

Curriculum and Assessment

Background and Context

The curriculum development programme discussed here is situated in a Community Development Project that is gender specific to women. The programme is strongly influenced by the principles and practices of both Community Development and Community Education. Therefore it fits with the definition of curriculum which suggests that '*...the curriculum is the totality of the experiences the pupil has as a result of the provision made*' (Kelly 2004, p8). The organisation culture would look on curriculum as a holistic experience, and would understand curriculum as the '*the overall rationale for any educational programme*' (Kelly 2004, p.4). Therefore much of the learning outcomes of this assignment are integrated throughout the document, rather than wholly contained within each section. Some of the programme activities include the following:

- '*Early Engagement Programmes*' with no accreditation (the early engagement programmes facilitate formative assessment only, and processes and praxis orientations are integrated).
- '*Needs Based Programmes*' tailored to the needs of the participants, which offer FETAC accreditation, and includes both formative and summative assessment, (product, process and praxis orientations are integrated).
- '*Higher Certificate and Ordinary Degree in Community Development and Education*, accreditation by Waterford Institute of Technology, (there exists a memorandum of understanding with WIT). This course is for practicing community workers. (Formative and summative assessment is facilitated and product, process and praxis orientations are integrated.)
- '*Facilitation Apprenticeship Model*', which is an intense year long training course which involves learners shadowing experienced facilitators, participating in critical reflection sessions, support and supervision, and continuous professional development training. (Formative and summative assessments, with integrated orientations.)

Accreditation options are currently being explored for the facilitator's apprenticeship/training module, as it is an in-house module. A pre-requisite for participants of this module is participation on the higher certificate or ordinary degree in Community Development and Education. Candidates for the facilitators training are also interviewed to assess their

suitability, as the work is demanding and certain skills need to be inherent in participants, e.g. self awareness.

The work and curriculum development is guided by a Guide to Best Practice in Women's Community Education, which this organisation had input into and is developed through the AONTAS Quality Assurance Framework. The Quality Assurance Framework is:

A system which supports the provision of a distinctive education process that is confident and assured in its education provision and is true to the defining features of women's community education (AONTAS Guide to Best Practice in Women's Community Education).

This best practice framework is rooted in four principles: '*women-centred, quality, equality and justice*' (AONTAS 2007). The curriculum and assessment of the organisation's FETAC programmes are also guided by the FETAC Quality Assurance Framework. The third level programmes are also informed by HETAC guidelines.

The work is also influenced by a Community Development ethos which has at its core a commitment to social justice as is outlined in '*Towards Standards*' which is a Community Workers' Co-operative publication.

Theoretical Approach & Practical Contribution

My role involves the co-ordination and course development of the FETAC and facilitators training courses. My role also involves co-ordinating the early engagement courses, and supervising the continuous professional development of facilitators. I also tutor on both WIT and FETAC courses. For the purpose of this assignment I mainly discuss early engagement and further education programmes.

My approach to curriculum is influenced by the context in which I work in a Community Development Project. The organisation has an emphasis on collective learning and methods are learner centred. I agree with Cornbleth (1990) in Smith (2008) who suggests that '*curriculum is contextually shaped*'. Therefore in the context of my work, it is necessary to have an eclectic approach to curriculum. My own theoretical approach is strongly influenced

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by Freire (1970), Biggs (1999), Brookfield (1990, 2011), Mezirow (1999) and feminist writers such as Lynch (1999), O'Connor (1999) and bell hooks (1994) among others.

Within the FETAC and WIT modules in the organisation the outcomes are quite prescriptive. However the methods, methodologies, and processes are constructivist, creative and varied. All of our learners have previously experienced teacher-centred approaches to education and have had negative experiences in formal education. Therefore my practical contribution shows commitment to student-centred learning and fosters a deep approach to learning as advocated by Biggs (1999), Ramsden (1992, p52), and Schön (1987). This is done by consistently striving towards constructive alignment according to the principles of Biggs, and designing group sessions that are student centred and working towards understanding rather than surface learning (1999).

My approach involves integrating the needs of the students with the design of the curriculum. A highly consultative process is facilitated which fosters the students interest in course content. '*...a student who is interested in the topic, is pre-set for a deep approach...*' (Biggs 1999, p.19). Consultation is not effective unless students see their suggestions put into practice, otherwise it only amounts to tokenism. Consulting with participants and implementing their views also fosters a concept of ownership. '*The concept of 'ownership' is closely linked to effective teaching and learning*' (Anderson, Brown and Race 1998 p.41). Assessment is always negotiated and agreed with the students which also helps foster ownership.

In this context process is very important; how the learning happens and what happens during the learning is just as relevant as the outcomes. Therefore the concept of curriculum as process or as a means of facilitating learning is apparent (Stenhouse 1975 in Smith 2000, pp.5-6), however it is not the only approach used.

Rationale, Critical Understanding, Justification of Methods

I agree with Stenhouse (1975 cited in Smith 2008) that referring to process as curriculum widens the meaning. The concept of curriculum as process only may result in difficulty capturing and measuring learning. However the reality that the learning has to be captured and measured, ultimately results in a product. Therefore there is sometimes incongruence

between the methods used and the desire for a product at the end of each module. The idea of curriculum as a product (Kelly 2004, p.56) is fundamentally behavioural, yet the methods used to facilitate learning are process orientated and constructivist.

The way this incongruence is managed is by being creative, learner centred, flexible and drawing from more than one approach. It could be argued and indeed it is evident from evaluations that even though the learning has to be captured, measured and a product produced, creative and constructivist approaches are not abandoned. Therefore an eclectic approach is applied to curriculum, which involves the integration rather than polarisation of curriculum as product, process and praxis (curriculum as praxis is explored later) (Kelly 2004). It is possible (in my work context) to take the positive aspects of each approach, and be pragmatic in its application to curriculum.

Kelly (2004, pp.76-78) suggests that the process approach to curriculum is an *overtly value-laden and ideological model*'. There is no doubt that this approach is value-laden, ideological, and also resource laden. However this is justified as the target group of learners are women who have been failed by both the formal education system and liberal democratic society. Kelly (2004, pp.162-163) explores '*political influences*' and '*competing ideologies*' in England in relation to curriculum. This incongruence also exists, perhaps to a lesser extent, in Ireland, certainly in the community sector.

When learners have experienced a lifetime of internal and external oppression and social exclusion, it takes time to work through those issues. Therefore it is important that resources are made available to people who have returned to education, having been failed by the system in the first place. Community organisations are becoming under increasing pressure to provide accreditation each year, regardless of the profile of their target groups.

Consequently my approach to curriculum as a community development worker also has a social justice agenda, which involves consciousness rising and social analysis. This also involves exposing social and institutional inequality, which suggests conceptualising curriculum as praxis.

'The pursuit of social justice involves identifying and seeking to alleviate structural disadvantage and advocating strategies for overcoming disadvantage discrimination and inequality' (Towards Standards in Community Work).

Collective action for social change are words that are often used within the organisation. There exists collaboration and much dialogue within my practice which is inclusive of all staff around our processes and theoretical framework. Smith (2000, p.12) suggests that '*we could expect practitioners committed to praxis to be exploring their practice with their peers*'. Members of staff are encouraged to work in collaboration with each other and the participants.

Freire suggests that knowledge that is constructed far from the learner's personal experience serves to alienate them from their own experience, and therefore dehumanises them (1970). Illich (1973) looks at the connection of education and the learning of dominant values through what he calls '*passive consumption*' an uncritical acceptance of social order. He suggests that upholding the status quo is implicit within the education system. Bourdieu (1984) also looks at how education has a part to play in perpetuating social and economic inequalities, through influencing the learning of values through what he calls the '*hidden agenda*'. Kelly (2004, p5-6) explores the '*hidden curriculum*' and looks at how the values that are perpetuated are implicit within teaching, he suggests that teachers should be aware of the implications.

It could be argued that the consciousness raising element of the curriculum in my practice serves to counteract at least some of the values perpetuated by the '*hidden agenda/curriculum*'. The values that we wish to perpetuate are to question, and take a critical look at how society is set up. All of our learners are from working class backgrounds and many have low self-esteem and lack confidence. Therefore the approaches used are justified as it puts emphasis on the failure of the system rather than the failure of the individual.

In the context of my work it is impossible to discuss curriculum or any aspect of education without considering that education is political. As staff we are also required to reflect on our own position in society. The majority of the staff are from working class backgrounds so we are aware of the issues first hand. It could be argued that we have our own '*hidden agenda*' which involves consciousness raising. Although social justice is made explicit to our participants, is not always made explicit to our funding agencies.

Application of the Key Principles

FETAC level four 'Personal Effectiveness' and a level four 'Drama' module were delivered to a group of fifteen adult women last year. For the purpose of this assignment I will discuss the how curriculum theories were implemented in the 'Personal Effectiveness' module. However it is important to note the facilitation of this module is only one small aspect of the overall learning, considering the wide definition of curriculum discussed.

All of the learners have left education at lower secondary level and 80% had no formal educational qualifications. During the initial consultation with learners it was apparent that there existed a lot of fear when I mentioned FETAC or assessment. There was no mention of FETAC again until after the first evaluation. Consequently I suggested to the learners that they had covered the necessary material for two FETAC level four modules, 'Personal Effectiveness' and 'Drama'. I asked them if they would like to capture the learning and submit it for FETAC accreditation, and they agreed.

We negotiated how the work would be presented and the women decided that they would like to take on a project renovating an overgrown garden. It was a learning-by-doing exercise, *'most learning happens when learners practice things, have a go, and learn by making mistakes and finding out why'* (Anderson, *et al* 1998, p10). Using a garden renovation project as a vehicle of learning; the 'Personal Effectiveness' module was integrated with the group activities. This is an example of a pragmatic approach to curriculum as explored by Dewey (1997), the learners were enthusiastic about learning in this integrated way.

Personal effectiveness skills were developed throughout the process. Learning strategies included portfolio building, project work (which involved learning by doing and documenting the progress), reflective learning journals, collective learning sessions, role play, teamwork and discussion. Brainstorming was also used as a learning strategy which *'...can be a very good way of stimulating creative thinking'* (Race 2007, p.150). They experienced conflict resolution through working through and resolving a real life disagreement over where the pond should go, and then reflecting on and evaluating the experience. All of the learning outcomes were met and much more, as collateral learning described by Dewey was also captured during the evaluations, on DVD as well as written up (1997, p.48).

According to Biggs (1999) the alignment of presage, process and product is conducive to a deeper learning, with more emphasis on process than content. Biggs three p's approach was applied by keeping the learning close to the student's life experience, which is a motivating factor. The students were consulted and their needs identified which directs what is taught, often in addition to the module outline. The learning was directed and designed to meet the learning outcomes. In addition some activities were influenced by the expressed wishes of the participants.

Assessment was carried out using similar methods as the learning strategies with some use of DVD (explored fully in Assignment two, and in relation to Bloom's taxonomy). The activities facilitated during the process had a direct relationship with and is aligned to the assessment (Biggs 1999). The learning was also laced with social analysis and consciousness raising, through exploring, conditioning, internal and external oppression and inequality. Also facilitated was examining society through the lens of class, gender, power relations etc., which demonstrates the integration of curriculum as product, process and praxis. A team work exercise was integrated with an assessment of the 'Drama' module, as the assessment criteria satisfied the outcomes of both modules.

In relation to Biggs (1999) solo hierarchy, students demonstrated increased knowledge and understanding as they developed their personal effectiveness skills throughout the learning experience. Functioning knowledge was used as they applied the skills being developed to their conflict resolution episode, which incorporates the use of procedural and conditional knowledge. Biggs suggests that functional knowledge is '*...knowledge that is within reach of the learner*' (2003). The level of understanding demonstrated suggests that it was at first multi-structural (as a wide range of communications skills were being developed). Later in the module these skills were practically applied to many circumstances which involve relational understanding. Some of the learners integrated the understanding gathered in their life experience with their learning, and brought their understanding to the extended abstract level. This was encouraged during the learning experience.

Evaluations are an inherent part of curriculum in the community sector, and learning that was not captured during assessment was made explicit during evaluations. What Dewey (1997, p.48) calls collateral learning was just as significant in this context as the planned learning outcomes. In addition to achieving personal effectiveness skills the students transformed a wild garden into a usable beautiful space, and developed associated practical and theoretical skills. The development of their personal effectiveness skills while doing so facilitated a deeper understanding; consequently the skills were immediately applicable.

In addition to skills discussed, students suggested that they had increased confidence and self-esteem as well as a sense of empowerment as a result of the overall learning experience. What is planned and what is received curriculum in this instance is seen to be of equal importance, which as Kelly points out is the teacher's responsibility (2004, p.6). The aim of part of the learning was to facilitate increased personal effectiveness, so that the women can articulate and question their position in society. Brookfield suggests that communication skills, organising skills and active citizen skills are necessary for the '*...most dispossessed in today's capitalist societies...*' (2011, p.140). So it was not learning for learning's sake, there was a bigger picture, which was a step towards enabling participants to advocate for social reform.

Tension can exist between the demands of the curriculum regarding outcomes and delivering a mainstream course through unconventional methods. It can be a struggle to abide by the principles and practices of Community Education/Development, critical pedagogical theories, and the eclectic concept of curriculum as a mixture of product, process and praxis. At times there are tensions and incongruence between the theories-in-use and my espoused theories (Schön, 1987).

There is no doubt that our approaches to curriculum could be considered radical, and initially I contemplated writing about elements that fit in more with formal concepts of curriculum. However since the assignment is focused on a programme I am involved with, it is therefore contextually shaped. Brookfield (2011) suggests '*a focus that is threaded throughout all radical teaching is the illumination of power and hegemony*' (2011, p.118).

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