Rewriting Curriculum:
Managing This Complex Change

By Michael Travers

"It's time to rewrite the curriculum."

These are words that many of us hear during our lives as educators. Some respond with enthusiasm at the prospect of adding invigorating new ideas to the curriculum. For others, however, it results in a fear of change and discomfort with the unknown.

Regardless of where you reside along this spectrum, rewriting curriculum is a complex change to manage. At our high school in Wellesley, Massachusetts, we experienced all of the stages of anxiety, fear, and excitement.

In September 2018, the faculty of the Modern Languages Department of Spanish, French, German, and Mandarin at the high school dedicated itself to writing language neutral curriculum starting with our Year 1 students. Language neutral curriculum is designed so that all languages in the program have the same curriculum, learning targets, and assessments, giving students a similar experience in all courses. Starting with Year 1 allowed us to rebuild our courses from the bottom up with the eventual plan to rewrite Years 1-5 in all of our modern language offerings. This process involved many moving parts and countless hours of collaboration, research, writing, and rewriting, which has revitalized our department.

However, this would not have been possible without a framework on which to structure our work. I first encountered the "Model for Managing Complex Change," by Tim Knoster at a workshop by Leslie Grahn in 2018. Knoster provides a formula for how leaders should go about implementing change that involves vision, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan to achieve success. If any one of these elements is missing, your attempt at change could result in false starts, frustration, resistance, anxiety, or confusion. In our department, this document served as the framework which allowed us to thrive as we worked on our Year 1 program.

Vision

The first step in this process is coming up with a common vision that answers the question: "Why are we doing this?"

Far too often we make or take part in a change that is simply change for the sake of change but is not based on evidence or a solid rationale. "The collaborative process can best ensure a shared direction, a strategic intent, on the part of the staff and the school, and serve as a common frame of reference from which to gauge existent practices" (Knoster, 1993).

As a department, we agreed that we wanted to create an experience for all students to grow in their language proficiency based on the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*, the *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements*, and the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*. Our vision as a department was to prepare our students to be able to communicate in a second language. This would include reading and listening to authentic texts, engaging in interpersonal conversations, writing and speaking presentationally, and growing as global citizens who possess intercultural communicative competence. This vision helped remind us why we were doing this work and the impact that we were hoping to have on our students.

According to Knoster's model, lacking a vision and a reason for the change would have resulted in confusion and potentially halted this important project. Knowing *why* we were spending countless hours

Model for Managing Complex Change

Vision	Skills	Incentives	Resources	Action Plan	=	Success
Vision	Skills	Incentives	Resources	Missing	=	False Starts
Vision	Skills	Incentives	Missing	Action Plan	=	Frustration
Vision	Skills	Missing	Resources	Action Plan	=	Resistance
Vision	Missing	Incentives	Resources	Action Plan	=	Anxiety
Missing	Skills	Incentives	Resources	Action Plan	=	Confusion

Adopted from Knoster, T. (1991). Presentation in TASH Conference, Washington, D.C. Adapted by Knoster from Enterprise Group, Ltd.

looking for that video about teenage life in Argentina, creating input-based vocabulary activities to help students express their opinions on teenage trends, or writing those interpersonal assessments, motivated us, and allowed us to make continued progress toward our vision.

Skills

The next step in the process was making sure that all members of the team had the skills needed to dig into this work.

It would be great to say that we were able to accomplish this during our annual professional development days but unfortunately, this was not the case; this is a learning process. Our department actually spent countless hours in trainings at MaFLA's Proficiency Academy or at their fall conferences, as well as learning from some of the field's top presenters like Leslie Grahn, Greta Lundgaard, Greg Duncan, and others.

It was important for us to recognize that we were taking part in a learning process to help change our teaching. This is not something that we could accomplish during a one-hour meeting or a discussion in a hallway. What we were doing was building an understanding of what teaching to build proficiency is, how learners best acquire language, what strategies and ideas move students along ACTFL's proficiency continuum, and reimagining our classes so that communication, not grammar, is the driving force.

To really do this work well, the team needed to be skilled in ACTFL's six Core Practices for World Language Learning. These include creating an environment that facilitates target language use; finding, evaluating, and guiding students to interpret authentic resources; designing units using Backward Design in which learning progressions guide learners from input to output; designing interpersonal speaking activities that allow learners to communicate on relevant and interesting topics; providing appropriate oral feedback and teaching grammar as a concept and in the context of our units.

We also valued reflection as an important skill for our team. It was essential to have the ability to look at a learning target, activity, or assessment and ask questions such as what went well, what needs to be adjusted, what did learners gain from this, and where will we go from here.

A final skill that we found important in our work was the need to possess an understanding of how second language acquisition works. This didn't mean citing research but rather understanding how students learn languages and what we can do to help be facilitators of that process.

One misconception that we encountered early on was that all teachers needed to have the same skills, or that all teachers needed to be ready with all skills in order to move on as a group.

In theory this sounds practical. However, in reality an effective team is made up of people who bring different experiences and skills to the table and share them with their teammates. "Every great leader is clearly teaching, and every great teacher is leading" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). So, while not everyone was an expert on designing PACE lessons or finding authentic resources, what became vital was the teaching that took place within our team so that those with the skills were provided opportunities to lead the group while still progressing on the project.

The Core Practices, the ability to reflect, as well as an understanding of second language acquisition, were invaluable to our team. It is important for departments thinking about rewriting their curriculum to reflect on these areas. As Knoster indicates in his model, lacking skills when implementing a complex change will likely lead to heightened levels of anxiety. If our group hadn't felt sufficiently confident in our collective knowledge base to create this curriculum, there would undoubtedly have been apprehension and a fear of not knowing how to develop a curriculum appropriate for today's learners.

Incentives

It sounds counterintuitive for a teacher to need an incentive to do curriculum work. After all, isn't that part of our job?

Well yes, it is. However, our job is not what it used to be back in the days of opening to page 48 and doing exercise 4. Those activities were created by publishers and all we had to do was add a warm-up, a review, and our own little flare, and we had a lesson plan.

Now the work looks different, is more tiresome, and teachers need help. And while this is part of the job we all love, we have to acknowledge that in order to create quality curriculum we need some kind of assistance, an incentive, or inventive leadership to help with motivation. In our situation, thanks to the innovative leadership of our Principal Jamie Chisum and our Department Head Tim Eagan, we received just that.

Our department adopted a schedule that we called the 4+1 Model which took the seven members of our curriculum team and provided them with one less class to teach, reducing their course load to four. The fifth class was dedicated time built into the school day for teachers to develop the new curriculum. This was made possible by increasing our class sizes and reducing the number of sections of some of our courses, but the results were valued by everyone. Teachers on the team were working at least the same number of hours on the curriculum as they would have been had they been teaching a fifth course.

We recommend the use of the 4+1 Model by all districts in all disciplines because it provides teachers with the essential supports needed to make real changes in the curriculum and their teaching. This kind of work is happening across the country, with educators teaching a full course load *and* spending outside time or vacation time to write curriculum. Understandably, this could lead to teacher burnout or a sense of resistance or hesitation to rewrite curriculum.

Resources

Leslie Grahn said it best during her 2019 MaFLA workshop when talking about teacher leadership and providing resources: "If you ever expect teachers in a department to do something, you must provide them with the tools and resources needed to complete that task." These words could not be more true than when undertaking a project as challenging as rewriting a program's curriculum.

When starting a curriculum from scratch, it becomes crucial to have models to use as resources on which to base your work. Through Twitter, we received incredible support from teachers across the country who provided resources, documents, and ideas, which we then used to shape our templates and units. These resources proved to be invaluable and were reference tools used by everyone on the team to create daily learning targets and checks for understanding.

Other resources came from the immense generosity of teacher blogs, Pinterest pages, and our connections to speakers of the target language around the globe. According to Knoster (1993), without this collection of resources the project likely would have resulted in frustration provoking questions such as: "Where do we start?," "Where can I find a resource?," "Are we doing this right?" All of these are valid and important questions to discuss when collaborating on curriculum and, thankfully, we felt sufficiently supported by these resources to help us avoid becoming stuck.

Action Plan

The final element that Knoster mentions as important for implementing complex change is having an action plan.

Our action plan was very detailed and relied heavily on teacher leadership. Teachers worked in teams to develop curriculum and also met one-on-one with me, the *de facto* project leader, to discuss progress as well as their overall well-being. In the midst of this process, we found it essential to talk about how we were feeling about creating and teaching new curriculum. Recognizing the emotional labor that goes into recreating curriculum is important and throughout the process we made it a goal to talk openly about what challenges we were facing as well as what victories we encountered along the way.

We also divided ourselves into teams based on our strengths. These teams included a critical review team that looked for bias and visibility in our curriculum, a grammar team that embedded grammar, when appropriate, in the context of the themes and units, and a website designer who organized our resources.

Our action plan did not stop at simply assigning roles to each person but also included a set of steps that were used while collaborating on new units. The teachers on the team identified how they would approach starting a new unit with some realistic and manageable steps:

- First, plan the path that you will take by looking at the performance goals of the unit and the performance assessments.
- Second, examine your learning targets and the sequence of lessons to help guide learners to the performance assessments.
- Third, identify obvious challenges such as access to resources and linguistic difficulties.
- Fourth, identify the resources needed to accomplish your goals while also troubleshooting to ensure that sufficient comprehensible input is identified while also challenging potential biases. For example, making sure that when showing pictures of classrooms around the world, we show multiple classrooms from the same country to avoid creating false assumptions about all schools in other countries.

Once the initial planning steps were completed, the teachers then began locating resources from a variety of sources. While looking for those resources, a constant reminder to decentralize Eurocentric cultures was emphasized as was making sure that diverse voices are present in our curriculum. Once that was done, the teachers designed meaningful interactions with those resources so that students would be working toward their performance goal every step of the way.

The teachers on this project said overwhelmingly that the driving force behind their work was the collaboration and communication with a team of teachers as well as the action plan to make this work possible. Working on a curriculum requires a variety of perspectives, and crafting curriculum in this way prevents teachers from working in isolation or ending up in a paralyzing state of indecision which can lead to what Knoster calls false starts or a false sense that the project is complete when there is more to do. As teachers, it's important to remember that "leadership is not a solo act; it's a team performance" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Conclusion

Following these five steps to implement a complex change was really at the core of the work that we did over the past few years in our department.

It bears saying that curriculum development is a skill that takes time to develop. There is a process behind learning how to build quality curricular materials, one which requires a great deal of trust from everyone involved as well as the understanding that developments will happen gradually over time. In fact, this process is remarkably similar to learning a language, also a piecemeal process in which teachers and students need to trust deeply. Curriculum development and language proficiency mirror each other, reminding us of how the process works as well as the hurdles that will be encountered along the way. These are to be expected and, at times, even desired as they encourage growth.

As we continue our rollout of new units, our students are reacting positively to the changes. While in the past there was an awkward mismatch of grammatical structures and vocabulary lists sprinkled with elements of proficiency, now students are having a different experience. In a recent student survey, one individual called her Year 2 Spanish course a puzzle, reflecting on how each piece/lesson fit together with the previous and the following pieces, constantly moving learning forward. Other students in that course commented on how enjoyable class had been this year as they studied the language and the people through relevant topics like pop culture.

This amazing team of teachers at our high school have dedicated a great deal of their professional and personal time to the creation of this curriculum and we are thrilled with what has been created. Most importantly, the students are responding positively to what we've accomplished. And at the end of the day, that's what inspires us to go through this process again with Years 2-5.

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