

Curriculum Change and Scholars' Changing Agency (0109)

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This paper explores freedom and control, the theme of the conference, from the point of view of curriculum change. Curriculum development has stronger or weaker strategic, administrative and disciplinary control structures which may arise from the global, national or local origin. Among the scholars, the control and guidelines coming from outside the disciplinary or university community are often criticized (e.g. Antunes, 2012; Millar, 2016). Universities are collections of relatively nonhierarchical networks resisting strong top-down control and seeking meaningful justifications for the changes (Kandiko & Blackmore, 2012). Nevertheless, within all control structures, it is people, scholars, who essentially design and reform the curriculum, and who have academic freedom to make choices based on the justifications they consider relevant. Thus curriculum development and reforms in higher education can be characterized as a negotiation process within certain constraints and opportunities. Agency and structure are ways to characterize these processes. According to Ashwin (2009), in agency it is question of projects of human agents, and in structure it is question of the factors that enable or constrain such projects. Following the ideas of Giddens (1991) and Archer (2003), we suggest that the structures and agents are mutually constitutive entities in curriculum reforms and development.

In this study, we focus on the nature and changes in scholars' agency in two different contexts in curriculum development: first, during strong departmental autonomy, and second, during a comprehensive curriculum change concerning the whole university. The research questions are: 1) What kind of agency emerges in the descriptions of curriculum development? 2) What kind of differences and changes in agency can be identified in two different contexts of curriculum development? 3) How could the scholars' changing agency be explained?

The research context and data collection

The research data was collected by semi-structured interviews concerning practices and processes in curriculum development at a medium-size multidisciplinary research university in Finland. The data is comprised of 34 interviews for 17 people, including professors, senior lecturers, university teachers and administrative staff with teaching duties. The informants represent a wide variety of disciplinary fields. In the first interview, we asked the departments to name an interviewee from their curriculum development team for an interview. During that time, the departments developed their subject- or disciplinary-based curriculum with a manner and rhythm they themselves defined. Soon after the first interview round, the university in question launched a comprehensive educational reform. The number of study programmes was reduced to half and there was an organizational shift from subject-based education to degree programmes. After the reform and three years from the first interview, we carried out a new interview round for the people interviewed earlier.

Analysis of narrative reflections

Narrative reflection is seen as a method to understand the complexity of the processes where people interact, how they make sense of their experiences and how they structure them. As many narrative researchers (cf. Bruner, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) have claimed, at its best, narrative reflection could be a constructive 'tool' that offers alternative ways to examine issues that are otherwise inaccessible by using other qualitative methodologies. In this study, the narrative reflections were thus results of confluences of social influence on participants' inner lives, social influence on their environment, and their unique personal histories. Accordingly, the strategy for organizing the data was based on the premises of analysis of narrative reflections with different stages. In the first categorising stage, we first conducted the data driven coding procedure regarding to the expressions of agency by one person in the first and second interview into a comparative table. The data was read carefully many times in order to find all the basic units. The basic unit was a sentence or short notion containing a view expressing agency. Next the notions were reflected with the expression of structure – the factors that enable or constrain the agentic projects. Then the expressions were compared horizontally and vertically, i.e. between the years and between the scholars, trying to find the changes and social phenomena around them. Six agentic profiles were found. In the last phase of analysis, the changes in the profiles and the explanations for the diversity in agentic profiles were reflected.

Agentic profiles and the changing structures

The agentic profile of *academic developer* highlights interest towards the student learning and teaching in general with readiness to take responsibility for curriculum development. Academic developer can leverage all resources by being creative and thus can cross over the structural constraints.

Opponent does not believe in curriculum change nor its meaning as a part of scholars work. Opponent is very critical, profiling in agentic projects against the local and/or university-wide curriculum initiatives. These projects may portray as active resistance or withdraw even though the personal position and duties would require it.

The profile of *tribal advocate* features interest towards protecting the high status of disciplinary territorial and is unshakeable and committed to different, often personal, values. Tribal advocate has strong confidence and assurance of agent's own competence and the superiority of the disciplinary field.

Responsive bridge-builder acts as a mediator between the different interest groups at a university, labour market and society. Responsive bridge-builder accepts negative feedback from other scholars, but aims to adapt to the conditions that are unavoidable.

The agentic profile of *entangled workman* has no passion, no resistance and accepts chaos as a part of the curriculum development and academic work. The focus is on the rational process of developing curriculum and to avoid conflicts.

In the latter interview, emerged only one new agentic profile that was named as *suppressed expert*. It has similar features as academic developer and has a will to contribute but not status or space to

have agency in curriculum development. Suppressed expert expresses frustration and disappointment.

An interesting notion was that all the five agentic profiles appeared in both contexts. However, there was a great number of moves from and to. The analysis revealed that structures have many layers related to the changing agency. The local disciplinary communities seem to have a key role, but also the power relations and status of both people and discipline. Bourdieu's thinking (e.g. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) resonates with the results. Curriculum development can be seen as a game in a field where different players compete in order to maintain and develop different types of symbolic capital and it is also the question of habitus how the games are experienced by agents. The results will be discussed in more detail in the conference.

References

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