

Substance, Sense, and Sensitivity: A Veteran Bilingual Educator's Thoughts on Curriculum

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Regarding positive curriculum development models

There are some valuable movements among professional educators that have the potential to re-focus curriculum and instruction to meet the complex and varied needs of our increasingly diverse student population while simultaneously seeking to make the content learned more substantial, cognitively complete, relevant and challenging. Of signal importance is the just published monograph *Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design* (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006) which marries the thorough restructuring of the curriculum proposed by Wiggins and McTighe in the *Understanding by Design* (2005) construct they have been developing over a number of years with a similarly extensive effort by Tomlinson in her work with differentiated instruction. An effort to harness the power of teaching with technology in tandem with the powerful concepts of profound and significant meaningful outcomes which respond to "essential questions" is evident in the valuable materials provided by the Intel Teach to the Future project. I have found that working with these innovative structures and conceptually rich ideas has

given the experienced bilingual teachers in my graduate courses renewed encouragement to teach beyond the test.

At the same time, the consciousness of increasing demands to level the playing field so that all learners can experience success is clearly attested by resources such as efforts by Richard LaVoie and Mel Levine, whose work is made easily accessible to both novice and experienced teachers in multimedia VHS and/or DVD formats with titles such as *Beyond F.A.T. City* (LaVoie, 2005a) and *Learning Disabilities and Social Skills—Last One Picked, First One Picked On* (LaVoie, 2005b) and *MisUnderstood Minds* (Kirk, 2004).

The February 2006 issue of *Educational Leadership* contains fourteen major articles on varied aspects of the theme “Helping Struggling Students” and includes issues of race, gender, ethnicity, language and disabilities. These articles demonstrate the need to “*Teach Me Different!*” (American University, 2001) which was very well illustrated in the series of four videos bearing that title, featuring the Sally L. Smith methodology for learning-disabled students.

Other concerns experienced and expressed by parents and teachers relate to increased needs for schools to provide discipline and behavioral guidance to both students and their parents. This is evidenced by the rapid growth in popularity of materials produced by the Love and Logic Institute (Fay & Funk, 1995). All kinds of students have a great need to learn to solve the problems of everyday life by making good decisions in a healthy and appropriate manner (Funk, 2002) and, increasingly, parents of all ethnicities need support (Cline & Fay, 1990) in learning how to parent the “millennium student,” just as teachers need guidance in

modifying their approaches and attitudes when confronted by the changing expectations of their pupils (Nasseh, 1996).

Specific new curriculum materials of interest to teachers of ELLs

I regard it as a positive advance when I encounter new materials and initiatives that are supported by the teachers who are using them or that I feel would have enabled me to be a more effective classroom teacher at the elementary and secondary school level.

I am impressed by the potential offered by *Keys to Learning: Skills and Strategies for Newcomers* (Chamot, Keatley, & Anstrom, 2005). It is a much needed, carefully researched and developed resource for newcomer ELLs who arrive in the upper grades with limited previous academic access. Although not explicitly intended for such populations, it is also a good resource for learners whose English language learning is limited due to learning problems that are within the areas served by special education programs. The companion *Shining Star* 5-level program (Chamot, Huizenga, & Hartmann, 2005) for ELLs grades 6-12 that further develops literacy and sheltered content for these learners is also promising, as are the Longman content area texts, also for ELLs in grades 6-12. In particular, as I compared *Longman Science* (Pearson Education, 2006) to materials from other sources for ELLs in this age group, it was the only one with coherent, meaningful content that was well developed and fully understandable. Most of the others I looked at contained bits and pieces of diluted content information in formats that would be

insulting and belittling to the upper grades student.

For younger learners (reading levels grades 3-6), I am particularly delighted with the engaging and beautifully prepared supplemental reading materials with extensive multicultural and cross-curricular social studies, language arts, science and math content in the *WorldScapes/Vistas del mundo* leveled literacy resource published by ETA Cuisenaire (2005). It is an impressive endorsement that when I sent a sample copy of these materials home with one of my undergraduate students for her to complete a materials evaluation assignment, she was unable to return it promptly because her nine-year-old son was unwilling to part with the book until he had finished reading it!

I have yet to encounter the resource I would want to put in the hands of every bilingual teacher who teaches children to read in Spanish although I have seen a few scholarly articles that I ask students to read as we discuss teaching strategies and appropriate interventions (Alanis, Munter, & Tinajero, 2003; Alanis & Tinajero, 2004). For any teacher who teaches children to read in English I would certainly wish they could own or have the use of Miriam Trehearne's *Comprehensive Literacy Resource for Grades 1-2 Teachers*, published by ETA Cuisenaire (2005). This is probably the one book I feel would have helped me the most as a classroom teacher to organize my literacy curriculum and instruction more confidently and effectively. Each of these *Comprehensive Literacy Resource* compendia is a wonderful resource for the grade level(s) addressed. However, the book for Grades 1-2 is the one that would either guide a new teacher to teach literacy successfully with few other resources in circumstances where teachers lack materials or to make

appropriate selections in a school where shelves full of potential resources crowd and shout for attention, leaving the novice teacher in danger of sampling all and utilizing none.

Delightful, meaningful, authentic curriculum resources cannot overcome some of the errors in our current implementation of learning programs for English Language Learners, but thoughtful use of them and positive advocacy can certainly make the struggle to meet our challenges seem less tedious and more rewarding. Certainly, there are wonderful opportunities to increase the success of all our ELLs and their peers if new and veteran teachers continue to seek to understand and implement the best of the new materials in the context of the best new models for curriculum and instruction. We should focus on

- Materials which exhibit serious attention to *substance, sense and sensitivity* with authentic academic language in a coherent cultural context in every language in which learning and instruction occur.
- Curriculum constructs such as *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), which aim to develop a deeper, more relevant and meaningful context for learning by working back from worthwhile learning outcomes to the essential questions that will be answered by completing the learning tasks.
- Instructional imperatives such as differentiated instruction within a context of challenging all students to achieve (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).
- Consideration of the needs of children and parents for the support of schools to help us face, enjoy and reconstruct our amazing world of technology and

globalization (Fay & Funk, 1995; Funk, 2002; Cline & Fay, 1990; Nasseh, 1996).

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