

Title

The multiple curriculum: A material feminist analysis of knowledge-making in higher education

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Abstract

This paper explores the conceptual tools a 'new' feminist materialist approach offers for re-thinking the higher education curriculum. The paper engages Barad's (2007) concepts of intra-activity, entanglement, apparatus and phenomena to propose the concept and practice of 'the multiple curriculum'. Drawing on empirical evidence from two undergraduate modules in a UK university which enacted the multiple curriculum, the paper illuminates how such practices recast the student as knowledge producer, rework subject-discipline relations, and remake the curriculum as a matter of human and non-human agencies. The paper exemplifies how Barad's (2007) diffractive approach contributes to producing knowledge 'otherwise' (Lather, 2007).

Summary

The primary aim of this paper is to explore what a 'new' feminist materialist approach has to offer in reconceptualising the higher education curriculum. The paper puts to work Karen Barad's (2007) elaboration of agential realism – and its generative conceptual framework of intra-activity, entanglement, apparatus and phenomena – to make a case for the 'multiple curriculum'. The paper argues that agential realism helps make a decisive, and practical, move away from theories of learning which have separated the cognitive from the material, and away from Cartesian ideas about knowledge which emphasise the dis-embodied nature of knowing. Instead, I argue for a material feminist approach to curriculum that attends to the co-constitution, not separation, of matter and meaning; and I propose a materiality of knowing that pays due attention to the situated, the embodied, the material alongside and with the cognitive and intellectual. Such a shift enables us to reconceptualise the higher education curriculum as a relational ontology in which bodies, objects and material things of all kinds take their place in practices of meaning-making. I argue that this not only extends how we understand the production of knowledge and question presumptions about what counts as knowledge, it also brings into view new ways of thinking about subjectivity, classroom relations and ethics in higher education. In order to explore these concerns, the paper is framed by the following three questions:

1. How can we use the conceptual tools offered by new material feminism in practical and pragmatic ways to design and develop the higher education curriculum?
2. How can the theoretical resources of agential realism be 'translated' into a set of curriculum enactments which engage students as knowledge producers in learning?
3. How is the role of the lecturer reconfigured in a material feminist curriculum?

In proposing the 'multiple curriculum' as a practice to enable curriculum innovation and as a working concept or exemplar of how new material feminist thinking may be realized in curriculum enactments, the paper speaks to, and is informed by, a range of ongoing debates about the nature of the higher education curriculum in particular, and curriculum studies more generally.

Barnett and Coate (2005) have noted the historical and contemporary absence of the term 'curriculum' both in higher education policy documents and in the intellectual and theoretical literature on higher education. For example, the term 'curriculum' is a notable absence in the document responsible for ushering in the most extensive changes to the higher education system in the UK in recent times, *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011). The notion that 'the higher education curriculum remains largely unknown' (Barnett and Coate, 2005: 27) has been corroborated by other more recent studies which disclose that the relations between knowledge and the curriculum in higher education is an under-researched area (Ashwin, 2014). These absences are not accidental but perhaps point to a range of 'systematic interests at work' for which/whom the term curriculum would 'pose difficulties' (Barnett and Coate, 2005: 16). As the HE landscape shifts further in the direction of instrumentalism and consumerism, and as the discourses of marketisation, increased competition, student/consumer 'choice', graduate attributes, skills and employability, and the national measurement of student satisfaction take increasing hold, it becomes both more uncomfortable and jarring – but at the same time more urgent – to return to Pinar's (2007) question 'what knowledge is of most worth'? A material feminist approach to curriculum puts Pinar's question centre stage, along with other difficult but equally necessary questions such as: What sorts of persons do we want higher education to produce? What values underpin the higher education curriculum? And how do, or should, individuals relate to society?

At the same time, there have recently been some moves to involve students as co-producers of the higher education curriculum in partnership with staff. (Healey *et al.*, 2014). Curriculum work in this vein is articulated within pedagogic discourses which aim to give students greater voice (Bovill *et al.*, 2011), promote student engagement (Taylor, 2012), make higher education a more democratic process (Apple, 2011) and produce an alternative political economy of the student experience (Neary and Hagyard, 2010). The radical intent of some of these moves is laudable. However, it may be the case that the radical potential of students as partner/producer models is diffused by stable, linear and bounded curriculum practices. This is partly because of pressures to construct curricula through tightly-focused learning outcomes, instrumental ends and the dissemination/ consumption of knowledge chunks. In many contexts, then, despite radical aims, curriculum partnership practices may work against the potential of knowledge as a transformative force and may not be able to put in place any radical shifts in hierarchical staff-student power relations.

As a way of countering these pressures I elaborate the theory and practice of the 'multiple curriculum'. The multiple curriculum, I argue, begins by opening

up the modular package and, from this, it offers a radical space for re-thinking curriculum as a post-human confederation of intra-active agencies and materialities; as an onto-epistemology of knowing-in-being; and of knowledge as a material practice. The paper supplements Barad's (2007) concepts of intra-activity, entanglement and apparatus with Bennett's (2010) notion of 'thing-power', and Deleuze and Guattari's (1997) ideas of assemblage and becoming. The theoretical discussion is grounded in empirical evidence from two undergraduate modules from a UK university which are experimental and provisional enactments of the multiple curriculum. I argue that exploring the specificity and detail of these curriculum enactments provides insights into what 'new' material feminism offers in the way of reconceptualizing subject and discipline knowledge production, reworking student-staff relations, and remaking the higher education curriculum. I indicate how 'new' material feminism provides a definitive break with the 'the modernist framework, in which the Tyler rationale is embedded' (Doll, 1989: 252) and gestures towards some new and creative ways of thinking about, and doing, curriculum in higher education.

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