The complex relationship between theory and practice in higher education curricula

Seminar: Development of HEQF aligned qualifications
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Should HE curricula be about learning delivered to students in ready-made packages?

Should meeting stakeholder needs be the only considerations when we develop HEQF aligned qualifications at UoTs?

Is there perhaps more to it than just this? If so, what should be considered?
Impact of globalisation on HE curricula

- Effects of globalisation have broad structural change in four main areas:
  - The marketisation of the sector & increased competition between institutions;
  - The commodification of education – increase emphasis on the performative value of knowledge that would be of direct benefit to employers;
  - Changes to higher education consumption patterns;
  - Emphasis on efficiency and accountability.

In search of “lost knowledge”

- Displacement of knowledge in outcomes-based curricula – a concern in many countries.
- This displacement of knowledge came about as a response to globalisation – reinvention of HE as a tool for economic reconstruction and the move to a market relationship with education as a commodity.
- Increased emphasis on quality of the ‘product of learning’ as determined by customer satisfaction.
Needs of customers take centre stage

- Increased emphasis on quality of the ‘product of learning’ as determined by customer satisfaction.
- Needs of the customers (employers, industry, students) are at the centre of organisational focus and strategy
  › Competency-based approaches to pedagogic practice – equipping students with a tool-box of work-ready skills
  › Flexible ways of delivery to meet the needs of industry predominantly.

Exchange value of knowledge

- Wheelahan (2010) reports that learning has become something to be ‘delivered’ to students in ready-made packages in order for them to simply ‘consume’ learning – vocational education system in Australia.
- O'Brien & Brancaleone (2011) argue that knowledge is conceived primarily as “a product of exchange value” – critique on the European Credit Transfer System.
Problems with UoT curricula

- Technicist approach to curriculum design
- DACUM exercises focused mostly on functional task analysis appropriate to occupations – neglect disciplinary knowledge in favour of workplace skills
- Displacement of knowledge
- Theory – practice relationship distorted
- Lack of alignment – outcomes-teaching-learning-assessment
- Teacher-centred paradigm - long lists of topics to be covered
- Textbook-driven classroom activities encourage surface approach to learning
- Lack of student engagement in meaningful & complex learning to prepare them for a changing world – world of “supercomplexity”

What should UoT curricula consist of?

- Induct students into a body of knowledge organised through the academic disciplines
- Induct students into a field of practice and the situated knowledge influences the practice

Is there some tension between these two forms of knowledge in your curriculum?
The nature of professional practice

- Professional practice requires the development of a body of disciplinary knowledge;
- Professional practice includes basic and very complex skills, procedures, problems, practices, etc;
- Professional practice involves becoming the professional and includes the development of certain attributes.

\[ \text{Knowing} \quad + \quad \text{Doing} \quad + \quad \text{Being} \]
\[\Rightarrow \text{An engaged curriculum}\]

Conceptual framework

- Basil Bernstein (knowledge structures);
- Michael Eraut (tacit knowledge, knowledge-in-practice);
- Jeanne Gamble (vocational knowledge);
- Michael Barnett (the vocational curriculum);
- Ronald Barnett (the engaged curriculum)
Discourses & knowledge structures

**Horizontal discourse**
Knowledge developed through practice

**Vertical discourse**
Academic knowledge

- Everyday practice
- Complex Practice
- Horizontal knowledge structures
- Hierarchical knowledge structures


**Discourses**
(the distinction between theory and practice)

**Vertical discourses** are abstract, theoretical ... they are not independent of one another, but are ‘integrated at the level of meaning’ (Bernstein, 1999:161).

Vertical discourses are associated with the traditional academic disciplines and the ways in which their symbolic systems have evolved.

**Horizontal discourses** are ‘typified as everyday, context dependent, tacit, multi-layered, often contradictory across contexts but not within contexts ...’

the objects of such knowledge are likely to be volatile and substitutable...’ (Bernstein, 1996:170–171).
Interpretation of Bernstein: Theorising craft (Gamble, 2004)

Procedural knowledge

- Procedural knowledge
- Principled procedural knowledge

Everyday practice
Codified practice

Conceptual knowledge

- Proceduralised conceptual knowledge
- Conceptual knowledge

Applied Theory
Pure Theory

Relationship between theory & practice in a curriculum

Contextual knowledge base

Occupational/technical/professional

Disciplinary knowledge

Complex relationship in curriculum

Further study

**Occupational/professional knowledge fields**

Continuum of knowledge fields

- Weaker disciplinary core
- More manual work
- Less formal entrance requirements
- Less organised in terms of regulations
  e.g. fashion designers

- Strong disciplinary core
- More mental work
- Formal entrance requirements
- Strictly regularised
  e.g. Accountants

**Different forms of knowledge**

- Academic/conceptual knowledge
- Situated/contextual knowledge

Winberg (2011)
Professional qualification

Occupational/vocational qualification

Winberg (2011)
List of selected sources

Any questions?

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