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Mary O'Rawe
Technological University Dublin, mary.orawe@tudublin.ie

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ENGAGING THE 'GEN. Y STUDENT: CURRICULUM, INNOVATION AND CHALLENGES

Mary O'Rawe

School of Hospitality Management & Tourism

Dublin Institute of Technology,

Cathal Brugha Street,

Dublin 1.

Mary.orawe@dit.ie

ABSTRACT

Curriculum and pedagogy have been central to many contemporary debates on fostering student success. These themes are evident in discussions from policy level to the staffroom in many countries, and are particularly relevant in the mass higher education sector in the Republic of Ireland. However, a narrow treatment of the term *curriculum* can prevent the development of new understandings and effective learning.

Central principles have emerged in debates around curriculum and innovation, with 'student engagement' evolving as a focal point in the search for a solution to tackle what are perceived to be problems of student disengagement particularly associated with the 'Generation. Y' student.

In the context of a hospitality curriculum, graduates must possess a diverse set of skills and behavioural traits to meet the demands of this dynamic sector. Curriculum–making is heterogeneous and fluid, involving different networks and stakeholders. Efforts centered on developing the hospitality curriculum are therefore varied, and can result in multiple

approaches with often variable results, indicative of the many tensions between the prescribed and enacted curriculum.

This paper examines whether an innovative, integrated and technology-enabled curriculum can help solve these challenges. In presenting the case study of the 'Get Smart!' initiative developed by the author, and the insights gained, it argues the case for a revised interpretation of the concept of a widened curriculum. Although many successes may be identified along the Get Smart! journey, notably the bridging of consistency and creativity, resistance has often emerged as a response.

Keywords: curriculum; innovation; Gen. Y; Get Smart!; student engagement

INTRODUCTION

There has been much heated debate on the contemporary student's lack of preparedness for the demands of a higher level (university/college) education, and the resulting frustrations for lecturing and administration staff. The many underlying factors are already extensively explored by the literature. Indeed, Mc Innes (2001, p. 40) warns of the "danger of building a massive but trivial literature." Mindful of this, the author chooses to concentrate on themes of curriculum and innovation, examining how debates and experiences around prescribed, enacted and experienced curricula are now critical in aiding student success. With the main student cohort now drawn from Generation Y (Gen. Y), the changing nature of the curriculum and its link to successful student engagement deserves greater attention.

This paper presents the case study of the "Get Smart!" initiative, which is a bottom-up, innovative approach to integrative and experienced curriculum, developed by the author in the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism, Dublin Institute of Technology. Beginning at the pre-entry stage, it looks to extend the Orientation beyond the initial few days of a student's commencement on their programme, using academic and quasi-academic elements, supporting students with a bespoke first-year app. It further aims to address levels of student disengagement, embed academic skills such as information literacy, and build stronger connections with industry partners. The overall objective of the initiative is to widen the curriculum beyond what is simply prescribed in course descriptors and taught in the lecture hall, and towards a more 'experienced' learning environment (Marsh, 2009).

Although no formal methodology is applied, the author has secured student feedback each year through an online survey, selected focus groups and written evaluations. Staff feedback has been garnered intermittently through surveys and team meetings. A critique of the initiative is thereby presented, and the challenges over its seven years highlighted. These include connecting the curriculum to the workplace, career preparation, developing metrics and measuring results, securing staff and student buy-in, managing resistance, and the development of student resilience among the Gen Y. population.

TRANSITION AND ENGAGEMENT IN A MASSIFIED HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

The growth in numbers participating in college/ higher-level education in Ireland has been impressive. The Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2011, p. 31) states that the participation rate has risen from 5% in 1960 to 65% in 2010. OECD figures support this,

highlighting that participation rates in higher education in Ireland have increased by an average of 2% per annum since 1960 (OECD, 2006). Such growth is derived from a range of factors, but the access & widening participation debates and policies have had a central role. These participation rates have, perhaps unsurprisingly, led to an increased drop-out rate. Around one in six of those who commence a third-level programme do not continue into second year (Donnelly 2014, p. 1), although this figure varies from one discipline and college to another. A recent report by the HEA (2016) also points to the problems of drop-out rates and non-progression from first-year to second-year in particular, a picture mirrored elsewhere (Foster et al. 2011) (as cited in Xuereb, 2015 p. 206); (Yorke and Longden, 2008) Redmond, Quin, Devitt and Archbold (2011).

THE 'GEN. Y' STUDENT: CHARACTERISTICS AND CURRICULUM

With troubling statistics such as these, many universities and colleges have turned a spotlight on understanding and managing student transition, particularly around the 'Gen. Y' cohort which constitutes the majority of the current classroom make-up.

Lumsden, McBryde-Wilding and Rose (2010, p. 13) point to the need for "reconceptualistion" of the transition process and its dimensions. Hussey and Smith (2010, p. 157, 158, 159, 160) present a framework for broadening understanding of transition centered on transitions in knowledge, autonomy, approaches to learning and social cultural integration. This offers many different connections and challenges, but the debate around the curriculum is not always the centrepoint.

Such challenges are particularly acute when considering Gen. Y. There has been much discussion of this generation of students, now the main consumers of college education. Although there are variable dates as to when Gen. Y. begins and ends, commentators suggest that Gen. Y is the student cohort born after 1982 (Gardener and Eng, 2005, p. 405). Research around this cohort is still emerging and mostly dominated by their patterns of technology use (Skene, Cluett and Hogan, 2011). However, newer research casts an eye on their learning styles and indeed, challenges the common (often uncomplimentary) discussions of this age group (Thompson, 2015, p. 468). It is now clear that a newer conceptualisation of the curriculum is needed to engage this cohort of students and ensure their successful learning, and transition to and through a higher education programme.

DIMENSIONS OF CURRICULUM

Before embarking on an examination of arguments around the curriculum, and strategies for curriculum development, it is necessary to tackle the terminology. Curriculum planners face a hurdle in that a common understanding of the terminology has yet to be reached (Scott, 2014; Young, 2014). Nonetheless, key perspectives can be seen repeatedly in the literature. Bloomer (1997) presents dimensions of curriculum as being prescribed, described and enacted. Another useful staring point is Marsh and Willis' (2007) typology where they point to three levels of curricula: planned, enacted and experienced. McNeil (2003) focuses on the enacted curriculum but offers further refinement into 'live' and 'dead' approaches, whereby live curriculum produces meaningful classroom activities between lecturers and students. These and other typologies, tend towards an exploration of the similar and contrasting ways in which the prescribed curriculum is translated into "action", and whereby the learner progresses towards individual control of knowledge. In the context of the following case

study, Marsh and Willis' 'experienced' curriculum (2007) may offer the most meaningful lens through which to understand the objective of the initiative.

Diversity is not yet common in the prescribed curriculum, and even less so in the enacted curriculum (Edwards, Miller & Priestly 2009, p. 29). Many barriers exist in creating a successful bridge between the two; Edwards et al (2009, p. 30) pinpoint a range of factors including organizational and micro-political barriers as affecting successful curriculum design. Thus, building an integrative, creative and experienced curriculum that links to quasi-curriculum and extra-curricula aspects, while still meeting the demands of Quality Frameworks brings many challenges and tensions.

Furthermore, academics may not be willing to adapt their curricula and pedagogies to foster engagement with the Gen, Y. demographic. Research carried out by the author found that many staff perceive the root causes of disengagement by Gen. Y as lying outside their control. A questionnaire designed by the author and completed by staff at the School of Hospitality Management & Tourism in February 2014 as part of ongoing school review research, received responses very much in line with those put forward by Wallace (2014, p. 347) whereby non-engagement behaviour is seen to be an in-built characteristic of this age group in question, and to some extent someone else's responsibility.

THE GET SMART! INITIATIVE – A NEW APPROACH TO CURRICULUM BUILDING

The impetus for the creation of the Get Smart! initiative was the experience of staff in the School of Hospitality Management & Tourism, DIT, that the Gen. Y student cohort had a reduced level of skills in a range of areas. The concerns were a mixture of anecdote by staff, and some more empirical evidence that preparedness had shifted (O'Rawe, 2011). Original concerns centered on academic skills, the traditional lens through which to view a curriculum: students' lack of ability and confidence in using library resources, lack of knowledge as to which were acceptable Internet sources to use, and poor writing skills. Although academic skills are only one facet of the scaffolding required around the curriculum, they are often the most tangible one, where the results of improvements and interventions might be at least observed if not measured. Widening the curriculum and building connections to other stakeholders and partners was a key aspect of the development and roll-out of Get Smart! Connections were made with other key stakeholders in D.I.T. such as careers teams, library services and retention staff, and with external stakeholders from industry.

Get Smart! was developed by the author after substantial secondary and primary research around transferable skills and graduate attributes, and is built on fundamentals of learning progression such as Bloom's (1956) typology and Kolb's learning styles (2005). Despite this, its multi-directional nature makes it difficult to typify or categorise.

Figure 1: Overview of the components of the Get Smart! initiative
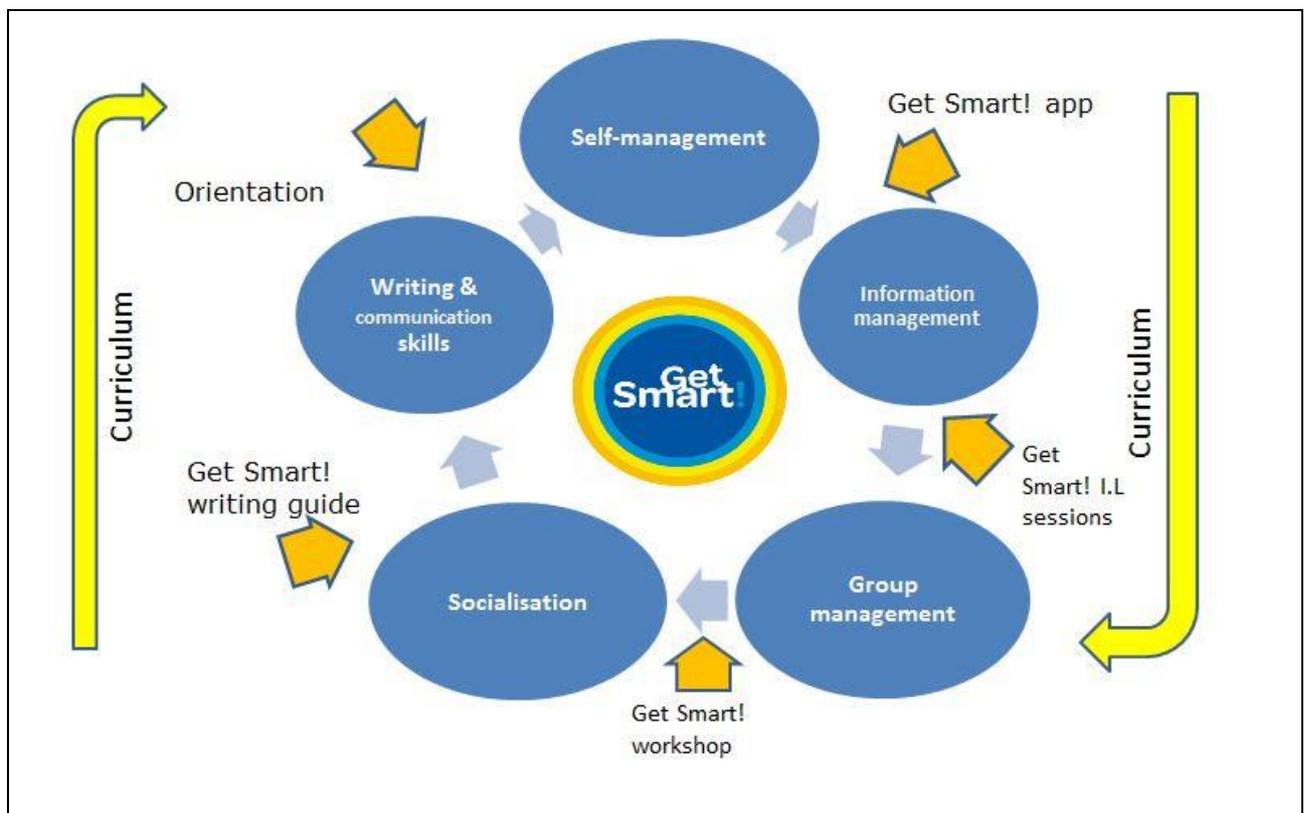
The process displayed in Figure 1 is now discussed:

STARTING AT THE START: ORIENTATION'S ROLE IN SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION AND BUILDING CONNECTIONS

All the prior discussion clearly points to the need for a good start to a student's engagement with the curriculum. Typically, incoming students' first experiences of their degree and university/college is at orientation/induction. This is increasingly identified as one of the key points of transition in the student journey.

"The potential for enthusiastic engagement in the curricula should be harnessed in the critical first days of the first weeks of the first year, thereby promoting a sense of belonging, so often missing for the contemporary learner" (Kift & Nelson 2005, p. 229)

For years there was an excellent orientation/induction day in D.I.T.'s School of Hospitality Management and Tourism. In attempting to point towards graduate attributes required on exit, Get Smart! has revised a number of Orientation components on entry. Techniques such as mind-mapping have been used to aid new students' understanding of how all modules inter-relate, as well as their own role in maximizing learning through self-management, professional responsibility, group management and information management. It is based on understanding that by taking a more epistemological approach to learning, students can look beyond the prescribed curriculum and view it in a much wider manner (Zais, 2010), thereby moving towards the 'experienced' curriculum highlighted as being so valuable by Marsh (2009). In this way, linkages are built to the curriculum from day one. Get Smart! has attempted to view and roll-out Orientation more as a process than a stand-alone event, supporting an integrated model of curriculum development and engagement. A more social and sociable element has been introduced to attempt to achieve deeper emotional engagement and experience.

Surveys carried out by the author in November 2013 (n=120), November 2014 (n=138) and October 2015 (n=111) to assess feedback on students' experience of and satisfaction with their Orientation, found that constructing an engaging Orientation is a finely balanced act. Despite 50% of respondents being "very satisfied" or "satisfied" overall with Orientation as a preparation for their programme, it is clear that students want the emphasis on the non-academic elements, less information, and more peer and staff-student engagement. These

challenges are not only related to the early orientation, they also follow through to the curriculum experienced in the lecture hall.

One student branded the "academic bits" ('Learning to Learn'/ Get Smart! sessions) as "boring". Another urged "more sports and games" and "free stuff". This was typical of the social approach expected by Gen, Y students, and indeed the need to view socialisation as a key aspect of engagement and the curriculum.

In response to this demand, in 2015 the student orientation was extended from two days to five and a half days. This was designed to allow more space for industry interaction and further socialisation among students, including an 'away day' at an outdoor adventure centre.

THE SKILLS APPROACH: EMBEDDING INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS

Concentrating in the first semester, information literacy Get Smart! seminars are integrated into the tutorials of all modules which are scheduled during the relevant semester. This takes the form of basic library skills, building confidence in library searching and database management, referencing, citing and plagiarism among others. Critically, modules draw assessment/module marks from the embedded Get Smart! component. Embedding skills is not a new suggestion (MacVaugh, Jones and Auty, 2013), but in the context of Get Smart! it can be restated. This is also supported by online quizzes. Increased deployment of assessment support materials and transferable marking templates was encouraged, supporting Hussey et al.'s view of such templates as "guide posts" for the autonomous learner (2010, p. 158).

While no-one can argue against the case for improving academic skills such as writing, information and digital literacy, this has opened a 'Pandora's box' to some extent. Not only do students and lecturers have different perspectives on the importance of good academic

writing and what it constitutes, lecturing teams themselves often argue the case. Different disciplines and modules/subjects have varying roles, levels of importance and perspectives on the extent to which good writing skills are important and how the curriculum should reflect these. Barriers identified in Itua, Coffey, Merryweather, Norton and Foxcroft's study (2014, pp. 315, 316, 317) were also experienced in Get Smart!, including lack of time and confidence, limited experiences of extended writing, inability to read, understand and synthesise academic texts and "jargon," and referencing. Building on and responding to these challenges, the author added an academic writing guide ('The Right Way to Write') to the Get Smart! portfolio in September 2015.

With a view to building enhanced social and emotional engagement, stronger connection to industry, and a wider view of the experienced curriculum, Get Smart! workshops run each year. These attempt to inter-relate the curriculum and translate it into an 'experienced' curriculum, by combining module lecturers, students and hospitality industry guests in a fun and engaging manner, tailored towards career awareness, professional and personal planning. Get Smart! while not a longitudinal study in the methodological sense of the word, has consistently evaluated its elements and success every year. Thus a broad picture has been built up.

Student feedback from the workshops included comments such as "Get Smart! was inspirational and motivating", "fab!" and "extremely useful." Again, this points to the importance of viewing the socialisation of Gen. Y students as a key element in their learning, particularly when based around the curriculum rather than purely extra-curricular. The power of team-building activities such as these are evident in student evaluation comments, such as the following: "I had not settled into my degree at all until we went away for the day…now I'm not thinking of dropping out any more".

DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES OF BUILDING A FIRST-YEAR INITIATIVE

It has become clear in the management of Get Smart! that engagement and ownership are key to the longevity of such initiatives. The need for this 'buy-in' becomes even more critical, but also more difficult to maintain as time progresses.

Resistance has been observed by the author from a number of directions in the development and operation of Get Smart! Evidence from the literature indicates that this is common. McGoldrick (2002, p. 18) pointed to barriers such as inflexibility and resistance on the part of colleagues arising from lack of resources and "managerialism". Edwards et al. (2009) see hierarchical factors and individual dispositions of lecturers as being just as critical as factors such as funding. All these sources of resistance were evident in the operationalisation of Get Smart!, symptomatic of colleagues' increasingly over-burdened workload, and some conflict with professional relationships and autonomy. Lecturers value academic integrity, and in some cases can see a wider, innovative and more experienced curriculum as a form of "dumbing down." There is also a reluctance to challenge the status quo.

THE CHALLENGES OF MEASURABILITY AND METRICS

Lack of measurability of the specific outputs of an embedded programme such as this, and therefore perhaps its value is also viewed by the author as a challenge. Attrition rates, progression rates and exam success statistics may all be validly proposed as benchmarks against which to measure the effectiveness of Get Smart! However, attributing improvements, or disimprovements in these metrics to Get Smart! alone is problematic, and ignores the wide range of actors, networks and "educative enactments" (Edwards, 2011, p. 52)

that are all at play. The author feels that it is important to review arguments against retention statistics being held to be the over-arching target, as budgets tighten and what cannot be measured easily may fall from favour.

CHANGING THE FOCUS OF THE CURRICULUM TO THE PRE-ENTRY STAGE

A key flaw of many first-year initiatives to expand the curriculum is that they have a sole focus on the student post-entry. Successful programmes work to engage students pre-entry. Open days to meet students and lecturers, ezines and Facebook communication are all valuable, but a more personalised approach would not just add value, but help set manageable expectations and build an early relationship.

In an attempt to build stronger pre-entry communication with the student, the author introduced a 'Welcome Ezine' in the summer of 2015 to introduce students to the School, re-communicate the details of their upcoming orientation, and specifically to communicate instructions on how to download and use the new version of the Get Smart! app.

COMMUNICATION AND CONVERSATIONS: RETHINKING PRACTICES FOR THE GEN. Y STUDENT

Much has been written on students' methods of engagement in higher education, and the challenges this presents compared to a decade ago (Cloete, de Villiers & Roodt, 2009). Popular technologies such as wikis, blogs and podcasts are now being integrated into the curriculum as we search for ways to encourage active student engagement in learning and building and 'experience' curriculum. And the rise and rise of apps has rapidly found its way into the curriculum and extra curriculum supports. Can such tools actually support and

enhance the learning environment and build connections to the curriculum? In employing such tools, the author has observed a paradox in that these digitally competent generations have, in fact, less willingness to apply these skills in what they perceive to be an academic context (O'Rawe, 2010).

Get Smart! has experimented with a range of communication modes, both formal and informal. An ezine provides programme-related information from study skills and features on current student activities, connects to Facebook, and offers prizes. In 2014 a bespoke Get Smart! app was launched to help first-years engage better with their programme, industry sector, and curriculum from Orientation to year end. Version 2 was launched in August 2015. An analysis of feedback and usage of the app is ongoing as part of the continued evaluation of Get Smart! by the author (O'Rawe and Bermingham, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the critical and increasingly complex area of rethinking the nature and meaning of the curriculum in the context of the Generation Y. student. It presents the case to interpret the curriculum as much more than aspects of prescribed learning and to move towards an enacted and experienced perspective of curriculum. The author's work with Gen. Y. students concurs with the popular view that they demand an integrated, technology-enabled and social dimension to the curriculum which supports and enables learning. Furthermore, their perspective of learning is increasingly mobile and nomadic which also presents challenges in designing curriculum in terms of time and space. The experienced

curriculum therefore comes to the fore as the key means of managing the network of elements and stakeholders involved.

In exploring the nature of the curriculum and how it may be reinterpreted, many difficulties arise in bridging theory and practice. Indeed, the author supports Edwards' (2011. p 53) assertion that there is more to curriculum-making than we might imagine.

While of course it is too broad to state that the curriculum can be everything that students do or engage in, yet, in trying to develop a series of high-impact practices, it becomes clear that the curriculum now needs to be viewed from many different directions. In such a context, how can consistency be maintained? Indeed, is standardisation still important amidst the multiplicity of curriculum-making practices?

These debates are also held back by the lack of empirical and evaluative research into measurable benefits of adopting a revised approach to the curriculum, particularly at first-year. Despite ongoing research by the author, it is difficult to assess quantitatively the direct impact of this initiative, even with available attrition, progression and engagement rates. This results in a reluctance on the part of some stakeholders to move away from the status quo, and invest the considerable resources needed. The Get Smart! case study does not yet contribute any diagnostic solutions to this problem. However, what it may contribute is a first-hand, longitudinal observation and study of the journeys and difficulties involved. As well as experiences around the role and nature of the curriculum, the Get Smart! journey also documents the challenges of the Gen. Y. student transition, the journey of the lecturer in perhaps reinterpreting their role, and the need for a cultural shift in schools and faculties. It has been clear in the creation and management of Get Smart! that both learning and the

curriculum need to become equally centered on transitions in knowledge, autonomy, approaches to learning, and social-cultural integration.

Broadening the curriculum is an easy call, making sense of the challenges is problematic and involves multiple enactments. The mechanics of integrating the needs of diverse interests and identities brings many difficulties. It is the author's experience that Get Smart! successfully moves towards bridging the prescribed, enacted and experienced curriculum. However, resulting challenges bring fresh difficulties and debates to the surface - debates which deserve our full attention.

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