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Redesigning Literacy: Our Story

Johannah D. Baughner and Victoria N. Seeger

Introduction

The strengths of a program lie in its curriculum and the faculty instructing content for candidates in the program. There are many considerations when proposing changes to courses within a curriculum and these are multiplied and magnified when decisions are made to change an entire program. Three major factors contributed to the redesign of a graduate reading program at a small Midwestern university: 1) the curriculum had not evolved as quickly and as often as literacy content and instruction changed in K-12 schools and districts; 2) the university transitioned most graduate programs in its School of Education to the online environment; and, 3) the current curriculum was not adequately meeting the needs of its candidates.

The authors of this article were instrumental in the redesign of the graduate reading program. They were tasked with changing the program to meet candidates' needs in the online learning environment, and both were concerned about the content of courses due to very different roles prior to the redesign. As faculty changed in the education department, a new member joined the faculty who was dedicated to delivery of literacy instruction. Note that this faculty member is one of the authors of this article and graduated from the graduate reading program eight years ago. The other author has been a faculty member for the past seven years and taught two of the courses required of candidates prior to graduation from the program. Both contributed heavily to discussions about the content for redesigned curriculum. The task was to examine current courses and implement new ones according to university guidelines and relevant content area standards including: International Literacy Association (ILA), National Association of Teachers of English (NCTE), International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), and state literacy standards housed within the Missouri Standards for Professional Educators (MoSPE).

History of the Graduate Reading Program

Examining the history of the graduate reading program proved useful to understand the past decision-making processes about the curriculum and the evolution of not only the content delivered, but summative assessment processes determining candidate success (or lack of) prior to graduation.

As initially implemented, the graduate reading program focused on reading and reading assessment. Courses carefully aligned with whatever textbooks were being used by individual instructors for coursework, and candidates came to campus for what were primarily lecture-based classes that followed the content of the textbook assigned to each course. The thinking at that time was that candidates were training to be future clinicians with expertise in reading. The program even included a reading clinic held on campus during the summer months. Candidates came to campus for a several-week period, stayed in dormitories, and tutored children who had severe reading difficulties. The candidates' work became diagnostic in nature – working to determine the strengths and weaknesses of children's reading skills.

As recent as seven years ago, the program coursework was delivered during evening sessions, with the majority of the sessions in a face-to-face modality. Even candidates living in other areas of the state too far away for face-to-face, on-campus instruction were required to attend synchronously using web-based tools. While most of the time these tools worked, it was difficult for distance learners to participate in class discussions with their peers and in-class activities in meaningful ways. The class format did not lend itself well to instruction beyond lecture as the instructor (and the distant student) needed to have proximity to a laptop or computer microphone during class sessions in order to be heard.

In 2015, the university technology services announced a competitive application process to transition a limited number of graduate courses into the online environment. Faculty received a small stipend for the work associated with the course transitions. Two courses in the program (taught by one of the authors) transitioned into an online platform at that time. The overarching intent of those two courses remains intact today although resources, length and breadth of the courses, and some topics have changed considerably. Within a two-year period, all core courses transitioned into the online environment utilizing a previous online course delivery system.

A Personalized, Mission-Oriented Experience for Candidates

One of the redesign goals was intentional emphasis on a more personalized learning experience for candidates. Initial feedback from candidates demonstrated the achievement of moving the course content from a primarily clinical model to courses where candidates can immediately apply their learning (Vandenberg, 2005) to whatever educator position they currently hold – most often a classroom teacher. A mission statement was developed to assist others in understanding the intent of the redesigned program:

Holistically, the mission of the [university graduate reading program] is to prepare effective literacy professionals of the highest quality who are steeped in the knowledge of meaningful literacy instruction, resources, programs, initiatives, models, interventions, strategies, and administrative responsibilities. Program candidates will also engage in analytical and evaluative thinking to scaffold reflection in an aim to develop a competent voice in service to advocacy for all students, K-12. Threaded throughout the program, candidates will gain exposure to literacy theorists and respective philosophies in order to gain a deeper understanding of the interrelationships between the components of literacy to include: reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visual representation. Literacy leadership is an avenue to transfer life-long learning, equipping 21st Century readers and writers with the skillset necessary to function fully in a diverse, technology-rich society.

This new model differentiates for graduate candidates having many years of classroom experience to those who may have taught one to two years. For example, in a course titled, *Literacy-Based Assessment and Analysis*, candidates were provided a “menu” of literacy assessments, targeting a broad spectrum of literacy areas, to administer each week throughout the course with a focus learner of their choosing. The “menu” allows for differentiation for each candidate. For instance, a skilled classroom teacher may feel comfortable administering all the components of a reading inventory whereas a newer educator may be working on mastering the

complexities of using a running record. This differentiation meets each educator's need, while still allowing each to expand his/her knowledge and confidence with literacy-based assessments.

We also consider the redesigned graduate literacy program to be a more personalized program in the ways a candidate can complete the program over time. The redesigned program offers courses in a carousel format, which boosts student recruitment by offering six program entry points throughout each academic year. No longer would a prospective student have to postpone their pursuit of a graduate degree by a traditional, sixteen-week semester; instead, prospective candidates can now enroll prior to the start of any term, which operates on a seven-week course schedule.

Because the redesigned program is delivered through a carousel model, candidates can take up to two courses during each seven-week block session. In a traditional trimester, there are two block sessions. This model decreases candidates' time to degree completion, effectively allowing a candidate to complete all of the required coursework within a year if they so choose. Another candidate may choose to take a single course within a block, completing the program over a longer period. With the exception of the *Literacy-Focused Academic Inquiry* course and *Literacy Capstone* (which must be taken at the end of the program), candidates have autonomy in determining their own instructional sequence and timeline for degree completion.

Philosophical Changes in Redesign

Action Research. Prior to the redesign of the graduate reading program, many candidates engaged in two very different models of action research over the course of their enrollment in the program. The first was a course titled, *Improving Instruction Through Action Research* where candidates were assigned a set of data (based on interest) to research from a state department of education website. They engaged in a quantitative methods analysis of the data. The second action research project was completed in a course titled, *Reading in the Elementary School*, and was a model more closely aligned with qualitative research principles.

The true premise of classroom action research, at least from the authors' perspectives, is for an educator to examine a problem or puzzle within one's own classroom. We believe that action research is a simple and reliable research process for teachers that may be used to focus attention on teaching questions, as well as to organize and interpret the multiple classroom data sources that reflect student learning (Calhoun, 2002; Moore, 2004).

To that end, action research is now the culminating experience spread out over two courses at the end of the newly designed program. Candidates spend one, seven-week block in *Literacy-Based Academic Inquiry*, determining the topic of their action research, the questions they want to ask, the data sources that can address those questions, and a strategy to be implemented. During the *Literacy Capstone* course, the action research project is finalized as candidates revisit their methodology for data collection, engage in data analysis, report results and key findings, offer conclusions, while also identifying implications for both teaching and learning. This course is last in their instructional sequence, prior to graduation.

Portfolio. Prior to the redesign, all graduates of master’s degree programs in the School of Education were required to assemble a portfolio. The Graduate Reading Program portfolio was a collection of selected artifacts from all of the completed coursework. Required artifacts addressed nine specific ILA standards. In addition to the artifacts, candidates submitted the portfolio scoring guide showing how the artifact was assessed, along with corresponding reflections that captured candidates’ thinking about how the artifact(s) addressed the standard at the point in the program when it was created. An additional “choice” artifact rounded out the portfolio for the ten which were required.

All candidates were then scheduled to complete a portfolio defense three to four weeks prior to graduation. The defenses were presented to two or three faculty members, with at least one having expertise in literacy. A set of questions were asked of the candidate with the expectation that the candidate demonstrated how the artifacts addressed each of the standards. A typical defense lasted about one hour. The candidate was then excused while faculty discussed the success of the defense using a separate scoring guide. Finally, the candidate was called back in to learn of the results and any further elaboration on the portfolio prior to graduation.

Capstone Reflection. Anchor standards remain an integral component of the terminal product that candidates complete as part of their last course in the program. Imbedded within the course, *Literacy Capstone*, candidates prepare six mini-reflections that eventually will be infused as part of their culminating project, their Capstone Reflection. In this task, candidates are required to analyze and synthesize their learning throughout the program in a digital format. Moreover, their work must acknowledge their professional growth, show evidence from coursework that stands in support of their learning, as well as draw upon foundational research and theory from the field of literacy. This task is two-fold serving to complete a course requirement, in addition to the program’s comprehensive assessment.

Transition to Online Learning

Quality Matters® (QM) (2018) identifies eight standards for online coursework in higher education. QM uses 42 review standards for course development in a rigorous, peer-review process. In order for a course to be certified, the design must have an overall score of 85%. The goal is that students can focus on the content presented and knowledge to be gained rather than the mechanics of effectively navigating a course site.

Creasman (2012) notes that in 2001, 89% of public four-year institutions were offering courses in the online environment. While Creasman (2012) was writing about undergraduate programs, graduate online work has been offered longer than undergraduate programs. Universities that lack staff dedicated to developing online curriculum and coursework must rely on the faculty within the schools, colleges, or departments. Online coursework is different – “you radically alter the nature, process, and ultimately, the content” (Creasman, 2012, p. 2) of any type of communication with students, including the instruction and student learning that occurs. Key differences between face-to-face and online courses, as noted by Creasman (2012), are complex. First, face-to-face courses are largely synchronous, while online learning is largely asynchronous. Students may be asked to participate in multiple, online discussions at the same time which does not occur in face-to-face classes. Writing becomes very important in online

coursework – by the student and by the instructor. Communication may be slowed down depending on when communications are checked by the students and the instructor, and this can lead to frustration by both. In an online environment, students have increased expectations for instructors to be “present” in online learning. The amount of information “presented” to students in a distance format is in greater volume when compared to face-to-face courses. Lastly, an instructor in the online learning environment is considered a facilitator of learning.

Increased Communication, Collaboration, and Engagement

As part of the redesigned program, increased emphasis has been placed on practices of communication, collaboration, and engagement among program candidates, as well as program faculty.

Communication in online coursework is critical and key to how students perceive the coursework and the learning that occurs. Kim and Bonk (2010) discuss how important it is for faculty teaching online coursework to be socially present, that is, it is imperative that the students feel they have an instructor who is responsive, giving feedback and comments in a timely way. This is achieved through four dimensions that Kim and Bonk (2010) identified related to affective and cognitive interaction with students, using technology that meets multiple student learning styles and organizing the course with images, messages, and instructional presentations, as well as ongoing interaction between students *and* between students and instructor.

Riggs and Linder (2016) identified approaches that can be used in successful online courses. This includes making it clear how communication will occur with the instructor through the first communication source – the syllabus. This lets students know about policies and the levels of engagement that are expected. Conducting some type of orientation is a critical component. Riggs and Linder (2016) suggest considering how the course is set up using modules, encouraging the presentation of course material through other mediums including: digital tools, applications, and web-based tools to increase engagement for students. The creation of discussion formats where students are invited to share through other “links to media content they have created” (p. 7) establishes a rich and meaningful learning environment. Finally, reflection should be an expectation for students (Riggs & Linder, 2016).

For faculty in the redesigned graduate program, both full-time and per-course, the expectation for heightened response times is held for all (Ragan, 2009). Email communication replies and returned phone calls are to be made within 24 hours of receipt, Monday through Friday. Feedback on submitted course assignments are to be returned to students within 72 hours of receipt. Program candidates are afforded opportunities to communicate independently, with peers, as well as with other building and district stakeholders throughout the program. All forms of communication are expected to remain professional and respectful at all times. Dispositional rubrics are also utilized to monitor candidates’ professional interactions throughout their duration in the program.

Collaboration remains an integral component of the redesigned program and the depth of which varies across learning experiences. Logistically, program candidates collaborate with their academic advisor to plan their instructional sequence and term schedules. Assignments in each of

the courses also require collaboration to varying degrees. This could be in the form of a discussion forum, field observation, group project, or practicum experience. Engagement in collaborative dialogue (Bruffee, 1999; Charan, 2001/2013) also occurs with program faculty for the purposes of semester schedules, course revisions, informal trainings, etc.

Investment in engagement from both program faculty and candidates is an equal expectation. As indicated previously, program faculty are expected to be visible and present (O'Malley, 2017) as they facilitate learning in their assigned course(s). Because a primary goal was for candidates' learning to offer practicality in terms of immediate application to their classroom and/or present role, the level of engagement and investment in program content is an added benefit.

Program Compliance

As part of the program's redesign, work to maintain compliance with issued, state regulations by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) was completed. Part of this work involved the alignment of program courses to certification requirements, specifically those for Special Reading K-12 certification. While the program independently does not satisfy all certification requirements, multiple courses imbedded in the program can transfer to satisfy certification requirements, allowing for expediency for candidates who seek Special Reading K-12 certification, in addition to the Master of Science in Education degree in Reading. As noted in the approved program matrix for Special Reading K-12 certification, requirements must be fulfilled in each of the following categories: Child Psychology, Adolescent Psychology, Education of the Exceptional Child, Evaluation of Abilities and Achievement, Special Reading Content Knowledge for Teaching, and Culminating Clinical Experiences with Students Experiencing Reading Difficulties.

Program Boundaries

As previously mentioned, this redesigned program is aligned with multiple sets of standards ranging from compliance with localized, state standards to those reflective of international scope. The rationale to do so was to enable this graduate program to reach graduate education students in Missouri and beyond. Presently, program enrollment reflects students residing in Missouri and bordering states. However, through directed recruitment efforts, the vision is for this program to reach students throughout the United States and globally. While providing a high-quality, graduate program in literacy education was the ultimate goal, accessibility remained a top priority too. Preparing specialized educators in the area of literacy, without regard to border restrictions, allows our higher education offering to foster accessibility for all prospective program applicants.

Cost Effectiveness

Graduates from the redesigned program must successfully complete ten, three-credit hour courses and their individual requirements. Prior to redesign, the program consisted of 32 credit hours and was condensed to 30 following the redesign. Courses include (please note that the first two listed are required of all School of Education graduate students):

- Multicultural Education for Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion
- Data Literacy & Assessment for Schools
- Literacy-Based Assessment & Analysis
- A Survey of Literacy Professionals & Practices
- Literacy in the Elementary School
- Literacy in the Secondary School
- Graduate Elementary Literacy Practicum
- Graduate Secondary Literacy Practicum
- Literacy-Focused Academic Inquiry
- Literacy Capstone

As part of this instructional sequence, candidates can attain a graduate degree in literacy for \$9,750. Edward St. John, Nathan Daun-Barnett, and Karen Moronski-Chapman (2013) further purport the significance of access to higher education as they identify that "...academic preparation and financial aid matter in college access" (p. 102). Not only do we believe that our literacy program equips candidates with the skillset to function effectively as a literacy professional in their classroom, building, and school district, but our programmatic framework also models cost effectiveness as well (Mitchell, Crowson, & Shipps, 2011). For many prospective applicants, cost is a significant factor when it comes to program selection, application, and ultimately, degree completion.

University-System Change Management

Even as the redesign efforts of the graduate reading program followed suit of other programs in the School of Education, the process of change was nonetheless complex (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Unifying all stakeholders involved to share in the same mission required disconnecting from history and tradition, in many regards, to successfully innovate (Levi, 2013) and chart a new, redesigned path. Doing so required holistic alignment and clarity across course titles, course objectives, program outcomes and competency strands, assessment tools, and professional standards.

Kotter (2002) identifies eight stages which he accounts to effectively process times of change. They include: 1) creating a sense of urgency; 2) organizing a guiding team to facilitate the change; 3) devising a vision and strategies for achieving such; 4) communicating the vision for change through a variety of mediums; 5) foreshadowing potential threats and eliminating obstacles; 6) acknowledging progress and celebrating short-term goals; 7) demonstrating perseverance; and, 8) shaping a culture to celebrate the innovation achieved when a season of change is complete (as cited in Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 394). Having effectively redesigned this program, time was invested in each of these stages, allowing for the successful launch of the redesigned program nearly one year later once all revisions were complete.

Change at the university-level is largely catalyzed by the scale of prospective opportunity which exists on the other side of any implemented change. Drucker (2004/2011) acknowledges that industry trends, market forces, new innovations and knowledge, as well as fluctuations in population demographics, mindsets, and structures can capitalize on opportunities for change in organizations. By the same token, consideration of context is paramount when evaluating the

timeliness of prospective change initiatives and their suitability for the organization and its constituents (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997/2011; Levi, 2013).

Roles and Expertise of the Classroom Teacher

From a philosophical paradigm, one of the biggest components for programmatic revision was threading best practices and research-based instructional strategies (Harvey & Ward, 2017; Holbrook & Salinger, 2018) throughout the program. As previously mentioned, historically, this program had been largely geared for clinical diagnosticians; whereas now, the emphasis is on practical usage of research-based literacy strategies and interventions (Walker-Gleaves & Waugh, 2017) that a variety of literacy professionals can use in their classroom and beyond with individual learners, small groups, or even whole class.

Prior to redesign, opportunities for candidates to observe, communicate with, and learn from practicing literacy professionals was obsolete; and, as part of the redesign, a key effort was made to construct a course that would remedy the absence of such. This course is titled, *A Survey of Literacy Professionals & Practices*. In this course, candidates are afforded fifteen hours of observation experiences where they have authentic field opportunities to observe professionals across a multi-layer literacy system. This system includes: school-based literacy volunteers and paraprofessionals, literacy coaches, reading teachers and interventionists, literacy specialists, and literacy coordinators.

Regardless of whether the program candidate is a classroom teacher who desires to remain in that position or if, upon completion of their degree, they wish to assume a new role as a literacy specialist in a school district, program curricula equips all candidates to immediately utilize their literacy expertise in whatever setting they are employed. Intentional curriculum merged with immediate, practical application opportunities prepares all literacy professionals (Bean & Dagen, 2012) with the expertise to lead well with credibility in the classroom setting and beyond.

What Candidates Are Saying

Feedback about the redesigned curriculum has only occurred informally through course evaluation and personal communication with candidates' academic advisor and program faculty. However, candidates are expressing positive reflections about course content, the block style of delivery, and the consistency in the structure of each of the courses. Candidates appreciate that there are connections between courses and artifacts that are shared between courses.

Further study of candidate satisfaction, dispositions, and overall competency using the identified standards will be completed as the first candidates to exit the program graduate with their Master's in Reading. Indications are, though, that candidates are learning skills and feeling competent to become literacy leaders in their schools, and desiring to move into literacy-specific positions as a result of the newly designed curriculum.

Conclusion

Celebrating currency and relevancy, the redesigned graduate program is now, from our perspective, better aligned with K-12 practices; and as a result, it is more effectively meeting the needs and hunger of its current candidates to benefit their professional learning. Upon being approached to transition the Graduate Reading Program to an online environment, concerns were expressed about the sustainability of academic rigor. Through professional literature, intentional curriculum, and authentic field experiences, program coursework is closely linked, easily allowing candidates to see and experience relationships across course content. As a result of candidates' completion of this program, they are steeped in best literacy practices and interventions, which equip them to celebrate their autonomy in philosophical beliefs as it relates to their identity as a literacy professional and leader.

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