

1 Teachers as course developers

Kathleen Graves

Purpose of this book

One afternoon, a teacher came into my office to discuss an independent study. “I have been asked to design an evening English course for adults in my town in Nicaragua.” He paused and then continued, “I’ve never developed a course before. Are there any guidelines? Is there a procedure to follow? Where do I start?” I realized as I listened to him that I had heard these questions many times before, from many teachers, the difference being the nature of each teacher’s situation. For example, one teacher explained that her school needed a course for the preteens who had finished their children’s course but were too young for the teen course. Another teacher said, “I’m given some books and then told I can teach any way I want.” A fourth teacher explained, “My students are in danger of losing their first language literacy. How do I design a course that enables them to maintain literacy in both languages?” The situations were different, but the questions were the same: Are there any guidelines? What do I do? Where do I start?

These teachers’ situations are not unusual, as teachers are increasingly being called upon to design the courses they teach (Breen 1987; Nunan 1987; Richards 1990; Yalden 1987). The challenge for me, as a teacher educator, was both to help these teachers draw on their own experience to answer those questions and to provide them with a conceptual framework for making sense of the course development process. This book is an attempt to meet the challenge from those two perspectives. First, it will help teachers see that they do have experience in course development and recognize how that experience can serve as a basis for developing new courses or modifying existing ones. Second, the book will describe a framework of the components of course development that can help teachers make sense of a complex process. Thus the purpose of this book is to lead teachers to an understanding of how to develop courses from their own experience as well as from the experiences and theories of others. It attempts to capture that

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-49768-8 - Teachers as Course Developers
Edited by Kathleen Graves
Excerpt
[More information](#)

2 Kathleen Graves

process in action through the stories of six teachers, each of whom developed a course.

Premises of the book

Helping teachers understand how to make use of their own experience as well as the theories of others raises questions about the relationship between theory and practice, which is a fundamental question for teachers and teacher educators. A distinction between theory in the general sense and theory in the personal sense may be useful. Prabhu (1990) defines theory in the general sense as an abstraction that attempts to unite diverse and complex phenomena into a single principle or system of principles so as to make sense of the phenomena. Personal theory, by contrast, is a subjective understanding of one's practice or "sense of plausibility" that provides coherence and direction for the teacher. Both the efforts of others to provide models and the teacher's own experience and understanding of that experience are part of how teachers make sense of what they do. In the words of Mary Kennedy (1991: 2), "Teachers, like other learners, interpret new content through their existing understandings and modify and reinterpret new ideas on the basis of what they already know or believe." Thus one premise of this book is that teachers develop and change from the inside out, through individual practice and reflection, and from the outside in, through contact with the experiences and theories of others.¹

Another premise is that course development is a grounded process because it is about a specific course in a given time and place with a given set of people. It is not an orderly sequence of events but rather a complex, unpredictable, and individual process. The teacher herself is the most important variable in the process. A teacher develops a course in ways that reflect her experience and the values and priorities that are products of her experience as well as the prevailing wisdom around her. The more aware a teacher is of her values and priorities, the greater her understanding of why certain things make sense to her and the greater her ability to understand and resolve the dilemmas she will confront.

Contents of the book

This book is about teachers as course developers in two senses. It is about teachers such as the ones who asked the questions in the opening paragraph,

1 For a model of how teachers construct their understanding of their practice, see Colton and Sparks-Langer (1993).

and thus all teachers who are asking the same kinds of questions. Chapter 1 discusses teachers as course developers in this general sense. Chapter 2 describes a framework of components in course development and issues for the teacher to consider in the process. The book is also about course developers in a specific sense: the accounts of six experienced teachers who describe the process of developing a course in Chapters 3 through 8. Each account is followed by an analysis and a set of questions that ask the reader to consider a particular aspect of the framework discussed in Chapter 2. An annotated bibliography at the end of the book is intended for readers interested in learning more about curriculum theory and course design processes.

Course, curriculum, and syllabus

The terms *course*, *curriculum*, and *syllabus* have been assigned meanings by their users that often overlap. For example, Nunan (1987) discusses three ways in which the notion of curriculum has been interpreted by teachers: as a product or set of items to be taught, as a process for deriving materials and methodology, and as the planning (as opposed to the implementation or evaluation) phase of a program. For the purposes of this book, a curriculum will be understood in the broadest sense as the philosophy, purposes, design, and implementation of a whole program. A syllabus will be defined narrowly as the specification and ordering of content of a course or courses (White 1988). Hutchinson and Waters (1987:65) have defined a course as “an integrated series of teaching-learning experiences, whose ultimate aim is to lead the learners to a particular state of knowledge.” Thus syllabus design is a part of course development, and a course is part of a curriculum. However, such strict definitions do not apply in practice, as some teachers may refer to the “curriculum” for their course and others to the “syllabus” for the curriculum. The distinction between a curriculum and a course is nevertheless important because some of the areas of concern in curriculum development may be out of the hands of teachers who are developing courses – for example, societal needs analysis, testing for placement purposes, or programwide evaluation.

In a broad sense, the process of course development is similar to that of curriculum development. Course development includes planning a course, teaching it, and modifying the plan, both while the course is in progress and after the course is over. In the traditional view of curriculum development, which Johnson (1989) calls a “specialist approach,” teachers have no role in the planning stages, and specialists determine the purposes, plan the syllabus, and develop the materials that teachers are then supposed to use in

4 Kathleen Graves

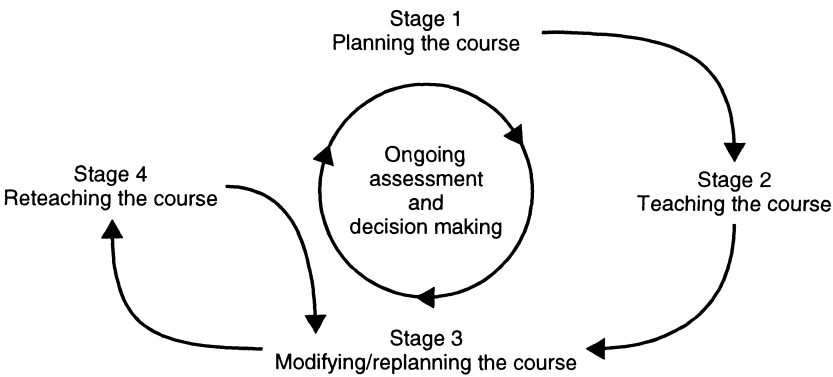


Figure 1 The process of course development for the teacher

their classrooms. Nevertheless, teachers who have never planned a new course still have experience in course development. This is because course development is more than just planning a course; it also includes teaching it, an experience that teachers, by definition, have. Furthermore, most courses also entail modification of the course, both while it is in progress and after it is over. In discussing the nature of decision making in curriculum development, Johnson proposes that it is “a continuing and cyclical process of development, revision, maintenance and renewal which needs to continue throughout the life of the curriculum.” Similarly, teachers are involved in a cycle of decision making about their courses, as shown in Figure 1.

All teachers have experience with stage 2, teaching a course. Even when following an assigned text or syllabus, a teacher must still make decisions about what to emphasize, leave out, augment, and review and how to practice, how much, with whom, and when. Most teachers have experience with stages 3 and 4 because they teach the same course or use the same textbook one semester after another and change the way they teach according to their experience. For example, a teacher may decide to spend more time on pronunciation or on Unit 3 the next term because experience has shown that those are problem areas for her students. In this respect, planning and teaching lessons are a microversion of planning and teaching courses. The teacher who decides that in the 9:30 class the students needed more time to practice Exercise 3 and so gives the 11:30 class extra time is operating in a way similar to the teacher who determines that in the next term students will need to spend more time on Unit 3. A teacher’s expertise at the level of planning and teaching lessons is thus both part of and similar to the overall process of course development.

Problematizing

When a teacher who is about to design a new course asks, “Are there any guidelines? Is there a procedure to follow?” the hoped-for answer is yes. No teacher wants to reinvent the wheel, and if there is a procedure to follow, she wants to know what it is. In practice, however, the answer to the questions is both yes and no: yes because there are models, guidelines, and principles to consider that can help a teacher make sense of her situation, mobilize her resources, and organize her progress; no because the guidelines are not a recipe. There is no set procedure to follow that will guarantee a successful course because each teacher and each teacher’s situation is different. Put another way, there is no answer to give, but there is an answer to find.

A set of guidelines and principles will be the subject of the next chapter. They address the areas of needs assessment, goal and objective setting, conceptualizing and organizing content, choosing or adapting materials and activities, evaluation, and consideration of constraints and resources. Though they suggest an ordered process, it is probably more realistic to view them as a framework of components that overlap both conceptually and temporally and raise issues for the teacher to consider. Different teachers will start with different issues. One teacher may start by thinking about who the students are, another by figuring out what to do with the required material, and another by trying to formulate course goals and objectives.

Where a teacher starts in the process of course design depends on the constraints and resources of her situation and how she perceives them. To proceed, she needs to understand the givens of her situation, to identify the challenges that will shape her decisions, and to figure out what must and can be done. I call this process “problematizing” her situation.² Problematizing and problem solving are not the same. Problematizing depends on the teacher’s perceptions of the context, out of which arise problems to be solved. The teacher defines the problems. Problem solving assumes that the problems are givens that the teacher needs to address. Asking questions and identifying problems are obvious means of problematizing. However, the process is not necessarily one that results in an articulated statement because most teachers work autonomously. When teachers problematize, they do so in concrete terms because the challenges arise from a concrete situation. The generic questions may be “What do I see as the challenges of

2 Problematizing derives from Paulo Freire’s term *problematization*, about which he writes, “The process of problematization is basically someone’s reflection on a content which results from an act, or reflection on the act itself in order to act better together with others within the framework of reality” (Freire 1973: 154).

6 Kathleen Graves

my situation?” and “What resources are needed and are available to address the challenges?” but to teachers the questions sound more like “What kind of material works with teenagers?” or “How do I go about motivating the more advanced students in the class?” As a teacher problematizes her situation, she can begin to find workable solutions that make use of her experience and the resources available to her.

Problematizing requires that the teacher recognize the value of her own experience. Because of the role played by experience, there is no such thing as “starting a course from scratch.” The expertise acquired through experience is an important source of answers as a teacher problematizes her situation. It is often difficult for teachers to acknowledge their own expertise; instead, they seek answers from people they consider experts. Valuable though the knowledge of experts may be, teachers themselves are experts in their settings, and their past experience and successes can serve as bridges to new situations. Correspondingly, the experience of developing a course enables teachers to make sense of the theories and expertise of others because it gives them opportunities to clarify their understanding of theory and make it concrete. Their practice in turn changes their understanding of the theories. For example, examining needs assessment tools, understanding the rationale of two different models for integrating content, or examining other course syllabuses can trigger the appropriate steps and solutions. In applying that new knowledge, the needs assessment is modified or expanded to fit the teacher’s situation, a third way of putting together content emerges, or the course syllabuses are found to be inappropriate, which helps the teacher decide what is appropriate.

Finding one’s own way in designing a course does not mean that all ways are equally effective. Successful course design depends on the teacher’s making sense of what she is doing, not just doing it. Gaining access to one’s expertise and that of others depends on a teacher’s ability to make sense of her experience through reflection and understanding, to make a bridge between practice and thought so that one can influence the other. Teachers develop various tools to aid in reflection and analysis, including journals, notes, reading, conversation, and rest.

Just as they develop an approach to teaching that guides them in each new teaching situation, teachers develop an approach to course development that guides them in developing other courses. The approach is the result of experience, not a condition for it. The experience of developing a course is not always a clearly articulated, rational process. The approach one develops can eventually be articulated in rational terms, such as a series of steps or a framework. The rational look of a framework or plan is a later result of the process. The framework does not exist *a priori*. It evolves. Course development is a dynamic, ongoing process. The variables that make a context unique continue to change, as does the teacher. There is a

continuous interaction of practice and the reflection that shapes it and is shaped by it. Thus an approach that can continue to serve in developing one's courses must be flexible.

The stories of six teachers as course developers

The teachers whose accounts make up the body of this book problematized their situations and developed courses in ways that made sense to them. Their stories are meant to serve as examples rather than as models. They are not case studies that have been constructed for specific purposes, such as those proposed by Shulman (1986): prototypes, which exemplify theoretical principles; precedents, which capture and communicate principles of practice or maxims; and parables, which convey norms or values. Rather they are accounts or stories of experience, told by the teachers who experienced them. I have chosen to use these stories as the focus of this book for several reasons. First, accounts such as these are useful in teacher education because they are a way of “capturing the complexity, specificity, and interconnectedness” of teachers’ experiences (Carter 1993: 6). These accounts show teachers dealing with the unpredictable and contextual nature of course development issues as they occur in real situations. They illustrate the dilemmas faced by these teachers and the web of factors influencing their decisions. Second, they highlight various aspects of the framework in Chapter 2, and yet, because they are stories, they cannot be interpreted in one way and thus “cannot be subsumed into what Bruner (1985) called paradigmatic knowledge,” which “requires consistency and noncontradiction” (Carter 1993: 7). Thus these stories contribute to our understanding of the framework components by presenting them to us embedded in the complexity of real situations. Finally, these concrete experiences provide readers with an opportunity to examine their own personal theories and test their own sense of plausibility.

The six teachers were asked to write a narrative in response to the following questions, which are based on the view of course development as a multistage process as illustrated in Figure 1.

1. What process did you follow in designing your course?
2. How did you modify the course once you started teaching it, and what prompted you to modify it?
3. In reviewing the process you went through in designing the course, what would you do differently, and why? (In other words, what have you learned about course design?)

The teachers are all experienced ESL or EFL teachers, with experience at the time of writing the narratives ranging from five to twenty years. The

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-49768-8 - Teachers as Course Developers
Edited by Kathleen Graves
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Table 1 Teachers and course features featured in this book

<i>Author</i>	<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Type of course</i>	<i>Place</i>
Johan Uvin	3	Health-care workers, Chinese	Workplace ESOL	Nursing home (U.S.)
Pat Fisher	4	Junior high (middle-school), multinational	Content-based social studies	International school (Japan)
Maria del Carmen Blyth	5	Postgraduate, Ecuadorian	English for academic purposes	Language institute (Ecuador)
Maria Estela Pinheiro Franco	6	High school, Brazilian	Writing supplement	Language institute (Brazil)
Barbara Fujiwara	7	University, Japanese	Advanced listening	Junior college (Japan)
Laura Hull	8	Business personnel, multinational	Individually tailored language training	Language institute (U.S.)

teachers and their situations were chosen to reflect a range of contexts in the field of English language teaching. Table 1 summarizes some of the characteristics of the courses they developed.

Six stories cannot possibly encompass all the contexts in the broad field of English language teaching, but they can illustrate a diversity of approaches to achieve a similar end, the development of a course. Moreover, these stories are meant to be examples from which the reader can learn and draw her own conclusions, not models that the reader is expected to emulate. The teachers approached their situations in different ways, not only because of the differences in the types of courses they were developing but also because of the differences in their contexts and their perceptions of the challenges of those contexts. In that sense, these six teachers are both representative and unique.

Suggestions for using this book

As this book is based on the two premises that course development is a grounded process and that teachers construct their understandings through the interaction of theory in the general sense, theory in the personal sense, and practice, one way to approach this book is with a course in mind, as a way of grounding what you read. The course can be one that you are developing or will develop or one that you have already taught. In reading about the framework of components in Chapter 2, you can use your chosen course to determine which aspects of the framework are useful and appropriate to work with, as well as which issues to explore. In reading the teachers' accounts and subsequent analyses, your own context will allow you to determine what is useful, notice things that you may not have thought of before, and consider other ways to approach course design. The tasks that follow each account are designed to be carried out with reference to your chosen context. The analysis follows rather than precedes each account so that you can interpret it in light of your own experience.

Another way to read this book is to choose one of the components in the framework and analyze the way in which each teacher addresses that component. For example, does each teacher assess students' needs? How? How does each teacher conceptualize content? How does each teacher deal with evaluation?

A third way is to use the following questions, which are based on the concept of problematizing:

1. What steps did this teacher follow in designing this course?
2. Where did this teacher start in the process? Why?
3. What did this teacher see as the main challenges or considerations in her situation?

10 Kathleen Graves

4. What seem to be the beliefs, values and priorities of this teacher?
5. How did this teacher draw on her own experience and expertise?
6. How did this teacher gain a perspective on what she was doing so that she could make sense of it? What were her “breakthroughs,” and how did they come about?
7. How did this teacher make sense of and use of the theories and expertise of others?
8. What are the characteristics of this teacher’s approach to course design?
9. How will this teacher’s approach serve her in the development of other courses?

Finally, you may simply wish to read the accounts as stories whose central figures are teachers engaged in understanding and shaping their teaching as they experience the setbacks, breakthroughs, problems, and accomplishments of developing a course.

References

- Breen, M. 1987. Contemporary paradigms in syllabus design. *Language Teaching* 20 (2–3): 81–92, 157–174.
- Bruner, J. 1985. Narrative and paradigmatic modes of thought. In E. Eisner, ed., *Learning and Teaching the Ways of Knowing* (84th yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education), pp. 97–115. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carter, K. 1993. The place of story in the study of teaching and teacher education. *Educational Researcher* 22 (1): 5–12, 18.
- Colton, A. and G. Sparks-Langer. 1993. A conceptual framework to guide the development of teacher reflection and decision making. *Journal of Teacher Education* 44 (1): 45–54.
- Freire, P. 1973. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Hutchinson, T., and A. Waters. 1987. *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centered Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, R. K. 1989. A decision-making framework for the coherent language curriculum. In R. K. Johnson, ed., *The Second Language Curriculum*, pp. 1–23. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kennedy, M. 1991. *An Agenda for Research on Teacher Learning*. East Lansing: Michigan State University, National Center for Research on Teacher Learning.
- Nunan, D. 1987. *The Teacher as Curriculum Developer*. Sydney: National Curriculum Resource Centre, Adult Migrant Education Program.
- Prabhu, N. S. 1990. There is no best method. Why? *TESOL Quarterly* 24: 2.
- Richards, J. 1990. *The Language Teaching Matrix*. New York: Cambridge University Press.