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Programme design practice in a polytechnic in Aotearoa/New Zealand: A case for complexity

Unpublished Ph.D thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Waikato

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A programme is an instrument for education. Through educational programmes, we help shape our society. Programme design includes decisions on what is valuable for people to learn, and how this should be structured and organised. In this way it influences teaching and learning. Therefore understanding programme design practice is vital for the improvement of teaching and learning. Yet, research regarding this understanding in the context of tertiary education is scarce.

My thesis reduces this scarcity by theorising the design practice of sub-degree programmes in a polytechnic in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The research consisted of an interpretive case study of programmes within one polytechnic. The study included embedded case studies of programme design practice at institutional level and in five certificate and diploma programmes across the institution. Data were analysed from three sources: interviews with 32 representatives of the six embedded cases; documents; and from meeting observations.

The findings show that programme design practice can be observed through various lenses. For this case study, seven lenses were identified:

1. The teaching and learning lens shows how language shapes the conceptualisations of a programme and their relationships to views on teaching and learning;
2. The rational lens shows how—often unconsciously used—models and frameworks influence programme design practice;
3. The cultural lens illustrates what is considered normal within programme design practice and how differences from the norm are approached;
4. The personal experience lens highlights how personal experiences of people involved contribute to programme design practice;
5. The ethical lens shows how people's moral and professional responsibilities influence their practice;
6. The business lens illustrates business considerations in programme design; and



7. The social-political lens highlights how people's assigned roles and responsibilities, their political responsibilities, and their negotiations between multiple responsibilities impact on design practice.

The connections between the images of these lenses can be understood if a programme is theorised as a complex system, which is constituted of people's considerations, language, silences, experiences and relationships. These constituents concern six aspects of education: intentions; structure and instruction; administration and management; assessment; the evaluation of a programme; and, consultation for and development of a programme. In this case study, the people who create the considerations, language, silences, experiences and relationships were almost solely people within the polytechnic.

Programme design practice can be seen as the programme system's adaptation to its interaction with the outside world. Ideological discourses are shown to form the power structures that shape the direction of this adaptation. This particular case study shows neo-liberal ideological discourses as prevailing, determining the direction of adaptation of the complex programme system.

The findings imply that the effects of a programme on the outside world around it cannot be predicted or controlled but emerge from the programme system. Additionally, if a programme is to continue to develop, it needs diversification. Further strengthening of already dominant ideological discourses risks the death of a programme system. Finally, acknowledging ideological discourses as the power structures that shape the direction of a programme system's adaptation requires practitioners to be responsible in deciding which discourses to follow and to be mindful of possible implications of their decisions.