

Studies on curriculum in higher education: a systematic review (0033)

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Introduction

The term 'curriculum' refers to many kinds of issues, from practical course planning to the global and ideological perspectives behind education. The concepts of *syllabus*, *product*, *process* and *praxis* are frequently used when the nature of curriculum is discussed in theoretical texts (e.g. Kelly, 2009; Grundy, 1987). In the *syllabus* approach to curriculum, the focus is placed on the content/body of knowledge that one wishes to transmit or the list of subjects to be taught, or both (Kelly, 2009). Curriculum as a *product* emphasizes education as a technical exercise: objectives are set, a plan is drawn up and applied, and the outcomes are measured (Tyler, 1949). More recently, curriculum has been approached as an interactive *process*. This includes the idea of the written curriculum as a negotiated artefact, its implementation in teaching-learning processes, and the student's autobiographical experience and learning engagement (cf. Pinar et al., 1995; Stenhouse, 1975). Curriculum as *praxis* is a development of the process approach, with an emphasis on informed, committed and emancipatory action (Grundy, 1987). It requires a constant evaluation of what is valuable, what needs to be changed and why, and develops through a dynamic interaction between action and reflection. As such, the ways of understanding the idea of curriculum in relation to HE reflect the kinds of knowledge, dispositions, learning conceptions and qualities that are revered in this field. Besides this, curriculum is linked to the institutional or societal power relations that reflect a certain historical context.

Our aim in presenting a systematic literature review on the state of recent studies on curriculum is twofold: firstly, we seek to deepen understanding of the wide array – and disarray – of studies on the topic of curriculum and, secondly, we examine different conceptualisations of the curriculum in the context of HE.

Data and methods

The data was selected from the SRHE's Research into Higher Education Abstracts database. In selecting the data, we used the following search criteria: the article had to have been published during the last ten years (2004-2013) and the term 'curriculum' had to appear both in the title and among the keywords. We collated 62 articles for detailed analysis.

For the systematic literature review (e.g. Kyndt & Baert, 2013), the selected articles were examined systematically and attention was drawn to the ideas and understanding surrounding the notion of curriculum. In other words, we studied how 'curriculum' was defined and/or approached. In some cases, this meant focusing on small semantic minutiae but, generally speaking, we were looking for a bigger scheme.

The analysis involved two phases. Firstly, we used the four curriculum approaches of *syllabus*, *product*, *process* and *praxis* as reference points in order to identify and construct the emerging conceptualisations of curriculum. Secondly, we began to look for concepts or themes that would help us to classify the key differences between the concepts that connected the articles to the four approaches. We found that although the articles used similar vocabulary, they differed especially in their orientation towards the ideas of knowledge and ownership. These two themes helped us to

develop an analytical framework, which allowed us to position the implicit approaches that emerged from the articles in relation to one another. Thus, we constructed and illustrated the different conceptualisations of curriculum in HE studies.

Results

The results demonstrate that curriculum is a widely used concept that does not have a shared theoretical or conceptual basis within HE research. The 62 articles were spread across 31 journals, and it emerged that different disciplines had distinct approaches. Only a few of the articles contained explicit definitions of the term 'curriculum'; most of the articles assumed that the meaning of the concept was self-evident. Consequently, a wide variety of interpretations was discovered, indicating that the discussion of curriculum in HE has been rather fragmented over the last ten years. Many borders need to be crossed in research on curriculum in higher education: between higher education studies and curriculum studies, between disciplinary boundaries, and between local, national and global boundaries.

In discussions of knowledge, at one end of the spectrum, there are research-based attempts to explain the definitive contents of a curriculum. Here, knowledge consists of static content and skills that are to be transmitted. At the other end, knowledge is characterised as a dynamic entity, challenging students' epistemic development. In this case, knowledge is seen more as a type of critical reflection (e.g. Mezirow, 1998), in which learning and understanding the knowledge practices appropriate to the discipline is key, and students are encouraged to develop themselves and create knowledge.

Regarding ownership, which signifies the power relations and agency behind the definitions of curriculum that emerged from the data, there are also divergent views. On one hand, curriculum is approached as a way of controlling students' learning outcomes. This control arises from the interests of the university or the world beyond, but there is little room for ownership by the student. On the other hand, the increasing agency and participation of students in defining knowledge within the curriculum is emphasised, as are the various potential areas of development.

Our analysis led to the identification of four ways of conceptualising the curriculum: 1) curriculum as control over contents, 2) curriculum as producing competences, 3) curriculum as negotiating of potentials and 4) curriculum as empowerment. In the first one, the curriculum is seen as a unit of valuable content that should be transmitted to future generations. The second area is based around the questions, 'What works?' and 'How can this be achieved?'. The key issue here is how to achieve improvements in relation to intended learning outcomes. The third one refers to the curriculum as a negotiated artefact, in which knowledge is related to students' epistemic development and their potential. In these negotiations, ownership is shared. The fourth way relates to cultural perspectives and equality. Emancipatory power relations are important here, arising in discussions about what is thinkable and doable, and who has access to what within the various cultural and institutional layers that underlie the concept of curriculum.

References

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