

Autonomy and consensus-seeking in course planning and approval in higher education [Abstract only]

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Autonomy and consensus-seeking in course planning and approval in higher education

This paper reports a doctoral study of the processes involved in course development and approval in higher education (HE). It examines curriculum development as the activities and processes by which courses are designed, reviewed and updated on an ongoing basis, within institutional and national requirements in the United Kingdom (UK). One subset of this involves the institutional processes that take place when new courses are 'approved' and existing courses are granted 'licence' to continue. Drawing on social realism this study applies Bernstein's pedagogic device to examine curriculum development knowledge and differentiates this analysis using Maton's Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), and its autonomy dimension, to examine who decides what (positional autonomy) and according to whose principles (relational autonomy) in course design and approval. Panels, committees and boards that have the authority to approve documents, such as course specifications, are seen to act as interpretive communities, activated through social processes, in which the goal is collective design. This operates as a form of consensus in which the approval event is formalised, made accessible by means of a social realist analysis, in which consensus is a process rather than an outcome. A socially real view of consensus as it operates in course approval, therefore, identifies a form of social integration, in which positions taken relative to others in the field, and the principles by which this occurs, is governed by the degree to which curriculum expertise, as the basis of curricular authority can be contested – in other words its autonomy. This moves beyond simplistic notions of collegiality, and is made accessible by LCT in which I identify a particular kind of epistemic insight (doctrinal) to be operating in the legitimation of course content and structure that reflects a dominant form of curricular coherence that is in essence evaluative. The findings throw light on curriculum development knowledge itself, and what constitutes legitimate 'know-how' as well as 'know-what' in designing the curriculum in these contexts. It partly explains why the texts that teachers create for the institutional approval process are poor representations of their pedagogic intentions. Furthermore, these intentions are seen to be vulnerable to the external influences on the curriculum, such as employability, and the underlying organising principles that operate in the approval process. Importantly, this analysis makes visible an alternative (situational) insight that may be better able to realise new forms of the curriculum.

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New Zealand's Tertiary Education Strategy and an alternative ecological framework for higher education in New Zealand

New Zealand's Tertiary Education Strategy 2014-2019 has six strategic priorities. These priorities reflect the economic growth agenda of the current government. There are no references to sustainability or climate change in this document and very little to acknowledge that we are now living in a global environmental crisis.