

**Struggle for Control: the importance of social theory in research on the higher education curriculum (0121)**

Higher education researchers from the UK and the wider European context have tended to - if not ignore - effectively marginalise the topic of the higher education curriculum. Indeed, the curriculum tends to come into view only when a certain preoccupation appears on the horizon: e.g. creativity, widening participation, internationalisation, employability or sustainability. While general debates about the higher education curriculum in the US have received much more attention, these can often be reflective of concerns within US society more broadly and are less applicable to a UK/European context. In the latter context, there is a danger of turning studies of the curriculum into technical projects related more to teaching and learning than to sociological analyses of the operation of power within universities.

The lack of curriculum theory in higher education is somewhat odd given the rich tradition of critical, social and philosophical theory which has had much influence on higher education researchers. Most of this social theory is relevant to the curriculum, although it is not always identified as such. The question then becomes whether a theoretical exploration of curriculum is a necessary endeavour and in this presentation I will argue that it is, mainly because the curriculum is the manifestation of disciplinary and academic practices. The higher education curriculum reifies the norms, values and core functions of academic work. To understand the curriculum is to understand the university, and to understand who is struggling for control within the university.

There is a deeper, philosophical argument to be made as well. As Posner (2005) states: 'Every curriculum represents a choice as to how to approach the education of students'. An a-theoretical approach to the students' experiences of curriculum would be inadequate for addressing the underlying worldviews behind these choices that the students are expected to negotiate. At stake are the most fundamental questions about the purpose of education: questions around agency, freedom and the formation of civil society. The curriculum is a construct and it is continually in (re)construction through the work of those in higher education. We can therefore utilise theory to understand whose interests we are serving, as indeed Posner (2005) exhorts us to do.

There are a number of critical, social theorists whose work is influential in higher education research but not necessarily in relation to curriculum studies. They have been used by some HE researchers to explore other aspects of higher education, such as widening participation (e.g. Reay 1998 ); student engagement (e.g. Mann 2001) and pedagogic practice (e.g. Malcolm and

Zukas 2001), but not curriculum. Bourdieu, for example, has illuminated the exclusionary practices embedded within the norms and values of educational institutions. His work highlights the interplay between structure and agency which has become the focus of much sociological theorising in subsequent years. The higher education curriculum offers a particularly compelling example of tensions between structure and agency which has perhaps not received as much attention as it deserves. Where there is a more clearly defined articulation of how the higher education curriculum affords or denies student agency is in the research on widening participation, but not within a field designated as curriculum studies.

The work of Basil Bernstein has been most directly related to curriculum structures, particularly through his concepts of knowledge structures, classification and framing. His theoretical contribution in relation to higher education curriculum is most clear in the possibilities for curriculum change across different disciplines. Agency is enabled or constrained by different disciplinary structures. Those with the most agency in defining curriculum structures are most in control of determining what gets into the curriculum and what is left out: as Bernstein argues, the study of curriculum is the study of who is allowed to think and what they are allowed to think.

Foucault, while perhaps overly familiar in some areas of educational research, could offer more to higher education curriculum studies. His work around disciplinary punishment enables an understanding of how individuals can be controlled through professional judgements rather than corporeal threats. His nuanced understanding of the power-knowledge nexus has obvious relevance to the higher education curriculum, although in higher education research his theories are more often brought to bear on issues of, again widening participation, but also the surveillance of academic staff and the rise of performativity. Given that students are the subject of surveillance and control through curriculum it is surprising to see this gap.

Finally, the work of Cornelius Castoriadis offers the possibilities for change. His project of developing individual and collective autonomy is an encouraging response to the more reproductive tendencies of earlier theorists. Autonomy as the goal of education, as developed through the concept of social imaginaries, offers a means for exploring a re-imagined higher education curriculum. His work extends and recasts earlier radical theorists such as Friere.

In summary, my contention in this paper is that the field of curriculum studies in higher education research in Europe is under-developed, and yet the curriculum is a manifestation of practices and values within the university and offers enormous potential for understanding what we do in universities, who is able to participate and why we do it. Separating out curriculum (as distinct from topics such as 'widening participation', 'internationalisation', 'employability' etc) could enable us to explore disciplinary differences in detail through a range of methodological approaches, and to develop further theorisations around power and the struggle for control of the curriculum. None of the theorists I am discussing here are new to education researchers, and obviously have been used in different ways to develop research on other aspects of higher education. What I am suggesting is that there are more possibilities if we consider 'the higher

education curriculum' as a field of study in its own right, rather than a concept that only emerges through the study of different aspects of higher education or through a technical discussion about curriculum development as a teaching activity. By not theorising the curriculum we are missing opportunities for deeper philosophical explorations of the purpose of higher education.

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