

The Politics Of Standards-Based Curriculum In A Course-Based Environment

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Abstract

Demands for standards-based teacher education clash with university systems in a case study of one university's experience in revising its elementary education program. Issues of power and identity are explored.

1. Introduction

With the approach of the millennium, a series of education reform policies brought the era of standards-based education to Illinois. In 1997, the adoption of the Illinois Learning Standards established what K-12 students should know and be able to do in each subject area. The state achievement testing system was aligned to the standards, and even though the tests do not have the high-stakes effect of the required exit or grade promotion tests found in other states, the state tests are the basis of the school report card. School report cards draw annual attention from the press, and rankings based on state achievement test results are touted in real estate advertisements as well as school referenda publicity. Consequently, even before the provisions of *No Child Left Behind*, Illinois schools and school districts understood that the state learning standards impacted their work and began the work of aligning curriculum to the state standards.

With the state's K-12 students being held to meeting standards in their learning, the state turned its attention to assuring that those students' teachers also meet standards in their teaching. In conjunction with a restructuring of the state's teacher certification system from a single-tiered system to a three-tiered system with complex requirements and processes for certification renewal, the state developed the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards (IPTS). The knowledge and skills delineated in these standards, which apply to all teachers regardless of type of certification, grade level, or teaching subject, reflected existing national teaching standards structures such as INTASC and National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). The IPTS were accompanied by core technology and language arts standards for all teachers as well as standards for each content and certification area. As with the state learning standards, the state revised its testing system to align with the IPTS, creating the Illinois Certification Testing System (ICTS) to assure that candidates meet standards before teaching certificates are issued. The ICTS includes three tests, two of which (the Basic Skills Test and the Content or Subject Matter tests) had existed prior to the adoption of the IPTS. Legislation placed the requirement of these two tests at gate-keeping points within teacher preparation programs. The components of the ICTS are: (1) the Basic Skills Test which students must pass before being admitted to a teacher preparation program, (2) the Content test, which must be passed prior to student teaching, and (3) the Assessment of Professional Teaching, which must be passed for initial certification.

In the standards movement within education reform, K-12 learning standards and state teaching standards represent a shift in the meaning of diplomas and degrees as learning credentials. Earning a high school diploma is no longer a matter of amassing sufficient credits through passing courses based on Carnegie units of seat-time. Similarly, earning a degree in a teacher preparation program is no longer a matter of obtaining specified numbers of semester hours in defined categories. Because the K-12 learning standards are structured according to traditional subject areas and grade levels, aligning curriculum with learning standards does not challenge the existing curricular structure of K-12 schools. The structure of the state teaching standards, however, does not bear a one-to-one correspondence with the defined categories of the previous course-based system.¹ That lack of correspondence

gives rise to a problem: how can a standards-based curriculum in teacher education coexist with a higher education system based on department subject categories and course-based programs.

Ball and Bowe (1991), in their analysis of the micropolitics of change, note, “The implementation of externally initiated changes is mediated by the established culture and history of the institution” (p. 23). The purpose of this paper is to examine the experiences of one Illinois teacher preparation program as the externally initiated change of the state teaching standards was mediated by cultural environment of the university.

2. The Case

Founded as a normal school in 1895 and continuously accredited by NCATE since 1954, Northern Illinois University offers teacher preparation programs in a variety of certification areas. By far the largest of these programs is the elementary education program. For much of its history, NIU’s elementary education program looked much like its counterparts in other colleges and universities in the state. This is not surprising—the pre-IPTS state certification manual governing all teacher preparation programs in the state listed prescriptive semester hour requirements for each certification area. The difference among programs offered by the state’s colleges and universities were not in the courses included in each institution’s elementary education program, but in how each institution sequenced or grouped those courses. In other words, the certification manual might be considered as a train set, with the list of course requirements as the engine of the program train, the courses as the cars, and student teaching as the caboose. Each institution might place the cars in a different order, but the same cars would be included in all institutions’ assembly of the curricular train. In NIU’s elementary education program, the order of the cars in the program train included “pre-major” course work followed by education courses in a sequence of three professional semesters for those admitted to the major. Pre-major courses encompassed specific university general education courses (e.g., both semesters of U.S. history), as well as early education courses (e.g., child development, educational psychology, foundations of education). Each of the first two terms in the sequence of professional semesters included a clinical experience and methods courses (in assessment, reading, children’s literature, language arts, science, and social studies). The final professional semester centered on student teaching, with one-hour courses in environmental education and a seminar. Other required courses (an upper division foundations course, math methods, a “mainstreaming” course) and electives (courses to support a middle school credential) were taken either prior to admission to the professional semester sequence or during summers.

In the latter half of the 1990s, the Elementary Education program served as the organizational nexus for the development of partnerships between the College of Education and K-12 schools in the NIU service region. Initial partnership activities tended to center on the placement of elementary teacher candidates in partner schools for early clinical experiences as well as student teaching. As partnerships developed, each took on distinctive characteristics—extended days in some districts, development of interdisciplinary curriculum in literacy methods courses and school classrooms in another district, a focus on technology in another district.

During the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 academic years, the process of revision of the elementary education program occurred twice. Drawing on documents generated by both iterations of the revision process and observations of meetings held during the second, standards-driven, revision, this case study explores the influence of the established university culture on the development of standards-based curriculum. Using a political frame (Bolman & Deal, 1991), the narrative and analysis of this case study focuses on the political dynamics of the curriculum revision process, with particular attention to the issues of power and identity.

The political frame is grounded in three propositions: 1) Organizations are coalitions, 2) Because of scarce resources and enduring differences, conflict is central to organization dynamics, and power is the most important resource, 3) Organizational goals and decisions emerge from bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position among members of different coalitions (Bolman & Deal, 1991, p. 186). The questions guiding this inquiry connect this propositional framework to the work of creating standards-based curriculum in a course-based university environment. The guiding questions were: 1) What was the nature of the coalitions operating in the elementary education program revision process? 2) How were power relationships among coalitions enacted in designing

standards-based curriculum? 3) How did the bargaining and negotiations of the curriculum design process reflect the mediation of the university environment on the design of a standards-based curriculum?

3. The First Revision

In 2000-2001, under the leadership of an interim department chair who had been a professor in the area of science methods, elementary education faculty (those teaching children's literature and reading, language arts, science, and social studies methods) generated a new configuration for the program. The mainstreaming and math methods courses would now be part of a second professional semester "block" of courses, a new basic course in educational technology was added to the pre-major requirements, and a post-student teaching "capstone" semester was added. A few new cars had been added to the train, the cars on the train were reordered, and student teaching was no longer the caboose.

The new configuration was not approved through the college curricular process. Actually, the program revision was never included on the college curriculum committee agenda. In the process of designing the revisions, the elementary education faculty had not included faculty from other departments whose courses were part of the elementary education program in the discussion. The non-elementary education faculty voiced their chagrin to the dean's office. Revision of the program would require proposals from the elementary faculty pertaining to changes in "their" courses as well as proposals originating from the non-elementary faculty to create new courses (i.e., a course in teaching and technology) and revise existing courses (i.e., combining educational psychology and child development courses in a single six-credit-hour course). In the college and university curricular process, the non-elementary education faculty might vote against proposals put forward by elementary education faculty and/or not submit the desired proposals regarding their courses. In this case, the political process of curriculum adoption included two distinct coalitions: the elementary education faculty and "service course" faculty.²

The political dynamics evident in the impasse reflect what Bolman and Deal (1991) refer to as the mistaken assumption of top-down change: "to assume that a combination of the right idea (as perceived by the proponent of the idea) and legitimate authority is the basic ingredient for a successful initiative" (p. 233). Such an assumption runs afoul of the political agendas and political power of the "lowerarchy" (p. 233) who can resist, divert, and undermine change efforts. As Bolman and Deal (1991) point out, political power exists in several forms (p. 96). While the elementary education faculty had the power of legitimate authority to determine the curriculum of the major, a coalition of providers of "out of department" courses required in the major had the power of access to and, to some extent, control of agendas. The impasse between these forms of power challenged the traditional pattern of power within the cultural environment of the university. In the cultural discourse-practice of the university, the most highly valued courses (in terms of prestige of teaching assignment and economic consequences for departments) are courses offered by a department for degree majors within the department. The least valued courses are service courses, those courses that are required for a degree but which are offered by a department other than the major department. In this cultural pattern, the power of legitimate authority would seem to predominate over other forms of power. For the interim chair who bemoaned the fact that the service course faculty were not "cooperating," the first revision scenario proved otherwise.

The interim chair retired and a new interim chair was appointed. Meanwhile, a federal court case (*Corey H*) led to the expansion of the IPTS to include specific indicators related to the inclusion of special needs students in the general education classroom. The Illinois State Board of Education developed standards matrices which teacher certification programs would submit to indicate the courses and assessment activities that addressed the knowledge and performance indicators for each of the standards. Because the standards had taken center stage in the Illinois educational policy arena, the revision of the elementary education program needed to be revisited.

4. The Standards-Driven Revision

A directive from the office of the dean designated the composition of the committee that would be charged with the development of a proposal for a revised, standards-based elementary education program. The committee's composition was defined by roles: those who regularly taught courses in specified areas (including both major and

service course areas), those with roles in support areas (the clinical office and the advising office), and at least one school-based person. The idea was to forge an inclusive coalition. The success of the new coalition would depend on defining common self-interest values that would subsume previous coalition economic and political self-interest values (Fowler, 2000).

The work began in January 2001 with an examination of the standards matrices. Committee members were asked to identify standards indicators currently addressed by existing courses. The committee also identified four areas of work as a vehicle for the initial organization of the curriculum design and development process:

- Structures, exploring models used by other institutions' elementary education programs, particularly in the area of clinical experiences,
- Competencies, identifying distinctive program foci consistent with the standards,
- Connection/communication, developing channels for collaboration across departments and among program components, and
- Methods, examining integration of elementary and special education programs.

4.1. Team Work

Cross-coalition teams were formed for each of these four areas. The teams met in January and February to develop a summary document to be shared with the whole committee in March.

4.1.1. The Structures Team

The Structures team explored ideas regarding field/clinical experiences to support course work in light of state standards for teachers. From this perspective, early and intermediate field/clinical experiences, in particular, were viewed as the "lab" in which the knowledge and skills developed in courses would be applied, thus providing a venue for performance assessment as well as opportunities for reflective practice. All clinical/field experiences include four elements: placement, preparation/orientation, supervision, and reflection. These elements would be coordinated through a "team" approach, in which the team includes faculty/instructors associated with the professional education courses, educators in the field, and (in some cases) a university clinical supervisor.

To orient candidates to the teaching profession, to develop appropriate dispositions for working with children, and to connect early course concepts to a meaningful "real life" context, service learning experiences would be connected to pre-major (prior to formal admission) courses. Courses would also include a reflective component to field-based assignments.

The first professional semester would focus on literacy. Based on the "lab" needs of the courses associated with this clinical experience, expansion of this early clinical experience to 5 or 6 weeks might be considered.

The second professional semester would link methods courses to a clinical in a partnership school. Candidates would examine student readiness, classroom management routines as they impact instructional strategy decisions, curriculum flow, resources available (e.g., media services, special education consultation), and note student learning needs, styles and interests pertinent to differentiation of curriculum and instruction. Should existing partnerships ultimately develop to the Professional Development School stage, courses might be delivered on the clinical school site.

As with the first revision, the Structures team proposed a post-student teaching semester in which candidates placed their student-teaching experiences in a larger context (through courses in foundations, community connection, and elementary curriculum), and could begin their induction/professional growth by taking courses toward certification endorsements (e.g., reading, middle school, etc.). The capstone semester could include a service learning component, perhaps attached to the community connection course. In this way, service learning would serve as "book ends" for the program and provide a distinctive NIU emphasis in teacher preparation.

4.1.2. The Competencies Team

This team did not meet regularly, nor did it issue a summary document for consideration by the whole committee. Expressing the opinion that courses in the current program collectively met the standards (i.e., all of the spaces in the standards matrices were filled), this committee recommended that the first revision (with the minor addition of adding a second course in the area of special education) should be adopted.

4.1.3. The Connection/Communication Team

The team discussed potential points of connection and communication for all four semesters following formal admission to the program as well as pre-admission course work. Seizing the initiative in this committee's discussions, a member from the service course area of educational psychology proposed using essential questions grounded in educational psychology and a problem-based format as a vehicle for curriculum coherence. The team's recommendation embedded this approach in advocating use of standards-based portfolio development across the program. For each of the professional semester, faculty teaching the courses within the "block" of courses would meet regularly (pre-, mid-, and post- semester) to communicate and coordinate course assignments. Like the Structures team, the Connection/Communication team advocated a field experience in every professional semester as well as a pre-admissions clinical experience.

4.1.4. The Methods Team

Thinking about ways in which standards knowledge and performance indicators related to special education might be incorporated in the elementary education program, the Methods team offered the following ideas:

- Including an introductory special education course as a requirement in the elementary education program as well as the special education program. Class sections would include students from both programs.
- Focus in what is now the first professional semester would be "literacy." Courses would be block-scheduled and taught by the same instructor or team-taught by two instructors (both present for both courses all sessions) to reflect the current emphasis on integrated language arts. An assessment course in this block might include not only development of classroom assessments related to the taught curriculum, but also diagnostic assessment related to reading and familiarity with standardized assessments associated with special education placement.
- Focus in what is now the second professional semester would be "integration." This semester would include science methods, social studies methods, math methods, integration of exceptional children and a "reading across the curriculum" course.
- A course in inclusive teaching practices would be taught in conjunction with second professional semester block methods courses. Delivery configuration might include blended scheduling of this course for elementary and special education candidates so that team-teaching and/or combined sessions would be possible
- Paired placement or a required activity in at least one clinical placement would provide elementary education candidates with familiarity and experience in (1) consultation with special education teachers in planning curriculum and providing instruction to exceptional students, (2) participation on Intervention Assistance Teams, and (3) participation in IEP meetings/placement meetings.

4.2. Putting It Together

With common themes crossing the team recommendations, the anticipation for the March meeting of the whole committee was that designing the standards-based program would be more than reordering or adding cars to the train of the old program. If standards were to be the engine, one hoped that the program vehicle would be more like a staged rocket, each stage propelling the other to achieve a standards-based trajectory. The mediating influences of the university culture added complexity to the task.

The committee easily reached consensus on three points:

- The program would be comprised of thematic semesters. Pre-majors would complete a semester focused on learners and learning, including course work in educational psychology, child development, and introduction to special education. One semester would be a literacy semester. Another would be a content integration semester. A capstone semester following student teaching would situate an overview of elementary education within the broader contexts of educational philosophy and the reciprocal relationship of school and community.
- Field experiences (whether clinical courses or service learning) would be included in every semester.
- Faculty within each thematic semester block would meet regularly.

Translating these points into the language of the university culture proved more difficult.

The committee undertook the task of operationalizing ideas through use of the graphic organizer of a sample program of study. Eight semesters of course work needed to be filled with general education requirements, program requirements, and electives. Each semester could have no fewer than 12 semester hours or more than 18 semester hours of coursework. Further, the central administration of the university had pronounced that all of the coursework included in the first four semesters of the program must be able to be articulated with community colleges so that transfer students could enter the program on an equal footing with “native” students. In the process of converting standards-based ideas into university course structures, two phenomena were visible:

- If an area was worthy of being among the standards, it merited being a course unto itself.
- The three-credit-hour course was viewed as a sacred value. The axiom was that “if it was worth teaching, it was worth a three-hour course.”

The first phenomenon is connected to faculty identity. Like teachers in secondary school (Johnson, 1990), university faculty identity is connected to department affiliation and area of teaching expertise. Coalitions based on this identity resurfaced. Since expertise is a form of political power (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Fowler, 2000), faculty from various coalitions laid claim to various standards, and, consequently, to spaces within the program. For example, based on core technology standards for all teachers, faculty in instructional technology claimed the need for a course in teaching with technology. Faculty in educational psychology claimed the need for a course in classroom management (termed “the learning environment” in the IPTS). Separate methods course for each subject area (e.g., science, social studies, language arts, reading, math) were necessary because the content standards for elementary education include categories for each teaching subject area.

Furthermore, if an area merited a course in the program by virtue of being included in the standards, that course needed to be a three-hour course. The three-hour course format is deeply entrenched in faculty load—one or two-hour courses would make the assignment of faculty teaching load more complex, and that was not desirable. The faculty in instructional technology were perceived to have made a major concession in agreeing to “split” a three hour course into a two-hour class during the literacy semester and a one-hour class concurrent with student teaching. In trying to make everything “fit” within the student course load parameter of 12 to 18 hours per semester, a suggestion to change the assessment course from three hours to two hours was offered. That suggestion was not welcomed by the assessment faculty; in fact, in order to maintain the three-hour value, the assessment faculty asked that the course be placed in the post-student teaching capstone semester where there was “room.”

Ultimately, the standards-based program that was submitted through the curricular approval process included only two electives (unless students opt to take additional courses during summers). The elementary education curriculum train had a few new cars, a revised order to the many cars from the old train that remained coupled in the new train, and a new caboose.

5. Closing Thoughts

From the perspective of the political frame, externally initiated changes such as standards-based curriculum “become the site as well as the stakes of internal dispute” (Ball, 1987, p. 263). In the NIU elementary education program revision process, the internal dispute arose as demands for standards-based teacher education clashed with university systems. Coalitions emerged to compete for places in the elementary education program. Those coalitions were rooted in the university environment of identity based on department affiliation and area of expertise and course status (in particular, service versus major courses). Coalition claims were grounded in the power forms of legitimate authority and expertise, and those claims were strengthened by claims of connection between those power forms and the standards. In essence, the standards served to legitimate existing power forms based on the university environment. During the curriculum design process, negotiations and bargaining dissolved coalition distinctions when discussions focused on visions of the ideal. Coalitions solidified when those visions were translated into the implementation language of the university environment.

As increasing numbers of university programs are required to meet externally initiated standards, questions arise from a political analysis of the NIU experience:

- How might program faculty be defined? Does being a member of a program faculty require being a member of the department that is the administrative home for the degree, or might it include all faculty who teach required courses within the program?
- How are standards related to courses? Do standards represent a justification for courses or a guide for curriculum coherence?
- How might the university credit hour course structure serve rather than constrain standards-based curriculum?

Perhaps the more basic question is whether the appropriate metaphor for standards-based university programs is that of a train or a rocket. Like the early attempts at launching rockets, the experiences of the NIU elementary education program’s efforts in designing standards-based curriculum may offer lessons that ultimately lead to a the paradigm shift necessary to enter a space age. 📖

Endnotes

1. The eleven areas included in the IPTS are: content knowledge, human development and learning, diversity, planning for instruction, learning environment, instructional delivery, communication, assessment, collaborative relationships, reflection and professional growth, and professional conduct and leadership.
2. Broadly, all courses at a university can be considered as general education courses, courses in a major, or service courses.

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Notes