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Managing curriculum change and ‘ontological uncertainty’ in tertiary education

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Curriculum reform at institutional level is a challenging endeavour. Those charged with leading this process will encounter both enthusiasm and multiple obstacles to teacher engagement including the particularly complex issue of confronting existing teacher identities. At Unitec Institute of Technology (Unitec), the ‘Living Curriculum’ initiative focused on whole-of-institution curriculum renewal and, in the process, acknowledged and addressed teacher beliefs and practices that variously supported and contested both the initiative itself and the professional development offerings that accompanied it. The related research project identified factors and processes that unsettle teachers, rendering them ‘insecure’, and strategies that have proven effective in supporting teachers through significant change in conceptions of curriculum, teaching and learning.

Keywords: change management; curriculum reform; ontology; professional development; teacher identity

Introduction

Leading curriculum change at institutional level is complex. While discussions about teaching and learning are commonplace and those relating to technical matters such as assessment or credit weightings are pervasive, those that focus on institute-wide approaches to curriculum are less common and, often, invisible. This may reflect Barnett and Coate’s thesis (2005, p. 25) that curriculum is a ‘missing term’, or at least elusive, and there is a paucity of debate and attention to curricular issues at both local and policy level. Recently, new research from Blackmore and Kandiko (2012) reports on international trends that are creating the platform for curriculum renewal – often linked expressly to the vision and practices of the institution.

At Unitec Institute of Technology (Unitec), a new strategy of ‘innovation in teaching and learning’, part of a complete review of the institution’s strategic direction undertaken by a new leadership team, led to the institution as a whole grappling with current conceptions of not only learning and teaching, but also of the ‘elusive’ concept of curriculum. This arose from a desire to ensure that the institution’s offerings are reflective of contemporary curricular (and pedagogical) approaches and responsive to the requirements of uncertain and fast-changing educational and professional contexts. As a dual sector institute of technology, the institution has a strong focus on applied professional and vocational education and delivers qualifications from certificate to doctoral level. The initiative also sought to address directly

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some outdated and ineffective programme offerings. The institutional strategy reflected an approach to curriculum as pedagogical practices rather than syllabus or regulation. As Barnett and Coate (2005, p. 3) suggest, ‘curriculum design has too readily been understood as tasks of filling of various kinds (filling spaces, time and modules, not to mention minds)’ rather than ‘the imaginative *design of spaces*’. Therefore, the approach to curriculum underpinning this initiative differs from many of those undertaken recently in other institutions as identified in *Strategic curriculum change* (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2012) where the focus falls more on structural approaches to curriculum.

The process used to introduce, implement and evaluate curriculum change was aimed at promoting shifts in teachers’ beliefs where appropriate, and, correspondingly, building capacity that would help to anchor these shifts in ongoing practice. However, creating such momentum and securing lasting change across an entire institution with diverse disciplinary approaches and pedagogical beliefs was a very challenging process. de la Harpe and Thomas (2009) report on recent similar whole-of-institution curriculum initiatives in Australia and maintain that few have been achieved successfully, noting their heavy reliance on the willingness of academics to do the work required in the context of their disciplines.

At Unitec a new overarching institutional approach called ‘Living Curriculum’ was introduced. Early in a four-year process of institutionally mandated curriculum renewal, significant opportunities have arisen for profound curricular, pedagogic and cultural change. These opportunities have been met by some with enthusiasm while others have resisted changes and, at times, felt strong challenges to their identity as teachers.

Senge and colleagues (1999, p. 15) use the term ‘profound change’ to describe change that ‘combines inner shifts in people’s values, aspirations and behaviours with “outer” shifts in processes, strategies, practices, and systems’. ... ‘The organisation doesn’t just do something new; it builds its capacity for doing things in a new way – indeed, it builds capacity for the ongoing change’. However, as Ball (2003, p. 220) notes, when policies require teachers to change not only what they do, but who they are, they may become ‘ontologically insecure’. Teachers potentially become unsure of the value and worth of their work.

The team charged with defining and implementing the new approach to curriculum were aware of these arguments and needed to anticipate, manage and reflect on issues of institutional change management, professional development, teacher identity and disciplinary differences. As Trowler (1998, p. 65) notes:

curriculum decisions are always highly value-laden. Perceptions of and responses to these decisions and to the environments they create are conditioned not only by cultural contexts but, more narrowly, by the patterns of the educational ideologies found among the individuals involved.

This article reports on the outcomes of a cultural change initiative. Within the initiative, the institution’s priorities included responsiveness to staff needs and uncertainties. The approach taken argues in favour of a focus on curriculum as a process of teaching and learning. It, therefore, reports on teachers’ responses to institution-wide curriculum change, the impact of the initiative on them as teachers and outlines some lessons for leaders involved in managing such change.

Conceptualising a 'Living Curriculum'

In 2009, the institution implemented the 'Living Curriculum' process, specifying that all programmes undergo a review of their programme offerings and learning and teaching practices to align with this 'new' conceptualisation of curriculum. The 'Living Curriculum' aims to reframe learning as 'conversation' and develop programmes that are integrated with the world and genuinely dynamic. The central notion of conversation is influenced by the work of several writers (Barnett, 2000; Barnett & Coate, 2005; Doll, 2002) including Pinar (2004, p. 186), who suggests that curriculum is best conceived as 'an extraordinary complicated conversation', rather than the common understanding of curriculum as the content that teachers are required to cover. This view, mirroring Barnett and Coate's (2005) proposals around curriculum space and design, is located in a 'why' as opposed to a 'what' conceptualisation of curriculum. It also reflected the desire as an institution to ensure curricula were engaging, current and relevant and students experienced a sense of agency over their learning.

'Living' curricula aim to nurture resourcefulness and resilience in students and enhance their capability to flourish as graduates. The curriculum, therefore, is defined not as merely the information content of the programme, but rather as the wider programme learning experience. Learners are nurtured and encouraged to develop a growing confidence and recognition that they are able to take significant responsibility for advancement of their own learning as individuals and as a community of learners.

A Curriculum Design Policy was written by the Executive Dean Academic Development in an extended consultation process with teachers and academic committees and ultimately approved by the Academic Board. It directs curriculum development and specifies nine characteristics that are congruent with much current educational literature. As the policy states, curricula:

- Involve complex conversations
- Are curiosity/inquiry led, and stimulating
- Are practice-focused – educating students for work, in work, through work
- Are socially constructed – self-sufficiency and collaboration are equally valued, and together they help nurture resourcefulness and resilience
- Blend face-to-face and web-based learning
- Are research-informed
- Have a discipline base, and are also interdisciplinary
- Develop literacies for life-long learning
- Include embedded assessment.

Barnett's (2004) work on supercomplexity and curriculum was a key influence on this development. He argues that the contemporary world is characterised by supercomplexity as an outcome of multiple interpretations, tolerance of diversity, resistance to universals and acceptance of ambiguity and concludes that:

Under these conditions of uncertainty, the *educational task is, in principle, not an epistemological task*; it is not one of knowledge or even knowing per se. It is not even one of action, of right and effective interventions in the world. For what is to count as a right or an effective intervention in the world? Amid supercomplexity, *the educational task is primarily an ontological task*. (p. 252)

Barnett and Coate (2005) propose that the student be given ‘curriculum space’ instead of being ‘boxed in’ (p. 125), and that ‘[a] curriculum has to become like so many ultra-modern buildings, full of light and open spaces, different textures, shapes and relationships and arrangements for serendipitous encounters’ (p. 129).

This conceptualisation of curricula also forces an examination of teachers’ notions of their identity and role in the learning and teaching process. Beliefs about the teacher’s role, the balance of power relationships between teacher and learner, and the degree of control or prescription over the learning processes are all potentially challenged. Some teachers find this affirming and freeing; others experience deep uncertainty and personal challenge. ‘No matter how honorable the motives, each and every individual who is necessary for effective implementation will experience some concerns about the meaning of new practices, goals, beliefs and means of implementation’ (Fullan, 2001, p. 39).

Leading curriculum change

The literature of organisational change (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005; Kotter, 1996; Senge, 2007) suggests that such a significant initiative should be handled as cultural change. Walker (2006) proposes that educational leaders need to be thinking coherently about the future, the ends, the greater good, the best interests and larger purposes of activities taking place in the learning community. de la Harpe and Thomas (2009) also outline critical leadership behaviours to enhance successful curriculum initiatives in higher education and emphasise the importance of people knowing the rationale and process for change, also confirmed by James and McPhee (2012) who argue that a commitment to educational beliefs and values underpinning change is critical. Similarly, change agents need to be aware of the prior knowledge and interests of teachers, and participants need to be ‘valued in the change process, and not marginalised by it’ (Sykes, Freeman, Simpson, & Hancock, 2012, p. 175). de la Harpe and Thomas (2009, p. 9) report on research with academics involved in curriculum change initiatives and note that ‘identifying *staff professional development* needs and providing appropriate and relevant activities, located as close as possible to the change initiative, would also be needed’.

Implementing the ‘Living Curriculum’ was a *cultural change initiative* requiring strong, distributed and shared leadership and committed advocacy and involvement from academic staff. Whilst there were pockets of excellent teaching in the institution, and departments and teachers already teaching in a ‘Living Curriculum’ way, it was recognised that pockets do not make garments. To develop a robust and enduring culture that focused on learning and teaching, a purposeful institute-wide strategy was necessary. Issues of organisational learning and change management became both paramount and challenging. It was clear that a mandated process would be necessary to create the momentum to achieve deep cultural change across the institution, while simultaneously avoiding teachers feeling a sense of imposition. It was also important that the ‘Living Curriculum’ would not be seen by teachers as just another set of institutional demands to be satisfied – that is, a transactional rather than transformational process. To this end, the approval process for the ‘Living Curriculum’ required programme teams to demonstrate aligned, and in some cases changed, learning and teaching *practices* and not merely documentation.

The new approval process was named *The Tick*. This two-phase process requires each programme to demonstrate that the characteristics underpinning the ‘Living

Curriculum' have been attended to. The initial *Tick* concept was derived from the New Zealand Heart Foundation and was intended to imply that a 'healthy' programme embedded and enacted the 'Living Curriculum' characteristics.

Submitters document how programmes reflect these characteristics, assessed by a member of the institutional Learning and Teaching Committee who recommends Phase One approval. The second phase requires a practice assessment that involves peer assessors talking with staff, students and other key parties and visiting classes to ascertain if the statements made in the documentation are being enacted in practice. Where practice falls short, assistance to move the department to Phase Two (practice) approval is available.

At the time of this research, Phase Two processes have not been implemented. However, a range of professional development resources and support is available for academic staff. Academic advisors from the institution's Learning and Teaching Unit work with academic teams to map the existing practice against the desirable 'Living Curriculum' characteristics. The academic advisors are then able to design professional development interventions to specifically address any 'gaps' or areas of need, and facilitate additional support including: a range of supplementary resources; peer observation of teaching; informal mentoring; and engagement with institutional communities of practice where staff can further discuss and reflect on issues identified in the initial mapping activity.

Embedding change in a culture of learning and teaching

A recurring theme in the literature of organisational change is that sustainable change requires effective, direct leadership (Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Heifetz (1994, cited in Fullan, 2001, p. 3) argues that leadership is about 'mobilizing people to tackle tough problems'. Rather than mobilising people to tackle problems we already know how to solve, it should help them confront those that have not yet successfully been addressed. As an institution, there were several 'problems' to be addressed, primarily relating to curricula and pedagogical reform, and strong and consistent leadership at all levels was required (see also de la Harpe & Thomas, 2009; James & McPhee, 2012; for specific higher education contexts). As with many institutes of technology, many of the institution's teachers come to teaching from industry or vocational practice. For these teachers in particular, the requirement to reconceptualise teaching is potentially troubling.

While students are grappling with new ways of knowing, as suggested by the 'Living Curriculum', tertiary teachers may also 'become ontologically insecure: unsure whether [they] are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others' (Ball, 2003, p. 220) as they reconsider their own approaches to teaching and learning. Established academic identities, therefore, are potentially increasingly unstable when faced with challenges to the known and familiar. The implementation of a 'Living Curriculum' thus requires support not only for students but also for teachers who are themselves learners in this process. Both their identity and their conceptions of knowledge are potentially being challenged.

Therefore, the implementation team were attuned to issues of 'profound pedagogic change' and challenges to teacher identity that may arise where values around, or disciplinary approaches to, teaching were potentially challenged. They initiated a support process to assist departments in both curriculum renewal and staff development. It was always clear that attending to the documentation requirements of curriculum renewal

was potentially the easier of the two components, and changes in teachers' practices, and indeed identity, were more complex. So alongside the approval procedures, comprehensive professional development and support processes were established. Indeed this became the primary focus of the learning and teaching centre's work. The necessary 'space' for curriculum discussions was implicated (Barnett & Coate, 2005).

At the time of the research, institute-wide and localised discussions about the 'Living Curriculum' had been occurring for more than a year. A set of Principles for Learning and Teaching had been agreed by the Academic Board and rolled out, resources had been developed and disseminated through a number of platforms, and professional development events (both institute-wide and within departments and teaching teams) were becoming relatively commonplace.

Research methodology and method

Approximately a year after the launch of the 'Living Curriculum' initiative, the research team (a subset of the implementation team comprising the Dean Teaching and Learning and key personnel from the Learning and Teaching Centre) initiated a project to monitor and evaluate implementation progress, with a particular focus on the change management process. Their desire was to ascertain the impact on teachers and teaching and to determine whether changes to either the policy or implementation practices were necessary.

Three departments were invited to participate in researching the concept and experiences of 'Living Curriculum' development and implementation. These departments represented the institution's three faculties of Social and Health Sciences (A), Technology and Built Environment (B) and Creative Industries and Business (C). They also represented diverse disciplines and were at very different stages in the renewal process. Only Department C was involved in renewal in the research year. One other department was warmly disposed to the idea and practices of a 'Living Curriculum' and making positive progress outside the formal institutional renewal process, while the third was relatively resistant and historically less receptive to institutional initiatives and due to engage in curriculum renewal in the following year. The departments were, therefore, invited purposefully to represent a range of both disciplinary and attitudinal perspectives and because they reflected different stages in the renewal process. This allowed insights into departmental perspectives both in relation to implementation and to the concept itself independent of the institutional process.

The research questions focused broadly on factors that enable successful implementation of a 'Living Curriculum' and targeted teacher perspectives of the change process and its impact on their view of themselves as teachers and their teaching practices. The qualitative narrative-based methodology involved case studies of the three departments initially over a period of six months (though later extended over two years) and located the research questions in the context of each department's experience of the concept and implementation process. The methods involved an initial focus group open to all staff in each department to ascertain how each department, as a whole, was disposed to the idea of the curriculum initiative and was prepared for reform. Any staff members in the department were welcome to participate in this discussion and, in total 35 staff comprising 12 staff from department A, 19 from department B and four from department C participated. This was followed by two individual face-to-face interviews with five teachers from each department (15 in total) – one soon after the focus group and one about five months later. Teachers approached for follow-up interviews

were selected after the focus groups and included enthusiastic teachers and those who expressed some doubt, uncertainty or resistance, so that the research covered a wide range of perspectives in each department. Some were very experienced teachers while others were more recent appointments. Ethics approval was secured to allow all focus groups to be video-taped, and all individual interviews audio-recorded. These were all transcribed and subsequently coded and analysed in NVivo. The team of three researchers established a thematically based coding frame through independent and collaborative coding samples and this frame was used by an independent research assistant to code all transcripts.

Teacher voices

For the institutional team, there was a logical alignment between the process and the product; that is, between the implementation process of the 'Living Curriculum' (organic, bottom-up, not too prescribed beyond the characteristics and principles) and the 'Living Curriculum' approach itself (also organic, bottom-up, flexible, based on pedagogical principles and focused on process). Teachers, however, experienced a wide range of perceptions of the concept itself, and of the implementation process and their own experiences of engaging with the initiative. This section identifies and examines the key tensions and alignments in staff responses to the 'Living Curriculum' concept and implementation.

Teachers' conceptions of a 'living curriculum'

The implementation team had been determined to ensure that the 'Living Curriculum's' roll out modelled its teaching and learning philosophy of conversation and co-enquiry. Thus, there was a deliberate lack of specific prescription around implementation in order to allow teachers flexibility to be innovative and creative, and to contextualise the characteristics and the curriculum. In practice, however, teachers commonly experienced some level of tension between a prescribed policy and flexibility in its interpretation and implementation. As one observed:

I can see on one hand that if you have this perception of how the 'Living Curriculum' is, and it may be a wrong perception from the beginning, but you see that it's... being imposed and this is how it's going to be rolled out. That potentially you would like equally a lot more rigidity and a lot more structure to resources and training and implementation, but then that narrows the way that you go with it, because you tend to follow the frameworks and the training structures that you've been given and don't see outside those boundaries. (A5)

Another teacher agreed that flexibility in implementation was important but it felt 'a little vague ... Well I guess it's something, in some respects it's a bit "Living Curriculum" itself, in the sense that it's kind of a bit of a moving feast and is growing' (C2).

Some teachers appreciated the non-prescriptive nature of implementation, while favouring a more rigorous process in which discussions were convened and feedback sought on the Curriculum Design policy. Then, as one teacher suggested, during the implementation the institution could 'make sure that the resources and so forth were in place ... I like to have something prescriptive for myself, some set boundaries and I know I'm on target' (B8).

Another teacher distinguished between an intentionally non-prescriptive philosophy, and what they saw as an unstructured ‘launch’ of the policy to teachers:

I found that what it’s really come out as is as sort of a soft launch of what the ‘Living Curriculum’ is. Rather than actually putting it out there and saying, you know, because of the nature of the ‘Living Curriculum’ it’s not about prescribing it, I understand that much, but the soft launch was just, at least the way I see it, is something that I’m not sure is being effective in certain ways. (C6)

One team was very unhappy about the lack of a prescribed direction:

This has been presented to us all and said, ‘We’d like you all to undertake this wonderful ... warm and fluffy concept, and we’re going to give you absolutely zero concrete information as to what you should do or how you should do it.’ Cause that’s the way I see it, I’ve had absolutely nothing. (B14)

There was a sense within this team that teachers should be told in detail what to do: ‘how are we supposed [to achieve] the outcomes when nobody’s told us what the heck it is we’re supposed to achieve out the end?’ (B3). Interestingly however, another teacher on the same team saw the initiative as overly directive and ‘driven by the expert’ and ‘delivered from outside’ (B16).

Compulsion or opportunity

Teachers and departments varied significantly in how they framed the ‘Living Curriculum’ initiative, ranging from seeing it as a matter of compliance, to an opportunity to be reflective and creative. Teams that were otherwise generally positive about innovation and creativity in teaching and learning sometimes found the ‘tick’ idea counterproductive. The sense of compliance and perception of a checklist as something achieved or not achieved became barriers to their creativity:

For me the ‘Living Curriculum’ provides an opportunity, to not just renew what you’re doing and to not just celebrate what you’re doing well, is to really look outside the box and go, ‘Hey how can we get something that’s really innovative and creative?’ And again I sometimes felt the approach that was taken was holding it back. (A8)

Within the team that was least positive about the ‘Living Curriculum’ initiative, some teachers felt that they were being told to change their practices without consultation: ‘I think it’s being forced on us, no one asked us do we want it, okay, we’ve been told “This is going to happen”’ (B18). Nevertheless, other teachers in that team felt that, over time, the process and policy had led to benefits and even created opportunities:

Well I see it as a compliance activity and an opportunity to think and reflect on new ways of doing things. But the opportunity to reflect and I think improve what I’m doing is an area that I’m actually quite enthusiastic about. (B8)

Identity and ontological insecurity

Earlier reference was made to the notion of ‘ontological insecurity’ – a destabilising process that can arise from challenges to teachers’ existing practice and their beliefs

about teaching and being a teacher. Most teachers engaged in some contemplation on their practice, and indeed their teacher identity, as they encountered and then reflected on what the ‘Living Curriculum’ meant for their teaching. For some, the specified characteristics were innately grasped because they were in harmony with their own teaching approaches. Such teachers felt immediately comfortable with the approach to teaching and learning, if not also the language:

I personally don’t feel any tension, for me it’s been a breath of fresh air as a new teacher and I feel like it was the round hole that I, that fitted well with my own personal philosophy and my own personal growth. (A5)

One teacher saw the educational philosophy of the ‘Living Curriculum’ as a fine match for the contemporary world:

I’m very enthusiastic about it. The reason for that is that I think it has very particular virtues or values that are not only the kind of real world in the sense of the global real world, but also in terms of a new way of behaving and operating in the world, a contemporary way of operating in the world. (C2)

For other teachers understanding how to operationalise the characteristics involved a significant struggle, for example, what does ‘conversation’ or ‘inquiry’ look like in the classroom? Or how do these characteristics differ between undergraduate and post-graduate courses and students? This struggle was partly caused by the intentional lack of prescription around the ‘Living Curriculum’. Not uncommonly, teachers wanted flexibility and freedom in how they teach, but clearer guidelines and examples for implementation. As one teacher commented, ‘I personally would like to sit in on the “tick” classes, those classes that have received the tick, just to see, “cause I actually don’t know whether I’m doing it right or wrong”’ (B19).

Teachers wanted guidance where they were sceptical of the possibilities, such as in large class teaching: ‘... a lot of staff are quite anxious about how do you actually have a conversation with a class of a hundred and twenty students?’ (B16). Teachers within this team were very aware of the challenges of large classes, seeing them as working against a ‘Living Curriculum’ that actively engaged students in learning. This invites reflection on Ball’s (2003) idea of ‘ontological insecurity’ that may occur when institutional policies impinge on, or cut across, teachers’ deeply held beliefs about teaching or, indeed, their worth as teachers. As one teacher observed:

... it’s as if we have to wipe clean what we’re doing already and start doing it this new way, when there’s no recognition that we’re already trying to achieve a lot of this already, we’re doing quite well with a large part of it ... but there seems to be no recognition of what we’re doing already. (B11)

Responses such as this, echoing self-doubt and anxiety, were common within this team with another teacher saying:

I’m not against progress by any means and anything we can do better I’d love to. But ... I think I was probably over sensitive that I thought it was really questioning that everything I’ve done for the last three years is rubbish. (B18)

These teachers interpreted the curriculum renewal process to be telling them that their teaching had to be completely overhauled without any acknowledgment that much of

their current teaching practice might already be aligned with the new approach. While many teachers expressed concerns about the value of what they were doing, in some teams this apprehension was mixed with excitement and enthusiasm:

I think the Living Curriculum is a good way whereby we can all take a look at what we do, and it's a mechanism really whereby we can rethink how we teach in a, in the non-threatening way, in a non-defensive, people don't have to be defensive about their content or their, the way that they go about doing things. (C8)

Another teacher was reflective and cautious:

And then there's that fear and the barrier of, 'Oh I'm not going to be able to do this ... this is going to involve a big shift in the way that I am, how's it going to fit in with that sense of me as a lecturer?' (A5)

Professional development

Teachers were specifically asked to reflect on the professional development that had been made available as part of the renewal process. Teachers commented that their teams generally benefited when conversations among staff about the 'Living Curriculum' could be productively framed as conversations about ways to improve learning and teaching:

... we were trying to work out what the hell it all means and out of the brainstorming you might hear, I heard one or two staff members say, 'Oh I've got a book', or 'I went to a seminar about a guy that's really good at teaching large lectures, you know, having a conversation with this guy afterwards and he gave me a few ideas and those sorts of things, little threads of stuff'. (B8)

Where such conversations took place within teams, as advocated by Barnett and Coate (2005), the benefits accrued were further increased:

I think we're really lucky ... because we've got quite a strong team environment, so we tend to bounce off one another and support one another through our ideas and whatever it is we've got going on at that particular time. (A3)

One teacher sought specific, practical support, acknowledging that an approach focusing too broadly on the philosophy of the 'Living Curriculum' was unlikely to be well received in his team:

I think it's got to be [tailored] like that rather than the generic, yeah. I think broad stuff tends not to be accepted very easily and you can always create barriers to that being appropriate if it doesn't work in one area. And actually the challenge is we should turn it around, yes we can make it work for our area if this [specific example] is done. (B16)

In contrast, this teacher from another team saw the benefits available when their team took the time to grapple with and internalise the philosophy to their own context. They also commented on the importance of aligning professional development approaches and practices with the core principles actually being espoused – the need to walk the talk:

... it needs to model its method, its, any kind of workshop if it wants to be, have any credibility, needs to model what it's talking about, what it's practising. So I would've

thought the very first thing that was required, a bunch, amongst a bunch of educationalists, is, 'What do you already know, how do you practice it? What do you know about the Living Curriculum vis-à-vis your practice, your delivery methods?' A whole lot of that needs to be extracted out, have a community of learning. It's actually, it's got to mirror what it's trying to say. For me that's, yeah, that's critical. Otherwise we switch off. (C2)

Another teacher also sought professional development that was embedded and that addressed both philosophy and practical specifics:

I would really like someone who understands to sit me down and walk me through all, how it all fits together, the why, why it was developed, all the aspects of it. I mean I can read it, I've downloaded stuff and I've read it, but I just, I would like someone who knows about it to walk me through that ... so I can have a picture in my head about, a clear picture about, what it's aiming to do, what it's about, the parts that come together. And I suppose other people's understandings of what it might look like. And having those discussions, again I can read them on paper, but I find it easier to hear the discussions and the different viewpoints about what that might look like, so I would like that personally. (A9)

This desire for ongoing dialogue around the concept was echoed by other respondents. Such comments further highlighted the need for the methodology of professional development events to be consistent with the core principles of the 'Living Curriculum'.

Reflecting and acting on teachers' perspectives

The research data have provided valuable insights into teachers' experiences of curriculum reform, the main themes and lessons being identified below. This information will assist the ongoing implementation process and inform resource and professional development, and will be of interest to other tertiary institutions embarking on curriculum change projects.

The amount of professional support required for such widespread institutional change, particularly where it confronts teacher identity, cannot be underestimated. Teachers' voices indicate a number of areas of engagement, contentment and enthusiasm with both the 'Living Curriculum' concept and experiences of implementation. However, there has also been much bemusement, irritation, a degree of resistance, and in some quarters, anxiety. It was in this arena of cultural change around teaching that the most complex situations arose, and the tensions between top-down 'imposed' and organic localised development were most visible. A number of lessons can be derived from these complexities and tensions.

It is clear that change must be located within specific contexts so that teachers feel a degree of ownership and relevance of the initiative. While this has traditionally been conceived of as occurring within 'tribes and territories' of disciplines (Becher & Trowler, 2001), recent thinking acknowledges the limitations of the notion of 'discipline' and prefers to consider more complex, ambiguous, inclusive and ecological groupings (see Krause, 2012; Manathunga, 2012; Trowler, 2012). The participants in this study did not necessarily express 'discipline' concerns but rather contextual concerns. Although such contextualisation was the intent of the project, some teachers did not experience the necessary degree of autonomy and agency to allow them to engage fully or confidently, while others, as noted, wanted both autonomy and detailed prescription. At times, this led teachers to call for detailed advice on curriculum design and implementation – the antithesis of the 'Living Curriculum'. It is also likely that the

wide ranging reactions to the change initiative reflected differences in ‘pre-existing values of staff ... [which] need to be addressed when considering change’ (Trowler, 1998, p. 151). Certainly, while some teachers were comfortable being encouraged to take risks and innovate this created conflict and de-motivated other teachers who held different values (Aitken & Higgs, 2010). The lesson here is that change leaders need to provide opportunities for framing issues and negotiating disagreements. Such spaces allow cultural change initiatives to occur (Senge et al., 1999). Leaders must be explicit in providing teachers with license to experiment and adapt initiatives to their disciplines and contexts. For their part, teachers need time to build ownership, and for corresponding identity shifts to occur to avoid ‘ontological insecurity’.

A second key point concerns the methods used to communicate ideas and disseminate information and resources to teachers. Although the implementation team was committed to making resources and professional development available, and to engaging in open collegial dialogue with staff, this approach was not always successful in two respects. First, some teachers had limited exposure to, or awareness of, the available resources or had had negative experiences in using them. Second, the intent of allowing teachers autonomy in implementation was not always sufficiently communicated or fully grasped. Indeed, some teachers saw the institution’s professional development support as overly didactic and not, as Senge and colleagues (1999, p. 200) argue, ‘walking-the-talk’ in order to build the credibility of the organisational initiative. It is also possible that the extended four-year implementation timeline meant that some teachers had not yet engaged in any depth with the concept as it was not currently a critical part of their work.

A related third point is that sufficient time must be allowed for teachers to reflect on, and engage in, curriculum change. Change leaders must be patient because such ownership cannot be achieved in advance (Trowler, 1998). Instead, as the research data show, there has often been significant improvement in perceptions as teachers have learned from engagement with the change project. Some teachers who were initially negative expressed more enthusiasm in their second interviews after they had experienced further support, or had additional time to reflect and experiment. Both time and support have proven critical where teams have the responsibility to understand and implement fundamental changes to their teaching philosophy. For one team in particular, this has involved surfacing ‘patterns of defensiveness [that] are often deeply ingrained in how a team operates’ (Senge, 2007, p. 9). For sustainable change, it is critical that teachers have both time to reflect and accurate, relevant, timely engagement with institutional leaders (Fullan, 2005).

Conclusion

The research data have shown that each of the points identified above is an important dimension to be addressed in the process of institutional curriculum renewal. Ontological insecurity may not necessarily be a negative experience but the degree to which teachers are unsettled from existing beliefs and practices is critical. Where teachers are pushed too far too fast beyond their ability and willingness to consider new thinking, the initiative and ‘progress’ is potentially compromised. In this instance, the curriculum renewal initiative is gathering momentum and acceptance, and institutional capability to give life to the policy statements is developing. The teachers’ perspectives represented here have been very influential in reinforcing and amending aspects of the implementation process.

The most critical components of the strategy's implementation have proven to be the necessity for clear, consistent and continuous messages to teachers, and willingness by change leaders to listen, adapt, accept and explain. The ongoing provision of targeted, context-specific support and professional development that reflects the characteristics of the 'Living Curriculum' has been key and this has been informed and adapted by the findings of the research project. Time and patience have also been critical – there is absolutely no substitute for allowing sufficient time for teachers to understand, experiment, discuss and reflect. A strong mix of structure and agency has proven invaluable.

Exemplars from peers have been valuable in assisting teachers in internalising any desired changes and affirming their own efforts. While those efforts are underway, change leaders must stay in close touch with teachers. Establishing and maintaining key relationships with teachers is vital in order to walk alongside staff who are attempting to contextualise the changes into their own sense of identity and practice. Merely providing supporting resources is not enough according to Barnett and Coate (2005) who advocate for the importance of strong leadership in curriculum reform because engaging academics in the process of curricular conversations and initiatives is a matter of 'hearts and minds' (p. 159).

With a four-year implementation timeline and the formative data from the research, there is significant optimism for ultimately achieving sustained pedagogical and curriculum reform across the institution through ongoing engagement in discussion, debate, professional development and through a willingness to listen – at all levels.

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