

# INTERCONNECTIVITY BETWEEN THE CURRICULUM AND THE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

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***Abstract:** One of the responsibilities of higher educational institutions is to enhance students' character building and soft skills. The disjuncture between institutions' expectation in educating their students and students' perceptions on the benefit of their teaching and learning processes necessitates a paradigm shift in the college curriculum. Given that universities prepare students to be an individual and a member of a society, college curriculum, therefore, should enhance students' experience both academically and non-academically. This paper attempts to propose a modest and brief preliminary proposal for curricular change for English Departments in Indonesia. The proposal includes the proposal for five elements of curricular revision - purpose, learner, content, instructional processes, and evaluation and assessment.*

***Key words:** curriculum, interconnectivity, student experience, character building, soft skills*

## INTRODUCTION

In responding to the increasing demand of accountability and autonomy and in improving the competitiveness of higher

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education in Indonesia, the Directorate General of Higher Education lays out its strategic plan in *Basic Framework for Higher Education Development*. One of the strategies stipulated in the framework is the responsibility for higher education institutions in enhancing students' character building and soft skills. The framework underlines the importance of the paradigm shift from teaching to learning "in order to produce graduates with immense self-learning capacity" (Directorate General for Higher Education 2003: 8). In the era of global competition, university graduates need to "learn beyond their skills and expertise" (2003: 16). The strategic plans of the Directorate General for Higher Education clearly highlight the importance of students' academic and non-academic experiences in college. Some of the endeavors of the Directorate General of Higher Education to promote students' learning are providing funding for student research and community-based projects, training in leaderships, funding for exchange programs, and many other activities that can benefit students in developing their hard and soft skills.

Universities in Indonesia in general open a wide variety of opportunities to get their students involved in academic or extracurricular activities. They respond to students' need by creating activities that can promote students' social, psychological, and intellectual development. However, lack of financial support has severely limited students' activities and organizations (Kompas 2006). In addition, students' participation to such activities is low due to tight class schedule (Kompas 2006).

Most English departments in Indonesia in Indonesia create a wide range of activities to get students involved inside and outside of class. Given the emphasis of the curriculum is to produce graduates who are proficient in oral and written English and have expertise either in the study of language (linguistics) and literature, they create activities that will provide students opportunities to practice and improve their language skills as well as apply their

knowledge in either linguistics or literature. In Murniati and Dukut's study, however, the findings indicated the disparity between the institution's expectation and the students' response. Their study showed that while students were cognizant of the importance of such activities to improve their skills and, their participation rate was low (Murniati and Dukut 2005). The findings of the study raise some important issues on the connection between academic plans and non-academic activities. They highlight the salience of students' perceptions on the meaningfulness of their non-academic experiences for their personal and professional development and the role of the faculty members and staff to improve students' participation inside and outside classroom.

The main arguments that the paper wishes to make are, first and foremost, that interconnectivity between the curriculum and the students' experiences inside and outside classroom is essential for students' personal and professional development. The contents and the pedagogy need to be revised in such a way that they put students' collegiate experience as priority.

Second, to ensure whether students benefit from the curricular revision, English departments should use multiple ways of outcome assessment. Learning is a developmental process. College education is merely a transition to become a full-fledge member of the community. The knowledge, information, and experience that students learn in their college years prepare students to be well-rounded individuals. Given that assessment is a vital element in college curriculum, outcome assessment needs to be able to document students' progress inside and outside classroom.

The main purpose of this paper is to propose a curricular revision and non-academic activities that might increase student engagement and improve students' language skills. This paper is by no means a finished piece. Rather, it is intended as a starting point,

a developing and open proposal that administrators in English departments in Indonesia can use. This paper will present some insights of how and why courses have to be interrelated and how and why administrators and teachers need to connect the contents and pedagogy of the courses to students' extracurricular activities.

The discussion will be limited on sets of courses and types of activities that students think are important for their personal and professional development, in particular the ones related to their language proficiency and their majors. Additionally, this paper focuses only on five elements, namely purpose, learner, content, instructional processes, and assessment and evaluation.

## **CURRICULUM AND THE PROCESS OF LEARNING**

Mentowski in her article *Thinking through a Curriculum for Learning that Lasts* contends that to foster learning that lasts, higher education, with all its constituents, "should conceptualize, design, practice, experience, evaluate, and improve curriculum" (2005: 336). Higher education institutions have to design their curriculum in such a way that students can learn through a multiplicity of modes and opportunities. In real life, students are social agents. They interact in highly diverse social contexts, modes of communication, and people. Collegiate experience should reflect students' social interactions outside of school settings. In other words, skills, information, and knowledge acquired and learned in college must equip students with skills they need as social beings in every aspect of their life.

Students enter college life with their own unique and distinct past and with a vision for the future. Therefore, college education serves as a path connecting the past, present, and future. It is "...fundamentally about making and maintaining connections, biologically through neural networks; mentally among concepts,

ideas, and meanings; and experientially through interaction between the mind and the environment; self and other; this generality and context, deliberation and action” (AAHE, ACPA, NASPA 2005: 425). It is also “... a cumulative process involving the whole person, relating past and present, integrating the new with the old, starting from but transcending personal concerns and interests” (2005: 424). This suggests the interplay of academic and non-academic practices in college.

Stark and Lattuca (2005:325) suggests that any higher education institutions should view curriculum as “academic plans”. A good academic plan has clear well-planned objectives and well-designed activities and puts emphasis on improving students’ education. They, in addition, point out some elements of a good academic plan. They are purposes, content, sequence, learners, instructional resources, instructional processes, and assessment and evaluation. These elements are keys in designing a good curriculum. From the model, we can see that purposes and content are always connected, and content and sequence are sometimes connected. The seven elements in the academic plan should constantly be revisited, revised, and refined. Stark and Lattuca (2005) furthermore propose that curriculum should be “integrated with the co-curriculum and the college experience.” (2005:343). Therefore, a good curriculum design needs to take into account both academic and non-academic experiences.

## **A PROPOSAL FOR CURRICULAR REVISION**

The following is the proposal for curricular revision.

### **1. Purpose**

The purposes remain the same, that is, to equip students with an oral and written mastery of English language and expertise in the study of language and literature.

## 2. Learner

Language comprises both productive and receptive skills. Productive skills like writing and speaking are more participatory in nature. In other words, language learners can improve their proficiency when they have (intended) audience and partners to practice their skills. The change is intended to shape participative students who have high motivations to collaborate with other people both within and outside the department, who are capable of engaging in various modes of communication, and interacting with community in which they live. The participative nature of learning is crucial as learning is "...a process of becoming a member of a certain community...from a lone entrepreneur, the learner turns into an integral part of a team" (Sfard 2005:412). Consequently, the learners should be active players of their own educational practices.

## 3. Content

Interconnections among course contents are imperative. It is a common practice for most English departments to establish gradual sequences of language skill courses (speaking, writing, listening, reading, and structure) in terms of the language development. For instance, in the first semester, students learn elementary skills, and then they learn more advance skills in the subsequent semesters. The study of language will would have had a far-reaching effect if it is more applicable and can relate students' past, present, and future. While learning the rules of language is essential in any language learning classes, overemphasis on language structure without sufficient application for real communication and use is detrimental to students in the long run. The contents of language skills courses will be much more useful for students when they are geared towards more practical applications. The disconnection

between the classroom assignments and student experience and interests further complicates this problem. For instance, reading texts assignments do not relate to students' world and background experience. It is of common perception among English teachers in Indonesia that assigning popular magazines or books as reading texts are not appropriate as they do not prepare students with appropriate reading strategies for standardized tests such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System). Thus, the contents focus more on accuracy rather than meaning. As a result, students are more detached from and less interested in their classroom experience. Some studies have suggested the use of popular culture in English classes to connect the curriculum with students' ways of making meaning (Tomlinson 2005).

The interactions between one course to another are also of paramount importance. Thus far, the language skill courses are the skills that are closely related to one another, even though only in terms of target language functions. Other sets of courses such as literature and linguistics courses are very distinct to one another and do not typically relate to language skill courses. Therefore, administrators and faculty members need to explore the interconnectivity among those sets of courses. It is very likely that such interconnectivity might become strong language reinforcement and enrichment for students as well as a good practice for language recycling. Reading assignments given in the Popular Culture class, for instance, can be used in speaking and writing classes. Students can write reflective logs on their interpretation of the plays or any issues raised from such plays. They can perform the plays during their extracurricular activities and use their compositions for essay contest. Such practices will tremendously enhance students' understanding of the plays, increase students' proficiency, and

do not give more burden for students as they can use the classroom assignments for other activities.

#### 4. Instructional Processes

The paradigm shift on the nature of learners brings about need for pedagogical change. The participatory nature of learners can be achieved when teachers are willing to give up their habitually authoritative style and embrace more dialogic style of teaching. Interaction between teachers and students should not mirror the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. Instead it has to be dialogic and reflects teachers' eagerness to listen to and value their students. Teachers have to recognize and acknowledge student's individual voices as a key to their development of self-authorship (Magolda 2005). She defines self-authorship as the way "one can construct knowledge claims, makes one's own inner psychological life, and regulate relationship with others to maintain one's own identity" (2005:394). In Javanese culture, teachers are viewed as the transmitter of knowledge whereas students are the receiver of knowledge. In the field of English teaching, learner-centered approach has been around for the last few decades. Many workshops and seminars introduce teaching strategies and methods using learner-centered approach. However, the implementation of this approach is challenging partly due to the Javanese culture, in particular the Javanese ethics of harmony, which is indelibly etched in teachers and students' personality. In Javanese culture, it is people's responsibility to sustain harmony in life. The disruption of harmony will bring about misfortune and bad luck. This idea of sustaining harmony in all aspects of life is indicated by the people's attitude to always pay respect to elders and avoid conflict. In the classroom, students are reluctant to express their disagreements as it indicates their lack of respect for teachers. Similarly, teachers will be offended if students argue and question their knowledge



as it indicates lack of respect (Nal 2007). To successfully implement learner-centered approach, both teachers and students should alter their attitude and recognize that questioning, discussing, and arguing each other's viewpoints do not constitute lack of respect; rather they are constructive practices for teaching and learning process. According to Bakhtin, recognizing and valuing diverse voices in the classroom is essential for a person's growth. Bakhtin distinguishes two discourses: authoritative and internally persuasive discourses (Bakhtin 1981). Authoritative discourse is that of the authorities, like administrators' and teachers' whereas the internally persuasive discourse is a common discourse, it is how students perceive themselves and others. When teachers and students interact in the classroom, the voices come into contact. These voices ultimately influence the way students perceive themselves and become internally persuasive for them. Unlike the authoritative discourse, the internally persuasive discourse constantly changes as students make contacts with other people (Ball and Freedman 2004). Recognizing and valuing these discourses, therefore, is essential for a person's intellectual growth.

While creating activities using learner-centered approach in language skill courses is not as challenging as that of in linguistics or literature courses, it is by no means impossible. Even in courses with dense concepts such as syntax and morphology, teachers can modify the lecture-type delivery to a more interactive one. For instance, teachers can use problem-based method. Students are required to solve problems in sentence structure or word formation and generate rules from those problems. Problems related to the use of language in real communication are abundant as and authentic texts are available for resources. If teachers use problems that students commonly encounter in their daily interactions inside or outside

classrooms, the concepts they learn will become more meaningful.

## 5. Evaluation and Assessment

Outcome assessment is an integral part of the learning process because it reflects not only students' performance but also the relationship between the curriculum and students' development, the effects of college curriculum on students, and to evaluate whether the curriculum achieves its purposes. The goal of outcome assessment should be more holistic and integrated, encompassing not only learning achievements such as test results and grades but also informal learning through extracurricular activities.

The typical outcome assessments in most English departments are tests, comprehensive exam and senior thesis. While one might argue that comprehensive exam and senior thesis are types of assessments that reflect students' ability to apply what they have learned in college, it does not allow learners for self-reflection. One of the major tenets in outcome assessment is the opportunity for students to observe their own progress, look for their own strengths and weakness, and take actions to maintain their strengths and improve areas in which they are weak.

One of the most common types of assessment that shows a student's progress is portfolio assessment. Portfolio assessment allows students and teacher to monitor the learning progress and reflect on the results. Teachers can observe students' potential through collected samples of students' works whereas students can make use of the portfolio to document their extracurricular activities through photos, samples of their writing, journal entries, diplomas or certificates for their participation in various events, and many other artifacts. Those artifacts inform teachers, administrators, and even employers

about students' personality, style, and most importantly, their cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal growth.

Implementing portfolio assessment requires additional preparation because it is complex. It entails factors such as setting up objectives, scoring system, control group, and more importantly, it calls for student commitment (Courts and McInerney 2005). They further point out that in portfolio assessment the key factor is student perception on whether the assessment is related to their own learning and growth. When students view the assessment as being useful, they take it very seriously. The challenge in implementing portfolio assessment, nevertheless, should not discourage administrator and faculty members from putting it into practice.

Student portfolio items should include their work samples, test scores, samples of their participation outside classroom activities (such as their essays, videos of their plays), and their reflective journals. In the reflective journals, students describe their works and self-evaluate their performance in their works. They judge how well their progress is and comment on what aspects need improvement.

## **CONCLUSION**

Learning takes place throughout a student's life, through formal and informal context, through interactions with peers and adults, in a myriad of activities and events. College education is the one that assists students for their own growth as an individual and as a social being, to prepare students as a member of community. College education is, as Angelo puts it, "...an active, interactive process that results in meaningful, long lasting, changes in knowledge, understanding, behavior, disposition, appreciation, belief, and the like" (2005: 454). In that manner, college

curriculum should relate and enhance students both academic and non-academic experiences.

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