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Teacher Beliefs and Subject Matter Boundaries: The Struggle for Curricular Transformation Among Teachers of Adults

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Abstract: Teachers of adult learners in formal settings are increasingly exploring more integrated approaches to curriculum and teaching. One location for such work is the community college. Among these teachers, however, who are traditionally content experts, an integrated approach often represents a paradigmatic shift in their understanding of what is most worth knowing. Little is known about how these teachers' beliefs influence, change, and are changed by participation in such curriculum efforts. This study reports on the beliefs and meaning and perspectives of one group of teachers attempting to bring about more curricular coherence and integration within four different disciplines of developmental education.

In the United States, community colleges are rapidly becoming major, postsecondary locations for the education and training of adults, contributing to what Grubb (1996) describes as a "mid-skilled labor force." Many of the occupational programs offered through community colleges, however, require students to complete some level of basic academic or general education coursework. For many adult learners, these courses are experienced as fragmented pieces of information or skill, disconnected from each other and the learners' life contexts. Developmental education programs represent a specific example of this problem. Usually taught by subject matter specialists, these instructional experiences are designed to equip the "underprepared" adult with the academic skills he or she will need in later college-level work or on the job. But they often have little to do with each other or the learner's future employment contexts. Scholars and practitioners suspect the lack of a meaningful, coherent curricular experience may be a significant and fundamental reason why so many adults do not complete these courses and eventually drop out of college (Beane, 1995; Grubb, 1996). Efforts at curriculum reform, involving integration of academic and vocational content or integrating content more within the life contexts of the learners (Dirkx & Prenger, 1997), represent teachers' attempts to bring some coherence to an otherwise fragmented educational experience.

To be truly effective, however, integrated approaches require a paradigmatic shift from a focus on teaching to one on learning. Many community college teachers rely on curricular structures and instructional models intended to transmit to adults codified bodies of knowledge or skills for which they are perceived to be lacking or deficient (Brody, 1998). Learning-centered (O'Banion, 1997) and integrated approaches to instruction represent radical departures from what teachers have come to know as effective practice (Griffith & Conner, 1994; LeCroy & McClenney, 1992). This paper reports on one group of teachers who are collaboratively engaged in a process of transforming their curricula through the use of more integrated approaches. Our goal was to

develop a deeper understanding of the beliefs and perspectives which teachers from different disciplines use to guide and make sense of curricular integration.

Theoretical framework

Our focus in this study was on the beliefs that teachers hold about the process of curriculum integration. According to Fang (1996, p. 49), "Teacher theories and beliefs represent the rich store of general knowledge of objects, people, events, and their characteristic relationships" that teachers hold and use in their planning, interactive thoughts and decisions, and when working face-to-face with students in the learning setting. We might think about a teacher's general knowledge in terms of subject-matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and curricular knowledge (Shulman, 1986). Thus, teachers hold beliefs about the nature of the subjects they teach (what is most worth knowing and how we know it), ways to most effectively teach these subjects, and the variety of curricular materials available to them within their subjects and to their students within other subjects. Teacher beliefs constitute an important dimension of a teacher's general knowledge, forming a conceptual representation of what teachers perceive to be the reality of their educational setting. It is through this representation that teachers filter their perceptions and make sense of the curricular and pedagogical issues which confront them minute to minute within the learning setting (Dirkx & Spurgin, 1992).

Along with attitudes and values, a teacher's beliefs make up what is referred to as a "belief system" (Pajares, 1992), or what Pratt (1998) refers to as "perspectives" or "points of view." According to Pratt, an individual's perspective reflects "an expression of beliefs and values related to teaching and learning" (p. xii). These perspectives are not merely random assortments of beliefs, but ones which seem to cohere and are, in some way connected with each other. That is, they seem to be held together as if through a structure of some kind, not unlike what Mezirow (1991) refers to as meaning schemes and perspectives. Thus, we can expect seasoned, experienced teachers, trained within specific disciplines, to bring to a process of curricular development well-established systems of beliefs about what is most worth knowing and how it should be taught. The task of exploring a more integrated approach to teaching will challenge and make problematic some or most of these curricular beliefs held by the teachers. Our focus in this study was on the beliefs that educators of adults use and reconstruct as they seek to negotiate the boundaries of their disciplines within a process of curricular transformation.

Methods

This study focused on five developmental education teachers from Riverdale Community College (pseudonyms are used throughout). Riverdale, located within an urban setting, enrolls about 12,000 students annually. Approximately 10%-15% of the college's first year class participate in one or more developmental education courses. The students are quite diverse with respect to class, race, culture, and ethnicity. The teachers, three white men and two white women, are all trained in the disciplines of and with expertise in reading, writing, mathematics, and psychology and all five have been with the college for at least eight to ten years. After an initial workshop, the teachers decided to implement a pilot project aimed at implementing a more integrated, theme-based approach to their teaching (Dirkx & Prenger, 1997). They agreed to work with university-based researchers who would participate as co-learners in the project. A

major assumption, held and made explicit by the university-based researchers, was the teachers would evolve and construct their own model of integrated curriculum and what it means within their particular context.

A qualitative case study method was used, informed by methodological assumptions and strategies of action research, ethnography, and phenomenology. Data were derived from weekly or semi-weekly teacher meetings over a year, documents distributed and discussed in these meetings, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the teachers, and written synopses from each teacher, gathered at the end of the first semester. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and all data were subjected to analytic procedures commonly accepted for use in case study methodology.

Findings

Our findings indicate that teachers understand and approach curriculum integration largely through the lens of their respective disciplines, a position which both reinforces and is reinforced by the organizational structures within which they practice. This perspective of curricular integration is manifest in their beliefs about: (a) helping students see relevance and meaning of the content taught; (b) developing a sense of community among faculty and students; and (c) interpreting the organizational context in which they teach.

Making subject matter content meaningful. Teachers regarded integration as things they did within their own discipline to broaden the students' perspectives. This work was, none-the-less, considered to be a substantial change in the way they viewed and understood their teaching, as is illustrated in taking a more holistic approach to the teaching of reading, writing, thinking, listening, and critical thinking within the overall structure of a writing class. Joan remarked, "I see my integration of the language arts skills as a big shift for me, pedagogically, in teaching this [writing] class." For these practitioners, the notion of a curricular "theme" served as a context for teaching their respective disciplines, and as a "link between the disciplines," providing continuity and structure across otherwise unrelated areas. Jake observed that "Instructors are attempting to use common themes to reach their objectives for their respective classes." These themes allow the students to further explore the content in "terms of their own personal experiences and needs." John, the reading teacher, remarked, "I realize that athletics is [sic] where it's at for them... We might have them talk about some things that impacted them during that prior week that related to the theme." Jake suggested themes could help students improve their math ability: "The thing that happens in the themes is, if somebody really gets interested in quantifying what they're taking,...the math goes up real quick" In addition to contexts relevant to individuals, themes also provided common ground through which the students could experience the different disciplines. One teacher mused, "If you could take these various classes and you could find a common element that these kids can grab a hold of see how all this has value." Another remarked, "We select these common themes and we use those as interest areas and, from our discipline, we all try to feed into these same kind of interest areas where our discipline may be different. But we're all using the same theme and perhaps the students can see that, 'Hey, these things...relate to one another in some way, shape or form.'

Despite their interest in and excitement about themes, the teachers clearly saw them as secondary to the content of their respective disciplines. In the words of one teacher, "Instructors are attempting to use common themes to reach their objectives for their respective classes." Their task in curriculum development was to "locate content or problems within the present curriculum that have relevance to the themes." In our weekly meetings, teachers sometimes asked one another how they might address the themes within their respective classes or how they might incorporate math into the psychology class, reading into the math class, or writing into the reading class. In other words, integration means for the teachers an opportunity to teach another skill within one's own respective discipline. Themes provide loosely defined contexts for identifying these opportunities but there was little evidence that these opportunities were enacted in any significant way. It was not even clear that the teachers shared a common understanding of what role themes should play in the curriculum. Jake suggested, "I don't know if they're on the same tract that I am on that. It may mean something else for those people." Yet, there is a sense among some of the teachers that there is a potential in using themes not fully realized in their work so far. Tim indicated, "I guess my focus on that integrated thing was narrow as we started and it still is. I gotta broaden the perspectives." Some teachers thought more could be done with the themes than what they had been able to accomplish so far. Jane wished that she "could do a reading, writing, speaking theme to help, but how many hours a week is that?" Even still, themes were regarded as ways of illustrating discipline content, helping students realize its relevance to them, rather than being the central focus of study.

Developing a sense of community. An emerging sense of community among both teachers and students also characterizes the teachers' perspective of integration. The teachers highly valued the weekly meetings for giving them opportunities to discuss students' progress, problems they were having in and out of the classroom, and their whereabouts, or if they had not been in class for some time. The teachers demonstrated a richly textured knowledge of their students and their life context, and they saw the process as an opportunity to strengthen and share understandings of their students. In reflecting on the process at the end of the fall semester, the teachers pointed out that the "project fostered dialogue among some of the instructors working with students at risk" and provided for an exchange of information among the instructors "regarding particular students." They valued these opportunities to hold conversations with each other, regardless of the topic, and saw these times as beneficial. Tim remarked, "I think I've grown in the experience with the [course] and even association with [a colleague]." Another said, "It's nice to have this opportunity [to dialogue]. It really is." One teacher described it as bringing "together the different disciplines in [developmental education] to create a more meaningful experience for the learners." They talked about the integrated instructional process as a "vehicle for conversation among the four disciplines," creating some "cohesiveness" for those working in developmental education.

The teachers also saw the process as fostering community among the students: "[This approach promises] to develop a community of learners among our students, providing them with a strong sense of belonging and increase in confidence through support of instructors and classmates." Another teacher said simply that the process established "community among students taking all four classes." Several weeks into the fall semester, the teachers commented on the sense of community that seemed to be developing among their students. This sense of community was perceived as critical to developing effective learning experiences for the students. It allowed the

instructors within the separate courses to integrate common themes which provided the students with connection and coherence from class to class.

Influence of the organizational context. The teachers' interest in developing an integrated approach within their teaching was fueled by a sense that there is "no program" in developmental education at Riverdale. They perceive no formal leadership within developmental education, "a headless entity." As one teacher suggested, learning within the various developmental courses is often experienced by students as a "series of disjointed, unconnected activities." It is best understood as a "set of independent courses offered by four separate departments." During our meetings and in the interviews, the teachers repeatedly complained about the lack of communication among developmental faculty, little awareness of what each other is teaching or how, and no real sense of how their students are doing in other developmental courses. They often feel isolated from one another and from the College as a whole. Considerable time was spent in our meetings talking about problems "created" by counseling personnel, some administrators, and others in the institution who did not have a good understanding of what they were attempting to do in developmental education or the academic needs of their students.

Years of experience working alone within their disciplines have left these teachers skeptical of the possibility of meaningful change within a broader, programmatic or institutional context. The teachers perceive considerable institutional obstacles to pursuing their vision of a more coherent, integrated curriculum. These obstacles both implicitly and explicitly contribute to maintenance of a curriculum in which subject matter is the central focus. The teachers pointed to a lack of full institutional support for improving developmental education, identifying things that teachers "can't do," and that the institution "can't afford." Full-time teachers in developmental education also see the high use of adjunct teachers as a limit on what can be done because of a limited ability to ask things of them. The College expresses concern when teachers are not teaching exactly the same curriculum as the discipline advocates or are not sticking to the designated text, which are selected by departments. The teachers in this project saw a concrete connection between the organizational structure and the nature of curriculum: "You're trying in the end to change the structure... You can say you have [a thematic teaching model]...but there's a whole lot of people with reins in their hands. They're saying every opportunity they get, "Whoa!" Another teacher observed that there are "too many roadblocks for putting all four groups [of subjects] together."

Discussion

Because they work as developmental educators, these teachers already are adapting and using instructional strategies to better support student achievement formatively in and out of the classroom (Amey, forthcoming). This orientation and commitment is at the heart of developmental education and at the core of these teachers' beliefs. In many settings of higher education, this view in itself might represent a dramatic transformation. But, for these teachers, this notion is embedded within a particular view of what an integrated curriculum means. The teachers in this study are guided by a set of belief structures consistent with a multi-disciplinary perspective to curriculum integration (Drake, 1993). In this perspective, one views the curriculum through the lens of particular disciplines or subjects (e.g. math), but content from other areas (e.g. writing) may be used to enhance relevance. In this model, themes are applied to

specific subject areas to illustrate or expand the meaning of the concepts embedded in the discipline, but the curriculum remains subject-centered and preserves the integrity of the discipline boundaries. The model provides teachers with a sense of common ground and provides a context through which to connect as colleagues, despite disciplinary boundaries. The process created a context in which they began to share information and, as they did, questions of structure and broader purposes emerged. Integration came to mean sharing with one another information about students, pointing out connections among the disciplines and how they may act on them, and fostering a sense of community among teachers and learners.

The notion of learning communities has been linked with curriculum integration and with transformation of the community college into the "learning college" (O'Banion, 1997). There is some indication among the teachers' processes of these transformative dynamics. It is clear from this study that the reflective, dialogical process in which the teachers engaged significantly contributed to the emerging sense of integration characteristic of their collaborative work. The nature of this process was intimately bound up with how they came to understand curricular integration. Yet, the findings suggest a dynamic tension between beliefs about curriculum grounded in the disciplines and the teachers' growing recognition of the epistemological demands of a more fully, experience-based and integrated approach to developmental education. This tension is played out within an organizational structure largely antithetical to substantive curricular change.

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