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Bovill, C. (2013) Students and staff co-creating curricula: a new trend or an old idea we never got around to implementing? In: Rust, C. (ed.) Improving Student Learning Through Research and Scholarship: 20 Years of ISL. Series: Improving student learning (20). Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford, UK, pp. 96-108. ISBN 9781873576922

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Deposited on: 13 September 2013

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Students and staff co-creating curricula – a new trend or an old idea we never got around to implementing?

Abstract

Within higher education, there is increasing interest in conceptualising students as producers, partners and co-creators of their own learning (Little, 2010; McCulloch, 2009; Neary 2010; Werder & Otis, 2010). One particular area of interest focuses upon students and academic staff co-creating curricula (Bovill et al, 2011; Delpish et al, 2010). The nature of co-created curricula can vary greatly and might include: students being consulted about changes to the content of course design; students designing part of a virtual learning environment; students designing marking criteria; or designing some of their own learning outcomes. The concept of co-created curricula is not new. However, discussion about co-creation of curricula has been most strongly evident in schools based literature, with many important discussions framed within 'student voice' and critical pedagogy discourse. In contrast, there has been less engagement in co-creation discussion and practice within higher education contexts until more recently.

Keywords

Co-created curricula; curriculum design; student-staff relationship; participation; collaboration

Introduction

In this paper I intend to provide an overview of some of the key historical trends in ideas about co-creation of curricula and to illustrate the range of literature that this work draws upon. I will then explore current discussions about co-creation, including an attempt to distinguish the different kinds of co-creation being advocated and pursued. Finally I present some possible future directions for co-created curricula work. However, before providing an overview of relevant literature, it is useful to pause and consider what we mean by the term curriculum.

Curriculum is a problematic term that in many texts simply refers to the content or syllabus of a programme of study. Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) carried out a useful phenomenographic study asking academics for their definitions of curriculum and they present four different conceptualisations held by staff: "a: the structure and content of a unit (subject); b: the structure and content of a programme of study; c: the students' experience of learning; d: a dynamic and interactive process of teaching and learning" (Fraser and Bosanquet 2006: 272). The first and second of these definitions focus on commonly understood study 'units' and they distinguish between module/course and programme/degree curricula. The third and fourth definitions start to capture some of the essence of co-created curricula. Indeed, the fourth definition of the curriculum as "...a dynamic, emergent and collaborative process of learning for both student and teacher" (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006:272) expands the traditional idea of the curriculum towards a view of the "teacher and student acting as co-constructors of knowledge" (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006:275).

Co-creating curricula in the past

In the early 1900s, Dewey was one of the first protagonists arguing for democratic classroom and school environments (Dewey, 1916). Dewey published influential works critiquing accepted approaches to formal schooling and suggesting a more 'progressive education' that was based on social democratic principles (see for example, Dewey, 1938). His work was highly influential for many other writers who were to follow in the later stages of the Twentieth Century.

In the Twentieth Century, dissatisfaction with government approaches to formal education reached a peak in the 1960s, where schooling was often viewed as perpetuating narrow versions of what was deemed to be valuable knowledge. The 1960s also saw rising dissatisfaction with many other state policies, most starkly demonstrated by university student riots around the world. In the USA, protests were a culmination of the growth of the civil rights movement and the free speech movement as well as a result of protests against the Vietnam War (and in some cases university connections to the government supporting the Vietnam War). In the mid 1960s students in the UK also rioted and protested against the Vietnam War. While in Tokyo there were student riots sparked by the Japan United States Joint Security Treaty that led to students becoming more organised through the formation of a range of student social movements (Steinhoff, 1999). In Paris in 1968 the student riots that took place in response to closure of the Sorbonne due to a range of unresolved conflicts between the University administration and students, led to a general strike in France that brought the economy close to crisis point.

Other developments around this time included Alexander Neill's highly influential alternative form of schooling at Summerhill school in Suffolk, UK (Neill, 1964) and Rogers' critique of prescribed curricula in the 1969 publication of his seminal text 'The Freedom to Learn'. Rogers returned to some of the ideas that Dewey had been advocating, proposing alternatives to existing approaches to formal schooling. He emphasised positive views of the learner as a contributor to the learning process and included calls for students to co-create the curriculum. Rogers' work was influential in increasing student participation in school learning processes over the next couple of decades in a number of countries. As Northedge states,

"...the blossoming of the student-centred learning movement in the 1970s offered the potential of a joyous release from the grind of delivering information crammed lectures. Carl Rogers, for example...called on teachers to step off the lecture treadmill and rely instead on students' natural inclination to learn, by providing unthreatening opportunities to explore their own interests" (Northedge, 2003:169).

Similarly, at this time Heidegger's influential 'What is called thinking' (1968) challenged current conceptions of the relationship between teacher and pupil, arguing the need for more freedom and openness in this relationship in contrast to dominant views of the teacher as the purveyor of pre-specified knowledge.

The 1970s saw continuing critique of formal schooling. Illich (1970) in his book 'Deschooling society' provided a damning indictment of the problems with the formal schooling system. Similarly, Jurgen Habermas' (1974) work critiqued the legitimacy of the interests and values of formal education systems, and his work was highly influential for writers such as Henry Giroux, Michael Apple and others who developed the idea of critical pedagogy over the following decades. Another key publication around this time was Willis's (1978) critique of schooling, which argued that schools perpetuated the existing class system in society.

Perhaps one of the most well known publications of the 1970s was Paulo Freire's (1972) 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' which advocated popular education as the only meaningful approach to education. Popular education continues to be defined in a multiplicity of ways (Kane, 2005) but usually focuses on the interests of ordinary people, it is political in nature and it is usually committed to progressive socio-political change. Popular education focuses on the needs of learners and contributes to a process of conscientization, through which people become increasingly aware of their often oppressed and subordinate position in society. Popular education, therefore, focuses on facilitating individuals as members of communities to find practical solutions to enable them to challenge their oppression. Freire's work became highly influential in all education settings, but particularly for those working in community and adult education. More recently, work by Crowther et al (2005) has connected popular education more explicitly with higher education.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Aronowitz (1981; 1994), Pinar (1981), and Shor (1992) all built upon Rogers' work in arguing that students should share responsibility for curriculum planning. In the 1980s, a key contribution to the discourse about democratic approaches to education was the critical pedagogy literature. The first use of the term 'critical pedagogy' was in Henry Giroux's book 'Theory and Resistance in Education (Giroux, 1983). Critical pedagogy emphasised the need to take a critical stance on education, to challenge the continued teaching of accepted forms of knowledge. Critical pedagogy encouraged students and staff to collaborate and negotiate to create new forms of knowledge from their own experiences and to challenge existing views of the world (Darder et al, 2003). Giroux (1983) argued that the aim of critical pedagogy was not to fit students into the existing society, but for students to create a different society on the basis of their new knowledge discovered by critically analysing and acting on their individual and shared experiences. As Darder and colleagues outlined,

"...students come to understand themselves as subjects of history and to recognise that conditions of injustice although historically produced by human beings, can also be transformed by human beings" (Darder et al, 2003:12).

Within this literature there are some elements that are considered crucial for creating more democratic approaches to education. These include: that learning is meaningful; that there is freedom for students to make choices; that the student-tutor relationship is facilitatory, collaborative and based on dialogue; and that the learner is viewed as a knowledgeable and critical partner in learning (hooks, 1994; Neill, 1995; Rogers and Freiberg, 1969). Many authors agree that the student-tutor relationship is key. Co-creative approaches encourage a relationship where the tutor and students are learners co-creating the learning experience through dialogue. As Freire explains:

"Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (Freire 2003:63).

Similarly, Rogers and Freiberg (1969) argue that the teacher becomes a co-learner in this process. This view of a collaborative student-tutor relationship outlined here relies on collective inquiry and dialogue (Grudens-Schuck 2003; Haggis 2006). This dialogue between the tutor and students implies a new view of the learner as a knowledgeable and critical partner in learning (Aronowitz 1981; Darder et al, 2003; Freire 2003; Grudens-Schuck 2003; Shor 1992).

Critical pedagogy literature was mainly focused upon education in the school setting. However, it still offers valuable and relevant insights for those in higher education concerned to democratise learning within the academy. Indeed, this literature informs many of the calls for co-created curricula and student-faculty partnerships in learning and teaching.

Garth Boomer and colleagues drew heavily upon the critical pedagogy literature in their work focused on negotiating the curriculum (Boomer et al, 1992). Negotiation of the curriculum relies upon challenging existing understandings of power relationships. Drawing on the work of Foucault, power, which is frequently viewed as a relationship between the dominator and the oppressed, can instead be seen in a new light as a result of critical inquiry into power relationships. Critical pedagogy can help the oppressed to realise that they have power to resist domination and can alter existing power relationships (Giroux, 1983; Rabinow, 1984).

In the 1980s and 1990s there were some calls within higher education for students to have a greater say in their learning experiences. This can be seen in proposals for students to negotiate marking criteria and contribute to self and peer assessment (Falchicov, 1986; Stefani, 1998). However, growing emphasis on the free market within the global political context at this time was influencing the higher education sector and many authors emphasised finding ways to measure learning processes, as Stefani observes, "Looking back on this period, at one level what some academic staff seemed to be doing was reducing the concept of student learning and student empowerment to a series of correlation coefficients" (Stefani, 1998:343).

The current resurgence of calls for co-creation

More recently, within mainstream higher education literature, interest in student centred learning, social learning, enquiry based learning and learning communities has been growing. All of these concepts imply students becoming more active participants and owe much to earlier ideas of democratic approaches in education (Barr and Tagg, 1995; Kahn and O'Rourke, 2005; Reynolds et al, 2004). However, this current higher education literature calling for students to be more active participants in their learning does not always draw upon the long tradition of critical pedagogy or popular education and the more radical, emancipatory or transformatory rationales that underpinned calls for negotiated curricula in much of the historical literature. In contrast, it often focuses more on, for example, student engagement, retention, learning communities, and employability skills, it is often less overtly political and demonstrates a more mainstream, instrumental adoption and dilution of concepts of participation. As Lambert argues "...participatory principles and practices may become divested of their socially progressive potential by the economic preoccupations of higher education reform" (Lambert, 2009: 296).

It is helpful at this point to distinguish between some of the different kinds of participation and co-creation that are currently being discussed in higher education. Frequently, authors refer to student participation in university in terms of widening access and widening participation in university education. Many others refer to student representation on university committees and within university quality assurance systems. However, there are differences between participating in University life, ensuring student voices are represented on university committees, and the idea of students becoming partners or co-creators of learning experiences. The most common form of student voice within discussions about learning and teaching is student feedback on teaching often in the form of end of course feedback questionnaires or at staff-student liaison committees.

Some authors have recognised the limitations of these forms of student participation. A number of writers are calling for students to become researchers in their own disciplines and researchers and scholars of their own learning processes (Jenkins & Healey, 2009; Otis & Hammond, 2010). At the University of Exeter, Dunne and Zandstra (2011) take this concept further with the idea of students as researchers, but also as change agents within their own institution. The University of Lincoln's 'Student as Producer' project, also promotes the idea of students as researchers and creators of knowledge, but based within a much more overtly Marxist theoretical framework (Neary, 2010).

More recent literature exploring staff-student partnerships in higher education (see for example, Little, 2010), covers a vast range of conceptions of partnership, often overlapping widening participation, student representation, student feedback on courses as well as other partnerships related to learning and teaching. The literature that specifically calls for co-created curricula offers a range of suggestions about what is possible and desirable in terms of student participation in designing curricula depending on a number of contextual factors (Bovill and Bulley, 2011). These factors include, for example, the size of the class, the level of the students and whether there is a professional body that stipulates outcomes for a programme (Bovill, in press). These and other issues are likely to influence a tutor as to which ways they try to engage students as co-creators of curriculum, for example, from partnership on a curriculum planning committee for a selected group of students to all students in a class being involved in discussion and negotiation of marking criteria.

Relatively recent suggestions for students to become co-creators of the curriculum include, examples focused on ethical citizenship and environmental justice (Fischer, 2005; Grudens-Schuck, 2003; Scandrett et al, 2005; Wilkinson and Scandrett, 2003), examples from language teaching (Breen and Littlejohn, 2000a) and examples from teacher education programmes (Delpish et al, 2010). The focus on co-constructed curricula in social justice programmes is perhaps not surprising where co-creation is a pedagogical and planning approach congruent with the content of the programme. Similarly, education programmes aiming to enhance students' understanding of curriculum design approaches can enhance learning by modelling co-creation in action. Interdisciplinary examples of co-creation include suggestions that there may be a need for academic development support for staff considering adopting co-creation approaches (Bovill et al, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2010 & 2009; Manor et al, 2010; Mihans et al, 2008).

Where are co-created approaches going?

Co-creation of learning experiences and curricula is increasingly an accepted topic of discussion about learning and teaching in higher education. This level of interest in co-created learning was not so apparent ten years ago, however, the current resurgence of interest exposes a number of challenges that should not be overlooked. We should perhaps be wary of the sometimes uncritical use of terms such as participation, engagement, co-creation and students as change agents. This terminology is being used by staff and university administrators with a vast range of motivations and intentions. We need to be explicit about our intentions, about the details of which particular students are involved, how they are involved, and about evaluating students' experiences of co-creation.

The current marketised higher education system in the UK provides a challenging context. As Stefan Collini argues, "expansion of numbers on the cheap has dramatically diluted the level of attention to individual students that most universities can provide" (Collini, 2012: 179), and this situation makes it more difficult to suggest

to overloaded staff that they should try new approaches to co-creating curricula with students. Student participation does not remove the need for the teacher's expertise (Bartolome, 2003; Breen and Littlejohn, 2000b; Dewey, 1938), rather it often requires additional skills in facilitation and negotiation that staff may find challenging. Negotiated decision making is not straightforward, and the move to enhance student voices within curriculum design does not mean that students will get everything they want. Processes of negotiation and decision making are under-researched and under-discussed aspects of co-creation work. It is often unclear, for example, whether students and teachers are using processes of majority vote or consensus building as ways of reaching decisions. In reality in many instances tutors remain in control of assessment and it is paramount to ensure trust between partners in co-creative processes, for academic staff to be clear about any limitations of shared decision making in particular courses and programmes. For academic staff, co-creation work is often experienced as unfamiliar and risky – although admittedly highly rewarding – and we need to acknowledge that adopting new pedagogical approaches and conceptions of learning can be demanding for staff and students (Bovill, in press).

Student tuition fees make staff wary of asking students to contribute to curriculum design where some students may consider this poor value for money if they expect responsibility for teaching to lie with academic staff. However, Collini (2012) argues that this is a poor notion of the nature of a university education. Students may need guidance to realise that the greatest value of higher education includes opportunities to be challenged and to change the way in which they think by taking greater responsibility for their own learning; and that this is most effectively developed through students becoming more meaningfully involved in learning processes rather than simply being handed pre-packaged forms of knowledge.

The effectiveness of many quality assurance mechanisms in higher education have been criticised (Collini, 2012). These mechanisms include relatively inflexible university course design regulations that can make it difficult for staff to pursue more innovative approaches to learning and teaching. However, university systems, structures and regulations are created by university staff and therefore academic staff must take greater responsibility for influencing these processes and regulations in ways that may create more responsive and appropriate approaches.

I have perhaps portrayed an overly bleak picture here, at a time when co-creating curricula has encouragingly re-emerged on some higher education institutional agendas. However, Michael Apple argued over thirty years ago that "...there exists in curriculum development...something of a failure of nerve. We are willing to prepare students to assume only some responsibility for their own learning" (Apple 1981:115). We perhaps need to examine our own attitudes to students taking increased responsibility for elements of curriculum design. Curriculum design has traditionally been the domain of academic staff and curriculum planners (Bourner, 2004; Bovill, in press). The whole co-creation approach challenges many academics' understandings of roles and responsibilities within learning and teaching design. So in many ways one of our biggest challenges is supporting individual staff to re-imagine curriculum as something that is not 'owned' by staff, but instead to see curriculum as Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) described: "...a dynamic, emergent and collaborative process of learning for both student and teacher" (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006:272). In the same way that staff attitudes may be constraining, in contrast, other staff may be highly motivated to engage in regular reflection and consideration of ways in which they can innovate and enhance current practice through challenging the dominant models of higher education practice. Individual staff motivations, imagination and creativity may be key to whether co-created

curricula approaches are implemented and embedded in higher education, or whether we will suffer 'a failure of nerve' .

In response to the challenges that co-created curricula pose to academics, there is a need for academic development units to support staff to learn new skills in facilitation and negotiation and supporting students. Many academic staff are already undertaking co-creation in different forms and academic developers should make the most of these examples of existing practice to help others to imagine what might be possible. Academic developers should also consider modelling co-creative approaches in taught programmes and workshops. The unique position that academic developers inhabit between academic staff and senior managers within institutions may make them well placed to influence changes to regulations and systems that can become more supportive of co-created curriculum approaches (Bovill et al, 2011).

Conclusions and recommendations

In exploring the historical background to recent calls for co-created curricula, I have outlined a range of different influences and motivations for more democratic approaches to education. Whilst much of the literature originated in schools, there has been a recent rise of interest in a range of student partnerships in higher education. However, we need to remain attentive to our use of terms such as 'student participation' in order to avoid instrumental and uncritical usage, for example, within university strategies. If we claim participation and do not offer meaningful participation to students, we run the risk of disengagement, where individuals feel they are being manipulated for the benefits of others (Arnstein, 1969). Indeed, it is crucial in co-creation activities to ensure that, early in the collaborative process, academic staff meaningfully demonstrate how they are listening to and responding to student voices and acting on the ideas they generate. Early demonstration of students' opinions being taken seriously can create liminal moments that transform processes into truly collaborative partnerships (Bovill et al, 2011; Delpish et al, 2010).

In order for co-created curriculum not to disappear from the agenda again, it is important for us to realise that not all academic staff and students will want to be involved. Similarly there may be contexts where co-creation can be difficult and it is important to recognise that differing levels of participation and collaboration are possible and appropriate. It is essential that academic staff can access advice and support to pursue co-created curricula approaches. Further research is needed to outline ways in which staff and students have co-created curricula in different disciplines, with different class sizes and in different institutional and national contexts, to help those considering how to approach collaborative curriculum design. Finally, further evaluation research to synthesise the compelling outcomes from co-created curricula processes would also be useful to help those interested in pursuing this approach.

Realistically, academic staff conceptualisations of learning and teaching, as well as their attitudes to teacher-student relationships will have a strong influence upon what is possible in co-creating curricula. Individual academic staff, who currently act as gatekeepers of curriculum design, have the power to provide opportunities for students to engage in co-creating curricula and, therefore, staff have the potential to become key barriers or facilitators of co-created curricula.

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