Insider motivated curriculum renewal

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Abstract

This article explores how change is effected within an organization. Factors critical to the overall curriculum innovation process are highlighted through an analysis of three change strategies: the power-coercive, the empirical-rational and the normative re-educative, and through a discussion of an example innovation, the introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT) in Asia. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of local-level participation in promoting curricular change and concretely illustrates the potential benefits of such participation through examples of renewal-focused program practices. By developing opportunities for target users to contribute directly to renewal, it is shown that the chances for sustaining an innovation are far greater than with a more top-down oriented approach to change.

Introduction

The ways in which an organization effects curricular change depend on a wide variety of factors, such as overall organizational structure, institutional traditions, cultural orientation, and the roles of program personnel. In order to clarify important features of progressive-minded organizations, this paper explores practices that are central to successful innovation and then examines those features as they relate to the uptake of CLT in Asia. Essentially, what conditions are necessary to foster productive curriculum renewal? What program characteristics or practices must be in place to successfully implement change?

In terms of how organizations approach the innovation process, Chin and Benne (1976) propose three general strategies of change: the power-coercive, empirical-rational and normative re-educative, each of which is discussed below. Change strategies tend to reflect a particular organizational structure: a centrally managed hierarchy typically employs power-coercive or empirical-rational ways of change, while decentralized organizations tend towards the normative re-educative approach (White 1988, Markee 1997). Although the shape of an organization may lend itself towards a similar-minded approach to change, those who play a change agent role within their organiza-

tion have the responsibility of identifying which strategy should be employed in order to effectively identify, develop and implement sound innovations (Kennedy 1987). Thus, by considering the advantages and disadvantages of each approach, those seeking to introduce change are better able to choose strategies that best lead to successful, long-lasting innovation.

What follows is a brief explanation and evaluation of each change strategy. As opposed to other literature on curriculum innovation, this paper does not distinguish between the terms *change* and *innovation*. Often, a *change* is referred to as an alteration of a current practice or situation, but the result is not necessarily an improvement. On the other hand, a deliberate effort to introduce a new practice for the purpose of improvement refers to an *innovation* (Stoller 2001). As the central issue being discussed in this article is of improvement per se, either term is intended to refer to productive curricular development.

Change Strategies

Power-coercive strategy of change

When decisions to make a change are passed down by upper-level program administrators or by outside change agents, the power-coercive strategy is being employed. In these cases, changes are mandated based on "expert" decisions and often do not involve consultation with those directly involved in the curriculum, such as teachers or students. In this view, those at the top of the hierarchy hold the most knowledge and/or experience with educational processes, and therefore are best suited to invoke change. Such a top-down approach to change is commonly implemented where a clear hierarchy exists and where there is no tradition of lower-level staff participation. Communication is often unidirectional and initiated by a small number of high-level educational administrators.

In many parts of the world, the power-coercive strategy is a frequently used approach to curricular change. A common example of this approach is when a governmental body introduces a new textbook that has been developed with little or no consultation with its users. How effective is this approach in producing successful innovations, or as in this example, in resulting in the use of the new textbook? According to Kennedy (1987), if the methods supported by the text are quite new and different for the users, then problems are likely to arise. Teachers may end up abandoning the text or may simply continue using present practices. Not surprisingly, research has indicated that this type of change strategy does not result in enduring, "self-sustaining" innovations (Kennedy 1987, White 1988). One reason is that this approach does not promote individual initiative, a feature that Markee cites as "indis-

pensable to the long-term maintenance of innovation" (1997:64). Rather than discovering opportunities for improvement and contributing to the curriculum directly, teachers become "passive recipients" of decisions and function essentially as implementers of a given change. With such a limited role, teachers have little stake in the innovation process and overall direction of the program.

One consequence of limited participation is the potential for implementation barriers. Kennedy stresses that top-down mandated innovations can backfire when they reach the innovation adoption stage: recipients of the change may respond with their own power-coercive strategies thus creating conflict that hinders implementation. However, a less extreme and possibly more common response may be to feign implementation in order to appear compliant rather than display disagreement. In these cases, classroom reality may differ greatly from expected practices, as teachers are to accommodate curricular changes that do not reflect their educational beliefs, or in their eyes, adequately meet student needs.

Empirical-rational strategy of change

This strategy is based on the premise that individuals are rational beings, and that when presented with sufficient information illustrating the benefits of a proposed change, acceptance and adoption of the initiative are likely to occur (White 1988). Research is valued highly and considered integral to the innovation process; therefore, change is typically initiated by researchers rather than practitioners. Essentially, when an empirical-rational approach is employed, providing people with adequate evidence is in itself justification for change (Kennedy 1987).

Similar to the power-coercive approach, an empirical-rational strategy also tends to work within a centralized, hierarchical management system. Those at the top of the hierarchy hold more information than lower-level staff and can therefore initiate the innovation cycle and maintain control over decisions. Communication is top-down passed on from specialists, and there is little lower-level participation. With this strategy's focus on information dissemination, change agents often focus on increasing the flow of information throughout an organization (Markee 1997). In contrast, power-coercive proponents use authoritative tactics to induce change instead of sharing information and justifying decisions with concrete evidence.

While gathering and conveying information may well be an important stage of developing innovations, this approach is quite limited. According to Markee, the biggest disadvantage is that it assumes people accept proposed changes based solely on rational arguments. In reality, a host of other factors are capable of affecting innovation adoption, such as socio-cultural factors, personal beliefs and ideologies, organizational limitations as well as features of the innovation itself. In fact, many of these fac-

tors can play an even more important role than the act of information sharing itself.

Further criticism of this strategy includes a lack of emphasis on innovation implementation and a lack of staff participation. Change agents who are primarily focused on developing supporting arguments for innovation tend to overlook the complexities involved with implementing it. Often, no provisions are made for misunderstandings or conflicts as the innovation user is simply regarded as recipient of the change. Thus, this strategy is effective only when target users are already sympathetic to the proposed change (White 1988). In cases where large-scale innovation is being attempted or where potential adopters are not open to change, the empirical-rational strategy is not sufficient and must be supplemented with another strategy in order for the innovation to succeed.

Normative re-educative strategy of change

In contrast to both the empirical-rational and power-coercive approaches, a normative re-educative strategy requires staff participation and collaboration. Change is prompted from within the organization and often based on teacher action research, so those who will ultimately implement the innovation are involved in the initial identification of areas for improvement, meaning that teachers themselves may assume the role of change agent (Markee 1997).

This bottom-up approach to innovation rests on the assumption that people form their attitudes and beliefs based on social and cultural values, and that in order to adapt behaviors and effect long-lasting change, personal ideologies must also be changed. Accordingly, this approach seeks to effect change at a deeper level, targeting values, beliefs, skills and relationships. If such a change does not occur, changes will be surface level only and short-lived (Kennedy 1987, Markee 1997). Rather than being expected to change or being forced to change in response to passed down information, the normative re-educative strategy is a more humanistic approach that views curriculum participants as central to the innovation process.

Greater staff involvement aids the innovation process in many ways. Typically, changes identified by insiders are more likely to be implemented successfully. When staff members are aware of problems and have contributed to creating viable solutions, they have a greater stake in the innovation itself and in seeing it through to completion. At the same time, Kennedy notes that a higher level of participation enhances overall interest in the program and fosters professional development by encouraging a continued interest in future innovations. When all staff members are ensured a voice and are able to participate in curriculum-level and/or program-wide issues, the likelihood of successful innovation is far greater.

Normative re-educative strategies can be time-consuming and difficult, however,

and require a certain level of expertise to be maximally effective. Markee points out that less experienced staff members may not yet be able to conduct and investigate problems skillfully via action research. Internally-motivated change is facilitated by an experienced staff that can articulate problems relevant to broader curriculum or program-level issues.

When considering each of the three strategies, evidence has suggested that the normative re-educative approach contributes to longer-lasting change and has a higher adoption rate (Kennedy 1987, White 1988, Markee 1997). Kennedy illustrates how this approach can address underlying teacher beliefs by outlining a teacher education project. In his example, teachers articulated a need for more materials, which was addressed by using a problem-solving, consensus-based approach. The teachers, as users of the change, directly participated in the development process, learned to derive the appropriate theories to support and justify their decisions, and ultimately created a materials blueprint that aided effective and efficient materials design. Overall, Kennedy shows that by introducing a principled approach to change by means of a normative re-educative strategy, an increase in teacher understanding and knowledge is accomplished rather than just a surface level, "mechanistic" change. As a result, the innovation stands a much stronger chance of sustained success.

Such staff participation and collaboration are well documented features of progressive-minded organizations, yet there are other important factors to producing successful innovations (Kennedy 1987, Kouragou 1987, White 1988, Markee 1997, Hadley 1999, Rea-Dickens and Germaine 2001, Stoller 2001). Stoller (2001: 214-15) succinctly summarizes these beliefs by itemizing a list of guiding principles that stimulate innovative practices, which are introduced below. In her explanation, she effectively characterizes a workplace environment that is innovation-led, and in doing so, provides an instructive example for other organizations to follow.

1. Involve faculty

   Program faculty play a key part in stimulating innovation. A working environment that promotes "creativity, initiative, commitment, professionalism and professional development" is more likely to generate curricular innovation.

2. Understand the complexity of innovations

   The innovation process can be extremely complex and requires a lengthy decision-making process. Programs must be able to recognize and accept the complex nature of innovation management.

3. Be willing to fail

More innovations fail than succeed; in fact, Rogers (cited in Stoller 2001:214) estimates that 75% of all innovations do not succeed. When initiating an innovation, program personnel must be willing to fail on some points in order to succeed with others.

4. Share responsibility

"The responsibility for innovation must be shared and should not be left to chance." In other words, strong team support is necessary for an innovation to be seen through each development stage to implementation.

5. Elicit subjective views

Subjective views of a proposed innovation are often more influential than objective perspectives. It is important to consider how potential adopters regard a pending change and to elicit perceptions towards the innovation that are not readily verbalized. In this way, change agents can attempt to address any underlying barriers that may exist.

6. Alleviate the fears of resisters

For some, it is easier — and preferable — to maintain the status quo rather than to initiate change. Encouraging "resisters" to participate in innovation development requires alleviating their fears and encouraging them to consider new proposals.

Each of these factors play an equally important role in the innovation process, and overlooking any one point may cause a proposed change to run the risk of failure. Innovations often fall short of expectations and do not survive implementation, so ensuring that target users play an active role in the development process greatly aids the potential success of an innovation. Each "guiding principle" cited above cannot be effectively accomplished without staff involvement: open communication, collaboration and participative decision-making are all necessary ingredients for each principle to be fully realized.

The Communicative Language Teaching Innovation

A case in point regarding the difficulty of implementing change without local-level participation is the introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT) in Asia. According to Li, EFL contexts have generally had a low rate of success in implementing this approach (2001), and several articles have documented the difficulties in uptake of CLT in countries where very different approaches to learning prevail (Sano

et. al. 1984, Burnaby and Sun 1989, Anderson 1993, Matsuura et. al. 2001, Yamamori 2002). These studies have emphasized the disparity between the goals of CLT and the realization of these goals in the classroom, thus illustrating a lack of successful implementation.

In order to clarify why the adoption of the CLT innovation has been so difficult, Li (2001) surveyed the attitudes and beliefs of South Korean teachers of English through written questionnaires and face-to-face interviews regarding the status and success of its implementation. Li found that the difficulties reported by South Korean teachers fell into four categories: those difficulties caused by teachers, by students, by the educational system, and by the nature of CLT itself. The vast majority of responses lied in the "teacher" category, while responses related to students, the educational system and CLT were distant second, third and fourth reasons. Based on these findings, Li concludes that as the ultimate users of an innovation, teachers' perceptions regarding the feasibility of an innovation prove to be a critical factor in whether a particular development will succeed or fail. Curricular change requires an ideological change in the individual who must enact the innovation, and reforming the system only is insufficient.

Many other similar accounts of implementation hardships can be found in the literature regarding CLT. In China, for example, teachers reported a variety of difficulties: traditional teaching methods, class size, availability of resources, English teachers' deficiencies in oral English and sociolinguistic competence, adequate teacher training, and student resistance have all hindered success (Burnaby and Sun 1989, Anderson 1993). In Japan, Sano et. al. (1984) explain that students have few occasions to use English, so the need to become a proficient speaker is not of great importance in the eyes of learners. The "imported" goals of CLT are not appropriate for Japanese students of English, and the authors suggest revising the concept of "communicative teaching" in order to accommodate the specific teaching context and appropriately meet learners' needs. This mismatch between innovation mandate and genuine "real life" needs is also mentioned by Hadley (1999), who discusses a study conducted in Japan that investigated the actual language needs of top foreign international companies. Results show that despite frequent requests from ministry officials, politicians and business leaders for universities to emphasize spoken English proficiency, most companies do not need fluent speakers of English for their daily operations. Rather, English communication is primarily written via faxes, email and memos.

The Sano et. al. article's recommendation to redefine CLT in terms of the target context is echoed by Li, who suggests that in South Korea and in other similar EFL situations, language programs should "*adapt* rather than *adopt*" such innovations into their English teaching (2001:161). Only after studying the learning and teaching situa-

tion carefully can a program then understand whether a given change is appropriate for its particular educational and cultural context. Accomplishing this step requires gathering information from those who directly participate in the curriculum and collaborating with participants to resolve adoption issues as they arise.

Addressing Innovation Adoption Challenges

Although involving all participants in the innovation process can prove to be productive, the reality is that in many EFL contexts employing this approach is difficult. In the case of Japan, Hadley (1999) highlights a number of challenges that face tertiary institutions in driving ELT curriculum reform, one of which is adequately supporting teachers through the adoption of innovations. Hadley identifies the absence of teacher re-training and lack of teacher involvement in the innovation process as serious impediments to the long-term success of ELT curricular innovation. In Hadley's view, these obstacles can be attributed to the top-down relationship style and organizational structure prevalent in Japan.

This organizational constraint on the ability to innovate is certainly not unique to Japan. According to Markee (1997), the normative re-educative strategy typically occurs within decentralized organizations, and is most common in English-speaking countries. White (1988) also observes that innovations are simply more likely to occur in certain organizational cultures as opposed to others. While programs characterized by the normative re-educative approach have an environment conducive to innovation, empirical-rational oriented organizations are much less likely to be innovative. When power-coercive style organizations initiate innovations, the success of a proposal can depend greatly on the influence and power of the individual change agent.

Thus in non-English speaking countries where a clear hierarchy exists and where a centralized management system is the norm, employing the more innovation-oriented normative re-educative change strategy is difficult. Despite these difficulties, what efforts can be made to encourage teacher participation in curricular issues? How can a more inclusive approach to change be accomplished?

Encouraging local-level participation

In his discussion of curriculum development issues in Japan, Hadley (1999) suggests that innovators look for concrete ways to treat teachers as valued team members and to involve them more in the decision-making process. By exploiting current practices or by introducing new, culturally appropriate practices that foster communication and the exchange of information, strides can be made in this direction. As illustrated below, practices that are standard at many language programs can be maximized for

curriculum renewal purposes and can be designed to foster greater collaboration towards gathering program data and inspiring innovation.

Teacher Meetings

By holding frequent teacher meetings and by approaching them as a source for curricular innovation, meeting agendas can be expanded to provide opportunities for teacher input and feedback on change proposals and/or desired developments. When meetings are conducted in this way, teachers become accustomed to discussing and providing input on broad curricular issues, which ultimately enhances collaboration. Creating a formal means for teachers to communicate face-to-face with personnel from various levels facilitates information exchange and suggests an inclusive approach to decision-making.

Course Evaluations

While it is common practice to administer end-of-term course evaluations, an important follow-up step is to communicate findings with the entire staff. Certainly not all information may warrant public perusal, but a synthesis of key issues that emerge should be shared in order to establish open lines of communication. Keeping people informed supports the uptake of an innovation; staff members must be aware of the evidence that supports a proposed change in order to accept it. Effecting a change in beliefs cannot be achieved when staff members are not informed.

In-class discussion groups

In-class discussions can be designed to elicit useful information for curriculum renewal purposes while still meeting course objectives and pursuing student learning goals. At an EAP university program in Japan (Quinn and Evans 2004), group discussions are held in all first-year seminar classes in which students evaluate various aspects of the curriculum, ranging from class content to overall program structure. The procedure requires students to formulate opinions through a series of homework assignments, share experiences in groups, and then collaborate with classmates to summarize comments onto one feedback form. Ultimately, the feedback forms are reviewed and discussed by both teachers and program coordinator(s) who work together to create follow-up plans.

By designing a class discussion activity that focuses its attention on the overall curriculum, both teachers and students learn that they have a voice in the direction of the program and that their opinions matter. Creating opportunities for such communication prepares the way for future investigative efforts as teachers and students become accustomed to participating in program-level issues. Teachers learn to

approach their courses as one piece of a larger whole and are encouraged to critique current practices and to develop a problem-solving mindset for the purpose of curricular improvement.

Another similar example of classroom-generated renewal is problem-posing, an approach employed by Schleppegrell and Bowman (1995) as a tool to help teachers develop materials to supplement national curriculum specifications. In this case, teachers identify topics of interest to students, introduce those topics as problems to the class, process discussions, and then generate language learning activities based on the language produced by students.

As a renewal tool, problem-posing allows teachers to directly contribute to curriculum development. Teachers learn more about student needs and are able to act on this new information by appropriately revising course content. Rather than consistently applying a national curriculum across a variety of circumstances or depending entirely on a course text, teachers can collaborate and learn to supplement core materials in a student-centered, goals-oriented way. Through the process of adopting a problem-posing approach, teachers can acquire new skills and modify their teaching practices, a process that promotes professional development. As Schleppegrell and Bowman claim, "the problem-posing procedure illustrates how collaboration among teachers and a dialogic approach to working with learners can result in ongoing curriculum renewal" (1995:305).

Conclusion

While the suggestions above are not meant to instruct all teaching contexts, they are intended to exemplify practices that have succeeded with some programs and can therefore serve as a springboard for similar ideas. Introducing and sustaining change is a complex and difficult process, and by carefully considering those factors that influence its development, the likelihood of effective innovation management is greater. A key factor discussed in this article is the importance of local-level participation, in which program participants contribute directly to curriculum development. Opportunities for sharing information, expressing opinions, and inspiring contributions to program development can help create an atmosphere that is receptive to change. Departing from standard practice can be a risky endeavor for any organization, and considering how a particular change will affect individual participants must not be overlooked.

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