How do we understand Curriculum for Wales - Video Transcript

Slide 1

Welcome to the first part of the Camau i'r Dyfodol practical support materials where we explore how we might understand Curriculum for Wales in terms of what model of curriculum it aligns with, and why understanding this is important for consistency of realisation across the system.

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Part of what the co-construction group did was to consider challenges as 'knots' to be unravelled. One challenge identified from evidence in phase 1 of the Camau i'r Dyfodol project and the co-construction group working in phase 2, was that professionals in the system are understanding and realising Curriculum for Wales in very different ways. In practice, these different ways of understanding the curriculum are leading to very different approaches to creating curriculum as well as very different approaches to teaching and learning.

Approaches outlined in the evidence include, for example, powerful knowledges, mastery learning, big ideas, backwards design, taxonomies of learning, learner-centred approaches and inquiry learning.

The challenge with this, as Newton (2020) points out, is that each of these approaches draws on different theoretical backgrounds and align with different curriculum models. Because of this, some of these align more fully than others with the approach to curriculum design, learning and teaching suggested by the Curriculum for Wales framework.

We explain alignment in more depth in the exploring things further section, but the key thing to think about for the moment, is that these different understandings mean that the system is tending to pull in different directions.

Next we have a 5 minute clip of Jenny Poskitt, who spoke to us about curriculum realisation and the importance of shared understanding and clarity helping those in the system to 'fly together'.

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Video excerpt from interview with Associate Professor Jenny Poskitt.

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'Curriculum for Wales: The Journey to 2022 describes Curriculum for Wales the curriculum as a purpose-led curriculum, but how do we understand that in theory and practice?

We found in the co-construction group that knowing about two contexts was helpful in unravelling the 'knot' of pulling in different directions during curriculum realisation.

The first context is that Curriculum for Wales is part of an international 21st century trend in curriculum design. We explain more about this in the next two slides.

The second context is that there are different ways of thinking about what a curriculum is and what it should focus on.

To explore this, we will use Vic Kelly's three main ways of understanding curriculum: Curriculum as content, curriculum as product and curriculum as process. These ways of understanding have been called models or approaches – We use Kelly to think about this because his overview seems to us to be the most helpful for understanding curriculum design in theory and practice.

As Mark Priestley said in his 2019 paper, "It is necessary to be clear on which model is being used to ensure coherence and conceptual clarity. Kelly (1999) offers three archetypal curriculum-planning models and suggests that each model is inextricably linked with both underlying purposes and conceptions of knowledge, as well as with pedagogy." (Priestley, 2019)

Priestley also makes the point that 'The particular curriculum-planning model that is outlined in the [curriculum] framework can exert a major influence on pedagogy. For instance, a framework that emphasises content to be learned might encourage teacher-centred approaches to teaching, whereas a model based on processes and skills may encourage activities that are student-centred.'

So, what do these contexts mean for Curriculum for Wales?

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These two contexts are important because, looking across the documentation of Curriculum for Wales, it aligns with both the 21st Century Curriculum trend and with Kelly's concept of curriculum as process.

Sharing this understanding should help to design local curricula, pedagogy and assessment that are in keeping and coherent with Curriculum for Wales as purpose-led.

We will come back to this last point in the final slide, but for the moment, we are going to focus on two things: firstly, what the 21st century curriculum trend is and, secondly, the different models of curriculum. Doing this will hopefully support a shared understanding of Curriculum for Wales.

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So, what is the 21st century curriculum trend?

This phrase is used to reflect a shift in recent curricula away from content- and subject-based curricula towards competency- and skills-focussed curricula. 21st century curricula help learners to develop (as Suto and Eccles say) ways of thinking, working and living in the world. Countries such as New Zealand, Finland and Australia have all developed this type of curriculum.

This change from content and subject, to competency and skills, is reflected in several ways:

There is a tendency to shift from specific outlines of content and standards of performance, to a broader focus on developmental progress over time.

Alongside this, there is a tendency for the role of the teacher to shift from one who leads learning to one who facilitates learning.

There is also a stronger focus on social, personal and character development within a broad general education rather than the development of content knowledge in a range of subjects.

If we look at Curriculum for Wales we can see an emphasis on these types of broader developmental aspects . For example, the what matters statements in Science & Technology say that 'Learners need to be able to evaluate scientific claims to help make informed decisions that affect our environment and well-being, including regarding the climate and nature emergency.' In Languages, Literacy and Communication, it says that: "In this Area, learners should be given opportunities to use languages in order to be effective as they interact, explore ideas, express viewpoints, knowledge and understanding and build relationships."

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This represents an ambitious policy shift when related to Curriculum for Wales, as Romaine Viennet says in her blog post Implementation in focus: How Wales is turning a 21st century curriculum into reality.

She writes that:

'Curriculum for Wales represents an ambitious policy shift from previous curriculum policy, in terms of its philosophy and the role it gives schools and teachers. The new curriculum policy is expected to provide every child, including those with additional learning needs, with an equal access to a broad and balanced education of high quality in all areas of learning. It aims to help children progress through learning processes that are holistic and interdisciplinary, and integrate knowledge, skills and experience.'

Viennet's point also emphasises other characteristics of a 21st century curriculum: they tend to be organised in broader areas of learning with an emphasis on interdisciplinary learning.

We can see this with Curriculum for Wales: it is structured around areas of learning and experience rather than traditional subjects, and interdisciplinarity is an important feature. It does not have standards to be assessed against or tightly focused learning outcomes – nor does it present a syllabus of content - but it does have much broader descriptions of learning that give a sense of progression over time. This provides for a broad educational experience rather than one that is highly specified and prescriptive.   Knowledge and understanding are still part of different areas of the curriculum, but there is an increased emphasis on the skills and processes of learning.   Rather than foregrounding what learners should know, the four purposes capture the characteristics and skills towards which learners will develop.

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Moving on to the second context, the co-construction group found that the curriculum models discussed by Kelly were helpful for developing practical understandings of Curriculum for Wales.

These three models are distinct because they have different starting points and are built on different ideas about the role of the teacher and the nature of learning.

In the first of these, 'Curriculum as Content', the starting point is to decide on the content to be transmitted to learners.

In the second of these, 'Curriculum as Product', the starting point is to decide on predefined learning outcomes.

In the third model, 'Curriculum as Process', the starting point is to consider the development of the learner.

We are going to begin with 'Curriculum as Content'.

With this curriculum model, decisions about what goes into a curriculum begins with the idea that subject/disciplinary knowledge is intrinsically valuable. When decisions are made about what should or should not go into a curriculum, they are made on the idea that some knowledge is valuable in and of itself – often because it is recognised as such socially and culturally.   The justification for what goes into the curriculum is therefore based on deciding what knowledge is most valuable for pupils to learn – and it is this that shapes curriculum design and classroom practices.

Culturally valuable knowledge is typically structured and presented to reflect established academic subjects or disciplines and education is seen as the process of transmitting these dominant knowledges and cultures to the learners. Curricula that draw on this model therefore tend to be organised around school subject.

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The second curriculum model Kelly describes is 'Curriculum as Product': The starting point for this model is the outcome or objective you expect learners to attain.

This is sometimes referred to as the 'aims and objectives' approach and is quite prolific in regions such as the United States where curricula are built around standards that learners are to meet. This curriculum model developed in the 20th century from approaches to curriculum teaching and learning derived from behaviourist psychology and its view of learning as behavioural change. Pritchard (2018) says that behaviourism is 'a theory of learning focusing on observable behaviours and discounting any mental activity. Learning is defined simply as the acquisition of new behaviour.'

This curriculum model views learning as a largely linear working towards the meeting of pre-specified learning outcomes. However, curriculum planning works backwards from the outcomes. Learning is then measured by testing or assessing learner performance against these outcomes. Taxonomies such as Bloom's or Biggs and Collis' Solo are sometimes used to frame the learning outcomes during the planning stage – these may also be called learning objectives. SOLO takes its name from the purpose of the taxonomy which focuses on the Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome, as a way of classifying learning outcomes by their complexity.

With this model of curriculum design, schooling is seen as having an instrumental purpose: it is useful not in terms of the processes of learning during education, but in terms of what outcomes education leads to by the end of schooling. The curriculum is usually organised around subjects and Kelly writes that combining the product and content models becomes the basis of Mastery Learning.

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As Kelly explains, the process approach does not start with consideration of knowledge to be transmitted or with the outcomes or objectives of learning, it starts by considering the development of the learner. It is for this reason that this model is also referred to as the learner development model.

With this approach to curriculum design, as McKernan says, the curriculum needs to be seen as a continuous educational experience: a process, rather than a product. The term process can be used in different ways in education. Here, it is referring specifically to the process of learner development and to the nature of the design of the curriculum as flexible and open-ended rather than pre-determined. It is this flexible open-ended approach that maximises opportunities for learner growth and development. The curriculum also tends not to be organised around subjects, but to stress broader areas of learning and interdisciplinary approaches.

The essence of the process model is not to see learning in terms of short-term objectives, but to think more broadly about long-term development. For example, with Curriculum for Wales, the broad long-term development is in relation to the 4 Purposes.

The process model of curriculum is based on the idea of education as the development of human potential: learner centred and accounting for the needs and interests of learners. In relation to the process model, McKernan says: 'to put it simply, education is not so much about arriving, as in hitting targets, as it is about travelling with passion, and being interested in worthwhile experiences at hand'.

Priestley and Humes comment that process curricula are based 'around a view of what an autonomous adult should be and a learning process (often dialogical, inquiry-based and experiential) that may serve as the route to achieving this state… a curriculum to enable students to "come into presence"… as unique individuals.

We provide more information on all the curriculum models in the thinking into practice section, where we link them to different approaches to teaching and assessment, but for now, let's look at why the models matter in practice.

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Why do these models matter in practice?

1. Each curriculum model is underpinned by and draws from different educational theories and practices and so each model suggests different ways of creating curriculum in classroom practice.

2. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that are not aligned can mean that the taught curriculum becomes very different to the intended curriculum

3. Lack of alignment can also affect curriculum coherence: Sullanma et al, explain a coherent curriculum as one that has 'unity and connectedness among the aims, content, instructional practices, learning experiences and assessments'.

In talking about alignment, we are not talking about a delivery model where there is a core curriculum and everyone delivers it in much the same way. With alignment, there is scope for creating of curriculum locally that takes consideration of local contexts and learner interests and needs.   As Mark Priestley and colleagues write: 'teachers and school leaders are more than simply passive conduits implementing – or… delivering – somebody else's curriculum product; instead, they are making the curriculum within their own contexts alongside a number of other social actors, including their students.' (Priestley et al, 2021)

However, if local curriculum making interprets the curriculum in many different ways, some of which are misaligned with the model that underpins the curriculum framework, then – to use Jenny Poskitt's metaphor, the system risks flying in different directions. It also means that pupils' experiences of the taught curriculum may not be in-keeping with the approaches to content, pedagogy and assessment suggested by the curriculum framework.

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Going forward we will use two terms to discuss Curriculum for Wales and its realisation:

1. We refer to Curriculum for Wales as having a process-orientation

2. Realising Curriculum for Wales in practice suggests taking a process approach to learning, teaching, assessment and progression

We make this distinction because the word orientation captures the uniqueness of Curriculum for Wales as a purpose-led curriculum. It aligns most fully with the process model in its foregrounding of the 4 purposes.

We also use the term process approach to signal the shift in thinking and practice that a process orientation suggests in terms of creating learning and teaching at classroom level, and in terms of thinking about assessment and progression.

We appreciate that using two terms might seem confusing, but as we go forward the key thing to bear in mind is the shift in thinking that a process orientation means for how we approach creating teaching and learning locally.

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Taking a process approach to creating curriculum suggests particular ways of thinking about content, teaching, learning, assessment and how we think about learner progression. We begin by exploring this in seminar 1 where we discuss what a process approach means for creating curriculum, for the role of knowledge in the curriculum, and for the teacher's role. This seminar was produced for the co-construction group to support their thinking about curriculum design.

Following the seminar have a there is short handout with reflective questions to consider curriculum coherence in a bit more depth.

There is then a longer handout which recaps on Kelly's curriculum models to provide more information, particularly about what each model suggests for how we think about curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment in practice. This handout then has reflective questions to explore what curriculum model your current practice aligns most fully with.

Following this, we then go on to explore what a process approach might mean for how we understand assessment and progression in section 2. This will be done through two seminar inputs which were, again, developed for the co-construction group.