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Texts, power and design and technology: the use of national curriculum documents in departmental power struggles

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Abstract

One feature of the development of the design and technology curriculum within schools has been an ongoing debate, between the various groupings within it, concerning the nature, purpose and delivery of the subject¹. This paper considers the use of selective readings and interpretations of national curriculum documents as part of such power struggles within design and technology departments. Drawing on evidence from case study work in five schools, and focusing in particular on the reception of the 1992 proposals², it illustrates the way that individuals' attempts to provide 'definitive' readings of the various documents have a significant effect on power relations, both those internal to the department and with regard to external groups.

A significant feature of the design and technology curriculum is the requirement that teachers from a number of previously existing subjects come together to negotiate and deliver a curriculum that incorporates features from a variety of areas. This creation of a new subject from a group of previously disparate curriculum areas (albeit with significant common features) has had a number of effects on the power relations within design and technology as a whole, with interpretations of the Orders and the place of the contributing subjects being contested between teachers within the departments concerned, and, in some cases, between departments and school managers¹. This paper considers a particular aspect of such struggles, the use of selections from and selective interpretations of curriculum texts in the ongoing debate about the nature of design and technology and its mode of delivery in particular schools.

Making sense of the new curriculum crucially involves the interpretation and assimilation of the relevant curriculum texts. It is not a straightforward matter to translate attainment targets and programmes of study into actual lessons and topics. Consequently, anyone who has a coherent interpretation of the key texts will also have a clear advantage in power terms, both within and outside the department. As Bowe et al point out,

"Like other innovations the National Curriculum can disrupt existing hierarchies, advantage some and disadvantage others. Information and understanding, 'authoritative readings', are at a premium in the process of accommodation."³

Given the openness of the current Orders for design

and technology, such 'authoritative readings' have been many and various, and the delivery of the subject has shown enormous variation from school to school. Furthermore, during 1992 there was a campaign in the press and elsewhere⁴ to present an alternative interpretation of the meaning of technology, culminating in the government's decision to commission a review of the Orders. The new proposals² reached schools in January 1993, just as most departments were beginning to grapple with the requirements of the long assessment task. A number of texts, both official and unofficial, were thus available to teachers; this paper is concerned with the ways that individuals and groups chose and used the various sources, and the effects such choices and uses had on power relations within schools.

With regard to the new proposals, the importance, in power terms, of having a coherent interpretation of the new curriculum was exacerbated by teachers' steadily increasing workload. When the current version of the Orders was in preparation, teachers were, generally, excited and interested in the process, and read each document as it came out. However, a number of events coincidental to the consultation period for the draft rewrite, coupled with a feeling this time round that it does not pay to get too familiar with a document that may be changed before implementation, resulted in a general disengagement with the policy process. Under more immediate pressures, such as the need to prepare for and carry out the long assessment task and the urgency of decisions regarding key stage 4, many teachers did not bother to read the 1992 proposals at all, choosing instead to wait for the Orders. This left them dependent for information on the educational and other press, and on any individual

within the department or the school who did decide to read the documents. Such individuals thus had an advantage in the struggle to persuade the department to recognise and adopt any particular reading as its own.

The data reported in this paper was collected during the academic year 1992-3 as part of an ongoing ESRC-funded study of the interaction of power and gender in the negotiation of the design and technology curriculum, conducted through case studies of five secondary design and technology departments in the London area, these being chosen to reflect a range both in type of school and LEA and in departmental emphases, organisation and leadership. At two of the schools, Bursley and Knype, the department is composed only of teachers from home economics (HE) and craft, design and technology (CDT); at Bursley even HE, partly for staffing reasons, plays a relatively minor role and is unlikely to be involved next year. At one of the schools, Hanbridge, art has a significant involvement, as do information technology (IT) and business studies (BS); these latter two subjects also play a part in design and technology both at Turnhill (where technology is led by an IT specialist) and at Longshaw Girls'.

In all the schools there has been a continuing history of debate and, to a greater or lesser extent, contestation about the nature of design and technology as the subject has evolved through attempts to implement the Orders. In this, teachers' different interpretations of the national curriculum documentation have been used in a number of ways, both to support particular positions within the department and in discussions with senior management. Having a clearly articulated interpretation of or just better access to the documents involved could significantly advantage particular individuals and groups; this was occasionally used even by those outside the school to influence events within it. For example, the CDT staff at Longshaw were all given copies of the new proposals by the local design and technology inspector, thus putting them at an advantage compared to the HE teachers, who did not receive them. At Hanbridge, a remark by an HMI that the current design and technology Orders had 'been discredited' was used by the CDT staff as part of their attack on the design and technology co-ordinator, an HE teacher who supported the current curriculum.

The most common use of curriculum texts was as part of a battle which was also being waged in the educational press throughout 1992: the struggle between CDT and HE for subject dominance, and in

some quarters, over the inclusion of HE at all. In this, particularly during the summer and autumn of 1992, press reports could be used as much as official pronouncements. The head of technology at Turnhill, for example, remarked, before she had read the new proposals, that 'we know...that key stage 3 will include textiles and not food' (interview, 6/1/93); she and the head had already begun to plan 1993-4 staffing based on this misconception. At Bursley a general dislike of the design and technology Orders coupled with support for a more practical, skills-based approach led both the CDT staff and the senior management of the school to trust the press reports over the summer and autumn of 1992, which suggested that the new curriculum would have a heavy engineering bias and be based on CDT; before the draft Orders were published the head had begun to plan for the preservation of HE outside of design and technology. The HE department was already both marginalised and suffering from staffing problems (both the head and deputy head of department were on long term sick leave by Easter 1993 and the remaining HE teacher was mainly involved in vocational courses); as a result the discussion of the new draft curriculum document was focused around the interpretations of its contents made by the CDT staff, all of whom had read at least some of it. Starting from the position that construction was the basis of key stage 3 design and technology, they argued that it did not matter whether food was included at all, and that, as they had some expertise in textiles, they would not require any support from the HE staff, if the latter would rather not have the extra hassle. When the issue was presented in these terms, HE, represented by a teacher who was in any case moving away from the subject, withdrew without a fight.

At both Bursley and Knype the use of department titles was a further feature of the struggle for dominance. At Bursley, everyone from the head downwards (except the HE staff) referred to CDT as 'd&t', thus suggesting that this area should dominate the new curriculum. Similarly, at Longshaw, where the department was about to be given a block of specialist rooms, the head of department (a CDT specialist) told me that there were 'no textiles rooms' in the new building, though the 'CDT rooms' would be provided with sewing machines (which, arguably, would turn them into multi-media construction rooms where textiles staff might be expected to teach). Meanwhile, the head of department at Turnhill, struggling to integrate a department whose staff were still entrenched in separate subject areas, insisted on, as part of her strategy, the use of the terms 'food', 'textiles', 'construction' and 'control' instead of 'HE' and 'CDT'. At Knype, where the department was jointly

run by the heads of CDT and HE, who were more often than not in dispute, the head of CDT always talked of 'HE and d&t', again suggesting that CDT was what design and technology was 'really' about. He also interpreted the new proposals as making his area the dominant partner in the new curriculum, playing down, for example, the decision to regard textiles as a construction material; he saw the move to have construction as the core of the curriculum as requiring the retraining of HE staff. In this way he used his interpretation both of the draft Orders and of the key stage 4 proposals as a lever in his attempt to marginalise HE; this was resisted by the HE teachers, some of whom were (despite his protests) already teaching in the CDT area. Meanwhile the head was able to use the lack of unity in the design and technology department to impose her preferred interpretation of the key stage 4 documents, introducing joint courses with music, art and BS, as well as options in food, graphic media and textiles, a move which united the department in somewhat belated opposition.

Selective quotation from curriculum documents could also be used as part of more general power struggle. At Hanbridge, such struggles were not only subject-based, but also had a significant gender aspect. The design and technology co-ordinator was the female head of home economics, who had worked mainly with two other women, an art teacher and the deputy head of CDT, to design a curriculum structure based on a version of the NDTEF model, with students coming together in cross-curricular base groups for some lessons, while spending most of their time rotating between separate curriculum areas, in order to carry out specialist-based design work. After nearly three years of this the male CDT staff were finding it unsatisfactory (the one female CDT teacher had meanwhile become acting head of CDT) and mounted an attack on the carousel system, arguing that it would be better for art to come out of design and technology and for CDT, HE and IT to be taught independently, one lesson a week each. As supporting evidence they photocopied a paragraph from the non-statutory guidance for the current Orders:

"Schools will need to develop models for teaching design & technology, and examples of models are given below. These are for illustration, and to promote discussion. There are many other ways of providing design & technology. The "carousel" or "circus" model, in which pupils work with one material for a period of time before moving on to work with another material, is not recommended. This cannot provide progression, and the range of products is constrained by the

limited materials available."⁵

This paragraph, with the sentence condemning carousels highlighted, was used to argue against the department's curriculum model in a number of ways. Particular emphasis was laid on the rejection of carousel-based timetabling, though the department did not in fact use such a simple rotational model. At the same time, student progression was seen as crucial, and it was argued, along the lines of the quoted paragraph, that progression under the current system was difficult to achieve or to track. In taking this line the male CDT teachers gained the support of their head of department, who was concerned about progression while generally supportive of integrated design and technology. Most interesting, however, was the way that official condemnation of what amounts to separate delivery (students working with one material at a time with no linking themes or common lessons) was used to move the department towards a de-integration of design and technology. They moved from having some general, integrated input, to a decision to have none in future in Years 8 and 9. The use of the quoted paragraph is particularly ironic in this context as one of the examples which follows it is not dissimilar to the model followed by the department, the only difference being that Hanbridge students had no choice regarding the area they worked in at any particular time.

A final use of readings of curriculum documents concerns disputes not within the department, but between the department and the school management. At Bursley, partly due to their general dislike of the curriculum, the design and technology staff had done very little assessment (they tried repeatedly, but failed to make it work). When the school management enquired about this, the head of department replied that they had been unable to do it because the statements of attainment were too vague, and referred the head to the 1992 HMI report⁶. He also resisted a review of the Year 7 curriculum on the (incorrect) grounds that the new Orders would be implemented in September 1994, and that a review of present arrangements would therefore be superfluous. Maybe because the head was in broad agreement with the department's view of the current curriculum, the head of department was successful in both cases.

It is clear, then, that differential interpretations of national curriculum texts, both official and unofficial, play a significant role in preserving or upsetting the balance of power in both departments and schools. With regard to design and technology at least, this has been complicated by teachers' increasing reluctance to read any but the final versions of

curriculum documents, leaving the field open to those who wish to use selective interpretations to support their own agendas. It is likely that the net result will be an increasing diversity of provision, as the power-wielding potential of the various groupings is differentially affected by factors of commitment, personnel and context.

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