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What Challenges Do Content-Based Program Administrators Face?

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In 1989 my colleagues Ann Snow, Mari Wesche, and I addressed practical considerations in content-based program implementation in our book *Content-Based Second Language Instruction* (pp. 70-88). The treatment of the topic was not meant to be an exhaustive one, but rather intended to highlight the particular issues and challenges germane to administering content-based programs. None of us had had a great deal of experience administering such programs, and content-based instruction (CBI) was still more or less in its infancy. My experience in the past few years has been more intensively in this realm—that is, I have been involved in administering a year-long content-based ESL program for concurrently enrolled university students at UCLA[1] as well as a summer adjunct program for visiting international students offered through UCLA Summer Sessions. Being in the administrative hot seat for these programs has enabled me to see the issues more clearly than I had before, and it is with this in mind that I share this experience below.[2]

Program administrators wear many hats—regardless of the type of program involved. Most frequently, they spearhead innovation and oversee the implementation of curricular philosophy as reflected in course objectives, syllabus specifications, and course activities and materials. They also assume responsibility for such critical aspects as budgeting, hiring instructors and support staff, selecting and ordering textbooks, scheduling class times and rooms, and providing for duplication facilities and audio-visual needs. On the student end, they produce and distribute promotional materials, contact program sponsors, and recruit and advise students. Finally, they direct ongoing evaluation efforts—student placement and achievement testing, instructor observation, program evaluation, and the like (see Pennington & Xiao, 1990 and Matthies, 1991 for a more detailed discussion of these activities). Carrying out all of the above duties requires a combination of pedagogical savvy, market insight, managerial talent, and crisis intervention skills.

The above picture is a generic portait of the ESL program administrator and does not take into account any of the special challenges of content-based program administration to which I alluded previously. I maintain that Murphy's Law, which prevails in all of program administration, is all the more prevalent in CBI, since in CBI we are mapping new boundaries in general. This redefinition of boundaries entails an accompanying redefinition of the program administrator's responsibilities.

The following insights from my recent administrative experience with the ESL summer adjunct program for international students will hopefully serve to alert others to some of the salient aspects which need special attention if content-based programs are to be effectively administered.[3] I share these experiences with the 1991 UCLA Advanced English Program (AEP) at the risk of being recognized as a novice program administrator, which I openly confess to being. Nonetheless, I believe that the hurdles which I jumped (or as the case may be, stumbled over) during the course of this program are not uncommon ones, and that anyone involved in the administration of content-based programs can benefit from being forewarned as to what may lie ahead.

Our job was facilitated by a supportive sponsor, UCLA Summer Sessions, whose staff understood the issues involved and were committed to the long-range goal of implementing CBI, even if it meant operating at a loss for the first year or two (which, needless to say, we managed to do). My coadministrator and I were fully prepared to deal with the types of problems discussed in the 1989 work cited above—for example, inadequate funding for the program, insufficient compensation for teaching faculty, lack of collaborative spirit among teachers, incomplete faculty understanding of CBI principles, unsuitable facilities, scheduling problems, excessive teacher work load, and the like.

In fact, none of these occurred. Because of the favored status our program enjoyed with the administration, we received priority room scheduling; further, we were able to budget adequately for our material needs (e.g., photocopying, audio-visual supplies) and even received support which exceeded our expectations (such as access to the university's computer lab facilities and tutorial services and a modest entertainment budget which covered an end-of-term student barbecue). We requested (and received) 150% summer pay for the teachers in our program, arguing that since they were working from a reactive curriculum in which they had to respond on a day-to-day basis to what was being presented in the content course, they would be developing most of their own teaching materials. Finally, through a brief but fruitful presessional workshop with the teachers involved, we were able to build on an already existing collaborative spirit and further orient teachers to the most critical underlying principles of CBI.[4]

Challenges

The following challenges, however, caught us more unprepared.

Student Recruitment

We were scheduled to offer two back-to-back six-week sessions, for which Summer Sessions had promised us 150 students each. The reality of offering a content-based program for the designated proficiency level,[5] however, soon became clear, as rosters for the first session showed only 12 students enrolled in the program. Eventually we were able to secure 18 students who both fit our desired profile (i.e., academically oriented with the required TOEFL level) and were interested in participating in the program. The second summer session fared slightly better, with a Japanese client providing the majority of the 88 students who participated. However, this brought with it a problem of a different nature, namely that the Japanese/non-Japanese (i.e., European and South American) mix in this session was extremely uneven, leading to certain cross-cultural problems which impacted negatively on the effectiveness of the program. This was particularly evident in the speech component, in which the oral proficiency differences of the Japanese and non-Japanese students were most evident, and where student needs diverged most radically.

Packaging the Program

We had attempted to communicate the nature of the program through specially designed promotional materials. Where possible (both in Japan and later when students had arrived on campus), we also held a student orientation to present program specifics and answer questions. However, we found that explaining a complex venture like CBI in language which is accessible to students (and especially within the confines of brochure copy) is a near but impossible task. The student orientation session at UCLA was slightly more successful; however, the complete unfamiliarity of students with this model of instruction made it difficult for them to imagine the integrated language and content teaching they would be experiencing. Many, in fact, were puzzled by the information presented, and opted instead to enroll in the more traditional intensive language program also available to them on campus.

Red Tape

Working within a bureaucratic hierarchy has its rewards (such as staff available to assist in various aspects of the program) and its punishments. Because our program was part of the regular summer offerings, our students enrolled through the central office, which also handles drop/add requests and the like. Staff in the Summer

Sessions office did not understand that in our model of linked courses, section changes entailed a change in not one course, but in the entire suite of courses which comprised the program (here, ESL, speech, and the content course). This was but the beginning of numerous red tape snags.

Selection of Content Classes

We wanted to offer a wide variety of content courses. However, in order to facilitate curriculum and materials development efforts, we had to team ESL teachers and attach multiple sections of ESL to a given content area. This limited the number of content courses we could offer. The eventual AEP content course offerings (economics, psychology, western civilization, American history 1900-present, and communication studies) were selected with a view toward allowing students to select from introductory courses across a broad spectrum of disciplines. In selecting these courses, we also considered factors such as the instructional effectiveness of the professors involved and their willingness to include international students in their classes. Unfortunately, we did not always have access to the instructors' syllabuses or reading lists, nor did we know in advance the academic backgrounds and interests of our student population. What in fact occurred was that the majority of students preferred the communication studies course, with far fewer selecting the remainder of the classes.

One of the issues we did not adequately anticipate in content course selection was the degree to which students' prior background knowledge would figure in their content course performance. This in fact proved to be the case in western civilization, economics, and American history. Especially in the American history class, the American students had a distinct cultural advantage over the international students—most of whom had never heard of Malcolm X, the WPA, the New Deal, and so forth. Finally, the six-book course reading load for the American history course (which included a novel and several autobiographies as well as several academic textbooks) overwhelmed the international students and caused several to abandon their attempt to keep up with the content course material.

Cultural Misunderstandings

Cultural misunderstandings are bound to occur in any program, especially those involving recently arrived international students who may be experiencing culture shock. In a content-based program, students not only experience the predictable kinds of cultural alienation, but suffer as well from lack of prior exposure to the university system. Perhaps the most interesting of our summer experiences with this involved a student from France who, misunderstanding the scantron instructions on his midterm psychology exam, designated the *no post* grade column, assuming that this meant the grade would be reported to him personally rather than mailed to him. When he did not find his grade listed on the midterm grade roster, he interpreted this as meaning he had failed the exam. Disappointed, he stopped attending the psychology class. Only through intervention by his ESL instructor, who sensed that something was wrong, was the situation righted. These kinds of misunderstanding may seem somewhat trivial or even amusing when first encountered; however, they clearly undermine students' efforts to achieve their academic goals and thus impact seriously on the program administrator's attempts to maintain the integrity of the program.

Attrition

No doubt all programs suffer from problems of attrition. However, in an adjunct model program, the attrition factor is compounded by the fact that a student who is failing one class is in all likelihood at risk in the linked course as well; thus once the failure factor sets in, it is multiplied over the number of courses involved, and students do not have the usual recourse of doubling their efforts in their "other" courses. This situation was certainly the case in AEP, especially in those courses (e.g., economics, American history) where background knowledge played a larger role. Since these courses were ones with lower student enrollments to begin with, this backwash effect was particularly disruptive to the effective implementation of the adjunct model, and teachers in both the linked courses experienced a high degree of frustration as a result.

Conclusions

Having detailed the above setbacks, which impeded the smooth administration of the program, I'd like to end with several recommendations. First, adjunct programs require a high level of student proficiency. Student recruitment at this end of the proficiency scale is difficult, since there may not be sufficient numbers of students who meet the designated cutoff requirements. Without focused, long-term efforts on the part of the sponsor, such programs will not be realizable. Second, such recruitment efforts need to be backed up by well-planned and professional program packaging. In other words, the program will need to be described in such a way that students understand its purpose and intent. Planning ahead for the future of AEP, for example, we have assembled video footage of participants in which they candidly give their own assessment of the program. This footage, once edited, will be available in enrollment centers to pique students' curiosity and present a more valid picture of what this type of language study entails.

Next, although being a part of a centralized bureaucracy can provide a program with important support services, content-based programs have special requirements which fall outside the realm of the procedures normally followed in the centralized administration. Such programs can therefore definitely benefit from having a decentralized structure (or at least a clearly detailed set of special procedures) to handle admissions, enrollment, and scheduling. This would prevent situations in which students are misdirected or falsely informed and would certainly simplify the administration of such programs. In terms of content class selection and cultural misunderstandings, a more sensitive administration (i.e., one aware of the types of pitfalls encountered in AEP) would be able to more effectively orient students to the U.S. university system and select courses which require less cultural background knowledge on the part of the students. Finally, the likelihood of attrition from the program can be lessened by attending to a number of the above recommendations.

Even in the administratively difficult arena of CBI, the ends do justify the means. Satisfied students and teachers and documented program success are the ultimate administrator's reward, and it is my belief that an effectively administered content-based program, by virtue of the meaningful language exposure and practice which it provides, produces these desired end results.

Students in AEP made measured gains in their writing and speaking skills, and (as measured via a self-assessment instrument) increased in their perceived ability to perform a variety of academic tasks (e.g., ability to take notes from a lecture, read an academic textbook, or ask a professor a question in office hours). They also showed gains in their academic writing skills on a pre/post composition measure. When asked to rate the program's effectiveness, they gave it high ratings in terms of the help it provided in improving their academic writing and listening skills as well as their English conversation and textbook reading skills. The teachers, too, expressed satisfaction in their end-of-term reviews of curriculum, as summarized by the following teacher comment: "My overall experience with the Summer Adjunct Program this year was quite positive—certainly the best of my four summers teaching summer-institute-type programs. Where the content class was concerned, students received clearly presented, comprehensible input . . . As for [the ESL class], the class worked much of the time in an almost magical way. If an ordinary [ESL class] were half as involved with the material and the discussions as this class was, it would still be a good class." Given these kinds of rewards, I would heartily encourage others to embark on the venture of content-based program administration, and I would further urge them to document their administrative efforts, thus building on the groundwork which I lay in this article. ■

Footnotes

1. See the article in this volume by Repath and Valentine for a more complete description of the curriculum in this program.

2. In both of these programs, I was fortunate to share administrative duties with my colleagues Brian Lynch (academic director, UCLA ESL Service Courses) and Jean Turner (codirector, UCLA Summer Sessions Advanced English Program). Though the opinions stated here are my own, I owe a large debt to both Brian and Jean for facilitating the administration of these ventures.

3. This program, like the UCLA Freshman Summer Program (FSP), follows the adjunct model of program design (see Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989). However, it differs in terms of audience (international students studying in the U.S. during the summer, not immigrant freshman students who are regularly admitted to a U.S. university) and in certain of its design elements. For example, students attend two linked courses (ESL and a content area course) plus a general (nonadjuncted) English conversation course, unlike FSP in which students attend only two linked classes.

4. See the contribution by Peter Master in this volume for more information on preservicing and in-servicing teachers in the CBI context.

5. This program was designed for students at the higher end of the proficiency spectrum (TOEFL 500+).

References

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