

A Connected Curriculum for Research-based Education: Programme Leaders' Stories (0273)

Dilly Fung
University College London, UK

Introduction

Universities looking to enhance synergies between their research mission and student education have been addressing issues of curriculum (Barnett and Coate 2005; Blackmore and Kandiko 2012) and considering ways in which 'research-based' curriculum can inspire students to learn through research and enquiry at all levels (Healey and Jenkins, 2009; Brew 2012). One such institution is University College London (UCL), whose *UCL 2034* strategy states that its 20-year 'strategic priority' is to 'close the divide between teaching and research', and 'integrate research into every stage of an undergraduate degree' (UCL 2015b). Setting out to enhance its curriculum, UCL funded a study of how course leaders internationally perceive and practise 'good' curriculum. This paper outlines the study's findings and introduces a new UCL 'Connected Curriculum' framework, informed by the study.

A twofold theoretical framing

Gadamer's philosophical conception of *Bildung* is characterised by 'developing one's natural talents and capacities' through dialogue (Gadamer, 2004, 9). Not linked explicitly to formal education, this notion emerges from philosophical analysis of lived human experience in the phenomenological tradition, which recognizes that we find ourselves here in the world (*Dasein*), experiencing the present moment and continually trying to make sense of what is apparent. 'Good' education here is more than learning in any narrow sense; it is about developing an enquiring attitude, a willingness to be open to alternative possibilities of knowing.

Pinar also sheds light upon the possibilities of curriculum, by arguing for the reconstruction of 'our understanding of what it means to teach, to study, to become educated in the present moment' (Pinar 2012, 2). For him, theory can help us see curriculum not as narrowly formulated objectives but as 'complicated conversation, as communication informed by academic knowledge' (19). Through curriculum, students and teachers can develop identity and voice, and 'scholarship can enable them to speak' (Pinar 2012, 22).

Is higher education curriculum locally and nationally providing opportunities for individuals – students and staff – to participate in and learn through meaningful dialogue and enquiry? Is it enabling students to develop their identity, and to have a voice in the world?

Methodological approach

In this qualitative, narrative inquiry, twenty-two programme leaders, from Australia, Bangladesh, Chile, China, France, New Zealand, Nigeria, Qatar, Republic of Ireland, UK (England and Northern Ireland) and US, were interviewed. The sample is exploratory, designed to be illustrative of diverse perspectives from experienced academics, rather than statistically representative. The interviews were conducted in an open, narrative style in order to elicit a nuanced, freeform picture of participants' experiences of curriculum in their subject. This approach reflects the power of narrative as a means of making sense of human experience over time (Bruner, 2002; Clandinin, 2000). Transcripts were systematically analysed and cross-referenced.

Findings

Participants most consistently expressed positive views of curriculum that is:

1. Research-connected: students develop understandings, skills and attitudes through gathering and interrogating evidence and through engaging with research and researchers.

Hung (China; Sciences) regrets 'an over-emphasis on the transmission of knowledge', wanting instead to focus on 'students' abilities of identifying researchable questions'. George (UK, Interdisciplinary) plans curriculum which prompts students to 'ask probing intelligent questions, play the devil's advocate, hold people to account', and engage with 'questions of evidence' (Alastair, Interdisciplinary, UK). Susan (Australia, Sciences) advocates curriculum which is 'case-based' and 'relevant to real-world complexity'.

2. Conceptually connected: students build explicit conceptual connections throughout the programme of study and make critical and creative connections between apparently disparate elements of learning.

Participants critique some adverse effects of a modularized curriculum structure. Students, argues Leonardo (Sciences, NI), 'memorize, pass the exam and then it's discarded.' Alastair (Interdisciplinary, UK) advocates a 'strand of activity' that runs throughout a programme, connecting other, apparently disparate elements. He aims 'to constantly reinforce core values and concepts'. Such a 'throughline', which anchors the learning narrative of a programme, can be created by a 'vertical' module, or through using continuous learning/research logs or e-portfolios for student assessment.

3. Personally and socially connected: students build meaningful relationships with faculty and with one another, and are given opportunities to develop their personal identity and voice.

Participants suggest that students need to feel they belong to a learning/research community. Curricular activities that connect students with faculty and with their peers include group projects, peer assisted learning/peer mentoring, journal clubs and cross-level research conferences. This element has an important conceptual as well as social aspect; as Diane (Humanities, UK) puts it,

these collaborative activities are seen as a means of 'structuring students' thinking about what multiple perspectives mean, and how they can be valuable'. An interwoven theme is that of developing students' opportunities to connect with the 'real world', whether through work placements, visits abroad, or outward-facing events. Interviewees speak highly of the value placed on these opportunities by students.

The UCL Connected Curriculum framework

This study has had a valuable opportunity to influence policy and practice, helping to shape a newly implemented institutional framework. Connected Curriculum (Fung, 2014; UCL, 2015a) has a core focus on learning through research and enquiry and six related dimensions. It draws on and expands the three main themes emphasized in the analysis above. It explicitly focuses on interdisciplinarity as a means of challenging knowledge assumptions and expanding horizons, in line with philosophical hermeneutic epistemology. It links academic learning with workplace learning to reflect the importance developing a disposition for lifelong learning. Finally, it highlights the importance of students' voices being heard, within and beyond the institution, using assessment 'outputs' to specified audiences as a vehicle for students' own narratives to be developed and shared. More than 500 staff recently shared practices in these areas at an institutional conference (UCL, 2015c).

Conclusion

This study draws on theory, empirical evidence and institutional practice to suggest that research-based curriculum can be highly valued for its potential to engage the whole person – teacher, student and researcher – in open dialogue, within and across disciplines, and to develop confident, diverse voices. The related UCL 'Connected Curriculum' initiative affords new opportunities for research into curriculum change over time, both internally and in collaboration with other institutions.

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