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# JOURNAL OF Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

## The Role of the Hidden Curriculum: Institutional Messages of Inclusivity

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### ABSTRACT

Significant attention is rightly given in literature concerning institutional curricular change to the design and delivery of the formal curriculum. Particularly influential in this area has been Biggs' work on constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999, and subsequent editions) and the learning taxonomies which higher education has sought to utilise in the alignment process (Biggs & Collins, 1982; Bloom, 1956). However, the role of the hidden curriculum (Giroux & Purpel, 1983), much discussed in the context of school education for many years, has barely featured in the discourse around learning and teaching in higher education. In this reflective analysis, I consider the question, 'To what extent do the learning communities we create and the hidden curriculum which frames them foster or fight the development of capabilities needed by our global students?' and propose the hidden curriculum to be an area we can no longer neglect.

**Keywords:** internationalisation; hidden curriculum; inclusivity; affective learning

### Introduction

*Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular things he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of like and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned...*

(Dewey, 1916/1966, p. 48)

I have devoted much of my professional life to understanding and advocating for the internationalisation of the curriculum (IOC), and have held institutional responsibilities for the introduction of cross-cultural capability and a global outlook into the curriculum. This reflective piece has grown out of that work, and I believe it illustrates the importance of the hidden curriculum in inhibiting or advancing student learning across a range of dimensions, and perhaps most significantly in areas of learning where our outcomes-based formal curricula dare not go. I am not suggesting that we should withdraw our attention from work to enhance the formal curriculum, I believe that work is crucial to the quality of the student learning experience and to the outcomes of that experience. However, I do suggest that when it comes to institutional curricular change, the hidden curriculum also needs to be exposed and interrogated and, in so far as it is possible, similarly *aligned* to the aspirations we espouse for student learning.

### The formal curriculum, the hidden curriculum, the internationalized curriculum

In higher education, the formal curriculum is laid out in course and module documentation, typically designed by course teams and quality assured through a rigorous internal system, usually with input from one or more external specialists. Among the checks and balances for the construction of the formal curriculum in the UK are the QAA Quality Code and Benchmark statements (QAA, 2011, 2013), taxonomies of cognitive, and sometimes behavioural, learning (Biggs & Collins, 1982; Bloom, 1956), possible professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements and the academic regulations of the individual institution. As higher education increasingly makes forays into transnational education (TNE), quality assurance bodies from other nations and other institutional regulations may also be brought into the process. Among the drivers for any redesign of the formal curriculum are internal and national student surveys and other student feedback processes, comments from external examiners, data on student demographics and achievement, and in some cases on-going consultation with relevant industries. Educational developers, professional awards like Postgraduate Certificates in Academic Practice, and the UK Professional Standards Framework pay significant attention to advancing academics' understanding of 'good' curriculum design and delivery. Despite all this, of course, we rarely make a perfect job of it and the current UK developments to frame and introduce a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for higher education will doubtless seek to shed light on those areas where we have most to learn.

The hidden curriculum, by its very nature, gets no such consistent, direct scrutiny. Yet the messages it carries are powerful, and indeed power-laden. The hidden curriculum, for example, carries messages about our institutional and disciplinary values, and about what and who is valued (Leask, 2009); it is "acknowledged as the socialization process of schooling" (Kentli, 2009, p. 83). In our universities, such (hidden) socialisation is likely to be operationalised through a privileging of the perspectives and/or behavioural

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norms of majority-student and majority-academic groups. The very terminology we use to categorise students contributes to the negative impact of the hidden curriculum on 'non-majority' groups:

*It is important that higher education grapples with ways in which to address the very real challenges faced by students from academically diverse backgrounds. Describing 'disadvantage' primarily in terms of poverty or socio-economic status gives an under-nuanced perspective. Employing a deficit mindset to frame student difficulties acts to perpetuate stereotypes, alienate students from higher education and disregards the role of higher education in the barriers to student success. In the process, universities serve to replicate the educational stratification of societies.*

(Smit, 2012, p. 378).

'International' students often carry similar deficit categorisations among university staff and students.

This hidden curriculum is pervasive, sending messages daily through the many diverse ways in which a student encounters her university, including:

- campus services – for example, the availability of/ labelling of Halal and Kosher foodstuffs;
- academic staffing profiles – for example, the recruitment and deployment of academic staff from other countries, or the percentage of women or BME colleagues in senior positions;
- estates – for example, the availability of/ positioning of access and toilet facilities for disabled students;
- Students' Union – for example, the degree of tolerance of 'laddish' and/or drinking cultures in Student Societies;
- corporate affairs – for example, the approaches taken to the development of international partnerships; and, of course
- hidden within the formal curriculum – for example through the predominance of case studies situated in the dominant culture, citations and references drawn mostly from the 'white, western, male' canon, or a restricted interpretation of 'good' academic writing.

While the learning which flows from such socialising messages is not directly measurable, it seems to me that when the messages of the hidden curriculum are *constructively aligned* with those of the formal curriculum the potential for more significant and transformative learning *in the direction we would hope for* might be achieved.

The process of institutional curricular change provides a good opportunity to reflect upon some of what is at stake and some of what might be achieved, by bringing the hidden curriculum into view; making it available for more critical scrutiny. For most advocates of curriculum internationalisation, the process seeks to update the content and the learning experiences (or the 'delivery') of the formal curriculum. We see this as urgent and necessary work because we witness that much within our existing curricula does not appropriately prepare our students to take their place in a multicultural, globalising world. Many of us also believe that the significant recent activity to develop TNE partnerships, with students of increasingly diverse cultures studying in increasingly diverse contexts, has added significantly to the need for curriculum internationalisation. There are significant differences between individual IOC advocates around what 'appropriately prepare' might look like. These differences, fundamentally, concern whether or not the principle focus should be around employability (education for the private good) or about the advancement of global social justice (education for the public good).

For myself, and as the basis for the illustrations in the article, I see the objectives of IOC as being to develop the individual student's capabilities to lead a life s/he has reason to value in ways which will, where possible, enhance the capabilities of others to also lead lives they have reason to value. Some readers will recognise this framing of capability as deriving almost directly from the work of Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen (Sen, 1999, 2003). Leading a life we *have reason* to value implies, I suggest, leading a life we have the capabilities to deconstruct, to see our actions from the perspectives of others they touch upon, an authentic life, an emancipating life. I have proposed the term 'global self' (Killick, 2014) in preference to the rather overused and confused 'global citizen' as the identifier for individuals who can lay claim to such capabilities. Those familiar with the educational philosophies of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1970) or John Dewey (Dewey, 1916/1966) will find echoes here of their respective notions of education for freedom and education for democracy.

An examination of the kinds of capabilities which would contribute to the make up of the global self enables us to list cognitive and behavioural capabilities which can be developed and assessed through the formal curriculum. See Killick 2014 (Op. Cit.) for more detail, but by way of examples:

As global selves, students will be able to:

- *evaluate* alternative global perspectives on a practice associated with their discipline;
- *critically analyse* a proposed solution to a local problem from the perspectives of a culturally diverse population; and
- *participate* in discussions using language and styles of communication which are accessible and acceptable to peoples of other cultures.

However, our examination will also soon bring to the fore examples of required capabilities in the affective domain. Such capabilities, being not directly measurable, do not lend themselves to being set out in learning outcomes and assessed in the formal curriculum. By way of examples, in turn related to the skills listed above:

As global selves, students will be:

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- *inclined* to take into account how others may view their personal or professional behaviours;
- *driven* to engage in ethical and sustainable practice; and
- *willing* to adjust their own communication to meet the needs of others whose verbal or non-verbal language may be different from their own.

Capabilities, then, far from being adjunct skills, are in this usage fundamental to *who* we are and to how we *choose* to make our way in the world.

These are not small matters; inclinations, drives, the willingness to undertake the “identity vulnerability” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 26) engendered when truly engaging with diverse cultural others, something which is, arguably, not a ‘natural’ act. In Tajfel’s terms, social identity threat (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) poses significant barriers to intercultural living, enthralling us within our in-groups. Crossing into the kind of being implicated in global selfhood is for many a process of identity reformulation – a psychological process in which the individual must re-imagine themselves into the novelty of a new socio-cultural reality. It is for this reason that I cite it as involving acts of vulnerability. As such, identity threat is seen to have the potential to stimulate potent defence mechanisms, including retreats to ethnocentrism, to prejudice and, at the extreme, to fundamentalisms (Giddens, 1999). It needs to be approached carefully and coherently across all dimensions of the student experience. Research across universities in Anglophone countries has demonstrated again and again that our richly diverse campuses do not spontaneously create richly diverse learning communities. Students of different nationalities and ethnicities tend to formulate friendship and study groups with peers of similar backgrounds. To be clear, here, this tendency applies across the student body – with the majority group (in most Anglophone universities, white and middle class) being as culpable as any other. The tacit acceptance of this through its continuation in most formal learning situations might itself be seen as a significant contributor to the messages of the hidden curriculum.

In our interconnected world, within and beyond our increasingly diverse university learning spaces, our students cannot do other than encounter human diversity in multiple fields. Being able, and willing, to do the sometimes hard and uncertain work to formulate relationships with these diverse others may be one of the most important capabilities of the current epoch. Much of what I am concerned with in the hidden curriculum, then, focuses upon human relations. And in particular upon relations with humans who are, whether actually or just habitually-seen-to-be, different to ourselves. The American anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai, 1997, 2006/1966) proposes that we can categorise how we experience the world as a series of ‘scapes’, metaphorical spaces (like *landscapes*) which formulate our imagining of the world. Among these, and central to this discussion, are our *ethnoscapes* – the others, and their representations in our lifeworld, which the globalising world brings forward – both physically through increasingly varied patterns of migration, and through tourisms of the exotic, and virtually through the *mediascapes* and *technoscapes* through which others and their behaviours and their values are dropped/beamed into our living spaces. The capabilities of our students to dwell comfortably outside their established communities of similitude, their in-groups of like-minded and like-experienced others, are fundamental to their becoming global selves. While IOC sees the creation of equitable and successful learning experiences as an essential part of the careful design of the formal curriculum, particularly experiences which foster communication and collaboration with cultural others, we must examine also how intercultural spaces and encounters are framed in the broader experiencing of university life.

### Framings of the ‘other’ in the hidden curriculum

Almost any university website or prospectus will tell us something about how the institution ‘values’ and/or ‘celebrates’ the diversity of its student body. These are visible, public positions which add to the tapestry of messages in the hidden curriculum. In the vast majority of cases, the same publications will be divided at a high level (usually on the website *Welcome* page itself) into information for international students and (by implication) information for everybody who is not an international student. This high level, pre-arrival act of segregation persists through the student journey in most institutions – international students frequently have segregated welcome weeks, social and cultural events for them alone, separate arrangements for fee payments, find ‘special’ support services specifically for them, live in dedicated halls of residence, have different attendance requirements and quite probably at the end of their course, are given a separate student satisfaction survey.

These, in the main well-intentioned acts, I suggest send much more powerful messages of *difference* through the hidden curriculum than do the inclusive statements about valued diverse campus communities. This view seems to be echoed by domestic students discussing this type of intervention in UK institutions: “The general consensus was that whilst building cohesion among and between groups of international students such arrangements served to ‘...separate the international students from the home students...’ and celebrations of culture could be ‘...counter-productive...’” (Caruana & Ploner, 2010, p. 85).

Taking a different tack, the under-representation of (and continuing discrimination against) BME students and academic staff in most UK universities (ECU, 2014a, 2014b, 2015) speaks volumes concerning whose university we are in, whose perspectives are voiced and given validity, as do the gender imbalances on some courses/in some disciplines. While causation is not demonstrable, I would suggest that the alienation from dominant institutional cultures portrayed through our hidden curricula to be a strong contributor to the continuing UK attainment gap between white first degree qualifiers and their BME peers (ECU, 2014b).

Similarly, messages are also carried, of course, by the ways in which the university itself conducts its business; how it utilises its surpluses, how it collaborates with its international partners (which partners it chooses to collaborate with, or not), whether or not it is actually and visibly seeking to identify and to address inequalities for diverse students and staff, and the like. Visible signals of

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positive approaches might be found in those institutions which gain badges/awards signalling good practice – such as Investors in People, Stonewall, or a Race Equality Charter Mark. Again, though, institutions laying claim to such recognition need to beware of tokenism and ensure that all their institutional practices fully align with their declarations. Elsewhere (Killick & Simpson, Forthcoming), we have proposed a model for institutional accounting based upon the Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1997) approach advocated for corporate social responsibility and sustainable business practices as one mechanism which might be used to add alignment with espoused mission and so enhance messages in this dimension to the hidden curriculum.

These institutional issues might seem to lie beyond the scope of most academics to question or influence. I do not necessarily agree with that position, but we can also focus on the hidden messages carried by the ways in which the academic community *design* formal curricula. Work on IOC proposes that curriculum content should draw upon a diverse range of source materials, going beyond the traditional/western canon, and include case studies from different cultures, for example. This is advocated as a mechanism whereby all students might come to understand that what works here, for this culture, for this individual, may not work for another; that which is ‘good practice’ for some may not be so for others; how this is understood by another might enable us to do it better; and so forth. And, if properly constructively aligned, these sorts of understandings will then be built through learning activities and be required to be demonstrated within the assessment process. However, there is also a powerful hidden curriculum message delivered by the degree to which such diverse sources are (i) actually diverse and (ii) balanced against the traditional. Tokenism in the formal curriculum will send all the messages through the hidden curriculum which tokenism in any other social sphere sends. Among other things, this attests to the need for academic developers to bring in a greater focus on the power of the hidden curriculum when looking at how the formal curriculum is designed, delivered and evaluated.

Similarly, the learning tasks which surround curriculum content also carry their own, unspoken, messages. Again, such learning tasks are, of course, part of the formal curriculum – but *how* we construct them, support them, reward them, and so forth – how each of our diverse students *experiences* them – often remains unexamined and therefore forms a significant contributor to the messages of the hidden curriculum. Perhaps the most obvious example is the formulation of group work when we are lucky enough to have a socio-culturally diverse cohort. As mentioned earlier, most research into international-domestic student integration points to significant failure on the part of universities to deliver the espoused educational benefits of international student recruitment. Within group work activities, it is often domestic students who complain about deficiencies of their international co-group members. Far from enhancing intercultural inclinations, drives or willingness, group work seems often to diminish it. Allport’s seminal work on intercultural contact (Allport, 1979/1954) led to his hypothesis that for encounters to diminish rather than enhance prejudice a number of conditions needed to be satisfied. Paramount among these were that encounters need:

- equal status between participants
- an emphasis on cooperation
- activities with a common goal
- the support of relevant authorities

Where we let our students embark upon group work with diverse others without establishing these parameters, their encounters have the potential to reinforce any mutual feelings of otherness and diminish the likelihood of positive learning gain. The hidden curriculum messages which are carried through group inequalities, through seeing the other as competitor, through the privileging of native speaker language competencies, through holding divergent task orientations and goals, and through there being no formal recognition of the value of positive intercultural working *per se* can only conflict with whatever statements might be espoused in the formal curriculum documentation. I suggest this is likely to apply particularly to the kind of transformative learning gain which might enable our students to identify themselves as somebody who is capable among diverse others, who learns from diverse others and who values viewing the world from the perspectives of diverse others.

The most obvious arena in which relevant authorities can demonstrate their support for the kinds of capabilities we are promoting is, of course, through assessments. So, the kinds of cognitive and behavioural capabilities set out in the examples above should feature explicitly in assessments. While, as noted, such assessments cannot measure the kind of affective capabilities associated with global selfhood, the very existence of cognitive and behavioural assessments which reward equitable group working, the incorporation of multiple points of view, accessible communication and so forth sends powerful messages concerning our own valuing, our own willingness to engage with diverse perspectives and alternative ways of being.

### Summary

This has been an attempt to set down some of my own reflections on the hidden curriculum and its potential to inhibit or to enhance student learning, particularly with regard to the development of the kind of affective capabilities which might be associated with the development of students as global selves. I have suggested that we need to pay much more attention to the hidden curriculum than is commonly the case and that, while some dimensions of this might lie at institutional level and need to be actioned strategically and with vigour, much can also be achieved (negatively or positively) by how we ensure the hidden messages in our own learning and teaching practice align with the aspirations (philosophy, objectives, learning outcomes, etc.) set down in the formal curriculum. I would conclude, by suggesting that you might also want to reflect on the question which I am struggling with:

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“To what extent do the learning communities we create and the hidden curriculum which frames them foster or fight the development of capabilities needed by our global students?”

To answer this question, I think, requires of us some of the capabilities discussed here for our global graduates – a willingness to examine our own practices, to see them from the perspectives of others, to question the communications we send and are perceived to support. And to change where change will bring about a way of being which is better attuned to our diverse campuses and the multicultural, globalising world in which all our graduates will need to make their way.

### Biography

Prior to his Emeritus role, *David Killick* worked in his own institution and across the sector on the internationalisation of the curriculum. He has published and presented at national and international conferences on curriculum internationalisation, global citizenship and creating inclusive campuses. He is now a freelance HE consultant and mountain leader.

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