

Engaging Teachers in Professional Development: Course Design at Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

A pertinent challenge in an online and/or physical learning setup is that learners appear to be forced by internal and external competitive pressures, as well as pressure of completing the coursework successfully rather than developing inspiration and commitment to learning. Globally, there is a consensus that real education means empowering teachers - enabling them to visualize issues and matters intellectually, ethically and critically. At the heart of this is teachers' continuous and reflective engagement in designing a course. This paper suggests that higher education must help their faculty members to develop the necessary knowledge, skills and attitude to be able to design and lead a quality course in their respective disciplines. It is important to recognize here that course design is not viewed as an official, standard and static document; it contains a sequence of planned experiences where students practice and achieve proficiency in content and applied learning skills.

1. Introduction

This paper explores an integrated and reflective framework for course design that can be incorporated in teachers' professional practices to foster high levels of student engagement. Course design is often defined as a course of study, which includes a series of textbooks and/or reading materials, outline of the topics to be covered, and objectives to be achieved. The paper is theoretically grounded in a belief that course design is a journey and a fundamental component of teachers' engagement in course design. Here a course design is not perceived as a policy document, which is developed by policy makers and/or interest groups. Rather, it is concerned with the process of what is planned, implemented, taught, learned, evaluated and researched at the higher education and in all disciplines (Marsh & Willis, 2007). Hence, course design is defined as an educational proposal offered by a university and is composed of updated and valued knowledge, skills, values and other dispositions that have been intentionally planned and implemented by a teacher of any discipline.

Teachers, with this theoretical construct, are constructive agents of social and educational reforms. Teachers theorize about what goes on in the social dynamics of their classroom, with individual learners and their particular learning processes, and what reform perspectives and actions are required (Bascia, et al, 2014). Teachers' engagement in the course design provides

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them with professional learning opportunities as well as opportunities to engage in macro-level process of educational reform.

As such, course design is a human and social construct; it is neither neutral nor given, but is value-laden and serves various agendas.

‘How we [teachers] conceive of [course] and [course design] is important because our conceptions and ways of reasoning about [the course] reflect and shape how we see, think and talk about, study and act on the education made available to our students’ (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006, p. 282).

This suggests that course design cannot be an instrument or document of control, indoctrination, narrowing of mind and reducing human learning to rote memorization and passing of standardized tests and high stake exams - actualities that have become endemic across the globe. It also implies that course design can become a means of unfolding, exciting, critical and creative higher order thinking, and holistic development. The general framework to design a course is geared towards the epistemic aims of education, i.e., critical and deep analysis of the needs; cultural and global values, demands and practices; and their transformation to serve educative, just, and dignified purposes.

The course design approach, as proposed in this paper, suggests a fluid, adaptable, flexible and reflective approach to develop both, high quality human resources and deep transformation processes. Effective course design and development is at the heart of teachers’ professional practices in higher education. As part of the academic planning process each year, tutors/educators design their courses by considering various key elements such as prior knowledge, student profiles, learning goals, activities to address and evaluate learning goals, etc. My analysis of course review at the higher education level indicates that the course design has largely not been considered as a systematic, student-centred, reflective approach. The course design is mainly viewed as a syllabus or a course outline indicating ‘... the content of a specific discipline or the set of units actually offered to the students and the timeframe in which they occur’ (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006, p. 270). Based on a review of literature, this paper suggests a transformative approach to course design, which may be used as a framework for course design in HE in Pakistan.

2. Theoretical Discussion on Approaches to Course Design

Course design is the most critical investment and a sure-fire way to enhance the sustainable, socio-economic welfare and cognitive outcomes of the students at higher education. It is also one of the major tools through which the cultural heritage of a society is transferred from one generation to the next. It is also a beneficial instrument, that universities develop, for bringing the desired change in the vision, thinking and practices of their students. Therefore, the goals of a course design include envisaged transformation of students’ skills, practices, beliefs and vision.

The epistemic aims of education, stated in a course, explain what preparations are needed by the students to understand, interpret, and produce knowledge according to the theory of knowledge adopted and followed by the society. It must be understood that the epistemic aims of education focus on the delivery of knowledge instead of the transference of information. It mainly helps students to differentiate between beliefs and opinions. However, it is important to recognize that course design is a human construct and may get affected by the epistemological perspectives that the teachers holds. In the following sub-sections some of these epistemological perspectives and/or approaches are discussed.

2.1. Positivist Approach to Course Design

A review of the literature suggests that mainly, the course design is understood as a complete programme of an institute, as define it as ‘the formulation and implementation of an educational proposal’ (Neary, 2002, p.40), in which the implementation includes an attempt to align learning outcomes with instructional strategies, and it takes place prior to the instructions. The course design, however, is considered as more of a decision to list the topics to achieve content coverage, with no or limited focus on how students would receive and understand the content. This perspective is rooted in positivistic orientation/ framework by which knowledge and the knowledgeable hold a position of hierarchy in academia. The teachers following this approach tend to believe that ‘knowledge exists in books and published records, waiting to be accessed by students’ (Toohey, 1999, p. 50), and that the role of a teacher is to ‘sift through it, select what is most important for students to know and transmit that to them’ (ibid p. 50). The outcomes of such an approach could be students obtaining abstract and theoretical learning which may not relate to students’ interest and/ or their life – students are placed at the receiving end in this learning continuum.

2.2. Technical Approach to Course Design

The professional qualifications or degree programmes, on the other hand, follow a performance based approach to course design. This approach has been derived from a pragmatic orientation towards education, which claimed that learning should be useful and relevant for students’ lives, and relevance was seen in terms of individual's performance towards meeting the needs of the world of work (Toohey, 1999). This approach mainly encourages practice of learning, which is built up into a skill of practice by following certain structures and formats, and which can be followed without much deeper thinking and problem solving approaches – students are placed at the performing edge in the learning continuum. The principle of performativity is, therefore, associated with the relationship of higher education to the job market. It implied doing rather than knowing, and performance rather than understanding (Barnett, Parry & Coate, 2001).

Critique on the knowledge and performance based approaches to course design raises fundamental questions such as: What is the purpose of higher education? Where are the students positioned in the education enterprise? What role could higher education play in enhancing balanced and healthy social relationships while ensuring economical and academic growth at par with the global needs? The current academic discourse at national and regional level indicates that the role of education is to empower students for future. It is broader than knowing or doing or vocational preparation and enhancing the economy. Rather, it is skills focused, disciplinary, process based to develop range of critical thinking and problem solving abilities, and involves a range of other experiences to prepare students for the 21st Century. As for knowledge and information, they are widely spread and easily accessible in an era where ‘rapid changes are taking place in the production and application of academic knowledge’ (Barnett, Parry & Coate, 2001). Moreover, the university education does not necessarily prepare students to cope with workplace expectations of the modern era (Biggs, J. & Tang, C., 2007). This situation could potentially increase intellectual, social and emotional pressures on the students, affecting their attitude and learning approaches at the higher education institutes. Also, research (Arthur, Davison & Lewis, 2005) indicate that knowledge should not be seen as fixed facts, rather it is changing in nature and constructed in a particular context.

Some researchers point out that these skills are not unique in the 21st century but rather, the degree of importance of these skills has intensified in the current workforce and economy (Rotherham & Willingham, 2010). Conventional 20th century education, which prepares people for routine cognitive and manual work, is no longer fit for the purposes of the 21st century.

Instead, the kinds of jobs which require expert thinking or complex communication are increasing (Levy & Murnance, 2004).

2.3. Integrated Approach to Course Design

A balanced and well integrated course positions students at the heart of planning teaching and learning in higher education. Barnett et al. (2001) propose that any course should be viewed as implementation of the three domains: knowledge, action and self.

‘Knowledge domain refers to those components of the [course] that are based on discipline-specific competences and those aspects of teaching and learning that develop subject specialistsThe “action” domain includes those competences acquired through “doing”: an oral presentation in the specialised area/ profession.....The “self” domain develops an educational identity in relation to the subject areas’ (p. 438).

This framework recognizes an interdependence and integration of the three domains, as students need to acquire subject specialised knowledge, practical skills and self-exploration to proceed constructively and confidently with their career and professional growth. The students within this framework are recognised as partners in an endeavour that has life-changing implications for them instead of being seen as instruments or product to be designed to run the labour industry or sustain academic or economical hierarchy. The integrated balanced approach also addresses the internalized perspectives of the course design. The theoretical underpinning of this approach is guided by the core goal of any education system, that is, providing contextually relevant quality education to the learners, enabling them to realise, develop and utilize their full potential, and thereby, maximizing their meaningful contribution to their and others’ lives.

The global research on students' weak learning experiences and superficial assessment raises issues of aggressive behaviours, and lack of confidence to cope with the fast growing technology era. These are being considered as growing factors of human illness (DiPerna, 2006). In these circumstances, individuals tend to become negative, judgmental, socially isolated and impatient. Their education seems to have failed in providing them with skills and attitudes so that they could cope with emerging expectations positively and confidently.

An internationalism perspective indicates that students cannot be isolated from the context (where they come from and in which they study); the relationship between an individual student and the environment is interactive. Since higher education has been growing as an international and global enterprise, and societies are evolving within multicultural and international setup, it is important to highlight internalization explicitly within the course design so as to help students to achieve ‘intercultural competence’. Intercultural competence is ‘the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes’ (Deardorff, 2006, p. 8). Hence the design, with this lens, requires collaboration, involvement and commitment among learners and teachers.

2.4. Course Design in the HE Context in Pakistan

A review of existing practices of teachers’ attempts to course design indicates that teachers at the higher education level mainly follow the syllabus and/or course scheme provided by the Higher Education Commission (HEC). The faculty prepares and delivers lectures around the topics, and follow the examination scheme as prescribed. The list of the topics is mainly guided by the HEC guidelines. This approach to course design is very much grounded in the controlled perspective of teacher education and student learning. The literature review indicated that in order to nurture students’ academic identity and building teachers ‘capacity, teacher and

student engagement in the course design is vital (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006, p. 281). This is in response to Freire's (1973) perspectives on critical consciousness in which he questions unjust and unequal power relationships in the curriculum design and assessment practices: pedagogical approaches and critical education perspectives must enable students from all classes and contexts, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, to develop critical consciousness resulting in their ability to develop critical and reflective stance of thinking, which takes place in a dialogical problem posing/ solving learning culture. It is important to recognize here that educational identity does not stand alone in an educational programme. The students' local, international and educational contexts are valuable sources to develop their educational identity. Therefore, developing professional and self identity has been viewed as a multifaceted aim involving the development of students' social, emotional and ethical identity within their identity in relation to the subject and professional areas.

Since course design is central to the teaching and learning process (Stefani, 2009), a shift from a product-oriented to a process oriented view of course design and a linear to a collaborative and reflective attempt in course design is inevitable. Grundy (1987) suggests that ' [course design] emerges from the systematic reflection of those engaged in the pedagogical act' [p.103]. This invites educators to think about how the different elements – Knowledge, Skills and Self - come together to help students to achieve quality learning outcomes. A course exists within a broader programmatic mandate and theoretical framework along with the participants' individual, contextual and cultural requirements, and their learning expectations. Therefore, it is important that various elements of a course, such as the teaching/ learning activities, assessment/ feedback, organization and management, learning support, the programme aims and scope – all need to be interconnected, and should address the intended learning outcomes. Such kind of congruence or alignment should not be seen as a straightforward task, as Ashwin (2015) suggests:

‘We should endeavour to reflect on our design regularly, ask ourselves what it is we want to achieve, what it is we want our students to be able to do, and whether our design best support students to be successful’ (p. 163).

A reflective approach to the course design is essential for establishing constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003) and/or congruence (Entwistle, 2009) among learning outcomes and teaching approaches and assessment procedures. Particularly, in the design of a professional course, none of the domains stands alone, neither the course design is an individual instrumental task; reflective interactions and collaborative partnership with relevant stakeholders is important to design any course regardless of its size, nature and level. Thus, an integration of intercultural dimension is essential in the teacher education programmes. Additionally, mutual ongoing negotiation/ interaction with students and teachers, students and their learning outcomes, and learning outcomes and other elements define course design as a living document. My view point is that there are three parallel interactive strands in the composition of a course design - Conceptual, Pedagogical and Developmental, where

- the Conceptual Strand includes philosophical and theoretical framework of an individual course within the broader aims of the programme and its educational and social mandate in relation to the profession/ discipline;
- the Pedagogical and Operational Strands include pedagogical decisions (including teaching and learning activities, learning support, assessment and feedback) in alliance with students' learning and management and organization; and
- the Development Strand includes professional consideration to analyze and improve student learning outcomes. Since the planning and implementation of a course takes place within a constantly changing system, it is important to include reflective inquiry within

the course design to bridge the gap between academic aspirations and attempts to operationalize them.

These strands run concurrently and inform each other through on-going reflections and interactive negotiation within and across the components, and with the students and the educational programme/course. We, as course designers, need to believe and understand that designing a course is a complex, multi-layered and dynamic process; not a linear/ one-off task and, therefore, requires an ongoing, interactive and reflective discourse at various stages of planning and its implementation, so as to help students to achieve meaningful learning outcomes. The literature suggests that a theoretical framework allows unpacking of reasoning about the decisions and, therefore, informs and guides the course design processes.

3. A Potential Framework: Reform Perspectives

This section discusses a recommended framework to be examined or followed for approaching course design at higher education level.

3.1. Conceptualization and Planning

It is important for course designers to reflect and examine what, why, and how to establish an environment conducive to learning and teaching. Despite the differences in the size, nature and level of any course, student engagement in reflective and analytical processes are crucial to transform their learning practices – helping them to self-regulate their learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007); therefore, learning through reflection and active participation in discourse, dialogues and collaborative tasks (Stephens & Crawley, 1994) should be the defining characteristic of any course design in higher education. The underlying principles of supporting students to become reflective and independent learners are being interpreted from a social constructivist perspective of learning, based on the idea that individuals are rational human beings and bring a wealth of experiences (formal and informal), and learning is established when they are able to discuss new ideas, and relate them to prior learning and real life experiences in an interactive and dialogical environment. Their prior learning, historical contexts and cultural experiences should be highly recognized, mutually respected and negotiated in order to facilitate their learning to become independent learners (Carnell, 2007; Kasworm, 2008).

Reflecting in this way may provide teachers with deeper insights and a strong rationale for student learning. They need to ask broad questions to consider and refine their philosophical underpinnings about teaching and learning of their specialized course. For example, some of questions given below may help in inviting critical reflections at the conceptualization and planning stage:

- What could be students' prior learning experiences?
- Where do they come from?
- Why do they need to undertake this course? What is the worth of this course in terms of their learning?
- What is the scope of this course? How would this course help them to achieve the overall programme aims?
- How could we engage students in deeper learning through this course?
- How could our assessment methods better enhance their learning experiences and review learning outcomes?

These questions are fundamental to rationalizing a course objectives, pedagogy and assessments along with the subject specific details.

3.2. Reflective Approaches to Implementation and Evaluation

Globally, there is a consensus that real learning means empowering individuals - enabling them to visualize issues and matters intellectually, ethically and critically. At the heart of this understanding is the need to develop teachers' problem solving, decision making and creative thinking skills so that they are capable of addressing intellectual, social and emotional matters (related to student learning) rationally while considering the cultural and intercultural values and perspectives of the organizations and societies the students live in, and their practices. Specially, in this era, where the structure of education is going through a profound change due to the Pandemic crises as well as fast growth in digital education, the integrated framework of course design supports teacher reflections on pedagogical and assessment approaches (such as interactive dialogue, project works, case analysis, presentations, etc.) that are necessary to invite students' critical perspectives and to help them rationalize multiple theories, perspectives and practices. In order to promote approaches to achieve the desired learning outcomes, i.e. student collaborative and independent learning skills and enriching course design, they need to engage themselves in questioning the implementation processes.

Reflection is a process of learning from analysis of learning outcomes, activities and the context in which the learning takes place, enabling teachers of every course to learn from own practice (Grimshaw, 2011; Welikala & Watkins, 2008). For example, asking questions enables teachers to learn how their decisions contribute to meaningful learning, and help them to see course design as a process which could continuously evolve through systematic reflection on practice.

- Why did I do the things I did?
- What does it mean to me as a teacher and as a learner?
- What was most powerful and/ or challenging learning moment for the students? What made that so?
- How did my teaching communicate the overall learning outcomes?
- How can I better support and encourage my students in future?

Such questioning is a fundamental component of self-analysis and reflection, and has a great influence on shaping and developing teachers' instructional decisions and course design on a regular basis (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007).

Moreover, research shows that an ongoing approach to receive students' feedback during various stages of the course design, including the implementation phase, is important to gain insights on how the students are proceeding with and progressing in learning and what adaptations need to be made to further nurture their experiences so as to help them to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The teachers must discuss with the students what, why and how they learned; how do they know what have been learned; and what to do next? This reflective approach enables teachers to revisit the intended learning outcomes, the pedagogical approaches and assessment method, thus, engaging them in transforming the course design. Research shows that in order to ensure reliable and valid feedback, the formative purpose of the evaluation should also be clearly explained to the students. Teachers may use various approaches to gather students' anonymous feedback depending on the nature of the course. For example, Student Dialogue Box could be a pertinent feature, where they share their concerns – academic and/ or any other – and suggest ways to address them. The student evaluation, thus, in turn opens up possibilities to revisit and refine the course design. It is important to recognize that course design does not just happen; it is anchored in important issues: what are teachers' conceptions of course design? What is education and what does it try to achieve? Any attempt at course design starts from a critical consideration of these issues.

4. Conclusion

With this attempt, this paper defines course as a living document. A course design in higher education must be viewed as an evolving and flexible phenomenon, where new themes may emerge as a result of students' engagement in ongoing reflections, their feedback and emerging trends as well as the teachers' reflective approaches. Training, seminars, and workshops play a positive role in supporting their professional practices, however, the impact of these learning avenues remain limited. Teachers face problems in working with the existing confining conditions of their universities, especially, in terms of changing the classroom practices. They often find the available facilities of their university as insufficient, which hinders them to become powerful contributors of and responsible members to bring about the desired change. Teachers' continuing professional learning approach could become successful when they are able to perceive reflective approach to course design.

Maybe teachers of some highly standardized educational institutions have viewed and experienced course design as a reflective process, but the majority of the teachers in this context are far from understanding a course design as a reflective process, in a proper way due to their less involvement in designing a course, particularly due to the bureaucratic culture in their organizations. The ultimate aim of higher education institutions is to help teachers develop the necessary knowledge, skills and attitude to be able to learn about process oriented approach to course design.

Teachers should be educated in the course designing process, and appropriate pedagogical training of understanding the related theories and practices. Hence, understanding of the orientations, philosophies and their implementations are very crucial in our educational institutions to meet the requirements of the 21st century. Teachers should have good command on their subjects as well the pedagogies and also be aware of the psychology of the students; only then proper learning could take place. The experience teachers should be there to teach every subject, specifically for science and mathematics. As we have entered in 21st century, so we cannot go on without integrating the technology knowledge into the teaching and learning process; thus, technology usage and access to technology should be there for every teacher and for every student and the teacher must know how to integrate it.

This paper concludes that teachers require continuous dialogue with self and support to refresh their course design process. It is important to indicate here that becoming a teacher is an ongoing, individual as well as a collaborative reflective process. However, working in isolation, for a long period, along with other contextual and individual barriers cause an unseen professional inertia; regardless of its length, it could hinder a teacher's professional growth. Developing and/ or sustaining a view of course design as an integral component of teachers' professional growth is quite demanding and complex – teachers, regardless of their expertise and experiences, tend to follow a routine of professional practices; sometimes, factors such as work pressure, contextual constraints, and/ or professional isolation could also cause unintentional or unconscious inertia in relation to their professional practice. Regardless of one's reflective approach towards teaching, approaching self-inquiry does not occur automatically. Thus, my argument is that course design, in the way described in the paper, offers that necessary space for professional growth and self learning to teachers that also helps in addressing the existing limitations of implementing their learning from formal professional development courses into the challenging contexts of their classrooms in most of the developing countries' higher education contexts. Teachers need space, forum and appreciation and deliberation to refresh their perspectives, invent and reinvent their courses on a regular manner.

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