

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Practitioners respond to Kathleen Graves’ ‘Mind the gap: A tale of two curriculum fallacies’

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As Kathleen Graves argues in her 2023 article, the belief that students learn best when teachers deliver a curriculum exactly as written is a common fallacy, based on an underlying assumption that ‘the institutional curriculum is the most important determinant of what happens in the classroom’ (p. 200). Graves stresses that, in reality, the institutional curriculum itself does not guarantee effective learning and that, instead, it is up to teachers to modify, adapt, or ‘enact’ the curriculum for it to make sense and work effectively in each unique context (p. 200). In our roles as academic writing instructors at a university in Japan, we are simultaneously teachers and curriculum developers. As such, we were drawn to this article and have examined how Graves’ ideas relate to our teaching beliefs and experiences. In this response article, we first discuss issues caused by an overemphasis on the institutional as well as on the enacted curricula. We then highlight the importance of building a program culture that invites open dialogue about how teachers creatively adapt a given curriculum in order to involve teachers meaningfully in course development.

One of our main concerns with the assumption that a ‘good’ institutional curriculum is the primary basis of effective teaching and learning is that it can be seriously detrimental to teachers’ relationships with their work. This occurs particularly when the fallacy is structurally reinforced within a program, leading to the expectation that the role of a teacher is to dutifully follow exactly what the curriculum prescribes. We have both worked on programs where following the institutional curriculum has taken priority over teacher autonomy in the classroom. One particular example from Peter’s experience is an academic English program which explicitly aimed for all 4,000 students to achieve identical learning outcomes by requiring classroom teaching to be a mirror image of the institutional curriculum. In practice, this meant that all aspects of the course, including the structure of each lesson, the timing of each stage, and the teaching methodology were prescribed top-down. A good institutional curriculum should be one that supports the teacher, liberating them from the task of creating a course from scratch and providing them with the foundations for them to dedicate their efforts to teaching to the best of their abilities. However, in this case, the curriculum was designed to intentionally take decisions out of the hands of the teacher and, as a result, it overreached its purpose. There was effectively no space for teachers to be creative or to adapt the lesson to the students’ needs or interests. For many teachers on this program, it was a stifling, demotivating, and deprofessionalizing experience; Peter left the program having lost much of his passion for the classroom and with a sense of having regressed as a teacher.

On the other hand, we do realize that in other cases teachers may not perceive such institutional expectations as frustrating, limiting, or restrictive. Instead, we know many teachers who are grateful to receive a curriculum to follow and who appreciate the support it offers. We, ourselves, have been similarly grateful to be able to rely on institutional curriculums, especially as early career teachers and when teaching a class for the first time. On the surface, this may appear to be an exception to Graves’ critique of the curricular fallacies that permeate education. In these cases, is it really

problematic to believe that effective learning can happen when teachers faithfully follow a curriculum, especially when the teachers themselves want to do so?

While we have so far discussed issues with overbearing institutional curricula, we also found it interesting to consider how far teachers could choose to diverge from the institutional curriculum. Graves provides an anecdote of meeting a teacher who tended to skip a pairwork activity included in a textbook she had authored. Despite conceptually understanding that the curriculum should serve as a 'map' for teachers rather than a prescriptive list of actions to follow, Graves (2023) recalls feeling tempted to convince the teacher to use the pair work activity: she felt that if the teacher's students did not learn, 'the problem was not the textbook, it was the teacher' (p. 197). While Graves was instinctively critical of the teacher in her example, she later reflects that she should have considered the teacher's reasoning and questioned her own assumption that the teacher was at fault for diverging from her textbook's approach.

As a teacher trainer working with Japanese high school teachers to develop their communicative language teaching (CLT) skills, Peter had strikingly similar experiences to Graves, whereby teachers introduced a grammar point from the textbook but subsequently chose not to provide students with an opportunity for practice of the target language. Their rationales included the perception that they needed to prioritize the entrance exam, that they lacked sufficient time for speaking activities, and that their students were either unwilling or unable to communicate with each other in English. Yet, while Graves was sympathetic to the teacher in her case, Peter was less convinced by the teachers' rationales for omitting pairwork. While he was sympathetic to the multiple challenges of implementing CLT at the high school level, he believed that some teachers in his context were simply resistant to change and were willfully overlooking the explicit main aim of the program: to shift to a more communicative, more student-centred teaching approach with the long-term goal of boosting the overall English proficiency in the country. This example suggests that although teachers should adapt curricula in ways they deem fit for their own contexts, there may be cases where an enacted curriculum can arguably be 'wrong' when it involves a deviation from the fundamental objective of the institutional curriculum.

A shift in orientation

It is important to note that Graves' main argument is not so much about what teachers do in the classroom (i.e. the extent to which they dutifully follow a curriculum or deviate from it) as it is about calling for a shift in orientation – from a culture of putting utmost primacy on the institutional curriculum to one that focuses more on how teachers actually take and use that curriculum in workable ways in their classrooms. A fundamental change here is from assuming teachers can deliver a curriculum in the same way to assuming that every teacher will inevitably deliver a curriculum differently, as no two teachers are exactly alike, and no two classrooms are exactly alike. What started as an expectation of homogeneity and standardization should shift over to taking for granted variety, difference, and creativity.

This, to us, is the most meaningful change in orientation proposed by Graves: when it comes to course development, it is necessary to shift the focus from the institutional curriculum to the enacted curriculum. The institutional curriculum is 'inert and meaningless' until it is enacted or brought to life by the teacher; the 'goodness emerges through enactment' (Graves, 2023, p. 200). The desire to achieve standardization in the name of fairness and to deliver the same educational experience across all classrooms can cast notions of curricular experimentation and innovation as threats to that standardization, rather than avenues for overall curricular improvement. Graves provides an example of curricular reform that centered on teacher input and feedback; creative classroom enactments were embraced and encouraged as a source of curricular innovation, rather than something to be stifled. However, our experiences as active participants in curriculum development point to the difficulties in achieving a context as Graves describes. Even when teachers are involved in the building of a curriculum, we believe there can still remain an emphasis on the primacy of the institutional curriculum, with far

less attention paid to enacted curricula. We have both been in situations where teacher involvement in curricular revision is actively encouraged, and curricular materials therefore appear malleable in that they are seemingly continually updated. This often leads to a sense of ground-up collaborative development based on teacher involvement: teacher input and decisions based on group consensus provide reassurances that the curriculum is attuned to the context and the needs of our students. However, even in these cases, we feel that there can be excessive time and energy spent on perfecting that central ‘product’ that is ultimately envisioned to be received by teachers. Despite apparent teacher engagement, we still find that teachers are, for the most part, ‘positioned as receivers and consumers of new ideas and practices’ (Graves, 2023, p. 202) and, once these have been introduced, there is rarely any discussion of how they may be interpreted and enacted by teachers. Even in programs where the curriculum is developed by teachers and then shared, with teachers as developers and also receivers of that curriculum, the foundational assumption that ‘teachers should faithfully follow a curriculum’ may not necessarily change.

In fact, we believe true curriculum development is frequently hampered by an absence of open dialogue about how teachers interpret the institutional curriculum, and how they have refashioned existing materials or supplemented with new activities to create their own enacted curriculum. Even with all teachers contributing to curriculum-building, no matter how ‘good’ a curriculum may look on paper, it will inevitably be mediated through individual teachers’ enactments. If teacher involvement in curriculum building does not also come with a programmatic culture that values the enacted curriculum, teachers may still feel alienated from the curriculum. In such a program culture, we have experienced feelings of uncertainty and guilt whenever we have felt the need to ‘stray’ from the curriculum to better fit the needs of our students. We have both experienced meetings about institutional curricula in which everyone appears to be in agreement and on the same page, only to later hear hushed corridor conversations about how teachers plan to modify the curriculum for their own classes. Even the language used to describe this enactment can be imbued with negative connotations: teachers talk of ‘rebellious’, ‘going rogue’, when talking about ‘deviating’ from the agreed-upon curriculum. We have often felt uncertain as to how much adaptation will be seen as acceptable or appropriate, and what will be frowned upon. Without a clear understanding of the extent of the autonomy teachers are afforded, we have realized that many teachers, ourselves included, are often reluctant to be open about the true extent of their enacted curricula for fear of being seen as not doing our jobs. The perceived risk involved in ‘admitting’ to making unilateral decisions about our own classes feels particularly pertinent in our context, where the job security for many teachers is not guaranteed.

To overcome this, we want to highlight the importance of a program culture in which curricular enactment is embraced and openly discussed. This would be in place of a culture in which there is an expectation that teachers deliver a curriculum in broadly the same way. Based on such an expectation, it follows that once the curriculum is decided, there is little to discuss since it is assumed that it will be delivered in the same way with similar results. Instead, by valuing teacher judgment and by placing the emphasis on enacted curricula, there could be increased open dialogue amongst teachers sharing the various creative ways in which we could adjust and adapt the materials, the reasons why we wish to make such changes, and how those decisions could lead to more effective learning. It is important for programs to create safe and supportive spaces to facilitate this dialogue so teachers can overcome feelings of guilt in not following the script and so the value of enactment can be formally recognized.

Reference

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