Negotiating Your Course Curriculum: What, How, When and Where?

Negotiated curriculum, also known as integrated, co-designed or co-constructed curriculum, is "a dynamic process in which what is taught and learned (the curriculum) is negotiated between teacher and students, rather than being solely pre-determined by the teacher" (Edwards, 2011, p. 144). Negotiating the what, how, when and where of a course gives students greater ownership of their learning experience, increases student motivation and fosters heightened engagement in the learning process. Harris (2010) explains: "the idea is that dialog will encourage learners to understand their responsibility in their own learning process, motivating them to engage positively in its activities so that they can accomplish the objectives they have helped determine" (p. 23).

Used successfully in elementary through graduate-level college classrooms, negotiated curriculum increases students' self-responsibility for learning in a format that offers greater flexibility in terms of scheduling and how learning time is spent (Yazid, Musa, Ghaffar, Noor, Azamri, & Majid, 2013). Perhaps more importantly, negotiated curriculum models an innovative pedagogical approach that can be replicated across the educational system to create more authentic learning experiences for students (Edwards, 2011).

A Step-by-Step Process
Chua (2015), a doctoral candidate who teaches classes for the School of Engineering Education at Purdue University, offers the following steps for negotiating curriculum with college students:

- **Step 0: Prep the class to expect the process.** Preparation may take the form of a "heads up" that students will have a voice in the design of the course (Chua, 2015), providing students with materials in advance of the first day of class (Harris, 2010) or asking students to complete a survey or other pre-assessment measure to stimulate their thinking about the course and what they hope to get out of it.

- **Step 1: Brainstorm learning objectives/outcomes as a class.** Generally occurring on the first day of class, brainstorming may involve small-group to whole-class discussion, written comments or one-on-one conferences with the course instructor. Variety is important here. As Chua (2015) explains, "Not everyone's voice is equally comfortable in every space" (para. 6).

- **Step 2: Converge on learning outcomes via some collaborative process.** At this point, students' ideas must be categorized and prioritized, and some may be voted out. Professional standards or mandated course learning objectives may provide a framework within which student-generated objectives are integrated, or students' objectives may be added to a required list. From the beginning, the course instructor

should make it clear that he or she has final authority over all aspects of the course, even though student input is highly valued (Chua, 2015; Yazid et al., 2013). Harris (2010) explains that it is the course instructor's responsibility to "judiciously tailor the process not only to student wishes and participative ability but also to such circumstances as course or institutional objectives" (p. 24).

- **Step 3: Repeat steps #1 and #2 for assessments.** Next, it is time for students to consider how they will demonstrate their newfound knowledge and skills. If your course is not guided by mandated content objectives, Fallahi (2011) suggests aligning assessments with Fink's (2003) taxonomy of significant learning: Foundational Knowledge, Application, Integration, Human Dimension, Caring, and Learning How to Learn. For example, in her undergraduate life development course, Fallahi assesses Foundational Knowledge using multiple choice questions, Application and Integration through case studies, Human Dimension through reflective writings and Caring through a Likert scale self-assessment.

- **Step 4: Repeat steps #1 and #2 for pedagogy.** Once the class has agreed on the course assessments, in-class and outside-of-class activities should be intentionally designed to equip students for successfully completing the assessments (Chua, 2015). For example, in re-designing her life development course, Fallahi (2011) organized a variety of class activities such as lecture, assigned readings, discussion-based debates and reflection papers around key conceptual questions such as "how might we provide a stimulating environment for our children?"

- **Step 5: Reflect on the process.** Near the end of the course, if not periodically throughout, it is important for students to reflect on the quality of their learning experiences, the degree to which they are achieving their learning objectives and how they can apply their newfound knowledge and skills. Ideally, the reflection process will involve introspective, written reflection and some form of sharing with the class. Larissa Pahomov, an English and journalism teacher in Philadelphia, explains, "To make students comfortable with this practice, the classroom has to become a place where each student is recognized as being on an individual path of improvement – and, an important point, no student has reached the end of the path, because *there is no end"* (MindShift, 2014, para. 11). Because leading the process of negotiated curriculum is a learning experience in and of itself, course instructors should take time to reflect as well.

"Start Small" Options
Upon first reading, moving to a negotiated curriculum may seem overwhelming. The key is to start small. If you're not ready to dive in, Edwards (2011) suggests that course instructors begin by simply "making space" for negotiated curriculum.

One option is planning your course as usual, but leaving a few areas open for discussion. On the first day of class, you can review the tentative course schedule and then engage students in discussion of which readings should be required, options for demonstrating their knowledge and skills (e.g., tests? papers? models or demonstrations? etc.), when assignments should be due or how course points should be distributed.

Another "start small" option is negotiating curriculum on just one or two assignments or assessments. For example, if your course requires two non-negotiable assignments, allow students to determine the what, how, when and where of a third assignment. This may be a simple choice of two options; for example, students can either write a research paper or engage in four hours of community service. Or, in regard to assessments, students can choose to take a multiple choice test or an essay test.

If you feel ready, you can offer students even more choice by making the third assignment open-ended, within carefully pre-established parameters. For example, students must design and implement a project that includes data collection, analysis and interpretation using one of the analytical approaches taught in class. Within those parameters, students are free to select any topic, sample, research setting, etc. If you give the assignment early in the semester with a due date much later, students will also have more choice in terms of when and where to complete the project. For example, a student may choose to collect data during an already-scheduled weekend mission trip, increasing the project's personal relevance significantly. For such open-ended assignments, you may wish to structure students' planning with a customized individual learning contract that you meet with each student to discuss and approve before the project is started. Rossman (2015) provides one example.

If all of this seems like too much, simply dip your toes in with a group activity that engages students in open-ended, collaborative problem solving and decision making that relates to your course content but has nothing to do with your course requirements. For example, assign each of four groups a different perspective from which to analyze a common issue, arrive at recommendations and later share and discuss with the entire class. Although such a one-time class activity is not an example of negotiated curriculum, it will prepare students – and you – for sharing opposing ideas, thinking outside the box, making decisions and defending choices. Alber (2012) provides a helpful overview for building students' collaborative skills during class time, skills that will help you and your students successfully negotiate the what, how, when and where of your course!

Resources

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Additional Resources

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Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education. *The Higher Education Academy: Inspiring Teaching, Transforming Learning*. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Engagement_through_partnership.pdf

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