

# Curriculum Development Practice

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the subject of curriculum development. More specifically the paper discusses involvement with curriculum development in teaching and adopts a reflective writing style.

Keywords: built environment, curriculum management, education, quality assurance, reflective.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since starting a career in lecturing at the School of the Built Environment a year ago, I have been involved in the teaching of a variety of modules at all levels. For the purpose of this paper, I have chosen a module entitled Career and Business Development (BE0871), which I have been teaching on this year as my focus of reflection.

The paper will first look at my role in module development together with the background and rationale for this particular module within the degree programme. I will then focus on the key areas. This enables me to conduct a critical analysis on how they have influenced the nature of curriculum development. A larger proportion of the report will concentrate on the second subject being 'curriculum management'.

1. Curriculum Development
2. Managing a Curriculum
3. Quality Assurance

The module Career & Business Development is a core subject at Level 5 taken by Year 2 students on the Estate Management and Planning & Surveying degree programmes. It is designed to allow students to reflect on their career aspirations and current skill levels ahead of taking an optional placement year in industry. It helps students to identify the skills required by employers and seeks to develop these transferable and business skills. It provides a job search strategy and includes C.V's and application forms, selection processes and interviews. The module also covers professional ethics and codes of conduct in the workplace as required by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.

The rationale for the module lies partly with the requirements of the RICS. In addition, there is a need to ensure that students are able to meet the needs of local and national employers for placement purposes. As I have recently made the transition from industry, I was asked to provide a teaching input on this module.

## 2.0 CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Before further discussion on the topic it would be useful to define 'What is Curriculum?'. The definition is not straightforward and many writers have their own definition of *curriculum* with various meanings and connotations which can be confusing. I have chosen two examples which, in my opinion, provide a clear and concise definition which I can happily understand.

*A 'curriculum is an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice.'* Tanner & Tanner (1975)

More recently

*Curriculum is the totality of learning experiences provided to students so that they can attain general skills and knowledge at a variety of learning sites.'* Marsh, C. J (2004)

With these definitions in mind it is important to consider the following aims in developing a curriculum. In the first place, a curriculum should meet the needs, aspirations and personal growth of an individual i.e social and economic(the workplace) needs. This will be discussed further below. Secondly, a curriculum should encourage the student to develop themselves through 'independent learning' to find their own interest in the subject. This should be in addition to the key skills and knowledge we teach them but does rely on the students own self-motivation. On the Career & Business Development module this approach is specifically instilled on the students who must prepare job applications and approach employers themselves.

Many factors influence the nature of curriculum development and I have set out below the following for further consideration.

- Individual influences
- Institutional/Professional influences
- Educational influences
- Social influences

### **2.1 Individual Influences**

This involves the impact on the individual i.e the student. It is important that they can see a clear ‘pathway’ for themselves in the way of personal development with an achievable result which, in this module, would be confidence in a business/workplace environment. They would also feel better equipped with good skills and knowledge required for placement or post education.

When developing a curriculum we also need to consider that some students will unfortunately take a surface approach to learning. The surface approach arises from an intention to get the task out of the way with minimum trouble while appearing to meet course requirements. This issue needs to be addressed at the outset of curriculum development. According to Biggs, J (2003) common factors of such an approach include:

- An intention only to achieve a minimal pass.
  - Non-academic priorities exceeding academic ones.
  - Misunderstanding requirements, such as thinking that factual recall is adequate.
- A genuine inability to understand particular content at a deep level.

### **2.2 Institutional/Professional Influences**

There is, understandably a large influence on the curriculum by the professions. This is partly due the university’s heritage as a former Polytechnic but also with an emphasis on industry and the successful partnership with the industry professional bodies (e.g.RICS and RIBA). This relationship functions well with the university working with rather than for the professional body. It ensures the university (and the curriculum it delivers) can keep it’s ‘finger on the pulse’ of the surveying profession.

From the students point of view it is also beneficial as they can see and mix with RICS staff and local members who often contribute by way of guest lectures, providing student prizes and supporting school and social events.

### **2.3 Educational Influences**

Our curriculum within the School of the Built Environment is largely profession-based with much emphasis still based on traditional drawing, surveying and measurement skills. This is also true of this particular module which aims to equip students with the personal and professional skills required in the workplace. This professional aspect together with the close collaboration with the industry body as mentioned above means teaching staff are often seen as ‘instructors’ in a training role as well as ‘academics’ in an educational role.

### **2.4 Social Influences**

Social influences have also become more apparent in curriculum development. As an example, over the last ten years or so, the property/construction industry has seen an increase in the number of women entering the profession which needs to be addressed in the curriculum. Northumbria University has also experienced a sharp increase in the number of international students from different cultures wishing to study here. It is important that our curriculum and teaching methods address this issue. Many university academics report challenges in teaching international students and this is an issue that I feel needs to be

addressed in our school. Common problems may include language difficulties leading to non-interaction in classes and referencing/plagiarism misunderstandings. This is really a separate topic and is covered in more detail in the text by Biggs (2003).

In terms of models of teaching and learning, there have been many valid theories put forward over the last 80 to 100 years. Without going into too much detail, it is good practice for academics to be familiar with a range of theories of learning and teaching whether they be 'humanist', 'constructivist' or 'consumer orientated'. It is important to select those aspects of the theories which are particularly relevant to our practice in higher education. In this regard and in considering our approach to teaching and learning, we have partially adopted the theory of 'constructive alignment'.

According to Biggs (2003), 'constructive alignment is a design for teaching calculated to encourage deep engagement. In constructing aligned teaching it is first necessary to specify the desired levels of understanding. Stipulating the appropriate verbs of understanding helps to do this. These verbs then become the target activities that students need to perform..... and for the assessment tasks to address, in order to judge if the students have been successful in meeting the objectives'.

These principles of constructive alignment are very much mirrored in the aims and learning outcomes set out in a typical module descriptor and act as a valuable tool for both teacher and student.

### **3.0 MANAGING A CURRICULUM**

Before discussing curriculum management in some detail it would be useful to briefly describe the process of formal module approval at Northumbria University. The module BE0871 Career & Business Development has been running for approximately five years but at it's inception it would have been subject to the following procedures. Firstly, numerous internal reviews will have taken place taking into account the views of the professional body (RICS), staff, students and external assessors. Any amendments to the programme curriculum or individual modules needs to be formally assessed by the school learning and teaching (SLT) sub-committee. A module tutor will have been appointed and given the task of preparing a Module Descriptor/Report for committee approval. This will have been sent in advance of the meeting for members to consider. Any comments or recommendations (usually made with conditions) are discussed at the meeting at which the module tutor should attend.

The key stages in the process could be summarised as follows:

- Consultation
- Agree support
- Write module/course
- Submit for approval
- Approval event
- Prepare teaching programme

Curriculum development needs to be constantly monitored and staff are encouraged to periodically review not only the results of their students and the syllabus but also their methods of teaching and assessment. This can be done informally at regular staff team meetings or more formally as part of the module review process. This would normally take place at the end of each academic year for a 20 credit, year-long module.

For the module review process to work efficiently it is important to receive adequate student feedback. This has traditionally involved the processing of self-evaluation questionnaires completed by students usually on the last day of teaching. These have now been updated and improved by the use of the E-Learning Portal (Blackboard) whereupon students can add (type) their additional comments following mainly tick box questions. This has added more clarity to the students' views on how they have or have

not benefited from their learning experience specifically on this module. However, some academics do have certain criticisms on the value of student feedback questionnaires i.e. they tend to measure charisma, the 'Dr Fox effect', not teaching effectiveness in terms of improved student learning (Biggs, 2003). There is also a commonly held view of apathy by the students in completing questionnaires as the results 'will not benefit themselves, only next years' students'.

In my experience, whilst there are benefits to this procedure, by far the most practical and immediate method of dialogue is via staff/student representative meetings which are held twice in each academic year. At these meetings staff are made aware of the added benefits students are receiving from, for example site visits and guest lectures which are positive feedback. As a team we can also consider any negative feedback on issues such as student workloads and timing of coursework hand-in dates etc. All these considerations can assist the school in planning and delivering an improved curriculum but also helps develop a positive relationship between staff and students.

As far as the ongoing management of the curriculum is concerned we have an experienced subject director providing overall leadership of the staff team and curriculum development. Within the team we have a mix of staff from professional backgrounds and those with a more academic background with much research experience. Indeed, the Dean of the School is keen to encourage more staff to engage in research activity. This is an extremely worthwhile exercise as each member of the teaching team can develop a specialist area of teaching expertise offering valuable knowledge to students especially those carrying out their final year dissertations which is compulsory for students on our undergraduate and masters degree programmes.

New staff, like myself, coming directly from the surveying profession are able to advise on what recent changes are happening in the profession and the workplace enabling knowledge to be transferred to colleagues and to 'filter' through to the syllabus. We are also, as new staff required to study PCAPL which benefits ourselves and the school through the exchange of new ideas and teaching practices.

As mentioned earlier, the curriculum can be influenced or driven by many factors including outside bodies. We recently became aware through discussions with the

RICS that many surveying graduates from universities including Northumbria were lacking basic knowledge of business finance which the RICS wished to see addressed.

As a result we have put a stronger emphasis on this subject and included it specifically (including an assessment) in our module BE0871. Minor changes such as this can prove challenging to staff who cannot simply apply some 'fine-tuning' to the curriculum. It is likely to involve such matters as:

- What level will it be taught at ?
- What are the implication on other areas of study ?
- How will it be delivered/ assessed ?
- What resources are available e.g. staff and facilities ?

There also needs to be consideration of the impact on the individual (student) with some students having no prior knowledge and struggling with the concept, whilst others with prior qualifications in business studies finding the assessment too simple. This is currently a topic of discussion between myself and the module tutor to be considered for the forthcoming academic year. The other part of the assessment on this module comprises the submission of a reflective statement by the student which works well for two reasons. It encourages the student to develop a more analytical or critical approach to their writing technique but also enables them to comment on what they have learnt from our lectures and seminars.

At this stage, very little has been mentioned on the role of the teacher in this process. In short, there can be no curriculum development without adequate teacher development. In the words of Kelly (2005) we need to become 'reflective practitioners', professionals able to evaluate their own work with a view to improving it continuously. This continuous self-evaluation can be assisted by teachers being actively

engaged in research. This point is well considered in the text by Stenhouse (1975) who states that a teachers research and development programme increases his/her understanding of his/her own work and hence bettering their teaching. 'It is not enough that teachers' work should be studied: they need to study it themselves'.

Once a curriculum has been developed it has been noted that it should be subject to continuous evaluation. There has also been the additional concern from various interested parties for higher education institutions to provide 'value for money' especially with the recent introduction of student top-up fees. Much has been written on the subject of curriculum evaluation which Kelly (2005) summarises as follows:

As with assessment, an important distinction is the contrast between 'formative' and 'summative' evaluation. 'Summative' evaluation is concerned primarily to ascertain if the goals of the course have been achieved. 'Formative' evaluation is concerned to provide feedback and thus a base for course improvement, modification and future planning. The latter is one area where, overall, according to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), many universities including Northumbria are poor at providing good feedback to students, although this does not appear to have been echoed by students of the School of the Built Environment which is satisfying to know.

#### **4.0 QUALITY ASSURANCE**

As mentioned above improving the quality of teaching and learning in universities is currently of concern amongst providers, politicians and stakeholders.

In higher education institutions external quality assurance procedures take the form of audits that are carried out by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) with Northumbria having its last QAA audit approximately two years ago. The QAA provides a 'benchmark' to measure academic quality to assist both students understand the learning opportunities available and also the educational institute's teaching, support and assessment criteria.

These definitions of academic standards and quality standards together with published reviews of these standards are a vital source of information for reviewing and further developing a curriculum. This information can be accessed easily via the QAA website ([www.qaa.org](http://www.qaa.org)).

Biggs (2003) states there are generally two kinds of quality assurance (QA) : *retrospective* QA, which assures quality by requiring conformity to externally imposed standards ; and *prospective* QA which assures quality by continually striving to improve teaching and learning in the institution.

Although quality assurance should include all aspects of teaching and learning it is the quality of the assessment process which gets most scrutiny and which as a new member of staff can be daunting. On this subject, the author Race (2005) recommends various tips including you interrogate your own assessment instruments and processes against the QAA's 'Code of Practice'. This can lead to the discovery of important glitches, and the opportunity to improve assessment practice. There is also the importance of not only keeping data from year to year but using it to identify where students generally showed strengths and weaknesses.

Within our teaching team a number of colleagues are involved in the role of external assessor at other universities. This is an excellent way to learn from the experience of other institutions and to carry out quality-reviewing of yourself. What you learn about the excellence (or otherwise) of others' means of assessment can then be transferred to your own context.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

In conclusion, I have over the last year, working as a lecturer at Northumbria and studying part-time the PCAPL course, learnt a great deal about the processes involved in developing and managing a curriculum. The formative assessment in TE0704 (PCAPL) whereby we prepared a new module and submitted it to

a 'mock' SLT sub-committee was extremely valuable. It has stressed to me the importance of attention to detail such as student workload hours and the necessity of good teamwork to bring all the various strands together to complete a module descriptor.

I have learnt that a good starting point for the writing of a new module descriptor is the learning outcomes. We also need to concentrate on aligning our teaching methods to the learning outcomes and methods of assessment.

- Other considerations at the outset may include the following:
- Why is the module needed?
- Will it be core or optional?
- What are the learning pre-requisites?

Is there a market demand for it?

This will undoubtedly help me in the forthcoming years work preparation.

The development of a curriculum is very much a 'balancing act' whereby students' educational requirements need to be met whilst still considering professional body requirements and the availability of resources. It is clear the curriculum constantly has to adapt and be refined through ongoing evaluation and close scrutiny by internal and external parties. Fortunately, whilst the enormity of the above is daunting, I am constantly able to rely on the support and guidance of the resources, colleagues, admin staff and the Dean of the School of the Built Environment i.e. there is always someone who can help.

In the near future I am likely to take on more responsibility in the role of module tutor for various subjects in which I would possibly like to explore alternative methods of formative and summative assessment. With more experience I would consider a future role as an external assessor at other universities or develop a better network of communication between ourselves and other universities running similar courses to share ideas which may well influence future approaches to curriculum development.

## 6.0 REFERENCES

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