

The ever evolving curriculum: The influence of internal and external forces on disciplinary curriculum development (0134)

In a recent study, a conceptual approach proposed by Bernstein (1990; 2000) was used to explore and understand the complexity of curriculum decision making and tensions within different disciplines in higher education. Attempting to avoid the often fragmented and disperse approaches taken in studies on the higher education curriculum, a strong theoretical framework was applied as an analytical tool to analyze and understand the complex process of curriculum development while at the same time doing justice to the socio-cultural context within which the curriculum process takes place.

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.

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 (Becher and Trowler, 2001). 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. Data was analyzed through formal data structure and discourse analysis.

The study demonstrated the existence of a *local pedagogic discourse* of the disciplines where each discipline has a distinctive and local structure and model characterized by different aims of the disciplines, different conceptions of student identities and teacher role and a specific instructional discourse.

Yet, the local pedagogic discourses are far from stable and competing ideologies within the disciplinary discourses as well as intrinsic and extrinsic forces within as well as outside the disciplinary context make their mark upon them and thus the curriculum development and process. Institutional changes and demands and dominant ideologies are seen to affect and support the local pedagogic discourse of some disciplines while weakening others.

To capture the disciplinary changes and curriculum development taking place, a modified framework provided by Becher and Barnett (1999) and Bernstein's theoretical concepts of classification and framing and the pedagogic discourse were used to explore and demonstrate the responsiveness of the disciplines and disciplinary cultures towards identified and recent change

forces in the higher education. The analysis demonstrated how the three local disciplines are changing and being modified by forces internal to the discipline, by those emphasized by the institution and finally, how they are responding in different modes to external forces.

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). The University was slowly moving into an era where the higher educational officials/the State was for the first time claiming the right for more informal and as well as formal interference into curriculum matters mainly through the implementation of the Bologna process. Although the intervention was not experienced as limiting the curriculum agency of the academics interviewed at the time, follow up research has indicated that those may indeed be increasingly making their mark upon the curriculum and university teachers' agency within curriculum.

In this proposed paper the research findings of the original research as well as of the follow up studies 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. A special focus is on how global shifts and transnational tendencies and policies at the macro level of higher education area are received and implemented in the curriculum within different local disciplines. The main questions raised here are:

- 1) How are internal and external forces experienced as making their mark upon curriculum development within different disciplines?
- 2) Do local disciplinary discourses lend themselves differently to those forces?
- 3) How can social theoretical framework such as Bernstein's help to explore and understand the interconnectivity of curriculum development and decision making at national, organizational and instructional levels?

References

- Becher, T. & Barnett, R. (1999). The reshaping of the academic curriculum in the United Kingdom. In C. Gellert (Ed.), *Innovation and adaptation in higher education* (pp. 92-107). (Higher Education Policy Series 22). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Becher, T. and Trowler, P. (2001) *Academic tribes and territories: Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines* (2nd Ed.). Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Bernstein, B. (1990). *The structuring of pedagogic discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity* (2nd revised ed.). New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Geirsdóttir, G. and Jóhannesson, I. Á. (2009, 28.–30. September). *The Bologna Process in two Icelandic universities and accreditation*. Paper presented at the European Conference on Education Research (ECER), Vienna.

- Geirsdóttir, G. (2011a). Teachers' conceptions of knowledge structures and pedagogic practices in higher education. In: G. Ivingson, B. Davies and J. Fits (Eds.) *Knowledge and identity. Concepts and applications in Bernstein's sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Geirsdóttir, G. (2011b). *Implementing learning outcomes at the University of Iceland. Where do we come from? Where are we heading?* Paper presented at the conference "Better today than yesterday" held by the committee of Bologna experts and Ministry of Education and Culture, Akureyri May 30. -31.
- Jónasson, J. T. (2004) Higher education reforms in Iceland at the transition into the twentyfirst century. In I. Fagerlind and G. Strömqvist (Eds.), *Reforming higher education in the Nordic countries - studies of change in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden* (pp. 137-188). Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning