Clarifying the Need for Language Programs

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Introduction

I am very conscious as I begin addressing this colloquium that I am in a very perilous position: namely, that I risk being perceived by those of you who are working in the field, often under very difficult circumstances, as what Alderson and Scott (1992) have very aptly called a "JDOE"-that is, a Jet In Jet Out Expert. For example, I have never been to SE Asia before this trip, so I know nothing about the local culture, politics and educational systems from first hand experience. Given that I have no special qualifications in terms of possessing appropriate insider knowledge about the contexts of implementation in which you work, the challenge I face is finding something to say that is relevant to aid work and particularly innovation in general. Consequently, I invite you to reflect critically on my remarks which, given the title of this colloquium, Clarifying the Need for Language Programs, will focus on defining and clarifying what innovative curriculum work entails, irrespective of the particular context of implementation in which each individual in this room happens to be working.

Innovative Curriculum Work: What's That?

Innovative curriculum work involves designing, implementing, and maintaining qualitative changes in pedagogical materials, approaches and values that are perceived as new by individuals who comprise a formal (language) education system (see also Markee, in press).

Let us now deconstruct what this definition means. First, in order to avoid any pro-innovation bias (Rogers, 1983), I do not assume that adopting an innovation is necessarily always beneficial. Brumfit (1981) and Paulston (1981) have both argued that the notional syllabus is an undesirable innovation because it deprives learners of the opportunity to exploit the generative potential of grammar (i.e., the ability to use syntactic rules to create new sentences), which both authors argue is an indispensable resource for language learning. Thus, whatever the merits of this particular criticism of the notional syllabus (see Wilkins, 1981a, 1981b for a refutation of this charge), it is important to recognize that if users feel the consequences of adopting an innovation are unacceptable to them, they are unlikely to adopt it.

Second, I do not distinguish between the terms "innovation" and "change". Some writers view innovation as a species of the genus change, in which change involves reworking familiar elements into new relationships; innovation, on the other hand, entails working with something that is fundamentally new (see Miles, 1964 and Nicholls, 1983). However, many other writers treat these two words as synonyms (see Adams and Chen,
As I will argue later in point 5, this does not mean that all manifestations of innovation or change are equally fundamental; but it is not very useful to make a categorical distinction which does little to help us understand how people actually react to "new" ideas when they first encounter them.

This brings me to my third point. The "newness" of an innovation is a matter of end users' subjective perceptions rather than an objective reality (Rogers, 1983; Nicholls, 1983). Thus, when Krashen and Terrell (1983) protest that the Natural Approach consists of nothing more than a rediscovery of the underlying principles of traditional "natural" or direct methods that were popular earlier this century, suitably reformulated and updated in light of current Second Language Acquisition research findings, they are being somewhat disingenuous. There is no doubt that, from a user's perspective, teachers in the early 1980s regarded the Natural Approach as a bona fide innovation. Furthermore, new teachers who first come across this approach today continue to view it in this light.

Fourth, I add the phase of maintenance to the better known stages of curriculum design and implementation because the continuation of an innovation is a crucial aspect of development. Many commentators writing about the problems of organizing (language teaching-related) aid to under-developed countries have noted that aid projects tend to fail in the long term. Instead of taking root and continuing to evolve autonomously, that is, achieving the stage of maintenance, the innovations that expatriate aid workers design and implement frequently wither away and die after the aid personnel leave (Jequier, 1976; Holliday and Cooke, 1982; Riejdik, 1984; Markee, 1986; Phillipson, 1992; Rondinelli, 1983, 1987; Rondinelli et al., 1990). While this problem is particularly acute and indeed obvious in the context of high-profile international aid projects, it is in fact a basic issue in all innovative curriculum work, wherever it takes place and whoever participates in the process.

This is because all (educational) organizations constantly change: in particular, the people who comprise the system change, as do the technologies that an institution uses (Baldridge and Deal, 1983). For example, in order to maintain the UIUC curriculum development/teacher education project, I had to take into account the fact that most instructors take two or three years to complete their MA TESL degrees and then graduate. There is therefore a constant need to induct new Teaching Assistants into the ESL service courses and to ensure that their more experienced peers pass on their skills and experience to these new arrivals before the senior instructors graduate. In this sense, the UIUC project cannot afford to be anything but open-ended (Tetenbaum and Mulkeen, 1986).

In order to get round some of these problems, the UIUC project is technology-driven (Tetenbaum and Mulkeen, 1986) in that it makes extensive use of computer technology to (among other things) develop, store and revise the units which instructors contribute to an in-house bank of materials. However, computer technology is changing so fast that today's state-of-the-art solution is almost literally tomorrow's technological dynosaur. Thus, an excessive reliance on technology can be a double-edged sword.
However, it is important that we should not allow ourselves to concentrate exclusively on hardware issues, which are in fact much less important than the cultural and ideological issues pertaining to the demand for and use of new technology (Jequier, 1976).

Fifth, I would like to argue that innovative curriculum work is highly complex and involves at least three qualitative dimensions of change, in which changes in users' behaviors (i.e., the use of new materials and approaches) are relatively easier to promote than changes in teachers' beliefs about teaching:

The three dimensions have...been presented in increasing order of complexity for implementation. Materials, most visible and tangible of the three, are the easiest to produce and to use literally. Alterations in teaching approach or style present greater difficulty when significant new skills must be acquired or additional time to plan must be found. Changes in beliefs are yet more difficult to bring about: they challenge the core values held by a person regarding the fundamental purposes of education and they are often not explicit or recognized, but rather buried at the level of unconscious assumptions (Fullan, 1982b:247).

Innovation clearly goes far beyond promoting relatively surface changes in behavior. Ultimately, it entails change agents encouraging teachers to make sense of new ideas and practices - that is, to develop their own, autonomous interpretations of what the innovations which change agents invite them to adopt actually mean to them as practicing or trainee language teaching professionals in their own right.

This process of change is developmental (Tetenbaum and Mulkeen, 1986). However, promoting successful development is notoriously difficult to achieve, because as teachers' pedagogical values become less stable, they become increasingly vulnerable to feelings of professional insecurity and self-doubt. Indeed, they may perhaps even become temporarily less effective in the classroom as they struggle to incorporate new ideas and practices into their pedagogical world view. However, as the development theorist Denis Goulet argues, "vulnerability provides a frame for viewing under-development as an initial condition, and development both as a change process and as a terminal state" (Goulet, 1971:x). It is this central paradox which change agents must help teachers resolve.

Finally, I wish to underline the fact that classroom innovation does not occur in a social vacuum. As Prabhu (1987) points out, the fact that the Bangalore Project was implemented in primary and secondary schools placed some major constraints on the project. For example, he decided not to use the procedural syllabus with students who were due to take various state matriculation exams at the end of the year, on the grounds that this syllabus was incompatible with the traditional grammar orientation of these exams.
Clearly, individuals are not free to innovate as they wish: if they do not have the power to change how an institution is organized, change agents must take such constraints into account and work within the parameters of the situation they operate in (Maley, 1984). Conversely, in those circumstances where structural change is possible, innovation may also entail changing organizational structures and relationships (Holliday and Cooke, 1982).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have briefly outlined what innovative curriculum work entails and unpacked this definition in terms of five issues which this definition raises. These are:

* It is important to avoid any a priori pro-innovation bias. Some innovations are just plain bad and should not be adopted in the first place.

* There is no need to distinguish between the terms "innovation" and "change". However there is a need to distinguish between different levels of innovation/change (see point 5).

* The "newness" of an innovation is a matter of end users' subjective perceptions rather than an objective reality.

* The phase of maintenance - that is, the self-sustaining continuation of an innovation, is perhaps the most crucial (though least understood) aspect of development.

* Innovative curriculum work is highly complex and involves at least three qualitative dimensions of changes, in which users' behaviors (i.e., the use of new materials and approaches) are relatively easier to promote than changes in teachers' beliefs about teaching.

This has been an extremely fast run through of some extremely complex issues. Of necessity, due to time constraints, I have had to skimp or ignore many important issues, for which I ask your forbearance. I will take up some of these issues, particularly the nature of the changes which change agents can promote, in my position paper for Colloquium Four, which explores the crucial issue of how to sustain (i.e., in my terminology, "maintain") learning.

NOTES

1. Although this definition does not explicitly mention evaluation, it is impossible to ascertain whether an innovation has been maintained without carrying out some form of evaluation. For the purposes of this talk, therefore, I assume that evaluation is an indivisible aspect of maintenance.
REFERENCES


