

Reflections of 20 years of curriculum policy

Lis Lange

University of the Free State

Argument

- HE policy has left the curriculum more or less untouched.
- It has displaced engagement with curriculum for a focus first on portable skills and outcomes and, later, for a preoccupation with more efficient teaching and learning.
- In both cases curriculum was seen a structure rather than process, thus leaving knowledge both of the discipline and of the individual students out of the equation.
- If we are to get anywhere in terms of addressing the unrealized transformation, we need to explore the relationship between curriculum, knowledge and identity and see where we stand in relation to the demands put to us by our students.

Laying out the argument

- Curriculum and knowledge in the policy discourse, 1995-2015
From the NQF to the CHE flexible curriculum proposal
- The curriculum as a question in 2015
Knowledge, curriculum and identity
- Changing the terms of engagement: who is afraid of the curriculum?
To know, to act, to be

Curriculum and knowledge in HE policy

- The predominant focus of policy development on access and redress made impossible a real interrogation of the higher education curriculum.
- The human capital framing of education and training dismiss any engagement with relationship between curriculum and knowledge and displaced the conception of curriculum as process for the focus on outcomes.
- In all the documents prior to the constitution of the National Commission on Higher Education “there is the desire to steer South Africa through the high-skills high growth path of economic development” (Ensor, 2006: 180).

Curriculum and knowledge in HE policy

- Underpinning the desire for high growth was an economic model that was as much influenced by globalization as it was by the terms of the political settlement.
- Market liberalization in a neo-liberal cast accompanied the democratization process shaping in more than one way the terms of the debate between training and education.
- NCHE engaged with curriculum more directly than the policy that was to come. The NCHE report touched on the tensions between the local and the global shaping curriculum, as well as on academic programmes responsiveness to the developmental goals of the country.

Curriculum and knowledge in HE policy

- Mode one and mode two knowledge: the decentering of the university as the sole provider of knowledge, and the development of knowledge in the context of application and interdisciplinary problem solving.
- Knowledge, identity and curriculum transformation in Africa: Eurocentric/Afrocentric curriculum.
- Skills debate at the HSRC.

Curriculum and knowledge in HE policy

- (The) NQF encapsulates the desire of policy makers to erode three sets of boundaries: between education and training; between academic and everyday knowledge; and between different knowledges, disciplines or subjects within the academic domain. (Ensor, 2004: 340)
- The main impact of the NQF was not on the reflection about knowledge and its democratisation but in the change in the outer form of the curriculum.

Curriculum and knowledge in HE policy

- In the mid-2000s the preoccupation with effectiveness and efficiency shifted policy's gaze to teaching and learning.
- The solution to dropout and poor success rates was the introduction of extended programmes and improved teaching practices.
- These interventions dealt with knowledge through structure, that is, a different organisation of the programme was designed for those students who were identified as not ready to negotiate the main stream curriculum.

Interval: reconsidering epistemological access

- A useful shorthand to describe the articulation gap between, especially, first generation university students, and the tacit assumption of knowledge made in the “main stream” university curriculum.
- The acceptance of epistemological access as a problem has resulted in the creation of special programmes offered by special lecturers to “special” (not in the nice way) students who need extra help to succeed in higher education.
- Everybody who comes to the university has to be initiated in the construction of academic knowledge within specific disciplinary fields.

Interval: reconsidering epistemological access

- Providing epistemological access is the task of the university and not of academic development/extended programmes.
- At historically white universities, inverted epistemological access: to understand the variety of ways of knowing and making sense of the world that their students have which can actually constitute the point of entry to epistemological access instead of its opposite.

Flexible curriculum: too much or too little?

- CHE report is not radical enough.
- The CHE proposal does not want to really change the whole undergraduate curriculum either. The four-year curriculum is not for everybody but for the majority who need extra space/time to achieve the expected outcomes.
- The enticement for the other students is an enhanced curriculum, i.e. new skills.
- The proposal does not challenge the theory of curriculum and the approach to knowledge that shaped our qualifications framework.
- It focuses much more on what students cannot do than on what university level teachers cannot do.

Curriculum as a question in 2015

- UCT, Stellenbosch, Rhodes and Wits brought squarely onto the table the curriculum as process and knowledge.
- What is the nature of the university in Africa today?
- What does this nature say about the process of knowledge production; the relationship between knowledge and society; knowledge and the state; knowledge and identity?

Curriculum as a question in 2015

- Knowledge of knowledge, the systematic investigation and critical engagement with the knowledge that we produce and transmit is a fundamental component of the process of transformation.
- This examination touches academics as subjects, it pushes new questions in relation to our identity not just as academics but as persons.
- What we teach pushes questions about the identity of our students as persons.

Curriculum as a question in 2015

- We have no alternative but to go back to the curriculum as knowledge and process and start where we got lost.
- With the best intentions we bought into a framework of thinking curriculum and a modality of organizing knowledge that has neither delivered the access and redress nor the skills for the economy.
- We are trapped in a neo-liberal system of efficiency and outcomes which is becoming the opposite of what we tried to achieve.

Conclusion: changing the terms of engagement

- Knowledge refers to the specialist professional or disciplinary knowledge that universities offer in a variety of combinations.
- Action refers to the abilities attached to a disciplinary field and professions. What historians, philosophers, psychologists, and engineers do. How they exercise their judgement within their fields or how they apply the actions of their fields into other situations.
- Being refers to the development of subjectivities that allow students to function in a world of uncertainty, complexity and change in which contradiction and paradox are always present and in which the subject has to redefine herself in the face of new situations.

Conclusion: changing the terms of engagement

- The focus on being allows for an intersection with the capabilities theory and provides space to reflect about the conditions for human flourishing.
- This approach has radical potential because it allows within the frame of engagement to change the pedagogic relationship in the very dimensions of knowing, acting, and being.
- It brings to the fore the non-neutrality of knowledge and the complex relationships between knowledge and power over time.