

The role of disciplinary knowledge in higher education curriculum practices (0091)

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In recent years, the employability agenda emphasising assessable and applicable learning outcomes, competencies and generic skills has challenged the traditional role of disciplinary knowledge in the higher education (HE) curriculum (e.g., Muller, 2009; Wheelahan, 2009, 2010; Young, 2013). The argument originates in the Bernsteinian tradition where access to abstract theoretical knowledge is a precondition for social participation and democracy in society (Bernstein, 1996; Shay, 2015; Wheelahan, 2010). From the HE curriculum perspective, the dispute is particularly acute. These on-going reforms and the debate about new roles place contradictory demands on higher education in modern society. The viewpoint that this paper seeks to develop further is that curriculum is the process by which these demands and traditions must be negotiated into practice.

This paper contributes to this topical field of research. Following the basic ideas of the 'crisis of curriculum' research tradition (e.g., Priestley, 2011; Wheelahan, 2010), we discuss how the problematic role and meaning of disciplinary knowledge becomes visible in HE curriculum practices. Our aim is to understand the curriculum processes in which the role of disciplinary knowledge is redefined and where it seeks balance with new learner-centred strategies. In other words, we are interested in how curriculum processes reconcile these different disputes.

As Wheelahan (2010) points out, there are many large-scale reasons for displacing knowledge from the curriculum. In the HE curriculum context, some of the most important ones relate to the changed relationship between universities as institutions and society (e.g., Muller & Young, 2014). In many cases, disciplines and disciplinary knowledge must justify their roles in terms of relevance or usefulness. Muller and Young (2014, p. 133) point out that disciplines can only do this "by weakening their boundaries with the world, which further weakens traditional power and legitimacy".

At the curriculum level, this has changed the curricular emphasis from theoretical (disciplinary) studies to more general, person-oriented skills and competences. On one hand, this can be seen in the growing interest in 'soft' and problem-based methods and social learning activities. Also, more studies are located in and attached to real-life (working) contexts. This is particularly problematic for the HE curriculum, because it means that there is a decreasing demand for specialised disciplinary knowledge in society. This, then, raises the question of why the disciplinary knowledge should be retained as the basis of HE curriculum. Wheelahan (2010, p. 4) argues that

generalist and liberal arts qualifications are affected by the displacement of knowledge from curriculum, partly by the emphasis on generic skills and generic attributes, but also by 'smorgasbord' programs that emphasize transdisciplinarity that take as the object of study a feature of the world rather than the structures of knowledge.

On the other hand, as Muller (2000; see also Wheelahan, 2010) points out, the roots of this development go back to the historical turn in the sociology of knowledge. The so-called 'linguistic turn', and postmodern critique in general, challenged the faith placed in value-neutral research and the unquestioned truths of science. In the higher education context, this meant that the debates about the role of knowledge became polarised. On one side are those who demand a return to basics in higher education and who favour bringing disciplinary knowledge, basic concepts and classical theories back to the centre of teaching and study processes. The proponents of the other side demand giving up the old traditions of knowledge production and prefer to focus more on individuals' needs. Their main point is that new relations in knowledge production (e.g., politics, new ways of governing and the role of the economy) have replaced the idea of objectivity with the idea of relativity. This, in turn, has altered the way we understand and use knowledge and who is allowed to produce it.

Our approach to curriculum is that it is actually a process that must reconcile these different (and often contradictory) aspects and views into (more or less) shared conceptions. These conceptions, then, are the basis for negotiations about curriculum practices. In this vein, we are roughly following curriculum theoretical ideas, where curricula collect the shared

assumptions on political and cultural atmosphere, moralities and relations between individuals and society, and, from among those, select the most important ones to practice. In this way, curricula define what and how to teach (Pinar, 2004).

In our previous research project (Annala, Lindén, & Mäkinen, forthcoming), we analysed different curriculum approaches and conceptions in research articles on HE curriculum from the past ten years. We found that the role of knowledge and the way it was contextualised and interpreted were the main components in HE curriculum conceptions. There were a few domains in particular that related strongly to the changing role and the theoretical disputes in the role of knowledge in curriculum. The first, and probably the most obvious, related to the definitions of competency-based education (c.f., Wheelahan, 2009). Competency-based curriculum was attached to generic skills and the modern person-oriented approach, but there were also references to research-based roots and origins. Second, in our data there were several articles that focused heavily on the processes of outcome selection and the overall emphasis on learning outcomes. These processes involved rather familiar knowledge areas, but they were based more on work-related competences than the logic of disciplinary knowledge itself.

Our overall impression was that, behind all the different curriculum conceptions, the role of disciplinary and theoretical knowledge was quite often seen as that of 'content knowledge'. As such, it was often neglected as unimportant in curriculum practices, because the connotation of 'content transfer' referred to behaviourist-type and old-fashioned curriculum development. To conclude, even in our preliminary analysis, we found some empirical findings that supported, for example, Wheelahan's (2010) theorisation about the changing role and difficult position of knowledge in HE curricula.

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