

## **Curriculum development in times of change (0125)**

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### **Introduction**

In a recent study (Geirsdóttir, 2008), a conceptual approach proposed by Basil Bernstein (1990; 2000) was used to explore and understand the complexity of curriculum decision making and tensions within different disciplines in higher education. The aim of the study was to explore university teachers' conceptions of the pedagogic discourse (or the disciplinary curriculum) of their discipline, their felt agency to make curriculum decisions and in such a way to provide insight and understanding that captures the complexity and intricacies into the curriculum process in higher education. The study was carried out within a single university, the University of Iceland, and involved three academic disciplines, selected on the grounds of their assumed epistemological and social differences (Beacher and Trowler, 2001). At the time of the study, the University was experiencing much of the political, social and cultural changes that have taken place in the global system of higher education (Jónasson, 2004). For example the University was slowly moving into an era where the State was claiming the right for more intervention into curriculum matters, requiring accreditation of curriculum programmes.

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted in the years 2002-2007 at the University of Iceland. Data was mainly collected through observations at staff meetings and in-depth interviews with university teachers and department heads within the departments of mechanical and industrial engineering, anthropology and physics at the University of Iceland. Data was analyzed through formal data structure and discourse analysis.

### **Main findings**

The study demonstrated the existence of a *local pedagogic discourse* of the disciplines where each discipline has a distinctive and local structure and modal characterised by different aims

of the disciplines, different conceptions of student identities and teacher role and a specific instructional discourse. The pedagogic discourse is most strongly shaped by teacher conceptions acquired during their own time of studying the discipline, their teaching experience, the discipline's organisational culture and structure and the discipline's saga.

Although the research claims that teachers hold a central role within curriculum development, the local pedagogic discourse of the discipline is located in a social context within which different contesting ideologies arise and where they are influenced by internal as well as external forces. Here the social context is the disciplinary university department, where boundaries, power relations, communication modes and management structures create special identities and different possibilities for curriculum development and change (Bernstein, 1996:10). Findings indicated that within the curriculum process, teachers within the three disciplines felt they had different opportunities and spaces for making decisions about curricula. Analysis of dissimilar departmental organisation thus demonstrated teachers' differing agency to make curriculum decisions according to department organisation and pedagogic discourses that operate within them.

The research findings further demonstrated how different disciplinary pedagogic discourses are not stable, they develop and change. During the time of the study, competing ideologies within the disciplinary discourses as well as intrinsic and extrinsic forces within as well as outside the disciplinary context made their mark upon the pedagogic discourse of the discipline and thus the curriculum development and process. Institutional changes (such as the establishment of graduate programs) and demands and dominant ideologies (such as a stronger research mission of the University) were seen to affect and support the local pedagogic discourse of some disciplines while weakening others. The findings indicate that critical analysis of disciplinary pedagogic discourses and departmental organisational modes can be applied to understand the possibilities as well as the boundaries of curriculum development in higher education

In this proposed paper the research findings will be discussed in the light of curriculum changes taking place within the local disciplinary pedagogic discourses and the forces influencing those changes and development. The main questions raised here are 1) Which internal and external forces do university teachers and department heads at the University of Iceland experience as influencing the curriculum development? 2) Do local disciplinary

discourses lend themselves differently to those forces? and; 3) Do those forces change the experienced curriculum agency and identity of teacher within the university?

The research questions stated above will be addressed by using a modified framework provided by Becher and Barnett (1999) distinguishing between internal and external forces influencing subject – specific or cross-subject development as well as Bernstein’s theoretical concepts of different recontextualising fields. The two forms of framework will be used to explore and demonstrate the responsiveness of the disciplines towards identified change forces. The research analysis is expected to provide insight and understanding into the possibilities as well as barriers to curriculum development at times when higher education is facing series of changes.

## References

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