Promoting social cohesion during blended learning in a Foundation Degree

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Abstract
This paper explores curriculum theory and principles, evaluates the social cohesion of curricula, and synthesises theory and policies related to education for sustainable development, whilst evaluating and enhancing a higher education blended learning module. Blended learning is defined as a 'pedagogical approach that combines the opportunities of face-to-face learning with the opportunities of the online environment' (Hew and Cheung, 2014, p. 3). The key challenge is social cohesion, specifically learner collaboration and social learning, which Lockhorst, Admiraal and Pilot (2010) break down into participation, interaction and the nature of the communication. To identify strategies to enhance the module, thereby maximising social cohesion and collaboration, this paper explores the module's curriculum: the policy context, theoretical principles of curriculum design, social cohesion in the context of the parity of esteem between work-based and academic learning, and education for sustainable development. It concludes by proposing enhancements to the module curriculum to meet the demands of twenty-first century graduates (Ashwin *et al.,* 2015, p. 159) and education for sustainable development.

Introduction
This report will explore curriculum theory and principles, evaluate the social cohesion of curricula and synthesise theory and policies related to education for sustainable development, in the context of evaluating and enhancing a higher education module.

'Supporting the curriculum' is a level five module within the Foundation Degree (FdA) Teaching and Learning at a partner college of the University of [redacted]. Due to the flexible delivery of this FdA, 'Supporting the curriculum' is due to be delivered for the first time in semester two of 2016/17 using a blended learning approach. Blended learning is defined in this context as a 'pedagogical approach that combines the opportunities of face-to-face learning with the opportunities of the online environment' (Hew and Cheung, 2014, p. 3).

One of the key challenges of blended learning is social cohesion, specifically learner collaboration and social learning. Lockhorst, Admiraal and Pilot (2010) break this down to participation (joining in and contribution frequency), interaction (continuation of contribution to online dialogue), and the nature of the communication. They proposed that the style of the learning task itself can significantly affect the social cohesion and learner collaboration.

To identify strategies to enhance the 'Supporting the Curriculum' module, thereby maximising social cohesion and collaboration, this report will initially explore the module's curriculum; the policy context, theoretical principles of curriculum design, social cohesion in the context of the Equalities Act 2010, the parity of esteem between work-based and academic learning, and education for sustainable development. Then it will propose enhancements to the module curriculum to meet the demands of twenty-first century graduates (Ashwin *et al.,* 2015, p. 159) and education for sustainable development (Quality Assurance Agency, 2014).

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Review of the current curriculum

Programme curriculum design – FdA Teaching and Learning

The FdA Teaching and Learning programme is governed by a range of national, university and college level policies and guidance, which influence the programme and module's curriculum design and implementation. These top-down curriculum influences are supported by bottom-up learner focused curriculum developments.

At a national level, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) governs the structures and subject content of higher education programmes. The QAA Characteristic Statements for Foundation Degrees (QAA, 2015a) sets out the distinctive features of foundation degrees, notably the integration of 'academic and work-based learning through close collaboration between employers and higher education providers' (p. 2). This emphasis on work-based learning is embedded in a commitment to education for sustainable development by enhancing the employability of learners, and reflects a growing parity of esteem between academic and work-based learning. The QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Education Studies (QAA, 2015b) dictates the core content required to meet the standards for higher education qualifications within the educational studies field, including the FdA Teaching and Learning.

Combining the QAA guidance and the policies of the awarding university, University of [redacted] (2016a) results in a programme and module curriculum design that reflects a traditional instrumentalism ideology, which Scrimshaw (1983) describes as education for a purpose or job (cited in Goodman and East, 2014). The instrumentalism ideology is reflected in planned curriculums, which Kelly (2004) defines as 'what is laid down in the syllabus' (p. 6).

A planned curriculum, instrumentalist in ideology, suggests a product model of curriculum design. The product model of curriculum design was proposed by Ralph Tyler in 1949, whose Tyler Rationale emphasised four processes of curriculum planning: identifying the setting's purposes, matching learning experiences to the purpose, organising the experiences and development assessment to measure learning against the setting's purpose (Tyler, 2013).

Curriculum design is supported by SEEC level indicators (SEEC, 2016a) which describe the level of challenge and depth of learning at each level of study, indicating the breadth of aspects of learning, and inform the writing of learning outcomes. SEEC indicators were originally developed by the South East England Consortium (SEEC) for Credit Accumulation and Transfer but are now used by educational institutes across the UK (SEEC, 2016b).

The SEEC indicators (SEEC, 2016) work alongside the QAA Characteristics Statement for Foundation Degrees (QAA, 2015a) to emphasise the parity of esteem between work-based and academic learning. The breadth of learning within the SEEC indicators place an emphasis on performance and practice of work-based skills, which can be assessed within academic learning outcomes or work-based assessment. The FdA Teaching and Learning has been designed so that learners' academic work is informed by their work-based learning, rather than assess their practice skills in the workplace. The increasing emphasis on Higher and Degree Apprenticeships within UK Government policy, as illustrated by multi-million-pound boost to degree apprenticeship opportunities announced by the Business Secretary Sajid Javid on 24 March 2016 (Gov.uk, 2016), further reflects an increasing parity of esteem between work-based and academic learning.

When the FdA programme curriculum was designed in 2015, provision for online and/or blended learning was incorporated to reflect a growing emphasis on online learning within higher education and within the University of [redacted] partner college. Blended learning is suggested to influence

whether students enrol and complete a programme of study (Cheung and Hew, 2011) and has a lower than average per-student running cost for educational providers (Battaglino et al, 2012). When the FdA programme was designed it was not anticipated that the modules would be delivered online. However, guided by a student-centred humanistic approach, the teaching team responded to the needs of the first cohort of students in early 2016 and adopted flexible programme delivery, including the blended delivery of one module per semester.

Module curriculum design – 'Supporting the Curriculum'

The planned curriculum for the FdA sets out the module aims and learning objectives, and reflects a product curriculum design (Tyler, 2013). However, the teaching team aim to align the module in a more praxis design manner to reflect the foundation degree characteristics (QAA, 2015a) and to meet the needs of the learners' wider student and employment communities, whilst keeping to the aims and learning objectives of the planned curriculum. A praxis curriculum design integrates theory and practice, and was developed from the ideas of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1972) who defines praxis as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Chp1, p.6). Yek and Penney (2006) argue that a praxis curriculum aims to 'maximise the potential for each and every individual' and is orientated towards learner wellbeing.

The module curriculum will reflect a praxis design facilitating learners and teachers to confront real problems together, enabling critical reflection and further skills development (Grundy, 1987, cited in Yek and Penney, 2006). Freire (1972) also emphasised the transformative nature of education to meet the needs of the wider society, through critical thinking and an awareness of the wider world. This transformative nature reflects a social reconstructivism ideology, inspiring social change to tackle 'injustices of racial, gender, social and economic inequalities' (Schiro, 2013, p.6).

As all the FdA students work in a learning support role, it could be argued that using critical thinking skills to confront real life problems in the safe higher education learning environment can be a transformative experience for the learners and their wider social and employment communities. Informal feedback from learners and mentors has indicated that a problem-solving approach in academic studies is transferred to the workplace, with learners taking more initiative and an active role in workplace problem solving for the wider benefit of the children they work with (FdA Teaching and Learning workplace co-ordinator, 2016).

In partnership with a praxis design, the programme and modules mirror a jigsaw model of curriculum. Jigsaw curriculums are described as modules providing component parts that fit together by the end of the course (Butcher, Davies and Highton, 2006, p.36). The FdA is a good example of a jigsaw curriculum as all the modules within the foundation degree are discreet packages of learning, but all work towards the academic and practice skills that enable students to be the best learning support practitioners they can be.

The FdA aims to 'equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to employment' (QAA, 2015a, p. 2) in a learning support role, however this contrasts with the notion of graduate attributes for the twenty-first century which promotes critical thinking, effective communication, openness and active citizenship (University of Aberdeen, cited Ashwin *et al.,* 2015, p. 158) to prepare learners for the highly competitive non-career specific graduate world. The FdA praxis design within jigsaw curriculum aims to meet the future employment needs of learning support students and equip them with the skills for a graduate world.

Reflecting on the blended learning delivery in 2015/16 and early 2016/17, learners fed back that although they enjoyed the modules they felt disconnected from the teachers, their peers and the assessment, and that they lacked the skills for blended learning initially (FdA Teaching and Learning

team, 2016a). This final observation supports research by Dearnley, Dunn and Watson (2005) who found that non-traditional learners are likely to have a skills deficit which impacts on their ability to participate in blended learning. This chimes with Lockhorst, Admiraal and Pilot (2010) observation that blended learning faces the challenge of social cohesion affecting social learning and collaboration within the learning community. Social cohesion is a key element of both education for sustainable development and the promotion of inclusion in line with the Equalities Act 2010.

Key challenges and opportunities for the 'Supporting the Curriculum' blended learning module
Applying a praxis design within a jigsaw curriculum to blended learning creates several challenges and opportunities primarily related to social cohesion, inclusion, employability, sustainability and parity of esteem.

Janmaat and Green (2013) postulate that British social cohesion is characterised by a belief in individual opportunity and rewards based on merit, but contrary to this there is in fact wider skills inequality and lower social mobility in the UK than most other western nations. Foundation degrees and the widening participation agenda aim to democratise social mobility by encouraging learners from underrepresented groups, such as disabled, mature and part-time learners and those from lower socio-economic or minority ethnic groups, into higher education (Moore, Sanders and Higham, 2013).

Blended learning offers opportunities for promoting social cohesion and inclusion of learners from non-traditional backgrounds who are able to engage in blended higher education as it is flexible, fitting around personal and professional commitments, and works particularly well for learners whose disability could reduce their engagement in traditional face-to-face lessons. Heiman and Shemesh (2012) observed that not only were learning disabled higher education students logging on to course websites more often than their non-disabled peers, they were more active on online learning forums within their courses.

Despite the opportunities for inclusion that blended learning offers, the primary challenge remains one of social cohesion. Graduate attributes and foundation degree employability aspirations both emphasise the social skills of effective communication and openness (Ashwin *et al.,* 2015; QAA, 2015a). The challenge for blended learning is to foster these social communication skills in an online environment. The feedback from blended module tutors was that learners' online participation in social learning opportunities, including forums and group activities, was very poor, and dropped off considerably as the modules progressed (FdA Teaching and Learning team, 2016b). The tutors felt they failed to facilitate the creation of online social cohesion which would have involved the cohort coming together to form a distinct online identify. If the learners had not also been meeting weekly for face-to-face lessons where they informally discussed the blended modules, they would not have worked cohesively to support each other's learning towards the blended module's assessments (FdA Teaching and Learning team, 2016b).

Blended learning supports employability for learners through the development of information and communication technology (ICT) skills. Dearnley, Dunn and Watson (2005) found that only 37% of their 124 part-time student participants were confident enough in their ICT skills to engage in the online forums and discussions as part of their course. Twelve years after Dearnley, Dunn and Watson's (2005) research ICT usage is now widespread. In 2010, 43% of young people had a smartphone or tablet to go online, but just three years later in 2013, this had risen to 89% (Cabinet Office, 2014), it could be concluded that Dearnley, Dunn and Watson's (2005) findings on student confidence for online engagement might not be replicated in 2017.

Education for sustainability covers themes of environmental, economic and social sustainability. The United Nations describe the need for education to support sustainable development as they believe that it cannot be achieved with technological solutions, political regulation or financial instruments alone (UNESCO, 2016). Blended learning can support each theme of sustainability. Environmentally, blended learning offers environmental savings for learners and educational settings with reduced travel, classroom and printing/learning resource use. However, this needs to be balanced with the increase in online software, hardware and running costs. Economic sustainability relates to employability for students, and thus wider economic benefits to the local community. ICT skills are a key employability skill (Lowden, Hall, Elliot and Lewin, 2011), but many digital-native current undergraduates are ICT proficient; however, the FdA students are generally more mature learners and many of whom are not confident ICT users (FdA Teaching and Learning team, 2016a). The technological skills these students develop through blended learning can enhance their employability as it gives them a more level playing field with their younger more ICT-competent graduate colleagues. Social sustainability relates closely to social cohesion, and includes topics such as cultural diversity, health and wellbeing, and citizenship and democracy (University of [redacted], 2016b).

The notion of academic drift (Gellert, 1993) which refers to the increasing academic focus of vocational higher education institutions was tied up with changes to former polytechnics in the United Kingdom which converted to University status following the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. This mirrored a rise in parity of esteem between vocational and academic learning, which eventually led to the introduction of Foundation Degrees in 2000 to 'provide graduates needed within the labour market to address shortages in particular skills' (QAA, 2015a) and later Degree Apprenticeships in 2015.

Parity of esteem between vocational and academic learning is reinforced within Foundation Degrees' learning outcomes and assessments, giving prominence to practical work-based skills and work-based learning. With the FdA Teaching and Learning, although vocational skills are not assessed in the workplace, parity is demonstrated through work based learning and the emphasis placed on reflective tasks which although academic in nature are based on vocational practice. Arguably the blended learning modules provide greater parity as they tend to be even more practice focused, particularly the 'Supporting the curriculum' module which will involve a reflection on workplace learning intervention that the students are required to plan, implement and reflect on.

In summary, the 'Supporting the Curriculum' module has been developed with a planned curriculum, instrumentalist in ideology. It will be delivered as part of a jigsaw curriculum and in a praxis manner to link theory to practice. It aims to facilitate parity of esteem between work-based and academic learning but without the work-based assessment as you would expect from a Higher and Degree Apprenticeship. Blended learning can meet the needs of the students and the educational setting, and promotes education for sustainable development by equipping learners with the work-based knowledge, understanding and skills for employability. Foundation degrees (QAA, 2015a) and blended learning (Jones and Lau, 2010) also support inclusion and widening participation for learners from communities that are traditionally underrepresented within higher education.

Curriculum proposal

Reflecting on the current planned curriculum for the 'Supporting the Curriculum' module, the feedback from learners and tutors about existing blended learning modules within the FdA Teaching and Learning, curriculum theory and principles, and the research into higher education blended learning, particularly in aspects of social cohesion and education for sustainable development, this report proposes enhancements to module's curriculum.

Module leaders for the existing blended learning modules within the FdA reported that due to their lack of online learning ICT skills they had planned their curricula and schemes of learning with an instrumentalism ideology using a constructivist approach (FdA Teaching and Learning team, 2016b). Although they had designed the schemes of learning with interactive learning activities including wikis and forum, few students had engaged in the activities in a meaningful manner. This resulted in the received curriculum being more didactic than anticipated – learners read the required reading or watched the videos posted by the tutors, but did not record their learning on the online interactive learner forums. It could be argued that this resulted in a more content and transmission model of curriculum which Kelly (2009) associates with formal curriculums, including the National Curriculum, which emphasises a transference of the information that learners 'need to learn' (Kelly, 2009, p. 53).

To protect against the curriculum becoming content transmission, Woollard (2011) proposes that when designing curriculum for online learning, teachers need to advance beyond face-to-face pedagogy and instead think more specifically of cybergogy. Carrier and Moulds (2003) define cybergogy as enabling autonomous learner-centred and collaborative learning through the means of a virtual learning environment (VLE) (cited in Woollard, 2011). Woollard (2011) suggests by adopting a cybergogy approach based on a social constructivist view (Vygotsky, 1962; Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer and Scott, 1994) to the curriculum design, teachers will be able to develop curriculums that maximise the benefits of online learning, rather than simply replicating face-to-face teaching online.

By adopting a cybergogy approach to the 'Supporting the curriculum' learners will construct knowledge and internalise it through the social process of learner-centred collaboration. This therefore requires the module's planned curriculum to include opportunities for learners to collaborate on problem-based (Savin-Baden, 2003; Barrett and Moore, 2010) and/or enquiry-based (Healey and Jenkins, 2009) learning activities which involve emotional engagement, immediacy, action engagement, cognitive engagement, and creative and critical thinking (Woollard, 2011). These activities could incorporate videoed introductions, voiced presentations, conference calling seminars, real-time forums and continuous assessment.

Savin-Baden (2003) guards against assuming that project work within higher education is the same as problem-based learning (PBL). She contends that true PBL is when the curriculum is organised around the problem scenarios rather than the subject matter and teams of learners work towards resolving the problems without a predetermined *correct* answer. Kandiko and Blackmore (2012) note that PBL is pedagogical approach that engages students as they develop a range of practical skills, which could be highly valued by employers. McCall (2010) highlights that PBL focuses on the learning strategy rather than the knowledge acquisition itself, with knowledge being acquired through learners checking what they already know and how it applies to a problem. This suggests that pre-learning of a subject would be advantageous before effective PBL.

When considering whether PBL could be applied to a blended learning environment, it is worth acknowledging that PBL has its limitations. Kandiko and Blackmore (2012) note that PBL can be very costly in terms of resources, time and administration, and that learners from a rote-learning background can find it very challenging. Ashwin *et al.* (2015) adds that learners need a lot of guidance and feedback from teachers to ensure that there are no gaps in their knowledge as they progress through their modules and courses. Further, Wheelahan (2007) suggests that PBL risks learners knowing elements of a subject, but not understanding the relational connections that build a field of study. It could be argued that a blended PBL approach would increase this risk of learners *missing* elements of the planned curriculum, due to the remote nature of the teacher-student interaction.

In contrast to PBL, enquiry-based learning (EBL) has a focus on research and discovery. Healey and Jenkins (2009) explain that the role of the learner in EBL moves from one of a PBL collaborator and problem solver, to an EBL participant in the learning process, investigation and analysis. Ashwin *et al.* (2015) contend that EBL enables teachers to incorporate teaching and research activities into their curricula. Levy and Petrulis (2012) situates EBL as student-led involving participation in building knowledge, whereby the learners engage in the research process themselves. Referring to the learning outcomes for the 'Supporting the Curriculum' module and noting that the learners have completed a Research Methods module in semester one of level five, it seems that adopting an EBL approach would be appropriate for this blended learning module.

Enquiry-based blended learning (EBBL)

Drawing on the work of Cooner (2011) who led an interdisciplinary team to develop EBBL for student social workers at the University of Birmingham, it is proposed that the 'Supporting the curriculum' module is enhanced with EBBL curriculum designs which promotes student collaboration and social cohesion, and supports the inclusion of all learners including those with protected characteristics as identified by the Equalities Act 2010. EBBL dovetails with a praxis model of curriculum which integrates theory and practice (Yek and Penney, 2006)

Cooner (2011) notes that social work education has a duty to ensure that learners are equipped with the knowledge and skills to function collaboratively with client groups, and health and social care colleagues after graduation. He stresses that these skills need to be embedded within their training, and it could be argued that the same is true for the FdA students who will all work within educational settings with a range of stakeholders (learners, parents/carer, teacher colleagues, senior management and outside agencies). By working collaboratively on EBBL tasks Cooner (2011) believes students get the joint benefits of personal reflection and working on group activities asynchronously in their own time and space.

Garrison and Vaughan (2008) outline a framework for developing EBBL activities which emphasises the importance of social, cognitive and teaching presence; the social presence of working collaboratively with *real* students – those that they also work alongside in face-to-face classes; the cognitive presence of an online environment which encourages reflection and critical thinking; and a teaching presence that designs, facilitates and directs the social and cognitive learning towards meaningful learning outcomes. These presences reflect the learner-centred collaboration features that Woollard (2011) outlines in cybergogy involving emotional engagement, immediacy, action engagement, cognitive engagement, and creative and critical thinking.

Implementing EBBL in 'Supporting the curriculum'

The first challenge for implementing EBBL in the FdA is the skills and capacity of the module leaders to investigate, develop and facilitate online learning (FdA Teaching and Learning team, 2016b). Rigby *et al.* (2011) stress that the start-up requirements of an EBBL project should not be underestimated; they note that development and facilitation of EBBL programmes should not be considered a cost-cutting measure. Having prepared the resources, Cooner (2011) suggests that the next stage is to prepare the learners. Feedback from the FdA teaching team has suggested that so far the students have been interacting with the resources but not with each other during the blended learning modules (FdA Teaching and Learning team, 2016b), suggesting that this preparation stage to encourage the social presence of learners in a safe and open cohesive environment will be key to the success of EBBL for the module. Cooner (2011) suggests the first activities within a teaching segment need to encourage open and free discussion, dialogue and collaboration, and do not necessarily need to be focused on the learning outcomes.

The learning outcomes state that by the end of the module, learners will be able to examine, analyse and evaluate a chosen curriculum area, and plan, implement and evaluate an appropriate curriculum intervention. To reflect the planned curriculum and assessments, learners will work independently to analyse and evaluate an area of the curriculum that they are interested in. This student-led progressivism approach meets the individual learner's real interests, but neglects the cohesion of the group. The challenge is to introduce an EBBL task that encourages collaboration and cohesion whilst supporting their individual investigations towards assessment. Cooner (2011) suggests that a triggering event is required to create a sense of puzzlement within the learners and to stimulate inquiry; this is often a real world case study, problem or question. This triggering event needs to be general enough to include all learners and their interests, but specific enough to draw the learners into the task. Cooner (2011) continues that this trigger could be presented as story board, video or audio diary, to bring the event to life. ZAK radicalisation awareness training is a good example of this interactive and immersive EBBL (Centre for Child Protection, 2016).

Having triggered an event, the EBBL segment of the curriculum needs to be planned in detail. Cooner (2011) stresses the importance of the teacher considering each step that the learners will take and facilitating their discussions, ensuring all learners have opportunities to develop and apply their learning within the task. During the facilitation stage the teacher needs to be mindful of fostering the social cohesion and inclusion, prompting learners who may be reticent to contribute, being flexible to offer alternative ways of demonstrating progress, in the same way a teacher would in a face-to-face lesson (Ashwin *et al.,* 2015).

The final element EBBL design that Cooner (2011) proposes is assessment that is congruent with the learning outcomes or constructively aligned as John Biggs referred to it (cited in Ashwin *et al.* 2015). Wang *et al.* (2013) demonstrated that learners who were on courses that were constructively aligned were more likely to use deep learning methods, the sort of methods required for effective collaboration and reflection within EBBL task. To ensure congruence within the 'Supporting the curriculum' module, the learners must see the links between the trigger event and EBBL sequence, and how this will benefit their completion of the module assessment.

In conclusion, the 'Supporting the curriculum' module of the FdA Teaching and Learning programme currently risks being delivered as a content transmission curriculum model, as the learners have not demonstrated effective interaction and collaboration in previous blended learning modules. Although learners would likely achieve the learning outcomes (product model), they would miss out on the collaboration, team work, enquiry and problem-solving potential of effective blended learning (praxis model). This would undermine social cohesion and education for sustainable development, as learners would not be advancing the skills vital for their future employability, both in their intended learner support employment but also as twenty-first century graduates with transferable skills.

By adopting an EBBL approach to the module, which fosters collaboration, enquiry, research, reflection and critical thinking, the FdA team have the potential to bring the students together on the online learning platform to work collaboratively towards group tasks whilst supporting their own investigations towards the module assessment. However, as Rigby *et al.* (2011) warns the start-up commitments of an EBBL project should not be underestimated.

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