DEFENSIVE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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On the wall of my office hangs a poster distributed by the U.S. Marine Corps showing a tank moving through rough terrain while guided by a John Wayne-like officer. When I look at it, I’m reminded of something I learned only through the rumble-tumble of repeated curriculum development forays: curriculum development, like combat, is full of landmines that can blow up even the best intended, carefully considered plans.

This realization has led me to envision a type of curriculum development maximizing psychic survival and accomplishment for those who practice it. I call it “defensive curriculum development” and believe that, like defensive driving, it increases your chances of getting from here to there.

Defensive curriculum development is hardly a science; it’s so new it may not even be an art. Nevertheless, it already has a set of tenets that may help those wishing to become initiates. No doubt over time these tenets will be augmented and an official dogma will develop. For now let’s just consider them as words to the wise.

Tenet: Don’t Overstuff the Sausage

Virginia Biggy, Dean of Education at the University of Lowell, Massachusetts, talks about curriculum and subject matter specialists who want to teach more about penguins than anybody wants or needs to know. This form of “overstuffing the sausage”—teaching too much about a subject—is caused by an expert’s involvement in and enthusiasm for his or her specialty. Having a skeptic serve as a content filter is one good way to counteract this form of overstuffing.

A second form of overstuffing occurs when, as usually happens, curriculum changes are made without considering all the demands on the learner. For example, a revision of the social studies curriculum might seem appropriate when viewed by itself. However, in relation to changes in the science or language arts curriculum, the total curriculum may be overstuffed.

The problem of non-holistic approaches to curriculum change is made worse by the popularity of “infusions” into the curriculum. Recent infusions include population and environmental education, career education, economics education, and emotional health education. One cannot go on infusing indefinitely before the sausage casing tears.

Tenet: A Slip of the Lip Can Sink a Ship

During World War II sailors were reminded by prominently hung posters that their words could affect the war effort. A similar situation exists in the field of curriculum development where even the gentle language of a curriculum developer can sink a project.

Some words and phrases catalyze people into severely opposing whatever you’re trying to accomplish. Several years ago, the phrase “critical thinking” turned a harmonious curriculum planning meeting into a stressful, turbulent shooting match. Peace was restored to the donnybrook only

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These tenets will help you dodge the "landmines" that ruin curriculum development efforts.

with the help of a skilful negotiator who offered the word "reasoning" as a substitute.

Unfortunately, with the exception of "evaluation" there is no lexicon of red flag words. You can only remember that they exist and hope to find them before they find you.

Tenet: Add One Egg—or Cooperation Pays Off

What is more frustrating than finding, at the end of an arduous curriculum development exercise, that one's efforts were for naught? Unfortunately, this happens all too often when the fruits of one's labor are judged inedible—or worse, simply ignored—by the teachers for whom they were intended.

Some years ago a new instant cake mix failed in the marketplace. Since taste tests had shown the product to be superior and homemakers were known to prefer mixes that were easy, what went wrong? After some head-scratching, the manufacturer discovered the mix was so "instant" the cake-makers felt left out of the process and, consequently, rejected the mix. When the manufacturer modified the formula to require the cake-maker to add one egg before beating, there was a turn-around in sales.

Defensive curriculum developers need to remember that teachers are like cake-makers. Most don't want to start from scratch, but neither do they want to be left completely out of the process. Some level of participant involvement is essential if your product is to "sell."

Tenet: Look Up, Look Down, Look Around

Many people have a strong interest in what the schools are doing, or purportedly, not doing. Therefore, the curriculum is not only for teachers.

Looking up and down the school hierarchy and taking into account the concerns of janitors, aides, principals, students, curriculum coordinators, assistant superintendents, and board members is important. So is looking around to find out what influential members of the community think about what you're trying to do. Forgetting these groups, or becoming fixated on one, can cause all kinds of grief.

Over the past ten years, I've heard dozens of tales of woe about how forgetting to take someone's concern into account undermined an otherwise fine curriculum development activity. There are stories, for example, of janitors who sabotaged process-oriented curriculums because they resulted in classrooms with re-arranged desks, dirty floors, and "junk" all over the place. Some literature programs die quick deaths (or agonizingly slow ones) after members of the community find out what kids are reading.

Remember that curriculums are for almost everyone. Make sure you develop support among relevant, influential, and concerned parties.

Tenet: Adhere to the Panasonic Code

For those who aren't aficionados of advertising, the Panasonic motto is "Just Slightly Ahead of Its Time." There is much curriculum wisdom in this message.

Curriculum change is forward-oriented—but with too much forward motion, people have trouble keeping up. This frustrates teachers who don't like to feel as ignorant of something as their students. On the other hand, curriculum with too little forward motion seems hardly worth the bother.

Following the Panasonic code, curriculum change should be just slightly ahead of its time. This makes the change worth striving for without making it seem out of reach.

The defensive curriculum developer should vow to uphold the code. What nobler cause than to devote oneself to producing a curriculum that teachers are ready, willing, and able to use?

Defensive curriculum development can preserve your sanity while giving you a fighting chance to bring about successful change. Its tenets have proved useful to me and to others at local, state, and national levels. And it may help you avoid those landmines that can ruin even the most courageous and well-intentioned efforts.

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