Engaging Students in Life-Changing Learning

Royal Roads University's Learning and Teaching Model in Practice - Revised Edition

Edited by Stephen L. Grundy, Doug Hamilton, George Veletsianos, Niels Agger-Gupta, Pedro Márquez, Vivian Forssman & Myriam Legault

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The Role of Curriculum Committee Related to the Learning and Teaching Model and Curriculum Development at Royal Roads University

Michael G. Young
Professor, School of Humanitarian Studies
Royal Roads University

Eva Malisius
Assistant Professor, School of Humanitarian Studies
Royal Roads University

Peter Dueck
Director, Admissions and Registrar
Royal Roads University

Abstract

Curriculum Committee at Royal Roads University (RRU) is mandated with ensuring that program and course curricula are of sufficient high academic integrity, are consistent with other academic institutions, are delivered in a manner consistent with program outcomes, and align with the recently adopted Learning and Teaching Model (LTM). Yet, the apparent simplicity of the committee's role is overshadowed by much confusion about what the committee does, how and why it does what it is intended to do, and whether it is effective in fulfilling its mandate. This paper explores the role of Curriculum Committee at RRU regarding the tensions that the committee encounters fulfilling its role. It begins with an historical review of Curriculum Committee, which is followed by a look at some of the factors that influence

decision-making during committee meetings. Next, it examines the tensions posed by trying to strike a balance between form, function, and the context of curriculum proposals. The paper concludes with an observation that Curriculum Committee continues to evolve as it incorporates the lessons learned from ongoing self-reflection and feedback from faculty members and the broader university. Recently approved new terms of reference and pending committee restructuring are evidence of CC's commitment to curriculum excellence, within the context of the LTM, and student success.

A previous version of this paper can be found in the Universal Journal of Educational Research 3(12):1070-1073, 2015.

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Introduction

At first glance, the role of Curriculum Committee (CC) at Royal Roads University (RRU) seems relatively uncomplicated, even straightforward. As a subcommittee of Academic Council (AC), it operates on the basis of the Curriculum Quality Assurance policy, which provides that curriculum is (1) of an appropriately high academic quality, (2) consistent with standards at other accredited Canadian universities, and (3) designed and delivered in a manner consistent with program outcomes (RRU, 2007). Essentially, and on an operational level, the committee is mandated with reviewing program and course curricula, making suggestions for change, and forwarding approved curricula to Academic Council.

Despite the apparent simplicity of the committee's role, there has been significant criticism from curriculum developers about the committee's approach to the curriculum review process. Perceptions of the committee range from one of annoyance, wherein attending a committee meeting is considered a waste of time, to one of resignation, where the experience is something to be endured before getting on with the real job of teaching. Others typify the committee as a star chamber comprised of members who seek to indict, convict, and punish curriculum developers who stray from the way curriculum is *supposed to be*. In reality, CC has developed a course template that speaks to the needs of curriculum developers regarding the breadth and scope of material required for a proposal (RRU, 2015a). More recently, a rubric was developed by CC for assessing the content of proposals. Yet, the role of the committee has not changed since its inception, nor has its essence. Curriculum Committee exists to ensure that all curricula deliver on the promise of academic quality and standards, and include the Learning and Teaching Model principles at RRU.

Based on conversations with previous committee chairs and the observations of the authors, all of whom have served or are serving on CC, this paper explores the tensions that CC encounters in fulfilling its role. We begin by outlining the history of CC. Next, we look at some of the factors that influence decision-making during committee meetings. We also examine the tensions posed as the committee tries to strike a balance between form, function, and the context of curriculum proposals. We conclude by noting that CC continues to evolve as it incorporates the lessons learned and ongoing self-reflection, and by implementing best practice into the review process. A key aspect to this evolution is to support curriculum developers by instilling a sense of distributed responsibility for curriculum development. Distributed responsibility is meant to lessen the potential isolation experienced by curriculum developers and to provide resources in terms of pedagogical expertise, particularly in the online context. The emerging curriculum development triad—curriculum developers, the committee, and the Learning and Teaching Model (LTM)—share a common goal: delivering

high quality programming at RRU (RRU, 2014b). Whether or not the committee, in its early days, ever dictated what was to be in curriculum, as some thought it did, its current focus is on how any proposed curriculum delivers on the promise of the LTM at RRU. The recent changes in the terms of reference for CC capture the evolution as outlined, emphasising the 'friend not foe' essence of the role of CC at RRU.

In the Beginning

Prior to the establishment of Curriculum Committee (CC) at Royal Roads University in the early 21st century, curriculum proposals were reviewed and approved directly by Academic Council (AC). AC approval of criteria such as learning outcomes and the quality of curriculum was reviewed and assessed by the Program and Research Committee (PRC), which worked at arm's length from AC (RRU, 2015b). Given RRU's status as a special purpose university under the Royal Roads University Act (1996), program and curriculum development were subject to intense scrutiny and assessment by the B.C. Ministry of Advanced Education and RRU's Board of Governors. The more traditional establishment of university status based on faculty curriculum vitae, including research and publication record, was supplanted by a desire to ensure the quality of curriculum and program development. In essence, academic units at the university were held responsible for producing the highest quality of curriculum possible within the confines of the very specific mandate of this new institution. Lacking a comprehensive history of program and course development, RRU was at a disadvantage in terms of expertise and resources.

Under the stewardship of a former Academic Vice President, the responsibilities of AC were hived off into three separate entities. In an interview with the first committee chair, S. Grundy, PhD (March, 2014), a professor in the School of Environment and Sustainability and one of the founders of the university, confirmed that CC was the first standing committee of AC to emerge in this new arrangement. Yet, program and curriculum development was not exempt from provincial oversight. Indeed, provincial scrutiny continued for over ten years after the university's inception, and scrutiny from the ministry continued, for example, in the development of new programming. According to previous members, CC was informally tasked with raising the bar of program and curriculum development, demanding more from curriculum developers than would be expected at a more traditional university. In a conversation with Professor D. Hamilton, PhD (March 2010), the second CC chair, he suggested that CC's role as guardian of quality translated into higher expectations for program and course proposals and the corresponding work involved.

It may be argued that the expectations placed on developers resulted in solid, well-planned curriculum design. However, the early years of CC were not without struggles between developers and the committee, for example

between teaching styles, pedagogy, and the guidelines provided in the LTM. A large portion of the apparent friction was the result of RRU's status as a special purpose university. A focus on applied graduate programming and undergraduate degree completion required (and opened up opportunities for) unique approaches to programming and to pedagogy. Not surprisingly, program and curriculum development did not always resemble that of other institutions. Thus, producing proposals that passed the rigours of CC could be and remains a challenge to developers. Producing the highest quality of curriculum possible required that CC establish and maintain credibility with the province and other academic institutions (RRU, 2007, 2014b).

As the university grew in terms of reputation and popularity, the second Chair of CC, Doug Hamilton, started to move the committee towards a model of inclusion rather than gatekeeper, a common perception at the time. Dr. Hamilton commented that this became more possible as the Ministry of Advanced Education, the body tasked with oversight, appeared satisfied that the university had established an effective and efficient curriculum development process. Indeed, as of 2008, new master of arts degrees proposed by the university are exempt from Degree Quality Assessment Board (DQAB) review, indicating that the province was satisfied with the quality of programs being developed by RRU and with the quality assurance process itself (DQAB, 2008).

While this was an informal and perhaps subtle transformation, the emphasis was to be on the shared learning experience of those in the curriculum development process. The committee attempted to offer advice before potential developers submitted proposals, and the Centre for Teaching and Education Technologies (CTET) joined the process, contributing to curriculum design and teaching excellence by incorporating the principles of best practice in the integration of technology into course delivery (RRU, 2015c). Although it could be concluded that this development occurred too late in Dr. Hamilton's term to be fully adopted or accepted by faculty members, it did establish parameters within which his successor would continue to guide the work of CC and which the current chair would recraft and continue to promote.

Curriculum Committee Operations

Curriculum Committee comprises representatives from several units of the university including: six faculty members, with at least two from the Faculty of Management and at least two from the Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences; the deans or designates from those faculties; a representative from the Centre for Teaching and Education Technologies (CTET); the registrar; and a non-voting secretary. While a number of these roles are *ex-officio*, and therefore ongoing, the six faculty members are elected through the Registrar's Office (RRU, 2015c). The committee meets on Tuesdays, twice a month for 2.5 hours. Meetings follow a typical model based on Robert's

Rules of Order and require four voting members for quorum. At the time of writing, however, significant changes will result from the new terms of reference for CC as described below.

Central to the development process was the adoption of a curriculum template in 2012. The template is divided into two parts, A and B, which distinguish between what can be considered immutable course outline material, part A, and more detailed content, part B, which is developed for the course shell in Moodle, the online delivery platform used by RRU. Developers are encouraged to follow the suggestions on the template, and to consult with CTET and the assigned Instructional Designer, and other units in the university such as the Library, Office of Research, and Registrar's Office regarding curriculum design, resources, and delivery as applicable.

Admittedly, the development of course outlines and, to a lesser degree, program proposals are not straightforward or linear processes. It is not possible to outline all of the stages of this process and faculty/school or program specifics, but a few salient points are worth mentioning here. Regarding course outlines, the process follows an iterative model wherein the developer has the outline approved by the program head, who then forwards the proposal to the school director. Once approved at this level, the director forwards it for approval by the appropriate faculty Dean who asks the CC chair to place the proposal on the meeting agenda. At any of these stages the proposal can be returned to the developer for amendment. An editor can be added to the process to reduce the amount of time spent at CC meetings dealing with issues related to presentation, such as grammar, diction and the like. Once a proposal has completed all of the above stages, it will be forwarded for review to the members of Curriculum Committee, who will share their observations in the regular meetings and in conversation with the developer or the development team.

How Decisions are Made

Decision making in CC is based on a vote requiring greater than 50 percent to pass a course program proposal, including changes to programs. In the event of a split, the chair is responsible for casting the tiebreaker vote. Decisions are commonly made in consensus, based on the content of the proposal in terms of alignment with the program, school, faculty, and LTM at RRU. Developers present their outlines or program changes at the meeting and, essentially, the committee uses the proceeding criteria to assess the quality of the proposal. The core components of the LTM (RRU, 2014a) include the following key reference points:

- outcomes-based,
- technology enhanced,
- experiential and authentic,
- learning community,

- team-based,
- integrative,
- applied,
- engaged learning,
- action research,
- supportive, and
- flexible.

Prior to submission to the committee, developers are encouraged to work with CTET's Instructional Designers on curriculum matters, learning outcomes, technology assistance/delivery options, and to have a CTET representative in attendance at the meeting. At the moment, program heads are invited to attend, but their presence is not required. The meeting process is intended to be inclusive and collegial, but the committee recognizes that some developers view the process as somewhat adversarial. It is assumed that the history of CC's role as guardians and gatekeepers of curriculum is responsible for this impression, and CC is looking to improve the reputation it has inherited. CC considers its role as a peer-review process, which is prominently reflected in the new terms of reference and evolving *modus operandi*.

Regarding the LTM, the focus on what is called "authentic learning" at RRU brings with it a broader definition and understanding of what appropriate curriculum looks like. While the 11 components of the LTM strategy broaden the scope of post-secondary education, their prominence also brings ambiguity, which CC must sort through in the curriculum review process. As the committee has discovered, there can be a fine line between innovative program and curriculum development and academic rigour—for example, when video assignments are considered for assessment or audio-visual resources complement required academic readings. It is not the CC's role or desire to prevent or eliminate innovation, but, at the same time, it is important to maintain academic standards that are acceptable to the broader academic community. Finding the right balance is further challenged by the format of the course outline submissions, which often resemble a syllabus or even course minutiae, rather than a simple outline. Many programs have also developed unique and specific approaches, which capture a diversity of interdisciplinary approaches and add to the challenges of CC to respect and acknowledge differences while safeguarding academic rigour and quality.

An Evolving Process and the New Way Forward

Given the move towards an inclusive curriculum development process, begun under the guidance of Doug Hamilton, and the concomitant emphasis on collegiality, the way forward is relatively clear. The development team, consisting of the assigned developer and a supportive CTET representative,

and the curriculum development triad, consisting of the development team, the committee, and the LTM, stands to ensure the continued high standard of curriculum development at RRU (see Figure 1). That said, it behooves the committee to emphasize and practise inclusiveness and collegiality. Curriculum Committee has been working to find ways to reach out to faculty curriculum developers, initially by developing the proposal templates and by adding some helpful notes, and both the current membership of CC and the registrar explicitly support the adoption of additional strategies to engage present and future curriculum developers. This function has been identified more frequently in recent planning workshops as crucial for CC as it works to reimagine its relationship with curriculum developers in supporting innovation alongside its mandate to maintain academic quality and rigour. As well, the ongoing functioning of CC and its continued evolution depends on the willingness of potential committee members to participate, which will presumably be enhanced as its goals and activities become more transparent and widely understood. The evolving process and new way forward also includes a slight shift in the role of CTET in the course development process, as highlighted in Figure 1 and outlined in the following.
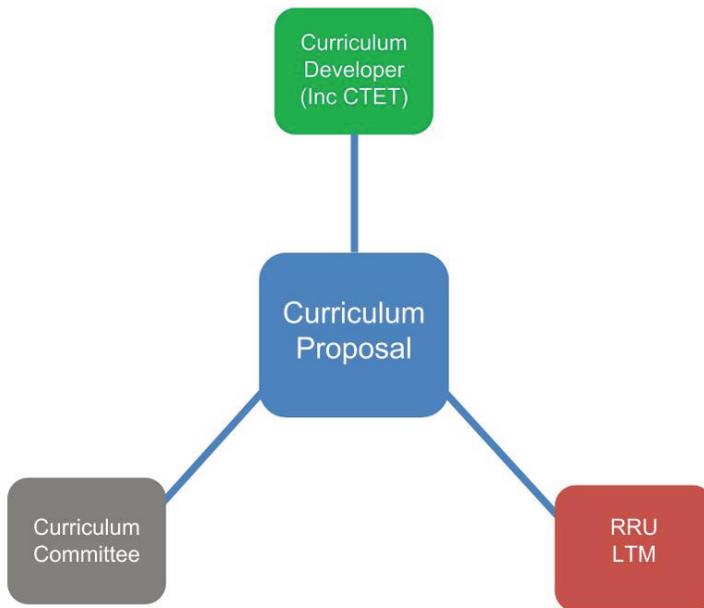

Figure 1. Curriculum Development Triad

Developments in the curriculum review process since the original draft of this paper have significantly changed the role of CC, particularly regarding course development and review. The course template has been modified to shift or reaffirm responsibility and oversight of course development to

programs. A review of course curriculum proposals has occurred at two main levels, generating a new way forward for the role of CC related to LTM.

First, the course template has continued to evolve. The latest version consists of a restructured two-part template: whereas Part A remains immutable and requires CC approval, Part B provides developers with flexibility in terms of content and assessment. Part A covers higher level elements such as a calendar description and learning outcomes with assessment criteria, which is considerably fewer elements than before. Part B contains more syllabus-like elements such as unit descriptions and readings, which are much more likely to change and evolve over time, given changes in the educational context, instructors, or in delivery format (e.g., from blended to online). CTET will play an integral role working with course developers on both Part A and B. However, while CC maintains a role in overseeing course development, the minutiae of course delivery and implementation now rest even more clearly with the program area. In other words, the expectation is that program heads and school directors continue to ensure that future iterations of a course remains consistent with the elements in Part A and the spirit of the elements in Part B. Only when changes to Part A are required or a new course introduced is CC review and approval required.

Second, CC itself has been restructured. This involves the dismantling of the existing committee format and the establishment of a review process and committee structure that more closely follow an editorial board model and peer review process. Academic Council has approved the new terms of reference for CC in December 2015. The CC mandate to review and approve program and course curriculum remains intact, but organization of the committee now includes two bodies: (1) CC Core is responsible for reviewing new and revised course curriculum proposals and minor program revisions, and (2) CC Extended is responsible for reviewing proposals for new programs and any major redesign of existing programs. CC Core is comprised of the committee chair, registrar, and secretary. CC Core is responsible for identifying reviewers of courses submitted to CC, focusing on individuals who have course content and/or pedagogy expertise, as applicable. Normally, reviewers will be core faculty members at RRU. In essence, the process works similar to the review of articles for publication in journals. Meanwhile, CC Extended includes CC Core, deans, school directors, and a representative from the Centre for Teaching and Educational Technologies. On an annual basis and when needed, CC Extended is convened to review new program proposals or course proposals that CC Core determines require additional expertise in the review process.

Overall, the new way forward is expected to facilitate an easier and supportive process for course development, highlighting the role of CC in supporting quality teaching and learning within the context of the LTM at Royal Roads University.

Conclusions

Since its inception, CC has been tasked with overseeing the development of programs and course outlines. Arguably, as a result, course outlines at RRU have been historically subjected to more scrutiny from outside the university than would be experienced at other institutions. This scrutiny has presumably resulted in higher quality program and course curriculum. At this time, the Ministry of Advanced Education seems satisfied with the operation of the university, and outside scrutiny of program and curriculum development has abated. Yet, success on this front has sometimes served to somewhat alienate CC from faculty. The apparent alienation experienced by developers may be due in part to an apparent conflict between traditional notions of academic integrity and freedom and the somewhat prescriptive expectations imposed by the LTM at RRU. That said, in the spirit of collegiality, efforts to include faculty in the curriculum process will continue as CC maintains and emphasizes its role as 'friend, not foe.' It may be argued that the pending changes to CC will improve the development process and result in a more effective and efficient curriculum review process, particularly for course proposals, which constitute the lion's share of CC workload. This is possible providing that program areas continue to work with faculty before proposals come to committee. As well, the continued support of CTET in curriculum design and more communication between the other people and areas involved in curriculum development will ensure more satisfaction for everyone involved in the curriculum development process. In essence, developers will have more latitude in the curriculum process, but success hinges on communication and cooperation in the curriculum development triad. As a result, CC is able to focus on the essence of its role and mandate related to curriculum development at RRU.

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