

FORMATIVE APPROACHES TO CONSTRUCTING SYLLABUSES FOR THE CARIBBEAN ADVANCED PROFICIENCY EXAMINATIONS

Cherryl Stephens

This paper examines the approaches used to construct syllabuses for the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations (CAPE). These approaches are described as **formative**. Two principles undergird the major activities that drive syllabus development using this approach—the iterative and the widely consultative process, and the use of data from a variety of sources as a feedback mechanism. This formative approach to syllabus construction produces a document that is culturally relevant, authentic, and “fit for purpose.”

Introduction

In the literature, curriculum as a concept is almost without boundaries. Portelli (1987) indicated that more than 120 definitions of curriculum exist in the educational literature. According to Tanner and Tanner (1980), curriculum is “that reconstruction of knowledge and experience, systematically developed under the auspices of the school, to enable the learner to increase his or her control of knowledge and experience.” This definition posits that curriculum is an interactive process, which involves the interface between the learner and the teacher with the subject matter in a particular milieu. The learner is an active participant, engaged in a constructivist mode of learning as he actively makes sense of the subject matter by bringing his personal and past experiences to bear on the content of the subject (Henderson, 1996). In this definition, the school serves as a microcosm of the society, where learning impacts on, and is impacted by, what takes place in the society.

To date, all Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) syllabuses attempt to capture the interaction between the school and the wider society by the inclusion of a rationale which establishes the justification for developing the syllabus, aims, general and specific objectives, content, suggested teaching and learning activities, and the details of the assessment component. The Council has continued to go beyond the mere

Cherryl Stephens

development of syllabuses and continues to develop curricula.

According to Griffith (1999), the establishment of the Council was an essential component of the independence efforts of Caribbean territories, which sought to establish institutions that would reflect the interests, characters, and aspirations of Caribbean peoples and governments. The CXC syllabuses and the corresponding examinations are not only relevant to Caribbean students but also reflect the social, economic, and development needs of the region.

This paper examines the procedures that the Council has used and continues to use to ensure that its syllabuses are linked to the curriculum in the schools of the participating territories. In this way, CXC ensures that its examinations remain accountable to the school system within each territory, and that the certificates awarded reflect the learning that takes place in the classrooms. This paper focuses on the approaches used to construct syllabuses for the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations (CAPE). These approaches are **formative** because there is continuous evaluation of the process during the development of the product. The term *formative evaluation* was first used by Scriven (1967) in connection with curriculum improvement. Scriven was of the view that formative evaluation involves the collection of appropriate evidence during the construction and trying out of a new curriculum, in such a way that revision to the curriculum can be based on this evidence. Beyer (1995) contends that formative evaluation is distinguished by three critical features:

- it is ongoing
- it involves assessment
- it seeks specific information.

These three critical features are also essential elements in formative approaches to syllabus construction. In constructing syllabuses using formative approaches, specific information is gathered on an ongoing basis from a variety of sources. This information is assessed and used as feedback to restructure or modify the product. These formative approaches result in a product that has the highest potential for producing or achieving its objectives.

Approaches to Constructing Syllabuses for CAPE

Two principles undergird the major activities which drive syllabus development that uses formative approaches. These principles are the iterative and widely consultative process, and the use of data from a variety of sources. The iterative principle ensures that syllabuses are continually being upgraded in light of new ideas and insights that are derived from the interaction of learners and teachers with the syllabuses. Each iteration of the syllabus is based on consultations with the major stakeholders in the process. Among them are teachers, students, employers, parents, principals, curriculum directors, school board members, and community members. These consultations with a variety of stakeholders represent views from different perspectives. These perspectives are used to construct a refined version of the product. This version is then subjected to further analysis. The data collected from the analysis of this version of the product are then used as feedback to further refine the product and produce another iteration of the syllabus. Indeed, each iteration of the syllabus represents a further refinement based on wide consultation and the use of data from a variety of sources.

The Decision to Develop CAPE

The CXC syllabus development process is usually initiated with an assessment of the demand for a subject, following a request from one or more participating countries for an examination in that subject. In the case of CAPE, the Chairman of Council, in 1979, reported to the Standing Committee of Ministers of Education that the Council had successfully launched the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) programme and that the time had come for the Council to consult with Curriculum Officers of Ministries of Education on the need to develop an alternative to the A'Level examination. The Ministers agreed that Council should consider a new developmental model that emphasized post O'Level certification rather than replicating A'Level examinations in the Caribbean. The Council was asked to continue to consult with the major stakeholders to determine the extent of the need and demand for examination at a level above CSEC, and to make proposals for the consideration of the Ministers (Caribbean Examinations Council [CXC], 1979).

At the 1988 meeting of the Standing Committee of Ministers of Education, the Council was able to report that, based on consultations, the proposed post-CSEC programme had received general support from

Cherryl Stephens

The University of the West Indies (UWI), the University of Guyana (UG), regional community colleges, and other tertiary institutions. Moreover, through an extensive process of collaboration between CXC staff, representatives of UWI, other tertiary institutions, and Ministries of Education, the central concept of the CAPE framework had been developed (CXC, 1988). This consultative process produced the major working document, which outlined the general guidelines for the development of the CAPE programme, *The Post-CSEC System of Examined and Accredited Courses* (CXC, 1996). This document outlined the structure, philosophy, rationale, objectives, target groups, and proposed subject offerings of the CAPE programme. In addition, it provided general guidelines for syllabus development and assessment.

Based on the consultations with different stakeholders, it was determined that the CAPE programme should provide educational opportunities for a wider cross-section of students who wish to pursue post-secondary education. Courses were to be defined in terms of one or two Units. One Unit may be completed in one year of post-secondary study. In cases where the subject consists of two Units, the student may proceed to the second Unit of study and examination in the same year, in the next year, or in a later year. Thus, the CAPE scheme allowed for breadth and depth of study. In this way, a student pursuing CAPE is able to select Units of a subject that match his or her own interests and abilities (CXC, 1996).

Panel Formulation

All CXC syllabuses are developed by Subject Panels. A Subject Panel is made up of five to six specialists drawn from various CXC participating territories. The Panel comprises teachers who are qualified to teach the subject at the secondary level; specialists drawn from the tertiary institutions of the region, including universities; and practitioners in the field. In developing the syllabus, the Panel receives technical guidance from a CXC curriculum officer and a CXC measurement specialist.

CXC undertakes consultations with a number of entities in the region, including Ministries of Education; UWI; UG; the University of Technology, Jamaica; University of Belize; community colleges; and subject associations, to obtain proposals for members of subject Panels. These consultations yield several nominations. The nominations are first

Approaches to Constructing Syllabuses for CAPE

reviewed by the Syllabus Officer and an effort is made to find persons with the best mix of skills. This is followed by a review and consultation with the Pro-Registrar, in his capacity as Head of the Syllabus Unit, out of which refinements are made. After this, another consultation and review between the Pro-Registrar and the Registrar, who is the Chief Executive Officer of CXC, takes place where the list of prospective Panel members undergoes further refinement. A further consultation and review is done between the Registrar and the Chairman of Council, who approves the final selection. What finally emerges from this iterative and consultative process is a team that the Council is confident can guide the syllabus development process and one that best represents the views of the region.

The Process of Developing the Drafts of the Syllabus

In preparation for the first Panel meeting, CXC staff consults with Ministries of Education in the region to find out what is happening in the territories and to examine existing syllabuses and programmes taught in schools. In addition, other documents and materials are sourced and together they form a package that is circulated to Panel members for their review.

The Subject Panels having been appointed, the first Panel meeting is convened. These meetings last for three or four days. At this meeting, panellists are reminded that they must bring to the meeting the views and concerns of the interest group they represent as one of the data sources to inform the syllabus development process. Developing the rationale, aims, and general objectives represents a critical first step in syllabus development because all subsequent steps are designed to respond to these parameters.

During the meeting, the Panel is subdivided into working groups and assigned tasks. These working groups are followed by plenary sessions where amendments are made, informed by the collective thinking of the group. At the end of the final day of the meeting, and following several rewrites of each section of the document under preparation, the Panel produces Draft 1 of the syllabus that includes the rationale, objectives, content, and assessment criteria.

As part of the formative approach to syllabus development, further

Cherryl Stephens

inputs are made; in the first instance by the Sub-Committee of the School Examinations Committee (SUBSEC). SUBSEC is responsible for overseeing the syllabus development and maintenance work of the Council. The Sub-Committee comprises representatives of Ministries of Education in the region. The Chairman of Council presides over these meetings and the Registrar, Pro-Registrar, and Heads of Technical Divisions participate. The report on the initial deliberations and recommendations of the Panel is submitted to SUBSEC. SUBSEC reviews the progress made and provides feedback to the Panel for further consideration. The inputs from members of SUBSEC occur at several stages in the development of a syllabus, as will be shown. It provides a critical review of the work of the Panel, as well as comments that are critical to the further deliberations of the Panel.

In addition to SUBSEC, Draft 1 of the syllabus is referred to resource persons who are considered experts in their field. Each syllabus is sent to at least five reviewers. In the case of interdisciplinary syllabuses, there may be at least eight reviewers. The critical issue is the selection of the right reviewers and asking the right questions. In the absence of these two elements, this formative assessment of the early draft of the syllabus is unlikely to yield the desired results.

The selection of the reviewers by Council is also a result of consultations—first with the Panel members who are asked to nominate persons they consider subject experts in the region, then among the Subject Officer, the Pro-Registrar, and the Registrar—before final selections are made. The objective of the consultations is to ensure that persons best suited to the task are selected. Indeed, one of the six critical flaws in formative evaluation identified by Beyer (1995) is the use of unqualified persons as expert evaluators. The consultations provide the opportunity to ensure that the persons with the right skills are selected for the task at hand. In addition, to ensure that reviewers are encouraged to provide the kinds of information that would be most useful to the Panel, reviewers are asked to respond to specific aspects of the document. They are invited to comment on the structure of the syllabus, general objectives, specific objectives, content, and the assessment criteria.

Additionally, Panel members are asked to consult with colleagues in their territory and institution. After this round of consultations, the

Approaches to Constructing Syllabuses for CAPE

second Panel meeting is convened, at which the data from the many different sources, namely, comments from the reviewers, SUBSEC, and colleagues of Panel members, are analyzed by the Subject Officer and used as the major data source at the second Panel meeting. Each comment is discussed and, based on agreement by the Panel, adjustments are made to Draft 1 of the syllabus. In effect, the results of the consultations from the different sources (individuals and institutions) provide the data that are used to produce the second iteration of the syllabus, Draft 2.

This second iteration of the syllabus is subjected to a wider consultation. According to Beyer (1995), an educational product must be continuously assessed throughout the entire course of its development. Each iteration (draft) or reiteration (redraft) of the product must be assessed. The purpose is to not only get as many key persons as possible to comment on a draft of the syllabus, but also to ensure that changes made as a result of earlier formative feedback do not cause an unanticipated problem. Assessing changes as they are made ensures progress toward the production of a quality product. One way to do this is to expand the sources of data.

CXC employs two mechanisms to ensure that this ongoing assessment is conducted. The first involves the dispatch of a detailed questionnaire and the syllabus to selected schools within each territory, national CXC committees, subject associations, university lecturers, and teachers' colleges for their consideration.

The second mechanism for consultation involves regional syllabus scrutiny workshops. This was particularly applicable during the early development of CAPE syllabuses. Syllabus scrutiny workshops are held with selected groups of teachers from each territory. The workshops are managed by the Syllabus Officer, a Measurement Officer, and the convenors of the Panel. At the workshops, Panel members discuss with practising classroom teachers:

1. the scope and nature of the rationale and objectives of the syllabus;
2. the scope and nature of the objectives in terms of their feasibility, validity, and efficient articulation with tertiary institutions;

Cherryl Stephens

3. the main organizing concepts, principles, values, and perspectives that undergird the content and teaching methods of Units, Modules, and themes;
4. the depth and breadth of content coverage;
5. the appropriateness, compatibility, and marketability of the syllabus;
6. the appropriateness of the teaching methods; and
7. the way achievement is measured in the subject.

In addition, practising teachers are invited to sit with a sub-committee of the Panel to develop specimen examination papers. During this exercise, the syllabus document is scrutinized as the syllabus is viewed from the perspective of examiners and item writers. In attempting to develop the specimen papers, critical data are collected and inconsistencies and gaps are identified. This process provides a valuable source of data for use in further refining the syllabus document.

These consultations reveal the varying interpretations that teachers from different schools within the same territory, and from different territories, make of the written document. The perspectives provide an invaluable source of qualitative data that are essential and critical to the next phase of the development process. Here, teachers are seen as partners in the curriculum process. This is important, as the teachers know best the milieu in which the syllabus must function. Schwab (1983) suggested that the active involvement of teachers in curriculum development and revisions was essential. Curriculum developed under conditions detached from the real teaching-learning situations does not fit the needs of teachers and learners. Eisner (1988) recommends the use of an experienced eye in the consideration, interpretation, and assessment of data. Teachers do have the experience and can make discerning judgments on the emerging syllabus. Through these interactions with teachers, shared understandings evolve and meanings are constructed.

The deliberations of the third Panel meeting are informed by several sources of data representing a variety of critical perspectives. The comments from SUBSEC on Draft 2, the quantitative data collected from the teacher questionnaires, and the qualitative data from the syllabus scrutiny workshops are used at this Panel meeting to further refine the syllabus document. Henderson and Hawthorne (2000) agree that because curriculum is contextually and personally expressed, it must be viewed

Approaches to Constructing Syllabuses for CAPE

through multiple lenses that reveal not only major elements but also the relationships among them. The Panel discusses each comment from the variety of data sources and arrives at a resolution. The perspective of each Panel member is an important component for resolving conflicts. At the end of the exercise, the wisdom of the collective group is used to decide on the issues. This consultation produces Draft 3 of the syllabus, that is, another iteration of the document informed by the consultations and the data collected from several sources. This draft is submitted to SUBSEC for its review and approval. Based on consultations with SUBSEC, the syllabus is finalized and ready for piloting.

Piloting the Syllabus

The activities of piloting the syllabus are designed as another major data collection exercise, where the viewpoints of an even wider cross-section of the teaching fraternity are sought as they seek to implement the syllabus. Partnerships are established among CXC staff, Panel members, Ministries of Education, Principals, teachers, and students from across the region. Together, they agree to be part of the consultative process in developing the syllabus.

Three major activities are used to collect data during the initial implementation of the syllabus. The activities include workshops, site visits, and a Panel finalization meeting. Teachers selected to participate in the piloting of the syllabus are involved as partners in these activities. They participate, together with CXC staff, Ministry representatives, and Panel members, in two workshops, three site visits, and the keeping of a journal. An orientation workshop is held prior to the start of teaching, where teachers are asked to collect information on how they implement the syllabus in the Teacher Journal. This journal provides information that will be used to refine the syllabus document. A second workshop is convened midway in the teaching year, where teachers can seek further guidance and provide additional evidence of the working of the syllabus.

In addition, each teacher is visited three times during the year by a Panel member selected by the Council. Site visits provide immediate advice and assistance to teachers in implementing the syllabus but, more importantly, they provide the syllabus developers with the best opportunity to see the syllabus at work. During the site visits, Panel

Cherryl Stephens

members make timely interventions by providing guidance to teachers on how to improve teaching and learning in the classroom. Opportunities to interact with teachers, principals, deans, students, and parents provide invaluable insights into the working of the syllabus. This strategy provides additional information and additional perspectives on the syllabus. Reports of site visits are made to the Council, and immediate remedial action is taken, if required. The procedures for conducting site visits to pilot schools are provided in Appendix A.

Syllabus Finalization

At the end of the year of piloting, a syllabus finalization meeting is held. A wide selection and variety of data are available for finalizing the syllabus. These include data from the site visit reports, the orientation and midterm workshop reports, reports of discussions with employers, teacher journals, and examination performance. The views of Connelly and Clandinin (1988) support the use of content analysis of journal entries, teacher interviews, and focus group sessions as sources of data to finalize the syllabus. This varied data help to create a holistic picture of the curriculum, which is needed to construct a syllabus. The finalization meeting produces an iteration of the syllabus which was informed by several consultations that provide data from a variety of sources. It is this iteration of the document that is used for wide-scale implementation.

Conclusion

This paper describes and analyzes approaches used in the development of CAPE syllabuses. These kinds of descriptions and analyses are generally omitted from the literature on curriculum development. The description and analysis demonstrate a creative approach to syllabus development, which ensures that CXC benefits from the extensive educational resources of the region. The consultative and iterative processes used assure that the syllabuses are responsive to the needs of the region. The process attempts to satisfy the needs of the various stakeholders in the 16 participating territories of CXC. The composition of the Panel and the continuous interaction with employers, teachers, students, specialists, and other stakeholders in the course of syllabus development ensure that the syllabus responds well to the provision of skills required for personal and social development, for employment, and for further education and training. These measures assist in assuring

Approaches to Constructing Syllabuses for CAPE

and sustaining the relevance of the CXC syllabuses and examinations to the needs of Caribbean students, and to the social and economic development needs of the region.

References

- Beyer, B. K. (1995). *How to conduct a formative evaluation*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Caribbean Examinations Council. (1979). *Report to Standing Committee of Ministers of Education*. Kingston, Jamaica: Author.
- Caribbean Examinations Council. (1988). *Report to Standing Committee of Ministers of Education*. Kingston, Jamaica: Author.
- Caribbean Examinations Council. (1996). *Post-CSEC System of Examined and Accredited Courses*. Kingston, Jamaica: Author.
- Connelly, P. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1988). *Teachers as curriculum planners: Narratives of experience*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Eisner, E. W. (1998). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
- Griffith, S. A. (1999). The Caribbean Examinations Council: Responding to the educational needs of the region. Kingston: Jamaica: UNESCO. (EFA in the Caribbean: Assessment 2000. Monograph Series, No. 8)
- Henderson, J. G. (1996) *Reflective teaching: The study of your constructivist practices* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Merrill.
- Henderson, J. G., & Hawthorne, R. D. (2000). *Transformative curriculum leadership* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
- Portelli, J. P. (1987). Perspectives and imperatives on defining curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 2(4), 334-367
- Schwab, J. J. (1983). The practical 4: Something for curriculum professors to do. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 13(3), 239-265.
- Scriven, M. (1967) The methodology of evaluation. Chicago, IL: Rand McNally. (AERA Monograph Series on Curriculum Evaluation, No. 1, S.39-83)
- Tanner, D., & Tanner, L. (1980). *Curriculum development: Theory into practice* (2nd ed.). New York, Macmillan.

Appendix A

FORM PCSV

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL WESTERN ZONE OFFICE

CARIBBEAN ADVANCED PROFICIENCY EXAMINATIONS (CAPE)

PROCEDURES FOR CONDUCTING SITE VISITS TO PILOT SCHOOLS

1. Visiting Resource Persons will make three scheduled visits to each teacher during the academic year.
2. The Visiting Resource Persons will be panel members and subject specialists recommended by Ministries of Education.
3. For the first visit to each teacher, the Assistant Registrar/Syllabus will coordinate the activities which include:
 - (i) informing ministries and schools of date and time of visit;
 - (ii) overseas and local travel arrangements;
 - (iii) hotel accommodation.
4. The schedules and arrangements for the second and third visits will be made by the panel members and in other instances resource persons recommended by Ministries of Education.
5. In territories in which the Visiting Resource Persons are resident, all three visits (first, second and third) will be made by the Visiting Resource Persons. The schedules of the second and third visits are to be forwarded to the Assistant Registrar/Syllabus.
6. (a) In territories where the Visiting Resource Persons are not resident, the first visit will be made by the Visiting

Approaches to Constructing Syllabuses for CAPE

Resource Persons and resource persons recommended by Ministries of Education, and the second and third visits will be organized and arranged by resource persons recommended by Ministries of Education.

(b) During the first site visit, the Visiting Resource Persons will work closely with the resource persons recommended by Ministries of Education in order to introduce the teaching and assessment approaches used by the CAPE programme.

7. The focus of the activities undertaken by the Visiting Resource Persons will be to:
 - (i) offer support and guidance to teachers with respect to problems encountered in the implementation of the syllabus;
 - (ii) hold discussions with students, teachers, and administrative staff and provide guidance where necessary. These discussions will in general be based on journal entries made by the teachers.
8. On completion of each site visit, a report, carefully identifying problems and suggested solutions, must be completed and submitted as quickly as possible to the Assistant Registrar/Syllabus. This report will be used to determine appropriate action to be undertaken by the Council.

Western Zone Office
1998.09.02