

Reflections on Curriculum Development by a New Academic

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Abstract:

New members of academic teaching staff will encounter any number of issues and problems in their first year. This paper discusses the issues encountered in the first year of a lecturing post and the efforts put into writing and compiling a new, core level 3 module. The paper explores experiences of curriculum development, discusses lessons learnt and exhibits reflections based on the knowledge accumulated from attendance on a Professional Development Programme designed specifically for new teaching staff. Emphasis rests on the design and implementation of the course, with specific focus on intentions, content, assessment and delivery. Reflections on peer and student feedback are also provided.

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Introduction and Background

New members of academic teaching staff will encounter a large number of issues and problems associated with their new position; these will be associated with their new role(s), new location, different student backgrounds and different colleagues. Most of these issues and problems can be unforeseen and unexpected. Problems will range from juggling preparation, stimulating student interaction, unexpected variations in the abilities of students, suppositions of the way students learn, expectations of students' prior knowledge and experiences of life, and the importance of cultural differences between university levels and between students.

Books often provide guidance on how to become an 'effective' lecturer, but reflections on experiences and methods of dealing with problems are rare even though potentially they could provide lessons to pass on to the next generation of academics. The purpose of this paper is to examine and explore the experiences of curriculum design from the perspective of a new academic in the field of economics. As a new academic, I draw from my own experiences and illustrate that the level of success was driven by the quantity and quality of interaction, guidance and advice given by existing teaching staff.

Prior to taking up this lecturing position I was a Research Fellow with no teaching requirements, at a different university. Three months before the start of the contract, the proforma and syllabus for a level 3, core module were sent to me for perusal. This module, named International Economic Policy (IEP), was for students following a BA (Hons) in International Business Economics. The proforma and syllabus had already been written by a member of staff prior to my arrival (hence details of

assessment were already beyond my control).¹ Given that the module would be strongly associated with my background in international economics, I was very pleased to be offered the chance to teach a core module that appeared to be close to my research interests, and I duly accepted the offer.

I immediately obtained contact with academic colleagues and friends across a number of universities to collect advice and guidance. The advice from colleagues illustrated that my first year would be relentless, with streams of students, requests from other members of staff and numerous administrative requirements.² They stressed that preparation was very important and that I should begin writing the module before commencement of the post. This included using unused holiday at the end of the previous contract to work on the design and content of the new module. In order to get ahead, I decided to write the whole course during the summer (in my spare time, evenings, and holiday) and to submit my design to the Module Leader³ in late August to obtain some constructive feedback, prior to commencement of the module.⁴ In this paper, I describe my experiences of curriculum development for a core level 3 module and present reflections on knowledge accumulated on a Professional Development Programme (PDP).⁵

Like many new lecturers with high expectations of students and strong intentions for professional success, I had decisions to make on content and judgements

¹ Hence, the aims, objectives, needs of the students, co- and pre-requisites and the learning outcomes were already stated prior to my input. This meant that the course was already deemed appropriate for the university's commitments to students and for the degree that the students were taking.

² I did not realise in advance that I also had to enrol on a Professional Development Programme (PDP), and the School's QAA's SPR, which would take place in my first term in post, would also consume so much time!

³ As this module would be a core, it was decided that a more senior member of the School should have ultimate responsibility for the quality of this module.

⁴ Although keen and eager to develop courses, I had only written a couple of lectures and numerous conference presentations, but never sequential lectures.

⁵ Enrolment on the PDP is a requirement for inexperienced lecturers when joining the University. Successful completion is a requirement of the University before either tenure is granted or the probationary period is officially complete. Successful completion also gives the candidate automatic ILT status and a PG (Cert.) TLHE.

to make concerning the methods of teaching. The content of the essay surrounds the elements of curriculum development detailed by Cannon and Newble (2000, p. 71). They suggest that, although there is no straightforward formula to guide lecturers in curriculum development, “our major concern is to ensure that each element – intentions, teaching, assessment, content – is considered and that the links between the elements are thoughtfully made”. The structure of this paper is based on the chronology of elements: first comes intentions; this is followed by content, assessment and then teaching. Reflections are then summarised using peer and student feedback that was received during, and at the end, of the academic year. Finally conclusions are drawn.

Intentions

Being keen and eager to be a success as a lecturer generated high expectations of myself with intentions of generating stimulating and interesting modules. With respect to this IEP module, my intentions were to:

- ?Have a content that was relevant to contemporary world issues
- ?Encourage students to question the theoretical content and its practical relevance
- ?Stimulate students’ analytical thought
- ?Engage and inspire students’ minds
- ?Encourage high levels of interaction between students.

In order for the students to be inspired enough to question the content of the course, the perspective was adopted that the economic content should include contemporary issues highlighted in the media. The more the topics are discussed in the media over the year

of study then the greater the likelihood of students recognising the usefulness of the content of the module and to engage in study of the subject. This would allow students with an interest in current affairs to be able to interpret the origins of international and national macroeconomic decision making. It also gave me the option of analysing and discussing media coverage that appeared up to and including the day of the lectures and seminars. Moreover, if the media were to highlight activities that were of relevance to issues covered earlier in the course, students would be consulted at the beginning or end of seminars and encouraged to refer to these issues in their essays and exam preparation.

Given these prior considerations, time was spent wondering how these ideas would be integrated into a highly interactive and stimulating course. Other important issues were also pondered over, including whether I would be solely transmitting knowledge to the students or whether there would be recognisable interaction and exchange of knowledge, skills and attitudes between students. The latter were believed to be necessary for students to appreciate and develop their understanding of key concepts and ideas. Although one of the aims of this module was for it to be interactive and stimulating, there were other factors that could be viewed as being important. For instance, it was also an intention to encourage students to feel in control of their learning by encouraging hands-on-learning, engagement in the topic and the development of curiosity to stimulate students to find out more. To encourage this hands-on-learning, a clear and explicit structure was deemed desirable, which had no tenuous relationships between sequential lectures and seminars. It was believed that a clear and explicit structure would be more likely to encourage students to engage in the subject, to question the theoretical content and to appreciate its practical relevance.

To fulfil some of these intentions, a scaffolding approach was explicitly adopted. Theoretical developments would build on the knowledge students obtained from a level 2, core module in International Trade and Multinational Business. Theory would

become the first building block of the scaffold. Some of the newest theory would then be integrated, considered and developed.⁶ Finally, case study evidence and contemporary issues would be analysed and this would be the third and final element of the scaffold.

Content

Students following the BA (Hons) International Business Economics degree are required to take a core module on International Trade and Multinational Business in level 2. This comprises a number of concepts including the central theorem in international economics – the Heckscher-Ohlin theorem. Given the proforma and this prior knowledge of the students, it was decided that IEP would be grounded on the Heckscher-Ohlin theorem and the purpose of the module would be to bring students' knowledge up-to-date with the most recent theoretical and empirical developments in the field. Particular focus would be on academic articles that had been published over the previous five years.

Course content is a broad concept meant to include all aspects of knowledge, skills and attitudes relevant to the course and to the intellectual experiences of students and their teachers, but there are different types of criteria on which we should value our curriculum. These include philosophical, psychological, practical and student criteria (Cannon and Newble, 2000).⁷

⁶ These include the recent developments in skill-biased and sector-biased technological change, combining import-substitution and export-promotion macroeconomic policy orientations, fiscal harmonisation and the *e*-economy, globalisation, foreign direct investment and the immiserisation of wages of unskilled workers in developed countries.

⁷ Cannon and Newble (2000, p. 72) also suggest that “courses may reflect explicit legal and professional requirements”. This issue is not covered here because of the lack of professional requirements in the economics awards at the ‘University of the West of England, Bristol’.

Philosophical Criterion

The philosophical criterion focuses on the theoretical, methodological and value positions of the curriculum. A module should be a means to enhance the intellectual development of students, and not an end in itself. As detailed above, in order to enhance the intellectual development of students, it was decided that the module would adopt a scaffolding approach and build on the knowledge obtained at level 2. To achieve this aim it was decided that the first few lectures would recap and reorientate students' knowledge so that they would revise the foundations of the intended IEP module.⁸ To enable a high level and ease of understanding throughout the course, similar issues would be grouped together.⁹

Cannon and Newble (2000, p. 72) suggest that content that is solely concerned with technical matters has no place in university education. This may well differ between disciplines, but to encourage analysis, and a high level of understanding that economics is a "living, breathing science" (Ormerod, 1994), we must illustrate to students that as soon as we have identified a relationship then this relationship will break down. Goodhart's Law essentially states that the control of a symptom or part of a problem will not cure that problem; instead, the part that is being controlled now becomes a poor indicator of the problem. Recognition and understanding of such technicalities is *very* important in certain disciplines, such as economics, and the appreciation of technicalities can lead to good, rigorous, analytical thought.

Technical matters need to be appreciated and understood in economics if analysis and evaluation are to be developed. For instance, economic theory suggests that there is

⁸ In practice, throughout the early lectures my focus was on whether the students' knowledge of the core concepts was clear and explicit. To identify whether this was the case, open questions were frequently asked to students in lectures and seminars.

⁹ For instance, skill-biased technical change was followed by sector-biased technical change.

an inverse relationship between inflation and unemployment – commonly known as the Phillips Curve. This relationship can most easily be appreciated and understood through the use of diagrams, which can be technical. It is only when we appreciate that a relationship is complex and does not always hold that we can develop our understanding and appreciation of associated, complex relationships. Within the economics discipline it is only through the appreciation of general and specific issues (including technicalities) that deep rather than surface understanding can be achieved. As economics is an analytical, human science,¹⁰ it is only through deep understanding that rigorous analysis can be achieved.

The scaffolding approach was adopted to help develop and enhance the philosophical criterion. The theoretical, methodological and value positions of the curriculum could then be developed and constantly revised over the duration of the module to enhance the intellectual development of students *and* the knowledge of the module should benefit students' understanding when international issues are discussed in the media. Such issues include the policies and issues discussed at the World Summit for the environment in Johannesburg, which include the discussion of trade, environment, employment and poverty.

Psychological Criterion

Content should i) be carefully integrated to avoid fragmentation and consequential loss of opportunities for students to develop deep approaches to learning, ii) provide opportunities to emphasise and develop higher-level intellectual skills, such as reasoning, problem solving, critical thinking and creativity and iii) relate to the

¹⁰ Some would term economics an *art* rather than a *science*, as we're unable to use 'vacuums' (such as within the Chemical disciplines) to thoroughly understand all of our policies.

'process' activities and to the development of attitude and values (Cannon and Newble, 2000, p. 72).

The integration of topics for this module for the achievement of the psychological criterion proved to be one of the most difficult to achieve. One reason for this difficulty was that all topics related to each other to different extents. A logical progression to develop deep approaches to learning and the development of higher-level skills presented itself as a difficult task. How could this be achieved? Many of the topics required others to be discussed in advance. The organisation of the module would be key to the logical progression and for the development of logical thought over the duration of the module. Modules with similar content taught at other universities were perused, while discussion with peers and frequent reflection and redrafting were undertaken to tighten the line along which the course would develop. This took a surprisingly large amount of time, for which I was not prepared. I was left wondering whether the amount of effort it took to develop a highly contemporary and innovative module would be appreciated by the students, or whether I should have used a recent text book that provides a broad sweep of the issues (usually in a relatively dry and uninspiring way).

To encourage the development of higher-level intellectual skills, the course would require students to present recently published academic papers to the rest of the class. In order to teach others, we need to understand what we are saying in advance. Presentation of non-textbook content was believed to be one way to achieve this goal. The provision of opportunities to develop higher-level intellectual skills, reasoning, critical thinking and creativity were also reflected in the structure of the course. Academic papers would be presented by a different group of students each week, which in turn had to follow a lecture with appropriate content.

Practical Criterion

It is an unfortunate and sad fact of university life that few students attend every lecture and every seminar. The provision of reading materials is therefore essential for students to catch up and keep up with the knowledge being disseminated in sessions from which they were absent.

One of the main problems with attempting to include some of the most up-to-date literature and ideas in a course is that textbooks cannot contain such content. This made the practical criterion of course development difficult to achieve. For this reason, an assortment of journal articles was selected as the essential materials for student reference. These journal articles would also feed off of several textbooks that could be used for understanding at a less rigorous stage. Hence there was conflict between the intentions to be up-to-date and the practical criteria of textbook availability, although this may be inevitable as it takes time for academic articles to be fed into textbooks.

To facilitate ease of access to the required information and knowledge, two text books were recommended that would provide core information and the academic articles would be collected and made available to students in a restricted loan area of the University library. These two complementary sources were deemed necessary, as the content was to be so new that this information had not yet been summarised in textbook format. This was also influenced by the availability of key teaching resources of library materials, computer equipment (including restricted access to Journal articles via the Internet) and the physical environment of the library itself.

Student Criterion

Content may be selected to reflect the needs and interests of the group, but there is no straightforward formula to guide lecturers to ensure that the content and the student considerations are directly linked (Cannon and Newble, 2000, p. 76).

An important criterion for any level 3 course is that it should provide a sound foundation for advanced study, should the students wish to progress to study the topic at a higher level. This means that the content of the course should include a breadth of core issues that may be required at other universities for progression to the Masters level, but also some areas in greater analysis to ensure that the content is in the required depth for level 3. To achieve this aim, the core literature would be presented in the first few lectures, and this would be the foundation for theoretical and empirical development in later sessions.

Content should be up-dated each year. As research is undertaken across the world it is vitally important to update our courses to make sure they are relevant, interesting and contemporary. It was felt that it is vitally important that the module leader does not shirk the responsibility of making the content relevant, interesting and contemporary. Perhaps the ideal time for this reflection and active updating is best done over the following summer. However, over an academic year, not only does the lecturer come across new publications, case studies and theoretical developments, but the lecturer can also reflect on how an individual session went, whether students were engaged with the content and the level of understanding of students. This knowledge and reflection will be lost the greater the period of time left between the presentation of the material and the summer. So for the sake of an effective and interesting module for the next year, it was perceived that the re-writing of lectures would be most effectively carried out on a continual basis, with academic literature integrated into lectures throughout the year and

the rewriting and reordering of lecture and seminar content done in the hours and days after the lecture and seminar. This was, of course, the intention. In reality, the first year would be relentless, with streams of students, requests from other members of staff and numerous administrative requirements and so time for such module development was limited. Something had to give to ensure that periods for reflection were not lost, and that's where the evenings came into their own. Out goes the social life and through the front door comes the work – perhaps an invasion of privacy, but it would get easier with experience; wouldn't it?

Assessment:

Assessment is an important element of curriculum design and should be related to the objectives of the course. The proforma stated that there would be two assignments and a three-hour exam; I had to adopt this format.

Although these constraints were 'set-in-stone' for the first year, there was still room for manoeuvre. My personal preference is to avoid a large amount of marking at one point in time. Another aim was for all of the course content to be understood, at least to some degree, by all students. To achieve these aims, the decision was taken by the acting Module Leader and myself to develop a rolling approach for individual essay submission that would be based on group presentations. Each presentation would be grounded on a recently published academic article that would be directly related to a lecture. Essays on the topic would be submitted by the students one week after presentation, therefore providing me with regular but very small amounts of marking.

Since designing this course, I have learnt that this is termed 'Jigsawing' in the educational literature. It appears a useful and effective way of ensuring a high level of interaction between students and for students to take control of their own learning. It

also seems that students help each other in the process of learning, as students in the audience are encouraged to ask questions to the students presenting the academic paper. Students also develop other skills through the appreciation of the Jigsawing and Scaffolding approaches; these include presentation and communication skills.

Teaching:

As different students learn in different ways, I decided to adopt several approaches to teaching while the course was being developed. From the attendance of the PDP during the teaching of the IEP course, I identified that these teaching techniques fall into three distinct styles. First, I was going to adopt the “Teaching as Telling or Transmission” approach (Ramsden, 1992, pp. 111-2) for my lectures, but to also encourage interaction by asking students questions for them to illustrate to me their understanding of the information. Second, I was intending to use the “Teaching as Organising Student Activity” approach (Ramsden, 1992, pp. 113-4) for the student presentation part of the seminars. Third, I was intent on using the “Teaching as Making Learning Possible” approach (Ramsden, 1992, pp. 114-6) for the case study analysis part of the seminars. The first approach would be most appropriate for ‘listeners’. The second approach would be most appropriate for ‘interactors’ and the third approach would be most appropriate for those who have to have a hard piece of evidence in front of them (‘empiricists’) before they can understand the theory.

Lecturing:

As a student, I always enjoyed lectures, but many of my peers fell asleep! I didn't want this to happen in my sessions so I intended to encourage a high level of interaction. To ensure students listen and stay awake, I would frequently ask questions that relate to the content of the session, and enquire how they perceive it relates to other lectures. It was hoped that if the students knew that I would ask them questions, then they may stay awake for longer. It would also encourage students to think about the theory and evidence that is being disseminated and to apply these pieces of information to hypothetical or real life situations. 'Breaks' would be employed to permit some time for students to reflect on the content before it is developed further and 'brainstorming moments' would also be employed in which students would be set a small task to do in a very short period of time, usually in the middle of the lecture.

As Baume and Baume (1996, p. 11) point out, questions can be used for a variety of reasons. In addition to making sure that the students had learned from the content of the lecture, questions could also be asked to encourage students to apply information. However, these latter types of questions would not always be asked to gain a response; instead they would be often answered by myself. Although not being explicitly interactive, if the students take the view that the pause is there as I'm waiting for an answer, many students would be stimulated to think about the topic faster just in case they were explicitly asked for the answer. These questions would not only engage the students further, they would also illustrate that the theory could be applied to the real world. Such questions would take the form of "how does this contrast with...?", "how can you put these ideas together?" or "can you think of an example that was recently in the media?".

Seminars:

An aim of seminars was to demand high levels of intellectual performance and involvement by students. From my own experience, students learn well by practising something and I was not surprised to find this emphasised in the educational literature by (Baume and Baume, 1996, p. 9). I decided to integrate a very high level of learning-by-doing into the course through the adoption of the jigsaw approach.

The second assessment¹¹ would be an individual essay based on a group presentation of an academic paper. [There would be a question relating to each academic paper in the exam.] This meant that the papers could be up-to-date, hopefully found to be interesting, and would also encourage students to interact, to discuss the content of each paper and then to pass the information that they have gathered onto their colleagues. This was believed to encourage active learning so that students would gain a deeper understanding of concepts.

The presentation of academic articles was deemed profitable for a number of reasons. First it would encourage students to reflect on content – the presentation of information requires a thorough understanding of the material. A conscientious student would ensure that their understanding is very high so that they do not embarrass themselves in front of their peers. Presentations would also encourage an efficient use of resources and develop other key skills – such as using PowerPoint presentations, overhead projectors, handouts and resources, as well as practice in presentation skills and in public speaking.

Further good reasons for running group presentations are highlighted by Priestley and McGuire (1983). Several of their reasons are pinpointed for further comment. First,

¹¹ The first assessment would be an essay that requires students to show a critical level of understanding of the basic principles of the course.

students would be encouraged to *express a point of view*, to illustrate their understanding or to present evidence to support or reject theoretical propositions, thereby improving their *conversational skills*. This in turn would provide the students with *increased self-confidence*. Other obvious but very important considerations are that students would gain experience and pleasure of *working with others* (and they might even *learn about each other*) and provide each other with *mutual aid and support*. The question and answer period at the end of each presentation would also encourage students to *give and get feedback* and develop their *problem-solving skills*.

In addition to the prior identification of appropriate journal articles for presentation, the second part of each seminar would include a case study article¹² from either a newspaper (such as the *Guardian*) and/or a magazine (such as *The Economist*). This would be accompanied by a set of questions on the article to get the students thinking, analysing and reflecting on the topic. Students would be required to download the appropriate article(s) in advance, thus improving their IT skills, and be prepared to answer and discuss their answers.

So how did the Year Go? Peer and Student Evaluations:

This year was definitely the most exhausting year's work that I've ever had! Two brand new modules to write, present and evaluate; a new job; a different city; the School had its QAA SPR; I was a student again on the PDP; streams of students and staff asking questions; administration and the individual chosen to run the School's Staff Seminar Series and, of course, module re-evaluation. Re-evaluations were made soon after presentation to ensure that improvements were made and not forgotten.

¹² that is directly applicable to the topic of discussion

Probably the best indication of performance would come from peer observations and student evaluations. Both are School requirements. The School also requires that lecturers reflect on peer observation and student module evaluations, and to implement changes accordingly.

Peer observations were undertaken by the Module Leader of the IEP course. Feedback from the Module Leader indicated that the pace of the lectures that he attended was OK, the pitch and information were excellent and the interactive level of lectures should be encouraged. Pace of information dissemination should really be dictated by the ability of the students to understand and reflect upon content in an effective and accurate manner, but to identify whether this is the case requires frequent questioning of students and their answers might depend on the ability of them to reflect and to tell the truth without appearing slow or less intelligent than their peers. Hence it is probably more difficult to judge pace than many other aspects of a lecture. This might well improve with practice and experience and more peer observations can only help to further improve this in the future.

Student evaluations, especially when carried out away from the lecturer – as was the case here, can be informative and should influence the manner and structure of the course in later years. Several aspects of student evaluations are worthy of further comment. Firstly it should be noted that 100% of the students survey indicated that they would recommend this course to a friend. This was interpreted as an indication that the students felt that the course was worthwhile and that the course would be judged as a success, should this be the objective.

When asked for their view on the course, positive feedback from the students suggested that the course was “very interesting and informative”, “clear and well structured”, “well organised”, “well researched” and, perhaps most importantly given

the intentions of the modules, “very important for understanding today’s economic policies”.

Not so positive feedback was also requested from the students when completing their module evaluation forms. The first thing to note relates to assessment. Although it should be noted that I had no influence over the structure or formats of the assessments, students indicated that they would like their presentation to be marked and for this mark to contribute to their final grade. This has been discussed with the Head of School and at the School meeting, and this has now been adopted for the following year.

Given this limited amount of negative feedback on the module evaluation forms, the course could be perceived to be a success. In achieving this level of success it should be noted that this is entirely attributed to the advice from colleagues and friends across universities that resulted in the preparation of the module before the start of term. On reflection, guidance and help for younger members of staff is deemed to be one of the most important contributory factors in determining the relative success of their initial year in this line of work. Staff at a university where a new member of staff is going to join should be approachable and actively encourage new members to interact with them and make them feel able to ask questions in advance. Members of staff at other universities should also be willing to spend a few moments providing guidance and advice to new teaching staff at other institutions.

Conclusions :

This paper has presented a reflection on curriculum development of a core, level 3 module in economics – International Economic Policy – from the perspective of a new academic. It has detailed and discussed experiences of writing and compiling the module and has presented a reflection based on the knowledge and readings gathered in the Professional Development Programme.

Particular emphasis has been placed on the experiences of design and implementation of the module, with focus on intentions, content, assessment and teaching. On reflection, advice from colleagues and the resulting preparation was the key to the level of success and the achievement of goals. Given attendance on a Professional Development Programme and the School's impending QAA's SPR visit, the lack of thoughtful curriculum development could have created many problems.

Given that the module is already highly interactive and has a contemporary content, research will be carried out to identify whether different methods of information dissemination and assessment provide a higher level of success. Given the different levels of student' ability, willingness to integrate into the group and attendance, larger/smaller group presentations would encourage lesser/greater reliance on student peers to help each student through the course. It would be interesting to identify whether smaller group presentations would result in a lower number of free riders and a greater level of understanding by each student. Moreover, with more time for reflection, it might be worth identifying whether different methods of lecturing could also be employed. For instance, frequent formative tests and interactive PowerPoint presentations could be employed in the future to concentrate student's minds and to capture their imagination.

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