Curriculum design that welcomes students into the discipline

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In this short chapter I introduce three principles for an inclusive (or ‘welcoming’) curriculum design, none of which are completely new and all three often come together. The central tenet of the chapter is that a curriculum can act as a barrier to students entering the discipline. By this I mean students who are enthusiastic about the discipline when choosing their degree subject, can start to feel like the curriculum is foreign to them and completing the curriculum tasks, readings and assessments only increases their alienation (Oprandi, 2014). However, principles can be employed that can help a curriculum welcome all students into the discipline, whatever their background, and can help develop a sense of belonging. In the first part I say what the principles are, in the second part I make a case for why they are important and I conclude by suggesting some steps and examples.

What are the principles?

The principles are the following:

1. To set learning objectives that require the students to understand how what is known has come to be known for a given topic.
2. To teach the students the conceptual frameworks which have shaped how a topic is understood and provide a space for the
frameworks to be questioned and contested.

3. To provide opportunities for students to come to know parts of the topic for themselves through practice using the disciplinary frameworks and their own experience. This can be done individually or in groups.

Why are these principles important?

Knowledge is in a constant state of constant flux; it is usually highly context-dependent, often contested, and often changes, grows and develops. Furthermore, the frameworks by which we come to know are entrenched in history and culture. While this in itself is inevitable, the space in which the frameworks developed are increasingly contested. For example, the decolonising the curriculum movement challenges the validity of traditional curricula that are increasingly recognised to be western, white, middle-class and male and in a word, “colonised” (Arday et al., 2021). Principles one and two seek to provide a modest remedy to this by firstly acknowledging the history and cultural contexts in which the conceptual frameworks emerged and, secondly providing a space for them to be used in practice, questioned, contested and, if necessary, refuted.

Like many writing (and reading) this book, I understand that most of us learn best by doing and by applying knowledge to a personal context. The benefits of active learning approaches are many and well documented by renowned educationalists such as Dewey (1938) as far back as the early 1900s and, favourites of mine, Chickering and Gamson (1987). I therefore suggest that curriculum design needs to provide opportunities for students to apply these theoretical frameworks for themselves through practice. Problem-based learning is one teaching approach that can be used to embed Principle three; wherein “the starting point for learning is a problem or challenge which defines the scope of learning” (Boud, 1988 p. 87).
It seeks to provide the students with the opportunity to understand how the topic has developed, learn how they can contribute to it and have the opportunity to critique the frameworks used.

How can you implement the principles in your teaching?

How can this be done? I suggest the following three part approach to preparing a session:

1. Create **learning objectives** that require students to be familiar with the conceptual frameworks which underpin the topic, to be able to apply the frameworks for themselves and be able to offer a critique of the frameworks
2. Create an **application task** which requires the students to apply the conceptual framework to understand something for themselves
3. Create a concluding activity which requires students to discuss the cultural history and the limitations of the framework and, if appropriate, propose alternatives.

**Example 1: Linguistics**

In a linguistics class one might set an objective of exploring the social aspects of how a word is understood. The tutor might present (or provide research time) to
explore the conceptual frameworks that have been used to understand the social aspects of a word, such as spelling variations, dialects, registers, jargon, slang, and so on. A group task might be set to apply these frameworks to understand particular words and report back their findings to the whole cohort. The session might be concluded by discussing the usefulness and limitations of the frameworks as well as suggestions for alternative ways of understanding words (Oprandi & Murphy, 2019).

Example 2: Chemistry

In a chemistry class one might set an objective of a perceived reduction in number and size of fish caught along a river. See, for example, this PBL activity on the Royal Society of Chemistry website (Belt et al., 2002). The tutor might present or provide research time to explore the conceptual frameworks for detecting, analysing and suggesting counteractions for river pollution. A group task might be set for the students to act as investigating officers, and apply the frameworks to identify the
possible causes and suggest any remedy if required and for the students to feed back their findings to the cohort. The session might be concluded by discussing the cultural history, usefulness and limitations of the theoretical frameworks for tasks such as this.

Conclusion

This short chapter offers a curriculum design that seeks to provide students with conceptual frameworks that they can use to come to know new things. It includes providing the students with the opportunity to critically engage with those frameworks so they can challenge them and/or build upon them. The curriculum design is intended to lower the barriers that can prevent students from entering the discipline and instead invites students to come to know in their own way, welcoming all students into the discipline, whatever their background.

References


Royal Society of Chemistry. [https://edu.rsc.org/resources/tales-of-the-riverbank-environmental/1045.article](https://edu.rsc.org/resources/tales-of-the-riverbank-environmental/1045.article)


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