Toward a Theory-Practice Integration" The University goes to School

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Recommended Citation

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TOWARD A THEORY-PRACTICE INTEGRATION:

THE UNIVERSITY GOES TO SCHOOL

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One of the problems facing every professional is that of keeping pace with developments in the field after university graduation. This is certainly true in education where time pressures and financial restraints increasingly prohibit study leaves for teachers who feel the need for re-alignment with current pedagogical thought.

Recognizing the need for increased inservice education, the Alberta government, 1979, called for proposal for innovative delivery systems for teacher inservice. The delivery system reported here resulted from one of the proposals that were selected for funding.

A number of criticisms which have frequently been targeted regarding teacher inservice guided the formulation of general principles on which the delivery system was designed.

First, the lack of relevance of inservice programs to specific teacher needs is a perennial problem. In an attempt to obviate this problem a thorough needs assessment was conducted by the University of Calgary Teacher Inservice Office. In this way higher need target areas for inservice were determined. Perhaps, what is as important here as the needs that were identified is the fact that teachers had a voice in programs that would be implemented--a degree of investment--at least part ownership in the decision-making process.

Second, and closely linked to the concern over relevance, inservice programs have typically been criticized for their lack of practicability. To answer that criticism the delivery was designed to demonstrate instruction at a practical level. At the same time it was deemed desirable to communicate through such demonstrations the relevance of sound theory behind practice.

A third problem seen as a potential obstacle to effective inservice was that of short, one- or two-

session exposures. Our delivery system made provision for a minimum of 24 hours of contact time with the in-service leader, the length and spacing of sessions to be negotiated with the target audience of teachers. In this way opportunities were afforded for teachers to experiment with and modify within their classrooms, specific instructional strategies highlighted in inservice sessions. Further, it allowed them the luxury of questioning, even challenging, information derived from previous sessions.

Finally, teachers frequently react unfavorably to investment of time for inservice for which tangible returns are minimal or non-existent (Conran and Chase, 1982). Provision was made in this program for participants to receive university credit to be applied either to an undergraduate or graduate degree. Arrangements were made with the registrar to allow for the design of courses upon demand, to be given in flexible time frames, without the usual, long-range processing and clearing of courses up the bureaucratic ladder. Further, it was deemed desirable to offer courses at school sites central to the largest number of applicants for a given course offering.

A description of the design of the program, its implementation, and evaluation follows.

Content of the Program

One of the perceived needs clearly identified in the initial assessment was that of guidance in instruction which subscribes to an integrated approach to teaching the language arts. This was not unexpected since the Alberta Education Department had just recently mandated a language arts curriculum with a strong emphasis on integration. (i.e., curriculum based on the interrelationships among listening, speaking, reading, and writing) Many teachers felt that they did not understand the concept of integration sufficiently to design a program based on the philosophy. For these reasons the encompassing objective for the total inservice program was

To enable practicing teachers to understand how knowledge of the interrelationships and interdependencies among the language arts (listening, speaking, reading and writing) can be applied to the design of language arts instruction.

This overall, general objective was broken down

into eight more specific objectives each dealing with an important aspect of application of the interrelationships of the language arts (the basis for an integrated instructional program). Each of the eight objectives formed the basis for an instructional module. For example, the objective for Module I was:

To enable practicing teachers to plan instruction designed to help children build bridges from oral language to emergent reading and writing.

Components of the Delivery System

The delivery system consisted of a number of interlocking components designed to enable participants to achieve the content objectives designated for each of the eight modules.

The key component was a video tape corresponding with each objective. These actual video teaching vignettes were drawn from natural classroom and individual instructional settings. The instruction was unscripted and unstaged in an attempt to achieve maximum credibility. It has since been determined that the naturalness of the settings has achieved this goal. Many particpants have commented on the fact that the instruction they viewed seemed "believable".

Background narration to the video was dubbed over the instructional vignettes in order to highlight dominant instruction/learning aspects, but also to comment on theoretical underpinnings to particular instructional components.

Another component of the delivery system was that of Independent Study Guides. These guides correspond in content with the video modules. They were written to achieve the following purposes: 1) to provide participants with introductory cognitive organizers for eachof the video viewings. Such organizers included a statement of the objective, a very brief theoretical sketch to guide the viewing of practical instruction, and a reminder of how the specific objective related to the global objective of the course; 2) to provide students with an appended script of the complete video narration for follow-up reference; 3) to provide students with information to supplement both the theoretical aspects of the video presentations and instructional strategies, and 4) to provide students with suplementary information relevant to classroom observation

of children's language arts development.

It was felt that course participants should become aware of at least some of the research literature in the language arts. Since most of the course offerings have been off-campus, it was deemed necessary to make reading materials available on site. In order to expedite selection of articles, extensive annotated bibliographies were compiled and copies distributed to course participants. The major sources of the articles were: Language Arts, Reading Teacher, Journal of Reading, and Reading Horizons. The following example illustrates the extent of information available for each source:

Cunningham, Patricia, "Beginning Reading Without Readiness: Structured Language Experience," Reading Horizons, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1979, pp. 222-227.

This article describes a "structured" language experience approach which does not assume basic language fluency as it builds readiness and reading skills. The suggested group size is from three to five students, some of whom have a low level of oral language facility and some whose language skills are more developed. The article outlines the development of a language experience story spanning a five day period. This approach will help children increase their language fluency, enhance their knowledge of sentence and word, promote movement of eyes automatically from top to bottom and left to right, develop a store of basic sight words, and promote confidence in their ability to learn to read.

Copies of articles were then made available on a check-out basis. The benefits of this supplementary reading component can best be summarized by the following representative testimonials, "I wasn't aware the Language Arts published this kind of information; how could I get my own journal?" Evidence of benefits beyond course participants is seen in statements like "I shared this article with my colleagues; this is exactly the kind of input we are looking for."

The final component of the course involved a "course requirements agreement" between individual participants and the inservice leader. Since the course was designed to allow participants to test new theory in their own classroom settings, it was important to accommodate for high individualistic goals within the general course framework. For this reason

students were asked to submit a course requirment agreement proposal early in the term. They were allowed to select from among a wide range of suggested "classroom application projects" or to propose a project of their own choosing. These proposals were turned in to the inservice leader who suggested modifications, deletions, or approval. It is interesting that the most common suggestion was that of deletion, as the enthusiasm for satisfying course requirements "on the job" led many participants to propose projects in a scope much beyond expectations for minimum course requirements.

Evaluation of the Delivery System

To date more than 200 teachers have taken the inservice course at eight different locations (urban and rural).

Course evaluations have been uniformly highly positive. Many participants indicate that they are adapting their own instructional strategies. Many have commented that they "feel good" about being able to apply current theory in their classroom. Some have indicated that they have found a rationale for some of the strategies that they have used prior to taking the course, and are now pursuing these strategies with greater confidence and enthusiasm. One particpant echoed the sentiments of many: "the course, among other things, was useful because it has lessened my guilt about playing with oral language and going out on a limb."

Many participants have commented on the excellent theory-practice balance. Viewing video vignettes, listening to an underlying rationale, and then evaluating their own teaching in this light provided incentive for modifying approaches to instruction. They have been highly positive about the nature of the course requirements. Many felt that the personal choice of project added to their sense of "ownership", and also spurred them to think about their new learning on a continuous basis.

Participants have been unanimous in their positive reaction to off-campus, flexibly scheduled meeting times. They were happy about minimum travel time and responded favorably to meeting right within the school.

There is no question about the thrust of a delivery system like the one documented here to bring theory to the classroom teacher if the methodology, time, and place are right. It is proposed that such a delivery system could be used for virtually any content within the language arts domain--developmental or corrective.

It is proposed, further, that the delivery system has implications for the development of inservice programs for consultants, clinicians and administrators. A modification that might be applicable could include presentations of detailed case study modules. This would allow for an intensive study of a variety of assessment procedures as well as close examination of specific assessment-intervention links. It is suggested that the use of such a system for case study analysis has excellent potential for multidisciplinary discussion relevant not only to assessment-intervention concerns but also to the study of etiological variables.

In short, it is conceivable that the delivery system, with minor modifications could be applied to virtually any content area and streamlined to meet the needs of most target audiences. The necessary ingredients are - demonstration of, rather than talk about theory, and opportunities to apply, not in a term paper, but in the classroom.

REFERENCES

Conran, Patricia C. and Aurora Chase, "The Extended Year Program in Suburban Chicago: A Different Approach to Inservice Training", Phi Delta Kappan, Volume 63, No. 6, February, 1982, pp. 398-99.