Engagement, Evaluation and integrated Programmes

– Karne Kozolanka

There is no doubt that initiatives such as integrated multi-credit high school programmes have created much interest over the past few years. However, as Bert Horwood pointed out in the June issue of Pathways, 'we are rich in silent, practical knowledge, but weak in public, disciplined research knowledge' (1995, p. 17). This paper addresses two of the four major problems[1] arising from integrated packages that Bert mentioned in that article: research and evaluation. To begin, I will introduce the notion of 'engagement' as another feature that contributes to the integration of programmes.[2] I will then discuss how engagement may be a useful means of evaluating integrated programmes.

Before extending the discussion begun by Bert Horwood about the nature of what makes integrated programmes effective, it makes sense to begin by identifying two assumptions underlying this discussion – first, that integration fosters an educational climate in which learning and development is similar to life outside school. Second, that learning by doing has a history that extends beyond recent calls for relevance in schooling. It is important to point out that learning by doing is considered to be a hallmark of outdoor education at its best. Learning by doing in the form of apprenticeships, internships, cooperative education and work-study linkages have been with us for some time.

Engagement

The notion that engagement contributes to the integration of learning may appear to be obvious. It is, in the sense that if one is not engaged, then one might not be learning and developing one's capacities to live a good life. But engagement is an interesting concept with the potential to be understood many ways. The following example illustrates this point. Two students are members of a class building a house (Kozolanka, 1993). The first is observed standing off to the side of the house for most of the afternoon, leaning on his shovel, watching his classmates scurry about. The second spends the same time unloading and stacking a pile of lumber from a delivery truck. Which one is engaged? Both? Neither? Why? My first reaction to Robert was that he was just 'dogging it' and not engaged in what was happening at all. I felt differently about the second student, Paul, who appeared to be quite engaged. I subsequently asked both of these students what was happening with them while they were doing what they were doing. Here are their replies:

> Robert: [I was thinking] That this is like a pattern through the years. I think everyone has just built one [a house], and then another group's building another, and you get a whole bunch of people building houses just to make a community or something (p. 164).

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[1] The four major problems are in the areas of – teacher training, research, grading/evaluation, and money.

[2] Horwood's six central features of all integrated curricula are: experiential learning, whole process, authenticity, challenge, responsibility, and community.

Paul: [I was thinking] that these are just stupid houses, Like, I don't like any of the houses around here, really. Because they're just like … like this one right here is just stupid looking, the way it is like a box with the corners cut off (p. 162).

I was surprised by their responses. I realized that their engagement had little to do with the opinions formed by my observations. So, which one was engaged? Both? Neither? My hunch is that they both were, but in very different ways. Furthermore, their engagement changed according to circumstances, something I call a pattern of engagement. I think that these circumstances are influenced by the presence or absence of the features that contribute to integration identified by Bert Horwood (1995, p. 14). Put another way, these features may determine the nature of one's engagement which can be a pattern of involvement or a path of participation that meets the patterns and paths of others from time to time as we act in communities. So one's engagement is in part defined by one's relationship to others – in much the same way that Bert's features are defined by their relationships with each other. For example, experiential learning can be more or les experiential depending on the nature of authentic experiences or challenging action one may find in a particular programme. As students work with circumstances they form unique but interconnected patterns of engagement that are changing and shifting constantly. The shifting nature of their engagement is rather like the reflections in three mirrors held in a triangle facing each other. Each time one or another is shifted then the image reflected in each mirror shifts as well – the circumstances change and so do perspectives.

Evaluation

Thus far I have confined the definition of engagement to an additional feature in Bert Horwood's description of what contributes to integration. But there is value in seeing engagement as a kind umbrella idea too. It is here that we can address issues of evaluation. Meta-engagement might describe how a student manages her membership in the community of learners of which she has become a member.

For the students in the programme I studied, their perceived engagement or lack of engagement was a multi-faceted phenomena which did not respond well to traditional behvioural attempts at evaluation. For example, Paul was assessed as one with a chronic 'bad attitude,' an opinion I could not share. But was he engaged? I will say he was – to the extent that he was able to critique the house design and offer alternatives to 'boxes with the corners cut off.' Assessing Paul using behavioural criteria, for example his ability to meet certain objectives measured by corresponding performance criteria, is problematic. It represents a common dilemma found in integrated programmes – that of finding ways of evaluating students without falling into the trap of using methods which may not be appropriate to the nature of these programmes.

It may be useful at this point to step back to examine the competing perspectives we find in learning theory and, by association, evaluation. On the one hand, we have conventional evaluation that is grounded in the understanding that learning and development is something that happens primarily inside the heads of individuals. In other words, learning happens from the inside-out. The idea here is that mental operations are universal. This perspective, known as a 'centred' view, has tended to dominate practice in most mainstream schools. On the other hand, we have a perspective that sees learning and

development as something that happens initially from the outside-in where particular cultures, societal institutions and historical moments combine to influence mental functioning. This perspective is known as a 'de-centred' view – one that has tended to dominate the experiential schooling usually associated with outdoor education. A centred view is underpinned by the theoretical weight of developmental and behavioural psychology and holds that individuals acquire uniform learning capacities, as illustrated in Piaget's developmental stages. A de-centred view though, is underpinned by a group-oriented view of learning that emphasizes learning from the outside in. In this view, cultural forces and interactive experiences are seen to dominate learning and development where, for example, all reflection is preceded by experience. This is found in the research done by Gilligan (1982) where women were seen to have developmental realities distinct from men. Put simply, a centred view holds to an individualistic perspective while a de-centred view holds more to a collective or cultural one. In schools these tensions get played out in many ways, but nowhere are they so strong as in the area of evaluation. The dilemma for teachers is conflict-laden because individualistic imperatives pull in one direction, for example in the need for asserting ones uniqueness, while collective or cultural imperative such as the need for community, push in the other. The answer to the dilemma does not lie in choosing one perspective over the other. When attempts are made to combine these two perspectives we often get the kinds of conflicts that are common to evaluation within integrated curriculum packages. One such conflict involves the use of behavioural criteria as the sole means of determining a student's engagement – in much the same way that Robert and Paul were evaluated. The answer to the dilemma lies in the ability of teachers to locate these behavioural outcomes in broad contexts such as those found within integrated programmes. When this is done the two competing perspectives are seen to be contextualized or situated.

The middle position between centred and decentred views is referred to by Lave & Wenger (1991) as a 'situated' view and is underpinned by a new field of study called cultural psychology (Schweder 1990) which suggests that mental processes connected to understanding are socially shared where persons and communities mutually constitute each other' (Jahoda 1992, p. 167). A situated view of learning and development is one in which knowledge is seen to rest collectively in a community where it is continually undergoing reconstruction as a result of daily ongoing practical activities.[3] An example of this would be a community of practice such as a construction crew building a house or a group of teachers in a school. In these communities the relations need to be dynamic in order to be effective. For example, while certain things remain static in construction and teaching, like following plans, good practice is quite often characterized by a capacity to 'fly by the seat of one's pants.' This view of knowledge contrasts with that of a centred view that is concerned primarily with the acquisition and assimilation of information in the form of schemata or formulas which individuals then apply to various situations. It contrasts too, with a decentred view in which collective forces dominate and the individual is defined from without through communal endeavors. To sum up then, a situated view can be a response to the push and pull of individualistic and collective

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[3]For a detailed explanation of a situated view as a nuanced position between centred and de-centred perspectives, see Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, as well as Chaiklin, S. & Lave, J. (Eds.), (1993). *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Content.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

forces through which we as humans manage to establish and identity within what are called communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). If we choose to hold to a situated view of learning and development then it follows that evaluation that is also situated should be our primary concern.

Returning now to our discussion of finding appropriate evaluation for integrated programmes, we may see that one's view of knowledge will determine how one attempts to evaluate it. If we hold to a centred perspective, where knowledge is mostly perceived to be information and the fulfillment of established social roles, then one will be content with evaluation that seeks to measure such capacities. For example, both Robert and Paul were so perceived as marginal students by their teachers – Robert as marginal because he did not seem to be working and Paul because he had a 'bad attitude.' We may see then, that although processing information and fulfilling certain social roles may be desirable – these approaches can also become designs for conformity. This is possible because the behaviours or patterns of engagement that students enact are expected to fit certain pre-conceived ideas. When we hold to a de-centred perspective we run into similar problems. Here the emphasis is on the ability of a student to 'get along' and contribute to the group. Problems arise when the nature of how this is supposed to happen is (again) pre-conceived. Viewed differently, Paul's challenge to the design of the house could become an opportunity for discussion and reflection. Designs that encourage only compliance are troubling in schooling contexts such as integrated programming and outdoor education because these programmes in many ways promote individual variation and development within community. So the question remains, how might one develop an evaluation design that accommodates both of these perspectives without falling into the trap of using evaluations that first, speak to one or the other exclusively and second, avoid rule-governed ideas about performance? The answer may lie in an emphasis on neither of these competing perspectives alone but in an approach to evaluation that would be determined by the particular context or situated nature of experience.

Three suggestions for evaluation

Teachers and schools who wish to evaluate students within integrated programmes may need to be conscious of the competing traditions described above. Is to 'be engaged' enough, or do students need to be engaged in a certain prescribed manner? Do evaluations need to take a fresh view, transcending rule-driven accounts? In other words, can we give up the idea of evaluating behavioural performance alone, whether it involves information-processing or being able to function in a group? Being able to do either or both says little of one's ability to engage in the transformative potential of experience. Take for example the experiences of Robert and Paul. Robert was evaluated on his perceived inability to fit into the group and do the job. Paul too, was evaluated on his inability to model a 'good attitude.' Both of these responses are behavioural means that ignored the situated nature of their engagement. When Robert was afforded an opportunity to talk about his perceived 'non-participation' it was understood differently. The same was true for Paul. Originally, both evaluations ignored the capacity of both students to reflect on the nature of their engagement in the community of which they were members.

So, how would we evaluate a student's capacity to act within a community of learners? Bert referred to the Australian University that developed carefully disciplined

anecdotal reporting as one option. There are other good examples too, but what I think is important to remember is that integrated programmes begin with at least three characteristics. The first characteristic is that evaluations should be locally grown' wherever possible, that they be developed out of local needs. In other words, evaluation design might be more sympathetic to programme design. For instance, if students are building a house then the exercise of due care when it comes to the safety of others might be a primary concern. Secondly, whatever means are developed should be perceived as intrinsically worthwhile activities in themselves, otherwise there is danger in falling into the trap of providing recipes for compliance that tend to be meaningless and exploitive. In the integrated curricular programme I studied, the quality and incidence of journaling deteriorated when students were informed that their journals would be marked. I suspect that journals became less of a safe place for self-expression and personal growth issues. Thirdly, evaluations of students should center around an examination of the nature of student participation and membership in broad contexts, such as the community in which they might be working and studying. In this instance we might ask that students account for their engagement as it relates to others in the programme. This implies that students might well be asked to evaluate themselves as individuals and each other as members of a learning community. Each of these characteristics may be expanded and developed into more robust versions of what has been briefly presented here. For example, the third characteristic can be expanded to include an examination of the underlying assumptions that comprise the social relations in which students are involved. It could also accommodate Paul's house critique as more than just an attitude problem.

These characteristics are not the final word on evaluations within integrated programmes, but are intended to add clarity to an emerging debate. The gist of the argument is that integrated programmes need evaluation designs that fit with their curricular and instructional designs. To sum up, this paper has addressed two of the four major dilemmas arising from integrated programmes identified by Bert Horwood. The first is in the area of evaluation and represents an attempt to theoretically map out some of the landscape in which integrated programmes function. Connected to this is the idea that evaluations should reflect programme design and to that end, a framework has been proposed. The second is in the general area of research and is intended to extend our knowledge base in two areas: by adding to the features that contribute to integration and by introducing the notion of meta-engagement as a concept that may help in determining the nature of student involvement in these programmes.

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