
Curriculum Change and Programming Innovations in ESOL Programs: Making it Happen

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Programs that teach English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) operate in many different educational and cultural settings. Despite the numerous differences that distinguish ESOL programs from each other, they share two challenges: (1) to remain relevant to the changing needs of their students, and (2) to adapt to the changing circumstances of their programs. In order to meet these challenges, it is often necessary for ESOL programs to introduce curriculum changes and programming innovations. While new initiatives occasionally encounter vigorous, organized resistance, benign indifference usually claims the greatest number of casualties in the struggle to introduce change and innovation in a program. Knowledge of the change process and the adoption of appropriate change strategies can significantly improve an ESOL professional's chances of successfully implementing a curriculum change or programming innovation. This paper addresses important aspects of both of these considerations and concludes with a list of suggestions for those persons intending to introduce a curriculum change or programming innovation.

The Nature of Educational Organizations

Educational institutions are extremely complex social organizations and, as such, they share the same features of all formal social organizations. Kimbrough and

Nunnery (1983) have defined a set of four characteristics that distinguish social organizations: (1) they select leaders; (2) they determine and assign specific roles; (3) they develop particular goals and purposes; and (4) they must attain their goals and purposes to sustain the organization. Baldrige and Deal (1983) would add one more characteristic to the set: change. According to them, "the most stable fact about organizations, including schools and colleges, is that they change. You can count on it—if you leave an organization for a few years and return, it will be different" (Baldrige & Deal, 1983:1).

While all organizations share the five characteristics identified above, no two are exactly alike. Levine (1980) asserts that every organization has a unique set of norms, values, and goals that combine to form an organizational character. This ethos contributes to a shared mystique. This notion of a collective identity affects which curriculum changes or programming innovations are likely to be embraced by an academic institution and which ones are likely to encounter resistance. Predictably, those curriculum changes and innovations that are perceived to be inconsistent with the character of the institution are the least likely to succeed.

Understanding the Change Process

Lindquist, a major figure in the academic change and innovation literature, observes,

"The obstacles to academic innovation are many and great, and the motivation appears weak" (Lindquist, 1974:330). Any change in the status quo necessitates a reallocation of the increasingly limited resources in an institution. Resources such as space, money, and release-time are scarce commodities in most schools. The implementation of a significant change or innovation of any kind is an immediate threat to secured positions and established allocation patterns in the organization. In many cases, it requires reductions in one area to fund disbursements in another. For example, an ESOL program may need to fund expenses associated with a curriculum development project by using the funds dedicated to the purchase of new office equipment, thereby postponing the acquisition of additional personal computers for the program. If there is a difference of opinion among faculty over program priorities, the curriculum change may be postponed, scaled back, or dropped. For this reason, change implementors must be prepared to accommodate and to effectively deal with the various constituencies affected by a proposed change. Moreover, commitment and interest must be sustained over the course of the change effort. Inertia is, perhaps, the most distinguishing characteristic of large social organizations, and ESOL programs are no exception.

Planned changes are introduced into academic institutions in fairly predictable patterns that have several distinct stages. Three change models found in the literature (Fullan, 1982; Levine, 1974; Hunkins, 1980) distinguish between four separate phases in the process of introducing planned changes. The first stage entails the acknowledgement of a need by an individual or group and the

development of strategies designed to satisfy it. The second stage generally involves the implementation of the change, usually on a trial basis, following the approval of the appropriate persons or units. Next, there follows a period of continuation and evaluation of the outcomes of the change. Finally, based upon the assessment of outcomes, the change is either terminated or institutionalized.

A two-year curriculum project undertaken at Lewis and Clark College's Institute for the Study of American Language and Culture followed this same general pattern. The impetus for change was the growing perception among faculty members that the existing curriculum document, which divided language skills into the traditional skill areas of reading, writing, grammar, and listening/ speaking, no longer reflected classroom practice because skills were increasingly being integrated and taught through content areas.

This, in turn, led to the development of an entirely new approach to defining and organizing the content of the curriculum. A series of linguistic and socio-cultural performance objectives were developed for each course and each level of the program. Following a one-year trial period, the project was judged to be successful and was adopted.

Adopting Successful Strategies for Educational Change

Because implementing planned change is a lengthy, complex undertaking, it is not always easy to discern when or if a given change has been successful. Baldrige observes that "Planned change is very

difficult to produce, often results in intense political conflict, and usually ends far from where its originators intended" (Baldrige and Deal, 1983:4). Certainly, the most obvious indication of whether a change has been successfully implemented is whether it is adopted and persists following a trial period and subsequent assessment. Inertia and the passage of time often combine to ultimately institutionalize a change after a trial implementation has been approved.

In an extensive review of over 1,500 studies of successful innovations, Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) have identified five critical characteristics that typify and increase the likelihood that an innovation will be adopted: (1) relative advantage, (2) compatibility, (3) complexity, (4) trialability, and (5) observability. Relative advantage is the extent to which an innovation is thought to be better than the existing idea or practice it supersedes. Compatibility is the extent to which an innovation is consistent with prevailing norms and past experiences of an organization. Complexity is the extent to which the innovation is able to be understood and is easy to use. Trialability is the extent to which the innovation may be undertaken on a limited or experimental basis. Observability is the extent to which the innovation is visible and perceived by others. Clearly, curriculum planners and program developers must carefully consider their innovations with respect to these five critical characteristics in order to optimize the success of any planned change.

Lindquist (1974:325) offers a paradigm that provides a useful means of analyzing the chances of successfully implementing a proposed change or innovation. He

identifies three different levels of need (i.e., individual, sub-group, and organization) and three different types of need (i.e., survival, status/esteem, and values or formal goals) that affect individuals' proclivity to embrace an innovation. Lindquist maintains that the more levels and kinds of needs an innovation either satisfies or enhances, the greater the likelihood that it will be successfully implemented. Conversely, the fewer levels and types of need in the grid that are satisfied, the higher the risk the proposed innovation will be rejected. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that an innovation which threatens a large number of boxes in the grid stands little chance of being successfully implemented. (See figure one, next page.)

Lindquist hypothesizes that the strongest motivations occur in the top left corner of the grid, while the weakest motivations are found in the bottom right corner. This paradigm is consistent with Maslow's work and would seem to have face validity. That is, individual survival and self-interest prevails over abstract values and formal organizational goals during times of uncertainty or when threats are introduced into an individual's environment.

A curriculum change usually does not directly threaten the job security of individual ESL faculty members, unless those individuals lack the training or background necessary to deliver the curriculum competently. However, if a proposed curriculum requires more effort, or is construed to threaten student enrollments, self-interest is likely to take precedence over any inherent value the new curriculum may have or any recognition (status or esteem) it might bring the

	Survival	Status/Esteem	Formal Goals
Individual	holding my job	tenure, promotion, reputation	scholarship, teaching effectiveness
Sub-groups	maintaining dept. FTEs	national visibility, graduate programs	producing majors & research discoveries
Organizations	keeping up enrollments	higher educational & public acclaim	educating students, advancing knowledge, meeting student needs

Figure 1.

Source: Lindquist

program. Programming innovations that include the redefinition of responsibilities or reduction of staff are almost certain to be perceived as threats to individual survival regardless of how positively they may impact the other boxes in Lindquist's grid.

A Ten-Step Formula for Successful Change

Perhaps most useful to those persons responsible for implementing curriculum changes and program improvements is a synthesis of the theories of planned change culled from the research literature and presented here as a ten-step formula for successful change. What follows combines what this author has learned from guiding several successful curriculum projects and what Arthur Levine (1980:210) has carefully taken from the work of five significant figures in the field of planned change research (i.e., Bennis, Conrad, Lindquist, Martorana and Kuhns). These ten considerations represent a recipe, if you will, for successfully introducing change or innovation into educational settings.

(1) First foster an atmosphere that promotes change. This is achieved by persuading the affected parties to openly consider the shortcomings of the existing situation. At Lewis and Clark College, a consensus had already emerged that a curriculum change was necessary. At Central Washington University, it was necessary to lobby individual faculty members and to convince them that the existing curriculum did not adequately address the needs of students.

(2) Next, build consensus by compromising with and co-opting those who resist and reassuring those who are anxious. Deemphasize the threats associated with the proposed change and assiduously avoid stalemates and no-win situations. At Portland Community College, a curriculum team was equally divided between those who favored organizing content of the competency-based curriculum in terms of the traditional split between productive and receptive skills and those who believed in a more notional-functional orientation. In the end, the team leader was able to persuade the dissenting

members to accept a thinly veiled compromise that required oral and written production of some content and only recognition of other specific items and incorporated some notional-functional categories.

(3) Instill confidence by demonstrating that you have mastered the details and specifics related to the proposed change (i.e., be sure you know what you are talking about). Be assertive and do not settle for insubstantial changes. Tactfully outflank and confront opposition. At Central Washington University, this meant carefully reviewing curriculum models and being able to articulate the strengths and weaknesses of each vis-a-vis the CWU intensive program.

(4) Upon establishing an atmosphere conducive to introducing a change, appreciate the importance of timing. Consolidate gains before moving to the next stage in the change process. Spending an inordinate amount of time in the planning stage may be as harmful as moving to implement a trial period prematurely. At Portland Community College, pieces of the pilot curriculum were field-tested as they were developed rather than waiting to test the entire project after it was completed. This avoided the danger of getting bogged down in the planning stage and kept the process moving forward.

(5) Adapt proposed changes or innovations to your own particular setting. It is unrealistic and may even be counterproductive to attempt to adopt a change or innovation from another institution without considering its

implications for your institution and circumstances. The intensive program at Lewis and Clark was staffed principally by full-time faculty and it experienced low turnover rates. Intensive programs that also operate as teacher training programs (e.g., Central Washington) often utilize fewer full-time faculty and employ teaching assistants who generally have shorter tenures in the program. Attempting to adopt a curriculum that functions well in one setting without considering its implications for your own specific circumstances may be a mistake.

(6) Adequately communicate with and disseminate information regarding the change to all affected individuals and units. Ignorance of the rationale for and the value of a proposed change are frequently the biggest obstacles to obtaining support for it. Prior to implementing its competency-based survival skills curriculum, Portland Community College preceded with an extensive, paid in-service training of the part-time faculty who were expected to deliver the curriculum. The importance and value of the change was communicated thereby contributing to its successful introduction.

(7) Ensure that key administrators and "gatekeepers" are behind the innovation, if possible, before attempting to broaden support for the proposed change. At Central Washington, this took the form of ensuring that program faculty knew that the Director of International Programs shared the author's interest in and enthusiasm for the curriculum project.

(8) Then, expand support to like-minded individuals and begin

to build coalitions. Encourage ownership of the change, so that active support is maximized. Because the curriculum committee at Lewis and Clark was a committee of the whole, it was relatively easy to assure that all members of the faculty shared a sense of ownership for the final product. In larger programs, or where curriculum development is the responsibility of a select group, it is necessary to allow adequate opportunities for the other members of the program to review and make suggestions regarding the project or one risks resistance to it.

(9) Build in rewards and incentives to promote cooperation among other units and outside individuals. At Portland Community College, this took the form of permitting other teachers to use the materials and lessons that had been developed in the project in their own classrooms.

(10) Finally, prepare for the post-adoption period. As Cicero observed, "Nothing quite new is perfect" (Rawson & Miner, 1986:248). An ongoing evaluation component should be built into the curriculum or the program, so that data can be collected that will facilitate periodic refinements and modifications to the institutionalized change or innovation. The author left Lewis and Clark before the evaluation component could be developed, but work had begun on this critical aspect of the curriculum.

Conclusion

Attempts to change curricula are especially challenging. Hilda Taba (1962:454-5), in her classic work *Curriculum Development: Theory and*

Practice, noted that "To change a curriculum means, in a way, to change an institution. "Changing the curriculum also involves changing individuals. Therefore, to be effective, the process must be systematic and appreciate the human dynamics involved in getting individuals to accept and to implement desired changes. Adequately communicating and mutually working out the specifics of a change reduces individuals' hostility toward it and establishes a sense of ownership towards the final change product. Incorporating tangible as well as intangible rewards for individual cooperation reduces resistance and indifference. Finally, those individuals fortunate enough to possess or to have developed the leadership skills that enable them to motivate and effectively manage colleagues will be especially successful at gaining support for proposed curriculum changes.

To summarize, this paper has presented research and practical evidence that suggests curriculum developers and program administrators may increase the likelihood of implementing curriculum changes and programmatic improvements in their ESOL programs by understanding the change process and adopting appropriate change strategies. This, in turn, will permit ESOL programs to more effectively respond to the challenges of remaining relevant to the needs of their students and to more successfully adapt to the changing circumstances of their programs.

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