

Curriculum, twenty-first century discourse and teacher education: Position paper

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The purpose of this paper is to outline the understandings I bring to the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) project: Shifting the conceptualisation of knowledge and learning in the integration of the new NZ curriculum in initial and continuing teacher education. At this point, my contribution is focused on critical engagement with curriculum and with the notion twenty-first century thinking. The ideas articulated here represents some of my initial thoughts, the outlining of theoretical approaches that have influenced my thinking and raising of issues of interest and concern to me in relation to the project, understanding that these will change and develop as the project progresses. The ideas put forward are offered as a discussion piece – partial and contestable – to be put alongside others' ideas that may support or challenge the thinking herein.

Positioning self

Given my concern with context and the social construction of knowledge and understanding, which are elaborated on below, it is important that I position my self within the discussion and make clear the influences and experiences that underpin my 'take' on the issues. I am a pakeha female, New Zealand born, who has worked for the last 12 years as an academic and teacher education at Christchurch College of Education and the University of Canterbury College of Education. This work has primarily been in the secondary Graduate Diploma of Teaching and Learning, the one-year postgraduate initial teacher education (ITE) course for secondary teachers. A significant portion, but not all, of my tertiary teaching has been in curriculum courses, otherwise know as methods courses. Prior to that I was a secondary teacher, with experience teaching in three different schools (two co-educational, one single-sex girls', all relatively large (800 students plus)) and as a head of social sciences departments in two of those schools. I was also involved in the early phases of the curriculum review for social sciences as a member of a social sciences advisory group.

In becoming a teacher educator, I was compelled to think more deeply about curriculum and about teaching and learning than I had as a classroom teacher in order to teach others in professional studies and methods courses and, latterly, in Masters courses on curriculum leadership and research methods. As a classroom teacher in the 1980s and 1990s I had acted and reacted largely instinctively to issues and situations encountered, drawing on my own teacher education but also on my expanding professional experience. An instinctive response was not sufficient, however, when I needed to be able to explain the theoretical foundations of different classroom practices and approaches. This led to my questioning the nature of curriculum and a deeper awareness of how teachers, including myself, may act counter to their best intentions to maintain social structures and strictures in the ways that they shape the curriculum and enact it in practice. My personal experience is of a tension between an academic responsibility to challenge ideas and a professional responsibility to prepare beginning teachers for the realities, rigours and pressures of life in the classroom and school settings.

More recently, I have been challenged by ideas relating to teaching and learning in the twenty-first century and epistemological shifts that this may entail. This is the result of exposure to and initial forays in the emerging literature and discussions with colleagues involved in the TE21 initiative. In particular, I am drawn to the ideas of knowledge as performativity (Gilbert, 2005), something that is used rather than something that is held, and of the pedagogical implications of this idea for teachers and learners. It implies, for instance

that learning needs to be grounded in relevant, meaningful or authentic experiences – meaningful for students, rather than interesting to teachers. Also, that learning needs to be focused on issues or problems. This doesn't mean that there isn't a place for acquiring information and learning in subjects or disciplines, but that this learning needs to be oriented to real world situations or contexts and applied to a greater extent and in different ways than may have been done in the past. Subject knowledge is still valued, but for what it can do rather than for what it is. Also implied in the notion of knowledge as a verb is critical thinking and critical engagement. If students are to apply knowledge in ways that do not merely reinforce prejudices and substantiate inequities, they need to be able to critically think through problems, issues and situations and be cognisant of issues of context (as do their teachers). For teachers, reconceptualizing knowledge means thinking differently about how learning experiences are constructed. It implies that teachers will know individual students, rather than assume the 'average' student, so that their interests and needs can be more closely attended to. Also, that planning is flexible, to allow shifts and changes in the focus and nature of learning tasks in response to students' emerging needs and developing interests. These thoughts are influenced by a transformative model of education for change (Sterling, 2001) and education designed at meeting the needs of twenty-first century learners (Andreotti & Souza, 2008; Andreotti & Major, 2008).

My ideas and understanding of what it means to be a teacher, and a teacher educator, are shifting as I grapple with ideas that underpin the TLRI project and what they mean in terms of my identity and different subjectivities. As my ideas shift I am making changes in my practice, albeit small and incremental, to incorporate these new understandings. At the same time I am aware of the tensions and inconsistencies that exist between the 'talking' and the 'doing' in my practice – as yet unresolved. There is an unsettling motion, a shifting of the ground, and things that once seemed firm are now uncertain as I negotiate my academic and professional roles.

In respect of my personal research interests, I have been and continue to be interested in curriculum issues, gender relations, qualitative and classroom-based research, case study and experiential methodologies. Added to these is theoretical explorations relating to knowledge, teaching and learning. My interests are expanding through involvement in the TLRI project, within which I am positioned as a researcher and a learner.

Curriculum

In thinking about and conceptualising curriculum I draw on some 'oldies but goodies' in curriculum theory; 'old' in that some of the ideas were published a while ago, 'good' in that they are ideas that they underpin and sustain much contemporary, critical analysis and writing around curriculum.

Curriculum theory reminds us that curriculum takes different forms and is conceptualised in different ways. There is the *official* curriculum, which outlines policy and is located in officially sanctioned curriculum documents. There is the *enacted* curriculum, otherwise known as the curriculum in practice. This is the curriculum that is operationalized and constructed by teachers and experienced by students. It is located in schools and classrooms (Bruner, 1996; A. Hargreaves, 1994; McGee & Fraser, 2001). Then there is the *hidden* curriculum, that which is the unintended learning of students who are engaging with the curriculum in practice. It exists in the daily interactions and patterns of school and classroom life (Apple, 1999; McGee & Fraser, 2001). There is also the *de facto* curriculum, which is a default or alternative curriculum that may be adopted in the absence or instead of an official curriculum.

A social constructionist view of curriculum recognises and highlights the ideological underpinnings of curriculum. Curriculum is not politically neutral and schools are not ideologically innocent (Giroux, 1997). Cornbleth (1990) writes of curriculum as “contextualised social process” (p.25) that encompasses both content and classroom practice. It is that which actually occurs in the classroom. However, to understand curriculum changes it is important to understand the structural and socio-cultural context within which curriculum is shaped. Goodson (1988) describes the process of curriculum creation as the collision of current practice and the historical inheritance of official curriculum guidelines and previous practice. To this collision might be added the actions of practitioners seeking to change, reform or transform the status quo through new and different constructions and interpretations of curriculum in practice.

Drawing on these curriculum concepts, the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) can be seen as a policy document. It is a set of guidelines that establish the aspirations of the writers and the government of the day for the shape and focus of the curriculum in New Zealand schools. It is the result of a particular development and writing process and represents conflicting and contested ideas about what should be included or excluded and tensions between aspirations for the future and the legacy of the past. This is perhaps most evident in the disjunct between the ‘front end’ and the ‘back end’ of the curriculum.

The front end of the NZC is forward looking. It outlines a set of unifying principles, values and key competencies that are intended to infuse all learning areas and the teaching and learning that takes place in different subjects in schools. It is infused with a twenty-first century discourse that emphasises principles of inclusion, social tolerance, recognition and respect for difference, calls for the exploration of issues relating to sustainability, citizenship, enterprise and globalisation, amongst others, and for the development of critical awareness. In relation to critical awareness, for example, the key competency relating to thinking defines thinking as “using creative, critical, and metacognitive processes to make sense of information, experiences, and ideas” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 12), abilities that are linked with knowledge creation, reflection on learning and experiences, and capacity and willingness to ask questions and challenge assumptions and perceptions. The key competency about using language, symbols and texts goes beyond code recognition and emphasises the importance of students being about to “recognise how choices of language, symbol, or text affect people’s understanding and the ways in which they respond to communications” (p.12). The intention is that students go beyond knowing to understanding how we know and to appreciate that there are multiple ways of knowing. It signals a move away from absolute understanding and the essentialism of single positions to a more fluid and relational conceptualisation of knowledge. This movement signifies an ontological and epistemological shift.

In contrast, the back end of the curriculum is a modification of the status quo of the previous 14 years, defining as it does the essential learning areas through the construction of essence statements, strands and achievement objectives. These statements define the learning in particular subjects. Each learning area is provided with a revised set of achievement objectives, which broadly define understanding and learning in a curriculum area and are couched in terms that allow student performance to be assessed against the objectives. The discourse is positivist. Having said this, aims expressed in the essence statements for particular learning areas and specific achievement objectives can and do invite a critical reading of issues and an appreciation of different perspectives, positions and complexity in issues.

Calls for a paradigm shift and radical change in the education systems to redefine what it means to achieve (Gilbert, 2008), to create a transformative rather than transmissive type of

education (Sterling, 2001), to teach for understanding and World 3 thinking rather than for knowing (Hook, 2006), and to equip twenty-first century learners to participate in a knowledge society as producers rather than consumers of knowledge (Gilbert, 2005, 2007), and optimism that the new NZC will produce a fundamental shift in education in New Zealand, need to be tempered with an appreciation of the tensions inherent in the NZC and the broader framework of official and de facto curricula. For example, the changes in curriculum and assessment structures of the 1990s achieved the partial decoupling of the senior secondary curriculum and assessment qualifications structures and greater capacity for 'bottom up' curriculum development as schools developed new pathways for students (Bolstad, 2006). With the structural separation of curriculum and assessment structures went a tendency for assessment material to be seen as not part of the curriculum. I would argue that casting out the assessment components as somehow 'not curriculum' is to fall into a trap, the trap being a failure to appreciate the complexity of curriculum and the role of de facto curriculum in the construction of the curriculum in practice.

Post-structuralism, subjectivity and discourses

Post-structuralism as a philosophical or theoretical base is a way conceptualising the relationship between language, social institutions and individual consciousness that focuses on the exercise of power and on possibilities for change (Weedon, 1997). The concepts of 'subjectivity' and 'discourse' are important in post-structuralist thinking.

'Subjectivity' is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world... poststructuralism proposes a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak. (Weedon, 1997, p. 32)

'Discourse', defined in the Foucauldian sense, is sets of concepts, beliefs and practices that define and influence thinking on an issue. They are determined historically and are characterised in terms of what it is possible to think and say and the sorts of questions that can be asked (McLaren, 2003; Quicke, 1998; Reed, 1999). At any one time there will be coexisting, multiple and overlapping discourses operating in different discursive fields. Discursive fields are arenas of interest that comprise competing ways of giving meaning to the world and organising social institutions and processes. Education, law and health are examples of discursive fields. Within discursive fields, not all discourses will carry the same weight. Some will account for and support the status quo, while others will challenge existing practices and are likely to be marginalised by the hegemonic system of meaning because of the challenges they provide to that system (Weedon, 1997).

In the context of the TLRI project, each participant – researcher, practitioner, school-based project participant – can be seen to have a unique subjectivity. This is defined in his/her multiple identities and different roles and responsibilities as teacher, learner and adherent to particular disciplinary traditions. Also, different curriculum areas can be seen to have a subjectivity that is defined in the disciplinary structures and ideas about what is accepted practices and ways of teaching and learning in that discipline, curriculum and/or knowledge area. Thinking about the new New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) that is the focus of the TLRI project, the official curriculum of the national curriculum document can be seen to reflect different discourses. There are sustainability, equity, twenty-first and twentieth century discourses, amongst others. Each is defined in a set of concepts, beliefs and values that are enshrined in the language used. These are potentially complementary and conflicting. Discourses, though, are not confined to the written word but are worked out and contributed to in practice, in the actions that reflect different values and ideas.

Curriculum discourses, then, are and will continue to be worked out in the curriculum in practice in schools, in the actions of administrators, teachers and students that sustain or challenge particular ideas and schooling practices.

Critical perspective

Post-structuralist theory gives rise to a critical approach to the exploration of curriculum issues. Broadly speaking, a critical approach invites questions about power and whose interests are being served. It places the focus of attention on issues of social justice, problematises the institutions of society and education, and highlights the evolving, complex and contradictory nature of society and individuals (Marshall, 1997; Moore, 2004). Discussions take place about the intent of individuals and purpose of institutions, what and how discourses are being constructed and played out, the framing of an issue or problem, and tensions between structure and personal agency. Challenges are provided to essentialist thinking that highlight the complexity of situations and challenge assumptions that lead to essentialist notions, such as ideas that girls and boys or members of particular ethnic groups are better at different things by virtue of being female, male or born to particular parents. This is not to deny the potency of social structures and socialisation processes or the importance of gender or cultural identity, but to problematise notions of gender and identity. Within this conceptual framework, context is important and something to be considered and explored rather than ruled out as an irrelevancy in the search for universal truths.

In respect of the TLRI project, a critical approach invites questions about the nature and purpose of curriculum, the forces behind change and the tensions inherent in the change. Attention is drawn to grand narratives (or hegemonic discourses), such as a progress narrative for curriculum development and assumptions that the new curriculum is *necessarily* an advance on the previous and a natural step in a path to progress. A critical perspective also invites questions about the nature of knowledge and constructs such as 'twentieth century thinking' and 'twenty-first century thinking.' Is twenty-first century thinking *necessarily* an advance on twentieth century thinking? What assumptions are made about who might be labelled as particular types of thinkers and how appropriate are these? It suggests a need to be careful about assumptions relating to groups who might be involved in the TLRI research projects based on factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, location (eg. rural or urban) or academic background.

Phenomenological and social constructionist foundations

Underpinning post-structural and critical theories and approaches are the broad philosophical traditions of phenomenology and social constructionism.

Phenomenology is the "study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a world view" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 112). The phenomenological tradition derives from the work of Husserl and is epistemologically a reality-constituting interpretive practice. As an ideology it gives priority to lived experience over theoretical knowledge. As a methodology, it is the study of people's experiences of social phenomena, such as work, family, class, friendship, and involves the production of in-depth descriptions of those experiences (Creswell, 1998; Jackson, 1996). Phenomenology challenges the privileging of scientists' knowledge over the knowledge of ordinary people. There are a variety of forms of phenomenology, but all forms share a scepticism of that which appears to be given, normal or natural (Cohen & Omery, 1994; Creswell, 1998; Jackson, 1996; Ray 1994). The idea that there is an external and objective reality is

rejected. Phenomenological ideology underpins social constructionist research perspectives (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998).

Attributed to the work of Vygotsky, social constructionism describes a theoretical orientation and interest in perceiving how meaning or understanding is developed through people's experience in social contexts. These understandings may be personally distinct and/or represent shared constructs. The terms social *constructionism* and social *constructivism* tend to be used interchangeably in literature, however I prefer to use the term social constructionism in preference to constructivism, to refer to the sociological theory and avoid confusion with references to perceptual or cognitive theory relating to how people learn, which might be called psychological constructivism (Burr, 1995; Phillips, 2000).

Both philosophies propose that knowledge and understanding are socially constructed and therefore situated in time, place, social setting and interactions. In research based on social constructionist and phenomenological philosophies, it is important to recognise and articulate the process of meaning construction, for the participants in respect of the phenomenon is the focus of inquiry, and between the participants and the researcher in the construction of meaning and interpretation of data. The voices of the participants are important and need to be maintained in the production of the research product.

Methodological matters

Methodologically, the TLRI project as operate at two levels, a) the level of the individual projects, each of which will entail the development of a methodology appropriate for the initiative and purpose of the project, and b) the meta-level of the analysis of the multiple projects/case studies and their capacity to create epistemological shifts in thinking in respect of the New Zealand Curriculum and initial and continuing teacher education. Different methodological factors and debates will come into play at each level. However, there are some common concerns and interests.

Central to the methodological concerns is the question of how epistemological shifts can be identified. What constitutes an epistemological shift (relating to the nature and grounds of knowledge), as opposed to say, a pedagogical shift? How can the researcher or practitioner know that an epistemological shift has taken place? What can he or she look for that will signal a shift in knowledge and understanding? Implied in the project is some sort of before and after or before-during-after comparison and analysis. Also implied is an attempt to 'get into the heads' of the participants, to try and understand their thinking and the conceptual bases from which they operate, as well as efforts to observe how the NZC is interpreted and implemented in practice. All this assumes some sort of interpretive or reality-constituting methodology in the design of the specific research initiatives and of the project as a whole. A variety of methods or combinations of methods might be appropriate for gathering data, including semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, reflective journals, classroom observations, video stimulated recall, concept maps and questionnaires, depending on the context and focus of the individual initiatives or constituent projects. The research questions from the TLRI proposal will necessarily guide the research design and provide a focus of data analysis, for pragmatic reasons given that these are the basis on which approval and funding for the proposal was granted. The analysis needs to identify shifts in conceptualisations and describe how the NZC is interpreted and implemented in practice by the participants.

Discussion

So, what are some of the implications of engaging critically with the curriculum and exploring shifting conceptualisations of knowledge for teacher education? The following are some initial discussion points. They are tentative, partially formed and represent my own personal reflection on questions and dilemmas confronting teacher educators at this time of curriculum change and as we embark on the TLRI project.

An epistemological shift towards a transformative twenty-first century model of education requires that teacher educators, in ITE and continuing education, work with beginning and experienced teachers to understand what this means. It implies an appreciation of the characteristics of a transformative model and the pedagogical shifts that this might entail. There needs to be a place and time for this to be explored and discussed, both in its theoretical and practical manifestations. Given the situated nature of learning and the importance of subject, pedagogical and curricular knowledge for teacher development (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007; Shulman, 1986), it would seem to be appropriate to address this within curriculum contexts where connections between educational theory, content knowledge and pedagogical practice can be made. How, though, to achieve this? For example, in the context of a secondary ITE curriculum course, how can a balance and synergy be achieved between theoretical explorations and practical skills development in lesson and unit planning, learning activity development, National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) assessment task design and implementation? How can these aspects of teacher education be blended so as not to create a theory-practice divide, to enhance beginning teachers understandings of the nature and purpose of the education they are delivering and to make sure they have the practical skills that enable them to perform and thrive in the classroom, for their own and their students benefit?

One of the characteristics of a transformative model is that education is responsive and dynamic. This means that teachers need to have knowledge of learners and the pedagogical content knowledge to respond to diverse learners needs. Various approaches are promoted as potential means of achieving more responsive teaching in schools – for example, mechanisms in social sciences that make connections to students' lives, align experiences to important outcomes, build learning communities and create experiences that interest and engage students (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008); place-based and authentic education (Penetito, 2004); and the Te Kotahitanga programme with its emphasis on cultural relationships, student-teacher relationships and co-construction of learning (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007). The potential benefits in terms of school students' engagement and achievement are self-evident.

However, if we are expecting future teachers to be responsive to learners' needs, shouldn't tertiary teacher education courses do the same? What does being responsive to students' needs mean and look like in the teacher education context? The Teacher Professional Learning and Development synthesis of best evidence (Timperley et al, 2007) calls for teachers to engage with new knowledge that involves theoretical understandings and implications for practice and the integration of new learning into alternative forms of practice. This might mean engaging in professional learning activities that create dissonance and problematise existing practise. What, though, if the needs articulated by beginning or continuing teachers are contrary to those perceived by their teacher educators or inconsistent with the intent of the curriculum? This is the student-driven vs. student-focused debate in the context of teacher professional education.

The literature around twenty-first century education suggests that the exploration of different ways of knowing and different subject narratives or subjectivities is important for the preparation of beginning teachers. Teachers will need skills of critical inquiry and critical literacy if they are to be able to interrogate and challenge mainstream knowledge and

understanding, address inequalities and recuperate the perspectives of marginalised groups and include them in the curriculum (Andreotti & de Souza, 2008). Different disciplines embody different perspectives and ways of coming to understand that derive from their disciplinary perspectives – there are, for example, anthropological, philosophical, sociological, psychological and historical and scientific forms of inquiry (Shulman, 1981). Within different disciplines there are intellectual traditions that interrogate and challenge conventional or dominant discourses – take for example indigenous perspectives in history, feminist geography and Marxist economics. There are new and emerging traditions as well as long standing approaches within discipline realms. Depending on their personal academic and subject backgrounds, individual beginning teachers will have been exposed to ideas about knowledge and understanding to greater or lesser extents. Likewise, teacher educators will have been exposed to different ideas at different times and will have greater or lesser familiarity with ‘new’ thinking. The challenge for teacher educators is to see and present subject content and knowledge as something contestable and to engage themselves and their students critically with the curriculum, to see the curriculum as something to be negotiated as opposed to something to be delivered. This is critical awareness both within the curriculum and of the curriculum.

The broadening of the NZC to include principles, values and key competencies as foundations in all learning areas contrasts with the specificity that is described in the de facto curriculum of achievement standards and national examinations in the secondary sector. Herein lie potential tensions. The questions and challenges for teacher educators relate to whether and how the principles, values and key competencies can be blended with the specific requirements of the assessment standards. This challenge is perhaps most acute for teacher educators and teachers involved with senior secondary subjects, but also present for those engaged with the younger years if and where the role of schooling at these years is seen to be preparation for the senior years and the rigours of NCEA.

These are ‘big picture’ issues and speculative questions. The TLRI project provides an opportunity for a more focused exploration of particular issues and questions that derive from critical engagement with the NZC and with conceptualisations of knowledge and learning, through specific, situated case studies.

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