

Curriculum Transformation in Higher Education: A Paradigm Shift towards Transformative Learning

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Introduction and Background

- The purpose of this paper is to share experiences in relation to curriculum design and development as an Academic Development (AD) practitioner
- I seek to argue that if real transformation is to be achieved, institutions of higher learning need to re-examine their programme objectives, purpose, philosophies and the curricula in general to suit the profile of its learners and the context for which knowledge is designed for. There is a need for a paradigm shift from instrumental learning towards a learning paradigm, towards development of skills, capabilities and competencies and application of such knowledge and skills.
- Curriculum responsiveness, relevance and coherence are constantly debated concepts in Higher Education (HE) spaces (Howard, 2007, Ogude, Nel & Oosthuizen, n.d).
- These debates are informed by HE reforms, diverse needs of our society and economy, global trends, historic discourses and the knowledge economy. They influence University curriculum and forces institutions of Higher learning to deconstruct, re-construct and re-evaluate knowledge taught in these spaces.
- A need for curriculum transformation is further influenced by other factors as the diverse student profile, marketization, funding, accountability and contextual factors in which these institutions operate (Fotheringham, Strickland & Aitchison, 2012; O' Neill, 2015).



Introduction and background cont....

A curriculum taught in HE institutions inform the attributes of graduates it seeks to produce, their level of participation in the economy and their contribution towards development of own societies.

Parker (2003) believes that transformational curriculum centres on **Meta - cognition and self-direction** which involves dealing with super complex paradigms and value systems while understanding how and why to invest oneself .

Mezirow (2003) views meta-cognitive reasoning as involving insight into source, structure, frame of reference and judgement for relevance, appropriateness and consequences.

Morgan & Houghton (2011) advocate for an inclusive approach to curriculum development, which recognises students' multiple identities that are shaped by their experiences and backgrounds. They argue that curriculum should take into account students' social, cultural and educational background and experiences including any special needs the students may have.

Curriculum in this study refers to the totality of learning experiences. This encompasses a range from narrow interpretations to broad all-encompassing interpretations, which include virtually every aspect of the education system.

Research Questions

The main question therefore, sought to **establish the choices that lecturers make to create epistemological access through programme design and development to achieve transformative learning in a context of a rural University.**

- Lecturers were requested to share their experiences and challenges in relation to curriculum design and development by:
 - Describing the competencies that they seek to develop in their programmes and modules and share strategies they use to achieve such competencies.
- Establish whether the methods and approaches that lecturers use to plan and deliver knowledge in their classrooms lead to transformative learning.
- Whether they think staff development programmes have assisted them in designing and developing their programmes.

Problem statement

- In 2011 the 'national development Plan' of South Africa revealed low participation and high attrition rate in the higher education system (National Planning commission, 2011).
- In 2013 CHEs Vital Stats confirmed that students' completion rates were low (CHE, 2017).
- Many researchers revealed evidence of unsatisfactory participation, low throughput and high dropout rates in the SA higher education system (Bunting, 1994; Cloete et al., 2002; CHE, 2004 and Scott, Yeld & Henry, 2007).
- HE transformation in SA has focused on issues of equity, access and redress of the imbalances of the past. However, Quinn (2012, p. 29) argues that "despite equity of access there is not yet equity of outcomes" and it is clear that many students still do not have "epistemological access" (Scott et al., 2007, Muller, 2014).
- The national students' protests in 2015 – 2016 in South Africa (SA), which included "#Fees must fall; #Afrikaans must fall and #Rhodes must fall", which were then followed by "decolonisation of curriculum" campaigns, were symbolic of a need for a transformation in SA higher education system.



Theoretical Framework

- This study is informed by Jack Mezirow's theory which has been critiqued by a number of authors (Vaughn, 2016), however, it still finds favour and applicability in the context of education transformation in adult learning. Mezirow (1978) conducted a research concerning the processes and changes that 83 women went through when they returned to college. His research made him to believe that these women had undergone "a change in perspective" because of their experiences.
- He describes this 'change in perspective' as being ordered under the ten phases he described. Mezirow (1978, p100) argues that the "perspective transformation is characterised by a structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships".
- He describe two adult meaning making structures as "meaning schema" and "meaning perspective" (Mezirow, 1991a).
- The meaning schema is described as a belief or basic idea about how something ought to work or does work. Transforming a meaning schema could be discovering that not all activities could be performed in the same way as one had originally thought. This involves being aware about rational meanings in different contexts which may be influenced by different forms of interactions or cultures. It can further broaden ones understanding of own culture.

Theoretical Framework

- Meaning perspective is the “structure of assumptions within which ones past experiences assimilates and transforms new experiences” (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 42). These may include personal constructs, ideologies, and habits of expectations including ideas about how one view the world. Transforming meaning perspectives will result in a change in a way of thinking, attitude towards self and others, change in a set of beliefs strongly held by a group as well as a change of opinions and beliefs.
- An individual is seen to be transformed when he becomes aware of holding “a limiting or distorted view”, argues Cranton (n.d).
- Transformation therefore, can be described as one’s ability to critically examine this view (self-reflect), be open to alternatives and consequently change the way one sees things and views the world.
- I decided to conduct a study to determine the extent to which Mezirow’s theoretical perspective could be applicable in transforming learning and teaching through curriculum design and development – by allowing lecturers to reflect on their practice (reflecting on student academic performance using available data as baseline and work with lecturers to determine the kind of intervention required).

Literature Review

Much research on curriculum in HE focussed on methodologies that promote competency-based curricula, self-guidance curriculum and student-centred learning to promote student learning and autonomy with more focus on diversity and inclusivity (Demedts & Van Puyenbroeck, 2016; Yolk and Halter, 2016), against the universal pedagogical approaches that are based on the assumption that they are good for everyone.

Research on epistemological transformation encompasses “how knowledge is conceived, constructed and transmitted ” (Hall, 2006). “*The content of University curricula plays a significant role, not only in influencing the culture of a university, but in influencing social and political perceptions which have the potential to either reinforce or breakdown stereotypes*” (SAHRC, 2017, p. 63)

I argue therefore, that curriculum transformation through programme design and development can break the barrier of exclusion in terms of student social and educational background, class and race.

Methodology

This study is situated on an interpretive paradigm, however the approach was participatory and in a form of an insider research as the researcher is an academic developer. The aim of the research was to foster critical reflection on the practice of academic development (AD). A qualitative critical study was used.

Sampling

- Sixteen lecturers were identified from four, 1st year academic programs.
- The study targeted 1st year and Extended Curricula Programme (ECP) lectures. Programmes were chosen on the basis that they were identified as courses that attract most students and produce most graduates (DHET, 2017).
- Lectures were chosen because of their typicality for teaching in either 1st year and/or ECP.
- Purposeful sampling technique was used as all modules selected were selected on the basis of being a “high risk” or underperforming module. High risk modules are modules that have been performing poorly over the past 3 years.

Data Collection

- Data was collected using documents, observations and focus group interviews to allow for crystallisation. Qualitative researchers tend to collect multiple forms of data (Creswell, 2009). Field notes were gathered through objective observations first as an outsider and later as an insider to critically examine the effectiveness of AD practices.
- We identified modules that were underperforming as reflected in the Integrated Technology System (ITS). We tracked and monitored 31 modules from four programmes (ND: FIS; ND: LGF; ND: Cost and Management Accounting and ND: HRM) over a period of two years.
- Meetings were conducted to update lecturers on the student performance and decide on the forms of intervention.
- Focus group interviews were a major component of the study.

Data Analysis

Analysis involved “continual reflection about the data, asking analytic questions and writing memos throughout the study” (Creswell, 2009, p. 185). This process included:

- Analysis of assessment marks over a period of two years
- Evaluate assessment tasks /questions for alignment with objectives of the course /module and ensuring validity and reliability of assessment
- Conducting learner guide audits to check alignment (alignment of course objectives to programme objectives and relevance of teaching methodologies and lecturer reflections)
- I triangulated with the feedback I received from students from the evaluation of teaching (EoT) to establish accessibility of the course material, lecturer preparedness, communication with students, relevance of content, assessment approaches used as well as the feedback strategies used by lecturers.
- Data collected through audio- recorded interviews and informal sessions was transcribed and analysed through content/thematic analysis

Findings

Interviews conducted prior to data collection reveal that:

- Some academics perceive their courses as too difficult
- Some lecturers blame students (student deficit syndrome) – not having textbooks, poor class attendance, not properly prepared by the schooling system including not properly qualified for the programme enrolled for.
- Noted silences about the curriculum design and development (during the interviews)
- Lack of student voice (Lecturers did not refer to what students are saying about their own learning at all.)

Findings

Results – comparable academic performance of students from baseline data, Year 1 and Year 2

- Academic results in 90 % of the modules involved in the study improved drastically i.e from 40% - 100% (highest) ; 30% - 52% (lowest) etc
- Majority of lecturers whose modules were identified also participated in professional academic development (PAD) programmes. However, some were more involved and showed more interest than others.
- Some of the lecturers started using Learning and Teaching with Technologies (LTwT) and reported improved students interest and class attendance (some confessed to trying them for the first time).
- Some lecturers reported allowing students to record their lessons and some of the class presentations were posted on the LMS for reference later by students;
- Generally, lecturers reported more interaction with students inside and outside the classroom.
- Since we started the project, results improved from 69% (baseline) - 72% to 89%.

Findings

Interviews conducted after data was collected – a reflexive practice

- All participants agreed that alignment in programme goals; module objectives and assessments are a critical element in order to develop a well-rounded student. Some of the participants were involved in the re-curriculation of programmes to be aligned with Higher Education Sub-Framework (HEQSF)

“The current programmes are design in such a way that they expose learners to new knowledge, allowing them to be more equipped to participate in the real world, providing business solutions.....”

“We design learner guides to be tools that enable learners to understand the course objectives and the activities planned to attain that learning with the criteria against which their learning will be assessed, so that learner can achieve some level of autonomy and take control of own learning, that way transforming their attitudes and beliefs about learning.”

“.....however teaching and learning approaches are informed by different factors, such the level of preparedness of students; teaching skill; teacher and learner beliefs; etc. Facilitation of learning and teaching requires a resolute and conscious effort from both learner and teacher, which is a continuous endeavour that can be achieved by adopting a culture of continuous professional development, peer support, and reflexive practicein a learner-conscious environment.”

Findings

The following competencies were identified:

- *Critical thinkers*
- *Ability to understand concepts from multiple angles (perspectives)*
- *Self-awareness*
- *Problem solvers who can adapt in dynamic environments*
- *Students who can use analytic data to make decisions*
- *Develop intermediate level in Ms Office application and other IS related applications*
- *Develop adequate skill to analyse and develop working Database solutions*

Lecturers confessed to having re-worked and aligning their teaching to some theoretical underpinning, having kept a record of their class interactions and doing more research after realising that their modules were being tracked and monitored (***evidence-based teaching***)

“....my teaching focusses more on the enhancement and assessment of students’ current skills to create measurable goals”

“I have developed a portfolio of evidence to keep track of all my class interactions.....”

“ I then realised that I have to do more research..... allows to review and justify my classroom interactions and activities so I can adopt strategies to

Findings

- Lecturers also confessed to using various forms of assessment and different assessment strategies including conducting mock tests prior to main assessments.
- Lecturers were requested to reflect on students comments (**evaluation of teaching by students**), some lecturers confessed to being surprised by what students were saying about them

“...after I heard what students were saying, I started recording myself and discovered that indeed what they were saying was true I am now more conscious about that and I always reflect and try to slow down whenever possible”

“ ... evaluation of teaching is always a valuable source for insight about the impact you make and how best to assist students to succeed.”

“.... in a way I got an understanding of how students are responding to my programme”

Findings

students comments prior to intervention– (comments mostly negative, very few were positive)

- *“For most students its their first time doing this course but its difficult for all of us to adapt in the new course, therefore sometimes we are assisted by the PALLs”*
- *“THE LECTURE DOES NOT COMPLY WITH THE EXTEND PROGRAMME STUDENTS...THE WAY SHE TEACHES IS VERY DIFFICULT FOR EXTENDED PROGRAMME STUDENTS”.*
- *“i think the instructor must change because she is moody towards us, it is very hard to even ask a question. she says we giving her hard time”*
- *“Doesn't give us time to try and assess our challenges, always refers us to go and find help from the library even though most of us do not have a background”*

Discussion

Transforming meaning perspective - Some lecturers claim that improvement in their modules was also caused by the awareness after realising that their modules were performing badly. Some argue that they decided to change their teaching methodologies, interaction with students, assessment strategies and they decided to give students a voice, to hear their input and what they had to say (**Reflective practice**)

Generally, all participants admitted that PAD programmes helped them in the design and development of learning material (improved alignment with objectives and assessment was also observed).

“.....provided exposure to a number of material development strategies”

“.....we have been equipped with the skill to design and develop outcomes- based programmes”

Lecturers argue that their classroom interactions include more real life examples from students' immediate environment and they always try to expand from that knowledge and it makes students question and participate in their classrooms.

They claim to be doing more research in their practice than before.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The nexus between discipline specialist and being a teacher came out strongly during discussions as lecturers feel that they are not properly prepared to deal with curriculum issues. Lecturers mostly rely on intuition to be able to design and develop curriculum and there are no clear guidelines to indicate what works or does not work. Findings reveal that a competence based curricula can promote learning and lead to transformation in ones' 'meaning perspective'. This kind of 'change in perspective' can further be enhanced through reflective practice, evidence-based teaching, academic development and evaluation of teaching to establish student feedback.

Participants agreed that it is important to consider contextual factors and students background when designing learning content and argued that there is a need for a paradigm shift from focussing on what and the how to the development of knowledge, skills and competencies that can empower students to be self-dependent and confident about the knowledge and skills acquired. Lecturers agree that transformation in HE should privilege and promote students participation and lead to emancipation socially and politically. However, there was no agreement as to whose world views is HE promoting nor whether HE curriculum can lead to a completely transformed individual. There is a need to develop learners who are self-directed with an entrepreneurial mind. Further study may focus on the impact of hidden curriculum on student learning.

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