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## **CURRICULUM CHANGE: ONE CONSULTANT'S PERSPECTIVE**

**Ruth Nathan**

It is my impression that no one really likes the new...

Back in 1936 I spent a good part of the year picking peas. I started out early in January in the Imperial Valley and drifted northward, picking peas as they ripened, until I picked the last peas of the season, in June, around Tracy. Then I shifted all the way to Lake County, where for the first time I was going to pick string beans. And I still remember how hesitant I was that first morning as I was about to address myself to the string bean vines. Would I be able to pick string beans? Even the change from peas to string beans had in it elements of fear.

Eric Hoffer  
*The Ordeal of Change*

Teachers often find themselves in Lake County picking green beans, breathing deep. Like Eric Hoffer, we often feel the hesitancy and experience the fear associated with change. So much is new; that's part of the problem. We're faced with a revamped definition of reading, a process approach to writing, a problem-solving stance toward mathematics, science as exploration, massive amounts of computer technology to learn, a renewed focus on collaboration, and a developmental approach to learning, with students assuming the role of initiator. And there's more, for to this body of curricular complications we must add the national attention given to deficiencies in our children's knowledge base and the numerous international comparisons showing American children's deficiencies. It is no small wonder that curriculum change in the 1980's has been a hard pill to swallow. At times, like Hoffer, we want to stay in Tracy.

As we begin the 1990's, it seems appropriate to ask if there are ways to overcome the hesitancy Hoffer speaks of and thereby enhance the chance for desired curriculum change to occur. As a reading and writing consultant working within several Michigan school districts, I've grappled with these

issues for years. I've seen what it takes, from the inside, for students and teachers to reexamine their goals and alter their behavior, and I would like to offer a delineation of what I see as essential to informed curricular change, a list of elements I feel must be in place for movement to occur. Because I have been primarily involved with a process approach to writing, the examples provided with each listed will frequently be specific to this concern.

- 1. Research underlying the change must be in place and the resources describing this research must be accessible. Either training studies that demonstrate the positive effect of the change or collections of provocative articles written by known educators should be available. In addition, the case for change is furthered when the research, often highly focused, is gathered and interpreted by articulate spokespeople.**

Process writing, for example, has had many spokespeople (e.g. Don Graves, Jane Hanson, Lucy Calkins, Glenda Bissex, Mary Ellen Giacobbe, Ruth Hubbard, Susan Sowers, Nancy Atwell, Harvey Daniels, and others) who have gone into communities and effectively transmitted what they know and what they are continuing to investigate. Several of these researchers have presented at every level of Michigan's educational community: state, ISD, as well as district. Colleges and universities throughout Michigan have sponsored workshops and conferences by these spokespeople as well. These human resources have furthered the classroom adoption of new approaches.

In addition, there has been a tremendous amount of research published on writing by university professors as well as classroom teachers (for teacher-research, see *LAJM*, Spring, 1989). Research helps us all feel more confident as we abandon old strategies and try on new ones. Review articles on the writing process have been available in both periodicals and books as well (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1988; Hillocks, 1985; Hull, 1989). Reviews of research continually help us gain the larger perspective we need.

- 2. Literature regarding implementation should be readily accessible.**

Central, easily accessible professional libraries housed in individual schools provide crucial support to teachers in the midst of change. Many of the troubles that teachers encounter are subtle, hard to identify, and therefore, hard to talk about. Well-written books and journal articles, especially those written by other teachers, are invaluable. Of course,

theoretical and philosophical works provide inspiration and rationale, so they are needed also.

Administrators often complain that teachers don't look at the journals and books they provide. While I've found this to be true at times in the past, the situation is remarkably different today. The new emphasis on using literature to supplement or even supplant basal texts for teaching reading, as well as calls for using conferences, mini-lessons, and the writing process (instead of language drills) for teaching writing, send teachers to their professional literature daily. As of now (thank goodness!), there are few packaged programs. Teachers are reading *The Reading Teacher*, *The New Advocate*, *Language Arts*, *The English Journal*, and books from NCTE and IRA like never before. Book company representatives are loaded with orders they can't fill because the companies they represent can hardly keep up with the demand.

**3. The prospective change agents (teachers) must be authentically curious about the change; a "you shall do this" stance does not create the needed curiosity.**

In some districts new approaches are implemented on a voluntary basis, at least at first. I've found this to be the healthiest situation because it empowers teachers, allowing them to use their professional judgement and listen to their own voices. Small, voluntary workshops and informal discussion/support groups help create a core of committed teachers whose influence as change agents can then spread outward.

On a more negative note, I've seen irate teachers, having been forced to change, who sabotage a whole building initiative. And I've seen this (been affected by it, actually) more than once. Although the desired curricular change is usually made (or at least begun) in such cases, the spirit of change is lost in the battle. Principals, curriculum directors, and even parents need to be aware of this. On the other hand, I think we all agree that irate teachers need to be listened to. Their anger might stem from issues other than worry and anger over coercion, and excluding them from the decision-making process will not help in the long run.

**4. Inservice activities must be provided by the school district and/or the intermediate school district.**

Change requires support, and when inservices are provided, teachers have the opportunity to exchange ideas and alternatives as well as share current problems with experts who have often had more experience teaching in the new mode.

While inservice is often available, a few problems stand out which need to be addressed. For example, teachers should probably have attendance priority over administrators, since teachers are the ones who must directly effect the change. Often sessions at our ISD's in Michigan are limited as to the number of people that may attend, and teachers complain when their administrators go rather than themselves: They feel they're forced to learn too much secondhand. (I am not suggesting here that principals don't go to inservices; it's crucial that they do. But limited space means they must go elsewhere, if necessary, to national or state conventions, for example.)

A second common problem with inservices is that they're often not repeated. It's hard to learn something in one shot, which is often the expectation. This is one of the reasons professional school libraries are so important and ongoing inservice so necessary (see #5 below). Many teachers are willing to try new techniques, but would appreciate follow-up sessions to work out details, handle trouble-spots, and discuss extension, integration, and evaluation issues.

**5. Ongoing inservice activities must be provided once the change has begun.**

Some districts offer inservice beyond initial encounters with "experts." This is necessary for many reasons, but one that stands out has to do with morale. When change is seen as something that occurs over time, teachers don't feel they need to be comfortable with the change(s) right away.

Recently, peer coaching has served as a type of ongoing inservice, and seems to be a trend that might effectively replace our continual dependence upon inservice that, historically, has taken the form of workshop or lecture. Huron Valley has had great success with this method.

**6. Some money must be available to support the change.**

Funding is always an issue; change costs money. When dollars are limited, large districts seem to do best when they move slowly, funding a few schools at a time.

Obtaining money is an issue, too. State grants are a major source for Michigan school districts, but private funds are available for special projects initiated by teachers. Educators can go to reference books such as *The Annual Register of Grant Support*, *The Foundation Directory*, or *The Taft Corporate Giving Directory*, all books found in most public libraries. National organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English offer incentive grants each year for both research and classroom-oriented projects. School librarians have the addresses for all national educational organizations. In addition, individual school districts offer incentive grants for teacher-initiated projects. The Birmingham Public School District has done this for years, and many teachers I've worked with have gotten money for everything from computer hardware and software to funds for the publication of special literary journals, binding machines, and speakers.

**7. Change agents need some control over how money is spent.**

In some districts (just a few), change agents (the teachers) have some control over how money allocated for the change is to be spent. For example, one district let their teachers choose their new spelling series and actually bought the series the teachers recommended (which is not always the case). In these situations, teachers feel control over what happens in their classrooms and highly responsible for the success of the program.

**8. A major curriculum change is one which affects the curricular area's theory (knowledge base), social structure (relationships between students, parents, and teachers), and technology (the "stuff" of the curriculum, such as the textbooks and work sheets). When the change is major, the change agents' superiors need to support the change.**

Some principals, no matter how overworked, find time to visit classrooms and to read material that their teachers might find helpful. Additionally, some staffs are so highly professional that they find the time to read. When this is the case, as it is in many Michigan schools, the interplay between the administration and staff is exhilarating. A kind of interdependency emerges that cannot be well defined, but which nevertheless promotes a team approach to the change. When changes are major, this interdependency is crucial.

**9. A feedback loop between the change agents (teachers), their superiors (e.g. the principals), and the curriculum director(s) must be in place and easy to negotiate.**

Easy communication between all faculty levels is crucial. In some cases there is no feedback loop, or if one exists it is in conflict with teacher assessment. For example, many non-tenured teachers are afraid to tell their principals an approach isn't working in their classrooms, especially when veteran teachers seem to be making a go of it. Another example is when teachers perceive that just a few of them have the principal's ear. Two ways this lack of systematic feedback can be avoided are (1) planned faculty meetings that include the discussion of results from small, informal staff-wide questionnaires about the change, and (2) writing-to-think sessions, where teachers write freely for three minutes during staff meetings and then discuss the important roadblocks, successes, or questions to which their writing has led them.

**10. Time must be provided for change agents to collaborate and work out classroom management issues that deal with specific concerns of individual classrooms.**

In some schools collaboration time is created by the principal, by the staff, or both. Occasionally principals leave time during staff meetings for brainstorming sessions. In some schools teachers collaborate before or after official work hours. When asked why they are willing to put in so much extra time, teachers say it's partially because their efforts are recognized, e.g. their principals say how much they appreciate their efforts. On the other hand, a number of teachers don't see putting in extra hours as a matter of choice; they've opted for change, and that's what it takes.

**11. An evaluation procedure of the program at large should be in place from the beginning. By evaluation, I mean an assessment of the effect a change of teaching methods will have on students and teachers.**

Teachers feel responsible to the public, and change that remains unevaluated is worrisome to many. In my experience, districts that attempt to evaluate new programs *in-house* fare better than those that do not, or those that don't even consider the need.

Walled Lake provides a good example. They have used process writing for four years in selected buildings. Early on, under the direction of Dr. Judith Backes (now in Clarkston) and Dr. Sylvia Whitmer, they were asking if process writing would produce better writers, a greater love of writing, better attitudes about writing, etc. In the third year, with the help of a state grant, several teachers and I got together, reviewed the literature, and planned a study using data we had already collected, as well as new data we would gather. Although the study is still underway, initial results have been shared with the state and the Walled Lake community as well as discussed at staff meetings in schools and in private homes. NCTE invited the core group of teachers to present their results at their Spring, 1990 conference.

Birmingham is another school district that evaluated their change to process writing. This district was especially interested in teacher and student attitudes toward a process approach. Kathy Juntunen, a columnist as well as Birmingham's writing consultant, did much of the data collection and write-up.

It should come as no surprise that in both these districts a process approach is well established at the elementary level and supported by many teachers in the system. On the other hand, I can think of at least two districts that did not do in-house evaluation of their particular programs as they began, even though evaluation of the approach was a serious concern among the teachers. Both districts, floundering to this day regarding their stance toward writing, tend to try every new program that pops up, if only for a short time. I can't say unequivocally that in-house evaluation will determine the success or failure of process writing's longevity in Walled Lake or Birmingham, but in these schools planned evaluation has most certainly focused efforts and fostered change.

**12. Standardized tests measuring academic achievement in the curricular area should not be in conflict with the desired change for too long; nor should nonstandardized measures (grades) of student achievement be in conflict with the desired change for too long.**

In virtually every Michigan district where I work, standardized achievement tests and conventional grading procedures are in conflict with a process approach to writing. Standardized tests are not yet in sync with



a prewriting, drafting, proofing, publishing approach. Traditional grading procedures tend to evaluate the writing process only in terms of the final written product. With the new writing MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) and new report card systems, these two issues may be resolved in the future.

As I close this article, I'm drawn back to the concept of Hoffer's peas and beans and think he had it easy. In a matter of moments, as the beans snapped off the vines, he became confident in his Lake County task. We need more than *moments*. Change is a delicate procedure. It takes forethought, motivation, determination, cooperation, communication, and continuous but valid and non-threatening monitoring. I've tried to provide some guidelines and identify some elements that need to be in place for real change to occur: research, articulate spokespeople, the availability of literature, curiosity, inservice, ongoing support, money, teacher control, communication loops, time for collaboration, and evaluation of the program, as well as appropriate tools to measure student achievement. While change is often an ordeal, it is not impossible. Certainly process writing is making headway. It is my hope that the perspective I've offered here will serve as a valuable checklist or perhaps a starting point for discussion, as teachers begin the next school year.

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