

Promoting effective curriculum research: Linking the theoretic to the practical in FE teacher education programmes

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Perhaps one of the few issues that attract a form of consensus amongst policymakers, practitioners and researchers in the field of education is the drive for practice to be informed by research. To achieve this goal, it is important that teachers not only hone their delivery skills but also develop their skills in research such that they can consciously address emergent issues in their practice. In the context of developing teachers to be able to engage with this requirement, two questions become apparent. First, to what extent do we use our relevant modules such as curriculum development to prepare our students for engaging in curriculum research? Second, how can we reframe this module as it currently stands so that it can further enhance curriculum research? These are the issues that we contend with in this piece, in the context of FE teacher training.

Too frequently, FE teacher trainees come back to their classes from placements with questions such as, 'I have a student who does [X]: how can I deal with [Y]?', and, 'You know we talk about [X] theory. However, when I have tried to use it with my students, they did not respond. So what other theory should/could I use?'

Questions such as these have led us to wonder if we really have been developing our trainees in a way that prepares them to engage with specific problems and find solutions to them. Our initial investigation shows that this apprehension is not unique to us.

Reid (1991) observed:

'Just as, for example, physicists try to produce universal explanations for the behaviour of atomic particles, a new breed of curriculum theorists was setting out to establish

universal principles and explanation concerning the events surrounding teaching and learning'. (ibid: 30)

Reid's comment above seems to encapsulate both the symptom and cure for the issues we identified in the preparation we offer our trainees. Our goal, therefore, is to answer two simple questions.

1. How well do we use our courses/modules on curriculum development to prepare our students for engaging with curriculum research?

2. How can we change the current situation so that it further fruitfully enhances curriculum research?

To answer these questions effectively, it seems to us that we must first consider what constitutes a/the curriculum. In answering this question, we have opted to look at the curriculum from the viewpoint of curriculum theorising rather than that of curriculum theory. Relative to curriculum theory, which attempts to identify, describe, explain and predict in specific terms (Huenecke, 1982), curriculum theorising is more comprehensive and allows exploration of both potential and reality (see for example Huenecke, 1982; Reid, 1991). Theorising is generally preliminary to theory completion. It contributes to our understanding of the rationales for theory, and provides an avenue for enlarging 'vision, to present new possibilities, and to bring deeper understanding' (Huenecke, 1982: 290). It is effectively a process which leads us to an understanding of what we are engaging with.

Theorising has three established traditions: structural, generic and substantive theorising traditions. For us, all three traditions hold valuable positions and subsume the curriculum theory approach which, for example, talks of curriculum in terms of typology (Smith, 1996; Kumari and Srivastava, 2005), in terms of time/period (Man-Lau, 2001; 2006), or with a focus on specific context – as in the case of Weenie (2015), who uses the post-modern, post-structuralist and post colonial paradigms to explore minority education.

Having thus set out our way of viewing the curriculum from a theorising perspective, we suggest that the modality through which we deliver curriculum-based modules in FE initial teacher education (ITE) can be analysed using the framework offered by Reid (1991) – the ‘theoretic versus the practical’. This distinction draws upon the Aristotelian tradition of distinguishing between the possible goals of knowledge ‘seeking and using’ (Reid, 1991: 3; Schwab, 1978; Westbury and Wilkof, 1978).

While the ‘theoretic’ is focussed on finding and using knowledge to produce an explanation, the ‘practical’ is focussed on finding knowledge as a launching pad for taking action about a specific situation. It follows, therefore, that in the practical domain the situation has to be distinct from other situations and, therefore, the action has to be specifically designed for that situation. In contrast with the theoretic, although a specific event might trigger the search for knowledge, the knowledge and the explanation that the practical approach generates is often of a general nature.

The assessment requirements of current curriculum courses in FE ITE – which is overloaded with tasks that require students to evaluate, discuss and analyse the basis of curriculum – suggest that it is more aligned towards the theoretic. Our view is that these tasks limit engagement to the theoretical, and that evaluation of their curriculum remains superficial in order to meet the requirements of the assignment. How, then, can we consciously move away from the theoretic to the practical? We suggest that the more practical tasks must require our trainees to engage with different scenarios which will require them to develop and research unique and specific contexts. We must move our trainees away from a focus on answers to questions such as, ‘Explain what...’, ‘What might be responsible for...?’, and ‘What factors could influence...’, and towards questions such as, ‘What steps would you take to...?’, and, ‘Identify strategies you might use in this case, and why you think they would work with this group of students’.