

6-2 Course Design: “How do you decide what you chuck out?”

Introduction

This section considers the impact of higher education discourses on the course design process in media studies, a significant aspect of professional practice for media academics. Distinctively within higher education, the academic staff involved in the provision of a course are often also the designers of both the course structure and its content, albeit working within formal processes and procedures that provide structural constraints. This direct relationship between the teaching staff and the course design provides an opportunity for a consideration of the ways the discourses around media studies and higher education are played out through media studies courses.

The course design process is generally a collective, collegiate process through which a group of academic staff agree a rationale for the course and then define it in terms of course learning outcomes and overall teaching, learning and assessment strategies. The course is then sub-divided into learning units or modules of defined credit rating and level and these units are then designed by one or two individuals, each with its own aims, objectives, learning outcomes, teaching schedule, assessment strategy and criteria and learning materials (Prosser and Trigwell, 2001). Course teams will normally be working within a framework of institutionally prescribed course design requirements intended to ensure that the course interfaces with the institutions' delivery systems and that it also fulfils the requirements and expectations of external agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency and any appropriate Professional, Statutory or

Regulating Bodies (PSRB). The decision to design a new course or review and revise an existing course is often a result of strategic considerations at an institutional, faculty or departmental level.

Lea (2007) stresses the importance of a consideration of student discursive practices and their relationship to academic discourses as a key to successful course design. If student/academic oppositional discourses are set up through course structures, content, teaching and learning then, whatever the academic staff see as the rationale for media studies, those outcomes are unlikely to be realised. These participant responses (three participants) demonstrate the relationships between the discourses of media studies and the processes of course design.

Analysis

The response from Participant 01 (below) illustrates a dilemma for a course designer as a result of the discourses of '*out there in the real world*' and '*what employers want*'. Her concern is bridging the gaps between the differing expectations of the media industries and the associated PSRBs and research-informed academic concerns. Employer concerns are seen as short-sighted and focussed on filling immediate needs rather than equipping students for a long-term career in a rapidly changing industry:

It needed to not only look at what the industry needed tomorrow but it needed to look at what the industry didn't always know that it was going to need in the future. I went to accreditation bodies, so I looked at those bodies that were accrediting within the field and equally then applied what I'd just learnt and thought, 'Oh, there are shortcomings here. Now what do I do?' So that then led me first of all thinking, 'Hmm, they're only looking to tomorrow and I think they should be looking a bit to the future because if I develop a course and it's not actually going to start until next year then it could already be out of date by the time it gets in and, 'Oh hell!' So that was part of the panic. (Participant 01)

Richmond and Sanders (2014, p.12) characterise the employer focus on immediacy and short-term skills as a “*discourse of deficit*” and, as such, there is little agreement amongst employers as to what is missing, making the process of course design with employer/accreditation body approval as a requirement quite problematic.

I had to decide what length of credits I needed within a unit. That was a bit alarming! Erm, [...] so given that framework, I then set about trying to work out what it was we needed to; the first thing was what do we need to cover? What do we need in here? Have we got things that we're already doing that would work, to be developed? Do we have the expertise in-house already? That was another point, or can we call on it? How would we staff it? (Participant 01)

Participant 01 then goes on to discuss the process of course design in relation to the practicalities of fitting content into institutional course structure requirements, re-purposing existing course elements and resource constraints, an aspect that is also mentioned, more starkly by Participant 02, a Director of Teaching and Learning at a post-92 university:

There is a danger that people will see lots of interesting things and then will build lots of those interesting things into their curriculum, and those interesting things may be valuable to the learning experience but when you add them all up, we can't really resource all of those sorts of interesting things because often, those interesting things have quite high resource requirements associated with them. (Participant 02)

Participant 04 also focuses on course design as a filtering and editing process and the balance of content against resources:

[Grunts]. Well, how do you decide what you chuck out? I mean, my experience of course design is that everybody throws in things that should be in and they all sound like good ideas, and then suddenly you've got your pint pot and you've got seven quarts of content. Er, and one of the challenges is (...) whether you try and do everything too quickly and cram everything in, or whether you eliminate things and if so, what? (Participant 04)

Participant 02's approach to this touches on the discourse of 'collegiality' (see Chapter 6, Section 6-6) to show how she resolved her content selection issues:

I was talking to people who were validating courses and saying, "What are you putting in yours?" (...) And people were very good and very open and shared. (Participant 01)

This implies that academic discursive practices underpin the course design process and so whilst a discourse of '*new managerialism*' may set the broad parameters for a new course ('*is there a market for it?*', '*where will the students get jobs?*'), the translation of those requirements into an approved course remains a collegiate academic process with a sharing of ideas between academic staff that are not particularly constrained by institutional boundaries, despite the discourse of '*new managerial*' institution-to-institution competition.

Summary and Conclusions

The process of media course design is crucial as a set of discursive practices that directly link the public and academic discourses of media studies with the students' learning experiences and graduate outcomes. However, a search of research literature reveals very little work on the specifics of course design; the selection of curriculum content and its integration into formal structures of learning. There is an extensive literature around higher education pedagogy; teaching, learning and assessment at a unit/module level across a range of subjects and disciplines but little on course design as curriculum selection (Tight, 2012), a common activity in media studies that concerns a number of the participants in this study. Media studies lacks the traditions and coherence of subjects that have reached a broad consensus regarding core curriculum content at undergraduate level and so it is to be expected that this will more of an issue for these participants. Much of the existing literature on course design covers the specifics of a particular aspect of course design (for example, designing in employability) or designing courses for a particular delivery mode (for example, designing online or distance-learning courses).

On this basis, it is suggested that this aspect of media studies could be the focus of future research work with the aim of understanding the ways in which academic practitioners select and structure subject content into an approved course of study. This could enhance professional practice and provide greater insight into the ways academic staff manage these oppositional discourses of 'collegiate' collaboration and 'new managerialism' competition within the course design process.