

An English literature curriculum study: intersections between the macro and micro

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Abstract

This paper draws on data from a PhD study that looks at an English literature curriculum at a distance education institution: the University of South Africa (UNISA). The study uses Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) to make explicit what is legitimated in the curriculum and to consider the extent to which pedagogy and assessment enable epistemological access to the discipline. The LCT dimension of ‘Specialisation’ is used to unpack what forms of knowledge and what kinds of dispositions or ‘ways of knowing’ are valued within the discipline (as practised at UNISA). It is also used to consider the extent to which there is alignment between different modules in the curriculum; between course outcomes, pedagogy and assessment; and between student and lecturer expectations.

The PhD is a close-up case study which looks at a specific curriculum within a specific context. It draws on various datasets to come to a nuanced understanding of the particularities of the case. However, early on in my research, it became clear that macro and meso factors in the higher education landscape have a significant impact on student learning and on academics’ abilities to create constructive alignment between disciplinary values and the forms of pedagogy and assessment that they employ. These factors include those highlighted by Hlengwa (2021) such as massification, globalisation and a tension between universities serving economic imperatives and the public good. Other factors include the online distance education model and the UNISA’s unique role in the South African higher education sector.

This paper investigates the impact of these macro and meso and factors as they relate to a specific discipline, English literary studies, and to the teaching and learning experiences of English Department staff and students. In doing so, the paper suggests one way in which we can “place close-up research within macro phenomena” (Komljenovic, 2021). Interviews with UNISA academics revealed that many hope that students will undergo a transformative learning experience through studying English literature, coming to think more critically about themselves and the world around them. The paper considers how macro and meso factors impact on the curriculum’s ability to facilitate this kind of learning. I argue that an understanding of how these larger factors play out in relation to specific disciplines is necessary if university management is to make informed decisions that facilitate the function of higher education as a social good.

Keywords

English literary studies, macro factors, meso factors, micro factors, curriculum design, constructive alignment, transformative education, Legitimation Code Theory, Specialisation, epistemological access, epistemic-pedagogic device.