

Curriculum Deliberation Online: What does it offer? Can it be applied to online tutor training?

by **Lori Herod**

I am in the Doctor of Education program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto.

I chose to research online curriculum deliberation because I am interested in its potential for developing relevant and useful learning materials for Canadian adult literacy tutors. As I write this, I have almost finished collecting my data and have just begun to analyse and interpret it.

This article outlines the process of curriculum deliberation and the reasons I chose to investigate it. It also briefly describes my research and some preliminary impressions from the data I have collected. A much more comprehensive and formal article will be written once the analysis and interpretation of the data is complete.

What is Curriculum Deliberation?

The notion of curriculum deliberation is attributed to educator Joseph Schwab. While curriculum is typically developed in isolation by scholars or subject matter experts, Schwab proposed in the 1970's that many other groups or areas should be equally represented, including:

- the subject matter
- learners
- teachers
- milieus, and
- curriculum making.

In the case of subject matter, representation would be by an individual with in-depth knowledge of the curricular material; that is, a subject matter expert or



scholar. Learners would be represented by an individual with in-depth knowledge of the abilities, needs and/or wants of the learners for which the curriculum is being developed. Teachers would be represented by practitioners from the particular area of education for which the curriculum is being deliberated. Milieus refers to the context in which the learning takes place and involves various influences on the curriculum (e.g. the mandate

of the current government, the underlying philosophy of the educational system/school, the community in which the program is operating); that is, the needs/wants of various stakeholder groups. A curriculum specialist would represent the final area of curriculum making, and would ensure that a rational and defensible curriculum evolved. As Schwab suggests, this role is key to the effectiveness of the deliberations: "The special obligation of the curriculum specialist chairman [sic] is to ensure that the group hunt out, recognize, and juxtapose the different considerations which are pertinent" (p. 521).

How useful is this process for adult literacy work?

The purpose of a deliberative process is **not** to standardize curriculum. Rather, curriculum deliberation is a fundamentally democratic approach to developing curriculum. Learning

materials are developed to be considered relevant and useful to many groups (e.g. politicians, funding bodies, learners, practitioners/ volunteers and the

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community). Standardized curriculum, on the other hand, is developed in isolation and often described as a 'one size fits all' approach. According to educators such as Valentine, this is not an achievable goal in adult literacy because of the wide range of learner needs. More importantly perhaps, many practitioners would not consider standardization to be *desirable* given the humanistic underpinnings of the field and its emphasis on the needs/wants of the individual learner. Thus, the value of the process to the adult literacy field is that it is democratic and can produce representative learning materials by capture and integrate the needs/wants of many stakeholders (e.g. regionally specific requirements, differences in program objectives such as family literacy versus workplace literacy programs, address the requirements of funding agencies) into learning materials for the field.

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My Research

The primary purpose of my research was to answer the question, "How does the process of curriculum deliberation unfold when a pluralistic group deliberates in an online environment?" Despite the fact that the curriculum deliberation process has been well received by educators, it has rarely been researched. Little data is available and existing studies have looked at a team consisting of a single stakeholder group such as teachers rather than multifaceted teams made up of representatives from various stakeholder groups. This, ironically, is contrary to Schwab's belief that the process must be representative to be effective.

Even less data is available about conducting the process in an electronic environment. Since communicating by computer offers a means for our resource-strapped field to bring together far-flung parties, I also decided to investigate whether the curriculum deliberation process could be effectively conducted in an online environment. If the data collected were positive, then our field would have a

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From Theory to Practice

viable means by which we could collaborate more easily and cost-effectively than face-to-face.

My study involved two deliberation teams comprised of five to six stakeholders (including tutors, adult educators and government representatives) from the adult literacy community in Canada. Each team met in an online discussion forum at the University of Toronto over a two month

period to deliberate on a course I developed entitled "Adult Learning: From Theory to Practice". (The course is now available at www.nald.ca/adultlearningcourse.) The general goal of each team was to make recommendations for improving the course. This is more difficult than it sounds in that, since different stakeholder groups are represented, their needs/wants differ. My dual role as course developer and mediator in the deliberations was to ensure that the final version of the course represented the needs/wants of the various stakeholders in as fair and balanced a manner as possible.

Best Practices and Lessons Learned from the Research

Over the next three to four months I will be formally analyzing the data I collected in the study which include verbatim transcripts of the deliberations and a lengthy questionnaire which was completed by each participant. Based on my preliminary impressions of the data, however, the following points outline what my study seems to indicate about some of the best practices for curriculum deliberation in an online environment.

Best Practices for Curriculum Deliberation

- **The deliberations should be mediated by an objective, non-partisan individual who is experienced in conflict resolution.** By its very nature the process invites debate and therefore, conflict. The leadership of an objective, non-partisan individual as mediator is crucial to ensuring that the democratic goal of the process is pursued and achieved.
- **The deliberations should be moderated by an experienced curriculum specialist.** Because the final goal is to produce curriculum that is representative, this role is pivotal. The

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moderator must: a) ensure that the team focuses on the issues and generates alternatives and recommendations based on reasoned judgment; b) establish and maintain a supportive environment, which will allow critical reflection and risk-taking by team; and, c) accommodate the needs/wants of all stakeholders.

Since deliberating in an online forum is quite different than meeting face-to-face, the moderator's experience must also include the ability effectively facilitate discussion in a cyber environment. An online forum does not allow for physical cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice, and asynchronous discussions are spread over longer time periods.

- **The goal of the deliberations should be to accommodate the needs/wants of stakeholders rather than to achieve consensus.**

Pluralistic groups typically have conflicting needs/wants. Therefore, consensus is unlikely. Rather, an accommodation of stakeholders needs/wants is more realistic and achievable.

Lessons Learned

- **Whenever possible, team members should choose to participate.** The nature and purpose of the deliberative process is such that team members must have a high degree of motivation, tolerance for other team members' views, and a positive, open attitude. Being directed to participate rather than choosing to do so is unlikely to engender any of these. Moreover, it can be more difficult to sustain motivation and persistence in an online environment when members can lurk in the background or drift away due to the anonymity of the medium. Those who choose to participate, however, will need prompting from the moderator.
- **A timeline and end date for the deliberations should be specified.** Schwab envisioned a free flowing process unfettered by time. However, as in many fields the reality in adult literacy is that time is very precious and team members need/want to get to the task at hand. The moderator needs to accommodate stakeholders to some extent by suggesting a timeline for the deliberation and specifying an end date. This is particularly important when the deliberations are conducted in an online discussion forum. That is, asynchronous

discussions are quite different than face-to-face meetings in both form and function (e.g. responses are delayed versus given in real time, discussions are preserved in writing so that members can read, re-read and reflect over time). A timeline provides participants with a greater sense of time that tends to be lost in cyber environments.

- **The degree to which the deliberation process is unstructured and free-flowing must be balanced by the tolerance of team members for this approach.** Schwab proposed that in order to be effective curriculum deliberation must be a fairly unstructured process versus one in which a universal set of sequential steps is specified. The data from previous research has demonstrated

Assessing E-learning

E-learning means using a computer and the internet for teaching and learning. It is one of many tools and approaches to providing adult, workplace and family literacy. E-learning is continuously evolving and requires scrutiny. Given the limited resources, competing demands for investment, and public policy imperatives, we need to understand and evaluate it. For this reason, ABC Canada has asked FuturEd Inc. to conduct a study of E-learning.

The overall purpose of the research is to explore the application of e-learning in literacy programs in order to improve e-learning and literacy practices and policies. The research will balance the perspectives of learners/clients and program/e-learning providers. It will result in general findings about e-learning and literacy, and tools and advice for literacy practitioners, learners, and leaders.

According to Dr. Kathryn Chang Barker, President of FuturEd, "The e-learning industry is totally unregulated, and there is no relationship between cost and quality. E-learning may have particular benefits to learners who have limited literacy skills. We need to know a great deal more before we invest too much – or not enough – in e-learning."

The first phase of the research is gathering information about how literacy programs use e-learning. The researchers would like to hear from family, workplace, institutional, community and First Nations programs. If your program uses computers and the internet for teaching and learning, FuturEd wants to hear from you. Please send information to Maxine Adam (maxine.adam@futures.com). For more information about the study, visit www.FuturEd.com.

that this loose approach can cause frustration and discomfort on the part of many team members and this was confirmed in my study. The first team was not given much in the way of a structure for the deliberations. While the team provided very rich and useful input regarding the course, the dropout rate was fairly high. As such, the semi-structured process outlined below was used for the second team, and the dropout rate was much lower.

- Stage #1: Review and rationalize existing curriculum (two weeks)
- Stage #2: Generate and deliberate alternatives (two weeks)
- Stage #3: Identify unresolved issues and develop recommendations (two weeks)

Conclusion

As pointed out earlier, the best practices and lessons learned are based on preliminary or superficial impressions of my data. In the coming months, the data will be "mined" much more deeply and I will produce a comprehensive report in the coming year. Overall, however, my study appears to indicate that the curriculum deliberation is a valuable, if somewhat consuming and at times frustrating process which can

be used to produce useful and relevant learning materials. Moreover, the data suggest that the process can be effectively conducted in an online environment. This is a very positive finding for our field in that it suggests that we have, at our fingertips so to speak, a means by which we can successfully and inexpensively collaborate in such activities as curriculum deliberation. ■

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