

A LIVING CURRICULA: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT LEARNING AND TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Unitec New Zealand's 'Living Curricula' is both an Academic Strategy and an aspiration for a unique institutional culture. The Department of Performing and Screen Arts has developed course curriculum that crosses discipline boundaries and exploits collaborative opportunity to leverage economical solutions to ever-growing sector and system constrains.

A living curriculum is defined not as the information content of a program, but rather as the programs' learning experience (Unitec, 2010). Living curricula learning experiences emphasize the links and application of theory/knowledge and work experience/practice. Knowledge is both applied in practice and drawn from practice. Therefore the process of developing a living curricula involves 'conversations' about enquiry, knowledge, practice, learning and teaching approaches which focus on engagement between and among learners, teachers, practitioners, communities, scholars, and with self and texts. Embedded within a 'living curricula' is the concept of Ako, a Maori word which means to learn, study, instruct, teach or advise. Ako describes a teaching and learning relationship where the educator is also learning from the student and where educators' practices are informed by the latest research and are both deliberate and reflective.

Keywords: Student-centered Learning, collaborative learning, performing and screen arts education, curriculum development.

INTRODUCTION

A living curriculum is defined not as the information content of a program, but rather as the programs' learning experience (Unitec, 2010). Living curricula learning experiences emphasize the links and application of theory/knowledge and work experience/practice. Knowledge is both applied in practice and drawn from practice. Therefore the process of developing a living curricula involves 'conversations' about enquiry, knowledge, practice, learning and teaching approaches which focus on engagement between and among learners, teachers, practitioners, communities, scholars, and with self and texts.

Unitec's living curricula is aimed at developing course curriculum that crosses discipline boundaries and exploits collaborative opportunity to leverage economical solutions to ever-growing sector and system constraints. This 'living curriculum' solution continuously reframes the nature, context and concept of learning, providing a new educational offer that meets the changing needs of both students and workplace. This innovation in teaching and learning requires teachers to **Relook** at what it takes to succeed in the modern environment; **Rethink** their approach in response to their students' needs for tomorrow; and **Redesign** and revitalize the learning curriculum using inside, outside and worldwide points of view to continuously adapt and improve.

Developing a living curricula involves 'conversations' about enquiry, knowledge, practice, learning and teaching approaches which focus on engagement between and among learners, teachers, practitioners, communities, scholars, and with self and texts. It involves tailored teaching & learning approaches that are defined by four key ideas:

- Enquiry (how learners go about asking and answering questions);
- Discipline (how learners engage with the knowledge that underpins the discipline);
- Autonomy (how learners increasingly develop their capability and confidence); and
- Conversation (how learners engage with self and others to develop understandings).

Embedded within a 'living curricula' is the concept of Ako, a Maori word which means to learn, study, instruct, teach or advise. Ako describes a teaching and learning relationship where the educator is also learning from the student and where educators' practices are informed by the latest research and are both deliberate and reflective. The key aspects of ako are: **Language, identity and culture counts** – knowing where students come from and building on what students bring with them; and **Productive partnerships** – Students, whānau (extended family) and educators sharing knowledge and expertise with each other to produce better outcomes.

The living curricula project is helping to reposition learning as a continuous conversation within a dynamic curriculum that is integrated with, and takes advice from, the world our students live in. These conversations occur at all levels of the learning cycle between and among teachers, students and the communities in which they live and in which they wish to work. It has driven a culture of continuous professional development and improvement with our teachers toward more interaction and integration with the real world. And also helped to achieve a focus for the Institution on critical strategic focus areas such as developing an impact-focused research portfolio that is distinctive and positions Unitec research as practical, applied and valued, as well as at the other end of the spectrum, assisting in the repositioning of foundation education to provide a clear pathway through vocational and applied professional education.

A CONTEXT IN A CHANGING WORLD

Notions of the university as a protected space for unhurried scholarly contemplation with images of ivory towers where time moves at a leisurely pace have long since been rendered obsolete (Anderson, 2006). The global context of the late 1980s and 1990s saw intense downward pressure on higher education funding. New Zealand higher educational institutions (universities and polytechnics), as in other western democracies, have fared similarly. In light of the severe cutbacks in the private sector and the new global economy, expenditure and program performance in higher education has been placed under increased scrutiny by the general public to ensure more effective utilisation of available funds (Appelbaum & Patton, 2002). As a response to this altered economic environment and the shifts in broader political, social, and

economic trends, universities and polytechnics in New Zealand have experienced widespread, sustained, and transformative change over the last two decades (Curzon-Hobson, 2004).

Managerialism v's Professionalism

The rise of managerialism in educational systems has seen an increased emphasis on cost-effectiveness. Since the mid-1980s the public sector in New Zealand has undergone radical reform of its management and organisation. The changes aimed to improve efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of all parts of the public sector, including the university and polytechnic sectors (Marshall, 2011). Higher educational institutions experience political accountability (for the best use of public funds), and market accountability (answerable to customers, partners and stakeholders). Higher educational institutions also have a *professional accountability* for maintaining the highest possible standards of teaching and learning, and a *cultural accountability* to foster new insights, knowledge and understanding. These last two factors may be observed in the oppositional culture to managerialism – professionalism – which is based upon a “student-centred pedagogic culture” (Briggs, 2004, p. 587).

LIVING CURRICULA IS A STUDENT CENTERD APPROACH

Unitec has developed its living curricula concept based upon the firm foundations of student centered learning and its antecedents. Student-centered learning (SCL) is based on the idea that learning is meaningful when topics are relevant to the students' lives, needs, and interests and when the students themselves are actively engaged in constructing their own knowledge (Gardner, 1983). Hence, students are given choices about how they learn and are included in the classroom decision-making. SCL is where student's work in both groups and individually to explore problems and take initiatives that allows them to discover their own meaningful information and learn how to learn through discovery, inquiry, and problem solving.

In a SCL environment, McCombs and Whistler (1997) suggest that learners are treated as co-creators in the learning process, as individuals with ideas and issues that deserve attention and consideration. When properly implemented SCL can lead to increased motivation to learn, greater retention of knowledge, deeper understanding, and more positive attitudes towards the subject being taught (Collins & O'Brien, 2003). SCL learning environments recognize that the prior knowledge of learners powerfully influences future learning and thus attempt to build on prior knowledge, a principle which is central to the concept of the living curricula and its employment of the concept of *Ako*.

LIVING CURRICULA AND THE CONCEPT OF AKO

Ako, as mentioned previously, means to learn, study, instruct, teach or advise. The concept of *ako* describes a teaching and learning relationship, where the educator is also learning from the student and where educators' practices are informed by the latest research and are both deliberate and reflective. *Ako* is grounded in the principle of reciprocity and also recognizes that “the learner and whānau cannot be separated” (*Ka Hikitia*, 2009, p. 20). *Ako* therefore means to both to teach and to learn. It recognizes the knowledge that both teachers and learners bring to learning interactions and the way that new knowledge and understandings can grow out of shared learning experiences. Educational research has shown that when teachers facilitate reciprocal teaching and learning roles in their classrooms, students' achievement improves (Alton-Lee, 2003).

The principle of *ako* affirms the value of the pair and group learning approaches in which students interact with their peers, teacher, tasks, and resources. It suggests that in a reciprocal learning relationship teachers are not expected to know everything, but rather that “each member of the classroom or learning setting brings knowledge with them from which all are able to learn” (Keown, Parker, & Tiakiwai, 2005, p. 12). Embracing the principle of *ako* enables teachers to build caring and inclusive learning communities where each person feels that their contribution is valued and that they can participate to their full potential. This is not about people simply getting along socially; it is about building productive relationships, between

teacher and students and among students, where everyone is empowered to learn with and from each other (Kura Auraki, 2009).

CHARACTERISTICS OF A LIVING CURRICULUM

A Living Curricula is primarily about the engagement of learners with the learning itself. This may be learning material (technologies, skills, knowledge, text, etc.), their teachers, their whānau (extended family), community and industry. It can also be about the added value we can give learners in the way they engage – eg: research, enquiry, autonomy, professionalism, technology and innovation with that learning. The intention of the living curricula is not to change what is learned, but rather the way that it is learned. The characteristics are:

Enquiry is a process that is at the heart of what we do in tertiary study. It starts with thinking about the world, formulating a question, finding information about the question, interpreting and testing ideas and information, generating and synthesizing ideas, presenting and reflecting on the process. This allows for learning which:

- is curiosity/inquiry led, and stimulating
- is socially constructed – self-sufficiency and collaboration
- blends face-to-face and web-based learning
- is research-informed

Ako as wananga (tribal knowledge, lore, learning) informs the curriculum through critical enquiry. The relationship of the learner and the teacher is interdependent and reciprocal for personal and communal good. In this context, the teacher is prepared to learn from the learner.

Discipline can be defined as a community of practice, which has a (contested and evolving) body of knowledge and theory, based on particular ways of knowing and practicing, which is taught and applied and researched. A discipline has its own literacies and language. Members of the discipline (faculty, learners, practitioners, scholars, etc) identify with this community of practice and help to induct new members. Characteristic of this:

- are practice-focused – educating students ‘for work, in work, through work’
- have a discipline base, and are also interdisciplinary
- encourage active and responsive interaction with industry, professional and community groups to shape content, curricula and delivery modes

Ako as kaupapa (foundation, element), is a process by which the intellect internalizes, distinguishes, and creates new knowledge.

Autonomy allows for individuals to take increasing charge of their own learning. This may be best achieved through a scaffold and staged process of learning how to learn, planning, managing and reflecting on the process and products of learning. Approaches that:

- are equally valued, and together they help nurture resourcefulness and resilience
- develop literacies for life-long learning
- include embedded assessment

Ako as mana (authority). Mana binds the authority of learner and teacher with matauranga (knowledge). Integrity is developed through a process of poutama (scaffold learning).

Conversations about enquiry, knowledge, practice, learning and teaching are significant for engagement between and among learners, teachers, practitioners, communities, scholars, and with self and texts. Conversation develops beyond chat or discussion and becomes true dialogue that involves analysis, synthesis, critical thinking and reflection. These conversations may be:

- with (and among) teachers
- among students – face-to-face and online
- with class peers and with others
- with practitioners
- with partners – whānau, industry, employers, the world

- with texts – what is the text saying? what do we have to say about the text?
- with self – critical self-reflection

Ako as puawaitanga (the flowering of knowledge), acknowledges that curriculum development derives from diverse forms of intercultural communication.

A DISCIPLINE APPROACH

Whilst the living curriculum is acknowledged as an Institutional aspiration, there is a need for it to be localized to conform to Faculty objectives and Departmental strategies. Therefore the living curriculum at Unitec takes many guises and employs local solutions. One such solution is the approach taken within the Department of Performing and Screen Arts.

The programs offered within the Department of Performing and Screen Arts are based around the philosophy of fostering creative practitioners with both specialist knowledge and broad ranging abilities. Our courses are opportunities to expose students to situations of ambiguity, such as cultural diversity and intercultural awareness, so that understanding of how to respond to uncertainty is sharpened. This is particularly important in ‘creative arts’ departments such as Performing and Screen Arts where courses range across diverse content areas, such as contemporary dance to film editing to costume making. The uniting factor is a collaborative structure that offers a breadth of learning while extending and complementing the depth of study offered in the specialist areas. Desire for knowledge is the catalyst for enquiry to be conceptualized and articulated and the consequence of this are complex relationships where critical consciousness and student engagement evolve through pedagogical practice. The autonomy and potential of the learner is attained through the teacher/learner relationship using diverse forms of intercultural communication. This lifts the mana (authority) of the knowledge and the integrity of the institutional environment. This philosophy allows our graduates to communicate across traditional boundaries and within the burgeoning field of digital media content creation and analysis, while adapting quickly, appropriately and effectively in accordance with the demanding and fluid nature of the performing and screen art industries.

Employers, particularly those in small to medium sized enterprises such as those represented in the New Zealand performing and screen arts industries, increasingly require employees to combine expertise in a particular subject area with the capacity to work effectively across disciplines and to manage and thrive in multi-stakeholder environments (Oram, 2009). The New Zealand film industry is a mixture of local and international scale production with Hollywood blockbusters, local low budget features, world-class documentaries and syndicated TV series being made throughout the country. Similarly dance and theatre ranges from Opera and Ballet to regional theatre and local low budget artist generated work performing side by side. In this challenging and increasingly complex environment, employers are looking for people that can hit the ground running faster, covering more territory by applying a more creative and broader approach to work (Carden, 2007).

To cater to this environment, learning and teaching are integrated throughout the department’s programs to establish connectivity for each student between the specialist, generalist and sometimes disparate content (Kember, 2009). Specialist discipline learning as well as broader domain concepts and industrial professional practices are delivered to all students at all levels with ever increasing complexity. The environment within which learning and teaching takes place is modeled using collaborative techniques. Learning and teaching takes place between, among, within and across groups and individuals. This is because the industry art forms that are represented in the departments’ domains of learning are essentially collaborative in nature and function. It is therefore a tenet of the ‘teaching’ to engage the ‘learning’ in a way that prepares students for their future work and life-long learning needs.

International post-secondary institutions have similarly recognized that providing opportunities for collaboration and cross-disciplinary contact can extend and expand on students’ learning and engagement with the subject matter concerned. If, as Edmonds and Candy (2002) comment, “creativity can be characterized as a process toward achieving an outcome recognized as innovative”, then any educational situation that is already oriented towards disciplinary innovation will lend itself more readily to being a place where creativity

can occur and be fostered. Regardless of disciplinary location, collaborative practice, which is sometimes referred to as inter-professional practice (McCallin, 2005), recognizes that in order to cope with increasingly complex work and practice environments, these real-world situations require professionals and practitioners who can, from within their disciplinary specializations, relate with many clients and institutions and collaborate with many professions (McEwan, 1994).

Thus, where previously creativity was once recognized as the result of a singular talent working alone, a position similarly supported and enforced by older pedagogical models that dispersed and isolated students from each other across their various specializations, new pedagogical models, such as the living curricula model, recognize that intensive collaborative situations provide maximum opportunity for growth and creativity both within and between disciplinary environments (Mafe & Brown, 2006; Parr, 2007). There is a clear link between this practice and the workplace environments students move towards and into. As James (2007) notes “joint working is well established as an important aspect of professional practice in schools and colleges” (p.33.) and this factor provides an important pedagogical correlation between the training institution that seeks to prepare students for careers, and the kinds of experiential situations that await graduates in the workplace.

Example 1: Reverse engineering to map the curricula

An example of the approach used by the department to establish a curricula path has been to begin with each graduate profile statement and to reverse engineer them back into the curricula by mapping out the capabilities and learning opportunities offered by each. For example the profile statement – ‘*Graduates will display the ability and desire to contribute to and advance the performing and screen arts industry*’, relates to professional capabilities and attitudes to the work of the creative artist. To map this capability into a framework of learning opportunity the statement is considered in terms of its key words as demonstrated in Table 1:

Table 1: Graduate profile statement mapping

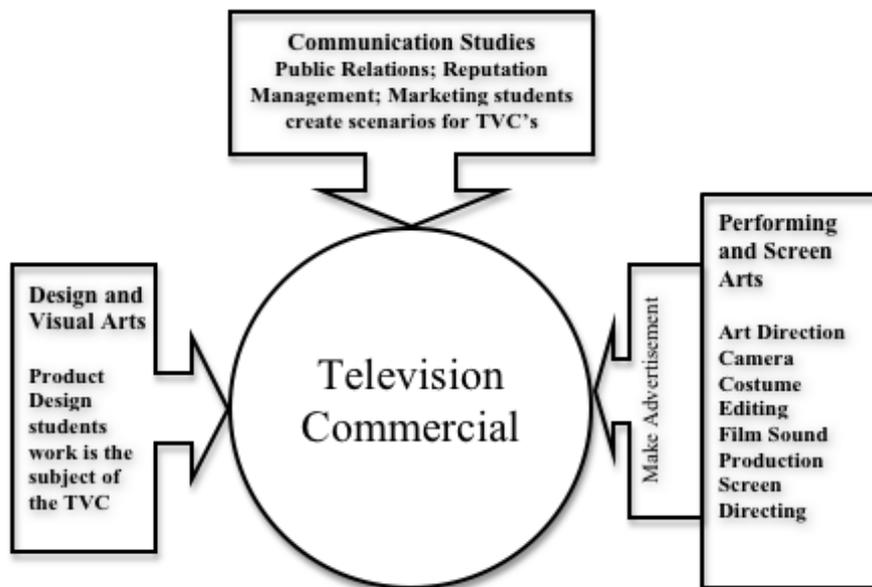
The ability to contribute:	<i>Students acquire the technical and creative skills, and professional practices associated with the discipline.</i>
The ability and the desire to contribute:	Students acquire the technical and creative skills, and professional practices associated with the discipline <i>in an environment of enquiry where they are required to actively seek the answers to a range of industrial questions.</i>
The ability and the desire to contribute and to advance :	Students acquire the technical and creative skills, and professional practices associated with the discipline in an environment of enquiry where they are required to actively seek the answers to a range of industrial questions, <i>and where they respond with new questions from active research, which are as yet unanswered.</i>
And other skill sets can be gained by:	
The ability and desire to contribute:	<i>Students lead discussion around new knowledge with other students and stakeholders.</i>
The ability and desire to contribute:	<i>Higher-level students pass basic skills to lower level students in mixed teams and model professional practice.</i>

The capabilities uncovered in this way are then aligned to the appropriate year and level of learning.

Example 2: Collaboration between disciplines and departments

Whilst it may appear natural for collaboration to occur between Performing and Screen Arts disciplines, the living curriculum principles of student engagement across discipline fields is not limited to only one department or group of disciplines. The development of connective course content across the Faculty of Creative Industry and Business has established the sharing of student generated 'texts' as shared places of learning within a living curriculum context. Fig. 1 shows a range of discipline areas engaging on a shared project.

Fig. 1: An Interdisciplinary Shared Project



In this project, the Product Design students provide the objects that become the subject of the commercial. Public Relations and Marketing students create TV commercial scenarios for the products with Production students. Performing and Screen Arts students then make the commercial with the Product students and the Communication students playing the role of 'client' in the scenario and on set. Each group of students brings their own creativity to the varying aspects of the project. Learning experiences throughout each course emphasize the links and application of theory/knowledge and work experience/practice. The collaboration ensures 'conversations' occur among students/ teachers/ participants. Knowledge is both applied in practice and drawn from practice.

CONCLUSION

In order to achieve the above goals the programs becomes progressively more flexible and self-directed, with greater and greater opportunities for the students to tailor their own learning (Cairns & Stephenson, 2009). Formal lectures, technique and technical courses give way to complex industry modeled projects in order for the student to demonstrate capability and skill in specialized areas, with greater degrees of responsibility. Courses are designed to ensure that contact with the outside world and internal academic development is:

- questioning (via field trips, cultural exchanges, visitors, guest professionals and artists)
- creatively explorative (via on-going inter-disciplinary focus on joint complex projects and workshops)
- collaborative (via on-going interdisciplinary focus on joint complex projects and workshops)
- focused (both more formal and specialized, negotiated and self-directed 'hands on' courses are tailor-made via specific assessment, content and division of time to related practical vocational needs of the industry and to the abilities and needs of the individual students)

Learning takes place in theoretical, simulation, practice, collaborative & experimental production, public performance, practice based research, technical and self-directed settings. Different modes of delivery are utilized depending on the setting. In this unique multi-disciplinary environment it could be said that students, at times, learn as much from the learning process and from each other as from the content that is experienced during that process.

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