Facing both ways: An analysis of the structuring principles underpinning the integration of theory and practice in a Journalism and Media Studies curriculum in a “research-intensive” university.

Jo-Anne Vorster  
Rhodes University  
South Africa

In this paper I investigate some of the bases for struggle in a collaborative project among lecturers in a Journalism and Media Studies (JMS) department which aimed to develop a curriculum which integrates media studies (MS) and media practice (MP). The purpose of the integration project was to create coherence between the theory and practice components of the course; to enable students to make the links between the theory they study in MS and the practice fields and also to enhance the academic integrity of the practice specialisations through the theorization of practice.

This department is situated in a “research-intensive”, traditional university. What emerged from the research reported on in this paper is the centrality of the nature of knowledge in driving curriculum coherence. This is congruent with Muller’s (2008) argument that the nature of the knowledge (whether predominantly conceptual or contextual) should direct the manner in which a curriculum is constructed. Within a professional qualification it seems as if the nature of knowledge and the nature of enterprise of the university guide (constrain) the possibilities for curriculum content and processes.

Lecturers teaching the fourth year of a four-year JMS course participated in a curriculum development process which lasted for approximately one year; the length of the process was mainly due to the difficulties they experienced in reaching consensus about curriculum content and associated pedagogic processes. The aim of the fourth year (which is regarded as the “professionalizing” year in the JMS programme) is to develop graduates who are able to integrate their theoretical knowledge of the field of JMS with the practice of a journalistic or media specialisation. In curriculum meetings lecturers spoke about the need for students to be “hybrids”, to “wear two hats”, to be able to “code switch”, to be able to “integrate” and “bridge the gap” between theory and practice. There was therefore a keen awareness of the need for the curriculum to “face both ways”, towards the academy and towards the profession (Barnett 2006, Wheelahan 2007). In this paper I interrogate the degree to which it may be possible for the curriculum to face both ways within the context of a professional course such as JMS in a research-intensive institution.

1 The following practice fields are taught in the department: writing and editing, design, photo-journalism, radio, television and new media. In the first two years of the four-year JMS programme, all students are taught writing and editing, design and a semester each of radio and television. In the third and fourth years, they specialise in one of the above-mentioned six practice fields.
2 At the end of the fourth year graduates are supposed to be “industry-ready” and they are educated and trained to cast a critical gaze onto the industry and to influence it. It is envisaged that many of the graduates of the department would take up leadership positions in media enterprises. There was thus a need for students to develop the dual capacity to practise and think about their particular journalistic craft in an academic and socially critical way (an axiological focus to the curriculum).
Journalism is an example of what Bernstein (2001) terms a “new profession” and, Muller (2008) classifies as a “fourth generation” profession. However, it a profession that is loosely organized, without, for example, a professional board that regulates the curriculum. My investigation focuses on the structuring principles of the hybrid knowledge that is considered to be the ideal in a JMS curriculum as well as what seems to be possible in terms of the degree to which teaching and learning can / is required to “face both ways”. For example, it is important to consider the nature of the discourses of MS and the practice fields. The degree to which the practical fields can be considered vertical discourses is examined. The data I use for this analysis includes transcribed curriculum conversations and interviews with lecturers, curriculum documentation as well as theoretical texts on the nature of knowledge and practices in the different practice fields such as photo-journalism, design, new media, radio and television. (For the purpose of this paper, I shall select two or three of the practice fields to analyse).

The curriculum project of softening the boundaries between theory and practice was clearly problematic and it was evident that a syncretic solution to the theory-practice dilemma would be difficult to forge. It is therefore important to understand “the underlying principles that keep the components [of the JMS curriculum] apart” (Shay 2009).

One principle relates to the degrees of verticality and horizontality of the discourses and knowledge structures of the various specialisations, while another relates to what it is that the fields specialise in terms of the epistemic and social relations (ER and SR) to knowledge and how. I use aspects of Maton’s Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) to illuminate the complexities of these underlying structuring principles. I examine how the JMS curriculum as a whole aims to establish the relative importance of the epistemic and the social and between the contextual and the conceptual through its explicit regulative discourse. I argue that the different practice fields exhibit various strengths of the epistemic and the social relations; that they require different “settings” of the ER and the SR and that this is part of the basis for the struggle for curriculum coherence. Furthermore my analysis of the data indicate that in the case of the JMS curriculum the instructional discourse is determined more by the forms of knowledge of the various fields (MS and MP) than by the RD.

In addition, I use Maton’s LCT (Semantics) to examine the principles structuring the degrees of context dependence-independence of MS and the various practice fields. The different fields exhibit different degrees of semantic gravity (SG) and have differential capacity for strengthening semantic density (SD). Theoretical disciplines exhibit relatively low degrees of semantic gravity and high semantic density. When an academic programme aims to “face both ways” or develop graduates who are “hybrids” the requisite relationship between SG and SD needs to be established. This is, I argue, a function of the form of knowledge of the field, but is also to an extent influenced by the nature of the institution or enterprise (Henkel 2005) in which the field is taught, since different kinds of institutions privilege different forms of knowledge.

I therefore argue that it is the confluence of the settings of the Specialisation and Semantics codes that will determine the capacity of a professional programme to “face both ways”.