

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Managing the collaborative curriculum

Ben Fenton-Smith

Kanda University of International Studies

Reference data:

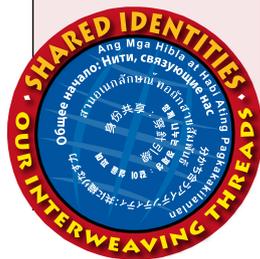
Fenton-Smith, B. (2009). Managing the collaborative curriculum. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2008 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Leo van Lier (1996) has defined “curriculum” as the meeting place of theory, research, and practice. If this definition is accepted, then bringing the three together requires attention to management. From this point of view, management becomes the manifestation of a theory of curriculum, rather than a purely bureaucratic function. Yet this begs the question: How can such a complex system be put into operation in a real institution? This paper presents an overview of some managerial guidelines that have been developed at Kanda University of International Studies to facilitate structured collaborative curriculum development and research in the form of ongoing institutionalized projects.

レオ・ヴァンリア(1996)は、『カリキュラム』という語を理論と研究、そして実践の出会う場と定義した。もしこの定義が受け入れられるならば、この三つを束ねることは、マネジメントへの配慮を必要とすることになる。この見解から、マネジメントは単に官僚的な機能ではなく、カリキュラム理論の表れとなる。しかし、このことは、どうしたらそのように複雑なシステムが実際の機関において促進されるのであろうかという問題を提起する。本稿は神田外語大学が継続して共同カリキュラム開発及び研究しているマネジメント上のガイドラインの概要を述べるものである。

Management is relatively neglected as an area of theoretical enquiry in language teaching, with the JALT2008 Conference being a case in point. Although more than 500 presentations were slated for the 3 days in Tokyo, a quick search on the conference website under the subject area “Administration, Management and Employment” revealed only eight presentations, most of which were not concerned with management. One reason may be that most language instructors are not managers and therefore unlikely to speak on the topic. But a further reason may be that, for many, “management” is synonymous more with “bureaucracy” than “theory.”

However, if one considers what is meant by “curriculum,” it becomes evident that management is just as bound up with theory as teaching or learning is. Management is the manifestation of a theoretical approach, since it involves the structuring of a pedagogical program, and this entails ideological choices about where an institution’s priorities ought to lie. In this paper I discuss what “curriculum” means to one such institution:



the English Language Institute (ELI) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). I argue that the practice of management is central to the realisation of curriculum, and that this is particularly so when curriculum development is to be carried out in collaborative teams. The body of this paper is comprised of an overview of the managerial guidelines that have been developed to facilitate the operation of collaborative curriculum and research projects at KUIS. My primary intention, therefore, is to provide others who are interested in collaborative curriculum/research with a sampling of the materials that have proven effective (and necessary) for the smooth running of institutional projects in one EFL university setting.

What constitutes a collaborative curriculum?

The curriculum model that is applied in the ELI is best expressed in the work of Leo van Lier. The second chapter of his 1996 book *Interaction in the Language Curriculum* is entitled “The curriculum as a theory of practice.” He elaborates this title by describing curriculum as the place that “breaks down the barriers between theory, research and practice” (1996, p. 24). Within this model, teachers are not the passive receivers of theory (e.g., from eminent scholars, management or some other authority), but are co-constructors of it.

A necessary question, however, is how such a place can be made a reality in an actual institution of learning? Van Lier admits that “To require such theorizing and researching from teachers may appear unrealistic in view of the reality in which most teachers live nowadays” (1996, p. 28). Constraints on teacher research have been well documented

in the literature on action research and professional development (e.g., Borg, 2006; Burns, 1999), with the principal hindrances being lack of time, lack of support from management, lack of resources, and lack of knowledge/skills.

However, collaborative curriculum development and research is now widely accepted as an effective model for program advancement. Working together reduces teachers’ sense of isolation (Burns, 2000), allows teachers to learn from each other, reflect, and make changes (Wigglesworth & Murray, 2007), reduces individual workloads, and improves overall program quality (Reagan, Sisley, & Stoeckel, 2007).

We can see, then, that curriculum can be “collaborative” in two senses: interpersonally and conceptually. *Interpersonal collaboration* refers to the *people* that need to be involved in making the curriculum – teachers, management, students, and so on. *Conceptual collaboration* refers to the *processes* that need to be involved in making the curriculum – theorizing, researching, developing materials, teaching, and so on.

Instituting collaborative work

This somewhat complex model of collaborative curriculum has been instituted at Kanda University’s ELI in the form of seven ongoing collaborative curriculum projects in which teams of language instructors work together in the processes of theorizing, materials developing, teaching (or advising), and researching. In line with van Lier’s notion of curriculum discussed above, all these processes are regarded as equally important components of the teams’ work. For ease of

reference I will refer to them in this paper as “curriculum projects.”

Membership of one project is a contractual obligation for the ELI’s 57 staff. As ELI contracts are limited to 4 years (except for continuing management), all the groupings experience turnover each year – experienced members leaving, new members arriving. Four of the projects are given the responsibility of developing, maintaining, and researching specific proficiency courses, while the other three are each responsible for an area that relates to language education across the university: computer-assisted language learning, self-access learning, and language testing. A project may be known, for example, as the “Writing Skills Project” and have the tasks of developing and maintaining a writing course, conducting research on the course, keeping abreast of writing theory, and teaching the subject.

While it may seem draconian to mandate membership of an institutional curriculum project, it is partly because the projects are institutionalized that a research-rich environment is evident in the ELI. As mentioned earlier, teacher research has long been a problematic issue in the language teaching field due to a number of constraints. The system described here aims to overcome some of them. For example, management may be more sensitive to the research needs of staff, since management are ultimately responsible for the research projects. The lack of time for research and development is still a problem, but is addressed by inserting project meeting times into staff schedules and providing substantial non-teaching time between semesters. Lack of resources is unlikely since all projects are well funded. Finally, the lack of knowledge and skills that often hinders

research and development is addressed through systems of mentorship and the provision of professional consultants.

Guidelines for coordinating collaborative projects

Space does not allow me to detail the exact nature of the research and development that goes on in each of the projects. The work is vast and varied. Instead, the focus of this paper is on the guidelines for coordinating the projects that have been developed to make them run as smoothly as possible. These guidelines have been composed to address both pedagogical principles (such as the notion of “curriculum” outlined above) and everyday experience (e.g., challenges raised by the organization’s structure and personnel). The experience of the ELI management team has been that the more finely elucidated the organizational structures are, the more successfully they operate. Conversely, where roles, structures, and expectations have lacked delineation, collaborative progress has faltered.

The document I describe below carries the official title “Guidelines for Coordinators” (Fenton-Smith, 2007). The term “coordinator” refers to those staff members who have been appointed to lead curriculum projects. Typically, one project has a membership of 6-12 lecturers, with one or two coordinators. An assistant director of the ELI is charged with managing the coordinators. At the beginning of the academic year, all coordinators are supplied with a copy of the guidelines and asked to read them in preparation for two meetings: one with the assistant director and another with all coordinators and the full management team. The document is divided into two main sections: “General information” and “How to manage a curriculum project.”

General information

This section of the document first explains how the projects fit within the structure of the university, especially in regard to funding sources and responsible authorities. Such information is important, since regular teaching staff may be unaware that authorities such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and the finance division of the university monitor project outcomes. The second part of this section explains the purposes of the projects. These are threefold: (1) to facilitate students' learning (through the production of materials and the conduct of research by project members); (2) to further the professional development of staff (by learning about materials development, research, and practice through collaboration with others); and (3) to promote the university (by publicizing its name, particularly through research output).

How to manage a curriculum project

This section provides detailed practical advice about coordinating a project, most of which is derived from the real-life challenges that have arisen in the ELI over the two decades since the collaborative project structure was put in place. Some of these may seem mundane or obvious – but a crucial lesson that ELI management has learned over this time is that “the little things” are often the causes of operational breakdowns and interpersonal conflicts. The guidelines are the result of the coordinators' desire to have a documented checklist of issues and job specifications which encapsulates the broad spectrum of their role.

Managing people

Coordinators are advised to delegate tasks and responsibilities as much as possible, since many mistakenly believe that leading a project means doing everything. Most importantly, an environment that allows for the constructive criticism of work and ideas – not people – is encouraged. Strategies for group bonding are suggested, such as holding social gatherings to mark beginnings and endings.

Incorporating new members

The ELI's projects are ongoing, although the exact nature of the research and development carried out in each one transforms from year to year. A challenge, therefore, is juggling well-established members with incoming lecturers. An orientation that includes useful information on project history, theoretical background, and available resources is helpful. A newcomer's first semester can be particularly difficult, as he or she may be anxious to contribute, but busy dealing with new classes and (often) a new living environment. A balance of reassurance and guidance is necessary: They need to know that little is expected in the early stages, but that there is much they can do if they are able (e.g., they can be given a supply of relevant readings). Once established, newcomers can either join an existing research/materials development activity or formulate one of their own that gels with the broad goals of the group. Naturally, all teachers are different – some are confident, others relatively inexperienced and intimidated. Another challenge for coordinators is being sensitive to this variety. There are several ways to have new members establish a direction: (1) explicit instruction (advising them that a

certain area requires attention); (2) meetings with senior staff or research/curriculum consultants (if funding can be obtained for them); or (3) provide readings that explain how to commence research (e.g., Richards & Farrell, 2005, chap. 12).

Resolving conflict/problems

It is wise to have an official grievance procedure in place and have the coordinator review it with his or her group at the start of the year. This is especially so for EFL workplaces with teaching staff from different cultural and educational backgrounds. The general principle espoused by the ELI's grievance procedure is that conflicts are best resolved at the lowest level first, with options for higher action spelt out. An awkward challenge for coordinators is dealing with uncooperative colleagues who were, until recently, of the same rank. It is helpful if strategies for doing so are explained in the guidelines document. An effective method is to have project members (or coordinators) read and discuss a case study of conflict resolution in a collaborative research project, such as Torpey (2006).

Managing meetings

Collaborative project work centres around meetings, and it is therefore important that they be run efficiently to maintain harmony. One of the most common grievances about the projects is "I don't like the way the meetings are run." Coordinators are therefore advised to discuss with their members how meetings will operate. For example, everyone should know well ahead of time when meetings will be held

and what the agenda will be (agendas keep meetings focused and allow participants to prepare). Meetings that begin and end on time and advance through agenda items efficiently are favourably regarded (varying expectations about time management tend to be a common cause of friction). Taking minutes may seem troublesome or unnecessary, but they guard against the fragility and selectivity of memory. Decision-making processes are also a common cause of frustration, especially those made *during* meetings before all implications have been thought through.

Coordinating materials development

Materials development naturally forms a key part of collaborative curriculum development. For the ELI projects this is especially so, since one of their purposes is to create original course materials in the place of commercial textbooks. However, as Reagan et al. (2007) reported in a similar study, problems can easily arise due to the unequal output of participants. Project guidelines can guard against this by presenting coordinators with pre-emptive strategies. For example, it can be made clear that all members are expected to be involved in materials development in some way, and avenues provided for those with no ideas (e.g., group brainstorming or mentoring). Clear deadlines combined with specified tasks (e.g., drafting, giving feedback, editing, trialling) have proven useful. Where deadlines have not been set or were unclear, conflict has often occurred when some participants completed the work and others had not. Finally, the question of ownership requires attention – in the ELI's case, it is made clear that an individual does not own the materials but rather they are the

preserve of the group and the institution. Materials writers are naturally possessive and sensitive about their work – but such emotions can be counterproductive in a collaborative environment.

Coordinating research

Established staff members often have their own ideas for research, in which case the coordinator's job is one of facilitating and monitoring. For those that do not, the same strategies as outlined for newcomers can be applied. In all cases an important role of the coordinator is to ensure that there are connections between research, materials development, and teaching – the processes that must inform each other for the “curriculum as a theory of practice” to be realised. It is easy for these processes to become fragmented, or for one to dominate the others, undermining curriculum development. As it is harder to specify deadlines for research than it is for materials development, coordinators are advised to regularly call on members to provide updates at meetings as a way of keeping participants accountable and on track.

Duty statements

A duty statement covers a project member's duties as a member of the team, including both materials development and research. They provide a reference point to gauge whether a participant has contributed adequately or not – without them, such judgements are very difficult to make without potential conflict. Duty statements can be largely composed by the coordinator or be negotiated between individual members and the coordinator. In the ELI, any

disputes about workloads (and their fulfilment) are settled by the research director. It is also this director who sets a deadline early in the academic year for submission of duty statements by coordinators.

Maintaining equipment

For ongoing collaborative projects, up-to-date and accurate records of equipment are very important for several reasons: (1) so that teachers can find things when they need them; (2) so that transitions between coordinators can be trouble free; and (3) in case the project is audited by a funding body (such as MEXT). An inventory should therefore state what exists, its quantity, its location, and purchase date. Ideally, labelling new equipment prevents it going missing from a project's resources space.

Budgets

If projects are funded, coordinators need to be schooled in basic accounting. In the ELI, coordinators are given an Excel spreadsheet to record outgoings and are instructed to keep copies of all receipts. Project members consult their coordinator before spending project money.

Circulating information

There are several ways in which the group's work can be publicized within its institutional context. One is to have coordinators submit short verbal or written reports at general staff meetings. Another is to have coordinators submit a written summary of project activities for publication in an

in-house journal. Regular meetings of all coordinators are another good idea. In the ELI, these are held approximately three times per semester, with two project coordinators making presentations of group work at each meeting. The minutes of project meetings can also be disseminated to higher authorities. In the ELI, for example, all project minutes must be forwarded to the research director.

Conclusion

Collaboration can bring out the best and worst in people. There is great power to be harnessed when humans work together for common goals, but equally, their intrinsic individuality can lead to debilitating conflict in communal work environments. Collaborative research and curriculum development (not to mention collaborative learning) are often cited as best practice in TESOL, but this can obscure the great difficulty any institution faces in actually setting it up. It is hoped that this account has provided some small degree of support and guidance to others interested in creating similar structures.

Admittedly, the Kanda model may strike many as overly restrictive and/or prescriptive. ELI members have less choice in their work life than those in institutions where research and class content are at the discretion of the individual. But structures can enable as well as restrict. There are many creative opportunities in the ELI for research, materials writing, and professional development that have resulted from the dynamic environment of intensive collaboration. What is clear from our experience is that any collaborative structure must be clearly articulated or it is less likely to succeed. This paper has been an attempt to do that, and

thereby share some of the techniques and strategies that have allowed our system to survive and move forward.

Ben Fenton-Smith is the Assistant Director in charge of research in the English Language Institute at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba City. He has a PhD in linguistics from Macquarie University, and his research interests include EFL management, curriculum design, second language reading, discourse analysis, and systemic functional linguistics. <benfento@gmail.com>

References

- Borg, S. (2006). Conditions for teacher research. *English Teaching Forum*, 4, 22-27.
- Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burns, A. (2000). Facilitating collaborative action research: Some insights from the AMEP. *Prospect*, 15(3), 23-34.
- Fenton-Smith, B. (2007). *Guidelines for coordinators*. Unpublished manuscript, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba City, Japan.
- Reagan, N., Sisley, J., & Stoeckel, T. (2007). Program development through teacher collaboration. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT2006 conference proceedings* (pp. 117-123). Tokyo: JALT.
- Richards, J. & Farrell, T. (2005). *Professional development for language teachers*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Torpey, M. (2006). A case study of conflict in an educational workplace: Managing personal and cultural differences. *Teachers College Record, 108*, 2523-2549.
- van Lier, L. (1996). *Interaction in the language curriculum: Awareness, autonomy and authenticity*. Harlow: Longman.
- Wigglesworth, G., & Murray, D. (2007). Opening doors: Teachers learning through collaborative research. *Prospect, 22*(1), 19-35.