OEPS | Opening Educational Practices in Scotland

Thought Piece: Students Participation, Openness and the Curriculum

Ronald Macintyre, July 2016

Introduction

This short paper concerns the idea of students as creators of content. In part this is inspired by people, encountered through the OEPS project, who have raised questions and concerns about the role of digitisation and openness in creating opportunities for learners to engage in curriculum production. In part it relates to my interest in participatory methods and design thinking (Macintyre 2014; Macintyre 2016). Sitting behind the paper is the sense we should be in a place where these opportunities are being realised, but they are not. For example, why, despite the effort of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to bring in student voices and ideas of co-creation into HE, has little progress been made? QAA lead Bovill (2013) notes that, even in the most participatory contexts, staff focus on the process of developing and designing content (the service), never on the choice of content, or how value is created. This frames the issue in relation to what we ask learners to do and where we see them in the process. I have been thinking about Bovill's conclusion and want to share some of my thoughts about why the affordances of free open online are not opening up curriculum.

Are Students Customers?

Openness as a way to enable student co-production does not arrive into an empty landscape as a fully formed solution. It enters a complex and changing set of student/university relations, which are increasingly marketised under New Public Management (NPM), in which approaches from the public sector are applied to the public sphere. Increasingly we treat learners as customers to whom we offer products and services (Carey 2013). Even though it is not clear whether the principles of consumer behaviour derived from the private sector, or even the broader public sector, apply to learners, attempts to introduce student voices into the curriculum have tended to focus on quality assurance practices (Brooman *et.al* 2014), and focus on "the service". However, research into student consumption within HE has found that while learners sometimes act like customers, and do consume, not all interactions are customer related, even where they sometimes result in customer like reactions (Woodall *et.al* 2012).

Nevertheless, NPM and treating learners as customers is being applied to HE. Most commonly it creates metrics as proxies, which can be measured and used to assess performance and mimic competition (Tahar and Boutellier 2013). Quality is one of the metrics. Applications of Service Design Logic (SDL), filtered through NPM approaches, tend to see quality and student value as a cost benefit analysis of the learner relationship. However, research into educator's attitudes to quality found they see quality as about improvement, enhancement, and transformation (Kleijnen *et.al* 2013). When quality is expressed as a concern for compliance with external standards it provokes negative reactions from teaching staff. But it is not just teaching staff who are wary of considering learners as customers; learners themselves view value as something beyond service quality, including; the net value of education, the nature of the personal investment, and social outcomes (Woodall *et.al* 2012).

When people talk (as I do) about openness as a way to encourage and enable student co-creation of curriculum, messages around participation may be occluded by learners and educators' feelings about NPM and ideas of value(s) in education. Thus tainting participation as merely another application of "service design". Education is not alone in not understanding "service". A systemic review into the ways SDL inspired approaches to co-creation have been applied found that the business literature is dominated by the role of technologies in enhancing customer participation; the marketing literature is concerned with how well customers are considered and whether expectations are met. These discourses rarely problematise the assumptions about the nature of interactions, or how value is created (Galvagno and Dalli 2014). However, educational practice is about practical problems, and this is a problem we ought to be concerned to solve.

It is not us it's them

This seems to suggest the problem is "the management" and if only student as co-creators of value and curriculum had not been tainted with meaningless metrics on quality we would live in a "better world". Faced with a dissonance between personal values and organisational ones, people resist, carving out particular niches within teaching practice. But more commonly they assimilate the values, or meet expectations while retaining the sense this is not "good teaching" (Skelton 2012). However, while as an educator myself I find it a compelling narrative, I am not sure it is correct. Educators tend to see themselves as the arbiters of quality and value in education (Skelton 2012). Indeed organisational narratives around quality, whether they focus on intrinsic aspects around reputation, or extrinsic ones around good teaching are part of the stories institutions tell themselves about themselves. Holding true to those ideas of value are a marker of belonging (Kleijnen *et.al* 2013) This suggests that barriers to students becoming co-producers do not simply relate to curriculum as a participatory process being tainted by the misapplication of SDL filtered through NPM, but may also relate to academics own issues over authority of who creates value, organisational culture and belonging. In research I have done in schools using participatory methods with learners, where curriculum emerges from the design process, it did not take long for teaching staff to feel uncomfortable with "not being the expert" and wanting to stop the process (Macintyre 2014). Even in participatory methods the "who knows" is contentious. Designers tend to think of themselves as the experts (Lehrer *et.al* 2012), and this perception can be difficult to shake. Recently in my own work I have come dangerously close to admitting ego around designerly ways of knowing have got in the way of participation (Macintyre 2016).

Towards Participation

Here I am suggesting that cultural factors, understandings of what is good teaching, and resistance to NPM are key to opening up the curriculum. Certainly organisational politics, reactions to "tick box" exercises and educators' values are important. The narrative seems to be pushing us towards a "happy conclusion" where we break these down and create a participatory curriculum. However, where academics work with students and interact with lay discourses we can see tensions. For example, Pain et.al (2013) explored the idea of blurring the sites of knowledge production using Participatory Action Research (PAR), in particular having undergraduates work with community groups to deal with real world problems. She found that while students became immersed in the context and it allowed curriculum to emerge from the process, there were issues around power and sustaining participation. Encouraging lay discourses within the development of academic knowledge means acknowledging people as experts in their own lives, as experts through experience. Fenge et.al (2011), in their work on sexuality and ageing, found working with people outside the academy has the potential to re-define and modify the field, but comes with its own risks for the participants (having their voices ignored or distorted) and for individuals own academic reputations. It seems

participation carries risks and the potential to do harm. In particular I have noted myself where PAR was used in development studies it often raised individual and community expectations only to abandon them and head back to the academy. Thus, while there is the potential to do the right thing, even with the best intentions, there is a power imbalance. Academics still hold the position of power and this will probably remain the case until we shift from a sense of academic as expert and/or mediator of knowledge to a sense of academics as facilitators. It also suggests if we are to encourage participation then it ought to be meaningful and real, otherwise we are abusing our privilege as enablers.

What now

So where does this leave students in the curriculum and the promise of open online? Well it certainly suggests that treating student co production/creation as a technical problem or using a series of technical solutions will not address issues around the learner's role in the curriculum. It suggests the issues are more deeply seated, relating to student co-producer narratives tainted by association with NPM and treating education as simply goods or services. A question of underlying values at the level of individual educators and also organisational culture. It suggests even where participatory methods are employed they come with risks that need to be surfaced and addressed rather than remaining hidden. We have not even touched on questions around whether educators and learners are equipped to take advantage of the affordances of open and digital media. The chimera of the educational prosumer makes assumptions about digital literacy that do not hold and would need to be developed.

I dislike reviews like the one I have just written which describe the problem but do not attend to the basics of educational practice; a question about what to do, of asking the right questions, and in turn how doing changes what we do in the future (Kemmis 2010)? What does this mean for us open education practitioners? I do not know – yet. In my defence, I have suggested areas worthy of practical concern. OEP in HE is not somehow separate from the approaches and values of academics or organisations, and I have argued elsewhere we make openness in our own image (Macintyre 2013). If OEP is part of the way HE providers reach out and learners voices reach in, then we need to attend to the issues within the formal curriculum as a way to understand what it might look like, and what plans might go awry. It is my view that inquiry, problem and design based approaches that treat curriculum as an emergent process are part of *a* solution.

Going back to Bovill (2013) and the QAA, it suggests it is less about designing mechanisms to make students voices heard, which as Carey (2013) notes tends towards tokenism and focuses on narrow issues around customer value, and more about attending to and understanding underlying pedagogic models. Herein lies the nub, learning is social and situated, the experience mutually constituted, learners create and accrue the value of education. Curriculum is already being co-created right in front of us; whether and how we choose to see it is probably "the right question" to ask. This would seem to be a useful lesson for OEP as it looks to employ the affordances and opportunities offered by digitisation and open licences to open up curriculum.

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