Chapter 6
Teaching and Learning in the Global Classroom: Strategies for Designing Thinking Curriculum and Online Collaborative Learning Projects

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides both theoretical underpinnings and practical examples of designing and implementing the “thinking curriculum” for the “global classroom.” The authors argue that teaching and learning in the global classroom calls for (1) thinking about the curriculum at a deeper level toward (2) implementing collaborative learning projects that count for multicultural and multilingual online learning environments. They use the term “thinking curriculum” to capture the proposition that teaching and learning are always concept- and assessment-based. The authors discuss examples of two thinking tools, concept mapping and Vee diagramming, to illustrate how these tools can help teachers think and communicate about the whole curricular process in a scientific way. In the second part of the chapter, the authors offer examples of collaborative learning projects that were implemented in the global classroom. In summary, this chapter is a practical guide for teachers who wish to think about their curriculum in a scientific way and recognize the value of creating a global classroom for preparing students for their roles in the global economy.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6347-3.ch006
INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss innovative strategies for teachers who are interested in improving their teaching in the 21st century for the global classroom. The purpose of this chapter will be twofold: (1) We will provide strategies for designing a “thinking curriculum” for 21st century learners, (2) We will offer strategies for designing collaborative learning activities for the online, global classroom. We use the term the “global classroom” to refer to the nature of learning where teachers and teacher-candidates together with their students collaborate toward building trans-disciplinary, online learning projects across different cultures and languages. We use the term the “thinking curriculum” to illustrate an inquiry-based approach to curriculum. We argue that an inquiry-based curricular approach provides teachers with the foundation, tools, and means to support learning in the global classroom of the 21st century.

BACKGROUND

From the perspective of educational policy, educational reform has been linked to national economic competitiveness in the global economy. Many in the past argued that K-12 curriculum is an inch deep and a mile wide (Schmidt, McKnight, & Raizen, 1997) and American curriculum is lagging behind to equip the next generation of the American workforce with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the demands of the 21st century (NCEE, 2007). The latest report funded by the OECD for the International Student Assessment (PISA, 2012), U.S students performed below average in math among the 65 nations. More specifically, 29 nations outperformed the US in math, and 19 nations scored higher than the US students in reading. In an attempt to better prepare American children for the global workforce, the Common Core State Standards have been proposed to improve national competitiveness in the global economy. The Common Core State Standards are expected to fully prepare American students for the future and better position them in order to compete successfully in the global economy (CCSSO, 2010).

Designing curriculum for a deeper understanding, setting higher standards with a set of clear expectations of what students need to learn, emphasizing the application of knowledge, and incorporating assessment throughout the curricular process have long been documented. Wiggins (1988 & 2005) proposed organizing curriculum around “big ideas” and “concepts” (Ericson, 2006 & 2008). Erickson (2006 & 2008) first coined the term Concept-Based Curriculum, but the idea of organizing curriculum around “big ideas” or “concepts” has been around since Wiggins’ and McTighe’s (1988 & 2005) well-known books on curriculum design. Concept-based curriculum entails two things: (1) being clear about the key concepts within a unit of instruction and (2) making generalizations among these concepts to show the depth of instruction. To be able to make generalizations as to what is to be learned and taught, teachers need to make higher levels of abstractions beyond facts and help students connect facts to concepts or show relationships among concepts (abstractions) to ideas of conceptual significance.

We believe the current trends in curriculum – building toward higher standards to emphasize a deeper understanding of the content and application of knowledge to real life settings – in essence is a “thinking curriculum.” We use this term in reference to our underlying theoretical underpinning proposed by Deanna Kuhn’s work in Education for Thinking (2008). Kuhn (2005 & 2007) has long argued that education should help students practice intellectual, thinking skills that they would need as adults in the future. Kuhn proposes “inquiry” and “collaboration” as two teaching and learning strategies to build toward higher levels of understanding and application of knowledge in real life settings. The process of inquiry – asking questions about a phenomenon,