What are students and staff co-creating? How our definitions of curriculum influence the nature of co-creation

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Introduction – increasing acceptance of students as partners
Student-staff partnerships are becoming increasingly accepted as part of the landscape of higher education. Student-staff partnerships are just one form of student engagement, but in the same way that 'engagement' has proven a challenging concept to define, so too, 'partnerships' can be interpreted in a myriad of ways. The increased interest across the sector can be seen in the growth of publications and conferences focused on student-staff partnerships as well as institutional programmes, policies and national funding streams targeted at 'students as partners'. Students are increasingly invited to become partners within quality assurance processes and structures as well as within disciplinary, institutional and learning/teaching research projects. Students and academic staff are also increasingly working together to design and evaluate learning, teaching and curricula within university settings. Where partnership is focused on designing and evaluating curricula, there is not only the challenge of agreeing on definitions of partnership, but there is an additional layer of complexity to this work due to the multiple ways in which both academic staff and students conceptualise the term 'curriculum'.

In reality, we probably know more about how staff define curriculum in higher education (see for example Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006). Indeed, staff definitions are powerful because staff often act as gatekeepers to the curriculum (Bourner, 2004; Bovill, in press); in other words, it is only where staff consider there to be value in drawing student voices into the curriculum design process that opportunities for students to participate are created. At these points of entry for students to work in partnership with staff, how staff conceptualise curriculum will have an enormous influence upon what students are being invited to participate in.

Conceptualisations of curriculum in higher education
The literature related to curriculum design within the school setting is not mirrored in the university setting and there are very few conceptualisations and definitions of curriculum within the higher education literature (Barnett & Coate, 2005). There is very little published since the 1990s that focuses on the nature of university level curriculum, particularly in the UK, that is not referring to either moves towards 'internationalising the curriculum' or embedding 'employability skills' within the curriculum. Many discussions of curriculum in higher education therefore often seem to consider the curriculum to be focused solely upon the content of a course or programme, or to be some sort of vessel or container within which we want to ensure all the latest policy directives are 'covered'. If we look to two of the curriculum frameworks that exist in the higher education literature, they help us to illustrate some of the different ways in which the term curriculum is currently being conceptualised at a university level.

Framework 1: Barnett & Coate (2005) Conceptualisation of the higher education curriculum
Ron Barnett, Gareth Parry and Kelly Coate argued that conceptualisations of higher education curricula, particularly in the sciences often emphasised workplace outcomes or content knowledge outcomes (Barnett et al, 2003). They argued that more emphasis needed to be placed on curricular processes and they suggested a curricular framework involving a dynamic set of forces involving knowledge, action and self.

Ron Barnett and Kelly Coate developed this model further by revisiting their vision of the curriculum several years later and they presented a framework encompassing knowing, acting and being. Knowing refers to the discipline specific competencies that go towards someone developing as a subject specialist. Acting refers to competencies involving doing, for example an oral presentation or demonstrating a particular skill relevant to the discipline. Being refers to students' development of a particular view of themselves as a researcher a critical evaluator or as a reflective practitioner. Barnett and Coate (2005) argue that "A world of uncertainty poses challenges not just of knowing and of right action but also, and more fundamentally, on us as beings in the world. How do I understand myself? How do I orient myself? How do I stand in relation

to the world?" (Barnet & Coate, 2005:108). They argue that we need to emphasise helping students to develop 'being' within our university curricula.

Barnett and Coate argued that different disciplines place different emphasis upon each of these elements within the curriculum. They suggest that for arts and humanities, knowing is prioritised, and then being and acting, but in science and technology they argue that knowing is also prioritised but that in this case, acting is then prioritised over being. Finally, they argue that in professional subjects in contrast, they prioritise acting, followed by knowing and being.

<u>Framework 2: Fraser & Bosanquet (2006) Academic staff definitions of the higher education curriculum</u>
Fraser and Bosanquet in Australia, carried out a phenomenographic study of academic staff definitions of curriculum. They distinguished four separate definitions of curriculum used by staff: "a: the structure and content of a unit (subject); b: the structure and content of a programme of study; c: the students' experience of learning; d: a dynamic and interactive process of teaching and learning" (Fraser and Bosanquet 2006: 272).

The first and second of these definitions focus on structure and content of curricula at module/course and programme/degree levels and are likely to be definitions recognised by many colleagues. The third definition focuses more explicitly on the student's experience of learning and thus broadens out curriculum to include the learner within the definition and to expand the definition to go beyond content and structure. The fourth definition of curriculum involves a view of the "teacher and student acting as co-constructors of knowledge" (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006:275). This final definition says far more about curricular process that the other definitions and makes explicit reference to interaction with implications for students and staff co-creating curricula.

Implications for student participation in curriculum design
First of all if we consider the concerns raised by Barnett et al (2003), curriculum is often focused on subject knowledge outcomes. If this is how curriculum is defined, students may be invited to choose between alternative key topics or readings that can be studied in a course. In another instance perhaps students would choose the topic for their individual or group project. Students are invited to choose between content elements that relate to existing subject knowledge. If the curriculum is considered primarily in terms of workplace outcomes, the emphasis is likely to be placed on employability skills, relevance to industry, business or other future employment, or meeting professional body requirements or competencies. Sometimes these elements are considered outside of what students should be invited to negotiate. However, co-constructing a curriculum focused on developing workplace outcomes could include students in discussions between employers and staff about the kinds of skills needed for future employment, or perhaps involved in devising with staff some new learning resources focused on developing students' employability skills.

Moving on from Barnett et al's (2003) critique of common definitions of curriculum, Barnett & Coate's (2005) conceptualisation of the curriculum in terms of a dynamic interaction between knowing, acting and being, suggests students that are invited to co-create the curriculum would be offered much broader scope within their collaboration with staff. This conceptualisation moves beyond the idea of outcomes or 'product' to include processes too. The framework suggests that subject knowledge is still important, but so are skills and capacity development among students and so is providing opportunities for students to reflect upon their own stance and relationship to learning and the world. Co-creation in this scenario is likely to include a range of possibilities where the curricular elements are thought to overlap. Co-creation imagined within this framework, might include senior students taking responsibility for devising worksheets for junior students focused on subject knowledge considered difficult or troublesome in some way. Or perhaps students present readings or topics to other students so contributing to the content of the curriculum as well as to development of skills. Other co-creation possibilities might include students writing their own essay questions or choosing an assessment method that enables them to express more effectively their own unique perspectives on a subject that they are particularly interested in or that they find relevant to their own circumstances or future plans.

In Fraser and Bosanquet's (2006) definitions their first two definitions focus on structure and content at different levels of design. These two definitions perhaps overlap with Barnett & Coate's (2005) 'knowing' element, however in Fraser and Bosanquet's definitions, these are stand alone definitions, while in Barnett

and Coate (2005) knowing is one of three essential strands within their framework. Focus upon the content and structure of a unit or programme may see students working in partnership with staff to devise a more suitable timetable or structuring of lectures, tutorials and laboratories to meet the diverse needs of all the staff and students involved. In another scenario, students might design the content of the virtual learning environment or devise the questions for an end of course evaluation questionnaire. At a programme level students might be part of a programme design team mapping out and redesigning the learning outcomes and assessments for a programme.

In Fraser and Bosanquet's third definition, the curriculum is defined as the student experience. This is a very broad definition of curriculum and some might even argue this could teeter on the edge of including co-curricular activity (despite the contradiction of defining curriculum with things that might happen outside of, or in conjunction with the curriculum). This suggests broader options for students about investigating the learning experience for example through co-created course and programme evaluations, through staff and student collaborative research into the student learning experience. It might also include students becoming change agents within the university. However, the broad definition includes smaller elements such as co-creation of criteria for judging the quality of a research paper being discussed in class, or co-creation of a new guide for students on graduate attributes: because these elements are all part of the wider student learning experience.

Finally, Fraser and Bosanquet's last definition is 'dynamic' and explicitly talks about interaction between students and staff within curriculum design. Here co-creation seems to be emphasising processes as well as outcomes. This definition suggests a change to the usual relationship between staff and students and implies students might be members of curriculum design committees, and could be involved in co-constructing knowledge with staff. This definition implies the curriculum relies on the expertise and experience of students as well as the expertise and experience of staff. This definition is the closest definition to an understanding of curriculum as explicitly involving active student participation and demonstrates an overt alignment with students and staff co-creating curricula.

Other important influences on the nature of co-created curricula
When inviting students to participate in curriculum design and evaluation, academic staff need to be aware that curriculum can also be a problematic term for students and may not be clearly understood. The different definitions and conceptualisations of curriculum suggest that when we talk about students and staff co-creating the curriculum we are talking about a range of different initiatives. The possibilities and realities will be very different across different contexts and settings. We also need to be aware that if staff are gatekeepers of curriculum design and, at least initially, are the predominant and more powerful partner in curriculum conceptualisation and design, staff attitudes and motivations will play a very important role in defining how students can engage. Indeed, staff may constrain or open up opportunities for students to participate in curriculum design.

Staff need to be careful about inviting students to collaborate with them in initiatives that claim to be partnerships, but that in reality maintain traditional hierarchical relationships between staff and students. Students can react negatively to empty claims of partnership where in reality staff maintain control of the curriculum. Similarly, if there is a mismatch between the ways in which staff and students define curriculum, our expectations may differ about the levels of agency students can expect from participation in curriculum design. In order to overcome these challenges, transparent dialogue between staff and students is crucial. It is important to take the time to explicitly define curriculum, and to be transparent about what kinds of new roles and collaborative projects are open to negotiation. This includes being explicit about where any parts of the curriculum are considered non-negotiable and why.

One of the most recent conceptualisations of curriculum in higher education has been produced as part of the Quality Assurance Agency (Scotland) Enhancement Theme work focused on 'Designing and Supporting the Curriculum'. In this work, Fotheringham et al (2012) have produced a briefing paper that defines curriculum in three ways: 1) product; 2) process; and 3) "as vehicle – the curriculum acts as the driving force for delivery of institutional agendas" (p1). This third definition describes the curriculum as a dynamic force, and suggests that the curriculum can be the way in which institutions implement and embed their priorities. However, what is less explicit is what these agendas and priorities might be and whether students have a role in deciding these agendas. So while the idea of curriculum as a vehicle for change has appeal, as with other definitions of curriculum, the nature of what will ensue from the definition will depend

greatly on the motivations of the individuals designing and evaluating the curriculum and the type of institutional agendas being pursued. There is a danger that the vehicle may be seen as a slightly more dynamic version of the 'container' model of curriculum, within which to stuff all subject content and all new policy directives.

Conclusions

In this brief overview I have outlined that there is a relative paucity of curriculum conceptualisations specific to the higher education setting. However, Fraser (2006) argues that we have moved past a model of higher education which is based on transmission of content knowledge and that we should move towards a more transparent collaborative sense of the curriculum. Certainly several of the definitions from academic staff that Fraser and Bosanquet outline as well as Barnet & Coate's (2005) conceptualistion of higher education curriculum go some way towards capturing the sense that curriculum is not something done 'to' students but something which depends upon what students bring to classrooms, online spaces and to the university more broadly. Barnett and Coate argue that "...curriculum design has to be seen not as spaces to be filled but as the imaginative construction of spaces in which students – as adults – are likely to build their own energies and commitments and so come to flourish in worthwhile ways" (Barnett & Coate, 2005:112). Scandrett (2010) goes further in arguing that the curriculum must emerge from students themselves. In taking a popular education stance from within higher education, Scandrett argues that the students must identify and create the relevance of all education to their own lives and thereby "...the source of the curriculum makes the education relevant, not its deliverer, how it is accredited, or the pedagogical methods used" (Scandrett, 2010:46)

We need to examine our conceptualisations of curriculum within higher education as well as examining our conceptualisations of partnership. Through these examinations we can be clearer about what we are inviting students to co-create as well as being clearer about what our motivations are for why we are collaborating with students. These are both key influences upon the nature of any resulting curricular partnership.

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