

Curriculum Development for Inclusive Education

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Abstract

Using a short revision course as a test case, this paper will look at the wider issues revolving around developing a curriculum; it will look closely at the process and praxis of the educational journey to attain the product with a deeper understanding of what is being studied. The paper will also discuss how the managing of product and process, amidst a lecturer/teacher's knowledge of their students is increasingly important. In addition, recognizing the student's objectives and pushing them to search out (with a certain degree of autonomy) their own objectives through reflection and contextualization of learning.

Keywords: Curriculum planning, process and praxis, cognitive flexibility, teaching and learning

1. Introduction

Kerr defines curriculum as, 'All the learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside the school.' (Kelly 1983: 10) To justify a course, knowledge of the objectives to be achieved is absolutely necessary. As Kerr states, the curriculum is a plan; set guidance on what is to be carried out over a specified timeframe. In this course justification I (the first author) will be analysing and reflecting on how my own teaching experience has informed not only my proposal, but also the manner in which objectives and assessment methods are implemented. I will show how my proposal takes into account notions of inclusive education. I will detail how I designed my course and the reasons for it; furthermore, focusing on product, process and praxis, I will analyse the functionality of my short course in the transmission of knowledge.

The research by Göransson (2014), and Florian (2014) has acted as a foundation for this work. Göransson (2014) critically examines research on inclusive education, addressing both conceptual variations and empirical limitations. The author delves into the complexities of inclusive education's interpretation and implementation while highlighting gaps in empirical evidence and suggesting areas for improvement. Florian (2014) addresses the diverse nature of inclusive education and the challenges in defining effective practices and validating them. Author responds to Göransson's (2014) critique by exploring the difficulty in establishing a precise inclusion definition. Both works agree on the need for advanced studies and theoretically informed research. Florian (2014) also presents a framework to capture real instances of inclusive education, bridging contextual variations and enhancing insights into how teachers implement inclusive teaching methods.

I have created an intensive revision course which is comprised of a range of activities designed so that pupils will be able to attain their educational objectives. The curriculum is to be implemented so as to teach an entire AS module in a six-week short course. The revision sessions are created for the sole purpose of providing the relevant information and the tools (or knowledge base) for students, so that they can tackle examination questions; essentially, this means that the course will be fundamentally driven by 'product' or a learning outcomes approach to curriculum development. Ideally, I would prefer to spread the content over a longer period, to allow more time for students to develop their creative and individual potential; however, because of looming examinations (and the time constraints involved within the AS curriculum) I have to push a high level of content within a somewhat short space of time.

It was more out of necessity, and in order to comply with A-level specifications, that the course was designed as it was. The lessons are very much content focused and designed for the purposes of relaying as much information as possible; despite this, I have attempted to make the sessions interactive and accommodate for individual learner needs. As the teacher, my personal objective is to motivate students to take on the challenge of listening, concentrating and, ideally, maximising on the learning opportunities inside the class. After this student must take on the responsibility for consolidating learning outside of it also. It is only by the joint effort of both student and teacher that the objectives can be achieved. A product-based curriculum is one where the product is clear, and the teacher works backward from the objectives to ascertain a defined structure for the transmission of content in an innovative way. (Kelly 1999) The key to the successful implementation of this short course will inevitably be dependent upon the reaction of the students: they must reciprocate the motivation I display in the creation of mentally stimulating lessons; regardless of the clarity or inventiveness displayed within the curriculum model, it will be useless if it does not produce results in practice.

2. Aim, Action, and Monitor

The college context is something that is unique to the specific location. One college situated in a certain area could be operating under entirely different circumstances than another further education establishment only a few miles away. A 'one size fits all model is clearly not suitable' when taking into account 'the needs and priorities of the learners in your community. The curriculum aims must reflect the needs of all your learners (Dimensions, 2009). City of Westminster College has many students who are entering education for a second time: students wishing to study; but, most often, they remain unclear

about the underlying reason for wanting to attain educational qualifications. Every student has the capability and the inherent intelligence to achieve good results; it is only hard work that separates the successful from the unsuccessful. There are issues with certain students (which I have witnessed in my own practice) who have personal troubles. Often these outside problems can find their way into the classroom. These situations are difficult to tackle. I have planned (because of time constraints) to deal with these problems, if need be, after lessons. It is my hope that the content of the lessons (alongside a consistent pace) will be enough to focus students, so that issues from outside of the classroom do not enter it at all. For curriculum aims to be successful, priorities must be thought through, clearly identified and shared with everyone, including the students themselves (Dimensions, 2009).

Often the 'destination' of created curricula can be vague and too general, thus resulting in outcomes which are not completely focused; this can have a negative impact on students, who are unaware of the goals they are supposed to be aiming for and what is actually expected from them. The problem could exist within the transmission of the subjects being taught, or perhaps, a lack of flexibility in the curriculum.

I feel that subjects and topics must be both relevant and applicable to the 'real world'. Bridge High School conducted a re-design of their curriculum model back in 2001. Their major concern was that 'its learners were not fully engaged in, or sufficiently challenged by, its curriculum.' Much of the learning they considered to be 'shallow' and they were worried about how learners seemed to be merely remembering items of information without 'developing deep conceptual understanding of subjects.' (Bridge High School Curriculum Design Model, 2004) It is a common problem that is not confined to high school but reaches deep into the further education sector. Students struggle to see the connections between subjects or to really appreciate the ideas that underpin them. Moreover, few students in both High school and college have developed the skills to work independently, in groups or be creative in their approach to learning. Many learners, (as I have witnessed in my Additional Learner Support class) once they become bored with a subject, find it extremely difficult to reengage, or be creative in their learning; they soon become disillusioned with the subject and de-motivated; which, in turn, can often lead to low attendance and, if not remedied, can result in complete disengagement with the subject, inevitably resulting in low exam attainment figures.

The goal of my curriculum is to engage students by using active tasks and attempting, through the content, to motivate learners to actively participate in their own learning. I have already established to the students the importance of attending and punctuality (as time is incredibly precious). I have pushed the fact that summative examinations are just around the corner and that every effort must be made at this crucial time, to make sure that they are all comfortable with every aspect of the AS course. The need to consolidate the in-class learning and the willingness to work hard will be an imperative element if the students wish to succeed.

Once the Curriculum is in place it is necessary to monitor it; the ultimate purpose of monitoring is to improve learning. For a course to be effective there must be a simple systematic plan for assessing the actual effectiveness of the curriculum in meeting the initial aims. In my specific situation the course I have structured resides within a larger curriculum; therefore, my short course is a micro model. The effectiveness of the course will be predominantly judged on this scale, where the 'single' module must be covered in its entirety, but, at the same time it must adhere not only to the micro curriculum aims but also the macro curricular aims of the AS syllabus. Monitoring should 'build up a clear picture of whether the curriculum is challenging, relevant, and being successfully implemented throughout the school'. (Dimensions, 2009) The sessions I have created will be fully planned and observed on various occasions; student's work will be checked, assessment materials will be viewed by peers and discussions will take place with pupils at the end of every session, to review progress and gauge what needs to be covered outside of the classroom before the next class: the notion behind this relates to ideas of self-motivation, student autonomy and personal responsibility for one's own learning.

A good curriculum should provide teachers with more ownership of what they are actually teaching in the classroom; furthermore, it should also give students increased ownership of their own learning which

creates a sense of mutual focus (teacher and student) toward a specific product or goal. My short course is based around the notion of trying to broaden the perspectives of students by applying course content into everyday situations- applying knowledge actively.

3. Cognitive flexibility and cross curricular learning

The manner in which a person learns is a large field of study which is incredibly complex. For this section I will be highlighting one learning theory: The Cognitive Flexibility Theory. Cognitive flexibility theory focuses on the nature of learning in complex and ill-structured domains. Spiro & Jehng (1990 p. 165) state: 'By cognitive flexibility, we mean the ability to spontaneously restructure one's knowledge, in many ways, in adaptive response to radically changing situational demands...This is a function of both the way knowledge is represented (e.g., along multiple rather than single conceptual dimensions) and the processes that operate on those mental representations (e.g., processes of schema assembly rather than intact schema retrieval).'

The theory is largely concerned with knowledge transfer and the development of skills beyond the initial learning situation; it is for this reason that the emphasis is placed upon the presentation of information from multiple perspectives and the use of real examples. The theory asserts that effective learning is context-dependent, so the instruction needs to be specific; in addition, the theory highlights the importance of constructed knowledge. Learners, within this particular theory, are invited to develop their own representation of information. It is essentially learning in a way in which students feel comfortable. Proper learning involves learner involvement. Cognitive flexibility theory builds upon other constructivist theories (e.g., Bruner, Ausubel, Piaget) and is related to the work of Salomon in terms of media and learning interaction. The key principles of the theory revolve around the central idea of providing multiple representations of content and supporting context-dependent knowledge; not oversimplifying instructional materials but insuring clarity. Information is based on case scenarios, where emphasis is placed on knowledge construction rather than transmission of information. For effective implementation, knowledge should not be limited or compartmentalized but rather should be interconnected. The great challenge for implementing this in my model will be to ensure the focus does not veer too far from examination objectives. Ofsted (2008) in the report on Curriculum Innovation repeatedly places focus on the need for an interconnected, cross-curricular approach (liaison between subjects and departments).

My lessons (generally) tend to be very 'process' orientated; focus is given to expanding the knowledge base of students. The dialogic interaction between student and teacher is something that I believe to be very important. The sessions are intended to be free formed, but always functioning with certain parameters to ensure that educational objectives remain clear; an attempt to meld various elements of different curriculum models into one effective 'working' model. Lessons are always context dependent, and the following section will look closely at issues to do with curriculum models and how they influenced the decisions I made in the creation of my own short course

4. Process or Product?

A Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) came up with a slightly tentative definition of a curriculum: 'A curriculum is an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice' Stenhouse (1975) suggests that a curriculum is rather like a recipe in cookery, where questions such as whether the knowledge provided nourishes students and whether it tastes good? The recipe for a curriculum, as that of a dish, is first 'imagined as a possibility' then the 'subject of experiment' (Smith, M.K 1996, 2000). Stenhouse was not saying that curriculum is the process, but rather the 'means by which the experience of attempting to put an educational proposal into practice is made available'. (Smith, M.K 1996, 2000) The process model looks to experimentation: the lessons I teach are often a mix of structure manipulated in an experimental fashion; what I mean by this is that lessons have objectives, but these objectives do not encroach upon the learning possibilities that occur via contextual development within the class. The focus must be on the interaction between learner and teacher, and these interactions change with the context of the class. The attention shifts away from the teacher to the learner. According to writers like Grundy

(1987), the process approach to curriculum tends toward 'making the process of learning the central concern of the teacher.' This is because this way of thinking 'emphasizes interpretation and meaning-making.' (Smith 1996, 2000) Every classroom, as I have stated, is different and each exchange is different and has to 'be made sense of' (Smith 1996, 2000)

Problems arise when trying to implement a purely process model. Those students who prefer greater uniformity in teaching may be uncomfortable with an experimental approach. In an educational and social environment where families, and thus some students, place a 'high premium' on exam or subject success and this ethos is inevitably brought into the classroom. Perhaps the process model does not, as in the case of the product model as well, pay enough attention to the context in which learning takes place. Assessment can also be tricky. In my proposal I have tried to incorporate exam questions into the process of learning; however, it is not a separate entity: it functions alongside and amidst the processes of knowledge attainment. Stenhouse (1975: 95) argues that it would be difficult to get weaker students through an examination using a process model and crammers cannot use it either, since it depends 'upon a commitment to educational aims.' Many students often reside upon the cusp: forever unsure about their motivation to study. I, in my own practice, try to provide guidance or frameworks (more product model) and supply something else also-- a sense that knowledge is relatable to the outside world, not only within the context of the classroom.

The pressure on teachers, one would think, would be less in a process model curriculum. But where the product models provide some kind of safety net (in the form of prescribed curriculum materials) the teacher in the process model flies through the air- a trapeze artist with little room for error. Although the process model is supposedly meant to give the teacher greater freedom, in some sense, (especially if the teacher is not up to the task) it can also become more debilitating than liberating. Cultivating wisdom and meaning-making in the classroom can (in my own experience) be very difficult to plan; it is a gruelling process in its own right. The rewards however, when it comes off can be great. The extra work in planning is well worth it when it all dots merge together. It essentially boils down to understanding what one can achieve as teacher and what the students will respond to as learners. Grundy (1987) writes that the actions have become the ends; the processes have become the product. Whether or not students are able to apply the skills to make sense of the world around them is somehow overlooked. (Smith 1996, 2000) The problem is that process models and assessment criteria do not really go hand in hand. Not to say that assessment cannot be done, but rather, must be taken in stride. Whether students feel comfortable with examination being a by-product of the process of knowledge acquisition is up for further debate and possibly beyond the scope of this rationale.

Curriculums can be viewed in many ways: some see it as a syllabus to be transmitted; some would say it is completely product orientated and others would feel it to be a process where knowledge is constructed. Education is most often seen as a technical exercise. 'Objectives are set, a plan drawn up, then applied, and the outcomes (products) measured.' (Smith 1996, 2000) In the creation of my short course I began to wonder: what is a curriculum? The answer is allusive, and it will probably remain so. Countless definitions abound and many theories exist. Ralph W. Tyler's theory is focused strongly on product and consists of four fundamental, simple and very rational questions (Tyler, 1949: 1):

- What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
- What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
- How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
- How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

Although the outlined questions seem compartmentalized, they offer room for manipulation and creative, process-based methods. The major problem is that learners within this framework appear to have little or no voice when it comes to their learning. 'They are told what they must learn and how they will do it.' (Smith 1996, 2000) Educators apply programs and are then judged by the products of their actions. Are educators technicians? There must be some kind of compromise, shouldn't they?

5. So, will it Work?

The principal of a large and reputable London FE institute (during a talk) referred to the establishment as a 'High Widening Participation' college. Going on to say that it catered for students from 4 of the 25 most deprived wards in the UK. It is an interesting fact, and one that in some sense can have an impact upon teaching style. As I have said before, during this rationale, I want to make lessons as enjoyable as possible; not only for the students but for myself also. From a personal standpoint I would rather create a short course that develops the skills of learning which would last beyond FE: skills that could be used throughout life. I would prefer to extend study sessions and develop projects for students to engage in, so as they can work autonomously or in groups: placing the responsibility for learning (to a certain degree) on their shoulders. But for a college that caters for 4 of the 25 most deprived wards in the UK it is quite a risky strategy to employ-the students need that product. Education, for me, is something that goes beyond mere schooling; it is more than what is defined by a syllabus or laid out in a curriculum model.

I have tried my best to provide something that students can engage with, have fun with and, most importantly, relate to. I have also attempted to marry this with a consistent (shared) objective: student's preparation for summative assessment and my guidance in providing the essential tools to succeed in exams. Whether this comes together will be dependent upon what happens in the classroom-the recipe has been made and now only the taste test remains.

6. Conclusion

This paper has indicated the importance of careful planning when putting together a curriculum that will engage learners and push them to think beyond the realm of the classroom so as to see knowledge as free formed and not compartmentalized. There is a need to understand that learning is something that is fluid and multi-faceted. We live in an age where information is readily available through a multitude of mediums; it is the responsibility of educational institutions to recognize that they need to raise expectations through allowing students to question their own understanding of what expectations are and what they mean to them. Through the development of a curriculum that challenges students to see that answers are to be searched for rather than handed to them, we may begin to see them engage in the process of learning in a manner that sees these students deliver a product that is not only beneficial to them in educational terms but also in the terms of the life they live in the future.

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