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Curriculum as a totem, symbolizing teacher's images of students

Ellen Kloet[1]

[1]*Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, Zwolle, The Netherlands*

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Abstract: In a university wide curriculum change process in the Netherlands grounded research was undertaken to grasp the differences between program teams. The discourse analysis in over sixty documents led to three perspectives on the student. First the student as pupil, which has a highly pedagogic tone of voice. The sentences show an active teacher and a passive student. The second one had deep rooted metaphor in the student as customer. All language used is from a business setting. The last perspective is the student as partner. Both student and partner are learners and try to figure out wicked problems in work field or society. The three perspective prove significant for the changes program teams make in their curriculum. Program teams adjust the change goals to fit their basic underlying assumptions. In the presentation we will discuss perspectives and focus on the different outcomes and the symbolic significance of the curriculum.

Paper:

Curriculum as a totem symbolizing teacher's images of students Change

This research focusses on the different views teachers in applied higher education have of students and reflects on how those images are transferred into a curriculum. The curriculum symbolizes the relationship between student and teachers, seen through the eyes of the teachers. The research was conducted during a university wide change process in which program teams were asked to adjust the program towards more flexibility, personalized education and improved teaching quality. The researcher tried to underpin the observed differences between the program teams.

Grounded approach

This research employed a grounded approach. The starting point was noticing that all program teams varied widely in their responses to the change. The first step was to grasp the differences. Data was collected through, mostly, document analysis. Forty plans of actions and twenty-eight substantiated curricula were scrutinized using discourse analysis. The analysis started with open coding. Meaningful sentences were selected and coded. Sensitizing concepts were found in the relationship between student, teacher, program, work field. All programs acknowledged the importance of these relationships but put them in a different light and gave the actors different roles.

Discourse analysis

In the second step the documents were analyzed again for their use of language in regard to those relationships. Key seemed to be the role and position of the student. The documents were screened with word counts for over forty words (student, teacher, flexibility, work, environment, engagement, support). How often a word was used was interesting, but also the company it kept. Some word combinations were frequently used in a number of documents where seldom used in others. Also the grammar and syntax of a sentence were insightful. It showed who the teams saw as actor and what the activities could be. The research focused in later steps on the relationship between student and teacher as perceived by the teacher.

Three perspectives

In the study we found three perspectives on the student as seen by the teachers. First the student as pupil. In the data there were sentences who concentrated on the pedagogy of higher education. The student is seen as immature and underdeveloped and the teacher as person who can help the student to mature. This perspective focused on providing a safe learning environment. The relationship between teacher and student is inequal, the teacher knows best. The sentences showed an active teacher and used a passive voice towards the student.

Secondly the student as customer. The root-metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008) is economic and businesslike with words as 'offer' and 'satisfaction'. The teacher is providing a service for the student, the student is customer and king. This metaphor sees the student as rational and knowledgeable. Learning is described in an acquisition metaphor (Sfard, 1998).

Thirdly the programs used the metaphor student as partner. In this perspective the student and teacher were equal, this was made visible in the grammar of the sentences. "Teacher and student study together…". The teacher is also a learner in a complex world. Student and teacher are connected together in their search for solutions for wicked questions from the work field or society.

Influence on curriculum change

The three perspectives proved to be significant to the changes that were carried out. The student as pupil metaphor led to changes in the educational environment to provide a more safe place to learn, support sessions were scheduled (and even rewarded with credits), in the program specific attention for subjectification and socialization (Biesta, 2014) and flexibility means adjusting the program to specific student needs. Teams with a 'student as customer' view focused in their change process on offering choices. To offer choices the courses must be thoroughly described and a lot of effort is put showing the student which choices there are by building a catalogue. Flexibility means lots of choices in which subject to study, but also flexibility in time, place and in the way students can learn (online or on campus). When the student was seen as partner, wicked problems are leading. The schedule for the student is made to facilitate teacher, student and society to meet. The description of the modules are vague to allow for just-in-time adjustments and to facilitate all kinds of wicked problems. The modules are larger in credits then in the other perspectives.

Discussion

This study tried to grasp the differences between program team in a university wide change program. Discourse analysis was used to distil the basic underlying assumptions from the espoused values (Schein, 2010). Three student perspectives were found in the data and have a huge impact on the outcomes of curriculum change. In the literature the student as customer is often discussed (Conway, 1994; Obermiller & Atwood, 2011). Most scholars emphasize on the fact that the metaphor does not embrace the whole phenomenon of being a student or the relationship between student and teacher (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). However by using academic staff can become aware of their own implicit beliefs and help explicate those beliefs (Visser-Wijnveen, Van Driel, Van der Rijst, Verloop, & Visser, 2009). It appears also that many words frequently used in innovation such as flexibility, quality, personalized education, and teacher as coach are floating signifiers (Lévi-Strauss, 1950). All three perspectives give their own meaning and significance to them. The curriculum as a whole is like a totem; a symbol that represents three perspectives on students by teachers. The deeply rooted underlying assumptions are not easy to change and certainly not by using fluffy concepts.

Literature

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