

# Towards a Critical Analysis of Curricular Practices of Eight Higher Education Teachers

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## Abstract

It has been argued that most curricular practices in higher education settings are still strongly based upon the so-called *telling paradigm* rather than some sort of *interactive* or *socializing* way to foster better teaching and better learning. Besides, assessment practices are quite often oriented to grade students instead of being a means to engage them in deeper and more meaningful learning. At the same time, it is generally acknowledged that there is a need for studies that are based on stronger empirical data, collected in real classroom settings. In fact, it has been stated that without studies such as those one cannot get thorough descriptions of how one teaches, assesses, and learns in higher education classrooms. Putting it in another way: one cannot come up with credible statements on higher education curricular practices. Research reported in this paper was aimed at describing, analysing, and interpreting eight higher education teachers' curricular practices within undergraduate courses of four knowledge domains: *Arts and Humanities*, *Sciences and Technologies*, *Health Sciences*, and *Social Sciences*. In particular, the study dealt with issues such as: a) teaching planning and organization; b) feedback nature, frequency, and distribution; c) classroom dynamics; d) teacher and student roles; e) tasks, resources, and materials used in class; f) class structure and time management; g) nature and dynamics of assessment; and h) student participation. For the purposes of the investigation reported in this paper, data were collected through classroom observations of eight volunteer teachers (two for each knowledge domain), interviews with each one of these teachers and with eight groups of students as well. The study makes a discussion of teachers' curricular practices while teaching courses in each one of the four mentioned knowledge domains. As a result, some policy, practical, theoretical, and methodological issues that could be taken into account when one thinks about new and innovative approaches to curriculum studies and curriculum theory are presented and discussed.

Keywords: curricular practices; curriculum studies; teaching; learning assessment; higher education

## 1. Introduction

Research reported and discussed in this paper was developed within a wider three-year research project (2011-2014) involving 36 researchers from four Portuguese and three Brazilian universities (The research project has been financed by National Funds through *Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia* (FCT) -Foundation for Science and Technology – Project PTDC/CPE-CED/114318/2009.). The overall purpose of the project is to describe, to analyse, and to interpret teachers' curricular practices, particularly related to teaching and assessment, in a diversity of practical or theoretical/practical undergraduate foundational courses in each one of the following knowledge domains: Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Health Sciences, and Sciences and Technologies.

This paper is a result of part of a preliminary research work that took place in one of the Portuguese universities involved in the project and it is aimed at: a) providing a description, analysis, interpretation, and reflection on the curricular practices (teaching and assessment) of eight higher education teachers (two per each one of the mentioned above domains of knowledge); b) providing a reflection, taking into account the study research framework, on some policy, practical, theoretical, and methodological issues.

## 2. Research framework

Research literature has been pointing out that students learn better when assessment and, in particular, formative assessment or assessment *for learning*, is integral to the organisation and development of teaching (e.g. Black & Wiliam, 2006). Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that curricular practices at the higher education level, namely teaching and assessment, are mostly based in the so-called *telling paradigm* meaning that teaching is essentially a

process where teachers are supposed to talk and students are supposed to listen. Learning, under these circumstances, is generally assessed through tests and/or final examinations (e.g. Biggs, 2006).

In the last decades students have been entering higher education as never before. As a result of this, both traditional teaching and assessment practices have been questioned and under pressure to change. Besides, in the European context, the so-called Bologna process (1999) put together a framework aiming at transforming and improving pedagogy and curricular practices in higher education. Consequently, there is a growing body of publications claiming, for example, that: a) there is a need for a greater integration of learning, teaching, and assessment; b) more attention should be put on the need to improve higher education teachers' expertise in the teaching, learning, and assessment knowledge domains; and c) there is empirical evidence showing that it is possible to improve higher education teachers' curricular practices (e.g. Bryan & Clegg, 2006; Falchicov, 2005; Menges & Austin, 2001). Indeed, in a literature synthesis of 30 empirical studies developed in a ten-year time span (2000-2009) Fernandes & Fialho (2012) concluded that new and innovative ways to assess students' learning have necessarily to be related with profound changes in the organisation and development of teaching. They also inferred that innovative assessment, namely formative assessment or assessment for learning, could only make sense if, for instances, students are provided with quality feedback, are engaged in finding solutions to a variety of tasks, interact on a regular basis with their colleagues and their teachers, use self-assessments and different forms of "interactive assessments" (e.g. peer assessment, small-group assessment) to regulate their learning, and participate in the processes of curriculum decision-making at the classroom level.

These are all pedagogical issues at the classroom level, particularly curriculum development ones, that need to be understood and that are still under-researched because there still is a need to elaborate in-depth descriptions, analyses, and interpretations about higher education teachers' curricular practices. This meaning that there is a need to look for patterns in those practices across different teachers, different courses and different specific contexts. Hopefully, as it has been referred to in the literature, these patterns might elicit the construction of a framework that could be a heuristic means to develop in-depth discussions and reflections on theoretical and practical curriculum matters (e.g. Menges & Austin, 2001). These authors, in their seminal paper, provided an in-depth discussion on a research framework for teaching in higher education that takes into account five interrelated elements: context, content, learner, teacher and teaching and learning environment. Besides, they discussed a set of recommendations for future research in areas such as *Faculty Learning and Development*; *Interactions among Teacher, Learner, and Method Variables*; *Influence of the Discipline*; and *Context-Specific Research*.

Obviously, pedagogical and curriculum issues are closely associated and one needs to take that into account when it comes to interpret and to reflect on what happens within classroom contexts. Barnett (2009) provides a discussion where pedagogy plays a significant role in developing those dispositions and qualities that, according to this author, students need in order to acquire knowledge. Thus, Barnett distinguishes the "immediate" relationship between teachers and what and how they teach from the "mediate" relationship between students and the curriculum they experienced. As it has been pointed out by other curriculum researchers (e.g. Goodlad, 1979; Goodson, 1997; Pacheco, 2005) Barnett also stresses the difference between the proposed curriculum and the curriculum experienced by the students. Ultimately, he mentions, it is the pedagogical relationship that could provide students with the dispositions and qualities that enable them to appropriate the curriculum in a meaningful way. Although Barnett considers that a curriculum in higher education should be built on the grounds of a "project of knowledge", he clearly refers that knowledge and the skills that enable one to deal with the world are not enough. In fact, he argues that the idea of "being" is a third "pillar" that might enable people to deal with this world's high complexity and, in his view, must have curriculum implications. Young (2008) also underlines the relevance of knowledge in the curriculum and brings up the idea of "social realism", recognizing the social basis of knowledge but underlining its context-independent nature and the differences between knowledge and common sense. Young states that the "curriculum of the past", advocated by the so-called neo-conservatives, ignores the surrounding social context where the curriculum "lives". On the other hand, he mentions, the "curriculum of the future" which the so-called instrumentalists advocate, fails to acknowledge that cognitive interests determine the extent to which any curriculum enables one to acquire knowledge. According to Young, discussing what the students should learn has been a neglected issue both by public policies and by educational researchers. Thus, on the grounds of his social realist approach he provides a set of guidelines and foundation principles that should orient curriculum policies (e.g. knowledge needs to be conceived as a "non-reducible element in the changing resources that people need access to in order to make sense of the world (p.90)"; if a curriculum was based on everyday experiences then it would only be recycling those experiences; the relevance of a curriculum based on research and pedagogy; the curriculum content and forms should be seen as dynamic and ever evolving issues). In the process of rethinking curriculum theory Young (2008, p. 92) remarks that "(...) we cannot go back to tradition or God in deciding what to teach: we have only reason, knowledge, and history".

### 3. Method

This research was qualitative in nature and data were collected by means of: a) in-depth interviews with each one of eight participant teachers; b) interviews with eight groups of students; and c) a total of about 160 hours of classroom observations (about 20h per teacher). For each one of the above-mentioned knowledge domains two volunteer teachers, teaching two different undergraduate courses of a given programme, were deliberately selected to participate in the study. A research framework defined the main research objects (e.g. teaching, assessment) and, for each one of the objects, a set of relevant dimensions (e.g. classroom dynamics; teaching planning and organization; nature, frequency, and distribution of feedback; nature of assessment). Based upon this framework both interview and observation protocols were conceived and developed through a collaborative and peer-review process. These protocols provided the necessary basis to guide data collection processes and to reach acceptable levels of consistency.

Data organization and systematization was developed through three different phases. In the first phase and for each of the eight teachers, three narratives on teaching and assessment practices have been produced: one as a result of the observations and the other two as a result of teachers' and students' interviews. In the second phase these three narratives were synthesized into one providing an integrated description of both teaching and assessment practices of each teacher. Therefore, at this stage, there were eight narratives – one for each teacher/course. Finally, the two narratives for each knowledge domain were integrated into one and, as a result, a total of four narratives were obtained. Each one of these four narratives is an account of both the observed and perceived teachers' curricular practices.

The aggregation and transformation of data followed the recommendations of Wolcott (1994) and took into close account both the research framework and the instrumentation produced.

### 4. Presentation and discussion of the main results

As one could expect the eight participant teachers exhibited a range of approaches to teaching and assessment that could be understood through a large variety of student, teacher, content, and context-related issues (Menges & Austin, 2001). Nevertheless, one could also discern a number of interesting similarities including among quite different courses and/or knowledge areas.

Generally speaking, all participant teachers carefully planned and organised their teaching taking into account the syllabi distributed to the students. Both the syllabi and other materials (e.g. bibliography, tasks, pedagogical guidelines) were often available in Moodle platforms or in the college and/or programme website. Also, all classes had well defined structures that seemed quite clear to the students although they ranged from somewhat "poor" ones (e.g. two-stage organisation: teacher synthesis of the previous class followed by teacher talk on new content) to "rich" ones (e.g. multiple-stage organisation: a synthesis of the previous class; teacher talk; students working on tasks with the teacher as an available resource; synthesis; and evaluation of the work done). Mostly, students felt quite at ease in all classes and enjoyed the overall environment, the opportunities and conditions to learn, and their relationships with both their teachers and their classmates. Teachers, on their side, always showed a genuine engagement in their teaching duties (e.g. being available – online or personally - to help students out; providing materials and guidelines; articulating classes with other colleagues) and seemed to sustain a quite good rapport with students.

Classroom dynamics were quite different from class to class. In some classes students were seldom involved in any sort of activities or were over dependent on their teachers since these were either lecturing what they were supposed to learn or telling them what they were supposed to do (e.g. Art History course; Law course; Numerical Modelling course; Chemistry course). Typically, in such courses, students were either taking notes or writing down what their teachers were saying or were writing on the board. In other classes (e.g. Drawing course; Human Geography course; Removable Prosthodontics course; Pharmacology course) students were actively involved in the classroom activities, working in different dynamics (e.g. small groups; large groups; pairs), engaging in task development, and participating in discussions about task and content-related issues. Actually, one might say that in these classes students seemed quite autonomous in their efforts to learn and they even seem very pleased with their interaction with the tasks and with the modes of communication and/or interaction among themselves and with their teachers.

Teachers assessment practices were quite consistent with their teaching approaches. That is, those teachers who fostered student active involvement in their own learning tend to make use of both formative and summative assessments as a means to improve learning, to use a variety of assessment tasks, to distribute quality feedback on a regular basis, to make learning assessment integral to teaching and learning, to define criteria, and to engage students

in self and peer-related assessments. In these cases, teachers seemed to be quite aware of the role that assessment could play in student learning improvement and, therefore, grading students was far from being the main and priority issue in the assessment process. On the other hand, assessment practices of those teachers who mainly “told the curriculum” and expected students to listen tended to be rather narrow in scope. That is, instead of being integral to learning and teaching aiming at improving these processes, assessment was totally oriented to grade students. This view is quite consistent with the “telling and listening” perspective on curriculum development. Therefore, processes such as student participation, feedback distribution, self and peer-assessments, and task development were totally absent in those teachers’ curricular practices.

The nature of tasks together with certain classroom dynamics (e.g. small-group work, tutorial approaches, student presentations,) rather than the nature of subject-matter itself, seemed to make a difference when one talks about issues such as high student involvement in curriculum development, distribution and use of quality feedback, interactive modes of assessment, transparency in the assessment process, teaching and assessment innovation, and ample learning opportunities. These were indeed the sort of “characteristics” that could be observed in courses such as Drawing, Removable Prosthodontics, Pharmacology, and Research Seminar on Human Geography and that are somewhat consistent with both results and recommendations of the literature above-discussed.

## 5. Conclusions and reflections

The following conclusions and reflections were selected for the purposes of this particular research paper.

1. The study showed that teaching and assessment practices at the higher education level could be frankly improved. Hopefully, this means that institutions and their faculty members could play a fundamental role in ameliorating student learning. Thus, faculty professional development emerged as an issue that should deserve more attention. Indeed, one could learn that most of the teachers involved in this research, even the ones that could promote excellent teaching and learning environments, made much more use of intuitive approaches rather than of pedagogical grounded knowledge. Obviously, this can raise questions about the sustainability of innovative curricular practices. On the other hand, institutions might play a more active and significant role in curriculum policy contributing, for example, to discussing and clarifying their “project of knowledge” and the relationships between knowledge, pedagogy, and “being” (e.g. Barnett, 2009; Young, 2008).
2. Students did appreciate to be involved in curriculum development and this seemed to work as a means to motivate them to engage in all sorts of activities that, supposedly, help them to learn. This is a quite interesting and challenging issue to be discussed at the curricular practices level taking into account perspectives on the cultural and social construction of the curriculum (e.g. Pacheco, 2005).
3. Task selection is probably one of the most relevant issues concerning the development of the curriculum at the classroom level. Indeed, results of this study suggest that task nature, task form, and task content together with other conditions such as classroom dynamics, could induce quite favourable environments for teaching, learning, and assessment to occur at the highest level (e.g. Fernandes & Fialho).
4. Although most of the empirical data of this study were gathered through classroom observations, teacher practices were, at a large extent, the unit of analysis. This is a methodological issue that one might want to consider in further research studies since the possibility of using the classroom as whole as the unit of analysis seems more consistent with efforts to come up with more integrated and holistic views about what happens in the classrooms (e.g. Fernandes, 2011).

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