



Teaching by Listening: Hearing the Voices of Our Learners

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“Until modern times young people could anticipate a future rather like that of their parents. Social change was that slow. Now young people face futures for which their parents’ culture cannot prepare them. The young must create the future themselves”

Margaret Mead



My Focus

Developing and using curricular approaches
that our learners find meaningful and
relevant to their lives

Gives voice to the
learners' life contexts and experiences



Key Ideas

- Curricular themes as an expression of learner's voice
- Identifying and selecting curricular themes
- Teaching and assessing learning using themes
- Organizational issues in implementing theme-based curriculum



Curriculum as Context for Learners' Voice



Giving Voice to Learners Through the Curriculum

- Nature of our learners
 - “At risk”
 - “Academically underprepared”
- What we know about meaningful learning
 - Context and relevance
 - Meaning



Giving Voice to Learners Through the Curriculum

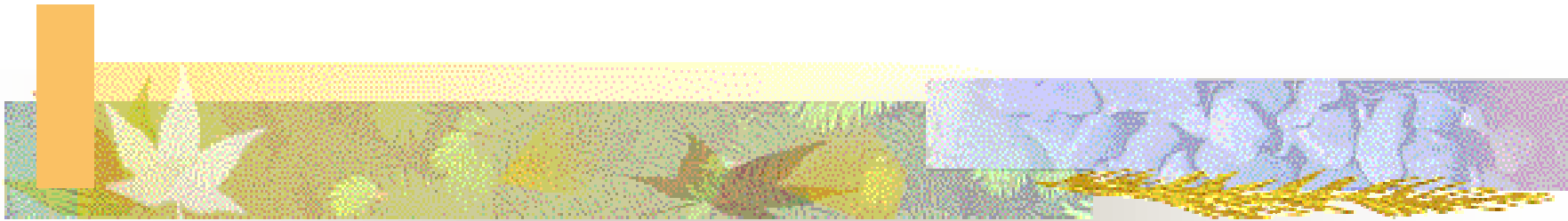
- The curriculum as a lens for making sense of self and life experiences
- A means rather than an end
- Listening and dialogue as an approach to the curriculum and to teaching



By curriculum I mean:

- That which represents our answer to what is most worth knowing
- Embodied in
 - Subject matter, activities, methods, materials, and physical and social environment of the learning setting
 - Dynamic processes that shape and influence these components

An Integrated, Theme-based Approach to Curriculum





The curriculum:

- Is theme-based rather than subject-based: Starts with the *learner's life* context
 - Contextual and authentic: Connects learning setting to students' real-life, day-to-day contexts, interests, experiences
 - Incorporates the wholeness of the learners' lives
- Builds in *subject matter* standards and competencies in the study of the theme
- Intentionally uses *process* to help make explicit this context and experience



In an Integrated, Theme-based Approach:

- Subject matter is a means and not the ends of instruction
- Learning is multi-layered and ill-structured rather than uni-dimensional and linear
- Learners are *producers* rather than *consumers* of knowledge
- Boundaries between disciplines are blurred



Related Curricular Approaches

Project orientations

Use of cases

Problem-based

Themes in the Curriculum





Nature of Curricular Themes

- Express aspects of learners' personal, community, or work contexts
- Reflect social, cultural, political, and economic issues or concerns learners face
- Build on what learners already know
- Represent learners' lives but are also broader in scope and application
- Real versus imagined issues within each group



Kinds of Curricular Themes

Academic

Teacher generated

Student generated



Identifying Themes

- Topics that emotionally engage the learners
- Brainstorming among learner groups
- Pictures, photos that represent learners' community contexts
- News stories, political issues



Selecting Themes

- Generate list of possibilities
- Students select from this list through
 - Consensus decision-making
 - Voting
 - Rating
- Use the *process* as part of the curriculum



Selecting Materials and Methods

- Should reflect the focus of the theme – engage the learners
- Authentic: occur naturally in the lives of learners outside of the learning setting
 - Newspapers Magazines
 - Bills Job applications
 - Television Video, Music
 - Use of technology and the Internet
- Student generated materials



“Scaffolding the Materials”

- Scaffolding materials into a “text”
- The meaning of the text is negotiable or constructed
- Materials presented in ways that allow students to create most meaning
 - Build on prior knowledge and skill within the theme
- Use of dialogue journals
 - Student-teacher
 - Free-writing



Implementing the Curriculum:

Student centered

Active

Collaborative

Problem-based or inquiry oriented



Assessing Student Learning in an Integrated, Theme-based Approach

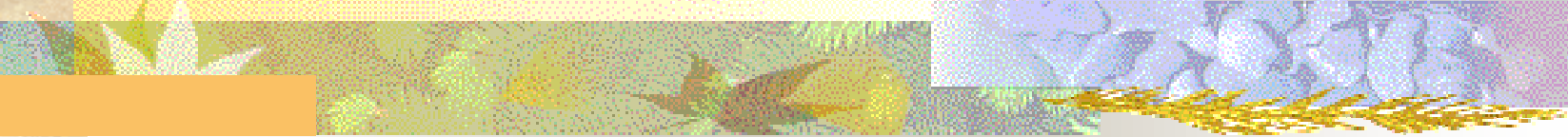
Skills or standards

Processes

Themes



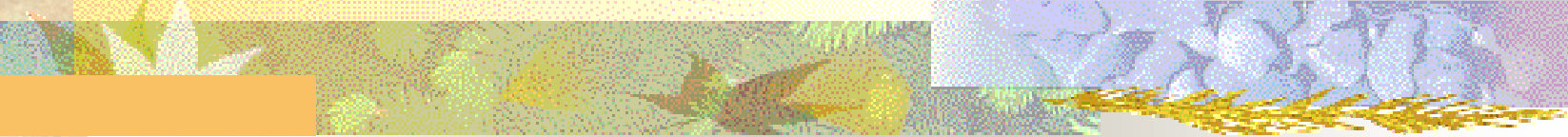
Developing Theme-based Approaches

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- Give yourself time – may take three to five years to do well
 - Work collaboratively with colleagues
 - Be willing to make mistakes
 - Strive for the ideal but be realistic about what you can do



Organizational Implications

- Use a systems approach
- Consider alternative structures to:
 - Fifty minute periods
 - Fifteen week semesters
 - Classrooms or buildings
- Align structures and policies with the curriculum
- Create space for the work

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- *“We are called to join a dance whose steps must be learned along the way...Even in uncertainty, we are responsible for our own steps”*

Mary Catherine Bateson