

The “Hidden Curriculum” in apprenticeships

Designing and delivering a curriculum based on Standards published by IfATE is a complex and challenging exercise. Training providers are obliged to comply with a range of external regulatory relationships: Ofsted, ESFA, IfATE, professional bodies, trade associations etc. These may be about quality assurance, professional standards, qualifications, other training requirements, without considering the impact of end-point assessment.

When providers discuss their curriculum, it is already loaded with meaning. Their curriculum is both intellectual property and the delivery model for a programme of study. It is both the space where learning is facilitated and also where apprentices are most under scrutiny through assessment tasks and preparation for end-point assessment. So, what is the point of discussing a hidden curriculum? Mary Richardson observes:

Hidden curriculums have nothing to do with textbooks and teaching resources; rather, they are the bedrock of school life – for example, how students and teachers behave, and understanding relationships with others and/or with authority (see Damla Kentli, 2009 for an excellent contemporary explanation of these theories). (Richardson, M. *Rebuilding Public Confidence in Educational Assessment*, London: UCL Press, 2022).

The concept of a hidden curriculum has a long pedigree (see P.W Jackson, *Life in Classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968). Unlike an educational or training curriculum, which is ‘intentional’ (designed and planned) and ‘enacted’ (delivered and executed in accordance with the design and plan), the hidden curriculum is relational, contextual and fostered in the environment and setting that it operates within.

For apprenticeship training providers and end-point assessment organisations, the sense of relational transactions as a significant and key part of any apprenticeship is just common-sense. The interactions and their iterations, between employer and provider, employer and apprentice, and between these and the end-point assessment organisation, are points of engagement, tension and stimulation. So, the hidden curriculum frames the success of the ‘intentional’ and the ‘enactment’ curriculum.

In assessment terms, this is of huge significance both to training providers and to end-point assessment organisations. The formative assessments, assessments for learning, which may contribute to portfolios, will depend for much of their success as a measure of apprentices’ abilities on the hidden curriculum. For EPAOs, the hidden curriculum may create a range of assessment encounters that depart from or are tangential to expected outcomes in ways that challenge assessors’ abilities to conduct fair assessments. For example, where the local technical terminology within a company, industry or sector, deviates in conceptual terms; ideas about risk and risk identification are not universal and terminology can be used in ways that are highly focused on specific functions tasks.

Efforts must, therefore, be made to create lines of communication that promotes an optimal ‘hidden curriculum’, generally understood and accepted by all parties in an apprenticeship across the whole duration of a programme, including end-point assessment.

In real terms, this means stakeholder engagement and the introduction of clearly understood obligations and accountabilities for everyone involved, including the apprentice themselves. A significant aspect of this will, inevitably, focus on the 20% requirement for off-the-job training, a shared discourse concerning assessment and a clear understanding of the pressures on the apprentice, the employer, the training provider and the EPAO.

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