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The CATESOL Journal

Title

Curriculum Development 101: Lessons Learned From a Curriculum Design Project

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4815x9mx>

Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 24(1)

ISSN

1535-0517

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Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/B5.36162

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Curriculum Development 101: Lessons Learned From a Curriculum-Design Project

To better prepare themselves for authentic teaching situations, pre- and in-service teachers should become familiarized with the application of curriculum-development theory in their training programs. The authors will detail how they have become more prepared to face the challenges of course development by outlining their own experience designing a curriculum for an English for Art Purposes course for a leading art school. Being inexperienced teachers themselves and outsiders to curriculum design, the authors outline and share what they learned about creating materials, tasks, and assessment instruments that not only addressed the specific needs and interests of the students, which differ from those of other academic disciplines, but also fulfilled the educational objectives of the art institution itself. Involving preservice teachers in curriculum design will help them to internalize second language teaching theory and have a deeper connection to their own curricula. The authors believe that it is through this curriculum-development process that teachers can experience professional growth and empowerment.

Introduction

Curriculum development is a term that is used frequently in the field of education, but who curriculum developers are and what their role in teaching should be has been under debate. In the past, educators tended to view curriculum development as the responsibility of researchers, theoreticians, or administrators, and there was a notion that materials were the product of “experts” and “innovators” that were handed down to the teacher, who was viewed as the “neutral transmitter” of the curriculum message (Enns-Connolly, 1990; Gough, 1977). In the case of second language teaching, theorists have acknowledged the need to involve teachers in curriculum development in order to create genuinely communicative courses (Enns-Connolly, 1990; Graves, 1996; Shawer, 2010), leading to many teachers’ being increasingly called upon to design the courses they teach. Teachers have been encouraged to participate in curriculum development because of the practical experience they bring with them and their personal involvement in the course; however, many teachers still lack the theoretical framework to interpret their experience and “take

control” of their teaching through certain curriculum-development strategies (Enns-Connolly, p. 501). However, teachers must understand that they play an important role in course design because they are the ones who deliver instructions in accordance with a curriculum, and they are the ones who bridge the gap between what has been described in a curriculum and what is actually being done in the classroom. By understanding the framework of curriculum development, teachers can “make sense” of what they are doing and not just do it (Graves, p. 6)

As graduate students of a MA TESOL program, we did not consider ourselves capable of being curriculum developers because of our lack of knowledge, but we were aware of the fact that course design was not a rare practice, even for new teachers. To our surprise, many in-service ESL teachers also vocalize similar opinions of not feeling fully equipped when it comes to approaching and tackling curricula. Our desire to gain expertise and to prepare ourselves for the future prompted us to enroll in a seminar course in curriculum and assessment at our university. We entered the class with foundational and theoretical knowledge of how to teach the four skills and had some exposure to second language learners through our work as tutors and teaching assistants in both academic and nonacademic ESL classrooms. However, we left the class with quite a different set of beliefs, attitudes, and strategies as English language teachers, and this change is indexical of teacher growth and development (Voogt et al., 2011). Through this course, we were equipped with the conceptual framework for “making sense” of the curriculum-development process that would enable us to apply this knowledge to a real-life language-learning situation, or “case.” As Graves (1996) explains in her book, *Teachers as Course Developers*,

the experience of developing a course enables teachers to make sense of the theories and expertise of others because it gives them opportunities to clarify their understanding of theory and make it concrete. Their practice in turn changes their understanding of the theories. (p. 6)

This Curriculum and Assessment course helped make our understanding of theory concrete through our experience developing an actual curriculum for an advanced integrated ESL course at a leading art university in San Francisco.

This article begins by situating the project we were assigned to work on and outlining the indications we were given for developing the curriculum. Following the contextualization is an overview of the curriculum-development process that we went through and how we addressed the unique needs of the students and fulfilled the educational objectives of the institution. This article concludes with reflections on our experience of making sense of theory and insight into the role curriculum development has played in our professional development.

Context

Our directive for the curriculum-development project was to (a) survey the course that was already in place; (b) evaluate the curriculum; and (c) look

for areas of improvement. The administrators hoped that having the students and teachers surveyed and the curriculum evaluated by “outsiders” would give them an extensive view of the course and perhaps their program on the whole. The institution encouraged feedback and suggestions from us that would lead to the development of a curriculum that would “increase student satisfaction, give students the opportunity to think critically, have focused tasks, enlighten students, and encourage them to take knowledge into their own hands” (personal communication). We interpreted these directives to mean we should assess the course and suggest possible improvements in the course to increase students’ motivation while meeting the institutional goals.

The course we were asked to assess was called English for Art Purposes (EAP), which is essentially an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program that prepares international students to (a) participate actively in college classes; (b) express themselves clearly in art critiques; (c) understand lectures and American idiomatic speech; (d) improve reading skills; (e) increase art and design vocabulary; and (f) write papers for class assignments. Today, there are more than 5,000 international students enrolled (30% of students enrolled) in the art university, which makes it the largest art-oriented English as a Second Language (ESL) program in the world (Preece, 2008).

Along with their ESL classes, EAP students are allowed to enroll right away in art and design classes that correspond to their major. To be successful in these and future classes at the university, they are expected to be competent in all language modalities; however, listening and speaking skills play a special role for these students. When we were trying to obtain more information about the nature of English for art and design purposes, one of the instructors at the university revealed that the need for strong listening and speaking skills is greater than the need for strong reading and writing skills (personal communication). Students also need to be well acquainted with the spoken vocabulary that is used during lectures in art classes to facilitate their comprehension. In addition, art students must be linguistically prepared to discuss their own projects and provide critiques of the works of others. Reading and writing competence is necessary for them to be able to carry out research and to succeed in their future composition classes at AAU.

The Curriculum-Development Process: Where to Begin?

According to Richards (2001) *curriculum development* refers to the “range of planning and implementation processes involved in developing or renewing a curriculum” (p. 41). Many curriculum-development textbooks present the stages of the curriculum-development process as follows:

1. Needs analysis;
2. Setting goals and objectives;
3. Course organization;
4. Selecting and preparing teaching materials; and
5. Evaluation.

Lacking experience in developing a curriculum, at first we tried to follow the exact order of the curriculum-development process based on the progression of our Curriculum and Assessment course and the textbooks we were using in our class. However, after many failed attempts to achieve our directives for the course design, we realized that we must approach the process from a different angle.

Instead of following the presented order from our textbooks, which is to determine goals and objectives before deciding course content, we decided to approach the process backward by first setting principles for the course content, next evaluating and revising the existing assignments based on identified students' needs, then deciding the scope and sequence of the content, and finally eliciting objectives students would be able to achieve. From this experience, we learned that curriculum development is "a framework of components that overlap both conceptually and temporally" (Graves, 1996, p. 5), which means that curriculum developers should start wherever and whenever they think it is suitable in their own situations.

In this section, first we will focus on our "backward" approach to articulating goals and objectives of the EAP course. Then we will reflect on how our approach to curriculum development helped us understand the interactive dynamic among the framework components of the course-construction process and enabled us to map our own stages of the process that made sense to us. What follows is an outline of the stages of the curriculum-development process we were involved in. In the following section, these stages will be outlined in more depth.

1. Conduct needs and situation analyses.
2. Conceptualize the content.
3. Evaluate existing assignments based on students' needs and institutional goals.
4. Identify what was missing or lacking in the existing assignments.
5. Revise and change assignments to fulfill course goals, bring unity to the course, and motivate students.
6. Articulate the goals and objectives based on the assignments we determined.
7. Compare them with the existing ones, and then add our goals and objectives to the existing ones.
8. Organize unit content (scope and sequence) and developing of course materials.
9. Choose evaluation methods that connected and built off one another.

Conducting a Needs and Situation Analysis

We began with a needs analysis, as all curriculum-development textbooks outline this as the starting point of curriculum design. We designed and conducted a questionnaire to elicit from the current EAP students what Brindley (1989) referred to as objective (i.e., language needs) and subjective (i.e.,

affective and cognitive) needs. By analyzing the results of the questionnaire, we extracted necessary information such as who the students were, what their goals were, and what their learning-style preferences were. What stood out to us from the student survey was that students expressed an overwhelming desire to improve their oral English skills; many explained that they wanted to become more fluent in order to be successful in future jobs in art and design in the US. The following quote from a student exemplifies the subjective needs we assessed, which guided our decision making in the development process:

In 5 years, I plan to be a famous director, I have to speak English fluently to be able to communicate with those actors and other people in a film crew.

After assessing students' needs, we conducted a situation analysis to understand factors affecting the EAP curriculum development. From this analysis we learned what constraints were involved in implementing our curriculum (i.e., teacher and institutional factors); however, we were not sure how to effectively make use of this data. Therefore, we proceeded to the next stage as indicated in our textbook: determining goals and objectives. Not being able to bridge the gap between the two phases (needs and situation analysis and determining goals and objectives), we found ourselves lost in a sea of "SWBAT"s.¹ We spent many days making lists of goals, objectives, and target skills. Some were too general and abstract whereas others were too specific. We could not decide which ones were critical and which were merely desirable. After hours of discussion and negotiation, we realized that there was a missing step and we decided that conceptualizing the content before determining goals and objectives might shed some light on our problem and bring about a solution.

Conceptualizing the Content

Left with the question of how to choose and articulate appropriate goals and objectives, we decided to develop a small set of questions that we could use systematically to guide us through the goals and objectives articulation process. We asked ourselves the following questions:

1. Who are the students?
2. What are their needs?
3. What is the nature of the course?
4. What should the students be able to do in their art and design classes and outside class?
5. What motivates the students?
6. What did the students learn in their previous English courses and what will they need to learn in the following courses?

As we were outsiders to the learning situation at hand, these questions helped us to situate the students and make decisions about what was important for the EAP students to learn. With a closer and more systematic investigation

of the course and learners, we were finally able to set the principles of course content for EAP. Within the realm of English for Art Purposes, we decided that the content should:

1. Help students build their future identity as artists;
2. Promote critical thinking and students' autonomy in their language learning;
3. Build study strategies and presentation skills;
4. Give students opportunities to work individually as well as collaboratively;
5. Encourage students' creativity; and, most of all
6. Be relevant to students' lives.

After analyzing these objectives in relation to the six questions that we asked ourselves, we were able to bridge the gap between the needs analysis stage and the goals and objectives articulation step.

Evaluating and Revising Existing Assignments

Our next step was to look at the existing assignments in the EAP course and to determine if the tasks effectively addressed the content we conceptualized. By doing so, we were able to articulate the learning objectives, to identify the missing constructs in the existing tasks, and to make the necessary adjustments to better address students' needs. By deconstructing each assignment in this way, we were able to identify the exact learning outcomes and constructs that were being measured and that should therefore be taught, and we were able to apply these objectives in creating the new tasks.

In the existing curriculum, all assignments were relevant to art and design discourse and practices, which include tasks such as writing an essay on modern art and giving presentations on personal artwork. However, among these assignments, one task seemed out of place. This task was a role-play in which students had to imagine they were soccer coaches and give advice to their trainees. For this task, students were required to demonstrate their pragmatic skills, which are an important component in language acquisition; however, it seemed irrelevant to their needs as art and design students. Therefore, we decided to keep the pragmatic aspect of the task but to apply it to a situation that was more thematically appropriate.

After analyzing the existing assignments and identifying areas for improvement, we revisited the situational analysis, looking at students' needs in a new light. To better address students' needs, not only did we change the tasks but we also fine-tuned the topics and themes to ones that we believed could engage students' interest and motivation and provide close relevance to their lives. In this, we agree with Tomlinson's (1998) statement that "what is being taught should be perceived by learners as relevant and useful" (p. 97) and we emphasize that there should be an apparent relevance between the language and assignments students use in the classroom and outside class. This approach also helped us with sequencing assignments so that all tasks would fit into the

larger thematic framework and could eventually fit into the final portfolio. We thought that by making connections between all of the assignments, then students could revisit their old assignments to revise, recall, reprocess, and edit information that would help students integrate all that they had learned.

Approaching Curriculum Development

Various concerns have been raised about teachers' approach to course design because how teachers approach it can have a serious impact on students' learning and motivation. Among teachers' approaches to curriculum design, Shaver (2010) outlines the *fidelity approach*, in which teachers transmit the curriculum as it is; the *adaptation approach*, in which teachers make adjustments and adaptations to an existing curriculum; and the *enactment approach*, in which the curriculum is a creation in action. In other words, it is dictated by the students' needs and experiences on the spot. The importance of conceptualizing these approaches will help us envision the *attitudes* that come with each approach. Teachers who value stability and avoid uncertainty prefer the first method, whereas others who value unpredictability and challenges would favor the third method. Through our graduate-course and firsthand experience working on a curriculum, we acquired a critical perspective on each of the approaches and the strategies that come with them, and we think that now we would not be afraid or feel underprepared to deal with any curricular situation. Shaver (2010) states that exposing preservice teachers to these models and the attitudes each model dictates should be part of teaching-training programs.

On the one hand, we witnessed the adaptation approach, in which we observed how the EAP staff created, negotiated, and renegotiated the curriculum by supplying concepts, skills, and materials missing in the official curriculum. On the other hand, by employing a detailed situational and needs analysis, we used the curriculum enactment approach. In this model, addressing learners' needs, interests, wants, and abilities is of vital importance. We directed all our mental and critical powers to creating activities that did not necessarily carry concrete objectives, but rather those in which students would be able to use language that was meaningful to them. Understanding the importance of addressing students' needs adequately in the curriculum-development process and having had the experience of trying various curriculum design approaches, we are now less inclined to rely on "prefabricated" lessons of the fidelity approach, but instead we will construct a curriculum that is "uniquely adapted to our students" (Johnson, 1996, p. 769).

Teacher Empowerment Through Curriculum Development

Freeman's (1989) descriptive model for teacher education defines teaching as a decision-making process that involves knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness. Our experiences leading up to the Curriculum and Assessment course had given us the knowledge and skills of language-teaching methodology, theoretical linguistics, and second language acquisition, but we had not had any practical experience teaching in the field yet. Through the curriculum-design course we gained field experience by working on a real-life "case" that

helped us to “foster a change in awareness and attitude” (Fan, 2011, p. 15). We were made more aware of our teaching and attitudes through the process of curriculum development because we needed to make decisions based on our own interpretations of the theory and the context we were assigned to. Theory can inform classroom practice, but it can inform practice “only to the extent to which teachers themselves make sense of that theory” (Johnson, 1996, p. 767). By applying these theories to a real context, we were able to make sense of them and internalize them. The source of our pedagogical knowledge, in this case, did not lie solely within the courses that we took, but rather the learning experience that we had.

Being given a framework for understanding the course-design process and carrying out the project, our attitudes about what constitutes good teaching practices were shaped, which led us to be more confident in our “expertise” and more prepared to enter the classroom. Now that we have had the experience of being involved in the process of designing a course, we also feel more in control of our teaching. By taking a more active role in their own curricula, teachers can become more “deeply involved in their own teaching situations” (Enns-Connolly, 1990, p. 500). We have experienced course design from the curriculum-developers’ perspective, which has allowed us to see how each piece of the curriculum fits and works together. We can now use this knowledge to create more effective lesson plans and generate materials that are in line with all aspects of the curriculum and students’ needs.

The Case for a Curriculum-Development Methods Course

It is not a secret that students learn best when they are actively engaged in their learning process, when they are situated in meaningful contexts, and when they collaborate with their peers. Researchers in teacher education have pointed out that this model is not only applicable to students, but to preservice teachers as well (Putnam & Borko, 2000). In our case, designing a real curriculum for real students is what has become that meaningful genuine context in which we collaborated and reflected with our peers and professionals. This context also resonates very well with the Vygotskian zone of proximal development (ZPD) model (1978), according to which ZPD is a space where “the development today will be the actual developmental level tomorrow—that is, what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (p. 87). As we were working, we could not help but notice the connection between our curriculum-development situation and the Vygotskian ZPD model. According to this model, children acquire problem-solving skills through the help, guidance, and collaboration with their more experienced peers; similarly, we, graduate students and preservice teachers, acted, interacted, and solved our problems and sometimes conflicts under the guidance of our more experienced peers. In this space we negotiated, reflected, and tested the validity of our personal knowledge and beliefs about education, instruction, and curriculum design in a structured and guided framework. The project also resulted in a concrete artifact or product—the curriculum—which not only documents the new practices that we were exposed to, but also documents how our practices and

visions were being shaped and which we can always turn back to. In the future, this “artifact” will attest to our laborious experience that we can always turn back to and use with similar or different curriculum-development practices.

Moreover, Wenger believes that teacher identity formation occurs and memberships are created through various participation modes in a community of practice (as cited in Sim, 2006, p. 3). During the course of our project, which we can equate to participation in a community of practice, we experienced a shift in our pedagogical and professional identities and statuses. According to Wenger, participation is configured through practices such as engagement, imagination, and alignment (as cited in Sim, 2006, p. 3). He defines engagement as an active and mutual process of meaning making and negotiation, whereas imagination is defined as creating images of the world and making connections across time and space. On our part, engagement and imagination were present from the start of the project till the end. We constantly consulted our professor, who, during the course of the project, became an adviser to us rather than an instructor. Also, instead of being mere observers in EAP classes, we interacted with the teachers on a peer-to-peer basis, and as researchers and situational analysts we interacted with the students. Through this act of engagement we became insiders to that behind-the-scenes academic community where negotiations take place and pedagogic decisions are made. In that community we were treated as experts and our opinions were anticipated.

Furthermore, this shift in identity and status from a graduate student to an expert taught us how to formulate opinions and suggestions that were carefully analyzed from different angles before they were articulated. We believe that now we are not only able to maneuver within our practices, but we will also feel confident contributing to the larger field. The act of imagination occurred through analyzing the components from a critical perspective. The process we went through to assess and revise the existing curriculum was not a linear process. Throughout the project we began to see how components were inter-related and how a change in one can affect others. We began by establishing the learning destination (revising the assignments) based on our understanding of students’ objective and subjective needs. How students’ needs affected other components of the framework drove the development process and led us down a unique development path. Because we focused on conceptualizing the content with the students’ future goals and subjective needs in mind, we were able to envision a course that would be learner centered and motivating for the students.

Conclusion

Since taking the Curriculum and Assessment course, we have transformed our understanding of the meaning of curriculum development. At first we thought curriculum design pertained to the domain of specialists, to which we did not belong, being preservice teachers and lacking expertise. Once we understood the framework of the curriculum-development process, we then struggled with how to apply it to a real context. After navigating through each stage of the process and finding our own approach to designing the course, we

were able to make sense of the theory we had learned. This sense-making process allowed us to internalize the theory we learned and gave us more of a sense of ownership of course design, which, in turn, inspired a deeper connection with our own curricula. Now looking back at our experience, we can see how curriculum development also played a role in fostering our emerging professional identities and allowed us to test and use practices that supported our memberships in the academic community as experts. Therefore, we join other practitioners and scholars in advocating an inclusion of curriculum-design projects in teacher-training courses (Shawer, 2010; Voogt et al., 2011).

Carl (1995) said in his book, *Teacher Empowerment Through Curriculum Development*, that curriculum development is not something done to teachers but *through* and *with* them. We strongly believe that all teachers and preservice teachers should be provided the space, the skills, and the knowledge to become active participants in curriculum development. Reflecting on our own experience, we can clearly see how this will lead teachers to feel more empowered and will increase and develop teachers' autonomy and the learning outcomes, thereby contributing to "the development of the learners' full potential" (p. 6). Our experiences attest to the potential that curriculum development has to empower preservice English language teachers.

Acknowledgments

We thank our Curriculum and Assessment professor, Dr. Priyanavada Abeywickrama, for being our mentor and adviser throughout the curriculum-development process and for her countless hours reviewing our work and giving us detailed feedback. We also thank the administrators at the art university with whom we collaborated closely to develop the curriculum.

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Note

'SWBAT stands for "students will be able to," which is how graduate students typically learn to write the objectives in a lesson plan.

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