

Curricular Change as a Generating Category, on Approval, in Designing or Redesigning Practices in Educational Reform Contexts

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Introduction

This paper addresses the problem of curriculum development², particularly with regard to the practical processes of curricular design and redesign, in higher education, in the context of reform.

Although the topic of methodological practicality is being addressed, we position ourselves, theoretically and epistemically, to think about the curriculum as both a project, and type of academic/political proposal in historical evolution. The proposals in which interests of the different subjects of the curriculum are played (de Alba, 1991: 38-39). These subjects position themselves to look at their object of practical intervention constructing these proposals as a *strategic artifact* (Orozco, 2015) to link university education and the university itself with society. This is how the subjects making the curricular proposal respond to graduates' professional services needs, which such sectors demand.

We also position ourselves (politically and theoretically) in a social and critical Latin American perspective in terms of *the way of thinking the curriculum - society link* (Orozco, 2015, 2016) as of the needs of each country and those shared in the region at the moment of entering into the *curricular intervention* action (Angulo and Orozco, 2007: 19-38). We think these projects as a strategic and tactical mechanism to play in curricular elaboration processes, as well as in a particular institutional and temporal educational space.

We assume a marked distance from the curricular intervention methodologies that reduce the elaboration - construction process, both in the *foundation* phase, as in the *curricular design*³, to its merely prescriptive, instrumentalist and technical - reductionist aspects. In a different position, we approach the curriculum object as a force field in which power is played in the academic field, in order to achieve proposals for higher education training. Hence, the curriculum is at core an academic political issue, an angle of observation that is proposed to be discussed.

This paper is structured twofold: the first part situates panoramically and synthetically the context of appearance of the imperative need for changes and development of innovative curricular models in accordance to the hegemonic discourse of educational policies enunciated from the agencies of political and financial power for education. This power is interpreted as concerned and occupied in linking the curriculum with the knowledge society, information society, and the economic market, through an educational reform that transforms schools in order to guide them towards a broad and complex educational and curricular reform effort. The second part exposes the importance of the design practice, and the methodological strategies



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used assuming the premise that the phases of foundation and curricular design constitute strategic and tactical moments of the game of academic power addressing the proposals as *curricular synthesis* (from Alba, 1991: 38). This synthesis presents the curriculum as an academic creation achieved through argumentation, counter-arguments amidst tensions, negotiations, and impositions negotiated between the commissions and academic groups in charge of preparing new proposals, or transforming and changing already existing proposals. This work concludes with some reflections to continue the discussion.

Elements of the curricular reform context

From the nineties, the field of education moved into a process of strong and significant changes determined by the domineering educational reform on a world scale. The *reform* was constituted since then as a key word in the lexicon of educational policy in almost all countries of the world under the assumption that the changes prescribed by the decision-making agencies of policies at a global, regional and national level; this would allow countries to move to the new era of the *knowledge and information society* and towards the new *knowledge economy* supported by a reformed education with that social directionality.

This reformist turn promoted overlaps between processes of educational decentralization, certification, assessment, and accountability among other changes. The long-range purpose was, and still remains, the radical transformation of the ways of teaching and learning under models centered on the axes of education and work, education centered on the student and not on the teacher, or only on the content in order to address the need to develop new professional profiles for work, and new designs -innovative- of flexible, comprehensive, and interdisciplinary curricula, under the focus of professional competences for the productive and service apparatus.

The great purpose was complemented even with school management and reorganization as comprehensive and flexible academic units, under the pretense of leaving behind the old university away from the problems of life and the productive sphere. By these means, school education began to face enormous challenges for change and innovation, under the principles of innovation, excellence, quality, and equity.

Huge efforts and resources were deployed for the educational reform, both from international agencies, as well as from governments and institutions to dislodge from a stagnant academic past, according to the diagnoses and evaluations that higher education institutions were subjected since the eighties, when the educational "crisis" began to manifest and the efforts were redoubled especially in the nineties.

In the last decade of the past century, the development of new curricular models and design of curricula for professional training have constituted the main focus of attention of the curricular works in higher education, according to the results of the 2nd state of knowledge of the research curriculum (Díaz Barriga and Lugo, 2003. 68-69).

The predominant curricular tendency since then was to leave behind the traditional teaching way centered on the transmission of disciplinary and academicist contents as it were, without any anchorage for life, or to apply knowledge in contexts of productive work and for life (UNESCO, 1998, Delors, 1997, ANUIES, 1999).

Between the last decade of the past century and the present one, the curricular activity at all levels of the educational systems and subsystems of the countries of the world has invested enormous human energy and financial resources to modify, change, reform, transform and even revolutionizing the curricular proposals.

In higher education, multiple curricular proposals emerged under new conceptual and methodological orientations. For those of us who work in the field of the university curriculum, either as researchers, curricular advisors, as part of groups and curricular commissions to prepare specific curricular changes in each of the areas of knowledge and professional training, evaluators of curricula, teachers who daily are in the classrooms and laboratories with students; we all play in the arena of the curriculum and we had to solve the changes in our respective fields of work under new principles and new orientations emanating from the educational policies for the reform, at the national, regional and international level. Sometimes the



interventions were successful or partially successful, in others not so much. These changes were produced through intricate slow and discontinuous processes; others hurried by the pressure of the times for the changes imposed by the institutions.

Based on the curricular research of the nineties, we maintain that the emphasis was on the "**making**" of the curricular changes (which is understandable and necessary due to the pressure of the reform), rather than on "**thinking the know-how**", which would imply reflective and critical care of the design and curricular redesign; that is, there was a decrease in the care of the theoretical aspects, availability of analysis tools, of intelligibility, and of proactive strategies for the innovation of the curricular design.

The second state of knowledge of curricular research in the nineties shows the increase of 114 curricular models that represented 53.02% of a total of 209 productions on curricular development which together with 12 intervention reports or experiences equivalent to 5.58%. This information corroborates what has been said about the predominance of "doing" that gives a total of 57.% between proposals, models, and experiences, compared to the few works of reflection that reach only 1.85% (Díaz Barriga and Lugo, 2002: 67-68).

In the following decade, between 2002 and 2011, the third state of knowledge shows that conceptual reflection, what we associate with thinking about curricular know-how, remains marginal; research on curricular reforms and changes exceeds 50% -from a total of 762 investigations and productions, in contrast to only 5.9% of the conceptualizations or studies of curricular theory (Díaz Barriga, A., 2013: 25).

These data point to an assumption: curricular development focuses on the making of new curricular models along with the traditional design of plans and study programs. This can be seen as the predominant of curricular production in Mexico as a discursive response of academics groups and curricular commissions facing the reform imperatives and the changes of plans and programs of study concretely.

The new designs included, among some of its components, new professional profiles, intermediary, objectives, curricular maps and areas of disciplinary training and terminals, ensuring that the latter support practical training for work.

From a social and reflective critical perspective, it is possible to assume the curriculum as an academic political project; this political dimension encompasses not only the macro-institutional level of the higher education reform but also a political installation at the micro-policy level within the group and intersubjective processes of curriculum design or redesign. Hence the importance of strategies analysis and argumentative tactics of struggles, negotiations, tensions and impositions that are mobilized between the association of forces of the subjects, or what Alicia de Alba calls, the *subjects of the formal curricular structuring* (de Alba, 1991: 52-53).

We approach this level of curricular analysis from the curricular advisory function that accompanies our research (Orozco, 2007, 2015). Next, we present a theoretical cutting tool that we use to analyze the processes of curricular change in counseling experiences in the last two decades.

The theoretical, conceptual and methodological framework for curricular design

Mexico began to test methodologies for curricular design since the seventies. This process was initially under technical-systemic approaches and based on a logic of instrumental rationality (Furlan and Arísti, 1982), and as part of a process of transfer of North American educational thought, along with educational technology and curriculum as a rational proposal. During the seventies and the eighties, through the International Development Association and the World Bank Group's "help" among some of the donor "agencies" of funding, besides texts on planning and systematization of education that were translated and distributed throughout Latin America with the purpose of supporting the "democratization" of our region via education, to curb the danger of the revolutionary left, as was the case of the Cuban revolution (Furlán, 1997: 108-126).



Soon the weight of reality and its social, cultural and historical-educational features prevailed. In Mexico, as in the rest of the Latin American region, the curriculum has been thought from its close links with the historical, the political and its cultural complexity. We have argued as a thesis that the curriculum is intervened in its processes of formal structuring, considering these aspects as constitutive dimensions of the way of thinking the linked curriculum - society (Orozco, 2015).

In the category of pedagogical and curricular discourses of Latin American critical-social orientation, there have been clear studies and analytical reflections on the *way of thinking* about the curriculum as an object. In both the theoretical and in the practical processes, it is now understood how in the this past century, the thought and curricular language in the neoliberal era was impregnated with new operational categories for the practical processes of curricular design: flexibility, competencies, evaluation through evidence and accountability, student-centered learning, situated learning, problem-based learning, curriculum re-engineering, training in new languages such as the second language, digital languages, among other clearly prescriptive elements guided by the imperative of change and innovation of higher education. This series of words together are the concrete expressions by which the educational reform and educational change move forward in the present century.

After more than two decades of curricular changes, it is noticed that this academic political discourse is productive in a certain direction, linking the curricular proposals with the knowledge economy needs and the labor market, while being perceived from our regional interests the need to have alternative categories to those that permeate the language of the neoliberal curricular reform. Concepts and categories are insufficient as operational tools to intervene and create own curricular proposals, with the force of productive imagination for curricular projects with cultural, social and educational policy orientation in the region.

That is why the design space, seen as a setting and a moment of academic micro-politics, needs to be filled by the communities of lecturers, students and authorities in each school or faculty in the different areas of professional training and curricula. This approach leads us to argue that the strategic methodological moment of curriculum development is the level of practical intervention that we have to deal with strategies of deliberation, discussion, but above all, argumentation of proposals for curricular change with an academic political directionality thought and built with a regional view and from each country, because what we are and we have become, we can then relate to the global world to dialogue with other cultures.

In methodological terms, academic negotiations are part of the different acting groups in designing processes or *formal structuring of the curriculum* in order to achieve the *curricular synthesis* as a complex mechanism of tensions, struggles and impositions as held by Alicia de Alba (1991:38). This synthesis of imagined proposals gestated on a principle of the regional reality facing the world, without marginalizing our histories, realities, and reading of cultural and educational contexts as opposed to the broad social. We require *procedural categories* to curriculum development, as well as we require *categories to think* that way in which we position ourselves facing curricular change projects (Orozco, 2015; 2016), in a sense of praxis (Sánchez Vázquez, 1972) of curriculum development.

The reform's categories-oriented towards a hegemonic curricular language is certainly productive, but not enough. They have to be retaken with great care and under analytical scrutiny in function of the curricular legacies which are the experiences that historically have been playing since the past, by being present or mobilizing, stressing, and reconfiguring nowadays; this is the only way we can look beyond this present. The reform's categories and methodologies can be incorporated only through conceptual and methodological scrutiny which implies re-signifying some terms such as: innovative educational model, flexibility, competences, evaluation, community learning, learning experiences, education for life, new linguistic and ICT literacy, among other required, or even introduce their own curricular categories.

Under the pressure to adopt the imperatives of change and reform to incorporate the trends of education in the 21st century, questions are raised on the methodological level for the design of proposals based on the construction of regional curricular discourses. Efforts are being made for non-adaptive development in a passive way due to global hegemonic trends. As an



attempt to intervene, processes of curricular change with alternative proposals to the hegemonic (Angulo and Orozco, 2007) are being made when certain margins of curricular autonomy are perceived in some public universities, or when higher education perceives the need to take distance from proposals that make education a commercial enterprise in the knowledge market. The margins of autonomy emerge or are suppressed in the very space of academic practice where the subjects of formal structuring act, among other possible ones.

We propose that curricular change is possible as an alternative in terms of curriculum development micro-politics in which curricular subjects move when methodologies and the use of categories for design become *methodological discourses* (Orozco, 2015) constructed as scaffolding, categories or operational artifacts which in our curricular advising experience have been productive for us, both for the foundation phase and for the organization of the contents and the design or redesign.

These scaffolds have allowed rehearsing or at least trying a certain academic directionality to arrive at curricular syntheses negotiated between the subjects of the curriculum. This is the case of changes in the re-elaboration of professional profiles in the selection of the hierarchized contents in the design, in the school organization, in the teaching methods and evaluation, in the design phase itself in which the components are built: profiles, objectives, training areas, mapping or curricular structure, supported by the foundation phase (Díaz Barriga, 2015).

Category: complexity of curricular change, observation device from the adviser's perspective

The complexity category of the curricular change is a construct that we have used in the curricular advisory processes to rebuild the problematic field of curricular change processes (Orozco, 2007, 2015) as an alternative operational tool to the educational reform prescriptions. The complexity category of the curricular change as an observation device allows to take a methodological distance from the instrumental option of the curricular planning of instrumental technical cutting which undeniably is a productive methodology that leads through the instrumental and linear prescriptive path to the curricular commissions by sequential stages that indicate at what time and how to start, how to develop and how to conclude a curricular proposal.

We tried a different way⁴. We reviewed, from a genealogical reconstruction perspective, the strengths and arguments of the professional training and the reason for it according to demands and social interests found in the formal installation of the curricula commissions' work in public Higher Education Institutions in Mexico. Through this reconstruction strategy of the problematic field, the complexity category of curricular change can read explicit and implicit arguments in the voices of the curricular subjects represented with different levels of argumentative force in the work of the commission.

From the advisor's role and working with this tool of intellection, positions are located, obvious and hidden interests come to terms with history of that curriculum which allows at a given time to find potential elements for change where they confront interests, visions and goals that the curricular policy guides or imposes, along with the interests of the academic groups that look at the curriculum as a space of academic power that must be filled in order to introduce elements of change according to the way in which it is seen linking their professional training project with the various sectors of society. That is, in the way of thinking and acting in the interstice of the curriculum - society link.

Methodologically speaking, the advisor registers in the advisory journal certain keys or aspects in the encounter of intersubjective *relationships* which propose to the curricular group or curricular committee an action plan to introduce changes in tune with their manifest interests and common positions, not exempt from tensions and negotiations. This mechanism is not simple; it is about reading the produced process of the micro-politics which will help to find agreements and proposals for changing the plans and programs of study, as well as the action plan for its implementation once the proposal has been approved by the regulatory bodies for this purpose.



The construction - reconstruction of the *problematic curricular field* (Orozco, 2007) is necessary in order to understand the possibilities of what needs to be changed in terms of objectives, contents, selection forms and content configuration, work with teachers, through this instrument that identifies the positions, tensions, negotiations, confrontations and agreements, configures a set of power relations where power-knowledge relationships are played, and analyzed as the tactics and movements of the subjects in a complex process that is examined from their explicit and implicit elements that must be understood, supported, and accompanied until achieving the synthesis of agreements. In this way, the micro-components of curricular design are played at the methodological level, as a practice of micro-politics.

In these terms, the process of curricular change allows legitimizing the proposals and modifications from the social and power plot that are woven into the processes of curricular change. This is not simple, but necessary; otherwise, through the methodologies of linear systemic technical planning, the most that are achieved is the agreement of a few, and incomprehension and lack of commitment from the rest of the academic community, that is, students and teachers.

The epistemic and conceptual scaffolding from which the category was built has been exposed in other works (Orozco, 2015, 2016), which does not deepen due to the available space. Suffice it to say that its productive nature makes possible the understanding of intricate curricular processes not in a linear way, but in its evolution, in its genealogy, in its historical discontinuities, because it is in this way that the low backgrounds emerge (in terms of Foucault, 2000) of the processes of curricular change. Thus, these can be read, as far as possible, the keys of the curricular legacy, of the knowledge and power relations of social and educational subjects which have guided their previous curricular proposals which must be changed, modified, directed or re-address to face the politics of reform and innovation in the era of globalization.

Work from the reconstruction of the problematic field and the positions of curricular subjects opens a field of possibilities not necessarily prescribed a priori but from a certain margin of curriculum autonomy in design which constitutive process is observed from the reading device of curricular reality that has been exposed here.

Reflections as a way of closure

It is recognized that this is a category that opens a field of possibilities to articulate and reactivate other categories of curricular discourses still valid for their strength of ideas and creations; the way of thinking and configuring the curriculum - society link from Latin American perspectives is one of them. It is then, a tool that opens up possibilities, rather than closing with predetermined prescriptions that are outside the curricula in their social, historical, cultural and educational contexts.

In summary, the advisory space is the place of analytical processing, information for the know-how of the curricular advising as specialized accompaniment. However, the adviser does not decide the change, supports the academics in charge of it, to understand the moments and the key elements to advance in the modification, elaboration or re-elaboration of their proposals. For this reason, in another paper, we propose the role of the advisor as a listener, prior to the intervention (Orozco, 2007).

Notes

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² We continue using the term *curriculum development*, in the sense that Hilda Taba's translators of her classic book (1979) chose to account for what this author proposed as a broad and complex process of the multireferential practice of curricular processes and practices.

³ For those who advise curriculum development processes, it is known that these are not always processed in a linear and continuous way, but rather discontinuous. However, there are two major and significant moments that are distinguished in terms of products written by the subjects of formal structuring, which are the phase of the foundation and design itself (Díaz Barriga, 2015). In Mexico, in public higher



education institutions, these groups tend to organize themselves institutionally as *committees* for the design of curricular proposals, for analysis and evaluation, or proposals for curricular restructuring.

⁴ Reports of these advising experiences and their results will be reported in a subsequent publication.

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