

CO-CURRICULUM SEMINAR 2014

The co-curriculum: Re-defining boundaries of academic spaces

Birgit Schreiber*

The University of the Western Cape, South Africa, invited two renowned speakers to address issues concerning the co-curriculum in a colloquium on 14 May 2014 entitled “The co-curriculum: An integrated practice or fragments at the fringes of university experience?”.

Impetus for this colloquium came from the emergent policies at various universities in South Africa, such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the University of the Western Cape, which aim to promote and regulate the co-curricular spaces.

Debates surrounding the co-curriculum raise issues of boundaries and roles, not only traditional boundaries of what constitutes academic spaces, but also who teaches and what is learnt. Notions of the co-curriculum challenge the very *raison d'être* of traditional higher education. Education is re-contextualised and includes the intersection of the curriculum with student life. The notion of the co-curriculum encompasses issues of student engagement, lifelong and life-wide learning (Jackson, 2010), student development and support, authentic learning and graduate attributes, the uncommon-traditional and the ubiquitous-non-traditional student and how these issues relate to student success.

Student affairs is a key role-player in shaping and enabling complex learning within the many explicit and invisible curricula in higher education that are contributors to student success. The understanding of learning, on the one hand, as a segmented and bounded event, or on the other, as a seamless experience of in- and out-of-classroom development, impacts on the conceptualisation of higher education learning and development.

The co-curriculum and engagement are such a catch-all and “loose concept that both those who advocate neoliberal reforms in higher education and those who oppose them tend to agree that it is a good thing” (Klemenčič, 2013) – so no one is really sure what it is and what it entails.

While South Africa is asking questions about the co-curriculum, it seems the higher education sector across the globe is also grappling with it. This is evident in some of the definitions, which include terms like customer satisfaction, holistic development, citizenship, skills development and have slogans such as “shape your own future” and

* Director of the Centre for Student Support Services, University of the Western Cape, South Africa.

“community engagement” and other terms that really are located in almost contradictory frameworks.

One position is that the co-curriculum includes those things, which are outside the core curriculum. But, as with other descriptors such as “non-academics”, this tells us very little about what it is – only really what it isn’t. So this is not a very helpful way to go about it.

Another way of thinking about it is akin to the neo-liberal position of higher education. This position – in simple terms – promotes the idea of education being a commodity. The proponents of this ideology locate the co-curriculum within the marketing and economic framework.

Some of the questions this model would raise are: How is this co-curriculum promoting the image of the institution (is it a marketing tool?); and: How is this co-curriculum assisting employability? (This is a national economic question.)

For instance, the European Council on Student Affairs has promoted the idea of mobility and attractiveness amongst universities in the European Higher Education Area and has recently indicated that the co-curriculum is part of the profile of a university that makes it attractive to mobile students (Figel, 2009). In this case, it is an economic model that informs the co-curriculum – where it is designed to improve the attractiveness of the institution.

Also, the European Higher Education Area has introduced terms like “student satisfaction” as part of the co-curriculum – positioning the co-curriculum in terms of how it contributes to satisfying students and making education “fun” – and other such consumerist notions.

The idea that the co-curriculum is designed to serve the employer and increase employability of graduates is part of the national economic question: How do we improve graduate employability? This is a question that is central to a lot of what the co-curriculum encompasses – it speaks to improving employment chances. For us the question is whether the framework for the design of the co-curriculum is *simply* about employability, which is an individualistic way of thinking about it.

Employability is, of course, a good thing – so we need to think about what kinds of curricula are in the mainstream and how we mainstream the co-curriculum, if indeed such an artificial separation is useful.

There are many voices that will remind us of the universities’ contact with society and with social justice and the common good (Kezar, 2004). How do we respond to the questions raised about our agenda in terms of serving the common good, responsible citizenship and social justice? Are these issues located within the co-curriculum or ought they to be mainstreamed and explored in the curriculum?

Another question about the co-curriculum is about its alignment with government policy. We remember too well what happened when the co-curriculum was aligned with public policy in the South African regime prior to liberation – we remember when questions of human rights and democracy were silenced and the co-curriculum was reduced to a complacent extra-curriculum.

These questions concern Africa deeply. For instance, issues of human rights and social justice are certainly not part of the co-curriculum framework of the universities in Zimbabwe, Uganda, Nigeria and Tanzania where minority rights are not protected.

So, there is this fundamental question: What is the co-curriculum? Is it something at the fringes of university life, perhaps a little add-on programme all dressed up – or has it the potential to influence the very culture of our institution and higher education in general, redefining what we traditionally consider legitimate learning?

There are some universities that take student engagement and the co-curriculum very seriously, where it is weaved into the fabric of the institutional life. Such universities refer to the “meta-curriculum”, where these kinds of practices are not extra- or co-curricular, but inform the total student learning experience. Jackson (2010) asserts that the co-curriculum needs to be conceptualised much more widely to legitimise all learning, especially that of non-traditional students who make up the majority of students in Africa.

Ronelle Carolissen, in her exploration of the co-curriculum from a critical feminist perspective, critiques the notion of a confined and finite co-curriculum as a construct emerging from traditional notions of citizenship. She adds that issues of inclusion and access burden the co-curriculum as it potentially excludes the very students it aims to support and develop. Teboho Moja discusses the idea of relevance and embeddedness of the co-curriculum and its relationship to engagement and student success and persistence, discussing the idea of “seamlessness” in creating a continuous learning and development experience.

References

- Figel, J. (2009). Commission for Education, Training, Culture and Youth. Bologna Policy Forum. Opening Address. Retrieved June 7, 2010 from http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/forum/bologna_policy_forum_figel.pdf.
- Jackson, N. (2010). From a curriculum that integrates work to a curriculum that integrates life: Changing a university's conceptions of curriculum. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29:5, 491-505, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2010.502218
- Kezar, A. (2004). Obtaining integrity? Reviewing and examining the charter between higher education and society. *The Review of Higher Education*, 27(4), 429-459.
- Klemenčić, M. (2013). Student engagement – Between policy-making and scholarship. *World University News*, 13 December 2013. (short article). Open access. Retrieved May 5, 2014 from <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20131210124920672>.

