Curriculum change as institutional story: lessons from contrasting narratives (0054)

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Theoretical framing

This study is underpinned by theory on two levels. Firstly, we draw on a philosophical framing that engages critically with questions of the nature, purpose and values of the modern university. We argue with Barnett that a university needs to recognize the vital interconnectedness of its various functions, and in particular the synergies between its research and educational missions, and that institutions need to build on this 'ecology' to make an impact for good on the world (Barnett 2011). What is a university for in the modern era? Must a modern institution simply provide 'sources of marketable commodities for their customers, be they students, business or the state' (Boulton and Lucas, 2008, 5), or is it possible to sustain a values-based mission with a commitment to the 'global common good' (UNESCO 2015)? Our study speaks to these questions.

Secondly, we draw on conceptions of narrative as ways of making meaning in educational settings (Bruner 1990; 1996; 2002; Goodson 2014). Bruner sees educational culture as 'constantly being recreated as it is interpreted and renegotiated by its members' (Bruner, 1986, 123). Narratives, whether personal stories or metanarratives which attempt to subsume different stories within an overarching plot-line, are a means of making sense of change, identity and purpose, on both individual and collective levels. Bruner argues that stories 'impose a structure, a compelling reality on what we experience, even a philosophical stance' (Bruner, 2002, 89). Developing a narrative enables us to

> construct two landscapes simultaneously. One is the landscape of action, where the constituents are the argument of action: agent, intention or goal, situation, instrument... The other is a landscape of consciousness: what those involved in the action know, think, or feel, or do not know, think, or feel (Bruner, 1986,14).

Educational developments are inevitably multi-faceted, and experienced in nuanced ways by diverse actors. In higher education, actors include lecturers, researchers, professional staff and students: each individual has personal values, priorities and intentions, and is situated within local sub-cultures, including those of subject disciplines, with their own traditions and practices. Through the narratives we gather, our study highlights the role of identity and the 'meaning' of any changes to practice as crucial in adopting new educational frameworks (Wenger, 2010).

The use of narrative as a meta-theoretical framing also reflects our sense of the diverse ways in which change is experienced over time. Bruner refers to

> an endless dialectic: "how my life has always been and should rightly remain" and "how things might have been or might still be" (Bruner, 2002,14).

Narrative captures human experience not only in terms of current events, but also in terms of people's hopes, fears, dreams and expectations.

Case study: UCL Connected Curriculum

In 2014 University College London (UCL) began their 'Connected Curriculum' initiative, which aims to enhance the design of taught programmes of study across all subject disciplines, so that students engage actively in the challenges and achievements of research and enquiry at all levels of the curriculum (Fung 2015; Fung forthcoming). Connected Curriculum is a central objective of UCL's Education Strategy 2016-2021 (UCL 2016a). Its implementation involves developing programmes of study which exemplify six dimensions (or principles) of connectivity:
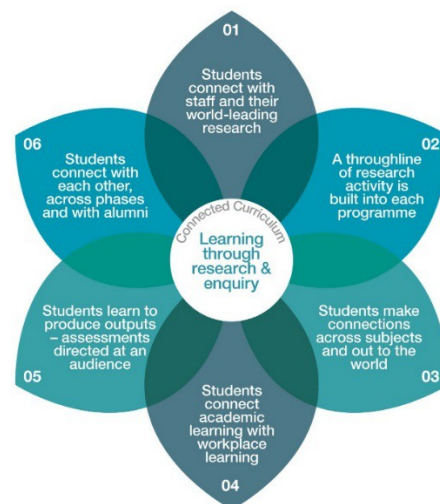

Fig.1 The Connected Curriculum framework (Fung 2015)

In order to create multiple opportunities to explore the potential of using the framework in ways which are suited to local settings, UCL has set up a Steering Group and a number of related working groups, comprising students as well as academic and professional staff from across the institution. The university has also invested in holding events and developing materials and case studies to illustrate and promote those changes (UCL 2016b).

Data gathering and analysis

Our data for analysis are the personal stories of the various actors in the institution, collected via a series of semi-structured interviews (data gathering is currently still underway, but the final number will more than 20). An open, narrative style guides the interview protocol in order to elicit a nuanced, freeform picture of the participants' experiences of and perspectives on their experience of the change initiative. The texts were professionally transcribed and analysed thematically by both researchers, first individually and then in dialogue. Analysis focused not only on the content of the text – that is, its referents - but also on notable features of discourse, such as use of metaphor and repeated lexical motifs.

Emergent findings

The study is currently underway, but early findings suggest that challenges relating to the institutional change initiative include:

- Time pressures for staff in adopting new frameworks and the challenge of juggling the imperatives of teaching and research within instructional contexts (lab, seminar, large groups)

- Different perspectives on research itself formed by disciplinary contexts, and the extent to which students at different levels can legitimately become involved with research through the curriculum levels
- Recognition that the institutional infrastructure (including quality regulations, the physical environment and the digital environment) needs to be upgraded if the principles of research-based education are to be realized fully and supported.

A number of benefits of the cross-institutional initiative are also emerging, including:

- Opportunities for staff to develop interdisciplinary connections with colleagues from different departments
- New opportunities to re-think and redesign current curriculum structures and make them more coherent yet still responsive to diverse student needs
- Benefits of connecting students to leading researchers in departments
- Development of productive new cross-departmental networks
- New opportunities to connect with external contacts and partners
- New opportunities for students to take a lead on building synergies between education and research.

Concluding the paper, we will analyse the extent to which our analysis of personal stories and the creation of an analytical meta-narrative have led to a deeper understanding of institutional change and the issues inherent in it. We will also consider the light shed upon the wider theoretical and policy contexts: we argue, as Goodson puts it, that 'we have to understand the personal and biographical if we are to understand the social and political' (Goodson, 2014, 1).

(988 words)

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