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Some Reflections On The Core Curriculum

James Avis

At Wulfrun, a West Midlands College of FE, the head of General Studies launched a departmental discussion to explore our response to the development of the core curriculum and the accompanying notion of core skills. The debate was focused on full-time GCSE and A level students and the post-16 core curriculum. The following paper was my contribution to the debate and reflects a personal response. It raises a set of key issues which must be addressed if we are to develop a core curriculum that enhances our educational practice and what is offered to our students.

Educational practice and the core curriculum

There are a number of educational issues that it may be sensible to address before constructing, modifying or developing a curriculum core. These revolve around the issues of: differentiation, integration, equal opportunities and social antagonism.

1. Much of the discussion around curriculum cores suggests that in order to gain credibility amongst students some form of assessment procedure is required. Sometimes this is linked to profiling or to records of achievement and tied to formative and summative assessment. Forms of assessment differentiate between students and may operate covertly as a form of policing - an attempt to regulate student subjectivity in ways that align these with the presumed needs of employers.

Alternative models have used the language of curriculum entitlement and suggest that student assessment could be measured on a value-added basis. This would show how a student had developed during a course of study, which could indicate future potential rather than the accomplishment of a particular level of performance.

There are a number of questions that differentiation raises: differentiation for

whom — students, potential employers? And what is the relation between this and students' educational development?

2. How far should core curriculum themes impinge on or be integrated into the mainstream curriculum? Again arguments suggest that narrow academic measures of performance discriminate against and marginalise the capabilities and skills of the non-academic. Integration serves to assess these particular aspects and could therefore enhance motivation and develop academic skills.

It might be argued that an integrated curriculum developed around an entitlement should abandon vocational, academic and gendered distinctions. The curriculum should therefore be reworked to undermine these and aim to generate similarities of outcomes in terms of race, gender and class.

3. Whilst models of the core curriculum operate within a framework of equal opportunities, they nevertheless embody a number of difficulties. These derive from an unreflective and commonsensically based notion of core and entitlement, which may serve quite unintentionally to discriminate against students and represent social interests that are neither educational nor necessarily benign. [Consider the CBI's and BP's pronouncements and even Boffy's Core Skills (1)].

There is however a more serious problem in the assessment of the core curriculum. Consider for example problem solving and working within groups. Within the core it is assumed these skills can be readily assessed and measured according to universal criteria. However, if we set this against a model of society that not only recognises social difference, for example in terms of class, race and gender, but allies these to an acknowledgement of social antagonism and conflict, what consequence does this have for our

thinking and assessment of core curriculum?

General Issues

What part is the student to play in these practices? What are the educational goals? Will a core curriculum enhance the education we offer our students? How does it relate to course tutors' interests in monitoring, evaluating, student performance and issues of 'discipline'? Should we keep the core separate from the issue of discipline?

Subsequent reflection on the paper has led me to recognise the importance of social science and critical teachers in the development of the post-16 core curriculum. Teachers have responded in various ways to the post-16 core. Some have distanced themselves from it whilst others have taken on the mantle of curriculum modernisers. Such teachers have validated the student-centredness, experiential focus and relevance of these developments to the needs of learners. However, we should be wary of pragmatism and the notion that by working within we can subvert and create educational possibilities out of conservative practices.(2) However, by being attentive to the issues of differentiation, integration, equal opportunities and social antagonism we are better placed to intervene in attempts to develop a progressive core that offers a better educational experience to our students and that challenges educational distinctions which block opportunities.

Notes:

1. MSC (1984) *Core Skills in YTS Report of the Vocational Education and Training Task Force* (Undated) *Towards a skills revolution* CBI A, Smithers and P. Robinson (1989) *Increasing participation in higher Education* BP Educational Service.

2. K. Jones (1989) *Right Turn: The Conservative Revolution in Education* Hutchinson Radius.