The Dynamic Models in School-based Curriculum Development and College English Reform in Mainland China

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Abstract: School-based curriculum development (SBCD) features the role of schools in curriculum decision-making and highlights the importance of school-based curriculum designs. By means of literature reviews on the dynamic models in SBCD, namely Stenhouse's process model and Skilbeck's situational model, this paper evaluates the two models to point out the strengths and weaknesses of SBCD. Both the process model and the situational model highlight the importance of dynamic process and regard curriculum development as a dynamic interactive progress rather than a linear process. Additionally, they reveal the high demands for autonomy in curriculum development, emphasizing the interaction between the curriculum developers. However, although teachers as the major implementers shift their positions to the chief curriculum developers in the dynamic models of SBCD, more attention should be paid to the external and internal factors influencing the change of their roles. On the other hand, curriculum evaluation should consider both the suitability and sustainability of the curriculum. In the end, the paper ends with a case, an ongoing school-based college English curriculum reform in a provincial university in mainland China, that puts these abovementioned theories into practice. The case reflects the dynamic features of curriculum design concerning a lot about teaching process and students' needs in specific university contexts. Apart from the short-term goal of using the curriculum to fit current students' needs, more attention should be paid to cover the sustainability of the curriculum for its long-term use. Through the documented literature review and case analysis, it is indeed conducive to better our understanding of this reform pattern and get more inspiration about the feasibility and applicability of SBCD in our actual practice of education reform.

Keywords: School-based Curriculum Development, Process Model, Situational Model, Literature Review Analysis, Case Analysis

1. Introduction

The international trend for educational change is one way throughout the world so as to cultivate the talents and prepare them for the change of globalization. School-based curriculum development (SBCD) is one of the widely adopted patterns in education reform. It features the role of schools in curriculum decision-making and highlights the importance of different curriculum designs suitable for specific situations in schools themselves [1]. Compared with western counterparts, eastern countries, especially mainland China fall behind in the popularity of SBCD [9]. Although educational reform is always a hotly-discussed topic, the understanding of SBCD is still vague and obscure and the effectiveness of its implementation is unsatisfactory and problematic as well.

This paper intends to review the relevant literature on the dynamic models in SBCD, namely Stenhouse's process model [15] and Skilbeck's situational model [14], and then evaluates these two models to point out the strengths and weaknesses of SBCD. Finally, the theories will be put into practice to reflect on the ongoing school-based college English curriculum reform in a provincial university in mainland China. Through the documented literature review, it is indeed conducive to better our understanding of this reform pattern and get more inspiration about the feasibility and applicability of SBCD in our actual practice of education reform.

2. School-based Curriculum Development (SBCD)

2.1. SBCD as Decentralized Curriculum Decision-making

According to the participants involved in decision-making process, the curriculum decision-making can be divided into two major models: centralization and decentralization. In the centralized model of curriculum decision-making, the senior educational management has the power to determine something such as instructional contents, teaching approaches, and evaluation methods [11]. Even though this centralized control of curriculum design can provide the standardized and uniformed curriculum to assist the distribution and allocation of limited educational resources, it constraints school-level involvement in curriculum decision-making, bounds teachers' initiative and overlooks the specific implementation differences among schools.

Due to these shortcomings, decentralized model was proposed to mean the transference of some sort of authority from senior state to community and school level [7]. This devolution of authority not only provides communities and schools with the opportunities to participate in the curriculum decision-making but also pushes every individual within school systems such as principals, teachers, and students to plan, design, implement and assess the curriculum. This power-sharing model, on one hand, enables the inferior school system to respond to their environment, on the other hand, releases the senior personnel from the tight pressure of time and expertise investment.

Sharing the idea of decentralized curriculum decision-making, SBCD is popularly adopted throughout the world [7-9]. Aiming to deepen our understanding of SBCD, it is of great importance to dip into the dynamic models of SBCD and explore its intrinsic features to provide theoretical guidance for actual practice.

2.2. The Dynamic Approaches in SBCD: Process Model and Situational Model

The dynamic view of curriculum development emphasizes the importance of process in curriculum design and allows for the flexibility of change in any phases and at any time. Although different models based on different educational philosophies and psychological grounds, both Stenhouse's process model [15] and Skilbeck's situational model [14] are dynamic in nature which emphasizes 'change for the better' in curriculum development.

2.2.1. Stenhouse's Process Model

Different from Tyler's objective model, Stenhouse's process model [15] supports the view that curricula should be designed by specific conditions and teaching procedures rather than by predetermined outcomes merely concerning knowledge. In the model, teaching process shares the equal position with the product of learning. The curriculum design is conducted with the process in the core position. For instance, principles of procedures are worked out before the beginning

of the detailed planning, all the activities are designed according to the principles of procedures, and the course assessment is implemented via process monitoring and learning outcomes. As teaching is a complicated process with various factors constantly changing, a curriculum should be dynamic and non-linear, able to change with different situations to meet different students' needs.

The phases in process model are as follows: 1) formulating general objectives; 2) designing and implementing teaching and learning activities; 3) recording all the results collected from teaching activities; 4) evaluating the collected results. From the four phases, it is apparent that the curriculum objectives in the process model are not concrete anticipated objectives but temporary, developmental, and changeable goals waiting for adjustment, modification and improvement. Teachers in the process work as important agents in curriculum development. Learners have more opportunities to decide the nature of learning activities in more individualized atmosphere [10].

Although process model was proposed as the criticism to Tyler's objective model, it is inevitable to have its own drawbacks. First, it is hard to conduct effective work since no specific plans are made for the process of curriculum development in the model. Besides, general objectives are less likely to provide sufficient and precise guidance in curriculum assessment [13]. The lack of standardized specific objectives deepens the difficulties in objectively evaluating students' learning outcomes in uniformity. Furthermore, all these apparently general and obscure contents in curriculum planning, implementation, design and evaluation lead to high demands for the quality of teachers with 'wisdom and scholarship' [15] as the major curriculum designer.

2.2.2. Skilbeck's Situational Model

Another dynamic approach in curriculum development is Skilbeck's situational model [14]. With much concern on social and cultural context, Skilbeck [14] proposed the situational model with a thorough consideration about relevant factors. Based on cultural analysis, all the related factors including national and local factors, internal and external factors will be investigated and analyzed to meet students' individual needs [2].

This model covers five stages, namely 1) situational analysis; 2) objectives formulation; 3) program design; 4) interpretation and implementation; and 5) feedback, assessment and consolidation (see Figure 1). It is necessary to perceive both external and internal situational needs and analyze the situational changes at the very beginning of curriculum development. Then some appropriate goals representing the decisions of changes in the context are proposed according to the results of situational analysis about future educational directions. After the goals have been laid down, the school constructs suitable curriculum plan through taking teaching materials, facilities, means and roles into consideration. During this stage, teachers are not the central controllers in the school environment, but the co-workers or helpers to let students construct in the context. Soon after that,

interpretation and implementation should be followed up by means of relevant theories and predictions for the program installation. Finally, feedback and evaluation should be conducted so as to track, reflect and rebuild the design.

It is quite obvious that the situational model considers the five stages as the organic entire whole with dynamic rather than linear relationship, believing that the curriculum operation can start from one stage or simultaneously from several stages. Similar to the process model, this model also

touches upon the significant function of teachers in the curriculum development process and highlights the importance of diversified students' needs. But it meanwhile pays special attention to the school's conditions in the process. This school-concern feature makes this model to be flexible and adaptable in school-based curriculum. But it should be admitted that too much flexibility and subordination to curriculum developers' beliefs or intentions could deviate it far from national curriculum.
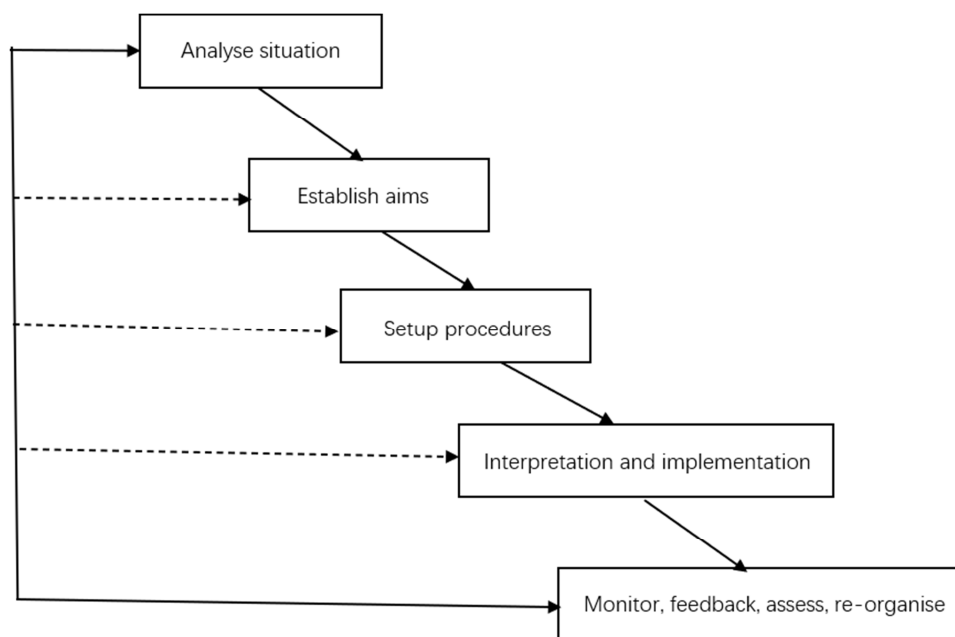

Figure 1. Skilbeck's situational model.

2.3. Strength and Weakness of Dynamic Models in SBCD

It should be admitted that both the process model and the situational model highlight the importance of dynamic process in curriculum development without any means-ends analysis. They regard curriculum development as a dynamic interactive progress rather than a linear process throughout its components. The teaching and learning activities within the process can start and develop concurrently. Developers can commence at any stage in the process that suits their needs. Besides, it reveals the high demands for autonomy in curriculum development, emphasizing the interaction between the curriculum developers. But what's noteworthy is that situational model realizes the importance of context in curriculum development. It places the process of curriculum development into social cultural framework, highlighting the importance of cultural and conditional differences among schools. To some extent, situational model is a more comprehensive approach which not only covers the essence of the process model but also considers the changing situations in the curriculum development process.

Certainly, these dynamic models also have some weaknesses. Although teachers as the major implementers in teaching process should shift their position to the chief curriculum developers in the dynamic models of SBCD, the effects of curriculum development will be greatly reduced

provided that they are unequipped with requisite knowledge and fail to place themselves onto the curriculum major position. The psychological features of the curriculum developers failed to be concerned in these models. Teachers may be reluctant to change their positions to adopt the new role of curriculum developers [6]. Just as Ertmer's [4] first- and second-order barriers in curriculum implementation, both the first-order barriers (e.g., time limitations and teachers' self-confidence and beliefs) and the second-order barriers (e.g., teachers' unwillingness to adopt change) possibly prevent them to change and adopt their new roles. Therefore, it is far from enough to merely underline the importance of teachers' role in curriculum development. More attention should be paid to the external and internal factors influencing the change of their roles.

On the other hand, curriculum evaluation is problematic in these dynamic models. The evaluation should consider both the suitability and sustainability of the curriculum [5]. The flexible features of these dynamic models lead to the non-directional and confusing curriculum design. Without setting up objectives, it seems to be difficult to evaluate students' performance in a way of uniformity, hard to satisfy parental and social expectations in a long-term decision making. As Fullan's innovation model [5] underlined, institutionalization which concerns for the long-term use of the curriculum shouldn't be overlooked in educational change.

3. College English Reform in China: SBCD Case from a Provincial University

China's college English teaching has received special attention since its foundation in that globalization brings about the high national and social demand for English education in mainland China. In order to cultivate quality-oriented talents rather than silent English speakers or English test-takers, college English has implemented reforms since the early 21st century. But the formal releasing of the College English Curriculum Requirements (hereinafter Requirements, Ministry of Education, China, 2007) was in 2007 [12]. One of the features in the Requirements is the decentralized national guideline. In the Requirements, no national universal rules have been set, instead, three levels of teaching requirements have been recommended ranging from the basic level to intermediate level, and advanced level. All the tertiary-level institutions have to set up their own teaching objectives, plans and implementations of their own curriculum development according to their specific situations. It reflects the dynamic features of flexibility, creativity, and foresightedness of curriculum development. The revision and adjustment of curricula should be conducted to meet the needs of different periods of time and various students in diversified levels.

The university I am working in is a provincial key university in mainland China. Since the year 2013, the university proposed '352' talent cultivation model to categorically develop undergraduates with the ultimate goal for their own needs, that is, nearly 30% students after graduation can continue their postgraduate studies in mainland, 50% finding desirable jobs, and 20% furthering their studies aboard. This category-oriented cultivation model allocates students into different groups to satisfy their own needs according to their interests.

As one of the important contents in this school-based reform, college English department explicitly put forward its reform requirement accordingly. Before the real implementation of the reform, all college English teachers in the department participated in the preparation. They attended a variety of group talks to share their understanding of the existing problems in teaching process and provide useful suggestions on curriculum reform. Meanwhile, several teachers had been assigned to attend academic conferences sharing their knowledge about college English reform with expertise from other fraternal institutions. Apart from that, students' consulting meetings have been held and questionnaires have been distributed to get their viewpoints about the ideal college English courses. Based on all the preparation, the school-based college English reform scheme has been proposed and taken into action in September, 2014. The curriculum system includes the following three sections:

Basic education courses;

General platform courses, and;

Personal development courses.

In the basic education stage, college English is made up of intensive and extensive English courses, which aims to assist students in laying a good foundation for the transference from high school English to college English learning. The general platform courses focus on the basic skills of English learning, including English listening and speaking, English reading, English-to-Chinese translation and English writing. The personal development courses target at meeting students' specific needs, offering various courses such as introduction to English-speaking countries, English talk of Chinese culture, English and American literature, business English, tourism English and other language courses.

In terms of curriculum arrangement, the basic education courses open in the first year after students' enrollment in the university. In their second year of school life, the general platform courses are provided to practice their English basic skills. When they attend their last two years in the university, the personal development courses are provided to be elective according to their own interests. Another worth mentioning feature is that differential teaching methods have been adopted in the first-year college English teaching. Students have to take part in a comprehensive English test so as to be grouped into different classes according to their English proficiency levels. In this way, teachers can focus on students of the similar English proficiencies and conduct their teaching effectively, while students will mutually benefit each other during the learning process. Student-oriented teaching approaches are popularly used but vary according to students' actual needs and abilities.

After one semester's implementation of this scheme, both the feedback from the in-service teachers and students and the assessment results of students' examinations were delivered to the department. It was in accordance with our expectation that the curriculum reform is highly welcomed but some problems and suggestions without consideration beforehand were also proposed. According to the evaluation and feedback from all the school staff, the appeal for general academic English alerted special attention. The so-called general academic English highlights students' professional competence in using English in their specific majors [3]. The previous basic skill practice is far from enough to meet students' professional needs. After one-year's trail, some modification and adjustment have been conducted in the scheme and more general academic courses such general academic writing, general academic reading, and cross-cultural communication are planning to add into the scheme.

Till now, it's very difficult to draw any conclusion about whether the school-based college English reform in my university is successful or not, but just as Fullan [16] stated that the failure of an innovation is not because of the idea but because of the implementation. The courage to change the existing curriculum is highly thought of. It is worth to be affirmed that the college English reform in my university reflects the dynamic features of curriculum design concerning a lot about teaching process and students' needs in specific university context. All the three-level category of the curriculum not only fits for the school '352' talent cultivation model but also put the SBCD into practice in line with the

decentralized Requirements. However, besides taken into the features of our own school, the three elements in Fullan's innovation model [5] should arouse more attention. Apart from the short-term goal of using the curriculum to fit current students' needs, more attention should be paid to cover the sustainability of the curriculum for its long-term use.

4. Conclusions

SBCD is used as a means of curriculum decentralization. It is believed that the satisfied and desirable curriculum is not designed merely by the central officials but also with the help of the cooperation from basic school personnel. The dynamic feature of both Stenhouse's process model [15] and Skilbeck's situational model [14] do shed light on how to conduct SBCD appropriately and effectively in China. However, since China's college English reform is still on its way and English language education reform needs to be more informed as Waters [17] stated, the balance between decentralization and centralization, between objective and process, and between temporary effect and sustainable value should be some significant concerns to keep in mind.

Acknowledgements

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