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ABSTRACT

Historically, teachers have primarily worked alone in their classrooms, have served as deliverers of standardized and textual materials, and have been managed. Now, however, they are expected to work in teams, create active-learning curricula, and manage themselves. This paper examines a self-initiated team of K-6 grade teachers working in a middle-class suburban public school in southern California. With their principal's support, they formed an educational program housed within the elementary school. In the Global Education Program (GEP) the teachers incorporated onsite curriculum development and collaboration. In addition to meeting regularly as a team to discuss their individual classroom work, the teachers used the meetings to plan curriculum units together. They then implemented the curriculum in their classrooms, bringing together classes from all grades. Data were obtained from audio- and video-taped observations of meetings and teacher interviews. The group balanced group cohesion with individual autonomy in their curriculum planning by using speech patterns that promoted shared decision making; by using physical artifacts to hold the shape of a complex teaching unit; by organizing their work in terms of relatively few fixed yet open-ended ground rules; and by creating joint finished products to culminate each curriculum unit. One table is included. (Contains eight references.) (LMI)

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The Balancing Act of Team Curriculum Creation

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Since the founding of modern American public school systems over 150 years ago, teachers have primarily worked alone in their classrooms; now they are to work in teams. Teachers have been positioned as deliverers of standardized textual materials; now they are to create onsite specially tailored "active-learning" curriculum for their own classrooms. Teachers have been managed; now, they are to manage themselves.

In this study I examine a group of teachers striving to turn rhetoric into reality. The subject of the study is a self-initiated team of kindergarten through sixth grade teachers working in a middle-class suburban public school in Southern California. With the support of the principal, the teachers formed an educational program housed within the elementary school. In this program, which I call the Global Education Program, or GEP, the teachers responded to the current rhetoric by incorporating some of its most popular principles, including onsite curriculum development and collaboration. In addition to meeting regularly as a team to discuss their individual classroom work, the teachers used team meetings to plan curriculum units together. They then used the curriculum with their students, bringing together kindergarten through sixth graders from their individual classrooms. In the fall of 1992, the five GEP teachers planned a curriculum unit called the "Harvest Festival" that focused on early peoples' food gathering practices. In the spring of 1994, the GEP team, which now had six members, collaborated with four teachers from outside the program to create a "Gold Rush" unit focused on the California Gold Rush. It is this process of building and using curriculum as a team that is the focus of this ethnographic and discourse analytical study. Working with a research group¹, I spent roughly two months each in 1992 and 1994 observing the teachers' work, audiotaping it, and videotaping it. We also interviewed the

¹ I carried out this study with a team led by Yrjö Engeström as part of Professor Engeström's research on workplace collaboration in a variety of sites. In the first year (1991-1992), research team members were Adrian Cussins, Yrjö Engeström, Dana Peterman, and the author. In the second year (1992-1993), team members were Amy Burgos, Ritva Engeström, Yrjö Engeström, Alejandro Kahan, Erika Toraya, and the author. I am especially grateful for the guidance and teaching of Professor Engeström.

teachers and observed them in their individual classrooms. (For complete findings, methodology, and description of the research, see Buchwald, 1995.)

One of the great challenges that teacher teams face is the need to cohere as a group without losing the independent voices and autonomy of its members (Little, 1990). The GEP team struggled with these dual pulls on their work, made urgent by the fact that their curriculum-making involved making complicated, detailed plans under extreme time pressure. This paper provides an overview of four ways in which the GEP team balanced group cohesion with individual autonomy in their curriculum planning.

SPEECH PATTERNS

The GEP teachers did not use textbooks or standardized curriculum packages. In 1992, they created their curriculum entirely through talk during their planning meetings. In the second year, too, talk during meetings was the primary mechanism through which the teachers brainstormed, created a general framework, discussed forms of organization, and agreed upon details. The teachers' discourse had a particular quality. For the most part, it was fast-paced, full of interjections, with several teachers sometimes speaking at once and one speaker following the next with little or no pauses. It also had a feeling of open-endedness and possibility.

In order to understand better what gave the discourse its particular feel, I analyzed it for verb use, concentrating on verbal "mood." There are three verb moods in English: the imperative, the form of statement or question of fact; the subjunctive, or hypothetical; and the indicative, or command form.

One of the most outstanding characteristics of the teachers' talk during their planning meetings was the absence of imperatives. If one considers that these teachers varied widely in age, experience, and knowledge and if one thinks about their lack of time for planning, s/he might expect that, for the sake of efficiency and accuracy, the teachers might have divided the planning labor from the first and/or relied on the more experienced teachers to tell the others what to do.

There were, however, only 4 imperatives out of 1131 clearly codable verb phrases in the 1992 planning and 5 out of 901 in 1994 (less than 1% in the planning of each unit). (See Table 1.)

The striking near absence of imperatives, along with other findings, suggest tacit agreement within the group that there was to be a lack of hierarchy in the team.

A second striking characteristic of the teachers' mood use was the frequency of conditionals. Just under half the verb forms (43%) the teachers used in 1992 were conditional, and 37.3% in the 1994 curriculum unit. (See Table 1.) What is particularly notable about the number of conditional verbs is the in which the teacher used them to build conditional strings. What I am referring to as "conditional strings" are series which trace out the possibilities of a hypothetical decision. The posited "if" in these series is held onto for more than a single statement. Both the one posing the possibility, and others who consider it, suspend the possibility like an actual object between them. They then posit different outcomes, sometimes piling on layers of other hypotheticals, sometimes altering the hypothetical (but not dismissing it). The transcripts are full of examples of such conditional strings, short and long. Here is one (from 10/13/92) in which the teachers considered the place of food preservation in their plans for the Harvest Festival unit:

Lily: Maybe each, maybe each class that wants to do
preservation can do preservation in their own way,

Beth: [yeah, in their own room

Lily: but then (.) with your main, with your with your teacher
for the main ()=

Beth: =and then we would all bring the our what we preserved
to the to the day

Lily: Right, right. Like Room Twelve might contribute, contribute
raisins, and you might contribute=

Beth: =apples () whatever

Lily: [(and somebody else might) fish, or whatever

?: (and so each room would bring some)

Table 1 Relative frequencies of verbal moods in Harvest Festival and Gold Rush planning meetings*

1992			1994		
Verb form	Total Occurrence		Verb form	Total Occurrence	
	f	%		f	%
Imperative	4	<1%	Imperative	5	<1%
Conditional	485	43%	Conditional	336	37.3%
Indicative	516	46%	Indicative	478	53.0%
Indicative working as conditional	119	10%	Indicative working as conditional	175	8.3%
Conditional working as Indicative	7	<1%	Conditional Working as Indicative	7	<1%
Total	1131	100%	Total	901	100.0%

*I coded all verb forms for "mood." There are three moods in English: the imperative (command); the subjunctive, called the conditional here (hypothetical); and the indicative (statement or question of fact). Some verb forms technically were of one mood but carried out the function of another. These verb forms are listed in rows four and five.

The co-constructed strings of conditionals were instances of joint attention to and extension of ideas, a time when teachers imagined together as they worked through potential choices and their possible outcomes.

The structure of the discourse was one important ingredient in the teachers recipe of balance between cohesion and autonomy. Lack of imperatives and hierarchy allowed teachers individual freedom and room to participate fully. The heavy use of conditionals and conditional strings allowed a strong shared plan to develop through the input of several participants.

ARTIFACT MEDIATION

Use of physical artifacts was another mechanism by which the teachers created units in which they could be clear about the openings for individual choices while also retaining a shared plan. The term "artifact" is common in the cultural-historical tradition of psychology (Vygotsky 1978; Cole & Engeström, 1993) and in activity theory (Engeström, 1990). Artifacts can be physical tools, such as an ax or a spoon. They can also be intangible, like speech. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg (1981, p. 53) succinctly state the importance of artifacts (which they call objects): "Objects affect what a person can do, either by expanding or restricting the scope of that person's actions and thoughts. And because what a person does is largely what he or she is, objects have a determining effect on the development of the self. . ."

In the fall of 1992, when the teachers planned the Harvest Festival unit, they wrote almost nothing down. The Harvest Festival plan, in all its detail, was almost completely mediated by talk alone. As a structuring medium, the teachers' discourse defined the planning in certain ways. For one, the discourse in any meeting was a shared artifact, accessible to all the teachers at the table. They built the discourse through statements packed with conditionals for considering alternatives and more occasional indicatives used to change the subject or make decisions. Furthermore, the accessibility and flexibility of the medium contributed to the open-ended, free-ranging nature of the planning.

In the spring of 1994, when the teachers planned the Gold Rush, talk was still the primary mediator of their work, but they also relied heavily on physical artifacts. All in all, the teachers used seventeen different written materials as part of their planning process: 6 lists; two schedules; one explanation of the curriculum for outside teachers; a set of written suggestions from a teacher who could not attend a meeting; a diagram; a video tape showing how to act in the drama groups; three sets of notes from three different teachers; index cards with student names and designations; and a booklet containing historical information about the gold rush time period.

Why did the teachers use so many more mediating artifacts in this unit than in the Harvest Festival? Perhaps the teachers learned over time that their planning was less repetitive, more efficient, or easier to understand when they used written lists and schedules. What is clear is that the intensity of the planning was greater: five meetings in two weeks rather than seven in four weeks; two-hour meetings totally devoted to planning the unit instead of one-hour meetings covering a range of subjects. The unit the teachers planned was also more complex: it involved more teachers, more students, and more distinct parts that were connected but not in a direct, causal fashion. It was more tightly coupled, allowing little room for independent actions, errors, or delay if it was to be ready on time and work as planned. In this situation of less time, a need to plan faster, and a tightly linked, many-part plan, the lists and other mediating artifacts were necessary forms of support for the team's work.

The primary consequence of the use of written artifact was that writing ideas and reviewing them on the basis of what was written fixed those ideas more definitely, causing the teachers to repeat less and change plans less frequently than they had done when their work was mediated by talk alone. As a result, the overall planning pattern was more linear and unidirectional and could be accomplished in the shorter time period.

In both years, the teachers' use of mediating artifacts affected their planning and helped the teachers offset joint planning with individual input. The 1992 planning, mediated almost completely by talk, consisted of imagining together and layering ideas. It was open-ended, fluid, changeable, and repetitive in a spiral pattern. These features allowed teachers to take part in

shaping the curriculum, like a vessel on a potters' wheel, as the planning spiraled round and round. The plan they shaped was sturdy and cohesive, but how the teachers filled their segment of the vessel was then left largely up to them. The addition in 1994 of a large number of other mediating artifacts, particularly documents the team created, contributed to a less open-ended, less fluid, less repetitive, more fixed and linear planning pattern. The teachers left themselves pockets of choice, but used the material artifacts as a sort of glue to hold the many parts of the complex unit together through the stages of planning and execution.

GROUND RULES

The term "ground rules" arose from the discourse of the GEP teachers I studied. The teachers were in the early stages of the teamwork; the unit they were planning, called the Harvest Festival unit, was only the second curriculum they had created as a team. The unit was designed to teach about early food gathering practices in a way that involved each teacher's leading a group of mixed K-6 students in the study of one grain or food-gathering practice. One teacher, Beth, suggested that a way to save time would be to have each teacher plug information relevant to her group's topic into a certain pre-determined format and then to divide work among student sub-groups in pre-set ways. Beth's suggestion would save the busy teachers time and effort by giving them a standard, ready-made format for the information on the different topic.

Still, over the course of this meeting, Beth's suggestion was countered by other teachers' overt and subtle insistence that they wanted to plan their own piece of the unit however they saw fit. This insistence on individual autonomy showed the teachers' commitment to individual autonomy.² Part of the tack Beth took in promoting her idea was the questioning of how the curriculum unit was going to hang together as a cohesive piece of curriculum. How, she asked the others, would the students in the different groups present what they had learned to the others on

² This interesting exchange between the teachers is discussed in detail in Buchwald, 1995 and Engestöm, 1993.

the day of the final Harvest Festival? When Beth's question was answered, the conflict was on the road to being resolved: the teachers would hold their unit together not by using a preset format for what they did with their groups but by agreeing on a set of guidelines they called "ground rules" that would help them create a final product, the Harvest Festival, that would have some consistency. (Excerpt from the 11/10/92 planning meeting)

Beth: How will you present this on the festival day?

Jili: Well, that's what we need to -

[
others: () (several talking at once)

Lily: All you need to do is to have to have some some ground rules.
Like for example maybe each group has ten minutes (.)in which
to present (.) their findings or their whatever.

This concept of ground rules was referred to throughout the rest of the Harvest Festival planning and in the Gold Rush planning.

There were two parts to the Harvest Festival teaching. The ground rules for the first part of the Harvest Festival were that each teacher would lead a cross-age group in studying a different topic related to early food gathering practices; each student group would be further sub-divided into small cross-age groups; each sub-group would prepare some sort of presentation on a specific topic; and each group would prepare one or more foods representative of their topic (for example, the hunting group cleaned and smoked fish and the corn group made succotash and popcorn). All the work in these topic-specific groups would be carried out over three morning sessions that the teachers set aside. For the final Harvest Festival that occurred on a fourth day, the ground rules were that all students would attend both as audience members and presenters; each group would give a presentation of approximately ten minutes on its topic; and each group would serve its food(s) to the other students. As long as they followed these ground rules, the teachers could schedule the unit and see it come together in one final Harvest Festival, all the while still preserving a great deal of individual latitude for decision-making. For instance, teachers chose how they would present information to their students, which stories and other texts they would use as teaching tools, what kinds of presentations the students would do, what kinds of visual aids--such

as posters or backdrops for skits--the students in a given group would use, and what foods they would prepare.

The Gold Rush unit also had two parts to it carried out over two consecutive days. The ground rules for the first day were that each teacher or pair of teachers would, for part of one morning, instruct a cross-age group of students about one particular place of origin for people coming to the California Gold Rush: China, Australia, Europe, or the East Coast of the United States. Each teacher would also make sure that every student prepared a name tag that indicated the students' assigned place of origin as well as the students regular classroom teacher. The ground rules for the second day of the Gold Rush were that each teacher would lead an activity related to teaching about the experiences of people in the time of the Gold Rush. The teachers agreed to follow a set schedule for rotations of students between the different activities, a search for "gold" rocks on the playground, and a special lunch prepared by parents. Within this format, the teachers had vast room to maneuver. Each teacher decided on how to teach about a point of origin: some used story-telling; others photographs, artwork, and acting, another used an overhead projector as part of a lecture-discussion. The teachers chose the activities they would lead, the props they would use, and how they would structure their rotations.

The ground rules of scheduling, shared culmination of the curriculum unit, and shared elements of otherwise divergent sections of a unit allowed the teachers to balance cohesion and autonomy in their planning. In each case, the use of ground rules created a framework for one sturdy and recognizable structure within which each teacher could create rooms of her own design.

JOINT CULMINATING ACTIVITY

One other means by which the teachers linked their work was the use of a joint final activity to culminate the units they created. As I described above, the Harvest Festival unit ended in an actual festival, complete with presentations and food. On a sunny fall day, students sat on a grassy hillside while teachers using a microphone discussed the theme of the day and announced the different groups. They watched one another's presentations, ate blueberry cobbler and other

treats, sang songs, and cleaned up as one cohesive unit, the Global Education Program. The Gold Rush unit, too, was geared toward one grand Gold Rush day. Teachers and parents had decorated a good part of the school campus with bright signs, bales of hay, and artifacts from the California gold rush. Teachers, students, and parents were all in costume. The day began with a group gathering in the activity center and singing of old-time days. Students preceded through rotations in which they played a math gambling game at an old-time saloon, worked at a Chinese laundry, made tin lanterns, weighed and measured rocks at an assayer's office, created burlap patches for gold, and did skits telling about their group's journey to the gold rush. After a frenzied hunt for "gold" nuggets on the playground, students ate an old-fashioned lunch of hot dog, corn bread, beans, and rootbeer floats.

The culminating events were festive events, chances to display what students had learned, and opportunities for hands-on learning. They also played an important role in the teachers' cohesion/autonomy balancing act. The teachers, each with a group of cross-age students, had been making their own paths, albeit intertwined ones. The final activity gave them a common destination and a chance to celebrate their arrival. Throughout their individual planning and teaching of parts of a unit, the teachers could use the rendezvous point as a clear point of focus. For them and for the rest of the school, the culminating events singled the GEP out as a program and defined, in part, what the program looked like; these events were times for community-building and -defining. Long after the last posters were taken down, the joint finished product was something the teachers could refer to and take lessons from as they planned new curriculum.

CONCLUSION

In 1992 and 1994, the GEP teachers struck a balance between individual autonomy and group cohesion by using speech patterns that promoted shared decision-making; by using physical artifacts to hold the shape of the complex Gold rush unit; by organizing their work in terms of relatively few fixed yet open-ended ground rules; and by creating joint finished products to culminate each curriculum unit.

Future research on teachers' collaborative curriculum creation would do well to continue to focus attention on maintenance of group ties in the absence of pre-planned curriculum and the presence of conflict. Those who form teams to create curriculum are unlikely to resign themselves to yet another system that reduces their individual decision-making and demands utter conformity. On the other hand, a team without common goals and practices to bind them together can hardly be called a team. Between these extremes, there is a place where conflicting possibilities can be openly discussed in a fruitful manner, where complexity and some degree of free choice are made possible by a common framework. Finding this almost paradoxical place of circumscribed openness is the balancing act of team curriculum planning.

The author received her Ph.D. in Communication from the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) in 1995. She lives in Minneapolis, where she is pursuing research projects in education and works as Principal of Secondary Education at Temple Israel.

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