, an imposing three-story building housing 100 teachers in wings designated by academic subject. And when Frances talks about 'realm' of knowledge she refers not only to the kinds of knowledge she hopes to impart, but to what has become the literal territory of those categories — the physical domains of the academic departments. Although she is officially a member of the English department, her classroom is in the Social Studies wing. It is in talking about the difficulties of finding time for access to the English wing, about the physical distance which reduces the collegial support and participation in planning which full membership should provide when she replies 'I'm still in the Social Studies department . . . they haven't moved my room. I'm not in the English wing, so I'm kind of out of the realm.'

Between the careers of these two teachers the realm of knowledge has moved from being a part of Downing — she will 'cover the entire realm' out of the knowledge she herself possesses — to something Frances wants to be part of, something she finds missing because of the location of her classroom. The realm of knowledge, reified in the formation of academic departments, has multiplied in number and created boundaries which divide knowledge into disciplines and schools into subunits, has populated them with specialized teachers, laid claim to territories in particular physical space, and from Frances' perspective, created a 'realm' in which membership is important. What is it she feels is missing? What would full participation afford? What does it mean to be inside a department, to be one of the inhabitants of these realms of knowledge within the modern high school?

The purpose of this study is to explore those changes, to look at the academic department as a context for teaching in three contemporary comprehensive high schools. It is an exploratory study, for while the department has become a familiar feature, it has remained largely an unstudied one. But as the teachers in this study tell and demonstrate, the departmental context is 'very crucial in a high school'.

From their stories, four critical aspects of the department emerge: 1) it represents a strong boundary in dividing the school; 2) it provides a primary site for social interaction, and for professional identity and community; 3) it has, as an administrative unit, considerable discretion over the micro-political decisions affecting what and how teachers teach; and 4) as a knowledge category it influences the decisions and shapes the actions of those who inhabit its realm.

Before turning to these four critical aspects of departments, and the stories teachers tell of what their lives are like inside and on the edges of these realms of knowledge, the first two chapters provide background information on what we know from existing literature about subject departments. Chapter 1 examines both the relative invisibility of the high school department as an object of study in

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educational research and recent suggestions of why it might be important to now illuminate these contexts. Chapter 2 explores the historical evidence on where, when, and how departments came to quietly constitute realms of knowledge in contemporary high schools.

Notes

- 1 The Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching (CRC) has been engaged in a five-year study of American high schools, supported by the US Department of Education. As is discussed more fully in Chapter 3, the research on which this study is based was conducted as part of that larger project, and all sites and participants here are identified by CRC pseudonyms and codes.