



ONLINE COLLABORATION IN ADULT LITERACY

PART 2

By:

Lori Herod, EdD (ABT) MEd, BA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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).

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who supported this research including:

- Dr. Jim Hewitt, my Research Supervisor
- Professors Wayne Seller, Clare Brett, and Rina Cohen, my Research Committee members
- Ms Wendy Hardman, my Peer Reviewer
- The deliberation team members from both the pilot and formal studies
- The National Literacy Secretariat, funding agency for the project in which the data from Team #1 was collected
- Mr. Charles Ramsey and Mr. Earl Letts of The National Adult Literacy Database

This article follows on my earlier article “Curriculum Deliberation Online” published in the Fall 2003 issue of *Literacies*. The first article concerned my preliminary impressions of data collected in a research study I conducted for my doctorate program at the University of Toronto in 2003 about the process of curriculum deliberation. This second article discusses the findings of the study based on an indepth analysis of the data. My purpose is to confirm and expand on my impressions and to illustrate the richness that mining or analyzing the data can provide.

In my earlier article I described a process conceptualized by Joseph Schwab (1973) referred to as “curriculum deliberation.” The process brings representatives of various stakeholder groups together as a team to identify problems and gaps in a particular curriculum, generate alternatives, reach an accommodation, and develop a set of recommendations. In addition to the process itself, I was also interested in determining whether collaborative endeavours such as curriculum deliberation could be conducted effectively online since as Quigley observes:

If adult literacy practitioners are to engage seriously in a clearer articulation of their own reality, and in critical discourse concerning their own field, improved ways need to be found to create and distribute critical knowledge to guide this field (1999, p. 254).

As depicted in Figure 1, analysis of the data confirms my initial impressions that the process of deliberating moves forward through three stages. Stage 1 – Questioning, Stage 2 – Deliberating, and, Stage 3 – Accommodating.

The process is spiral in form and can be described as iterative in that questioning, deliberating and accommodating are repeated in each stage, but one activity occurs to a much greater degree than the other two. Thus, each loop in the spiral was designated as a stage corresponding to the dominant activity in the process at the time.

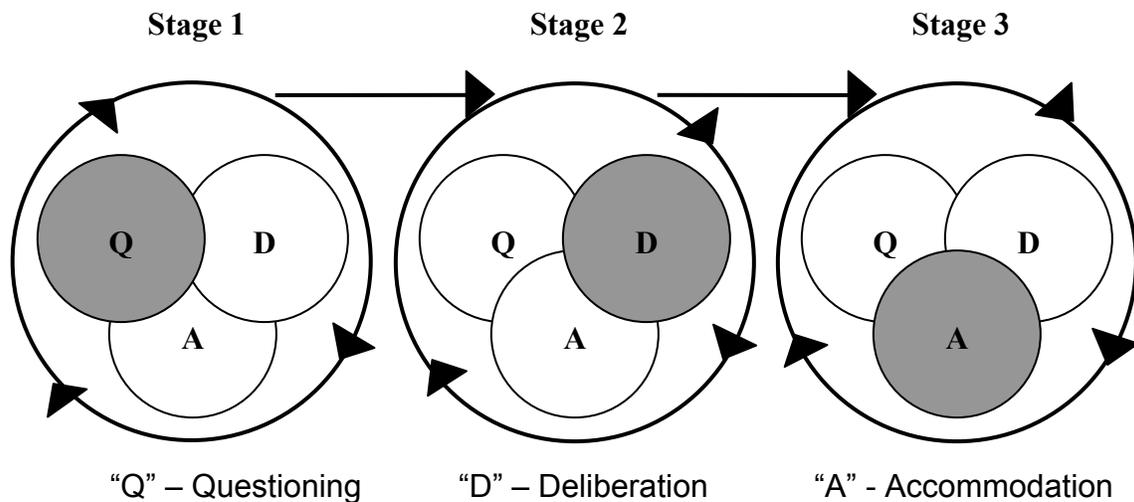


Figure 1: The predominant activity in each stage in a process which is forward moving and spiral in form.

In Stage 1 the teams were concerned with questioning the curriculum developer. This questioning concerned not only the choices that had been made with regard to the content and process of the curriculum, but also regarding matters surrounding the background and larger context of the course. How had the course come about? What gap if any it was designed to fill? Who was involved in its creation? Where does the curriculum fit in? Who would be responsible for delivering and maintaining it? As the teams gain a fuller understanding of the background and context of the course, the focus of their questions shift from “What, How, When and Where” to “Why?” That is, questions

about the rationale behind the choices that had been made for the curriculum. This shift in the type of questions signaled a transition into the second stage of the process.

In Stage 2, the focus of the teams was on deliberation which involved identifying problems and generating alternatives. For example, a number of participants on both teams in my study felt that the language in the course was too complex and needed to be made plainer. The ensuing deliberations revolved around whether making the language plainer would result in a loss of meaning or whether language that was complex might result in diminished participation and/or learning. As is the intent of the process, the deliberations touched on the larger context and issues (e.g., At what level are the majority of tutors? At what level should tutors be? Should tutors be accredited?). In the end, the language was made plainer throughout the course, but in instances where there was a possibility that meaning might be lost or diminished the term was retained and defined in a glossary that was added to the course. This accommodation represented Stage 3 of the process.

A number of factors which influence the process were identified in the study. Chief among these is the presence or absence of what I term “cognitive anchors.” Curriculum deliberation is not a clearly delineated, step-by-step process with concrete objectives such as DACUM (Develop a Curriculum). Rather, it is a much more open-ended, fluid and dynamic process in which team members, especially those who are inexperienced with unstructured, critically reflective dialogue tend to feel somewhat adrift. This sense is exacerbated in an

online discussion forum in that communication is asynchronous and physical cues are absent. As was demonstrated in my research, however, there are ways of helping team members to feel more anchored.

Cognitive anchors are perhaps best thought of as information which provides team members with a sense of form and focus. For example, content anchoring refers to the provision of one or more issues or problems by the Moderator and which the team uses as a jumping off point or lead-in to the deliberations. Structural anchoring refers to the provision of a framework for the team (i.e., breaking down the process into the three stages discussed earlier). Interpersonal anchoring may be thought of in three ways. First, it refers to information about team members such as the professional background and experience of each member. Second, anchors may be physical in nature such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. These are not available in text-based discussion forums and in this study were missed by the majority of participants. Finally, interpersonal anchors have a social function of anchoring members of a group to one another. Obviously, socializing is more difficult and less fulfilling online and this too was missed by participants.

The curriculum influences the deliberation process in three respects. First, the scope of the curriculum may vary from a single course module to a full program. The larger the curriculum, the more complex and difficult (and less effective) the process will be. Related to the scope of the curriculum is its state of readiness. In this study for example, the first team deliberated on material as it was being developed (formative deliberation), while the second team deliberated

on the completed course (summative deliberation). The formative deliberations required a greater investment of time and energy since the team's focus was on planning and developing curriculum, whereas the summative deliberations had more of an evaluative focus. The amount of time and effort expended in deliberating influences persistence and in turn, the effectiveness of the process (i.e., half of the first team withdrew from the study).

The degree of contentiousness of the curriculum also influences the process. In this study, the curriculum ("Adult Learning: From Theory to Practice") inspired the majority of participants to think reflectively and even differently, but was not considered particularly controversial by the majority of team members. As such, both teams were able to adopt a demeanour that was open-minded, collegial and critically reflective rather than argumentative. However, curriculum will often be controversial. Take for example, the case in K-12 education of whether or not to include alternate lifestyles in family life curriculum and evokes passionate debate. As the degree of contentiousness rises, so too does the potential for conflict, the end result of which may be that the process stalls or even breaks down.

Closely tied to the contentiousness of curriculum is the influence of stakeholders, or rather the stake each team member holds in the curriculum. A stake can be described in terms of type (economic, ideological, political or educational), degree (low, moderate, or high) and direction (direct or indirect). The composition of the team in terms of the various stakes held can predict the outcome of the process; that is, the higher and more direct the stakes are, the

higher the degree of conflict is likely to be and the less effective the process will be.

The findings of this study indicate that a pivotal role which influences the deliberation process is the moderator. Especially in the case of inexperienced teams (“inexperienced” relating to familiarity with the deliberation process or critically reflective discourse as was the case with the majority of participants in this study), the moderator will need to provide sufficient structure and support to “anchor” the team and facilitate the process without impeding or leading the deliberations.

The act of moderating is best pictured as a continuum ranging from mediation at one end to facilitation at the other end. The moderator will need to shift along this continuum based on the tenor of the deliberations at a given point in time. If/when the deliberations become emotionally charged and argumentative as sometimes will be the case, the moderator’s role will be primarily one of mediation. At the other end of the continuum, the moderator’s role becomes to facilitate as much as possible critical thinking, open-mindedness and reflective discourse among team members.

For reasons of length this article has provided a somewhat cursory overview of some of the findings from my research. As pointed out in the introductory paragraph of this article, my purpose was to confirm my preliminary impressions, as well as illustrate some of the richness that analysis can bring to data. For those interesting in planning an actual deliberative activity, a set of guidelines have been included as Appendix A to this article.

In closing, it must be pointed out that the curriculum deliberation process is not as much an educational “task” as it is a form of collaborative knowledge building. That is, through thoughtful consideration from multiple perspectives about what curriculum currently *is*, knowledge is built about what it *ought to be*. These types of knowledge building endeavours have been difficult to accomplish in the past, but as computer-mediated communication becomes ubiquitous and we learn more about ways to collaborate effectively online, much can be done to advance the field as a whole. As Ginsburg (1999) suggests:

We all acknowledge that the information age has had a profound impact on the world around us; thus it is not unreasonable to posit that the information age should also affect the form and function of adult education (p. 6).

References

Ginsburg, L. (1999). Integrating technology into adult learning. In C. Hoey (Ed.), Technology, Basic Skills, and Adult Education: Getting Ready and Moving Forward (pp. 37-45). Available: http://ericacve.org/mp_hoey_01.asp

Quigley, B. (1999). Naming our world, claiming our knowledge: Research-in-Practice in adult literacy programs. The Alberta Journal of Educational Research, XLV(3), pp. 253-262.

Schwab, J. (1973). The practical 3: Translation into curriculum. School Review, 81(4), 501-522.

APPENDIX A: CURRICULUM DELIBERATION PLANNING GUIDELINES

Author's Note: At the time of writing, these guidelines were a “work in progress” and as such, should not be considered exhaustive or complete. In that curriculum deliberation is in many ways an individual process, readers are encouraged to add to/adjust the list as need be to suit their particular situation.

Convening the Curriculum Deliberation Process

- Why is this deliberation being convened? (i.e., clearly articulate reasons and objectives will form the foundation of the process)
- What are the anticipated results of this deliberation? (e.g., educational, social, political?)
- What are the potential risks and benefits of this deliberation? (e.g., educational, social, political)
- What types of anchoring information and/or activities are participants likely to need?

Setting the Stage with Team Members

Throughout the process, but particularly in Stage 1 there will be questions about the background and rationale of the course. It is suggested that a written document be prepared by the Curriculum Developer (with the aid of the convening body/sponsoring organization where applicable), and provided to the Moderator and team prior to the start of the actual deliberations. This helps to “set the stage” for those involved. By providing much of the context and details that need to be known about the curriculum, the time needed for identifying the salient features of the curriculum would be reduced. In turn this would free up time to deliberate and generate alternatives for which the greatest amount of time should be devoted. The type of information this document could include (but should not be limited to given that each deliberative endeavour will be unique in some ways) is as follows:

- curriculum developer's
 - philosophy of education
 - education and training
 - experience
 - goals/objectives with regard to the curriculum
- curriculum sponsor's/convening body's
 - background and mandate
 - religious, political or social affiliations
 - philosophy of education
 - intentions with regard to the curriculum

- learners targeted by the curriculum
 - Individuals, groups or both?
 - What if any are the characteristics of the learners that influence the curriculum and how so? (e.g., culture, age, gender, language)
 - How might the curriculum positively/negatively affect learners?

- nature and purpose of the curriculum
 - Will the curriculum be developed as part of the deliberation process (i.e., formative deliberation) or will it be “teacher-ready” (i.e., summative deliberation)?
 - What is the problem the curriculum was designed to solve or gap to fill?
 - What is the scope of the material to be deliberated on? (e.g., one unit or lesson plan, a complete course, or an entire program?)
 - What are the objectives of the curriculum?
 - What, if any, constraints are there on the curriculum?
 - What resources are available to support the curriculum? What, if any, resources are still required?
 - Are there any future plans for the curriculum and if so what?

- design and delivery of the material
 - Is the curriculum designed to be stand alone, self-paced, or delivered/supported by teaching/administrative staff?
 - Will the curriculum be delivered in a face-to-face venue, by distance, or some hybrid of the two?
 - Is the course text-based, multimedia or some combination of these?
 - Is the development of the curriculum one-time only, or will it be updated/deliberated on further?
 - Is the curriculum to be imposed on or offered to learners? Is it required or optional?

- assessment of the learner and evaluation of the course
 - Will learners be assessed and if so how?
 - Will some form of accreditation be given for successfully completing the course? If so, who will be the accrediting body?
 - Will the curriculum be evaluated and if so, how, when and by whom?

Team members may or may not raise questions about the person(s) moderating the deliberations, but in any case the following information should be provided to the team. This will ensure that all members are working from the same page:

- Curriculum Specialist/Moderator(s)
 - What is the Curriculum Specialist/Moderator’s background and experience in curriculum development and moderating?

- What is the Curriculum Specialist's/Moderator's role in the process? (e.g., mediation of disputes, moderation/facilitation, administration)
- What, if any, affiliation does the Curriculum Specialist/Moderator(s) have with those convening the deliberations?
- What type and degree of authority or decision-making power does the Curriculum Specialist/Moderator(s) have over the deliberations?

Recruiting the Deliberation Team

- What individuals/groups have a stake in this curriculum?
 - Direct stake (e.g., educators who will implement the curriculum)
 - Indirect stake (e.g., citizens who pay taxes to fund the education)
- What individuals/groups might represent the five commonplaces?
 - Subject matter
 - Learners
 - Educators
 - Milieus
 - Curriculum Specialist
- What, if any, are the selection criteria for participants?
 - General (e.g., able to meet for two-three hours per week over three to four months; have full access to a computer and the Internet)
 - Specific (e.g., the individual[s] speaking to the subject matter will have minimum of a Master's degree in the specific or a related discipline)
- What are the conditions under which the team will be convened?
 - Volunteering, participating as a condition of employment, or other?
 - Paid or unpaid?
 - Will the identities of team members be revealed?
 - What information about members will be revealed in general or specifically?
 - What are the potential risks and benefits to participants? (e.g., Will any participants be deliberating with others who are in a position to influence their working or personal lives in some manner?)
 - Will members be permitted to withdraw from the deliberations at any point?
 - How much time are participants required to commit?
- Curriculum Specialist/Moderator(s)
 - How many Curriculum Specialist/Moderator(s) should be used in this endeavour? (i.e., large scale or complex deliberations may benefit from having more than one person filling this role)

- What criteria will be used to select individual(s) for this position? (e.g., education, experience in curriculum development and moderation)
- Will the position be volunteer, a condition of employment, or other?
- Will the Curriculum Specialist/Moderator(s) be paid or not?
- What, if any, affiliation will this individual have with those convening the deliberations?
- What type and degree of authority or decision-making power will the position have?

Warm-up Activity

One potentially beneficial warm-up activity is some discussion of members' underlying philosophy of education. In addition to providing "anchoring" information about team members, it assists individuals to clarify their own personal philosophies and helps set a more reflective than task-oriented tone from the outset of the deliberations. It also gives participants time to become personally familiar if not comfortable with one another and with the features of the discussion platform if the deliberations are online. Finally, it is a natural lead-in to Stage 1 of the process. (Note: In this study, I used Lorraine Zinn's "Philosophy of Adult Education Inventory." Reference: Zinn, L. [1990]. Identifying your philosophical orientation. In M.W. Galbraith [Ed.], Adult learning methods [pp. 39-56]. Malabar, FA: Krieger Publishing Company.)