

## NOTES OF FIRST NETWORK MEETING

**JANUARY 30th 10.30 – 15.30**  
**Universities UK, Woburn House, Tavistock Square, London**

The meeting was designed to foster a sense of community and to enable the initial proposals paper ([www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre](http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre)) and ideas to be discussed and developed. A list of participants can be found on the project web pages. Discussion was based on four groups convened around the following four areas: - 1) educational research 2) staff and educational development 3) skills and curriculum development and 4) subject centre interests. The feedback received is helping to shape the project action plan.

### **SOME CHALLENGES**

#### **Questions and issues that surfaced during the meeting**

- ❑ **What do we mean by curriculum?**
- ❑ **Why imaginative curriculum? Is the site only about creative responses to curriculum design?** *RESPONSE a core principle is that curriculum design is inherently a creative process. Our starting point is that all curriculum designers are creative but some are particularly imaginative in their approach and we want to celebrate these. The idea of creativity is akin to that developed for innovation by Hannon and Silver (doing something new for my particular context not doing something that is different in a world context!).*
- ❑ **How do we work with complexity?**
  - ❑ Many levels of information
  - ❑ Many potential audiences
  - ❑ Many dimensions to the information
  - ❑ Many conceptions of the idea of curriculum
  - ❑ The absence of a common conceptual language
  - ❑ Where do we stop – potentially the whole of higher education
  - ❑ How do we prioritise?

*RESPONSE – This is a major challenge that we can only grapple with as we engage in knowledge/web site development. In the first instance, we may have to focus on a specific audience.*

- ❑ **What problem are we trying to solve through building a web site and developing the knowledge base?** *RESPONSE – We are not solving a problem but creating information that will enable others to solve their own real, imagined or as yet unimagined problems. The ‘problem is actually a challenge – see next response?*
- ❑ **People may not want to go hunting a website – they prefer to talk to other people.** *RESPONSE - the key challenge is to create a market for the knowledge and the cultures that promote usage!*
- ❑ **Who are the priority audiences?**
  - ❑ Academic tutors
  - ❑ New teachers / teachers on teaching certificate courses
  - ❑ Course leaders
  - ❑ Staff and educational developers
  - ❑ People involved in strategic development at institutional level
- ❑ **How do we truly engage teaching staff in thinking about the curriculum? Web information alone will not achieve this?** *RESPONSE – Information has to be connected to institutional/departmental processes and policies for reviewing and developing courses and modules. The network and an expanded version of the network in the future will have a key role to play. We are into large-scale cultural change on the scale of 5 –10 years.*
- ❑ **The importance of institutions/departments providing a local context for the use of any information about the curriculum.**
- ❑ **The need to inspire/motivate, help people think about and do things they haven’t done before. Site should encourage people to experiment.**
- ❑ **Potential danger of linear model proposed is that it sends the message that you only think about assessment at the end of the design process. Can it be altered to suggest more dynamic interdependence?** *RESPONSE – see for example good idea below.*
- ❑ **Research – not just what staff want/need but actual examples of how people design from scratch or review and modify a module/unit. Are there general principles that might inform knowledge development?**
- ❑ **Could staff search the web site using questions rather than topics?**  
*RESPONSE: of course*

## **SOME GOOD IDEAS**

- ❑ Web site or tool kit(s) for curriculum design? See examples at [www.ltss.bris.ac.uk/jcalt/](http://www.ltss.bris.ac.uk/jcalt/)
- ❑ More than a website, more like an expert advisory/consultancy/brokerage service. Needs to be supported with an advice and brokerage service (i.e. a knowledgeable person should be maintaining, developing and acting as an active agent to communicate with teaching staff/HEIs)

- ❑ Make website interactive – managed discussion boards e.g. 1) enquiry based (how do I? Where do I find out? Who is doing it?) 2) topic based debate 3) managed discussion 4) summary and lessons 5) Codified information embedded in website.
- ❑ **Perhaps the website could initially be focused on a single audience (e.g. those staff on ILT accredited certificate courses.)** This would permit the needs of particular users to be defined, create a socialised process in which the website materials can be introduced and enable evaluation of materials to be undertaken by both inexperienced and experienced users.
- ❑ HEIs/departments need to promote use by recognising the site or specific resources / advice in its own policy documents. Institutional intranets could/should use hot link to web sites.
- ❑ The home page could convey the message of building a curriculum from the basic building blocks in the linear model proposed. These could be animated and the opening sequence might bring them together in some way.
- ❑ It should be possible in the opening pages to launch in one of several directions (e.g. rational outcomes model or a process model or a negotiated curriculum.)
- ❑ The possibility of building own web page as someone logs in?
- ❑ There could be a Research Lab domain within the web site that enabled people involved in empirical or action research to discuss their findings.
- ❑ Are there some core themes around which the imagination could be constructed? (e.g. widening participation, transitions, first-year experience, retention and disciplinary cultures).

## MARKET RESEARCH

Interviews with a small sample of academic staff and staff developers had been conducted in four HEIs. Draft reports can be found at [www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/projects/curriculum](http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/projects/curriculum)

- ❑ Staff do not understand the term curriculum
- ❑ Course design is a very personal process – information needs to connect to social processes
- ❑ Must ensure that we avoid the danger of reinforcing what staff do already and that we emphasise the need to make the curriculum more exciting
- ❑ As the project is potentially huge, and a website is essentially passive, we need to prioritise what appears and when, use of new/original ideas/materials and use strong signposting.
- ❑ What do we want people to know and what is the best way to do it?
- ❑ Are we solving a problem that doesn't exist? Do we need to tie in with existing systems/ networks/environments?
- ❑ The project requires more than a website, members of curriculum team learn from each other – website needs to be used and managed in support of social learning environments
- ❑ Case studies thought to be a valuable component

- ❑ Innovative and creative ideas can be 'diluted' in their wider dissemination
- ❑ Good, bad and non examples, contextualised, may be valuable
- ❑ Multidisciplinary considerations can provide interesting subject contrasts
- ❑ How do people actually set about the task (process) of (re)designing curricula
- ❑ The real drivers for curriculum change are issues around recruitment, retention, results and resources
- ❑ Where do curriculum development teams begin, how do they progress and what are the processes involved.
- ❑ SCs have an important role to play in raising awareness of website and its resources.
- ❑ Staff are curious about what happens in other peer institutions. Any information here would be of interest particularly to course leaders.
- ❑ A website might be a resource on courses for new lecturers – these were an 'audience' which was faced with curricular issues through learning & teaching courses in HEIs.
- ❑ Another potential market is the CPD of ILT members.

### **CURRICULUM DISCUSSION THEME**

- ❑ The website though based on a rational model should also support other non-rational models.
- ❑ There are many other models of curriculum – ought these to be made visible for those who would want this?
- ❑ Key curriculum drivers recognised were:
  - ❑ Market forces – no students/too many students/backgrounds that did not prepare them for existing course
  - ❑ Resources – e.g. diminishing contact time
  - ❑ Professional Bodies
  - ❑ Changes in staff
  - ❑ Assessment
- ❑ If left on their own most staff would do what they have always done. But they are being forced by internal and external pressures to change. But context is one of general hostility to change. Any help that can be given would be welcomed.
- ❑ Many new bureaucratic models within which staff try to do what they have always done. At same time new policies like programme specification can provide a catalyst for thinking in different ways and a more systematic approach to design.
- ❑ Website has to provide smart solutions to overworked staff with little time or desire to spend changing what they do.
- ❑ The opening sequence could be presented as 1) key building blocks, 2) connections and basic design principles for that curriculum model 3) wrap around processes.
- ❑ Most people would not want to see a site map as indicated in the concept map. But some might.
- ❑ Curriculum development is about working together – members of the team provide enthusiasm, passion, commitment, imagination and it is this people oriented climate (setting) that provides the spark to motivate students
- ❑ The linear process may be seen as a straightjacket – it is important that users can approach the curriculum development process from any starting point and in any order
- ❑ Any rational planning model should be 'hidden' from the user
- ❑ The resource should be able to be approached from the perspective of the 'big (fundamental) questions' in curriculum – questions concerned with the need to change the curriculum in order to respond to some significant problem/issue

- ❑ A venn diagram may be a better and more accurate way to represent the curriculum design process with the phases as overlapping circles rather than boxes in a straight line
- ❑ There is a stage before the first box which is about how teams approach the process of curriculum development
- ❑ There is a limit on sharing as HEIs think of competitive advantage implications.
- ❑ People engage in curriculum design from the perspectives of both pragmatism and theory.
- ❑ The word 'Imaginative' can be treated at a range of levels. It will look very different to a PVC and a classroom lecturer. So how can 'Imaginative' be cashed within the confines of the project?
- ❑ How far does 'Imaginative' go? Is it about doing something a bit better, or about doing something radically different?
- ❑ We need to remember that the drivers of change might not be those we would prefer. Institutional managers might well be driven by performance indicators and funding considerations, but curriculum designers could bend these (less honourable) rationales to more valued ends.

### **CONCEPT MAP & WEB SITE**

- ❑ Potential danger of linear model proposed is that it sends the message that you only think about assessment at the end of the design process. Needs to be presented differently and other ways of viewing the curriculum also need to be acknowledge up front.
- ❑ The linearity of the model hints at a technical-rational approach (despite the disclaimers in the text) yet it does have the advantage of structuring things according to bureaucratic needs, such as QAA
- ❑ The linear model might stifle imagination.
- ❑ Users curriculum needs might be addressed through FAQs
- ❑ A short diagnostic test could be use to help identify the needs of the user
- ❑ Who is the resource aimed at and what are its purposes (compliance with QAA, retention of students, motivation of staff/students???)
- ❑ What do people actually want? Something quick and dirty, or something more considered? Could a website accommodate all levels of interest?
- ❑ Is the (apparent) decision to push for a website a premature foreclosing of discussion about the best way to promote curriculum development?
- ❑ There was an interaction between HEI role and the kinds of issues which would be important for the person. Could a website be structures to accommodate this diversity, perhaps with questions progressively focused via hyperlinks to examples of practice (seen as necessary to give the meaning to the rhetoric), other informants, literature, etc? Also link to other websites.
- ❑ A well designed and documented curriculum will be easier to explain and more meaningful to students
- ❑ Our group tended to agree that People need ideas as to how they can develop curriculum at their level of engagement (although they may seek prescriptions in the first instance as a quick answer to the problem facing them). Hence a range of resources needs to be made easily accessible.
- ❑ Drivers for change are likely to be: change in course rationale/philosophy; increased student numbers; changes in teaching staff; course attrition
- ❑ The way in is likely to be through pressing urgent user needs (e.g. resource constraints) rather than blue skies (idealistic) curriculum theorising

- ❑ Dichotomies were suggested along generic/subject and course design/module design dimensions
- ❑ Issues around developing teaching strategies to cut s/s contact and to develop distance modes likely to be acknowledged especially on technology courses
- ❑ The wish of teachers to protect the quality of the student experience was generally accepted as a particularly strong driver
- ❑ It should be acknowledged that some changes that we might perceive as 'for the better' are often resisted by at least some stakeholders
- ❑ Need to strike a balance between the extent to which the resource is module or course driven
- ❑ Important that the resource acknowledges the need for course coherence and doesn't provide a fragmented impression of curriculum development and design
- ❑ Perhaps a need for further research to clarify the questions/issues facing different categories of stakeholders though a tick list approach with opportunity to add further comments
- ❑ Negotiated curriculum was seen to be assuming more importance as was the need to relate theory and practice.
- ❑ Why is the GC in effect replicating what the SCs are supposed to be doing?
- ❑ However, it was recognised that there is a double epistemology from which curriculum emerges – the epistemologies of subject X and education.
- ❑ Case studies of effective practice could be helpful. These would be contributing to a curriculum for curriculum development.
- ❑ Important to infuse the information with the findings of research into student learning and what works. Could use story telling tactics.
- ❑ Search engines need to be able to pull in examples of X from SC databases
- ❑ A user needs to be able to move backwards and forwards from HEI site into this website.

### **STRATEGIC**

- ❑ What is deliverable within a year? You can't do everything, so where are you going to place your emphasis?
- ❑ Need to provide examples of the types of information project team is seeking in order to show network how it might help.

### **LTSN Subject Centre focus**

#### **Some reasons why the 'imaginative curriculum' is of interest to Subject Centres.**

- Apparent lack of any imagination in some areas of the curriculum!
- Some subjects are being forced to re-think their degree programmes to take account of falling student numbers and changes in pre-degree qualifications and curricula
- Problem of current compartmentalised expertise. The need to grow a deeper level of understanding of curriculum amongst wider groups. Need to explore people's espoused knowledge of curriculum and their tacit knowledge of curriculum.

- There are pressures to respond to the needs of employers, professional bodies as well as funding agency demands so the need to be creative with the curriculum is essential!
- The LTSN can be a broker in the process of developing new curricula. It can develop and disseminate conceptual tools and simple proformas for prompting questions and discussions in the design of new curricula.

The group holds broad notions of curriculum that differed in terms of individual focus. The major and instant concern was that general curriculum means ‘nothing but content’.

**The challenge is to get academics to ask the question ‘what does curriculum mean’ for them.** Understanding the drivers that might exist for this to happen were explored and a quick brainstorm of how to get people engaged followed:

- LTSN can provide workshops with practical tasks
- We need to use clever and subtle ways of engaging staff
- We need to use the talent of those teaching and seek to develop a common language and discourse around curriculum
- It is critical we engage the experts in the debate
- It has to be about changing attitudes and values.

The unquestioned assumptions about curriculum lead to many academics to be secure in their own approaches. “Staff are brilliant at getting students through their exams”.

The framework for identifying current positions of academics on curriculum:

Incompetent	Unconscious
Incompetent	Conscious
Competent	Conscious
Competent	Unconscious

Howell, W, 1992 *The Empathetic Communicator* Belmont, Wadsworth.

Many academics are competent in their current practices but unconscious of wider curriculum issues or theory. The frameworks they operate with are often implicit and largely unquestioned and they do not have a language for talking about curriculum. We need to help develop the discourse in HE.

The group discussed the relationship between ‘education’ itself and ‘curriculum’ if curriculum is all-inclusive including underlying ideology and philosophy. But since all curricula do have an underlying, albeit probably implicit ideology (unless one subscribes to a completely objectivist view of knowledge), then one is obliged to explore the relationship between these two and is lead into a discussion of the purpose of ‘education itself’.

## **What do we know about the process of curriculum/course design?**

There are a number of inhibitors to imaginative curriculum design that we need to be aware of in support of Subject Centre constituents. e.g.

- Academics want quick solutions because they are busy people BUT they are resistant to ready made solutions.
- The disabling nature of the perceptions of professional benchmarking, which tend to make academics feel constrained in their creativity in the curriculum.

There are also supporting factors for the imaginative curriculum design potential. e.g.

- The potential of the LTSN to produce relevant case studies, prompt series and other supporting subject based resources.
- The decentralised web-opportunities
- The work of the ILT in professional development
- The useful work of accrediting professional bodies
- Recognition of the importance of people in the process of design. Academics ask other academics and this is the sort of process we need to tap into.
- Importance of the informal review processes that exist in departments and faculties.
- There are many external pressures driving need for imaginative curriculum change (e.g. employers, student retention issues, multi disciplinary teaching etc.)

To help give focus to imaginative curriculum design we can:

- Create a discipline appropriate toolkit designed around questions that we know motivate academics and in language they find familiar.
- Find the concepts that generate enthusiasm and interest in subject specific work/ curriculum design
- Identify the different aspects of knowledge and design skills to show the relevant elements
- Employ creative designers to the design process or develop a template for this.

To help support staff obliged to develop a new curriculum within professional constraints we can:

- Find ways to support experts in re-inventing themselves around a new professional programme.
- Create environments where such professionals can think more laterally around the curriculum
- Seek ways to engage those who may feel very threatened by the new processes and loss of past identity.

### **Group discussion on the map**

The group gave some focus to the current map. The issues raised included:

- The representation is linear and parts of the curriculum design process are clearly not linear.

- The diagram is based on an educational developers view of curriculum which is not necessarily the way academics in general would approach such issues.
- The model runs the risk of being about everything in learning and teaching!
- It is important to include philosophy and rationale of curriculum.

### **Group discussion on the website**

We anticipate the academics will attempt to access curriculum design information from (in this order):

- Colleagues within their department.
- Colleagues within their subject.
- Local sources of information (libraries etc.)
- LTSN Subject Centre contacts and web sites (so need to link to these).
- Unlikely to use a national website without other activities that could support their knowledge and use of it. (LTSN SCs could organise these for their communities as appropriate.)

### **How do we want the network to work?**

The LTSN group would like to develop a particular set of activities around the work on curriculum design they began at the workshop.

### **These ideas have been usefully summarised by Professor Chris Webster:**

The LTSN group had a shared interest in unpacking the issues and a willingness to explore perspectives arising from other disciplines in almost a haphazard way. This resulted in a really interesting synthesis of ideas - from design theory, engineering design, institutional economics, social work, LTAC, and drama. Amongst the useful analytical ideas emerging were:

1. The idea of a trilogy of tools for imaginative curriculum design:
  - (i) pedagogic knowledge;
  - (ii) subject knowledge and
  - (iii) creative design principles
2. The idea of an ever expanding curriculum space which can no longer be exhaustively mapped into any particular curriculum. The knowledge decision space expands with the growth of subject knowledge, pedagogic research knowledge and the scope for knowledge utilisation in society.
3. The idea that there are many ways in which searching this expanding knowledge space can be made tractable for the purpose of designing a particular curriculum - e.g. process-oriented, product-oriented, content-oriented; random selection (the equivalent of a particular set of individuals within a department - product of chance and some systematic events - deciding themselves what should be taught, how and to what end); carving up the space between different departments (niching); and so on.
4. The idea that there are different dimensions to curriculum design, the importance of which reflects ideologies, pedagogies, values and missions in different

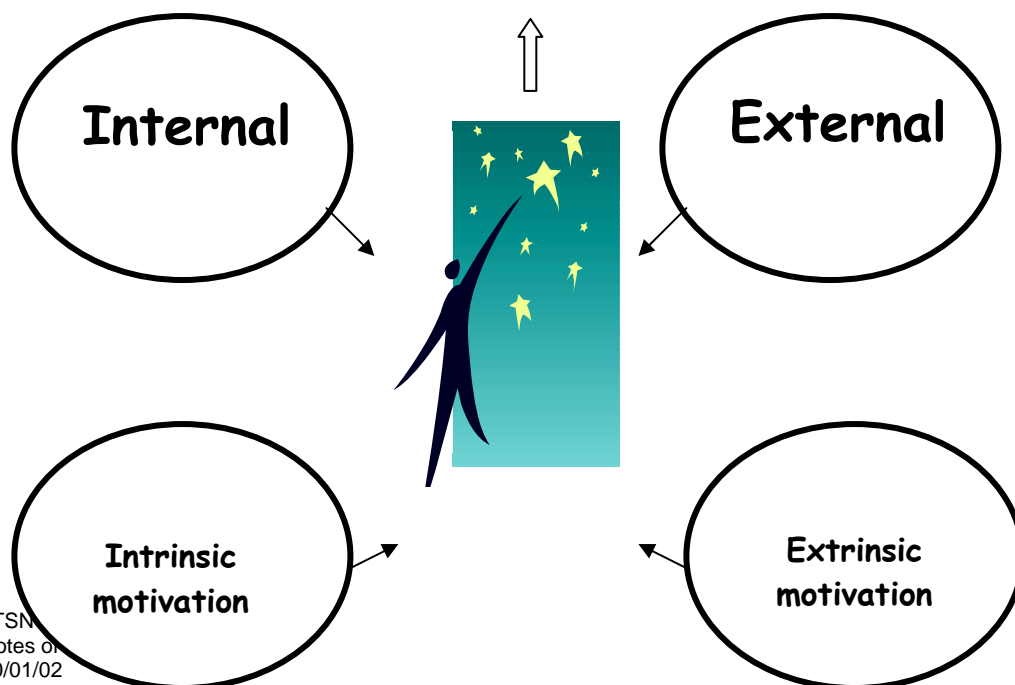
subjects. For example there is a person-oriented vs. product oriented dimension. There is also a planned versus spontaneous dimension.

5. The latter point, points also to the idea that there are various ways in which curricula evolve - models of curriculum change as opposed to models of curriculum structure or function. In some subjects, curricula evolve faster than others. While all knowledge is expanding exponentially, some curricula are more stable than others; some are more fluid than others. Some evolve spontaneously as a function of emerging research interests and shifting paradigms. Others change by conscious planning - by professional and subject groups.
6. The idea that there is a tension between the inherently evolutionary nature of knowledge development and need to take a one-time shot in consciously planned curricula.
7. The idea that curricula could in theory emerge with a degree of spontaneity if the choices of individual academics were governed by principles that guaranteed a degree of alignment. i.e. simple rules plus decentralised curricula decisions can minimise the need for alignment by imposed plans (the latter suffers from an inherently inferior knowledge base since the real knowledge lies with the teacher).
8. The latter - process driven curricula change - is consistent with the autonomy of academics, creativity, research-teaching linkage, and greater student and teacher enjoyment.

### Creative Design Process

(One model)

Creating the optimal tension zone for the individual



**Preparation  
Generation  
Incubation  
Verification/Evaluation**

**Developing**

