

Writing Arts Curriculum in a Public Sector-Private Sector Partnership

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Presented at the UNESCO Meeting of Experts
Arts Education in Latin America and the Caribbean
October 2001

Context

In 1997, the recently elected government in the Canadian province of Ontario announced that it was planning to make extensive reforms to its secondary school system including the reduction of a five-year program of studies to four years and the revision of the entire curriculum for these four years with a view to standardizing delivery across the province and adding a strong element of rigour to every course. In the context of world education trends, this conservative reform program was rather typical of initiatives the 1990s. What was unique about the process in Ontario was the government's determination that the revised curriculum for all subjects in all grades (in both English and French) had to be put in place within a single year. Such a massive undertaking would have incapacitated the curriculum branch of the Ministry of Education if normal development processes had been followed.

The government's response to this problem was to put the writing of secondary school curriculum out to tender. After commissioning a review of current developments

in each subject area and publishing a summary of key points, the government issued a Request for Proposals inviting interested groups to present bids on the writing of curriculum policy for each subject area. One such subject area was the Arts. According to the RFP, the Arts were to consist of Dance, Drama, Music and Visual Art. At the last minute, however, a fifth subject was added - Media Arts.

The Request for Proposals (or RFP) followed procedures familiar to private sector providers of services to other government departments but, for most educators, the terms of the request were extraordinary and rather intimidating. The government document outlined, in considerable detail, the required composition of the writing team and the form that the proposal was to follow. What was most daunting was the time frame which required proposals to be submitted no more than a month after a bidders meeting scheduled for January 26, 1998. (The RFP had been issued on January 14.) For those of us who teach in Canadian schools or universities, the months of January and February are extremely busy. The requirement that an extensive proposal be developed at this time of year seemed to eliminate most educational stakeholders from the bidding process.

Educators across the province were distraught by the widespread assumption that only a large, multi-national corporation would have the resources to put together an acceptable proposal within the time allowed. Our collective fear was that a generic (and possibly inappropriate) curriculum would be pulled from the files of such a corporation and hailed as the new Ontario curriculum by a government that was in a considerable hurry to make a show of reform. Committed educators came together in subject groupings to create teams capable of developing proposals that might meet the stringent criteria set out in the RFP while retaining a commitment to quality education as we understood it. The key stumbling blocks were time and project management. The RFP stipulated that an experienced project manager had to be identified and such persons are rarely available on a moment's notice.

The Consortium

When it became clear that Arts education associations were having trouble a) finding an acceptable project manager and b) putting together a professional proposal in the limited time available, I took the initiative and contacted a private sector manager with whom I thought Queen's University could form a consortium to develop a proposal. The man I called was Mr. Robin Quantick, CEO of Excalibur Learning Resources Centre in Kingston, the same city in which the university is located. I was familiar with his collaborative management style and I was also aware that, as an enterprising provider of services to government, his company was capable of preparing a highly professional proposal in very short order. Excalibur's principal business had been the provision of educational services within a number of federal institutions, so, I expected that the staff would be accustomed to dealing with government contracts.

Before calling Excalibur, I canvassed colleagues in my Faculty to determine if they were interested in participating in such a project. Happily some were very interested, as was Robin Quantick. Within a few days, we had met with representatives of Arts groups from across the province and won their support for our initiative. With their help, we were able to generate resumés from as many as 150 highly qualified teachers from which to select our writing team.

As I had expected, the staff at Excalibur put their experience to work and produced a fully professional proposal that met all of the requirements of the RFP. Having succeeded at the first level of the approval process, we then had to meet the strict requirement for an acceptable project manager. Robin and I were identified as co-managers of the project and, as such, were subjected to a rigorous interview by Ministry of Education evaluators. Late in April, we were informed that our proposal had been given final approval. Our contract was scheduled to begin on May 1, 1998. The first deliverable, including an overview of all courses, was to be completed by June 12. The entire project was scheduled for completion by November 30 of the same year.

The Writing/Review Process

Our contract with the Ministry of Education stipulated that we would provide specified portions of the work on given dates. Each of these deliverables would then be sent out to a long list of stakeholder groups (including teachers, parents, administrators, universities and colleges) who would have an opportunity to respond to our work in person and in writing. It was our responsibility to follow up on advice given by these respondents, giving particular attention to directives issued by our Ministry supervisor whose job included analyzing the responses of stakeholders to identify points of agreement.

To accommodate this feedback while maintaining our own on-going work toward the next deliverable, we developed a multi-layered team and established an internal schedule of writing and review. The section for each of the Arts was written by a group of six writers each of whom had a clearly defined set of responsibilities. The principal and associate writers were responsible for putting group decisions into a final text at each stage. The advisory writers were responsible for contributing only within scheduled writing sessions. And members of the editorial board were responsible for attending a limited number of writing sessions and for reviewing materials prior to submission to the Ministry.

In order to ensure that all documents submitted to the Ministry met a reasonable standard for clear and accessible language, each curriculum writing team was required to employ the services of a professional writer. We incorporated the work of our writer within our internal schedule in such a way that 1) she was able to refine the language of all newly written materials and 2) the writer-teachers were able, subsequently, to review her work to ensure that pedagogical concepts were not distorted as the language was improved.

One complicating factor that affected our work was a requirement that the English and French language documents on each subject be substantially similar although they

were being developed, simultaneously, by different teams of writers. Ontario is a predominantly English-speaking part of Canada, but there is a sufficiently large Francophone population to justify a separate French language education system. For this reason, the French language curriculum was not to be a simple translation of the English one. It was to be developed by a team of Francophone teachers established by the Ministry in a more traditional protocol. The French language team, which included only one writer for each subject area, began writing before our contract was signed and worked independently from our team although we made considerable efforts to communicate with them throughout the contract period.

The RFP specified not only the composition of the writing teams but also the approach that was to be taken to structuring the curriculum. We were to begin by identifying between 3 and 5 strands for each course. A strand was to be thought of as a major organizer for the course. Within these strands we were to identify a series of overall expectations and specific expectations - in other words, general learning goals on the one hand, and detailed knowledge and skills on the other.

It was at the level of strands, that the merging of the French- and English-language documents presented the greatest difficulties. Our overall and specific expectations were remarkably similar - a reflection of the similarity of activities that we engage students in, regardless of language. However, the designation of strands was a theoretical exercise that had more to do with culturally based linguistic orientation than with teaching practice. The English-language teams developed strands that spoke to the differences between subjects, the unique characteristics of each art form. For example, a central strand in the Dance curriculum was "technique". No other subject selected technique as a strand. The drama team settled on four strands for all grade levels - constructing, communicating, responding and appreciating.

The Francophone team, however, spent considerable time identifying four strands that they felt applied to all Arts subject areas. Roughly translated they were: knowledge/comprehension, techniques or competencies, the creative process and

appreciation/communication. By the end of May, our Ministry supervisors had identified this divergence as a serious problem and had begun to propose an alignment in which all subjects in both languages would adhere to the same four strands. Later the supervisors arbitrarily reduced the number of strands to three. At this point, it was clear that the English-language team was being pressured to conform to a major decision that had been made by the French-language team (or by their supervisor who may have directed them to develop mutual strands). Later in the process, it was the French-language team that was pressured to include expectations that had been identified by the English-language team. After considerable stress and challenging negotiation, both teams agreed to acknowledge the following three strands in all subjects - Creation, Analysis and Theory.

Overview of the Curriculum

To a large extent the members of our writing team saw themselves as the protectors of quality Arts education against a government that was likely to value science and technology more than artistic expression, to value preparation for employment more than preparation for life, and to value conformity more than individuality. In this context, it was gratifying for us all that we were able to develop a curriculum that addressed the important elements of an education in the Arts with relatively little political interference. The following is an excerpt from the introduction to the curriculum for grades 9 and 10 (1999) that shows how well we were able to maintain a focus on our central values.

"Experiences in the arts -- drama, dance, media arts, music and the visual arts -- play a valuable role in the education of all students. The arts nourish the imagination and develop a sense of beauty, while providing unique ways for students to gain insights into the world around them. All of the arts communicate through complex symbols -- verbal, visual and aural -- and help students understand aspects of life in different ways. Students gain insights into the human condition through exposure to works of art. They can imagine what it would be like to be in the same situation as a character in a play, an opera, or a painting, and try to understand that

character's point of view. They identify common values, both aesthetic and human, in various works of art, and in doing so, increase their understanding of others and learn that the arts can have a civilizing influence on society. In producing their own works, they communicate their insights while developing artistic skills and aesthetic judgement. Since artistic activities are closely connected to play and human interaction, students experience a sense of wonder and joy when engaged in the arts, which can motivate them to participate more fully in cultural life and in other educational opportunities." (Ontario, pg. 3)

The Arts curriculum as described in the courses we wrote can be seen to follow best practices in Ontario schools. For example, the Dramatic Arts curriculum begins with a strong engagement in role-playing and cultural exploration at the outset of the secondary school program and leads to a rich involvement in theatrical expression, theatre history and exposure to plays in the senior years.

Reflections

Did we sell out? A source of tension for the writing team throughout the entire process was a concern that political and bureaucratic pressures would force us into the position of betraying our ultimate goal of preserving the best in Arts education and enhancing the curriculum in ways that our fellow Arts educators would appreciate. I feel that from time to time we did lose a battle with bureaucracy. For example, I don't think the Dance curriculum fully recovered from the removal of technique as a strand. The writers were forced to place expectations derived from this strand under other, less appropriate, strands in ways that added an element of confusion. On the other hand, I am happy with the Dramatic Arts curriculum because it clearly reflects best practices as I have observed them throughout our province and strikes a fine balance between exploratory role-playing and learning about the art form of theatre.

In one sense, the process of writing and reviewing this curriculum can be seen as an informal research project in which the views of Arts educators throughout the province were blended with current thinking about the Arts at an international level, an element that was introduced through the influence of university based participants. The resulting curriculum reflects the values of this diverse community and presents a kind of snapshot portrait of an idealized Arts education program as articulated in our part of the world at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Sources Cited

Ontario Ministry of Education and Training (1999) The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 and 10: The Arts. Queen's Printer for Ontario.

Ontario Ministry of Education and Training (2000) The Ontario Curriculum Grades 11 and 12: The Arts. Queen's Printer for Ontario.

The entire curriculum document is available (08/12/01) at the Ontario government website (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/seccurric.html>).