

Engaging Teachers in Professional Development: Course Design at Higher Education

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Abstract.

A pertaining challenge in online and/or physical learning set up is that learners appear to be forced by internal and external competitive pressures, as well as pressure of completing course work successfully rather than developing inspiration and commitment to learning. Globally, there is a consensus that real education means empowering individuals - enabling them to visualize issues and matters intellectually, ethically and critically. At the heart of this understanding is the need to develop learners' problem solving, decision making and creative thinking skills so that they are capable of addressing intellectual, social and emotional matters (within and outside their work places) rationally considering the cultural and intercultural values and perspectives of the organizations and societies they live in. Specially, this era, when the structure of education is going through a profound change due to Pandemic crises as well as fast growth in digital education. The ultimate aim of higher education is to help learners develop the necessary knowledge, skills and attitude to be able to lead a quality life in their respective societies and in today's globalizing world. This paper discusses active learning strategies that can be incorporated in the teachers' professional practices to foster a high level of student engagement.

Keywords: course design; integrated approach; learner centred; higher education; teacher development

1. Introduction

This paper explores an integrated and reflective framework for course design that can be incorporated in the teachers' professional practices to foster a high level of student engagement. Course design is a human-social construct. As such, this is not neutral or naturally given, but is value-laden and serves various agendas.

'How we conceive of curriculum and curriculum making is important because our conceptions and ways of reasoning about curriculum reflect and shape how we see, think and talk about, study and act on the education made available to our students' (cited in Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006, cited in p: 282).

This suggests that course design can be a tool of control, indoctrination, narrowing of mind and reducing human learning to rote memorization and passing of standardized tests and high stake exams, actualities that have become endemic across the globe, and/or this can also become means of unfolding, exciting, critical and creative higher order thinking, and holistic development. The integrated course design framework is geared towards the latter goals, i.e., critical and deep analysis of the need analysis, cultural and global values and demands and

practices, and their transformation of to serve educative, just, and dignified purposes. The integrated course design approach is suggesting a fluid, adaptable, flexible and reflective approach develop both high quality human resources and deep transformation purposes. Effective course design and development is at the heart of teachers 'professional practices at higher education. The underlying assumptions are that in the process of every academic year tutors/educators sit down at their desks, and design the courses by considering various key elements (such as prior knowledge, student profiles, learning goals, activities to address and evaluate learning goals). Moreover, the students' evaluation also indicates that there is never a full level of satisfaction with regards to learning gained. The student evaluation, thus, in turn open possibilities to revisit and refine course design. It is important to recognise that course design does not just occur, it is anchored in important issues: what are their conceptions about curriculum and curriculum design? What is education and what does it try to achieve? Any attempt to course design starts from consideration of these issues.

My analysis of review of the courses at higher education level indicate that mainly the course design/curriculum has not been considered as an attempt of a systematic, student-centred, reflective approach. The curriculum is mainly viewed as a syllabus or a course outline indicating '... the content of a specific discipline or the set of units actually offered to the students and the timeframe in which they occur' (as discussed in Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006, p. 270). Based on the review of literature, this paper suggests a transformative approach to course design, this may be used as a framework of course design at HE in Pakistan.

2. Approaches to Course Design Discussion

2.1 Positivist Approach to Course Design

The literature review suggests that earlier, the curriculum was viewed as a complete programme of any institute, as Jenkins and Shipman (1976a) define a curriculum as 'the formulation and implementation of an educational proposal' (cited in Neary, 2002, pp. 40-41), in which the implementation includes an attempt to align learning outcomes with teaching and learning instructional strategies, and it takes place prior to instructions (Biggs, 2003). The curriculum design, however, was considered as more of a decision to list the topics to achieve content coverage, with no or limited focus on how students would receive and understand the content (Neary, 2002). This perspective is rooted in positivistic orientation/ framework by which knowledge and the knowledgeable holds a position of hierarchy in academia. The curriculum designers following this approach tend to believe that 'knowledge exists in books and published records, waiting to be accessed by students' (Toohey, 1999, p. 50), and that the role of the teacher is to 'sift through it, select what is most important for students to know and transmit that to them' (ibid p. 50). The outcomes of such an approach could be students obtaining abstract and theoretical learning which may not relate to students' interest and/ or relevant to their life – students are placed at the receiving end in this learning continuum.

2.2 Technical Approach to Course Design

The professional qualifications or degree programmes, on the other hand, follow a performance based approach to curriculum. The performance-based approach to curriculum design, has been derived from a pragmatic orientation towards education, which claimed that learning should be useful and relevant for students' lives; and relevance was seen in terms of individuals' performance towards meeting the needs of the world of work (Toohey,1999). This approach mainly encourages practice of learning, which is built up into a skill of practice by following certain structures and formats, and which can be followed without much deeper thinking and problem solving approaches –students are placed at the performing edge in the learning continuum. The principle of performativity is therefore, associated with the relationship of higher education to the job market. It implies doing, rather than knowing, and performance, rather than understanding (Silver & Brennan, 1988, cited in Barnett et al, 2001, p. 436).

Critique on the knowledge and performance based approaches to curriculum design raises fundamental questions such as: What is the purpose of higher education? Where are the students positioned in the education enterprise? What role could higher education play in enhancing balanced and healthy social relationships while ensuring economical and academic growth at par with the global needs? The current academic discourse at national and regional level indicate role of education is to empower students for the future - broader than knowing or doing; vocational preparation/supporting and enhancing the economy - skills focus; process based to develop range of critical thinking and problem solving abilities; disciplinary plus a range of other experiences to fit students for the 21st Century. Knowledge and information are widely spread and easily accessible; 'rapid changes are taking place in the production and application of academic knowledge' in this era (Barnett, Parry & Coate, 2001); moreover, the university education does not necessarily prepare students to cope with workplace expectations of the modern era (Biggs, J. & Tang, C. , 2007). This situation could potentially increase intellectual, social and emotional pressures on the students' desire, attitude and learning approaches at the higher education institutes. Also, research (Ashwin, 2015) indicates that knowledge should not be seen as fixed facts, rather, it is changing in nature and constructed in a particular context.

Some researchers point out that these skills are not unique in the 21st century but rather, the degree of importance of these skills has intensified in the current workforce and economy (Dede 2009; Rotherham and Willingham 2010). Conventional 20th century education which prepares people for routine cognitive and manual work is no longer fit for the purposes of the 21st century (Levy and Murnance 2004). Instead, the kinds of jobs which require expert thinking or complex communication are increasing (Levy and Murnance 2004).

2.3 Integrated Approach to Curriculum/Course Design

A balanced and well integrated curriculum positions students, content and practice at the heart of planning teaching and learning in higher education. Barnett et al (2001) propose that curriculum should be viewed as implementation of the three domains: Knowledge, Action and Self.

‘Knowledge domain refers to those components of the curriculum that are based on discipline-specific competences and those aspects of teaching and learning that develop subject specialistsThe “action” domain includes those competences acquired through “doing”: an oral presentation in the specialised area/ profession.....The “self” domain develops an educational identity in relation to the subject areas’ (pp. 438-439).

This framework recognises an interdependence and integration of the three domains, as students need to acquire subject specialised knowledge, practical skills and self-exploration to proceed constructively and confidently with their career and professional growth. The students within the framework are recognised as ‘partners in an endeavour that has life-changing implications for them’ [Paper 1 Higher education and higher learning: University of Oxford, p. 4] instead of being seen as instruments/ product to be designed to run the labour industry or sustain academic/ economical hierarchy. The integrated balanced approach also addresses the internalised perspectives of the curriculum design. The theoretical underpinning of this approach to curriculum design is guided by the core goal of any education system, that is providing quality education, contextually relevant to the learners, enabling them to realise, develop and utilise their full potential, and thereby, maximising their meaningful contribution to their and others’ lives.

The global research on students ‘weak learning experiences and being assessed superficially raise issues of aggressive behaviours, and lack of confidence to cope with fast growing technology era etc. as growing factors of human illness. Individuals tend to becoming negative, judgmental, socially isolated and impatient. Their education seems to fail them provide with skills and attitude so they could cope with emerging expectations positively and confidently (Diperna, 2006).

An internationalism perspective on the curriculum indicates that students cannot be isolated from the context (where they come from and in which they study); the relationship between an individual student and the environment is interactive. Since higher education has been growing as an international and global enterprise, and societies are evolving within multicultural and international setup, it is important to highlight internalisation explicitly within the curriculum design so as to help students to achieve ‘intercultural competence’. Intercultural competence is ‘the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes’ (Deardorff, 2006, p. 8). Hence the curriculum design, with this lens, requires collaboration, involvement and commitment among learners and educators.

A review of existing practices of teachers’ attempts to course design indicate that teachers, at higher education, mainly follow, syllabus and/or course scheme provided by the Higher Education Commission. The faculty prepares and delivers lectures around the topics, and follow the examination scheme, as prescribed. Mainly the list of the topics is guided by the HEC curriculum guidelines. This approach to course design is very much grounded in the controlled perspective of teacher education and student learning. The literature review indicated that in order to nurture students’ academic identity and building teachers’ capacity, teachers and students engagement in course design is vital (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006, P.281). This is in response to Freire’s (1973) perspectives on critical consciousness in which he questions unjust and unequal power relationship in the curriculum design and assessment

practices – pedagogical approaches and critical education perspectives must enable students from all classes and contexts and regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds to develop critical consciousness resulting in their ability to develop critical and reflective stance of thinking, which takes place in a dialogical problem posing/ solving learning culture. It is important to recognise here that educational identity does not stand alone in an educational programme. The students' local, international and educational contexts are valuable sources to develop their educational identity. Therefore, developing professional and self identity has been viewed as a multifaceted aim including the development of students' social, emotional and ethical identity within their identity in relation to the subject and professional areas.

Since curriculum design is central to the teaching and learning process (Stefani, 2009), a shift from a product-oriented to a process oriented view of curriculum, and a linear to a collaborative and reflective attempt in course design is inevitable. Grundy (1987) suggests that 'curriculum emerges from the systematic reflection of those engaged in the pedagogical act' [page 103 cited in Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006, page 281]. This invites educators/ staff to think about how the different elements – Knowledge, Skills and Self, come together to help students to achieve quality learning outcomes. A course exists within a broader programmatic mandate and theoretical framework along with the participants' individual, contextual and cultural requirements, and their learning expectations. Therefore, it is important that various elements of a course, such as the teaching/ learning activities, assessment/ feedback, organisation and management, learning support, the programme aims and scope – all need to be interconnected, and should address the intended learning outcomes. Such kind of congruence or alignment should not be seen as a straightforward task, as Ashwin (2015) suggests:

'We should endeavour to reflect on our design regularly, ask ourselves what it is we want to achieve, what it is we want our students to be able to do, and whether our design best support students to be successful' (p. 163).

A reflective approach to the curriculum design is essential for establishing constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003) and/or congruence (Entwistle, 2009) among learning outcomes and teaching approaches and assessment procedures. Particularly, in the design of a professional course, none of the domains stands alone, neither the course design is an individual instrumental task; reflective interactions and collaborative partnership with relevant stakeholders is important to design any course regardless of its size, nature and level. Thus, an integration of intercultural dimension is essential in the teacher education programmes. Additionally mutual ongoing negotiation/ interaction with students and teachers, students and their learning outcomes, and learning outcomes and other elements define curriculum as a living document. My view point is that there are three parallel interactive strands in the composition of a course design: Conceptual, Pedagogical and Developmental.

- The Conceptual Strand includes philosophical and theoretical framework of an individual course within the broader aims of the programme and its educational and social mandate in relation to the profession/ discipline.

- The Pedagogical and Operational Strands include pedagogical decisions (including teaching and learning activities, learning support, assessment and feedback) in alliance with students' learning and management and organisation.
- The Development Strands include professional consideration to analyse and improve student learning outcomes. Since the planning and implementation of a course takes place within a constantly changing system, it is important to include reflective inquiry within the curriculum design to bridge the gap between academic aspirations and attempts to operationalise them.

These strands run concurrently and inform each other through on-going reflections and interactive negotiation within and across the components, and with the students and the educational programme/course. We, as curriculum and/or course designers need to believe and understand that curriculum design is a complex, multi-layered and dynamic process; not a linear/ one-off task and, therefore, requires an ongoing, interactive and reflective discourse at various stages of planning and its implementation, so as to help students to achieve meaningful learning outcomes. Literature suggests that a theoretical framework allows unpacking of reasoning about the curriculum and, therefore, informs and guides the course design processes. Cornbleth (1990) states:

3. A Potential Framework: Curriculum Reform in HE in Pakistan:

In this section, I suggest curriculum design framework to be examined or followed for approaching a course design at higher education level.

3.1 Conceptualisation and Planning

It is important for course designers to reflect and examine what, why and how to establish an environment conducive to learning and teaching. Despite the differences in the size, nature and level of any course, student engagement in reflective and analytical process are crucial to transform their learning practices – helping them to self-regulate their learning (Biggs, J. & Tang, C., 2007); therefore, learning through reflection and active participation in discourse, dialogues and collaborative tasks (Schon, 1987; Stephens & Crawley, 1994) should be the defining characteristic of any course design at higher education. The underlying principles of supporting students to become reflective and independent learners are being interpreted from a social constructivist perspective of learning, based on the idea that individuals are rationale human beings and bring a wealth of experiences (formal and informal), and learning is established when they are able to discuss new ideas, and relate them to prior learning and real life experiences in an interactive and dialogical environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Kolb, 1984; Wood, 1998). Their prior learning, historical contexts and cultural experiences should be highly recognised, mutually respected and negotiated in order to facilitate their learning to become independent learners (Carnell, 2007; Kasworm, 2008).

Reflecting in this way may provide teachers with deeper insights and a strong rationale for student learning. They need to ask broad questions to consider and refine their philosophical underpinnings about teaching and learning of their specialised course. For example, some of

questions as given below may invite critical reflections at the conceptualisation and planning stage:

- What could be the students' prior learning experiences?
- Where do they come from?
- Why do they need to undertake this course? What is the worth of this course in terms of their learning?
- What is the scope of this course? How would this course help them to achieve the overall programme aims?
- How could we engage students in deeper learning through this course?
- How could our assessment methods better enhance their learning experiences and review learning outcomes?

These questions are fundamental to rationalising a course objectives, pedagogy and assessments along with the subject specific details.

3.2 Implementation and Assessment

Various approaches such as interactive dialogue, project works, case analysis , presentations et are necessary to invite students critical perspectives and to help them rationalise multiple theories, perspectives and practices. Savin-Baden (2003) argues:

Problem- based learning can offer students opportunities to learn how to learn, and to develop key skills, independence in enquiry and the ability to contest and debate. (p. 26)

In order to promote student collaborative and independent learning perspectives, they could be provided with adequate individual and group tasks as well as practical and reflective tasks, which could engage them in the processes of explaining and questioning their existing state of learning, expanding and refining it by analysing alternate perspectives in the specialised area of study, implementing them in available practical forums and reflecting on possible strengths and limitations.

It is important to recognise that students' participation in collaborative learning tasks, workshops and peer feedback exercises would enhance intercultural dimensions of their learning. Intercultural learning is 'a process of learning between people from varying cultures, which when effective enables participants of every culture (including those of the host culture) to learn from and about each other, including learning about their own culture' (Welikala & Watkins, 2008, p. 55). This would enable them to learn how things are viewed and seen in various contexts, within Pakistan, and through various perspectives and what could be learned from different perspectives (Grimshaw, 2011) as well as understand how to learn from their learning perspectives (Savin-Baden, 2003, p. 26).

Research suggest that students' active involvement, through peer and self-assessment has a great influence on shaping and developing their learning styles, skills, desire and motivation (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007); therefore, transforming teaching, learning and assessment is a

simultaneous phenomenon (Dochy et al., 1999; Brown et al., 1997). To provide students with meaningful learning experiences it is important to provide them with opportunities for self-monitoring and self-judgment towards achieving the learning goals (Nicole & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Student involvement in such tasks could help them to learn about formative assessment as well as to engage in self and peer assessment feedback which, in turn, could help develop the skills needed to make professional judgment about learning and encourage their reflection on progress and moving to the next stage in learning (Nicole & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). They must learn to document and capture their ongoing learning, through a portfolio assessment, which is mainly driven from student reflection on experiences and reflection through experiences. This portfolio assessment is in congruence with the learning outcomes which aim to take an active and autonomous role in developing their learning practices and understanding their journey to become independent learners (Wolf, 1996, p. 34, cited in Retallick, 2002, p.3). Through a portfolio assessment, each student assess the quality of their work demonstrated through the portfolio and make professional judgments about their own learning – seeking and interpreting their professional journey over the period of the course and its continuity in future.

3.3 Course Evaluation

An ongoing reflective approach to receive students' feedback during various stages of the course is important to gain insights on how the students are proceeding with and progressing in learning and what adaptations need to be made to further nurture their experiences so as to help them to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The tutors must analyse the students' feedback to discuss and understand what, why and how they learned; how to know what have been learned; and what to do next? This reflective approach enables tutors to revisit the intended learning outcomes, the pedagogical approaches and assessment method, thus engaging them in transforming the course design (Biggs, J. & Tang, C., 2007). Hence the students feedback and analysis of the feedback could help teachers to make efforts for improving instructional design and quality of courses.

4. Conclusion

With this attempt, I aim endeavour to make curriculum a living document and course design as evolving phenomena as well as to bridge the gap between delivering and receiving curriculum. However, it is important to recognise that a course design at higher education must be viewed as evolving and flexible phenomenon; in this new themes may emerge as a result of students' engagement in ongoing reflections and formative assessment practices.

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