

Curriculum Development As A Social Activity

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<p>Michael Carroll is an associate professor at Momoyama Gakuin University, Osaka.</p> <p>He has carried out research into the implementation of competency-based curricula, including the national Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) in Australia in the 1990s, and is currently, implementing two separate curriculum changes in his university in Japan.</p> <p>He is also editing a book on curriculum development.</p>	<p>ABSTRACT</p> <p><i>The paper will look at some of the problems often encountered in new curriculum initiatives, as well as how a new curriculum might be effective in stimulating better learning. Lawrence Stenhouse defined curriculum as ‘the shared understandings of like-minded teachers’, and David Tripp depicts it as ‘vested in the conscious values and beliefs of individual teachers, a systematic set of relations between particular people, objects, events, and circumstances.’ In other words, contrary to a popular misconception, curriculum is not simply a set of instructions but a living, changing thing situated within the minds and activities of all the people involved. By looking at curriculum initiatives in EFL situations in Japanese universities and an adult ESL program implemented nationally in Australia in the 1990s, the paper will explore the ‘conscious values and beliefs’ of the various people involved, and how these values and beliefs can conflict or overlap.</i></p>
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Introduction

“Curriculum: a living, changing thing situated within the conscious values and beliefs of teachers and learners.” This paper will explore how various parties to curriculum changes present their respective ‘conscious values and beliefs’ and how they might conflict or overlap. Four very imperfect curriculum initiatives from Japan and Australia will be presented, and examined to see how these models might help us reconcile the constraints and conflicting values we experience in our own curriculum situations.

Any curriculum change involves teachers, learners, and administrators, as well as other potential participants (parents, employers and so on). When we look at curriculum change on a small scale, within a single classroom, it’s easy to see how the dynamics between teachers and students might operate. However, the larger the scale of the curriculum, the more difficult it is to both predict and manage the human side of the change.

Perhaps the most important dimension along which curriculum changes vary is in the extent to which they are led from the top or the bottom of an organisation. Markee

(1997) describes five models of curriculum change. Four of them describe approaches to the instigation of change. The centre-periphery model is the most top-down. It describes the traditional situation in which changes are decided centrally by managers whose authority is derived from their position in the hierarchy, then passed on to teachers to implement. In this model the teacher's role is simply to carry out instructions from above, in a more or less mechanical way, hence the name; they are peripheral to the design process. A variation on this model is the research-development-diffusion (RDD) model. In this model, the instigation for reform, and the locus of decision making remains in the centre, but the authority of the change agents lies in their expertise in curriculum matters, and the flow of information from all parts of the organization is seen as an important part of the process. This model is theory driven, and rationalistic, and assumes that rationally justified changes will inevitably be taken up. It is therefore sometimes criticized as paying little attention to the implementation stage, since it often fails to consider issues of relationships between the various people involved.

A problem-solving model is a more democratic model in which the impetus for the change comes from problems and issues identified within the organization, primarily from teachers themselves. It is therefore a bottom-up approach, and is often realised in small-scale action research projects. The model is widely favored in recent work on curriculum change, but it has significant obstacles, most notably that it demands more time, commitment and skills than many teachers are willing or able to provide. Thus Markee proposes a 'linking model' which recognizes the complexity of real life teaching situations and is flexible enough to allow for both top-down initiatives, and the support that can come with them, as well as bottom-up feedback, amendments and involvement in decision-making, particularly at the implementation level.¹

This paper takes this linking model as a realistic model of how curriculum change might be effectively implemented. While it is true that much of the research shows that top-down curriculum changes, particularly those with an exclusively centre-periphery orientation are the least likely to result in lasting changes (Markee p64), clearly there are occasions when centrally-led initiatives are required. The dangers of these initiatives being rejected or subverted, though, (Gibbons 1989) do point to a need for serious consideration of the ways the changes are communicated, especially to teachers, and the

¹ Markee also discusses a 'social interaction model', not a model of change initiation, but a way of understanding how the process of change works. In this model, the diffusion of change is seen as a fundamentally a matter of communication. The implication for curriculum innovators is that communication networks need to be planned for rather than simply left to chance.

extent of the support mechanisms and feedback responsiveness.

Like most professionals, teachers are generally a quite conservative group, when it comes to their professional lives². Thus curriculum innovations are most successful when they do not get too far ahead of present thought or practice. As was pointed out over 30 years ago, at a time of especially rapid change in British schools:

The teaching profession as a whole, especially the non-vocal majority, are rightly more susceptible to evolution than to revolution. (Coulson, 1972 p95)

Of course, teachers can and do change their practice, but to varying degrees, 'in resilient and resourceful ways [they find] that they can continue to do what they have always done regardless of the impositions of policy.' (Hood, 1995, p32).

Moreover, willingness or unwillingness to change is not the only reason why effective communication is necessary. If teachers are excluded from all sense of involvement with the direction of the change processes, they may in fact be not so much unwilling as unable to implement it effectively. For instance Brundage and McKeracher, in an article dealing with adult learning styles, make the following points:

- Adults learn best when they are involved in developing their own learning objectives which are congruent with their image of self
- Adult learners react to experience as they perceive it, not as the teacher presents it, and they learn best when the content is personally relevant to them
- Adults learn best when they have learned how to learn

(Brundage and MacKeracher, 1980: 21-31)

Mackenzie (2002, 224) suggests that it is useful to see teachers as 'learners of our teaching-learning context'. If we take this one step further, and think of curriculum change as a learning activity on the part of teachers, we might easily re-phrase Brundage and MacKeracher's points as:

- Teachers learn new ways of teaching best when they are involved in developing their own objectives which are congruent with their image of their own classrooms
- Teachers react to experience as they perceive it, not as the curriculum manager presents it, and they learn best when the curriculum content is personally relevant to

² Even though, in Western countries at least, teachers are often politically radical, they remain nevertheless conservative in relation to their responsiveness to professional

their own experiences

- Teachers implement changes best when they have learned how to implement changes

In other words, curriculum design from the top down, if it recognizes the crucial role of teachers in implementing it, must take responsibility for supporting teachers through its implementation, listening to their concerns and acting on them. There are strong arguments for curricula to have sufficient flexibility to allow teachers' knowledge of the real situation at the classroom level to have an influence – from the bottom-up. Hugh Sockett (1976) has a useful analogy for understanding this. We can think of a curriculum designer as an aeroplane designer or as an architect. The aeroplane designer must think of every smallest detail, specify every possible use the aeroplane will be put to, and once the aeroplane is built very little can be changed. An architect, on the other hand, has to build into his design the possibility for the people who eventually live in his house to use it in whatever ways they choose. They may build an extension, knock down a wall, redecorate, change the dining room into the living room, and generally make it their home. If teachers (and learners too) feel that their curriculum is like the aeroplane, they may justifiably feel they have little role in it except to play the essentially passive roles of cabin crew and passengers. If they feel that their curriculum is a house, on the other hand, they are more likely to feel it is theirs, to look after, to personalize, and to improve. It is not too much to say, then, that curriculum innovations will succeed or fail according to the extent to which teachers in particular, and to some extent students too, feel that they are meaningfully involved in the process of change. (Mackenzie 2000; Menges 1997, Claire and Adger 2000)

Case studies: Curriculum initiatives in Australia and Japan

In this section, four curriculum initiatives are discussed in relation to the above framework. Two are relatively successful innovations carried out in Australia in the 1990s; two are more problematic innovations currently in the development and early implementation stage in a Japanese university.

CSWE

The certificate of spoken and written English (CSWE) is a competency-based system of assessment devised for measuring achievement of immigrants to Australia in the language use tasks they will need in order to operate as members of the Australian community. It is organized into 3 levels (with a 4th, advanced level for the academic strand), and two

change.



strands, general and academic.

The certificate was developed over several years, by teachers working in the New South Wales Adult Migrant English Program, with the aim of providing clear objectives for teachers and students alike, and in part in response to student criticism of the lack of structure in such programs throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s when the introduction of learner-centred language teaching methodologies saw a marked reduction in the use of course books.

The certificate was introduced in the mid-1990's and quickly spread throughout Australia after it was adopted by the Australian Government Department of Immigration as a framework for the courses for immigrants, which it funded.

Institutions which adopted the certificate, and which were funded to provide English courses, were also given funds for professional development for the staff who would be involved in teaching it. The developers of the certificate also provided training as part of the licensing package they offered to other institutions. In addition they coordinated substantial action-research type projects involving teachers using the certificate in each of the States who had adopted it. (Burns and Hood, 1995)

CALUSA Certificate

CALUSA, in 1995 a language centre of the University of South Australia in Adelaide ran several programs, among which was one preparing students for study in Australian universities. The predominant English language qualification used by Australian universities is the IELTS test. (International English Language Testing system, run by the University of Cambridge Examinations Syndicate, the British Council, and the Australian Government International Development Program.) This test comprises four sub-tests in each of the four macro-skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is weighted towards communicative ability rather than structural knowledge, and is generally perceived as an appropriate test for university entrance, by English teachers, students, and university faculty members. Nevertheless, the staff of the university preparation course at CALUSA felt a continuing conflict over their students' over-riding need to pass the test, which led them to focus on narrow test preparation strategies, rather than their perception that broader preparation for the actual demands of university study was needed. CALUSA had been one of the institutions which had adopted the CSWE, and taken part in the initial trialing and research (Carroll, 1995), and as a result the university accepted a proposal from them to devise an in-house course, based like the CSWE on a competency-based assessment scheme which would be recognised as equivalent to IELTS for entry to the university. This became the CALUSA university entrance



certificate.

The certificate was devised by a small group of teachers from the university preparation program, drawing on existing materials and experiences, and with the involvement of other teachers of English and of lecturing staff from faculties with experience of overseas students. A set of 10 competencies was identified, and assessment procedures defined. Some competencies (reading comprehension) were assessed through conventional tests, and posed few problems; neither did others assessed by classroom teachers through portfolios (keeping an annotated bibliography; demonstrating understanding of learning and research strategies); however the extended writing tasks and the oral presentation task required assessment independent of the class teacher, and close agreement amongst assessors as to what constituted achievement and what did not. This moderation process was very demanding on time, and required special funding to make it effective. This funding was not secured in sufficient amounts which led to continual tensions. Assessment and moderation was also the area that caused greatest interpersonal tensions in a small organisation where assessors couldn't help but be familiar with the students, to understand the importance of the qualification in their lives, and thus to feel some conflict between the pressure to get students through, and the need to maintain the quality of the program.

English for First Year University students in Japan

The author of this paper, coming to Japan in 1998 brought ideas on curriculum design based on these competency based programs. However it quickly became clear that it was necessary to start right from the beginning and re-think an enormous number of previously unquestioned assumptions. Large classes, English as a compulsory freshman/sophomore (first and second year) course, students coming from a translation based system, teachers (mostly part time) with enormous variations in skills, qualifications, interest in teacher development, and entrenched freedom to teach as they liked, and so on, were all quite different from the situation in Australia.

Curriculum for general students (aside from Communication majors)

At Momoyama we are currently implementing an ambitious new curriculum, based on an in-house textbook that we are writing as we go, for around 1500 first years and the same number of second year students. The curriculum reform was instigated as a top-down process, with little if any consideration for how it would be implemented – a centre-periphery, or RRD type innovation. A committee of professors designed an in-house textbook, based on the theme of the university campus as experienced by new first year students. This text and its associated tests were then made a compulsory

element for 50% of each course, the remaining 50% being left to the discretion of teachers. Involvement of the teachers in providing feedback and in re-writing the materials was carried out, but in a piecemeal fashion, and in the face of several institutional obstacles (Carroll and Head, 2003). While there have been gains, in that communication between teachers has become more frequent and students have been able to see some framework to the program where none was visible before, the situation is still in a state of flux at the end of its second year of implementation, and tensions between teachers and administrators are if anything greater than they were before the innovation. One unforeseen gain has been that two groups of teachers, at least, have come together to work on projects evaluating teaching methods and building on elements of the imposed curriculum.

Curriculum for Communication majors

In a separate initiative the Faculty of Letters in the same university is also redesigning its first and second year English curriculum. The initial attempt was purely a centre-periphery type change. A different committee of professors chose a textbook, and issued directives to teachers. No attempt was made to solicit teacher views, or to provide support in the implementation of the change. At the end of the first year of this it became clear that opposition to the text was nearly universal, and was expressed simply through non-compliance. The set text was withdrawn and a project was set up to investigate current classroom practices. Teachers were invited to complete a questionnaire and take part in a structured interview focusing on their course design processes, actual classroom activities, assessment systems and rationales and so on. Following this, students were surveyed and interviewed in focus groups to gain some understanding of their perceptions of needs and the extent to which those needs were currently being met. This data is currently being collated, and will then be used as the basis on which any future changes might be made. The data which is in to date indicates that in fact there is already considerable innovation, experimentation and serious consideration of curriculum issues going on, quite independently of any central curriculum administration. The situation has thus undergone a U-turn from the original centre-periphery type innovation to an RDD/problem solving one.

What can be learned from these initiatives

Of the four initiatives briefly described here, it is clear that all of them had, and in some cases are still working through, their successes and failures. The CSWE was implemented successfully, and is still in use. This was in large part this was due to the amount of support, including funding, provided for training and continuing professional development. In such a large program, of course, inevitably there were pockets of strong

and continuing opposition. Still, the encouragement to reflect on how the changes were affecting their teaching, and to articulate their concerns, made this opposition a potential source of strength in that problems could be revealed and addressed in a climate of genuine collegiality. Despite being implemented from the top down and imposed on teachers, the amount of effort expended on soliciting feedback, and more importantly acting on it when received, made it fit more easily in Markee's linkage model, than the RDD one.

The CALUSA certificate, on a much smaller scale, and designed by teachers to address their immediate concerns was clearly a problem-solving type, and in many ways, aside from the perennial problems in funding the assessment processes adequately, is perhaps a good example of a successful problem solving curriculum to keep in mind. It's model of collaborative development may be one to aspire to, if it can be accommodated within a larger, more centralized system. As a model of whole curriculum change, though, it has limited range, being dependent on small highly focused programs with the kind of culture and employment conditions which foster grassroots development.

The two curricula from the university in Japan illustrate the dangers of rushing into curriculum change without proper preparation. Nevertheless, despite the unpromising beginnings, both in time have begun to bear some fruit as a result of giving teachers (in fact to some extent forcing upon them) the experience of focusing on course objectives and design, and encouraging reflection and change. The general students' curriculum still faces major problems as a result of the lack of consultation and inadequate research that preceded it. But the attempt to redress the situation by after-the-fact consultation, while not the ideal approach, has nevertheless resulted in some positive developments in terms of staff becoming aware of the curriculum as a common endeavour and of classroom research as an activity that is both possible and productive. The Faculty of Letters curriculum too, beginning with even less consultation and less face validity, has begun to yield a positive result as teachers see that their current practice is being taken seriously, and that any changes that come will be ones that arise out of those current practices.

What all these examples, in their different ways have in common, is that whether the over-riding model is top-down one or bottom-up, curriculum designers, to the extent that they act, to return to Hugh Sockett's analogy, as architects rather than aeroplane designers, need to put in place systems that allow teachers to use their skills and experiences effectively to make changes work for the better rather than being overwhelmed and alienated by them.

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