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Harnessing the potential of the student voice to enhance curriculum (re)formation

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Introduction to the paper



- This paper reports on a component of a qualitative research project undertaken in a major Australian university
- It investigated the potentiality of harnessing the student voice as a productive provocation for enhanced academic engagement and the improvement of pedagogical practices
- The case study-based research was conducted over three semesters within two significant teaching programs
- Research used the explanatory potential of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) simultaneously as a tool for developing the study and interpreting its outcomes

Ambiguities in curriculum design



- A critical dimension of this research was to specifically seek to cross traditional boundaries in the curriculum formation process between students and academics
- Curriculum has conventionally tended to reflect the orientation of an academic to the field of study, being essentially a manifestation of multiple forms of discipline, research and institutional knowledge.
- Unlike other educational sectors, academic teachers have traditionally acted with relative autonomy, with enacted curriculum often representing a tangible expression of professional identity (Sharpe & Oliver, 2007)

Ambiguities in curriculum design



- As a result, academic conceptions of curriculum have been largely indistinct, ranging from content or process-driven notions to through to more developed pedagogical constructs (Oliver, 2003)
- However, the design of curriculum in higher education is increasingly contested by powerful, often contradictory forces which reflect the dissolving of traditional academic hegemony over knowledge (Barnett, 2000; Walker, 2006)
- Therefore the contemporary relationship between curriculum and higher education teaching is inherently ambiguous and complex in form

Curriculum and student evaluation



- Student evaluation now performs the role as an influential powerful proxy for assuring the quality of curricula across diverse discipline and qualification frameworks.
- Is a critical quality assurance measure, rendering student voice an influential arbiter of the effectiveness of curriculum design and implementation (Nygaard & Belluigi, 2010)
- Given this, it can be asserted that student evaluation increasingly negotiates the relationship between curriculum theory and enacted practice
- The student voice is therefore more critical than ever in shaping understandings of what constitutes effective curriculum practices in university teaching environments.

Research Design



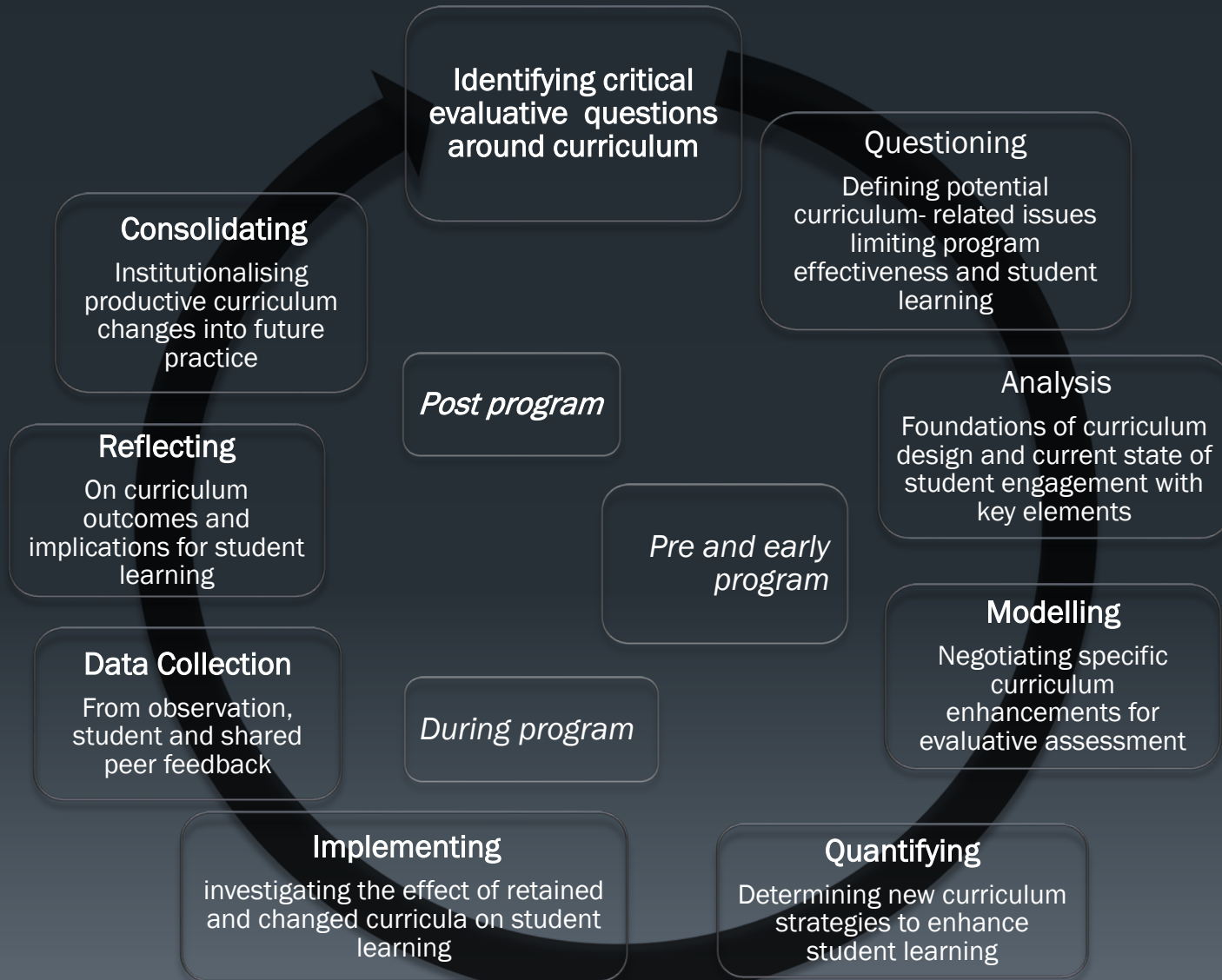
- Research was conducted over a three semesters (broadly an 18-month period) in two distinctly different program settings in a major Australian university
- The first case study site was one small postgraduate program of around 350 part time students. The program was relatively recent in formation and—reflecting contemporary academic employment realities—had a core teaching team of only three full time staff with a network of 20 sessional tutors
- The second longer established program was focussed on the work of a large core subject from a broader professional degree program with 160 full-time students, with and a core full-time teaching team of 18, with an additional 12 part-time tutors

Data collection process and analysis



- The research design was driven by the use of a series of CHAT-informed, action research cycles, centred on collective forms of dialogue amongst academic and support staff
- The cycles were primarily driven by qualitative student feedback that was collected semester-by-semester, based on a series of critical evaluative questions framed by the participants
- Student responses were thematically coded and formed into a research report to participants that provided an empirical foundation for their ongoing collective dialogue around program and/or course improvement

CHAT-informed, action research cycle as applied to curriculum reformation



Data collection process and analysis

- The study drew on the explanatory and analytical potential of a taxonomy developed from the situated research of Oliver (2003), which recognises that academics can simultaneously hold differing understandings of curriculum
- This can range from as simple as a proxy for course content, through a form of instructional planning, as planned process for enactment, as a reflection of the values/politics engendered in discipline teaching (often characterised as the *hidden curriculum*) and/or what is described as the *lived curriculum*—reflexive engagement in practice (Oliver, 2003)
- This allowed the action research to encounter curriculum in its broadest sense and avoid narrowing demarcations that may limit the potential for broad dialogue and action

Key outcomes



- Most significant and sustainable change was demonstrated in regard to enacted curriculum (as opposed to teaching strategies, learning resources or learner support)
- The data suggested this was for a variety of unsurprising reasons—in everyday contexts of academic teaching curriculum issues were often seen as:
 - too difficult or complex to confront
 - too problematic or polemic to disturb
 - too much work to reform (given the consequences for existing pedagogical approaches)

Key outcomes



- In addition, the research affirmed the conclusions reached by Oliver (2003) that curriculum is viewed by academics as largely an ambiguous and multifaceted element of their everyday work
- Yet despite this, curriculum represented a gnawing issue for teaching academics:
 - seemingly unresolvable, but problematic in practice
 - imposed-from-above, yet having to be actively engaged and not sufficiently contemporary, relevant or meaningful in its form (notwithstanding its apparent centrality to teaching and learning design)

Key outcomes



- Most significant implication of the cycle was the elevated use of the student voice and enhanced professional dialogue provided licence for academics to collectively engage with, and debate, curriculum issues
- Significant as curriculum discussions had traditionally been confined to the rigid contexts of formal review processes, which tended to privilege those roles possessed sufficient literacy to traverse the complexities of institutional and local curriculum frameworks
- By introducing the provocations of student perspectives on curriculum, academics (both full and part-time) felt at least some renewed authority to respond on curriculum formation and use

Key outcomes



- At a practical level, the reflective dialogue-driven cycle also encouraged teaching academics to more directly engage with the role and function of curriculum in designing productive learning environments
- By considering student feedback, a range of issues became a matter of critical inquiry in collective forums and in subsequent individual reflection, most notably the:
 - design and sequencing of learning activities
 - framing of student learning experiences
 - alignment of assessment strategies with these activities/experiences
- Another substantial outcome was to force difficult and largely neglected questions of program epistemologies to be confronted

Key outcomes



- The final dimension of the research outcomes that were significant for curriculum reformation was the effect of the action research cycle on encouraging what has been characterised in CHAT theorising as *boundary crossing*
- This is the process of creating new conceptual tools by moving horizontally into unfamiliar domains to better understand the intersections of potentially shared practice (Engestrom, Engestrom, & Karkkainen, 1995)
- The stimulus of student feedback became a useful provocation for heightened attempts to understand the transforming nature of disciplines, emerging technologies that may better afford learning and a more direct engagement with student learning (as opposed to a focus on teaching actions)

Conclusions



- The heightening contest around the design and enactment of curriculum suggests the need for new analytical tools to more effectively understand the transforming contexts of learning, learner expectations, occupational demands and social expectations of higher education
- Significant, academically-led reform to the everyday practices of curriculum construction, integration and re-evaluation can be usefully generated through the provocation of the student voice in prompting deeper forms of academic dialogue

Conclusions



- Need to generate more dynamic and reflexive methods of situated curriculum construction to sustain the relevance of university-based learning to transforming disciplines, practice and work
- It would seem that deepening the level curriculum-focussed feedback—which renders the student voice as an authentic provocation for professional dialogue—may represent a viable means of recasting curriculum (re)formation as a legitimately shared imperative between teachers and students