

An Education Studies Curriculum for Active Students: Engaging with the Disciplines

Education Studies is underpinned by the study of the Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy and History of Education. A new curriculum which is driven by these disciplines, rather than issues, has been introduced to at one North West university. This is based on a view of students as active, rather than passive, learners and seeks to overcome attitudes of instrumental rationality. Students have been positive about the curriculum generally and have demonstrated an engagement with it. Through an internal survey, the 530 first year students were asked to rank the disciplines in order of those they would most like to study in year two. This paper considers the choices the students made and some of the reasons for these. The results indicate that student choice in the disciplines is influenced by a number of factors, including their previous educational experiences and as a desire to be actively challenged.

In the Faculty of Education at Liverpool Hope University our underpinning philosophy is that education is a means of humanising society. Our aim is to create transformative learning experiences which can *transform the student's attitude from a private, instrumental rationality, towards a public-oriented, civic-minded, communicative rationality*. This is based on the idea that *the foundational purpose of the university is to develop democratic society by inculcating in students the discipline of critique*. A major pedagogical shift for us has been to see students as active, not passive, and as individuals and groups who do have the potential to study actively. We think this is best done by the study of the cognate disciplines of Education, which for us are the Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy and History of Education.

The study of the disciplines enables us to develop their critical thinking skills and to pull back a swing to vocationalism and assessment focussed teaching. The curriculum is based on a model for learning where four elements are closely entwined; the curriculum, relationships, disposition to learning and spiritual and emotional reflection. The weekly discipline focus revolves around a tutorial discussion of 10 students and 1 tutor. These tutorials are crucial as they provide a safe place for the students to really engage with the disciplines.

In the first year students study each of the four disciplines. At the end of their first year they were asked to choose which two they wished to study in the second year. By looking at the reasons for their choices we can begin to see whether or not students are active or passive in relation to their course of study.

An internal survey was conducted with the first year cohort, in the form of a short questionnaire, at the end of their first year course. They were asked to indicate their discipline choices in descending order. They were also asked to identify why they made the choices they did from a list of given reasons (see below). They were then invited to give a more detailed reason for their choice if they wished to. 446 students out of a cohort of 530 took part, 84%.

Table 1. Results of an internal survey of students to indicate their choices for second year study.

	Psychology	Sociology	Philosophy	History
First Choices	349	61	18	18

Second Choices	62	215	135	44
Total	411	276	153	62

Notes:

200 QTS students were given Psychology of Education as their first choice, as we think that can have the greatest impact on their classroom practice.

Students were invited to give the reasons for their choices as part of the internal survey, choosing from the options in the table below and then to expand on these if they wished to.

Table 3. Reasons for choosing the disciplines.

Why did you choose the discipline you did?	First Choice	Second Choice	Total
I find the discipline really interesting	346	292	638
I think I can achieve better grades in the discipline I've chosen	258	220	478
I studied the discipline before coming to University	187	97	284
The discipline also relates to my other degree subject	181	148	329
I don't like the other disciplines	93	121	214

Note:

Students could choose more than one reason.

Student attitudes towards the disciplines and their reasons for choosing them are interesting and suggest that many of them are seeking academic challenge (77%), that they want to be made to think rather than just take an easy option. This is illustrated in the following quotes from students:

The challenging thought and exploration of the Philosophy course is appealing to me.

I have taken an AS level in History and did not enjoy it therefore I dropped it. I have also got an A level in Philosophy therefore I would like to do the other disciplines as a new challenge as they both interest me.

This desire to be challenged in their thinking suggests that they want to actively study, to participate in the curriculum.

Less surprisingly, some students chose disciplines which relate well to their career aspiration (85%). For example:

I want to do Psychology because I'd like to do music therapy and think that it will help me. I want to do Philosophy because I think ethics in education is very important.

I think that Psychology and Sociology are very much linked to the classroom and will be easy to apply to the classroom on placement.

Choosing a discipline because it relates to their career aspiration may or may not be influenced by instrumental rationality, but we would need to ask them further questions to understand why they want to pursue the careers they do to be able to draw conclusions about this.

Some students demonstrate a growing understanding of learning and the importance of enjoying a subject. These students recognise the need to be actively engaged with the discipline and not to be passive.

Because I enjoy both subjects my learning will continue. (Philosophy & Psychology)

Many members of my family have studied these disciplines (Psychology & Philosophy) and I am heavily influenced by their interests. I can receive good support in these disciplines and nurture my learning.

I feel that the sociology lectures so far have been most engaging and interesting

Some students made links between their choices and their aspirations to work in the community. Their responses may be seen as early recognition of the purpose of education as a means of addressing social injustice and their aspirations to be part of this.

I believe that Sociology will allow me to better develop my understanding of theory of education and to be more hands on with the community.

Sociology involves volunteering which really interests me.

The student choices and the reasons for their choices are interesting as they do indicate active engagement with the disciplines rather than just a passive acceptance of the curriculum presented to them. As such we can begin to see that some students are not influenced by instrumental rationality.