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Una Destinatio, Viae Diversae – One Destination, Many Paths: An Invitation to Design Curriculum

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An Invitation to Design Curriculum

Abstract

One goal of early childhood teacher educators is to teach in ways that model teaching young children. What better way to study curriculum than to design it? This article describes a graduate early childhood curriculum course in which the students participate in the process of designing the syllabus. They receive a syllabus empty of topics, schedule, and readings. Together, we design the course according to their interests and needs. By semester's end there is a full reading list and schedule. The invitation to co-design curriculum provides opportunities for investigation, representation and reflection as does constructivist teaching for children, and demonstrates concretely that curricular goals can be addressed in multiple and varied ways.

Introduction

What better way to study curriculum than to design it? In the graduate course, Advanced Studies in Integrated Curriculum, I invite students to participate in designing the syllabus. This exercise grew out of the time when, toward the end of teaching my first-ever course, I was finished planning and found myself dismayed and thinking: "That's all I'm going to give them?" Celebrating was an after-thought. I had developed that syllabus by approximating a reified "Methods & Materials in ECE" course, like reaching for a brass ring on a carousel. Now, I suddenly understood that being the teacher meant forging the ring. Rather than replicate an ideal, multiple possibilities could satisfy the same course purposes. This article describes a collaborative design exercise, grounds the effort in theory, and reflects on it as a teaching practice.

Theoretical Framework

One goal of early childhood teacher educators is to teach in ways that model teaching young children, without infantilizing adult students. Dewey (1902) wrote that any meaningful problem involving contradictory elements could be solved when fixed meanings are avoided and new perspectives engaged. My graduate students are often experienced in-service teachers, some certified; yet I aim to teach them something new about curriculum and inspire them to create it. The key is to help them imagine new understandings (Greene, 2011).

Constructing knowledge consists of investigation, representation and reflection (Bickart, Jablon & Dodge, 1999). Constructivists posit that cognitive, personal, social and other competencies are developed best in active, process-oriented activity (Van Hoorn, Nourot, & Scales, 2011). Activity is playful when structured with five play characteristics: high affect, non-literality, process over product orientation, intrinsic motivation and free choice (Johnson, Christie & Wardle, 2005). Fred Goodman (personal communication) described curriculum as "ex post facto"; plans as such don't exist, one can only see what was enacted and understand it after the fact. That is, curriculum only makes sense in hindsight; the path an explorer took is essential to the final chart of the territory covered (Dewey, 1902).

Co-designing Curriculum

The Context

Advanced Studies in Integrated Curriculum is an intensive early childhood masters course, a full 14-week course taught mixed-mode in seven weeks, with an in-class meeting and an online engagement weekly. On the first meeting students receive a syllabus containing goals,

assignments, and a grading policy, yet empty of topics, schedule, and readings. Together, we design the course according to their interests and needs. By semester's end there is a full reading list and schedule. A scaffolded learning task, by inviting student contribution, the design exercise aims to develop their "initiative, motivation and resourcefulness" (Doyle, 2011, p. 25).

The Design Process Described

We start with defining *purposes.* Writing individually, students record their course goals, then share and discuss them in small groups. In the whole group we collect all the goals generated and weed out the duplicates to create a list of group goals for the course. In order to align these with standards, we review the professional standards the course is designed to address and discuss the role of the course in our program. Next we review the purposes and goals already listed in the syllabus and refine our group goals. We assign each of the group-generated goals to a purpose listed in the syllabus, and add any additional goals that the group has listed at the end.

At this point, we discuss the question "*what is curriculum?*" Some sections of the course begin online, so they have had the opportunity to read relevant readings prior to the first in-class meeting and we use those readings to stimulate the conversation. This prepares the students to for the next step in the process, *identifying topics of study that address our goals*. Finally we examine the number of sessions left, face-to-face and online, and *schedule* when each topic will be addressed. We discuss considerations and design principles that support the process and review past syllabi to see how prior sections have addressed similar purposes (see Figure 1).

Steps in the Design Process

Part I: Goals & Purposes

1. Students write their course goals

2. Discuss individual goals in small groups

3. Collect group goals

4. Review course goals listed in syllabus

5. Align group and syllabus goals

6. Develop final course goals

Part II: Select Topics to Address the Goals

1. Reviewing schedule: determine number of learning sessions

2. Investigation: identify topics relevant to goals

3. Scheduling: Select topics based on students' interests, arrange a logical progression

4. Reflection: learning goals can be accomplished through multiple various means, topics and learning activities, in different orders.

Part III: Student & Instructor Responsibilities

•Instructor selects readings and finalizes the schedule

•Students select their provision topics and contribute to reading selections where desired

•Instructor provides a final version of the syllabus, schedule and full reading list by the end of the course.
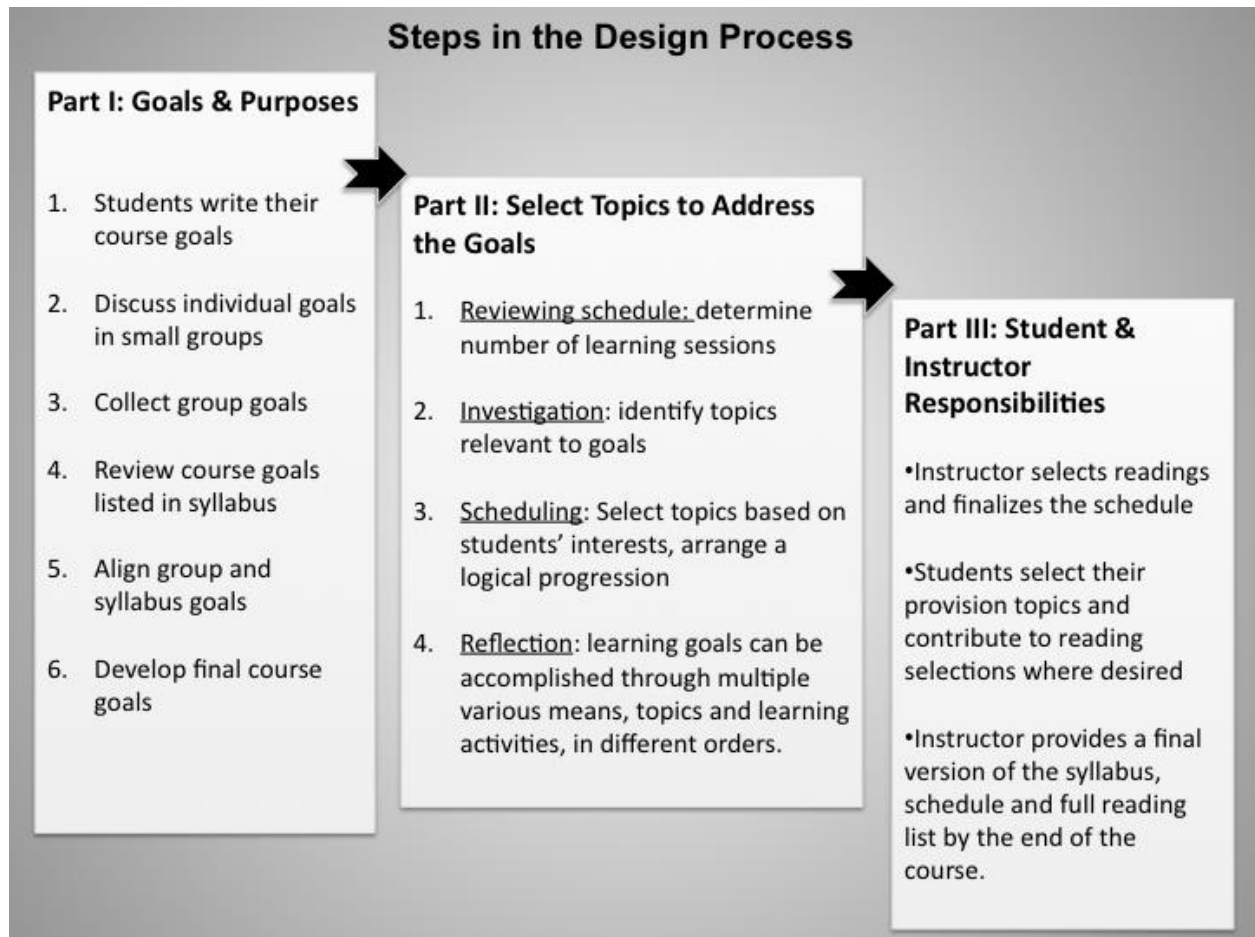
Figure 1: Steps in the Design Process

Once we develop the schedule of topics, the instructor selects and assigns appropriate readings, and it can take a few weeks to finalize the list. One requirement of the course is a provision of content by each student; on occasion they contribute to assigned readings as preparation for their session. The collaborative exercise generally takes one three-hour class period, although sometimes the design is only finalized during the second class meeting. Consequently students generally receive three versions of the syllabus, the first "empty syllabus," and a second that has the new goals and schedule of topics when the exercise is complete. By term's end, the third version contains a full schedule of topics and the assigned readings with a full reference list.

The Design Process Analyzed

The design process involves the elements of constructing knowledge, for example by *investigation* of course goals, *representation* of the goals as topics of study and their entry into a schedule, and by individual and group *reflection* on the definition of curriculum and the course designs of past sections that reflected students' interests and concerns (Bickart, Jablon & Dodge, 1999). It is active, open-ended & process-oriented activity (Hoorn, Nourot, & Scales, 2011) and playful in approach. The process includes all characteristics of play (Johnson, Christie and Wardle, 2005). Because it is open-ended, it is focused on the process without prescribing the finished product. Since students choose their goals and the content they wish to address, the design process engages free choice and enhances intrinsic motivation. It engages the students in imagining (non-literality) how the course goals might be accomplished in different ways and, as a process of discovery, is conducted with focused attention and high affect. I try to make the activity lighthearted and fun.

This exercise involves students in actively learning about curriculum design and in choosing topics based on their interests and concerns. Students generally come into a new course expecting a completed syllabus, anticipating that they will be taken on a journey with a full itinerary. In this case, the unformed and developing syllabus, unfolding like a narrative as the course goes on, transforms their ideas about learning and their understanding of teaching through first-hand experience. Receiving an "empty" syllabus without readings or schedule of topics is disconcerting for many students. By dislodging them from their pre-existing conceptions, it makes the familiar unfamiliar (Greene, 2011) and thereby allows new perspectives, so that planning for instruction can take on new shapes and meanings.

Students experience concretely that the same goals might be accomplished satisfactorily in multiple ways. Moreover, they become more aware of themselves as learners when they feel the unease of confronting an "empty" syllabus. This can help them identify with the children they teach. When the course plan comes together, the hope is that they will more readily see how following children's interests and providing them choices is not only important and beneficial – it is possible. In reflecting on the term, students recently described this method as one that models teaching for children, but at a graduate studies level. By engaging the students in reviewing options and making choices, this design process supports the development of reflective teachers (Curtis & Carter, 2008).

Results and Responses

Results. Embedded within the syllabus is a table of face-to-face and online session dates, topics addressed, readings and assignments. Initially, while it contains the deadlines of assignments and the initial readings, as well as reference to the design exercise, most of the schedule table is bare.

Course goals and purposes vary as the individual make-up of each section varies. While the core goals listed in the first syllabus remain, the group goals are aligned and distributed across these goals and additional goals are listed beneath. The goals translate to a focus on different topics, whether online or during in-class sessions; and the readings also vary from section to section. Some sections have focused developmentally on integrated curriculum and play at different ages. Other groups have had a great emphasis on integrated and playful curriculum in the content areas, specifically interested in how to use play to address STEM and other academic content areas. One group studied models of curriculum and research into historical and current trends to develop criteria for recognizing "good" curriculum.

Student responses. Inviting students into the work of course design is risky; even graduate students are often overwhelmed and uneasy. As mentioned, the schedule of readings and topics table is fairly empty on the first day. Some find the open-endedness confusing and this creates a great deal of uncertainty that a few never get beyond. In anonymous evaluation reports students have said that they felt as if they never knew what was coming and could not prepare properly as a result. For some the design exercise induced so much uncertainty that they did not experience the exercise as designing curriculum and judged the course negatively overall.

Conversely, most students evaluate the course quite positively and refer to the collaboration with peers among the most valuable parts of the class. One student articulated her understanding of the relationship between the readings and the design exercise in an online post. She began by stating that exploration and investigation, especially of how things work, is the way humans learn. When children are in charge of the process and the pace of their inquiry, she continued, the learning is that much more meaningful. She then compared this to the first day of class, where we started "with nothing," without information about the curriculum or syllabus, describing how the group needed to develop goals and discuss what they wanted to learn, in order to build a curriculum around what was important and meaningful to them. This student is one of many who connect the class experience with readings and with children's learning to develop a new understanding of playful, integrated curriculum that allows for a great deal of child choice and initiative.

Instructor responses. When students evidence this kind of learning I know the exercise was successful. I want this experience of overcoming the initial fear of the unknown to build their confidence and to demonstrate how rewarding it can be to tolerate the initial ambiguity, as an investment in creating curriculum that is responsive to learners' needs and interests.

Understandably, I am frustrated and disappointed when I am not as successful at helping students to see the point of the exercise. When they are so initially disconcerted by the "empty" schedule, it happens that the unformed impression of the course never leaves them.

As the instructor I find this exercise, while scary and risky, exceedingly rewarding. When I walk in to the first session, I do not know how it will actually go. The exercise provides an opportunity to get to know my students quickly: I learn about their course goals and their professional interests, and we begin to develop a community of learners. I see the degree of their flexibility and playfulness and also discover who needs more reassurance and support as we go through the exercise. The hardest part is finding and selecting the readings as quickly as I can; often a much more complex task than students realize. As with fitting the last piece into a jigsaw puzzle, when the table of topics comes together and we are able to slot them into a cohesive schedule that makes sense, I always experience a great sense of discovery and satisfaction.

I continually work to improve my ability to bring home the point of the lesson more explicitly, without having to tell about it in so many words. I aim for students to take away a working notion that they can make choices as they go, and that curriculum can be designed in multiple ways and be every bit as effective, though different. Considering the tension it creates for many graduate students, when adapting this approach for undergraduates, it may be beneficial to reduce the scope of the exercise from the syllabus for the whole course and possibly find ways to repeat it during the term. One might develop in-class curriculum planning exercises or tasks that demonstrate flexibility in methods while intentions remain stable. I continue to seek ways of supporting students through the discomfort, emphasizing the parts of the course that are in place at the start, and focusing on process rather than goal orientation.

Conclusion

The invitation to co-design curriculum is inherently constructivist in approach. It provides early childhood teacher educators a method of sharing responsibility for learning with students and develops engagement. It contributes to democratization and supports paths towards revitalization as professionals (Curtis & Carter, 2008), embodying the Mills College motto: "una destinatio, viae diversae," one destination, many paths. Two major benefits are derived: teacher educators are encouraged to tolerate ambiguity, and they experience a sense of joyfulness (Ward & Dahlmeier, 2011) when the course comes together as a coherent whole.

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