

Untangling the web: making sense of curriculum decisions and their implications for achieving higher education purposes (0219)

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Research Outline

Curriculum is a field of educational research that provides models and principles for the design and enactment of educational experiences (Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Smith & Lovat, 2003). However 'curriculum' is a term that has not been commonly used in higher education, where the focus of research has been on academics' and students' conceptions of teaching and learning (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Hicks, 2007; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Current understandings of curriculum encompass educational purposes and the planning and reflecting stages of course design (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Knight, 2001). Hence, there is renewed interest in curriculum to provide a conceptual framework for addressing higher education goals and new challenges that encompass institutional, national and international priorities (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Blackmore & Kandiko, 2012; Hicks, 2007). However, curriculum decision-making typically takes place at the level of the individual academic or curriculum team, who will determine the extent to which particular goals are adopted. Therefore understanding how academics make curriculum decisions and the influences that shape them is important for managers and policy makers identifying strategic curriculum change initiatives.

Two significant curriculum theories developed to inform teachers' practices are the 'product' model, now commonly known as outcomes –based education (OBE), and the 'process' model of curriculum design (Kelly, 2009). du Toit (2011) presents these models at opposite ends of a continuum representing functionalist and progressive views of education. OBE models, which include constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999), have become the dominant approach in higher education (du Toit, 2011; Prideaux, 2003). OBE provides a rational framework for making curriculum decisions by defining learning outcomes that express what students are expected to achieve and aligning them with teaching, learning and assessment activities. In contrast, the process model of curriculum focuses on learning processes rather than outcomes. Curriculum design begins from broad learning goals that provide a set of guiding principles for teachers and the curriculum is understood as the interaction between teachers, students and knowledge in the classroom (Kelly, 2009).

Both the product and process models represent prescriptive curriculum models, which are intended to guide and improve teachers' practices. An alternative approach examines what teachers actually do in practice to develop descriptive curriculum models (Print, 1993). Descriptive studies have shown that curriculum development does not follow a linear, sequential pattern and that teachers may begin from any curriculum element and proceed in any order (Brady & Kennedy, 2010; Stark, 2000). A common finding is that most teachers and academics begin with selection of course content, rather than learning outcomes (Brady, 1989 in Brady & Kennedy 2010; Stark 2000).

This study develops a descriptive model of curriculum design to understand how academics make curriculum decisions and what influences their decisions. Interviews were held with 20 academics from diverse disciplines teaching in a research-intensive university. The higher education curriculum was conceptualised as a field of decision making shaped by academics' beliefs about educational and contextual influences, including their discipline, research, students, institutional and socio-political contexts.

The study investigates the following research questions:

- How do academics make curriculum decisions?
- What are the influences that shape their curriculum decisions?
- How do their decisions reflect evidence-based understandings of good practice?
- To what extent are academics responding to institutional and national agendas for higher education?

The findings explore curriculum decision making as a process, the elements that constitute curriculum, the nature of decisions about key curriculum elements, and the key influences that shape those decisions. A common set of curriculum elements were identified that comprised: course content, learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, assessment and evaluation. Participants began their curriculum design from different curriculum elements and followed different pathways. A model is developed that shows curriculum decision making as an iterative web, where decisions about any element typically result in revisiting and refining decisions about preceding elements.

Course content was the starting point for the majority of participants because their first concern was what they would be teaching in a weekly schedule of lectures. The next most common starting point for one-third of participants was specifying learning outcomes or objectives about what they wanted students to achieve. The remaining participants began their curriculum design by considering students' learning experiences, which were typically informed by an experiential or inquiry based learning philosophy. However, these decisions were inter-related and participants who began from course content and teaching and learning activities were also typically guided by broad goals about what they wanted students to achieve. Participants who explicitly began by defining learning outcomes described it as a useful thinking process for clarifying their intentions for learning, for getting feedback from colleagues, and for making decisions about assessment. This approach represents an OBE model based on Biggs (1999) model of constructive alignment. However, the most innovative curricula were those where participants focused on the design of teaching and learning experiences that support students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

Hence, this study suggests that the process model of curriculum better represents higher education curriculum practice that leads to quality student learning and outcomes.

Participants' curriculum decisions were guided by their beliefs about the purposes of higher education, which shaped five distinctive philosophical orientations to curriculum. Many of the curriculum decisions and practices reported in the study reflected disciplinary and institutional norms, which were typically unexamined as decisions. Institutional norms were the strongest drivers for conformity, in particular the standard settings for teaching and

learning events in lectures and tutorials, and timetabling as a weekly schedule with standard hours allocated to each of the teaching events.

However, within each of the curriculum orientations some participants were found to be responding to changing understandings of teaching and learning and were making active, experiential and flexible learning central to their curriculum design. The paper presents the following case studies of participants who are adopting innovative approaches to teaching and learning and explores the conditions which support educational change.

- Peer instruction in a physics course
- Experiential learning in a sociology course
- Flexible learning in a specialist literature course.

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