0340

B8 | Caldicot
Chaired by Steven Jones

Wed 11 Dec 2019

12:45 - 13:15

Evaluating Institution-wide Curriculum Change: A Linguistic Analysis of Policy Enactment

Camille Kandiko Howson[1], Martyn Kingsbury[1]

[1]*Imperial College London, London, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract: Using linguistic ethnography, this project uses discourse analysis to review departments' approach to curriculum change using public, institutional and internal documents. This project draws on Ball et al.'s (2012) work on policy enactment as a process contextualised by institutional cultures with a variety of participants, comprising dynamic relationships with policy documents. Mezirow's transformational learning theory (2003) provides a lens to analyse the department's engagement with the curriculum change process, based on moving from passive to active approaches, or from instrumental to communicative learning (Habermas 1984). The project explores the extent to which departments moved from a disciplinary content-based approach to the curriculum to incorporating institutional aims and active learning theories.

Ball, S. J., Maguire, M. and Braun, A. (2012). *How Schools Do Policy: Policy Enactments in Secondary School*. London: Routledge.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 2). Beacon press.

Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education,* 1(1), pp. 58-63.

Paper: Introduction

A new regulatory framework in England has led to significant changes in how universities organise, deliver and account for their educational offering (Filippakou & Tapper 2019). New requirements for reporting data have forced institutions to collect, analyse and manage data on an unprecedented scale. National policies on transparency of data and real-time oversight are feeding into institutional strategies and creating new requirements for evaluation and impact reporting (Strike 2017).

This regulatory turn is part of a long-running discourse of 'quality' in higher education (Gibbs 2012) which plays out through policy documents, institutional processes and individual practices, but the degree of enactment is less well-understood. This follows decades of governmental desire for more strategic activity around learning and teaching, but this coincided with little evaluation (Gibbs 2001: 3), particularly at institutional levels (Saunders et al. 2011). This project is part of a wider research and evaluation exercise of curriculum reform at a UK-based research-intensive institution. The educational effects of curriculum change are notoriously difficult to evaluate due to the large number of variables and the lengthy timeframes (Blackmore & Kandiko 2012). Thus, this project is part of the first phase of a wider research and evaluation exercise which aims to investigate not only the educational effects of institution-wide curriculum change, but also the impact on institutional and disciplinary culture.

This project draws on Ball et al.'s (2012) work on policy enactment as a process contextualised by institutional cultures with a variety of participants, comprising dynamic relationships with policy processes and documents. Rather than focus on specific programme changes or their effectiveness, this paper explores how, and to what degree, a major institution-wide strategy was put into practice. We use a discourse analysis approach on data from three linked sources to explore reform processes and their enactment, uncovering patterns of language use which 'embody shifts in perspectives and values' (Baldwin 1994, 128). In this paper policy texts and institutional documentation are therefore discursively analysed and contrasted with each other, to capture the principles and underlying assumptions structuring accounts of policy development and enactment.

Methodology

The primary sources include an externally available but institutionally-focused Learning and Teaching Strategy; internally-based Curriculum Redesign Forms detailing the change and review process for each department over a two-year period; and individual Programme Specifications, which fulfil both external marketing and internal quality assurance needs, functioning as socially-constructed 'policy objects' (Sin 2014). The texts were analysed using linguistic ethnography which is 'an interpretive approach which studies the local and immediate actions of actors from their point of view and considers how these interactions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures' (Copland & Creese 2015, 13). This is a subfield of discourse analysis, an underutilised methodology in higher education research (Tight 2003). This approach explores the way language is used and how it impacts on social processes and *vice versa* and sees language and social life as mutually shaping (Rampton et al 2004).

This analysis looks at the planned, or intended, curriculum by focusing on the curriculum documentation (Bernstein 2000). The Learning and Teaching Strategy document was first analysed

and fed into the development of a rubric based on its key principles. Analysis explored the extent to these principles were adopted in the Redesign Forms and Programme Specification documents, representing a possible 'transformational' approach to understanding the curriculum as a site of pedagogical reform. Additionally, these were analysed for the degree to which they appeared to be completed to pass a minimum quality assurance threshold or as opportunity to engage with the curriculum reform; the level of competence with their understanding of the principles drawn from the learning and teaching strategy; and the degree of compliance to meaningfully engage in the process.

Thus, the analysis of texts was complemented by 'material-oriented' analysis, including how policies are enacted (Ball et al 2012; Smith 2005). This approach allows for intentions of policies to be drawn out, as 'the significance of language is what it is thought to be used for, not what it is thought to mean' (Saarinen 2008, 720), in the spirit of work on the scholarship of curriculum practice (Hubball & Pearson 2011). The analysis has been conducted across each undergraduate teaching department, independently by two researchers, one with extensive experience with the review process and another who has not been involved previously. The rubric was piloted on two diverse departments and periodic checks have confirmed its validity.

Discussion

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Redesign Forms focus on the regulatory aspects of curriculum reform, including meeting standardised academic regulations and structurally aligning modules and programmes. The Programme Specifications show that a traditional high-stakes exam-based assessment culture is slow to change and indicate a challenge of documenting a commitment to diversity and inclusion and articulating digital engagement. Through this analysis, the 'language' of reform only provides a proxy indicator of engagement with the process, but nevertheless offers valuable insight into levels and degrees of policy enactment across departments.

There are limitations of this approach, in that those completing or controlling the documentation process may or may not be the same people responsible for operationalising actual changes and there is the possibility that 'policy terminology' was adopted as mimicry rather than an actual engagement as a strategic attempt to gain political capital or an instrumental approach to address bureaucratic processes. Thus, apparent engagement with the policies may, or may not, be directly related to the will for, and practice of, actual curriculum change and innovation.

However, initial analysis of the curriculum review process, particularly when done 'at scale', suggests it can be seen as a disorienting dilemma that helps 'drive' transformational change (Mezirow 2003). The more 'superficial' linguistic mimicry or echoing could be considered (perhaps at best) as indication of engagement at the level of points of view, while more integrated use of terminology and communicative adoption of the associated underlying ethos could be considered as engagement at the deeper level habits of mind (Mezirow; Habermas 1984). This research represents the beginning of a multi-stage study of the curriculum change process and outcomes.

References

Baldwin, G. (1994). The Student as Customer: The Discourse of "Quality" in Higher Education, Journal of Tertiary Education Administration, 16:1, 125-133

Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research and critique*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Copland, F. and A. Creese (2015). *Linguistic ethnography: Collecting, analysing and presenting data*. Sage.

Gibbs, G. (2001). *Analysis of strategies for learning and teaching: A research report.* Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Gibbs, G. (2012). Implications of 'Dimensions of quality'in a market environment. *York: Higher Education Academy.*

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 2). Beacon press.

Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education,* 1(1), pp. 58-63.

Naidoo, R. (2004). "Fields and institutional strategy: Bourdieu on the relationship between higher education, inequality and society." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25 (4): 457-471.

Saarinen, T. (2008). "Position of text and discourse analysis in higher education policy research." *Studies in Higher Education* 33 (6): 719-728

Sin, C. (2014). The policy object: A different perspective on policy enactment in higher education. *Higher Education* 68(3): 435-448.

Smith, D. (2005). *Institutional ethnography. A sociology for people*. Lanham, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield.