



## **CURRICULUM DELIBERATION ONLINE: PART 3**

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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This article represents the third and final article about my research into the curriculum deliberation process in an online environment. Part One described the process of curriculum deliberation, and reported my preliminary findings following the completion of my study. Part Two expanded on those findings following my analysis of the data, provided more indepth information about the process including a set of guidelines for educators/researchers who may wish to convene a deliberation activity, and provided an example of the richness that can be gained from mining or analyzing research data. Part Three discusses the potential and promise of the deliberative process for the Canadian adult literacy community should the pan-Canadian electronic conferencing system recommended in the report, “First Steps: Towards a Pan-Canadian Literacy Electronic Conferencing System” be put in place.

The opportunity to work together in the Canadian adult literacy community is often limited by an ongoing lack of resources and geographic barriers. A major difficulty has been a timely and cost-effective means of collaborating. As early as 1996, the potential of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to resolve these geographic and resource barriers has been recognized by the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). A needs assessment by Consulting and Audit Canada recommended that a Canada-wide electronic infrastructure be put in place for the community:

*... a Canada-wide [electronic] infrastructure would offer significant benefits in terms of both effectiveness and efficiency.... Practitioners serving particular groups would be more effective if they could communicate with their peers across the country and if they had ready access to information of mutual interest. On the efficiency side, a Canada-wide infrastructure*

*would reduce duplication of effort among the provinces, while the costs of developing and maintaining the system would be shared more widely (Section 7).*

While this recommendation was not pursued by the federal government, since the report a number of independent electronic networks sprang up within and even between provinces. These independent conferencing systems serve their regions well in many respects. However, it has been difficult for those in the community to communicate easily beyond regional or provincial boundaries mainly because users have to switch between conferencing platforms. For this and other reasons, the notion of a nationwide online conferencing system is currently being revisited.

In March 2004, a steering committee made up of the NALD, eLit.ca, the Hub, AlphaPlus and the NWT Literacy Council produced a report for the NLS entitled "First Steps: Towards a Pan-Canadian Literacy Electronic Conferencing System." As their report proposes:

*Our research suggests that the functionality of the existing systems would be enhanced and simplified if all the users were on a single system. Users from all jurisdictions would be able to participate in a broader range of discussions, and have access to a larger and more diverse community of practice, while a single system would minimize the amount of time users need to spend in order to access and exchange valuable ideas and information.*

Although it is not known whether the government will act on this recommendation, the importance of the First Steps research is that it confirms the desire/need in the Canadian adult literacy community to connect beyond the local or regional level. Moreover, the report indicates that the field is willing to use CMC to do so.

Among the many benefits a national conferencing platform would provide is that it would make possible collaborative endeavours such as the curriculum deliberation process described in my earlier two articles. As discussed in those articles, this process was first proposed by educator Joseph Schwab in the 1970's. Simply put, curriculum deliberation is a dynamic, open-ended and ongoing process in which various stakeholders come together as a team to look at what curriculum currently is, deliberate on what curriculum should or ought to be, and collaboratively reach an accommodation about what it can realistically be given the specific circumstances in which it will be used.

Unlike traditional approaches to curriculum development, one of the main benefits of the deliberative process is the development of materials which address both the common and unique needs of stakeholders. As Schwab (1973) proposes:

*[Professors of curriculum] seek the right curriculum by consulting and constructing theories which they hope will be theories of curriculum. They conceive theory as being immediately applicable to every instance of its subject-matter. Hence, most act as if an adequate theory of curriculum, were it to be found, would tell us once and for all what to do in every grade and every stage of every school in every place. I, on the other hand, assert that a diversity of needs, resources, and recipients of education characterize American [sic] times and places, and hence, call for a diversity of curricula. The differences from curricula to curricula will often be small (though crucial), and may sometimes be of a substantial order. The construction of needed diversities entails attention by planners of curriculum to the "local" (p. 242).*

Schwab's use of the term "local" refers to various factors which differ for stakeholders (e.g., regional differences in language and/or culture), but are typically ignored by curriculum developers in favour of developing materials that are universally applicable.

Similarly, two levels of curriculum deliberation via CMC are envisioned for the adult literacy community. The first is deliberation at the national level to develop what can loosely be described as global curriculum (i.e., relevant to a broad range of users). These global curricula would then be made available online to users at other levels (e.g., provincial governments, regional organizations and/or individual programs). The second level of deliberation would involve teams who would come together at these levels to develop local curriculum. That is to say, users would adjust the curriculum according to their unique needs and/or wants (i.e., relating to various local factors such as urban rather than rural settings, regional differences in language customs, program mandate, and/or availability of resources).

A nation-wide electronic conferencing system such as that recommended in the First Steps report would provide the means for collaborating in endeavours such as the deliberation process. Collaborative curriculum development via CMC is not without precedent. In 1995 the Progressive Curriculum Network (PCN) was instituted at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto (OISE/UT), the goal of which was for teachers to progressively build/refine curriculum via the Institute's online conferencing platform Knowledge Forum (KF):

*Traditional curriculum is typically very slow to be developed, and is delivered to teachers and students as a static, completed product. By contrast, the idea of progressive curriculum is to build on existing curriculum units recursively, so that they become improvable objects that are increasingly effective in their educational value (Smith Lea & Scardamalia, 1997, p. 2).*

The PCN did not use the curriculum deliberation process specifically, but the researchers heading the initiative quickly concluded that they should "broad[en] the range of participants [to include] students, teachers, researchers, cognitive scientists, parents, domain experts and many other participants" (Smith Lea & Scardamalia, 1997, p. 5). In short, they arrived at the same conclusion as Schwab; that is, curriculum will be greatly improved by subjecting it to the scrutiny of multiple stakeholders. A major advantage of CMC is that it is often easier to convene a pluralistic group, especially over time, than it is in a face-to-face venue.

There are several advantages to developing curriculum using a collaborative approach such as the deliberative process. First, it is developed by representative bodies rather than being imposed from the top-down or bottom-up. This is very much in keeping with the humanist philosophy held by many in the field. Second, much needed high quality learning materials would be developed and refined over time. Further, these resources would be shared by the community and users would be encouraged to adapt them to suit their unique needs. This ensures the best use of limited resources. Third, given the progressive and iterative nature of the process, it is safe to say that a concomitant outcome of these deliberations would be the advancement of the knowledge base in the field. That is to say, the process would establish and sustain a knowledge building community. As Brett, Woodruff and Nason (1997) observe, "what defines a knowledge building community is not formal association

or physical proximity but rather a commitment amongst its members to invest their resources in the collective pursuit of understanding” (p. 3).

In the process of curriculum deliberation, knowledge is built in two ways. First, each stakeholder brings forward his/her own perspective to inform the others and in this sense, knowledge is built about alternate perspectives. Second, new knowledge is built by or through alternate perspectives. That is, the integration of multiple perspectives allows those involved to build new knowledge about the curriculum that is much more sophisticated and deeper than when it is viewed from one or two perspectives. Given that curriculum deliberation is an iterative, progressive and reflective endeavour requiring the input of stakeholders at all levels, it is well-suited to an electronic knowledge building community.

As the following excerpt from the First Steps report highlights, a national conferencing system by which the field could collaborate on this and similar endeavours promises to bear rich fruit if put in place:

*Our experience demonstrates that electronic conferencing offers powerful and accessible ways to provide professional development, share ideas and knowledge, build community and networks, distribute resources and information, and reduce isolation. However, these benefits are currently distributed unevenly across the country. That is why we formed the First Steps partnership to explore the potential for a pan-Canadian system.*



## References

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