Chapter 21
Adopting of a Critical Approach to Curriculum and Syllabus Design

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ABSTRACT

Almost all EAP practitioners will have had experience of working with a curriculum and associated syllabus. Indeed, many may have been tasked with devising their own for the classes they teach. As a result, educators will encounter a number of associated challenges which are well documented in literature. Consequently, this article will begin by considering the main tenets and issues within mainstream literature concerning curriculum and syllabus design, while also providing a critical analysis. It will then go on to consider curriculum and syllabus design from a critical perspective. Finally, it will consider how feasible it would be to introduce a critical stance within the professional context already briefly outlined, by considering the potential challenges of such an endeavor highlighting the importance of training and development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Almost all EAP practitioners will have had experience of working with a curriculum and associated syllabus. Indeed, many may have been tasked with devising their own for the classes they teach. As a result, educators will encounter a number of associated challenges which are well documented in literature. Some of these they may be explicitly aware of at the time, whereas others they may have subsequently reflected upon, with the benefit of hindsight and experience. As pedagogic knowledge increases practitioners are likely to engage more deeply with some of the less obvious issues within curriculum and syllabus design, which are brought to the fore by critical theorists and those who are more specifically engaged with critical issues in language education, TESOL, applied linguistics and EAP. Consequently, this article will begin by considering the main tenets and issues within mainstream literature concerning curriculum and syllabus design, while also providing a critical analysis. It will then go on to consider curriculum and syllabus design from a critical perspective. Finally, it will consider how feasible it would

be to introduce a critical stance within the professional context already briefly outlined, by considering the potential challenges of such an endeavor and highlighting the associated and subsequent importance of training and development.

2. CURRICULUM AND SYLLABUS DESIGN

2.1 A Curriculum

Within mainstream literature a 'curriculum' is often regarded as an overall plan or design for a course; a blueprint for teaching and learning (Wiggins and McTigre, 2006). According to Breen (2001), a curriculum consists of four elements; the course aims, content, methodology and evaluation. An expansion of and slight alternative to this understanding is offered by Brown (1995), who advocates that there is an interface between curriculum and teaching activities, with curriculum activities encompassing conducting a needs analysis, setting course objectives, utilising materials, teaching and testing (with all of these elements also ideally subject to evaluation), and teaching activities consisting of the selected approaches (or methodologies), syllabuses, techniques and exercises which are subsequently adopted and utilised. Laying aside term discrepancies and the fact that the term 'curriculum' can be applied at differing levels of abstraction (Johnston, 2003), there is also the problematic acknowledgment that, intentionally or not, any given curriculum is almost certainly underpinned by ideology which impacts upon resulting teaching and learning. Richards (2001) considers the notions of academic rationalism, social and economic efficiency, learner centredness, social reconstructionalism and cultural pluralism; however, other notable stances in this respect that are beginning to garner greater acknowledgment include the theo-religious, socio-romantic, technical-behavioural, personal-caring and critical-political.

2.2. Course Aims

In the same way that the term 'curriculum' can be applied at different levels of abstraction, the term 'goals' (or aims) is also often used in a similar vein. As Brown (1995) acknowledges, general goals might purport an educational philosophy which can be applied across subjects as well as encompass an adopted theoretical orientation to language learning, whilst also reflecting national or political developments. However, more often than not goals are used to describe the overriding aim of a course through general statements that express what needs to be accomplished (Brown, 1995). In contrast, objectives, as Brown (1995) notes, are much more precise statements about the content and skills which need to be mastered in order to achieve a goal. According to Findley and Nathan (1980) and Steiner (1975), the production of course goals benefit from literature consultation. They should also ideally not be overly prescriptive or stifle (Yalden, 1987), and certainly not be set in stone (White, 1988), which is something many tend to be. In addition, goals and objectives do not have to be solely language based (Stern, 1992), but preferably should be explicitly articulated, perhaps on a priority of importance principle as Eisner (1992) notes, which is certainly not always the case. They should also make it clear what learners should have achieved by end of the course (Brown, 1995), another moot point in many situations. Despite an argument being made that goals may never be perfectly formed, one point to note is that problematically there is often a mismatch between a course's goals and objectives and actual learner needs (Brown, 1995).

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