



**ONLINE COLLABORATION IN ADULT LITERACY:
PART 1**

By:

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Finishing a case study is the consummation of a work of art. A few of us will find a case study, excepting our family business, the finest work of our lifetime. Because it is an exercise in such depth, the study is an opportunity to see what others have not yet seen, to reflect the uniqueness of our own lives, to engage the best of our interpretive powers, and to make, even by its integrity alone, an advocacy for those things we cherish. The case study ahead is a splendid palette (Stake, 1995, p. 136).

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Abstract

This qualitative research used a case study approach to investigate a process called “curriculum deliberation,” a “democratic” approach to the development and rationalization of curricular material proposed by educator Joseph Schwab (1973). The research was exploratory in that despite being lauded by educators since its introduction in the 1970’s, very little research has been conducted into the process. What data there are concern homogenous groups in face-to-face-venues, whereas this study focused on curriculum deliberation in an online discussion forum by a pluralistic team. Initial impressions of the data indicate that there are three general stages involved in the process; a) reviewing and rationalizing the curriculum, b) generating and deliberating alternatives, and c) identifying unresolved issues and developing recommendations. A number of factors appear to mediate the process (e.g., the moderator, the curriculum, the stakeholders, resources such as time and funding), With regard to the efficacy of the process, although early in the analysis the data do seem to indicate that it is a valuable, if somewhat time-consuming and at times frustrating process which; a) can produce highly useful and relevant curricula and, b) be effectively conducted in an online environment.

Introduction

This intent of this article is to provide readers with some insight into the process of curriculum deliberation, the reasons I chose to investigate the process (i.e., its potential value to the Canadian adult literacy community), briefly describe the research process, and outline some preliminary impressions (i.e., “best practices and lessons learned”) of the data. A much more comprehensive and formal follow-on article is planned for 2004 once the analysis and interpretation of the data is complete.

Background

The study was conducted as a requirement of my Doctor of Education program with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. Although the data collection phase of the research is very nearly complete, at the time of writing my research is just entering the next stage -- analysis and interpretation of the data collected. I chose online curriculum deliberation for my research focus in order to investigate its potential for developing high quality (i.e., relevant and useful) curricular material for Canadian adult literacy tutors.

A case study approach was used to investigate the process. Yin (1989) defines a case study as, "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (p.23). The study can also be described as "exploratory" (Yin, 1994, p. 17) in that its primary purpose was to answer "how" or "what" questions. That is, "How does the process of curriculum deliberation unfold when a pluralistic group deliberates in an online environment?"

The participants in the study involved two deliberation teams comprised of 5 to 6 stakeholders from the adult literacy community (e.g., tutors, adult educators, government representatives). The curricular material that was deliberated on by both teams was a newly developed online course for tutors entitled "Adult Learning: From Theory to Practice." Qualitative data were

collected in the form of verbatim transcripts of the deliberations and a lengthy questionnaire completed by each participant.

Before moving on to a discussion of some of the best practices and lessons learned from the study, the next section will introduce readers to the concept of curriculum deliberation, and briefly discuss my reasons for choosing to conduct the process via computer-mediated communication (CMC).

What is the Curriculum Deliberation Process?

The notion of curriculum deliberation is attributed to educator Joseph Schwab who first wrote about the process in the 1970's. He proposed that while it is typically the case that curriculum is developed in isolation by scholars or subject matter experts, there are many other groups/areas that should be equally represented including: the subject matter; learners; teachers; milieus; and, curriculum making.

In the case of *subject matter*, representation would be by an individual with in-depth knowledge of the curricular material; that is, a subject matter expert or scholar. *Learners* would be represented by an individual with in-depth knowledge of the abilities, needs and/or wants of the learners for which the curriculum is being developed. *Teachers* would be represented by practitioners from the particular area of education for which the curriculum is being deliberated. *Milieu's* refers to the context in which the learning takes place and involves various influences on the curriculum (e.g., the mandate of the current government, the underlying philosophy of the educational system/school, the community in which the program is operating); that is, the needs/wants of various

“stakeholder” (Brandon, 1999) groups. A curriculum specialist would represent the final area of *curriculum making*, and would be responsible for ensuring the evolution of a rational and defensible curriculum. As Schwab (1973) suggests, this role is key to the effectiveness of the deliberations: “The special obligation of the curriculum specialist chairman [sic] is to ensure that the group hunt out, recognize, and juxtapose the different considerations which are pertinent” (p. 521).

It must be stated clearly and emphatically at this point that the purpose of a deliberative process is **not** to standardize curriculum --quite the contrary. Curriculum deliberation is a fundamentally “democratic” approach to the development of curriculum in that learning materials are developed by stakeholders (e.g., politicians, funding bodies, learners, practitioners/ volunteers, and the community). Standardized curriculum, on the other hand, is often developed in isolation using a “one size fits all” approach. According to educators such as Valentine (1986), this is not an achievable goal in adult literacy because of the wide range of learner needs. More importantly perhaps, many practitioners would not consider this a desirable goal given the humanistic underpinnings on the field and its emphasis on the needs/wants of the individual learner.

Why Deliberate Online?

The ability of the Canadian adult literacy community to undertake collaborative activities such as curriculum deliberation has been quite limited in that the field is geographically dispersed and limited in terms of the resources it has available for face-to-face collaboration. Until recently alternative means by which to collaborate have remained elusive. However, the advent of computers into the daily lives of North Americans, now offers a potentially effective means in the form of CMC (computer-mediated communication). In the case of this research, I am referring specifically to asynchronous discussion forums (i.e., rather than all forms of CMC such as email, synchronous “chatting,” and/or computer video-conferencing). The advantages of asynchronous CMC is that it bridges time and distance, can promote deeply reflective discussion, and is relatively inexpensive and simple to coordinate logistically in comparison to face-to-face collaboration.

Despite the fact that the curriculum deliberation process has been well received, indeed lauded by educators, very little actual research has been conducted. Few data are available and those that are concern homogeneous rather than pluralistic deliberation teams, an approach which ironically is contrary to Schwab's (1973) belief that the process must be representative to be effective. Fewer data still are available regarding the efficacy of conducting the process in an electronic environment. Thus, the overarching purpose of the study was to

investigate the process of curriculum deliberation by a pluralistic group in a CMC environment.

“Best Practices and Lessons Learned” from the Research

The discussion below should be considered in context; that is, it is based on very preliminary impressions of the data collected.

- Best Practice - **The deliberations should be mediated by an objective, non-partisan individual who is experienced in conflict resolution:** By its very nature the process invites debate and therefore, conflict. The leadership of an objective, non-partisan individual as mediator is crucial to ensuring that the democratic goal of the process is pursued and achieved.
- Best Practice - **The deliberations should be moderated by an experienced curriculum specialist:** In that the final goal is to produce curriculum that is representative, this role is pivotal. The moderator must ensure that: a) the team focuses on the issues and generates alternatives and recommendations based on reasoned judgment; b) critical reflection and risk taking by team members is promoted through establishing and maintaining a supportive environment; and, c) an accommodation of the needs/wants of the stakeholders is achieved.
- Best Practice - **The goal of the deliberations should be the accommodation of the needs/wants of stakeholders rather than consensus:** Pluralistic groups typically have conflicting needs/wants and therefore, consensus is unlikely. Rather, an accommodation of stakeholders needs/wants is a more realistic and achievable goal.

- Lesson Learned - **Whenever possible, team members should choose to participate:** The team must have a high degree of motivation and tolerance for other team members' views, and a positive, open attitude. Being directed to participate rather than choosing to do so is unlikely to engender any of these.
- Lesson Learned – **A timeline and end date for the deliberations should be specified:** Although Schwab envisioned a free flowing process unfettered by time, the reality in adult literacy is that time is very precious.
- Lesson Learned - **The degree to which the deliberation process is unstructured and free-flowing must be balanced by the tolerance of team members with this approach:** Although Schwab proposed that the curriculum deliberation must be a spiral (versus linear) process of "discovery," "coalescence" and "utilization," an unstructured format causes frustration and discomfort. This was the case for Team #1 and as such, the process was semi-structured for Team #2 as follows:
 - Stage #1: Review and Rationalize Existing Curriculum (2 weeks)
 - Stage #2: Generate and Deliberate Alternatives (2 weeks)
 - Stage #3: Identify Unresolved Issues, Develop Recommendations (2 weeks)

Conclusion

It should be reiterated that the “best practices and lessons learned” above are based on preliminary or superficial impressions of the data collected. In the coming months, the data will be “mined” (analyzed) much more deeply and a comprehensive report about the results of the study will be produced in 2004.

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