

Co-Creation of the Curriculum and Social Justice: Changing the Nature of Student-Teacher Relationships in Higher Education

Tanya Lubicz-Nawrocka

Moray House Graduate School of Education, University of Edinburgh, s1475432@sms.ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Co-creation of the curriculum is an innovative process in which students and staff members become partners who each have a voice and a stake in curriculum development. Although few academics and students currently participate in co-creation of the curriculum in practice, I argue that co-creation of the curriculum has become a popular idea within the higher education community because it represents the theory and ideals of social justice. Co-creation of the curriculum promotes an open dialogue about meaningful best practices in learning and teaching whilst redistributing power in the classroom and giving students more opportunities as well as added responsibilities. Students and staff members participating in co-creation of the curriculum can and should contribute different things to a partnership since their roles, expertise, responsibilities, and status are necessarily different. However, a partnership shows a commitment to social justice when it promotes honest discussions that develop engagement and trust, and when students and staff members share a more equal balance of power and learn from each other's rich experiences and perspectives.

Increasing tuition fees for Rest of UK (RUK) and international students have emphasised the market purpose of Scottish higher education, including instrumental and economic benefits, which have overshadowed more nebulous, intrinsic purposes of higher education. Traditional methods of teaching emphasising lecturing and examining focus on efficiency of teaching, transmitting knowledge, and maintaining academic power. I argue that these teaching methods can and often do preserve inequalities of power in the classroom, which does not fulfil a social justice purpose of higher education.

In my qualitative research, I explore why a small number of staff members in the Scottish higher education sector choose to engage in partnerships to co-create the curriculum with their students, and how doing so changes the nature of student-teacher relationships. Findings from semi-structured interviews highlight co-creation of the curriculum as a more just, engaging, and rewarding form of teaching and learning that can help students and staff to engage critically to facilitate more intrinsic purposes of higher education such as the development of active, informed citizens. This paper explores the ways in which co-creation of the curriculum can change the nature of student-teacher relationships to advance human flourishing and social justice.

Keywords

Social justice, co-creation of the curriculum, curriculum, student engagement, students as partners

Introduction

In a fast-paced and changing world in which ever-increasing numbers of students are participating in higher education, the curriculum has become more important than ever before. In many cases, academics work independently to create the higher education curriculum and, often times with little or no training in how to do so, they begin with and focus on academic content rather than how it is delivered, what teacher-student relationships are fostered, and what purposes of education the curriculum can achieve (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). The curriculum is rarely defined in the higher education context and, even when it is, there are many different interpretations (Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008; Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006; Lattuca & Stark, 2009). In their 'think pieces', McLean (2016) and Case (2016) question what knowledge is included in the higher education curriculum and how it is taught to create an inclusive educational experience that fosters social justice. Drawing on the work of Lattuca and Stark (2009), Barnett and Coate (2004), and Crosling et al. (2008), I take a broad view of the higher education curriculum and conceptualise it as an active process of teaching and learning that includes both course-level and programme-level content, structure, delivery, assessment, and learning outcomes achieved through interaction and collaboration between students and teachers. Furthermore, like Dewey (1998) and Kuh (2010), I believe that the curriculum must be responsive, dynamic, and adapted to each cohort of students so it is engaging and relevant to their needs.

In my research, I draw on critical theory to examine how co-creation of the curriculum is changing the nature of student-teacher relationships in many cases to develop an ethos of social justice within the classroom. Social justice is modelled to help students listen to and engage with different viewpoints in a safe learning community so that they can learn to identify justice and injustice in other areas of their lives. I define co-creation of the curriculum as process of student engagement that encourages students and staff members to become partners who each have a voice and a stake in curriculum development. There have been numerous small-scale, grass-roots efforts of staff members to implement co-creation into the curriculum in the US, Scotland, England, and Ireland (Bovill, 2014; Bovill, Morss, & Bulley, 2009; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felton, 2014; Croft, 2013). My research explores with participants what purposes of higher education can be achieved effectively by employing co-creation of the curriculum. In this paper, I look at the ‘think pieces’ by Case (2016) and McArthur (2016) in light of my qualitative data to analyse how co-creation of the curriculum is changing the nature of student-teacher relationships to promote social justice in higher education.

Injustices in Higher Education

In her ‘think piece’, McLean (2016) explores Miranda Fricker’s conception that ‘people-as-knowers can be epistemically wronged either by not being listened to (testimonial injustice) or by being denied access to the pool of available concepts and meanings in society that allows one to be a trustworthy knower (hermeneutic injustice)’. In my own research in Scotland, I interviewed students who were not necessarily from economically advantaged or disadvantaged backgrounds, and I was struck by how they often felt that university staff did not listen to them or did not value them as having trustworthy views regarding the higher education curriculum. One student, whom I call Kate, illustrates these concepts of both testimonial injustice and hermeneutic injustice. When speaking about the relevance of courses to her own life, Kate stated that she had considered dropping out of university because:

It didn’t seem like any of my other modules’ teachers were really aware of my goals. I don’t know whether it’s because we have so little contact hours. So maybe in the classes, particularly in the first and second year, I don’t think there’s really an opportunity to get to know the teachers so they know your personal goals. ...I think that’s one of the reasons why I found it quite abstract because I was like, ‘What’s the point of this module?’.

Within the context of the massification of higher education (Barnett, 2004; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991), students like Kate struggle with the structure of large class sizes in which they don’t have the opportunity to get to know academic members of staff. Therefore, they experience testimonial injustice when they are not asked about their past experiences or future goals and, as a result, don’t feel that courses are relevant to their lives. In speaking about staff, Kate elaborated:

...there are a lot of lecturers who are incredibly clever and have got awards for research, really clever people, but they’re not necessarily that great at articulating it in a way that the students can understand. It’s the language they use sometimes or it being a little bit too complicated and not basic enough. You can tell they’re really passionate about the subject, but it’s hard to share that with them.

Here, Kate’s comments highlight the hermeneutic injustice of excellent researchers not being able to communicate their subject in a way that allows students to access the concepts and meanings. Although Kate wants to share their passion about the subject area and wants to become a ‘trustworthy knower’ of the subject, she became so frustrated by her lack of access to the concepts that she considered ending her studies until the opportunity of participating in co-creation of the curriculum changed her mind.

Working Towards a Social Justice Purpose of Higher Education

In my research, I am exploring how co-creation of the curriculum can reduce injustices in higher education by creating learning communities in which students and staff members work in partnership to achieve many purposes of education, including a social justice purpose of education that also helps students develop employability and more intrinsic aims of learning. In her ‘think piece’, Case (2016) emphasises that the market purpose of higher education has focused on the instrumental and economic benefits of higher education which have overshadowed the more nebulous, intrinsic purposes. Various purposes of higher education include developing and enhancing individuals’ civic responsibility, employability, research training, teaching efficiency, widening participation, intellectual autonomy, general intellectual abilities including knowledge and skills, and personal character including authentic being and self-authorship (Astin, 1984; Barnett, 1992; Barnett & Coate, 2004; Dewey, 1934; Einstein, 1936; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Sullivan & Rosin, 2008). Traditional methods of teaching emphasising lecturing and examining focus on conserving and transmitting knowledge but – in an age of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2004) and constant change (Case, 2016) – I would argue that more just and innovative forms of teaching and learning including co-creation of the curriculum can help students and staff to engage critically with knowledge to facilitate more intrinsic purposes of higher education including ‘human flourishing’ (Case, 2016, p. 2).

Similarly, McLean (2006, p. 17) draws on critical theory to address three purposes of higher education: preparing students to contribute to the economy, helping them in a personal transformation to become citizens in a democratic society, and addressing inequalities and complex global problems. She goes on to show how these purposes of higher education could be achieved by embedding critical theory because:

an environment conducive to critical pedagogy would allow university students and their teachers to work in a climate of trust: to be authentic; and, to focus on intellectual growth and transformation. Such an environment would be characterized by rational argumentation about pedagogy; and, most importantly, by a sense of community in which knowledge is produced and reproduced with students. It would also protect academic freedom, but, nevertheless, demand that academic teachers explain themselves to students, colleagues, the public and government. (McLean, 2006, p. 129)

I believe that co-creation of the curriculum embodies each of these aspects and, therefore, I see co-creation of the curriculum as a pedagogy of critical theory that can help universities foster social justice within and outwith their campuses. While, in 2006, McLean viewed critical pedagogy as an ideal and not yet a reality, I would argue that the few Scottish academics and their students who are engaging in co-creation of the curriculum are developing vibrant learning communities that foster intellectual growth and transformation. These staff members are facilitating opportunities for students to work in partnership alongside them to develop content, teaching practices, assessment, and/or grading criteria. Whilst co-creation of the curriculum necessitates sharing control over decisions with students, academic freedom is maintained through discussions helping the academic member of staff to develop more robust curricular plans in partnership with students whilst also becoming more transparent about their practice so that the intrinsic purposes of higher education can come to the forefront.

Co-Creation of the Curriculum Facilitating Social Justice

Kuh defines student engagement as ‘...the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college [or university] and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities’ (2009, p. 683). Many individuals place the responsibility for student engagement on the students themselves but, like Kuh, I believe it is essential that university staff actively facilitate opportunities for student engagement which evidence a partnership between students and staff to develop an academic community that facilitates students’ success. This requires effort from both students and staff to create a healthy learning environment that fosters trust, honest discussion, and partnership. Cook-Sather et al (2014, p. 1) emphasise that ‘Partnerships are based on respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility between students and faculty’. Each of these aspects is critical for co-creation of the curriculum to be successful, and the social justice dynamics found in these partnerships are far from the current power dynamics that are often seen in traditional lectures and examinations. It is important to highlight – as do Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felton (2014) – that students and staff members can and should contribute different things to a partnership since their roles, expertise, responsibilities, and status are necessarily different. In my study, I interviewed eight academic members of staff and ten students, all at four different Scottish universities, who participate in different types of co-creation of the curriculum. These include student-staff collaborations to decide on course content, co-design meaningful and authentic assessment, or co-create grading criteria.

Creating a Safe Space for Students and Staff Alike

All participants in my study highlighted the importance of creating a learning environment that facilitates a collective academic experience through democratic engagement of both students and staff members in the classroom. The first aspect of facilitating this experience is in creating what Staff Interviewee 2 described as ‘...creating a symbolic space where people feel comfortable asking anything.’ Staff Interviewee 4 expanded: ‘there actually is no such thing as a silly question, but [you need to create a space where] it takes the fear factor out of asking someone if it’s a bit obvious’. Staff emphasised the need to create a safe space in which ‘silly questions’ were accepted and even welcomed so that small misunderstandings don’t lead to larger problems later in a student’s academic journey.

Staff also emphasised the importance of creating a safe space in which they could equally engage democratically in the classroom. Referencing the massification of higher education and the increase of widening participation, Staff Interviewee 2 states:

I think the assumption that one style, one approach (however brilliant that is) can help a mixed group of students, that assumption has always been a dubious one and I think it’s now less tenable than ever because of the huge mix of backgrounds and experiences and cultures that we have in class. So what that means is, if you can’t engender genuine, trustful communication with students – that sounds grand, but it might be very simple, it might be actually you’re standing in front of the board, or actually you’re using a red pen and I’m colour-blind, ‘why are you mumbling? I can’t

understand your accent at the back of the class' – it might be very simple things, but if you can't engender an atmosphere where students will let you know that then I think you're going to fail really. Or at least you're going to fail a substantial proportion of your students.

Higher education is a place that offers both students and staff the opportunity for transformation, but it is also a place that can reproduce inequalities (McLean, 2006). This participant highlights that, if staff do not create a learning community based on trust with their students, then either the staff will fail in teaching or they will disadvantage and fail the students who don't learn in the teacher's preferred manner.

Furthermore, the theme of trust was apparent when several participants highlighted the danger of staff assuming they understand students' needs. Staff Interviewee 4 said:

The issue I've got as I'm getting older, now in 2016, is that my own educational experience each year becomes a little bit more removed from the current educational experience. You know there's a whole gulf in terms of the way the stuff is taught these days. After a while I got to the stage where, rather than trying to project myself into the student mindset, it makes sense to talk to students who are actually going through it.

Many participants highlighted how, when they had tried to project themselves into the role of the student, their perceptions and assumptions were often incorrect. Therefore, this motivated staff to work in collaboration with students to gain diverse viewpoints while trusting students and creating space for all to engage democratically in the learning community.

Co-creation of the curriculum can promote a partnership that promotes an open dialogue about meaningful best practices in teaching and learning. McArthur (2016, p.1) shows that: 'A commitment to social justice requires an appreciation of alternative perspectives and the interplays between these vantage points'. This respectful dialogue and appreciation of others' views within a safe educational community helps both students and staff members who engage in co-creation of the curriculum to share a more equal balance of power.

Modelling Democratic Engagement

Many of the participants in my study engaged in co-creation of the curriculum because it enabled them to facilitate democratic engagement in the classroom. Staff Interviewee 3 engaged in co-creation of the curriculum because 'We found that there was a better power balance' since it facilitated both students and staff developing their work in deeper ways when students developed their professional skills and staff gained valuable feedback about their teaching. Both Staff Interviewee 3 and Staff Interviewee 6 noted that this could be challenging for staff to give up some power in the classroom and for students to take on new responsibilities, but rising to the challenge helped them develop personally and professionally. Staff Interviewee 6 noted, 'I do think they find it difficult at first because it is more democratic and it's them taking responsibility'. Giving students new responsibilities is a significant aspect of co-creation of the curriculum. Staff Interviewee 5 expanded on this: 'I do think we should be giving them more responsibility because that's just how they need to learn anyway in life'. Many participants believed that engaging students in the co-design and co-delivery of a course helps students feel more responsible for their own learning when they are contributing as an active member of a group, either the teaching community or – in some cases – an educational project that draws on their intellectual skills to help the wider community.

Furthermore, Staff Interviewee 2 highlighted the importance of co-creation of the curriculum since one benefit is that it is 'role modelling democratic engagement'. He states:

In my own subject there's a lot of talk about education for sustainable development and that's not just about understanding the carbon cycle. Most definitions of that would also involve equipping people with the attitudes and skills that are appropriate for a sustainable world – a socially just and sustainable world as well as an environmental one... It's about trying to live the values I think which are a bit more liberatory and democratic.

Similarly, McLean (2006, p. 1) shows that 'Education is political, cultural and social action' because it is influenced by the culture and society, and education also influences what individuals are able to and choose to give back to society. However, by fostering the capabilities approach to higher education pedagogy (Walker, 2005), staff create a learning environment in which students learn knowledge and skills, but the student learning is more valuable and meaningful when they learn within wider contexts of developing attitudes that foster academic freedom, social responsibility, and social justice. The above quotation from Staff Interviewee 2 also emphasises, as do McLean (2006) and Barnett and Coate (2004), how higher education is not only about developing the knowledge needed in a modern world, but it is also about developing the skills and sense of critical *being* to deal with supercomplexity as well as intricate social problems and inequalities.

Increasing Engagement

All student and staff participants in my research believed that co-creation of the curriculum helped students become more engaged in their own learning and more motivated to learn. Several student and staff interviewees highlighted that, by giving students additional responsibility for co-creating a course alongside staff, students worked harder and became more engaged. Staff Interviewee 5 noted that there was increased student engagement because: ‘There’s that buy-in from the students so that they know that they are valued and their opinions are valued as well’. By giving students responsibility and valuing their contributions, students often put in additional academic effort because they are not only working for themselves but also contributing to something larger than themselves: a learning community.

In addition to student engagement, participants also highlighted an increase in staff engagement resulting from participating in co-creation of the curriculum. For instance, Student Interviewee 1 stated: ‘...the tutor or the professional has to be equally open to the student’s ideas and willing to have their perceptions changed; willing to change their ways, not be set in stone.’ Similarly, Staff Interviewee 2 noted: ‘There are caveats, but I think as a way of really engaging with your practice, with teaching, it’s one of the best that I know. ...[I]t’s about really learning about what you’re doing from your students’. This student participant highlights that staff participating in co-creation of the curriculum must be open to non-traditional views, perspectives, and contributions. The staff participant shows how not only being receptive to these contributions but also embracing them can help staff reduce inequalities in the classroom when they engage more deeply with their teaching practice by learning from their diverse students.

Co-Creation of the Curriculum: Changing the Nature of Student-Teacher Relationships

In this paper, I have highlighted examples of testimonial and hermeneutic injustices for a student participant, Kate, when she felt that staff members did not get to know her or her personal goals of participating in higher education. Kate highlighted how participating in co-creation of the curriculum helped her to become more engaged with her own learning, motivating her to continue her studies. Having a say about which teaching methods were employed in her co-created course allowed Kate to play to her strengths while she not only felt engaged and motivated by participating in a course that was relevant to her interests, but she also achieved the highest marks of any courses throughout her university journey.

Co-creation of the curriculum is changing the nature of student-teacher relationships by creating safe spaces for students and staff alike to share, teach each other, and learn. Furthermore, co-creation of the curriculum is modelling democratic engagement which minimises injustices through becoming more inclusive, increases student and staff motivation and engagement, and develops critical skills and a sense of *being* which will help both students and staff cope in an ever-changing, complex world. Whilst I have focused on the benefits and opportunities that co-creation of the curriculum offers, it can be extremely challenging epistemologically for both students and staff and it can also pose practical, bureaucratic challenges of not having adequate learning spaces and timetables to facilitate learning in partnership. Whilst it can be considered too radical or progressive for many universities, I view co-creation of the curriculum as an opportunity of creating more collegial, engaging, and meaningful student-teacher relationships that facilitate the social justice purpose of higher education.

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