College Quarterly
Winter 2005 - Volume 8 Number 1

The Role of Personal Narrative in Constructing Classroom Curriculum

by Donald A. Kouri

This paper will explore the nature of my classroom practice and provide insights about how I construct and deliver classroom curriculum for the electrical apprenticeship classroom. In this article I define classroom curriculum as the planned and guided learning experiences that take place in a classroom setting with students under the guidance of a teacher. Throughout this paper I will compare my own classroom experiences and educational beliefs with those of other educators in the curriculum field from the perspective of a second career community college educator and former electrician. I begin by providing insight into the nature of my classroom practice. This will be followed by an examination of my curriculum beliefs, the value of incorporating past experience into the curriculum development, the importance of knowing the students and connecting theory to practice.

Nature of My Classroom Practice

Dewey (1916) and Beck (1990) point out that the values and aims of school curriculum are to prepare students for life. These ideas also embody the premise that various types of schooling exist for the purpose of satisfying the educational needs of both a diverse student population and the society in which they will live. In the context of this paper I share the view of Connelly and Clandinin (1988) who view curriculum as experience. Experience in this case refers to the lived experiences that teachers integrate into the official curriculum for the construction and delivery of more meaningful lesson plans to students.

The foundation of my teaching practice is centered on a constructivist teaching approach rooted in my past workplace, classroom and formal educational experiences that conform to what Grant (1982) describes as the "circles of authority" surrounding educational institutions (p. 5). These constraints include college and the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) policies. As a result of these experiences, I have developed an eclectic approach to college teaching. My classroom curriculum is influenced by Dewey's concern for the learner, Bobbitt's interest in social efficiency and Schwab's ideas about the fine-tuning of school curriculum at the local level (Jackson 1992).

An important characteristic of my workplace-oriented practice is that the learning specifically focuses on serving the workplace needs of the electrical construction and maintenance industry. The design of

the official Ontario MTCU electrician apprenticeship curriculum has been influenced by the Tyler Rationale that relies on the use of learning objectives to measure student performance (Tyler 1949). However, Tyler's work has shortcomings in the sense that its four questions only address what is to be done and fail to answer the procedural question. In my own practice I rely on the seven-step Taba Model that builds upon Tyler's work and solves the procedural question (Posner 1988). I view the Ministry curriculum guidelines given to me for instructional delivery as an outline of the subject matter to be taught. It is my responsibility to structure the classroom activities to meet the learning outcomes prescribed by the official curriculum in a manner that satisfies MTCU, employer and student needs.

I contend that all good curriculum implementation in the classroom must begin with teachers developing their own personal teaching philosophy around curriculum beliefs, personal epistemology, knowledge of curriculum content, beliefs about students and their perception of themselves as dispensers of knowledge. Because I began teaching practice without the benefit of teacher training, my classroom philosophy is shaped by the best attributes of teachers that I had encountered as a student and further refined over time by my own classroom experiences and curriculum oriented professional development activities. It includes such things as designing lesson plans that make learning a meaningful and enjoyable experience, fostering a climate that promotes interest in the subject matter and, most importantly becoming a trusted partner in the educational journey of each student.

These are the traits that writers of curriculum materials such as Meier (1995) and Beattie (2001) associate with good teachers. It is about the creation of a quality learning environment by presenting classroom curriculum to students in a manner that sparks interest in the learning. Kosnik (1999) suggests that "the learning opportunities in the class should be so powerful that they encourage the learners [sic] to apply themselves" (p. 147). Development of a personal curriculum philosophy is important because it provides a foundation for the building of curriculum beliefs.

Curriculum Beliefs

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1988), curriculum beliefs are personal beliefs that every teacher has about what the ideal curriculum should look like. Personal beliefs about curriculum are beneficial because they help guide each teacher in the development of curriculum decisions for classroom implementation. However, not all teachers share the same personal vision of curriculum because we all have preconceived ideas about what the ideal curriculum should look like. For example, some teachers view curriculum as subject matter delivered to students in a classroom. According to Kosnik (1999), teachers who hold this belief maintain that their role as teacher is to "concentrate on teaching the basic curriculum more

effectively" (p. 108). These teachers take no ownership of schooling that is not called for in their curriculum guidelines. The curriculum boundaries for these teachers do not extend beyond what they are told to teach by their superiors.

Other educators such as Meirer (1995) argue that curriculum is a combination of course content, student needs and the dynamics of the classroom. These educators have a broad approach to curriculum development. They view education from the perspective that education is a social process whereby teachers and students join together in the learning process to form a community of learners. Dewey (1938) also considered classroom learning as a social process where both teacher and students participate in the learning activities. He also suggests that the quality of learning that takes place "is realized in the degree in which individuals form a community group" (p. 58).

Building a learning community within the classroom is likewise important to Peterson (1992) because "learning is strengthened by group collaboration" (p. 2). Peterson also points out that during the course of a school week, the students may spend up to thirty hours engaged in classroom learning activities with one another. It is important that apprenticeship students learn how to function within a group setting because it promotes collaboration, dialogue and team building skills that can be applied to the workplace. Zemelman, Daniels & Hyde (1998) also point out that group activities allow students to learn from one another. In my teaching practice the students complete machine and circuit projects in working groups of two. Throughout the lab period the students work together in wiring the machines and performing all test requirements. At the end of each lab period the small groups form into larger groups to compare the results and thus ensure that the practical learning outcomes have met the theoretical learning outcomes.

Although I now share many of the same curriculum beliefs that Dewey (1938) and Peterson (1992) have previously described, my initial beliefs about teaching practice were sometimes misguided. For example, as a beginning teacher, my views were narrowly focused in the manner described by Kosnik (1999). I believed that curriculum was simply an outline of what was to be taught. This incomplete understanding of what curriculum was all about was caused by my lack of teacher education. Only after enrolling in educational studies at a faculty of education did my understanding of the term begin to expand. In keeping with Schon's (1995) idea of reflection as professional development, I believe that teachers need to reflect on a regular basis about the meaning of curriculum as it relates to their own practices and be open to expand the boundaries of their understanding of the term. Reflective practice acts as a guide for my curriculum development because it enables me to make decisions in the present by referring to situations in the past.

It is not enough to say that the aims of my curriculum beliefs

support the fostering of such things as numeracy, literacy, personal growth and the building of a classroom community. Aims without an implementation plan amount to nothing more than idealistic statements. Dewey (1916) argues that aims "must be capable of translation into a method of cooperating with the activities" intended by the teacher (p. 126). In my practice I establish detailed goals of what I expect the students to accomplish and an implementation plan to ensure that the objectives reach fruition. Although my goals are ambitious in a climate of educational funding cuts, larger class sizes and reduced contact hours with students, it is important that I hold on to my curriculum beliefs in order to provide the best possible education for my students. Sometimes, some of my curriculum objectives are not realized due to the conflicts that arise when I try to implement curriculum in a manner that attempts to promote individual growth while serving the needs of the workplace. However, I am not discouraged from continuing to work towards taking ownership of the curriculum I teach because I also recognize that there are limitations as to what teachers can accomplish (Kosnik 1999).

Classroom Experiences and Curriculum

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 1990), teachers who incorporate personal narrative into their lesson plans are introducing experience and situation into the official curriculum. Narrative is a useful approach that enables teachers to help students better understand what is being taught because it personalizes knowledge by allowing the teacher to incorporate their experiences into the curriculum development process. My students appreciate classroom comments such as, "I am going to show you an easier method".

A common approach used by good teachers is to incorporate successful past classroom experiences into curriculum development (Schon 1987). They organize the curriculum around selected classroom activities (Gross-Davis (1993). As an experienced teacher I have learned that a variety of teaching and learning activities such as lecturing, problem solving and discussion keep the students engaged in the learning. Dewey (1938) contends that teacher experience is a form of professional development. He suggests that this type of teacher education is the result of "development within" (p. 28). Experience has also taught me that student comprehension improves when I am able to present the subject matter from a variety of differing perspectives as described by Pepper (1942, 1945, 1967).

Knowledge of Students

Atwell (1989) argues that students can provide teachers with valuable qualitative feedback about classroom teaching, the learning environment and the surrounding classroom milieu. She also points out that in order to tap into this source of constructive feedback, teachers must first gain an understanding of their students. The best way for teachers to tap into this valuable source of data is to establish an open and honest dialogue between teacher and student by

creating a safe environment in which students can freely express their opinions.

Like Atwell (1989) experience has taught me the value of listening to what my students have to say. In my practice I teach a number of classes with up to one hundred students each. I have, therefore, developed strategies for dealing with this learning environment. Although there are too many students to deal with on a one-on-one basis, I take advantage of the fact that students usually congregate together in small groups in places such as the cafeteria. Frequently I have coffee with these students and engage them in an informal discussion about their studies. Because I have nurtured a trusting classroom environment, the students freely share their feelings with me about a wide range of topics. They provide feedback to me about such things as my teaching, the curriculum, course workload, course textbooks and what they like or dislike about the classroom learning environment. This is important because it allows me to find out how I am doing. I can apply this information towards course improvement.

Connecting Theory and Practice

Dewey (1938) places much value on creating a learning environment that encourages free thought and experimentation. He further suggests that it is the teachers' responsibility to create and implement learning situations that challenge students in interesting ways. Tomlinson (1999) contends that "students learn best when they can make a connection between the curriculum and life" in the workplace (p. 10). Connecting theory to practical applications is value-added education for technical students because it allows them to view the same subject matter from two different perspectives.

One method by which teachers can achieve this goal is by converting theoretical learning into applied learning through practical laboratory projects. According to Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde (1998) practical hands on projects create value-added education because they enable students to learn by doing. This type of educational strategy provides students with the opportunity to see the interconnectedness between theory and practice. It also allows students to arrive at their own conclusions about the subject matter through a process of deliberation.

My teaching workload at the college usually consists of four courses. They include courses in technical skills theory, technical skills practice, electrical machines theory and electrical machines practice. In order to create a learning environment that promotes good student learning, I have harmonized the delivery of the theoretical and practical courses in a manner that ensures they both occur during the same teaching week. Also coordinated is the subject matter content of each theory course with its associated laboratory course.

This interconnectedness of learning activities enables the

learners to apply theory to real world applications. An example of this type of coordination between a theoretical and practical course occurs during the study of fire alarm systems. In technical skills theory I discuss the components and associated devices that make up a fire alarm system, the electrical codes associated with the wiring of systems and how to design a working system. The homework assignment associated with this topic is to have every student design and produce a working drawing of a fire alarm system. During the technical skills practice course, each student is expected to wire and install a working fire alarm system. Students find this type of challenge rewarding. In addition to applying theory learning to a workplace task, they are also rewarded by a sense of accomplishment by having installed a working fire alarm system to electrical code standards.

Conclusion

In the context of this article I have argued that curriculum development is more than presenting subject matter to students or viewing curriculum in terms of models: it is about creating meaningful learning experiences. Teachers become curriculum developers when personal narrative and subject matter knowledge come together in a teachable moment to inspire student learning in the classroom. Throughout this paper I have compared my teaching practice and beliefs to that of other educational researchers situated in the curriculum field. Examples of how I incorporated personal narrative into the delivery of the official curriculum were given to provide additional insights about my teaching practice. The extent to which teachers can become curriculum makers is dependent upon their theoretical knowledge of the curriculum field and the genuineness of their personal narratives of lived experience.

Reference

Atwell, N. (1989). In the middle (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Beattie, M. (2001). The art of learning to teach. Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Beck, C. (1990). Better schools. London: Falmer.

Connelly, M. F., & Clandinin, D. J. (1988). Teachers as curriculum planners: Narratives of experience. New York: Teachers College Press.

Dewey, J. (1916). Democracy and education. New York: Macmillan.

Dewey, J. (1938). Experience and education. New York: Collier-Macmillan.

Grant, G. (1982). The character of education and the education of character. American Education, 18(1), 37-46.

Gross-Davis, B. (1993). Tools for teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Jackson, P. W. (1992). Conceptions of curriculum and curriculum specialists. In P. W. Jackson (Ed.), Handbook of research on curriculum (pp. 3-40). New York: Macmillan.

Kosnik, C. (1999). Primary education: Goals, processes, and practices. Ottawa: Legas.

Meier, D. (1995). The power of their ideas. Boston: Beacon Press.

Pepper, S. C. (1942). World hypotheses: A study in evidence. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pepper, S. C. (1945). The basis of criticism in the arts. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Pepper, S. C. (1967). Concept and quality: A world hypotheses. Lasalle, IL: Open Court.

Peterson, R. (1992). Life in a crowded place. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Posner, G. N. (1988). The curriculum: Problems, politics and possibilities. In L. E. Beyer & M. W. Apple (Eds.), Models of curriculum planning (pp. 241-258). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Schon, D. A. (1987). Educating the reflective practitioner. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schon, D. A. (1995). The new scholarship requires a new epistemology. Change, 27(6), 26-35.

Tomlinson, C. A. (1999). The differentiated classroom. Alexandria, Va: ASCD.

Tyler, R. W. (1949). Basic principles of curriculum and instruction. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zemelman, S., Daniels, H., & Hyde, A. (1998). Best practice. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Donald A. Kouri is a professor in the Electrotechnology Department at Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario. He is an Ed.D. candidate at the University of Toronto with interests in curriculum and teacher development. Don can be reached at don.kouri@mohawkcollege.ca

Contents