Building Walls: Limiting Innovation through Self-Imposed Boundaries

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Abstract: This paper explores the behavior of teachers when faced with an open-ended assignment in which they are to prepare something given minimal instructions and materials. The purpose of the assignment was to heighten teachers' awareness to the limits they place on their own actions. Teachers are reluctant to step very far from their perceptions of "what is wanted" and, as a result, narrow their options for action.

> I laughed and thought, so this is what it's like in the more liberal-arts environment! Being from an engineering background where most things are cut and dried, I was initially happy to be involved in a creative assignment. And then I immediately panicked because I wasn't used to having complete freedom.

How do people respond when they are given what appears to be complete freedom to structure a task? The above statement was made by a student enrolled in a master's level course when asked to reflect upon an open-ended assignment given on the first day of class. This paper explores student (most of whom were public school teachers) reflections on a non-structured open-ended assignment. The purpose of the assignment was to assist teachers in beginning to think about the limits they and others place upon their classroom activities as they design curriculum for their students.

What is taught in schools, in spite of literature about the influence of textbooks, is to some degree limited by outside influences (e.g., special interest groups, federal and state government, etc.) including community mores and values.

> State and federal agencies, local school boards, and individual schools often set broad educational goals applicable to all courses and toward which all teachers are expected to direct their instruction. ... Subject matter content is increasingly dominated by the standards movement. Although it is still possible in some subject areas on in some locales for the teacher to make major decisions regarding the subject matter to be taught, testing programs aligned with national, state, and local standards make it imperative to teach to the tests. (Gunter, Estes and Schwab, 2003).

Dale (1998) suggests that teachers are limited by social conditions surrounding their teaching, "conscious deliberation, that is, the teacher's awareness when he or she chooses what to do in the classroom, is superficial. The decisions teachers make when performing, in the act of teaching, have their background in the rationale of teaching, the underlying cultural code of teaching"(255). Dale continues, addressing what guides teachers, writing

> The national curriculum provides guidelines which the teachers, together with their colleagues, have to interpret and analyze, and then construct the aims for their own specific teaching based on these interpretations and analyses. The have also to choose the concrete content for the actual teaching and organize the content in adequate learning sequences/episodes. (1998, 257)

In 1980, Klein, in summarizing the findings of her study of perceived sources of influence on the curriculum, wrote, "There are two sources which all teacher in our sample consistently reported as having high influence across all subject areas: 'teachers' own backgrounds, interests and experiences' and "student interests and abilities" (Klein, 1980, *5).*

Ben-Peretz (1990) suggests that teachers might not, or should not, be automatons that blindly "install" or "administer" curriculum teaching suggestions found in textbooks and teacher guides. McCutcheon (1988) wrote that

> Teachers adopting a deliberationist attitude are mature and secure enough with their roles as teacher to have abandoned a starry-eyed, romantic love of teaching and progressed to seeing teaching as challenging, difficult, enjoyable work where problems exist that are murky but can be resolved. . . . This further implies the development of curriculum materials that engage teacher in deliberation rather than materials that assume teachers are a direct pipeline from the expert developers to students' minds. (202)

Ben-Peretz (1990) later argues for teachers who see the "curriculum potential" in materials and exploit that potential for the benefit of students. While this is an admirable goal or exhortation, one has to question the basis from which teachers will make decisions to go beyond the prescribed curriculum and wonder how teachers see themselves as they "break the mold" in teaching beyond the text. However, teachers do not have complete freedom in choosing how to implement or interpret national standards or local curriculum.

> Schools are free to introduce new practices in their classrooms as long as they don't violate parents' mental models about what should go on in "good" schools and classrooms. ... Because school boards and educators are acutely aware of what classroom practices fall within these influential parents' zones of tolerance and which practices will raise questions, they have in many cases self-censored their willingness to introduce practices which push against parents' expectations (Konzal, 1997, 5-6).

Additionally, parents have challenged the use of various school guidance materials (Peterson and Poppen, 1992). Teachers then must be aware of external forces directing and preventing them from making certain curriculum decisions. However, do teachers, and if they do, are they aware that they limit their own latitude when they select curricular materials and activities for use in their classroom? This paper reports on a study that looked at what limitations teachers place on themselves as they attempt to complete a task.

In an effort to identify and address teacher self-censorship as curriculum work, a beginning of course exercise was devised to be completed by teachers enrolled in a master's level course in curriculum development. The course is a required course for all master's level students and is used as a foundational leveling course for doctoral students who have not completed a course in curriculum development in their master's program. The data for this report was collected over three summers during which the students attended class five days a week for five weeks.

Some of the students (six) in the study group were familiar with the instructor's teaching style and philosophy (they had either completed another graduate course or undergraduate course with the instructor). Some of the responses reflect this prior experience and will be noted in the analysis.

At the end of the first day's class, the students were given an assignment consisting of a brown manila envelope with the following message on the outside

> The complete directions (i.e., all that you will be given) for your first assignment are in this envelope. The assignment will be due at the beginning of class tomorrow.

Inside the envelope the students found a single sheet of white typing paper (8.5 x 11 inches) and the following statement taped to the inside of the envelope's flap:

> Without consulting any of your classmates, use the sheet of paper in this envelope to prepare something and bring it to class tomorrow.

The instructions were designed to give students as little hint as possible regarding the type of "something" they were supposed to prepare." The words "something" and "prepare" were carefully chosen so students would not think the task was to be creative (e.g., the verb "create" might suggest that students were expected to do something creative or out of the ordinary) or limited to something related to the course, either by title or by reading the course texts. The assignment also did not ask for connections to writing or preparing curriculum because I did not want to suggest that they should have a body of knowledge they should draw on to complete the assignment.

At the beginning of the second day's class, students were given 15 to 20 minutes to respond to a five-item Assignment Analysis questionnaire (See Appendix A) relating to the product and the process involved in completing the assignment. After completing the questionnaires, which were collected by the instructor, students were asked to share their "somethings" with their colleagues by standing at the front of the classroom and describing or demonstrating their assignment. Some students volunteered the reasoning they used to complete the assignment. The second, third and fourth questions are the focus of this paper, those questions dealing with perceived expectations and limitations and self - limitations. In order to give context for student responses, a brief summary is given here of the types of "somethings" prepared in response to the directions.

Products Made

The products made have been divided into two categories with **a** number of sub-categories. The two categories are 1) used the paper as a presentation medium and 2) modified or manipulated the shape of the paper. In the first category, *25* students[1] used the paper to present a written message. Of the 25, ten prepared messages that were self-contained (e.g., a computer print out of a tiger with a poem, a quote by Mark Twain, recipes for favorite food, and a dance team routine). The remaining fifteen products were in some way related to the course. Nine others, responding to a thought that the product ought to be useful in completing a course requirement, made items such as a scope and sequence, a curriculum document cover, a table of contents, etc. Six of the students included concept maps related to curriculum, both the idea of curriculum and the course for which they expected to write curriculum.

Many of the students modified the shape of the paper by cutting, folding, or crumpling. One student described her project, saying, "I made an origami bird by cutting a square out of the paper and making various folds - I thought about a poem I had learned as a child and looked it up in the library" (2-16). Other examples of cut or folded products are a snowflake, a folded paper helicopter, several paper airplanes, a hat, a boat, and a drinking cup. One student cut the paper in a spiral pattern and made a quarter-inch strip of paper 47 feet long. Another student, a doctoral student in language arts, cut the paper to make a "little book" in which she wrote "important things." A master's level student, citing illness from the evening before, submitted a blank piece of paper with the explanation

> The assignment was done to prove a point and was an analogy for something. Then I tried to psyche out what the analogy might be. I also thought about my 9th grade English (sic) class and a similar situation. We were supposed to draw a pic (sic) from Huck Finn - someone turned in a blank page and it was Huck and Jim going down the river through the fog - they got an A. (1-17)

Another student (a doctoral level science teacher) also submitted a blank paper but stated that he would use the paper to demonstrate the differences in air resistance when dropping a sheet of paper and the same sheet when crumpled into a ball.

Analysis Procedure

The questionnaires collected from the students were numbered for ease of record keeping. Student responses to the questions were read and key words or phrases were typed into a table that was printed for analysis. Categories of responses were developed by reading the responses and clustering like responses. Each response of a particular type was highlighted with a different colored marker. After all responses had been highlighted, the categories were summarized. Some responses fit into more than one category; these responses are discussed as a sub-set of a category. Text of particular interest was highlighted and typed into the table with the responses. Direct quotes are identified by the coded questionnaire number rather than student name.

Question Two: Expectations about Assignment

The second question asked students to write about what they thought was the purpose of the assignment. Twenty-six students said that the assignment seemed to either be something for the course related to curriculum development or to benefit public school students. Eight thought it was designed to measure or foster creativity, seven thought it was an icebreaker to be used as show and tell for the next day's class. Five thought it was to be used to gain insights into the personalities of the students enrolled in the course. Several thought it was just "something to do until the students had read the text." One student, a former student of the instructor, approached the task in this manner.

> I felt relaxed because I know the expectations of Dr. -------. I knew I could do anything I desired and that, being the fair man you are, my grade would probably be determined on if I completed it. (3-6)

There is only a slight degree of correlation between the responses given to this question and the products made or the responses made to questions three and four.

Question Three: Limitations Placed by Instructions

Responses. Three broad categories developed as the responses to this question were analyzed and the majority of the responses fell into these categories: none, the paper, and inability to talk to classmates.

> Twenty-three students responded with a variation of "none' or "nothing" with two adding the phrases "but couldn't be too simple" (2-13) and "but creativity" (3-19)

> Fifteen referred to the single page of paper, with additional comments relating to its "whiteness" or its size. Two students did not feel compelled to use only the single sheet provided but added other sheets of white paper to the project.

> Eleven students cited the inability to talk to peers as a limitation given by the instructions.

These three limitations are reasonable in that the instructions were designed to give neither direction nor limitation, required the use of a single sheet of paper, and admonished students to not talk to their peers. Two other responses appeared several times, time *(5* times) and variations on the theme of vagueness or ambiguity. One student wrote "You call "prepare something" instructions?! 1 think knowing what you expected would have helped. Also knowing a *reason* for the assignment" (2-12).

From the responses, I have concluded that the instructions contain the proper degree of direction and vagueness so as to not guide the student into preparing a specific "thing" to complete the assignment. Only two students read more into the instructions by thinking that the instructions were directing them to do something related to the class. This response

(something related to curriculum or the class) appears numerous times in the section on self-imposed limitations (See below)

Question Four: Limitations Placed Upon Self

After reading through the limitations placed upon self responses, six categories became evident: 1) the product was to relate to the course, 2) the utility or appropriateness of the product was measured against the maker would think were others' values or expectations, 3) it was to be made solely with the single sheet of paper, 4) creativity was required, *5)* it would be completed with current skills and knowledge, and 6) a miscellaneous category with mentions of time and resources and the need for the product to have meaning for the creator. Of these six, the first two accounted for over half of the responses.

Nineteen students said they felt that they should make something related to the course, either curriculum specifically or the course in general. Statements such as "something to stimulate thinking about curriculum" (2-3), "limited to aspect of curriculum development" (1-5) or relevant to class (e.g., 1-1, 1-2, 2-9, 2-11), and "limiting to teaching and interesting to classmates" (2-5) illustrate this category. One student who outlined a lesson on "ladybugs" wrote, "I took this assignment to be a "lesson" simply because it is an education course -1 guess it could have been almost anything" (1-14).

Two types of external measures were used when determining what should be made in response to the assignment. A number of students thought about things that would be of interest to their classmates. Others were worried about what others would think of their work, either the instructor or their classmates. Some of their comments were

> "Worrying about what other people would think about my 'something.' I worried about that more than what <u>you</u> would think." (2-12, emphasis in original)

and

> "I didn't think I could be totally free and make something simple or you'd think I was lazy." (2-13)

and

> "I was afraid that I would do something totally different from anyone else but I guess that is okay, I tried not to read too much into the instructions and go with what I felt that I should do." (2-1)

and

> I didn't want to do anything too "off the wall" "I would come up with an idea, but then I would think, no, that's not what he wants. So I tried to stay conservative." (3-19)

and finally,

> "[C]ould this be what he was looking for?" I wonder if this is right?" (3-13)

From these responses, one can see that perceptions of instructor and peer expectations were a factor in the decision making process for many of the students. How the students interpreted "correctness" or "appropriateness" does not follow a pattern. Products from these students were, in the order listed above, a small, important things book, a concept map, a cut snowflake, a page of tessellations, a rolled paper straw, and a poem (3-15). If anything characterizes most of these products, they were more elaborate and required more physical work than did some of the other products such as those related to course content which could be characterized as text on the paper.

Several students wrote that the product was to be made solely with the single sheet of paper. These products were both constructed and text-based. Several thought the paper had to be used as it was, i.e., one could not add to it, either ink, pencil, or coloring, and therefore folded the paper. One student made a paper airplane and wrote "I was thinking about coloring my airplane but I decided I should limit myself to just using what was provided in the envelope" (2-6). As stated earlier, one of the most interesting was a 5-foot strip of paper made from the sheet by cutting a ¼" strip beginning on the outside and spiraling into the center. This student justified her activity, saying, "None (referring to limitations). When instructions are open to interpretation, you can only move in a direction you <u>think</u> is okay!" (1-4; emphasis in original)

Other students thought that creativity was required (test of creativity (3-9); "writing or drawing was not creative enough so altered the paper with cutting" (snowflake) (1-6). One student combined the notion of external approval and creativity in writing,

> "The item made had to have a use or purpose. I kept trying to think what the trick was, which at first limited me. It had to be unique and not something one would normally think of." (1-7)

This product was a crumpled paper ball used to break the ice in a large group by tossing the ball to individuals. One student this way expressed the lack of personal creativity related to class assignments.

> Well, I avoided it as long as I could because I really didn't know what I was going to do . . . . Relief - It wasn't at all what I expected, but also a little anxious because the instructions were so general. I kept telling myself that it was supposed to be fun and just to relax about the whole thing but I couldn't help wondering about what I was going to do.... I am so used to getting very specific instructions that I didn't know where to begin to respond to such open-ended instructions.

Ultimately, this student chose to copy a poem that she liked (Molder of Dreams) from a book to share with the class.

Several students thought they had to complete the assignment with current skills and knowledge. One of the most interesting rationales for the product (using the paper to demonstrate differences in air resistance between a flat sheet of paper and a sheet of paper wadded into a ball) came from a science teacher.

> Most of my time was spent thinking about what could be done with a blank sheet of paper. My first thought was to create some sort of origami figure, but my attempts were unsuccessful, so I decided Ito] use the paper to illustrate gravity and the effect of air resistance.
>
> I chose to limit myself to areas and skills that I felt competent in. I could have painted a watercolor on the paper, but since I have no experience in that area, I would have been embarrassed to share it with others. (3 - 10)

This student's first thoughts about the assignment were "I thought that this sort of ambiguous, creative assignment is the type that I most dread." (3 -10)

Ten students wrote that the amount of time allowed for the assignment or the amount of time they chose to devote to the task were limiting factors or that the product had to be meaningful or beneficial to either themselves (3- 1) or to the class (1 - 16). The type of product made with these rationales ranged from copied poems to elaborate concept maps of courses and curriculum development.

Some of the students responded that they put no limitations on their activity. Their products tended to be reprints of extant works (i.e., poems copied from books (1-24, 2-15*),* and a problem solving activity taken from a school file (2-4)). Maybe for these students, the vagueness of the instructions did not convey a sense of value to the assignment.

> I wrote a <u>brief</u> scope and sequence of a possible reading lesson. I felt elaboration was not necessary. I assumed this from the un-elaborate instructions given me. (1-18)

This might have been the whole rationale for this student response but the student's work for the whole course could be described as bordering in "minimalist."

Discussion

Some of the responses and products could be considered predictable. One should not be surprised by the focus on curriculum or course related products; after all, the students were enrolled in a curriculum development course. This could be attributed to task-centeredness on the part of the students but lack of time for thinking and gathering materials probably is more explanatory.

Also, a function of the nature of the course students were enrolled in, a five-week summer course meeting every day, makes responses related to time understandable. Students had less than 24-hours to complete the assignment, a time frame not conducive to learning new skills or gathering materials from home or the store.

Additionally, many of the students who enrolled in the course were also enrolled in one or two additional courses. Six or nine hours of course work in a five week summer session puts a strain on both time and creativity. This is not to say that students who were the most creative had the lightest summer schedule.

The vagueness of the assignment could explain some of the student products although for other students it was not a problem. The lack of creative response and uneasiness with the ambiguous nature of the assignment can be explained when one understands that the majority of academic tasks given students, whether at public school, undergraduate, or graduate levels, are intended to lead students to a particular solution. Students who had previous experience with the instructor were less inhibited in their responses; but their products (2-15, 3-6) were no more elaborate than those made by students who were encountering the instructor for the *first* time. Maybe they were not compelled to do anything because they knew the instructor did not have a particular product in mind.

The significant finding for this author is the large number of students, 35 out of 62, who, when given what appeared to be total freedom with certain materials, chose to base their decisions either on previous content and knowledge or made decisions based on what others, either the instructor or peers, would think about them or their product. Only six students cited practicality or personal meaningfulness as limiting filters placed on their preparation activity. Only one student used the assignment as a forum to

present information on something of great personal interest.

> I thought that I might create a lesson plan - as this is a course in curriculum development - but there were no instructions to that effect, so I decided to get on my soapbox and try to enlist the classes help in alerting the community regarding the appalling state of education in Texas. ... I decided to use my page as a soapbox instead. The audience was too tempting! (1-2)

This student created an information flyer on the state of adult literacy in Texas and, after reading it, distributed it to the class.

Subsequent class discussions about the patterns found in the limitations caused some discomfort for the students. Many were uncomfortable with their self-limiting decisions but could rationalize the situation. Variations on the themes of "no real free will in schools" and "you do what you have to do to keep your job" indicate that many teachers readily accept what they perceive as societal limits on their decision making process, even if they do not like the situation.

If curriculum and school reformers wish to see initiative and innovation on the part of teachers, additional study of teacher self-limitation should be conducted. The interpretations of the results of this study are hampered by the nature of the data collection (limited time, pen and pencil self-report) and could be enriched through interviews conducted after written response. Additional information could be learned by examining teacher thinking about limits if the product preparation was not limited by a 24-hour preparation period.

Summary

This paper reports results of a class activity given to teachers to explore limits they place on themselves as they prepare a product given non-directive instructions. Several types of limitations were perceived by the teachers, some in the instructions and some in their own interpretation of the task. The majority of the teachers chose, even while admitting that the instructions were non-limiting, to make products related to the course or in response to what they thought someone else would think if their product. Very few students used usefulness to self as the limiting criterion. These findings may add support to the knowledge of why many teachers rely heavily on textbooks and teacher lore when making decisions about curricular choices in the classroom.

NOTE: [1] Information was collected from 60 students. Percentages of students making particular responses were not calculated in that some students gave more than one response to a question.

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