

Are we there yet??

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Abstract: Does the curriculum fit the student for practice? Does practice fit the curriculum for the student? Few would disagree that curriculum is complex – defined (Barnett 2000) as containing/requiring more facts, data, evidence and tasks than are easily manageable within our current frameworks. Higher education finds itself situated now in an environment of supercomplexity, Barnett argues, whereby the frameworks in which we make sense of our world are themselves no longer inviolate. Higher education must be responsive to the (perceived) needs of society, both at large and in the narrower discipline in which it may be based; this almost inevitably leads to uncertainty and questioning. How easy is it, in fact, for us to read and interpret these needs – indeed, are the messages clear and unambiguous at source? Do we educate for local or for global needs, and how do we define these? Who influences the design of curriculum, why and how? How can we best incorporate technology – from the everyday use of PowerPoint to the intricacies of web-based assessment and teaching – to assist learning rather than overwhelm with glitz and showmanship? Perhaps the most vexed issue in the “vocational” disciplines (nursing and teaching for example) is balancing encouragement of self-direction and/or experiential learning with the release into the wild of a suitable and safe practitioner. How can we avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater? Learning and educating in a climate of supercomplexity requires new tools and the skills to use, and not be used by, them.

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Barnett and Coate (2005:1), lamenting the fact that “the very idea of curriculum is pretty well missing altogether” from the general discussions around higher education, pose questions that should be at the heart of any curriculum planning. In asking what it really means to design a course in higher education, they explicitly engage areas that, it could be argued, should be uppermost in the minds of those of us charged with the design and delivery of tertiary curriculum (no academic escapes the net here!).

While contending that the curriculum has been widely viewed as a means of filling spaces – of time, modules and minds – the authors assert that it is more productively considered as the way to *design* these spaces. Good design has a greater chance of spawning the “knowing, acting and being” that form what Barnett and Coates characterise as the desired “triple engagement” in education (2005:3).

Nobody could get away with the assertion that there can ever be a “one-size-fits-all” curriculum; no thinking person would be foolish enough even to give this statement mind room (would they?). However, in this time of increasing (and increasingly onerous) responsibilities and accountabilities, many of which seem far removed from the task at hand, it is too easy to slip into the comfortable clothes of the past and the tried-and-tested. Experimentation and lateral thinking involve risk-taking; the benefits may be legion, the costs relatively low, but how often we lack the time, the resources and/or the courage (this latter, sad to say, understandably so in light of the resource-strapped and litigious environment in which we now exist). It is salutary to note that we are in the same boat with those who tender to other parts of our audience’s minds – makers and mediators of our television viewing. In a very entertaining (albeit rather depressing) discussion with a class of media students, a producer of television programmes for both the ABC and

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commercial television told us that a “new” programme or concept is unlikely to even be considered for Australian adoption unless it can demonstrate appropriate prior success (invariably in overseas markets – Catch 22 once again!). Minor tinkering around the edges to fit it to the local environment may be permitted, but the franchise idea is king (H. Marianpolski, personal communication).

Courses in Universities can, for the sake of argument, be divided into three loose categories; those of the established professions (law); the emerging professions (nursing) and the generic courses (arts). The existence or otherwise of professional bodies, and the nature of these – national or state; regulatory or advisory; registration or no – means wide variance in terms of their input and influence, and thus the final shape of the course. It is important to make explicit the fact that any curriculum reflects the social context/s from which it arose and in which it is taught. If these two contexts are at odds, even in a minor way, the curriculum (and thus its product) may be the unwitting loser.

Undeniably a professional body must be intimately involved in setting the desired outcomes for the course whose graduates it registers. How much control, however, should it have over the way in which this course’s material is organised and delivered to generate this outcome? How much can and should be entrusted to the academics in curriculum design? Will this mean ‘one size fits all’ courses with one university indistinguishable from another? How can the body reassure itself that its professional (and legal) needs are being met but that the students are also being “educated” rather than just trained? To adopt for a moment the language of genetics, while the skills of a discipline [its genotype] are integral to its body of knowledge, the interpretation and incorporation of such skills into practice [its phenotype] varies widely dependent upon many environmental/contextual factors.

Layered over this is the issue of the body of knowledge of the discipline itself. The professional body is (or should be) accountable – yet the discipline is no less so, albeit to a different court. A discipline’s integrity and worth are, in general, held in high esteem by its practitioners, and closely assessed by the academic community at large. Advances in a discipline will always outstrip their incorporation into professional requirements; thus the person at the coalface (the teacher/researcher) may sometimes be in possession of facts and interpretations that conflict with the established norms or required knowledge. Who is the arbiter in cases of dispute, and why? How can such conflict be resolved, if indeed it can be?

To further complicate matters, there are of course other stakeholders – we cannot escape the language, I am afraid – whose voices are raised in this debate. One submission to the 2002 Commonwealth of Australia Senate Report on the Inquiry into Nursing commented: “Currently such programs [undergraduate nursing] are developed almost in splendid isolation, or in consultation with the professional bodies only.” Employers of these graduates rightly lay claim to a keen and legitimate interest in the attributes of their potential employees. How can this voice be heard? Bearing in mind that these additional groups are by no means homogeneous, can they, in fact, be said to constitute “a” voice? If, as seems clear, the answer is no, how then can we allow all who should be heard to be heard? How do we decide who to give weight to – and again, who is to make such decisions?

Clearly, more questions than answers are raised even in this brief foray.

The issues raised above are important and immediate, and as such may not be overlooked, but we must beware the blinkers and look not only straight ahead to the finishing line, but also to the field in which we run. Education is more than factual aggregation (after all, it is from the Latin ‘educare’, to bring up, rear etc) – I doubt anybody will dispute that, although it is easy to forget it in the urgent times in which we move. Barnett and Coate (2005:1) ask a seminal

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question: “Is there any place for a sense of students as human beings as distinct from being enquirers after knowledge or as possessors of skills?” They go on to argue that knowledge and skills are (and we switch hats here and borrow from epidemiology) necessary but not sufficient causes of a coherent and useful curriculum (Barnett & Coate, 2005:63), the final plank being the development of the student’s inner self. This self-understanding and self-reliance is essential for any person to flourish in what Barnett and Coate (2005:63) call an unknowable world. Few would find fault with the notion that we inhabit such a world, and this is especially true for those in the professions mentioned above.

The questions posed above lead inexorably to an exploration of Barnett and Coate’s desire (2005:3) to distinguish between curriculum as it is designed and curriculum as it is “enacted”. This is the goal to which this work-in-progress is striving. How can we ensure that what is agreed upon is not only delivered, but delivered honestly, competently and to the best that it can be? We owe it not only to our students but to our disciplines so to do.

References

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