

## **Is 'curriculum' relevant to higher education?**

My simple answer is 'Yes', hence this article. The 'curriculum' is frequently discussed in compulsory education, rarely in higher education. My article presents three models of curriculum which you can consider in relation to your teaching and learning.

### **The content model of curriculum**

This model is based on the transmission of subject knowledge from subject experts to students. Put simply, it is concerned with the 'what' of learning. In this model the curriculum is the *content* and education is the *transmission* of that content.

For Hirst (1974),<sup>1</sup> education is an intellectual activity organised around what he refers to as 'forms' of knowledge. The idea of 'transmission' can have negative connotations and may be misunderstood as simply the transfer of knowledge from experts to passive students who may do little with it other than remember it long enough to be used in examinations or other forms of assessment. Hirst (1974:3) states that "... there can be no curriculum without objectives." However, these are not objectives in the limited, behavioural sense in which they are commonly used in education today. The objectives are broader, and less precisely prescribed, being built around the development of student understanding within a subject rather than the acquisition of 'bits and pieces' of knowledge which might, or might not, coalesce into understanding. In this model of curriculum, knowledge is paramount but this does not preclude the development of wider skills and abilities within it that may be transferable to other contexts.

### **The process model of curriculum**

The content view of the curriculum is concerned, mainly, with *what* students learn. The 'process' model, in contrast, is concerned with *how* students learn and with their growth and development as human beings. In this view, students are seen as active participants in the construction of knowledge and the development of understanding rather than as passive recipients of knowledge. It is, therefore, associated with cognitive and constructivist theories of learning and with notions of active learning and

deep learning. Advocates of this approach to learning claim it is more likely to develop independent learners with a propensity to lifelong learning.

This approach to the curriculum and to learning has a long tradition. John Dewey emphasised the importance of experience in education. A.N. Whitehead (1932)<sup>2</sup> suggested that "... the curriculum is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than knowledge to be acquired and facts stored."

The most frequently cited reference to the process curriculum is Lawrence Stenhouse's *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* (1975) in which he sets out his arguments against behavioural objectives and proposes a curriculum based on educational experiences and an inquiry-based approach to learning. The role of teachers is crucial to this approach, particularly how they design educational experiences to encourage and enable students to use, develop and create meaning from the knowledge they receive. Stenhouse believed knowledge is important not simply for its own sake but for the opportunities it provides for the development of thinking – the curriculum should be a medium for thinking.

We can see here a clear distinction between the content model, as propounded by Hirst and the process model, based on Stenhouse's ideas. In the former, the transmission and acquisition of subject knowledge comes first and is the framework within which thinking and understanding are developed. In the latter, thinking and understanding are the aim and subjects are the vehicles which make these possible.

### **The product model of curriculum**

This view of curriculum is based on a more 'scientific' approach to education. It is essentially behaviourist, the key idea being that if the aims and objectives are clearly defined then the educational 'outcomes' can be more accurately and reliably assessed. The metaphor of 'production' is interesting because it suggests production processes in industry and manufacturing, which is where this approach began. (See for example F.W Taylor's 'scientific management' principles from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century). The dominant modes of describing and planning teaching and learning in higher education today are couched in the language of production, perhaps not in

strictly behavioural terms but certainly in terms of 'modules' of learning and 'learning outcomes'.

The move to an objectives-based approach to curriculum began in the USA in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Early proponents of this approach believed that all human activity was based on the performance of specific activities. These activities, once identified, should become the curriculum objectives; the curriculum itself will comprise the educational experiences through which these objectives are met. This approach was further developed by Ralph Tyler. His system was specifically behaviourist as evidenced by his statement that "... Statements of objectives should be statements of changes to take place in the students." (Tyler 1949:44)<sup>3</sup>. Tyler's model is built around four basic questions which underlie curriculum planning and designing teaching and learning.

1. What educational purpose do we want to attain?
2. What educational experiences are most likely to attain those purposes?
3. How best can these experiences be organised?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes have been achieved?

There are two main criticisms to the product model. Firstly, programmes designed on this model inevitably exist prior to and outside the learning experiences and, consequently, students have limited opportunity to shape the learning experiences. Secondly, if learning is broken down into small units, objectives and learning outcomes it will be more difficult for students to gain an integrated understanding of the whole topic, subject or activity.

Most universities and higher education providers have Teaching, Learning and Assessment strategies. You might like to look at one and see to what extent it embodies any of these principles.

## References

1. Hirst, P. H. (1974) *Knowledge and the Curriculum: A Collection of Philosophical Papers* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
2. Whitehead, A. N. (1932) *The Aims of Education* London: Williams and Norgate Ltd.
3. Tyler, R. W. (1949) *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* Chicago; University of Chicago Press

See also:

Higher Education Academy (2013) *Promoting Teaching. Making Evidence Count* (esp. p7) [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/making-evidence-count-web\\_0.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/making-evidence-count-web_0.pdf)

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