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A mile wide but an inch deep:   
Exploring problems and revisions   
in Spanish language curriculum

Introduction

Aside from those that currently study or have studied curriculum, many associate the word with the “stuff” that comprises what is taught to students. Supporting the view of the masses, according to Merriam Webster (2011), curriculum can be defined as “the courses offered by an educational institution” or “a set of courses constituting an area of specialization.” Although it is not inaccurate to connect courses and their content to the definition of curriculum, coursework does not stand alone as its essential quality. As a result of further investigation into curriculum and its reconceptualization, theorists and educators have explored the role of biographical and phenomenological experience (Slattery, 2006, 62). Initially described by William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet, Patrick Slattery (2006) suggests attentiveness to these two elements is “one of the central features of the Reconceptualization [of curriculum]” (p.62). Thus, in the spirit of autobiographical and empirical analysis, I have begun to think about my own experiences as both a student and instructor of the Spanish language and how it ultimately relates to my perceptions regarding curriculum.

Further suggesting that “the curriculum is the interpretation of lived experiences” (Slattery, 2006, p.63), through reflection of my teaching practices and ideas about what should be included in the Spanish language curriculum, specifically at my place of work, Saint Ignatius High School, I found that I rely heavily and draw upon my learning experiences in my own high school and college Spanish courses; most specifically, I frequently consider the methodology, classroom practices, and the content covered. Additionally, my conception of what defines a successful and effective curriculum has also been influenced by what I have witnessed during my three years as an instructor at Saint Ignatius. It would be both inaccurate and overly pessimistic to deny the positives of my workplace because I am grateful to have a generally fantastic workplace environment; however, as a result of my reflection, I have uncovered some curricular issues that are necessary to address for the sake of improving the Spanish education of the students. Subsequent to giving a lot of thought to what should be the essential goals of Spanish education in the context of a Catholic, Jesuit institution, I came up with what I consider the two most important motivations around which all grammar points and vocabulary should revolve: communicative ability and cultural literacy. Furthermore, the connection between service and these aspects of language education also provides relevance of Spanish to students as well as ultimately promotes the importance of being a person for others. However, on the contrary, the current state of our Spanish courses, most specifically those in the first and second year, could be described as not sufficiently fitting into my proposed mold.

Problem Statement

As the youngest teacher in my department, I have not been able to give much input into the way in which the Spanish courses are taught, mostly because everything had been determined by veteran colleagues well before I was hired. I do not wish to discredit my colleagues, especially because they have all given their time to serve our school and students; however, after being a part of this team for three years now teaching Spanish 1, 2, and Honors Spanish 2, as I reflect, I find that I consistently run into recurring and telling problems. Issues that are most common involve second year students and their lack of knowledge of basic vocabulary or grammar constructions from their previous year of first year Spanish. Additionally, I have also experienced students in the third year coming to me admitting their lack of vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, the students’ exposure to the cultural component of the language is too limited in the first two years, and the communication skills of our students should be much more advanced than their current level. Thus, as a result of these uncovered curricular issues, I have become frustrated with the way in which I am expected to teach my courses. Through consideration of my observations and experiences, I perceive the underlying issue to be that the vast amount of material expected to be covered is not feasible given the amount of time available. Furthermore, as a result of the current situation characterized by unreasonable expectations and lack of time, a curriculum that allows for grammar concepts and vocabulary to revolve around communicative ability and cultural literacy cannot be achieved.

Although there are many factors that encompass the issue at hand, those that can be considered main contributors are textbook, instructional pace, deficiency of cultural literacy, and absence of student-centered learning. First, speaking to the role of the textbook, P. Kenneth Komoski (1985) suggests that “most of today’s materials are mediocre products incapable of contributing very much to the achievement of excellence in education” (p.31). Komoski’s accusation, although not 100% accurate for the current text in which I currently use, provides an important reminder, suggesting the necessity of critically evaluating what is being used to instruct students. My textbook is problematic not because it does not have communicative and/or cultural components, which actually are quite good, but that it includes too much information, which therefore presents a problem to a department like mine that is married to the textbook. Furthermore, because getting through the text has become the central focus, the communicative and cultural components are often sacrificed for the sake of breezing through content, especially if any differentiation is done away from the material of the book. Additionally and in relationship to the problem of the text emerges the issue of pace. If the text does not provide enough time for the students to learn the material well, the pace of the course is not determined by the instructor, or more important student progress, but rather the text, thus creating a comprehension and ultimately retention issue. According to Susana Eisenchias (2010), “in spite of trendy jargon in textbooks and teacher manuals, very little is actually communicated in the…classroom…topicality is still sacrificed for the benefit of grammar and structure” (p.17). In my own situation, I can attest to a lack of communicative activities in the classroom as a result of having to brush over them because of the demand to move quickly through the textbook. Thus, pace is directly influenced by the demands of the text, often resulting in a variety of deficiencies among students.

The final two components surrounding the problem are also interrelated. Although it is neither out of malice nor a result of a cultural bias of my department members, the lack of emphasis on the cultural aspect of Spanish is problematic because not only are students missing an integral part of the language, but they are also further distanced from the relevance of studying Spanish. Further solidifying this idea, the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages postulates (2008) “we expect that more students will continue language study if courses incorporate cultural inquiry at all levels” (p. 290). Thus, a connection can be made between the minimal cultural experience in the first and second year courses, and the lack of student-centered learning. Although it is not the only strategy to achieve an improved emphasis on student-centered learning, if one of the most important real-life aspects does not have a presence, it is possible that student interest in Spanish will not be as strong.

Additionally, returning to the first two elements of the discussion, the text and pace seem to also deemphasize student-centered learning because of the focus on the inevitable equation that relates material to time. We must, asserts Frank M. Grittner (1990), promote a student centered approach that allows for activities that which encourage “fluency, flexibility, elaboration, and originality, which were seen as ‘abilities’ that will enhance a person’s ability to communicate effectively in a second language” (p.34). Therefore, it is necessary and important to not only analyze the issues contiguous to the inequality between material to be covered effectively and available time, but also move beyond the problem. Thus, a proposal for reform, as Grittner (1990) proposes, that shows “an increasing concern for developing a more student centered approach to classroom teaching…to ‘capitalize on student interests’ and to ‘get students actively involved in using the foreign language’” (34) is equally essential to my purpose of ultimately achieving a curriculum that is centered in communication and cultural literacy around which grammar and vocabulary would revolve.

Annotated Bibliography

Cotterall, S. (2000). Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: principles for designing language courses. *ELT Journal*, 54(2), 109-117.

Cotterall promotes student-centered learning in the Spanish classroom and also emphasizes the importance of cultural components, which I identify as lacking and will argue for inclusion of more in my paper.

Crookes, G. (2007) What influences what and how second and foreign languages teachers teach? *The* *Modern Language Journal*, 81.

Crookes devotes time to the evaluation and discussion of textbooks and pacing in the foreign language classroom and their effects on the students. I will discuss the implications of the textbook and pacing and use his notes in support of my opposition to moving too quickly along with following the text too strictly.

Eisenchlas, S. (2010) Conceptualizing ‘communication’ in foreign language. *BABEL*, 44(2), 13-21.

Eisenchlas emphasizes that many people are not doing what they say they are doing in the classroom, and these same people are using the textbooks and their curriculum to hide behind. I will use her insight to discuss issues with the current text/pacing as well as in drafting my revisions to the system.

Galloway, V. & Labarca, A. (1990). From Student to Learner: Style, Process, and Strategy. In Diane W. Birckbichler (Ed. 1), *New Perspectives and New Directions in Foreign Language Education* (111-158). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

G. and L. suggest the necessity of a learner-centered approach to successfully teaching foreign language. They also talk about the role of communication and culture; as I concur, they believe the curriculum should revolve around culture and communicative activities that will engage the learner.

Grittner, F.M. (1990). Bandwagons Revisited: A Perspective on Movements in Foreign Language Education. In Diane W. Birckbichler (Ed. 1), *New Perspectives and New Directions in Foreign Language Education* (9-44). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

Grittner also argues for communicative, cultural, and a learner-centered approach. He emphasizes creating meaningful and useful connections with the material, which I will use when pointing out the current problems and also while creating revisions.

Guskey, T.R. (1997). *Implementing Mastery Learning*. Belmont,CA:Wadsworth Publishing Company.

In his book, Guskey makes a strong argument for determining correct pace in a class. His mathematical formula will help me discuss the problems with pace, and I can also apply his research to my vision component of the paper.

Jarvis, G.A. & Taylor, S.V. (1990). Reforiming Foreign and Second Language Teacher Education. In Diane W. Birckbichler (Ed. 1), *New Perspectives and New Directions in Foreign Language Education* (159-182). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

Mainly, I will use Jarvis and Taylor’s work in order to help me draft my ideas for revisions in order to improve the foreign language classroom.

Kling, D. & Zimmer, K. (2000). Weaving curriculum strands together: data driven results on the implementation or of an interdisciplinary/integrated model.

This study’s conclusions show the positives of interdisciplinary and student-relevant curriculum. The data will be helpful in both problem exposure and solving.

Komoski, K. (1985). Instructional Materials will not improve until We Change the System. *Educational Leadership*, *31-37.*

Komoski specifically discusses instructional materials, like textbooks, and criticizes them for their ease and lack of critical thinking. I can apply this information to discuss my problem statement along with my ideas for amendments to current protocol.

Lange, D.L. (1990). Sketching the Crisis and Exploring Different Perspectives in Foreign Language Curriculum. In Diane W. Birckbichler (Ed), *New Perspectives and New Directions in Foreign Language Education* (77-110). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

Lange highlights the problems with allowing foreign language classrooms to be based on flying through a book and ignoring the cultural elements to language instruction. He considers, historically, what has been done and what should be done, which I can use to solidify the problems I am pointing out along with my vision plan.

MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages. (2008). The Issue. *The Modern Language Journal, 92, 287-282.*

This committee mentions many parts to the problem I proposed, but it also offers some concrete solutions I will draw from.

National High School Alliance. (2004). *Crisis or Possibility? Conversations about the American high school*. Washington, DC: Harvey, J. & Housman, N.

Dr. Mel Levine specifies the biological facts that we ask our students to do too much at times-their brains can literally not take it. This will help with my pacing argument.

Redmon, M.L. & Lorenz, E. (Eds.). (1999). *Teacher to Teacher: Model lessons for k-8 foreign language*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company

Although many of the activities are geared toward middle school and elementary students, the activities for the older children are more appropriate for high school. I hope to show that the “model” lessons have a communicative and cultural base to further suggest the cultural importance.

Slattery, P. (2006). Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era. New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

I referenced Slattery in the beginning of my paper when I discussed why I decided to research the topic of curriculum in the Spanish classroom. My reflections brought me to an important issue with my job and the curriculum, which also relates to how we have defined curriculum in class.

U.S. Department of Education. (2000). Weaving curriculum strands together: data driven results on the implementation of an interdisciplinary/integrated model for high school reform (DHHS Publication No. FL 025809). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

This committee presents issues of academic rigor and implementation of cross-subject information and suggests the importance (again) of the cultural component along with communication. The group’s suggestions will help in my vision creation and also further how I examine the current problems the curriculum presents.