Contents

Editorial / ix
Paulette A. Ramsay

– ARTICLES –

Learner Autonomy as a Means to Improve Pass Rates among First-Year Computing Students / 1
Daniel T. Fokum, Daniel N. Coore and Curtis Busby-Earle

Enhancing Learner Autonomy in Foreign Language Instruction through Contextualized Activities / 20
Yolanda Palmer-Clarke

A Case for Academic Literacies: Informed Needs Analysis / 42
Pamela Rose

Continuous Curriculum Development: An Approach for Quality Curriculum Development in the Caribbean / 63
Mervin E. Chisholm

The Hidden Curriculum and Learner Autonomy: Fostering Pedagogical and Professional Development in Pre- and In-service Teachers of English / 88
Schontal Moore and Yewande Lewis-Fokum

– BOOK REVIEW –

School-Based Assessment in a Caribbean Public Examination, by Stafford Griffith / 114
Charles Ball

Reviewers For This Issue / 125

Learner Autonomy and the University of the Global Future
Editorial Board

Professor Chris Anson  Director, Campus Writing and Speaking Program  North Carolina State University, USA

Glen Bowen  Director, Center for Service Learning  Western Carolina University, USA

John Campbell  Senior Lecturer, Department of History  The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine

Professor Hubert Devonish  Professor, Department of Language, Linguistics and Philosophy  The University of the West Indies, Mona

Patricia Donahue  Department of English  Lafayette College, USA

Professor Bruce Horner  Endowed Chair in Rhetoric and Composition  University of Louisville, USA

Professor Min-Zhan Lu  International Scholar, Department of English  University of Louisville, USA

Paulette Ramsay  Senior Lecturer, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures  The University of the West Indies, Mona

Professor Brian V Street  Department of Education and Professional Studies  King’s College, London
Notes on Contributors

Daniel Fokum is a lecturer in the Department of Computing at The University of the West Indies, Mona. His research interests include networking and Computer Science education.

Daniel Coore is a Professor in the Department of Computing at The University of the West Indies, Mona. His research interests include amorphous computing and other related complex systems, simulation, and robotics and automation.

Curtis Busby-Earle is a lecturer in the Department of Computing at The University of the West Indies, Mona. His research interests are primarily in software security and software engineering.

Yolanda Palmer-Clarke is a Jamaican scholar currently residing in Canada. Her areas of research include English as additional/second language (EAL/ESL/EFL) learners; pedagogies of foreign language teaching, language and gender, academic writing, international/graduate student support, triple learning and phenomenology.

Pamela Rose is a lecturer in the Department of Language and Cultural Studies, and in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Guyana. Her research interests include teacher education and development, classroom methodology, language policy and the teaching of academic writing at both tertiary and secondary levels.

Mervin E. Chisholm currently serves as an educational developer and curriculum specialist at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, where he is the Manager/Coordinator of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. He also teaches courses in Adult and Higher Education in The UWI School of Education.

Yewande Lewis-Fokum is a lecturer in the School of Education at The University of the West Indies, Mona. Her research interests include teacher training, and the teaching of English literacy in a Creole-speaking environment.

Schontal Moore is the coordinator of the M.Ed. Summer and Online Programme and also lecturer in language education in the School of Education at the University of the West Indies, Mona.
CHARLES BALL is a Spanish language instructor in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at The University of the West Indies, Mona. He has completed a Master’s in Learning and Teaching of Spanish in Spain and The Netherlands, specializing in Spanish grammar.
“Learner Autonomy is ‘a constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from (or even imposing meaning) on events’.”

“. . . the autonomous learner is a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent in his own learning process. He is not one to whom things merely happen; he is the one who, by his own volition, causes things to happen. Learning is seen as the result of his own self-initiated interaction with the world.”

LEARNER AUTONOMY INVOLVES A SHIFT FROM BEHAVIOURISM toward more constructivist approaches so as to attain more meaningful teaching/learning experiences and outcomes. This is becoming increasingly more important at the tertiary level where there is greater awareness of globalization and its demands for the internationalization of education. The debate has moved way beyond considerations about whether or not Learner Autonomy can work at the tertiary level, to exploring how it can be used across disciplines to promote self-direction and collaboration among students and lecturers/instructors for their mutual benefit.

Learner Autonomy should not be confused with complete self-instruction or dispensing with those who teach, but rather, Learner Autonomy means that
students know that they can depend on those persons to create learning environments which will encourage and enable them to take responsibility for their learning. According to Moore (2016), autonomous learners take responsibility for their own learning. This means they can identify their learning goals and processes, have well-founded conceptions of learning, are able to organize their learning, are motivated and have good information processing skills.

In a Higher Education system that endeavours to prepare students for the global future, they must be guided into developing an understanding of Higher Education and its implications for them to take responsibility for developing their intellectual skills, their own methods of learning/studying, by developing systems/strategies of engaging with course content and their lecturers/instructors so as to enable themselves to think critically and to acquire new knowledge. Indeed, students need to be facilitated by those who teach and mentor them to locate information that is needed for them to read, synthesize, and apply in their various disciplines.

The Importance of University Libraries

The university of the global future must provide good modern libraries, library facilities, books and journals that will be readily accessible to students. University librarians and content lecturers/instructors have a firm responsibility to guide students into finding strategies to wisely use information in ways that will advance their learning and their independence as learners. As guides, we must teach students to apply information, assess, synthesize, and build on existing information to create new knowledge (Moore 2016).

Time Management

An indispensable aspect of surviving the rigours and demands of university life, maturing as students, and increasing their knowledge in order to function in the global economy and future, is for students to develop the skills that will help them to effectively manage their study time, to balance this with recreation, social activities, and personal relationships. Students will be even more inde-
dependent when they are aided at an early stage of university life to manage projects, do their own problem solving and allocate research and study time.

Enquiry Based Learning (student-driven projects)

Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) is one critical way of helping students to function autonomously. This is an approach to learning that draws on their natural tendency to be ‘inquisitive’. EBL calls for more student-driven projects, research activities and individual presentations that allow students to gather information, sift through it, judge it, and present their findings to their peers and lecturers/instructors. EBL promotes the development of important research skills, information-gathering skills, leadership and inter-personal skills, planning and other skills related to project management, and professional academic development.

In this Volume 21, a number of scholars discuss a range of methods which they have employed in different disciplines to develop autonomous learning among students at the university level. Daniel Fokum, Daniel Coore and Curtis Busby-Earle researched, “Learner Autonomy as a Means to Improve Pass Rates among First Year Computing Students”. They claim that while the worldwide pass rate for a first-year tertiary level computing course (CS1) has been found to be about 67 per cent; at The University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, the semester 1 pass rate for the very first tertiary level computing course has been lower between the 2011/2012 and 2013/2014 academic years. In the attempt to improve pass rates, one of the authors has used an online programming lab – a concept related to learner autonomy, to facilitate students practising programming on their own. Their essay analyzes the results of that experiment, as well as other techniques that have been used worldwide to improve performance in CS1.

Yolanda Palmer-Clarke’s article, “Enhancing Learner Autonomy in Foreign Language Instruction through Contextualized Activities” explores and discusses how the use of contextualized experiences and activities enhanced communicative competence among a group of students learning Spanish as a foreign language. Research data collected among 18 grade 10 students in a rural
coeducational Jamaican high school, using contextualized activities, are used to deliberate the impact these activities have on learner communicative competence and autonomy. Grounded in the notion that communicative competence leads to autonomy in student learning, a programme using contextualized activities was planned and implemented. The findings point to improved communicative competence which enabled autonomy as students became more confident and willing to use the target language.

Pamela Rose in her article, “A Case for Academic Literacies – Informed Needs Analysis,” provides a framework for dealing with the challenges of developing academic writers at the University of Guyana. She highlights the gap between this regional institution and other institutions of Higher Education with regard to providing support for academic writing development, and argues for the use of an academic literacies-informed needs analysis framework, to support learners to develop autonomously as academic writers.

In an article entitled “Continuous Curriculum Development: An Approach for Quality Curriculum Development in the Caribbean”, Mervin Chisholm analyzes a curriculum reform project undertaken at an institution of higher learning. The case study shows that the autonomous learner must develop metacognitive approaches to learning, and therefore curriculum development processes must pay attention to these. The paper also engages in a critical evaluation of the approaches and findings employed in this curriculum reform project. Further, the case study reviews the activities and processes involved in curriculum reform. The findings indicate that four phases of the curriculum reform process were identified and these were considered to be important for institutionalizing best practices in curriculum development. These phases were curriculum assessment and evaluation, visioning, programme and course development, and coordination. University lecturers/instructors must take some responsibility for engaging in initiatives to stimulate autonomous learning in their classes, and this must commence at the course design and development phase of the process. An important continuing concern of the project is to create space for Caribbean issues to be considered in the development of the ideal Caribbean person/worker and the autonomous learner.

Yewande Lewis-Fokum and Schontal Moore in the article, “The Hidden Curriculum: Fostering Pedagogical and Professional Development in Pre- and
In-service Teachers of English at UWI for Jamaican/Regional Secondary Classrooms”, assert that a majority of tertiary-level language education students are not confident in their abilities to deliver an English language/writing curriculum at the secondary level, because of their tenuous content-knowledge of the English language and of writing; shaky grammatical competence; and lack of confidence. Faced with this dilemma, an intervention to strengthen the content and pedagogical knowledge, as well as the philosophy of the ‘ideal’ English language teacher was implemented in a final-year writing course at the School of Education, The University of the West Indies, Mona, between 2012 and 2015. The objective was to boost learner autonomy within the course as well as within the real-life classrooms in which the students would eventually teach upon certification. This intervention encouraged reflection on class assignments, integrated incremental grammar into class seminars, and afforded students the opportunity to work collaboratively with peers to implement genre-specific writing workshops and e-portfolios as part of their confidence building, towards personal and professional autonomy. At the end of the course, many of the student-teachers reported that they felt a greater level of confidence about teaching in the real world setting. Such an intervention has implications for institutional programmes seeking to foster learner autonomy within pre-service and in-service teachers of English preparing for the challenges of local and/or regional secondary school classrooms.

This volume also includes a review essay by Charles Ball that critically examines the research of Stafford Griffith in the book School-Based Assessment in a Caribbean Public Examination. This book is important to the Caribbean context and its approach to student evaluation. Interestingly, it is an evaluation method that could be easily seen as being critical to developing learner autonomy, since it gives emphasis to students finding solutions to various problems on their own.

Finally, the papers presented here address only some of the significant ways in which students at the university level can be helped to become independent and successful learners. A subsequent volume of the Journal will continue the focus on this very important topic. Indeed, as educators, one of our main goals should be to see how we can train our students to develop the skills that will empower them and make them function as independent learners.
References


Abstract

The worldwide pass rate for a first year tertiary-level Computing course (CS1) has been found to be about 67 per cent. At The University of the West Indies, Mona, the Semester I pass rate for the very first tertiary level computing course has ranged between 37.6 per cent and 66.7 per cent between the 2011/2012 and 2013/2014 academic years. Previous work from Ireland has shown that self-regulated learning, a concept related to learning autonomy, is important in learning how to program. In a bid to improve pass rates, one of the authors has used an online programming lab to facilitate students practising programming on their own. This paper documents the results of that experiment, as well as other techniques that have been used worldwide to improve performance in CS1.

Introduction

The worldwide pass rate for a first-year tertiary level computing course (CS1) has been found to be about 67 per cent (Bennedsen and Caspersen 2007; Watson and Li 2014). At The University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, the semester I pass rate for the very first tertiary level computing course has ranged between 37.6 per cent and 66.7 per cent between the 2011/2012 and 2013/2014 academic years. In a bid to improve pass rates, one of the authors has used an online programming lab, called MyProgrammingLab, developed by a textbook publisher to facilitate students practising programming on
their own. This intervention was done in conjunction with traditional face-to-face methods of teaching programming, including the use of tutorials and laboratory exercises that reinforce the concepts taught in lectures.

Computer programming, like music, is something that is learned through practice. Papert (1980) proposes that computer programming is best learned through a constructionist approach. This means that after a teacher has conveyed a concept via lecture, the student must build a mental model of that concept, experiment with it and make observations, and adapt the model until he/she is able to solve novel problems with it before he/she becomes competent at it. This is an example of self-regulated learning. So a student who becomes a competent programmer must engage in self-regulated learning. In our context, the tutorials and laboratory exercises assigned in the very first tertiary level computing course are typically short bounded problems that get students to learn to think algorithmically through practice. Thus, the tutorials and labs are structured mechanisms for students to engage in self-regulated learning. We do not expect that merely working on the tutorials and lab exercises is sufficient to turn the students into competent programmers. Thus, we encourage students to engage in programming exercises outside of those that we assign to them.

Ideally, when autonomous learning is implemented, the learner takes charge of his/her own learning (Thanasoulas 2000). Thanasoulas, citing (Benson and Voller 2014), described five different ways that the term “autonomous” has come to be used in the context of learning, the first of which was: “for situations in which learners study entirely on their own”. Murray (2014) states that self-regulated learning and learning autonomy, although different concepts, share several characteristics in common to the extent that they are frequently used interchangeably.

Although the students in this study were not working entirely on their own, we regard their using software tools that help them to learn a programming language on their own as a degree of autonomous learning. Recognizing that our students need more autonomous learning in order to become competent programmers, one of the authors used an educational intervention wherein the students tackled short programming exercises that allowed them to experiment with concepts being conveyed in lectures. The programming exercises are tied to a particular topic and they are graded immediately. In answering the exercises,
students get practice in learning the syntax and semantics of a programming language, which should in turn lead to better performance in a programming course (Pearson 2016). The objective of this paper is to measure the effect of this intervention at The UWI, Mona. Specifically to determine whether the intervention had any statistically significant impact on the performance of the students in the course.

**Literature Review**

Wilson and Shrock (2001) examined 12 factors that contribute to success in an introductory computer science course at a Midwestern university. Their study found that comfort level\(^1\) and mathematical background had a positive influence on success, whereas attribution to luck had a negative influence on success (Wilson and Shrock 2001). Their study also found that a formal class in computing had a positive influence on success, whereas playing computer games had a negative influence on class grades (Wilson and Shrock 2001).

McGill (2012) examined the role that personal robots have on the motivation of students who are learning to program. McGill (2012) found that programming with robots captured the attention of students better than programming alone. However, McGill’s study did not show any positive effect on motivation from using robots in an introductory programming course.

Hare (2013) documented classroom interventions to reduce failures in an introductory Computer Science course at a public urban university. The interventions included hiring peer student mentors to tutor students individually and on a group basis. The peer mentors also followed up with students who were absent from class. The intervention did not have its desired goal of reducing the failures, however, there were several lessons drawn regarding the factors leading to poor classroom performance. Some of those factors included (1) many of the students who ended up failing or withdrawing from the course also worked full-time; (2) students most in need of assistance were also those who were least likely to accept any; (3) requiring students to start early on an assignment, e.g., submitting a written algorithm days before the project was due, seemed to help students deal with procrastination (Hare 2013). As a result of the intervention, Hare’s university also introduced MyProgrammingLab...
(Pearson 2015), the same online programming lab that was used at UWI, Mona for the CS1 course.

Wilcox (2015) discusses the role of automation in an undergraduate computer science programme. As computer science enrolments in the USA have climbed, many programmes are using automation for grading of student work. Wilcox (2015) aims to determine (1) how automated tools positively or negatively affect learning; and (2) if the benefits of automation outweigh its costs. The aspects of automation considered by Wilcox are: automated grading, peer instruction, and online tutorials such as MyProgrammingLab. Wilcox found that by introducing automated grading, students are able to get immediate feedback on their submissions and so students are more likely to continue working on an assignment until the entire software test suite is passed. By Spring 2014, Wilcox was seeing an average of 4.11 submissions per student per programming assignment, which was up from 1.11 in Fall 2013. No statistically significant improvement was seen due to peer instruction. However, evaluation of the online tutorials revealed that students who used MyProgrammingLab generally got higher grades than those who were in a control group that did not use the tool. Furthermore, this difference was statistically significant. At Wilcox’s institution the introductory programming course is delivered using two lectures, a peer instruction session, and two 50-minute labs per week for 15 weeks. In the peer instruction session students are assigned to groups of 3–4 for the duration of the semester, and in each session they work on an automated quiz. The online tutorial, MyProgrammingLab, is in addition to all of the other course activities. At UWI, Mona the introductory programming course is delivered with 3 lecture hours, 2 hours of tutorials, and 2 lab hours per week for six weeks. This introductory course is immediately followed by another with the same structure for the next six weeks of the semester.

Bergin, Reilly, and Traynor (2005) examined the role of self-regulated learning on performance in an introductory tertiary-level programming course. Self-regulated learners are persons who are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviourally active in their own learning. By using a questionnaire designed to measure strategies for learning, Bergin et al. (2005) report that self-regulated learning is important in learning how to programme. This is consistent with the view that programming is best learned with a constructionist approach.
Failure rates in introductory programming courses were examined by Bennedsen and Caspersen (2007). A worldwide survey found that about 67 per cent of students pass introductory programming courses, with pass rates of 30%–50% not uncommon (Bennedsen and Caspersen 2007). A follow-up study found a nearly identical worldwide pass rate of 67.7 per cent (Watson and Li 2014).

This section has presented literature that shows factors associated with success in Computer Science and discussed various interventions to improve performance in Computing. In two cases the literature has indicated that students who use an online programming lab have better performance. In the next section we present our methodology.

Methodology

The data in this paper comes from two main sources. From MyProgrammingLab we downloaded a list of all students who took COMP1126 and COMP1127 in semester I 2014/2015. This list contained student IDs and whether each programming assignment was completed correctly on time, completed correctly late, incorrect, or missing. Thus, for each student we could report on how many exercises were completed, incorrect, or missing. From UWI, Mona’s grade upload system we retrieved student IDs and their final grades for both COMP1126 and COMP1127. A Microsoft Access query was written to combine the two data files, and output files were written for both COMP1126 and COMP1127. The output files were then imported into R (R Core Team 2014), a statistical environment, and additional analysis was done.

Measurement of impact

To measure the effect of the intervention, we used Pearson’s $\chi^2$-test. To do this we computed the expected proportions of the grades in COMP1126 and COMP1127 across five categories: A, B, C, D, Non Pass, based on the distributions obtained between 2011 and 2013, inclusive. We then examined the actual distribution across the same five categories, for the same subjects in 2014.
when the autonomous learning intervention was done, and compared them against the expected proportions, using Pearson’s $\chi^2$-test (with four degrees of freedom).

**Measurement of association**

We also examined whether there were any notable associations between the discipline with which students engaged in the autonomous tool and their overall performance. We used the outcomes of their auto-generated assessments as a representation of that discipline. To test the strength of association, we carried out Pearson’s $\chi^2$ test of independence. Pearson’s $\chi^2$ test of independence is quite similar to Pearson’s goodness of fit test, except that the degrees of freedom is now $(R-1)\times(C-1)$, where $R$ and $C$ are the number of rows and columns, respectively, in the contingency table.

**Results**

**Effect of online programming lab on performance**

The list below summarizes the null hypotheses that we considered for our study:

1. $H_{01}$: The observed distribution of A, B, C, D, and non-passing grades after the intervention follows the same distribution of grades before the intervention
2. $H_{02}$: Letter grade and the percentage of completed exercises are independent
3. $H_{03}$: Letter grade and the percentage of incorrect online programming lab exercises are independent
4. $H_{04}$: Letter grade and the percentage of missing (incomplete) online programming lab exercises are independent.

Table 1 summarizes the enrolment and the percentage of A, B, C, D, and non-passing grades from 2011/2012 Semester I to 2014/2015 Semester I for COMP1126. We observed that the number of students attempting the course increased steadily from 2012/2013, while the grade distribution varied from year to year.
Our next goal was to determine if the intervention, i.e., use of the online programming lab, made a difference with the grade distribution. To do this we computed the average percentage of As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and non-passing grades for all semester I offerings of COMP1126 from 2011/2012 through 2013/2014. While COMP1126 is offered in both semesters I and II, we only chose semester I offerings because the performance in the second semester is frequently quite different from that observed in semester I. Our goal was to carry out a chi-squared goodness of fit test to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in the distribution of grades after the intervention. Table 2 summarizes the input for our analysis. From table 2 we conclude that there was no statistically significant difference in the grade distribution after the intervention, since \( 0.143 \leq 9.488 = \chi^2_{0.05}(4) \). Thus, we conclude that \( H_0 \) is true.

Table 3 summarizes the enrolment and the percentage of As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and non-passing grades from 2011/2012 semester I to 2014/2015 semester I for COMP1127. As was the case for COMP1126, the number of students attempt-
ing COMP1127 increased steadily from 2012/2013, while the grade distribution varied from year to year. The grade distribution for COMP1127 was marginally better than that for COMP1126, with more students passing COMP1126, with better grades. This is due to the students gaining more competence with programming as the semester progressed.

Next, we determined if the intervention made a difference with the grade distribution. We computed the average percentage of As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and non-passing grades for all semester I offerings of COMP1127 from 2011/2012 through 2013/2014. We only chose semester I offerings because the performance in semester II is quite different from that observed in semester I. A chi-squared goodness of fit test was carried out to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in the distribution of grades after the intervention. Table 4 summarizes the input for our analysis. From table 4 we concluded that there was no statistically significant difference in the grade distribution after the intervention, since $0.415 \leq 9.488 = \chi^2_{0.05}(4)$. Thus, we conclude that $H_{o1}$ is true.

**Table 3:** Performance in COMP1127 Semester I, 2011–2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th># Attempted</th>
<th>% A</th>
<th>% B</th>
<th>% C</th>
<th>% D</th>
<th>% Non pass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011/12 Sem. I</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012/13 Sem. I</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013/14 Sem. I</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014/15 Sem. I</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4:** COMP1127 Grade Distribution in 2014/2015 Semester I, Compared to Distribution 2011/2012–2013/2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% A</th>
<th>% B</th>
<th>% C</th>
<th>% D</th>
<th>% Non pass</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014/15 Sem. I Observed</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>0.415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next we evaluated whether there was statistical association between the final letter grades in COMP1126 and COMP1127 and (1) the percentage of correctly answered online programming lab exercises; (2) the percentage of incorrectly answered online programming lab exercises; and (3) the percentage of missing, i.e., incomplete, online programming lab exercises. To test the statistical association we carried out a chi-squared test of independence. Table 5 shows the observed COMP1126 grade distribution in semester I, 2014/2015 for different percentages of correctly answered online lab exercises. It is quite clear that students who got higher grades in COMP1126 tended to answer more online programming lab exercises correctly. The chi-squared test of independence returned a $p$-value of 0.000, which shows that $H_0$ should be rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis, that there is dependence between the letter grade and the percentage of correctly answered online programming lab exercises. Similarly, table 6 shows that there is dependence between the COMP1127 grade and the percentage of correctly answered lab exercises.

Table 5: Observed COMP1126 Grade Distribution for Given Percentage of Correct Online Lab Exercises

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course grade</th>
<th>[0, 40%)</th>
<th>[40%, 60%)</th>
<th>[60%, 80%)</th>
<th>[80%, 100%)</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Observed COMP1127 Grade Distribution for Given Percentage of Correct Online Lab Exercises

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course grade</th>
<th>[0, 40%)</th>
<th>[40%, 60%)</th>
<th>[60%, 80%)</th>
<th>[80%, 100%)</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>91.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>73.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables 7 and 8 are contingency tables showing the observed COMP1126 and COMP1127 grade distributions, respectively, in semester I 2014/2015 for different percentages of incorrectly answered online programming lab exercises. In both cases, the $p$-value is less than 0.05, meaning that we reject $H_0$ in favour of the alternative hypothesis that there is statistical association between the grade and the percentage of incorrectly answered lab exercises.

**Table 7:** Observed COMP1126 Grade Distribution for Given Percentage of Incorrect Online Lab Exercises

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Grade</th>
<th>[0, 2.5%)</th>
<th>[2.5%, 5.0%)</th>
<th>[5.0%, 10%)</th>
<th>[10%, 100%]</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>71.6%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 8:** Observed COMP1127 Grade Distribution for Given Percentage of Incorrect Online Lab Exercises

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Grade</th>
<th>[0, 2.5%)</th>
<th>[2.5%, 5.0%)</th>
<th>[5.0%, 10%)</th>
<th>[10%, 100%]</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>74.7%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>62.6%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, tables 9 and 10 are contingency tables showing the observed COMP1126 and COMP1127 grade distributions, respectively, in semester I 2014/2015 for different percentages of missing online programming lab exercises.
It is clear that students who have higher grades have a smaller percentage of missing online programming lab exercises. In both cases, the $p$-value is less than 0.05 meaning that we reject $H_0$ in favour of the alternative hypothesis that there is statistical association between the grade and the percentage of missing lab exercises.

Table 9: Observed COMP1126 Grade Distribution for Given Percentage of Missing Online Lab Exercises

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Grade</th>
<th>Per Cent Online Labs Missing</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0, 10%)</td>
<td>[10%, 20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: Observed COMP1127 Grade Distribution for Given Percentage of Missing Online Lab Exercises

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Grade</th>
<th>Per Cent Online Labs Missing</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0, 10%)</td>
<td>[10%, 20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

exercises. It is clear that students who have higher grades have a smaller percentage of missing online programming lab exercises. In both cases, the $p$-value is less than 0.05 meaning that we reject $H_0$ in favour of the alternative hypothesis that there is statistical association between the grade and the percentage of missing lab exercises.

Table 11 shows the mean marks obtained on each question of the COMP1126 examination from 2011/2012 semester I through 2014/2015 semester I. There has always been a maximum of 60 available marks on the COMP1126 examination. From 2011/2012 through 2013/2014, question 1 (Q1) of the examination, which had 20 multiple-choice sub-questions had a
maximum of 20 points. In 2014/2015 Q1 had a maximum of 30 points. Analysis to test the equality of means for the Q1 scores shows that \( F = 1.211 < F_{0.05}(1,1), p = 0.386 \). Thus, we fail to reject Ho, and conclude that the data do not provide convincing evidence that one pair of mean Q1 scores are different from each other.

Table 11: Observed Mean Marks in COMP1126 from 2011/12 Semester I through 2014/15 Semester I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Exam Total</th>
<th>Coursework</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011/12 Sem. I</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012/13 Sem. I</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013/14 Sem. I</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014/15 Sem. I</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12: Observed Mean Marks in COMP1127 from 2011/12 Semester I through 2014/15 Semester I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Exam Total</th>
<th>Coursework</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011/12 Sem. I</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012/13 Sem. I</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>62.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013/14 Sem. I</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014/15 Sem. I</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>60.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prior to the 2014/15 academic year, UWI required that students achieve a grade of D (40%) or better in order to progress in a programme. Figures 1 and 2 show the percentage of students achieving a pass in the first year courses between 2004/2005 semester I and 2013/2014 semester I. The average pass rate over this window is approximately 62.5 per cent. The data show a small overall decrease in the pass rate for the first computing course (either CS11A, COMP1125 or COMP1126 then COMP1127) in the Department of Computing (DoC). With CS11A and CS11B, students were not required to pass CS11A before attempting CS11B. However, the pass rate for CS11B was generally marginally higher, or about the same, as that for CS11A. This was most likely due to the students gaining greater proficiency with programming as time progressed. Since the semester I enrolment for CS11A was approximately the same as that in semester II for CS11B it is unlikely that many students were dropping out of the introductory course sequence on the basis of their CS11A grades.

Beginning with 2008/2009 semester I, students were expected to pass COMP1125 before progressing to COMP1160. What this meant is that the pass rate for COMP1160 became much higher than that for COMP1125, except for semester I of 2010/2011. This point is obviously an outlier and can be ignored, with one additional observation: the normal sequence called for COMP1160 to be attempted in semester II. As a result, students who attempted COMP1160 in semester I tended to be those who had failed either COMP1125 or COMP1160 at least once. Therefore, they were more likely to be weaker than the rest of the students taking computing courses.

From 2011/2012 semester I, the DoC has seen a minor drop in the pass rates for COMP1126 and COMP1127 as well as for COMP1161. As was observed with the 2008/2009–2010/2011 curriculum the first courses in the sequence have a lower pass rate than COMP1161, the next course in the sequence. COMP1210 has seen pass rates of under 59 per cent in every semester since its introduction. This course, which has only CSEC Mathematics as a prerequisite, was supposed to strengthen students’ mathematical ability and prepare them for further study in computing. It is possible that this low pass rate is representative of poor mathematical ability amongst incoming students. The high pass
rate for COMP1220 as shown in figures 1 and 2 is not inconsistent with this observation because COMP1220 does not involve much programming or application of mathematics.

**Figure 1**: Performance in 1st Year Computing Courses from 2004/2005 to 2013/2014 (Semester I only)

**Figure 2**: Performance in 1st Year Computing Courses from 2004/2005 to 2013/2014 (Semester II only)
Beginning in 2014/2015 semester I, UWI introduced a new grading scheme that saw the minimum pass mark move from 40% to 50%. This change was motivated by a need to move assessment from marking based on raw scores to one based on defined competencies. Assessment in the DoC has long been based on defined competencies, as a result, students’ marks reflect their ability to analyze, design, and implement solutions to computational problems.

Figures 3 and 4 show the percentage of students in each course who achieved at least 50%. On average, about 55 per cent of students achieved a pass mark of 50% or greater. Figures 3 and 4 show that between 2004/2005 semester I and 2007/2008 semester II, there was an overall decline in the percentage of students who achieved grades of over 50%. The data also show that except for one semester, students performed much better in COMP1160 than in COMP1125. The one outlier can be explained as discussed above.

Since 2011/2012 semester I there has been a lot of variation in the percentage of students achieving marks of 50% or more. A few points that can be extracted from the data include:

1. Most COMP1220 students score 50% or more each semester
2. Students who take COMP1126 and COMP1127 in semester I perform much better than those who do so in semester II

![Figure 3: Proportion of Students Achieving 50% or more in 1st Year Computing Courses from 2004/2005 to 2013/2014 (Semester I only)](image-url)
3. Students who take COMP1161 in semester II perform much better than those who take COMP1161 in semester I
4. The percentage of students achieving 50% or greater in COMP1210 has seen an overall decline since 2011/2012 semester.

Finally, figures 3 and 4 show that beginning in 2011/2012 semester I, the average rate of students achieving marks of 50% or more for the first-year courses offered by the DoC has ranged between 37 per cent for COMP1210 and 73 per cent for COMP1220. This indicates that, barring a change in student effort or a simplification of the assessment, more students will fail courses once UWI’s new GPA scheme is introduced.

Discussion

Although previous studies (Wilcox 2015) had shown that MyProgrammingLab was expected to have a measurable impact on student performance, we did not detect that in our own experiments. This is not necessarily contradictory. First of all, the degree to which the intervention was measured to have a difference on student performance may not have been sufficient to be reflected as a change
in overall grade distribution. The range of proportions of students attaining each grade level varied significantly over the four years that were used to set the expected proportions, and that would have raised the threshold of impact of the intervention to be detectable by the Pearson $\chi^2$-test.

Feedback from the students who used the on-line programming environment, MyProgrammingLab, indicated that it was helpful in improving their understanding of the Python programming language through the opportunity it provided in allowing them to practise at their convenience, with immediate feedback. From interaction with the students, during lectures, a fundamental problem still exists: the ability to formulate algorithms to solve the small, well-defined problems that are presented to them. This is difficult to address for two apparent reasons: firstly, as the COMP1126 course is six weeks in duration, the time is inadequate to guide them in developing that skill. Secondly, over the (nearly) ten years that one of the authors has been involved with this course in its various iterations, the ability to think in a manner that supports the development of such algorithms is not something that comes naturally to many and in fact, is rather difficult to develop.

**Conclusion**

Although the MyProgrammingLab intervention probably has the capacity to improve the assessed outcomes of student’s learning, we did not detect any statistically significant difference in the outcomes for either COMP1126 or COMP1127 (semester I). To the extent that autonomous learning has been successfully applied to learning natural languages, we believe that in the form of its application described here, it probably had a similar impact on students learning the syntax of the programming language in question. However, the assessment of these first year courses goes beyond simply being able to read code and write code that expresses a given mathematical relationship. It also requires students to be able to first formulate the necessary steps to solving a problem, then to express those steps in the programming language in a manner that combines productively to solve the overall problem. Reading and writing such code is not something that follows naturally from knowing the syntax of a programming language. It is our opinion that the root of the problem in performance
may very well lie at the (general) inability of students to formulate those steps on their own, and not as much in expressing them in the programming language. Perhaps that is where the next autonomous learning intervention ought to be aimed, provided we can find the appropriate tools to do so.

Notes

1. Comfort level was a continuous variable computed from factors such as asking and answering questions in class/lab/office hours, anxiety level while working on computer assignments, perceived difficulty of the course, perceived understanding of course concepts compared to peers, and perceived difficulty of completing programming assignments (Wilson and Shrock 2001).

References


Abstract

This article explores and discusses how the use of contextualized experiences and activities enhanced communicative competence among a group of students learning Spanish as a foreign language. Research data, collected among 18 grade 10 students in a rural coeducational Jamaican high school using contextualized activities, are used to deliberate the impact these activities have on learner communicative competence and autonomy. Grounded in the notion that communicative competence leads to autonomy in student learning, a programme using contextualized activities was planned and implemented. Data were captured through multiple methods (observation, focus group discussions, interviews, questionnaires, and written and oral classroom activities). The findings point to improved communicative competence which enabled autonomy as students became more confident and willing to use the target language – Spanish – in everyday classroom speech and, to a lesser extent, outside of the classroom.

Keywords: communicative competence, learner autonomy, communicative language teaching, contextualized activities, foreign language pedagogies

Introduction

In recent decades, the field of foreign language pedagogy and programmes has witnessed unprecedented growth and transformations as educators continue to embrace and seek new ways to foster autonomy among students. Unfortunately, even amidst these changes and the imminent need for student
autonomy, many foreign language (FL) educators continue to struggle to reach and teach today’s ‘net-geners’ and ‘millennial generation’, who want to indulge in “experiential and interactive learning.” The terms experiential and interactive are important components of communicative language teaching [CLT], which when used as a method, enables students to communicate effectively and appropriately in the target language (L2) and across contexts (Omaggio-Hadley 2001). Interestingly, even with students expressing the need for more experiential and contextual teaching, many foreign language classrooms continue to be dominated by students who relinquish all responsibility to teachers. These said educators assume and hold control of students who are often passive learners who accept “whatever teachers do or say for them” (Xu 2013, 19). There is then a great need for foreign language teachers globally to assist students under their charge in attaining autonomy in learning and using the target language.

Much of the prevailing literature renders learner autonomy difficult to perceive and understand. Proponents of learner autonomy often position the concept as synonymous with self-instruction. This paper, however, counters that claim and argues that learner autonomy is more than just self-instruction. Rather, it could be defined as the facilitation of learners to assume responsibility for their own learning and to become involved co-contributors to their own learning as facilitated and managed by a trained educator. Furthermore, autonomous learners are able to problematize and critically reflect upon their learning and transfer concepts across disciplines and everyday life activities (Benson 2013; Little 1991; Xu 2013). The idea of autonomy, however, is challenged when foreign language students are reluctant to become responsible users of the L2 even with the best efforts of teachers.

Autonomy, as it is used in this article, envisions and subsumes the overarching goal of teaching and learning – acquiring knowledge, which results in changed behaviours and attitudes. In the case of the foreign language classroom, autonomy is accomplished when students are able to communicate effectively and transfer their target language (L2) skills and knowledge to other disciplines and areas of their lives. Autonomy, then, is not an add-on to the foreign language learning programme, rather it is an “integral part of language learning and language use” (Illés 2012, 510). Little (1991) argues that autonomous learners play an active participatory role in their own learning. This is to say that students
take responsibility for their own learning and take advantage of the opportunities and activities presented to them in the FL classroom. These arguments contradict the situations in many FL classrooms worldwide and certainly in Jamaica and the Caribbean.

The genesis of this paper is my observation affirmed by the prevailing literature regarding the general lack of communicative competence among foreign language students. Noting the constant struggle teachers have in their efforts to enable students to be autonomous in their learning, I conceptualized and implemented a programme of contextual experiences to improve oral competence in Spanish among a group of Grade 10 students at a traditional co-educational high school in rural Jamaica. The article explores the research question: “How does the use of contextualized experiences impact communicative competence and by extension autonomy?” Throughout the article autonomy and communicative competence are viewed as the goal of teaching and learning. The paper explores communicative language teaching and contextualized experiences as a mode of accomplishing learner autonomy.

**Learner Autonomy and Communicative Competence: Making the Connection**

The transformation of the conventional teacher and student roles has fuelled revolutionary growth and innovation in the teaching and learning tools and methods employed in the FL classroom. Moreover, the increasing challenges of globalization and internationalization have driven nations into recognizing the critical role of foreign-language competence in response to the need for effective interaction between countries of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Organization of American States [OAS] 2002). In many contexts then, the intensification of worldwide social relations also accentuates the need for members of global networks to develop competence in one or more additional languages, and/or master new ways of using languages they already know. Globalization ultimately changes the conditions in which language learning and teaching take place (Block and Cameron 2002). In addition, globalization drives the need for learners to become autonomous in their learning if they are to successfully transition and function in the global arena.
Learner autonomy is about personal agency. Agency encapsulates the idea that individuals are able to take responsibility for their own actions and learning through their independent and free choice. Being responsible for one’s own learning implies that learners make conscious effort at monitoring their own progress and use available opportunities to their advantage, including classroom activities and homework (Scharle and Szabó 2000, 3). Autonomous learners accept and understand that when activities and opportunities are provided they (the students) are crucial to the puzzle and their efforts are integral to their learning, therefore, they act accordingly. Assuming agency for their learning enables learners to transform their thinking and move from dependence on the teacher to independence, thereby, successfully using language competently across contexts (Palmer 2015). When looking through a looking-glass, autonomous learners are considered to be: motivated; moving to independence; able to demonstrate a confident, responsible attitude and respect for others; reflective of and involved in their own learning.

If the premise is that autonomy is one of the objectives in foreign language pedagogy, then it can be assumed that when students are able to communicate in the target language they have gained autonomy over and in their learning. A major way students demonstrate autonomy in foreign languages is by using the target language appropriately in situations across varied contexts. To be deemed competent or proficient in a language, the student should have mastered the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition, they should also be significantly aware of and appreciative of the target culture (Ur 1996; Omaggio-Hadley 2001). Notably, communicative competence is developed over time and is highly contingent on the planning and implementation of classroom teachers who facilitate L2 learning through the use of diverse activities and programmes.

Teaching a foreign language amidst the current ever-changing technologies available to students and teachers engenders multiple challenges. Owing to the dynamic nature of current technology and communication modes, the FL teacher needs to be prepared to overcome the challenges if the modern language class is to be effective and students are to become competent and autonomous. Ulaş (2008) describes the present age in which we live as the “communication age” (p. 876). Consequently, emphasis should be placed on appropriate com-
munication task building. Block and Cameron (2002) maintains that language is a vital commodity in the global world. They further added that language is the primary medium of human social interaction, which is the means through which social relations are constructed and maintained. Therefore, employing appropriate teaching methods to accomplish this task becomes an all-important undertaking.

My arguments are grounded in the belief that a major reason for studying other languages is to enable learners to communicate effectively with native speakers, either through writing or speech, in the language of choice in any given context or situation. It is about scaffolding students’ knowledge to get them to the place where they are able to communicate with other users of the language. I proffer that communicative competence in its truest form is only really achieved when one can speak, listen, read, write, and understand the L2 in varying contexts. Nevertheless, in the case of Jamaica and other Caribbean islands, the problem of achieving student autonomy is exasperated owing to the language situation and policies that prevail in these societies. In many instances, the target foreign language is not heard outside of the classroom. The absence of opportunities to use the language outside of class often facilitates a lack for students, which demotivates them as they seek to learn the language.

Foley and Thompson (2003) contend that contextualization is an important element in the understanding of text. They further posit that “learners must be able to contextualize a text in terms which are obvious” (p. 208) before they can be expected to reframe it in other ways. When students are able to understand the context and use the target language independently without relying on the mother tongue (L1), then the task of developing autonomy is at least partially accomplished.

The Caribbean Examinations Council Caribbean Secondary Education certificate [CXC- CSEC], hereafter referred to as the CSEC, is the regional examination that students sit at the end of the grade 11 year. Over the years, candidates sitting the CSEC Spanish examinations, in many instances, failed to identify and respond appropriately to given contexts. The Council then embraced the need for a more contextualized examination, and since 2007 students are examined on their appropriate responses in Contextual Announcements and Dialogues on Paper 2 of the General Spanish Examinations. The
cues for these are given in English. For this item students have to choose between writing a Contextual Announcement and completing a Contextual Dialogue.

Cognizant of the varying needs of the foreign language student and the many methods of teaching that can be employed, it becomes increasingly important for the teacher of the world language to achieve optimal performance within the classroom. Additionally, in the case of Jamaica and other Caribbean countries entering candidates in the CXC-CSEC examinations, more effort needs to be placed on fostering optimum communicative competence especially in contextualized situations. However, the real issue is to ascertain how teachers may achieve this amidst the many variables within the modern language classroom. It is important to note that this kind of learning can only be accomplished when the teacher has knowledge of who and what she/he teaches and how best to plan to meet their target language needs. Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) suggest that “second language learners need to be surrounded with comprehensible language – input – in order to facilitate the acquisition of the new language” (p. 33). Carter (2004) reasons that learners seem to benefit from the opportunity to manage input output possibilities of conversations. In concordance with these writers it is worthy to add that comprehensible input is important since the main aim of students studying a second language is to be able to communicate in the language and in communicating, being understood by their audience.

**Developing autonomy: The role of speaking and writing**

An important role of the FL teacher is to give students the opportunity to see, hear, experience, and apply the L2 in authentic forms. Tse (2000) purports that students’ perceptions of their foreign language learning classroom experiences “have important pedagogical and programmatic implications and have been theorized as having an effect on linguistic outcome” (p. 69). Hence, when preparing these opportunities, the teacher should also allow learners to use the language in meaningful exchanges. It is important that the foreign language of choice be used in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman 2000; Omaggio-Hadley 2001; Richards and Rodgers 2001; Curtain and Dahlberg 2004; Tabors 2008). Ulaş
(2008) concurs with this statement and comments that effective communication is one of the most important skills that individuals should have. When one has mastered the skill of communicating in another language, one will be able to assume authority of the language skills and to transfer said competencies across disciplines and everyday experiences.

Writing and speaking are both productive skills. Both skills require students to encode and negotiate meaning. Perera (1990), however, insists that writing is not a mere way of recording speech. Written language provides different opportunities from speech and requires different skills. It forces the writer to use language in different ways. These different experiences of language can then be fed back in speech and vice versa. Writing is not just a reflection or a record of oral competence but is also an important agent in language development.

Omaggio-Hadley (2004) advises that learning to write a second language is not simply a matter of knowing “how to write things down”. Oral language, on the other hand, is acquired in real-life, natural settings through interactions with others. As students develop listening comprehension skills, they begin to make connections between the oral language and the print that represents this oral language (Curtain and Dahlberg 2004). This could prove to be an effective tool in the writing process. One should note that the organization for delivery in speech differs from that of writing. Whereas oral language moves along an axis, written language is visually presented and the overall presentation can be seen at a glance. Both oral and written communication have a target audience. In the oral mode, the speaker can usually see his or her audience and receive continuous feedback. On the other hand, in writing there is very little interpersonal involvement.

Ulaş (2008) contends that speaking is the most common and important means of providing communication among human beings. He further points out that the key to successful communication is “speaking nicely, efficiently and articulately, as well as using effective voice projection” (para. 2). Furthermore, speaking is linked to success in life and occupies an important social in language development and use. Therefore, students should be encouraged to speak the target language. The ability to transfer language structures through speech and writing puts students on the path to becoming autonomous learners.
Communicative language teaching: Teaching language in context

Communicative language teaching [CLT], is student-centred, experienced based, and can thus be a useful tool for the FL teacher to assist learners to attain and maintain autonomy within the target language classroom. The primary goal of the CLT is to develop communicative competence, which is the ability to share and negotiate meanings and conventions across contexts. Definitions of the term have evolved over the years, and today refer to an individual’s ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in the target language and across contexts. Omaggio-Hadley (2001), inspired by the work of Savignon, redefined the term as “the ability to function in a truly communicative setting.” Therefore, CLT pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural and notional aspects of language.

Through the CLT the emphasis is on communication and real-life situations. According to Brown-Mitchell and Vidal (2001), communicative competence has to do with ways of facilitating real communication both in and out of the classroom. Additionally, it deals with whether communication is “formally possible and psychologically feasible” (Skehan 1989, 47). In the CLT classroom, the teacher acts as the facilitator rather than the one who is in charge of students’ learning (Richards and Rogers 2001). They also posit that the role of the student is “negotiator” as he or she negotiates with each other, the learning process, and the object of learning. Belchamber (2007) highlights the major elements of the CLT as communication, accuracy and fluency, promoting learning and motivation. These are all important elements that play a part in the implemented programme of contextualized experiences.

Contextualization and authenticity are basic premises of the CLT method (Larsen-Freeman 2000), thereby suggesting that language is not taught in isolation but always within a communicative context. Ur (1996) contends that it is important to teach meaningful chunks of language in context rather than decontextualized items such as lists of vocabulary or isolated examples of grammatical structures. Additionally, Omaggio-Hadley (2001) suggests that second language programmes should provide students ample opportunities to learn
language within a context and to apply their knowledge to coping with authentic language-use situations.

Meaningful communication can only take place within “real-world”, “real-life” contexts. Kramsch and Thorne (2002) postulate that the ease of access to foreign speakers and cultures provided by Internet communication tools has been hailed as potentially transforming the learning of foreign languages from a decontextualized exercise into an engagement with authentic “real-world” contexts of language use. For this reason, languages should be taught within context. Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) maintain that “clear, meaningful and interesting” contexts (p. 25) provide settings in which new language is understandable, and familiar language becomes more memorable and useful.

Research Methodology

The research was qualitative in nature. Bastick and Matalon (2007) affirm that qualitative research is “one of discovery and interpretation”. They also make the point that in this kind of research “an in-depth study” of the chosen topic is necessary (p. 5). Furthermore, such inquiries are concerned with context and meaning and generally focus on how people make sense of situations and human experiences (Ary, Cheser-Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen 2006) and use “language data” (Polkinghorne 2005, 137) to derive meaning and understanding.

Under the broad scope of qualitative research this study falls in the genre of Participatory Action Research. Drummond and Themessl-Humer (2007) describe action research as a cyclical process that begins with not only a general idea but with the sense of a problem. Gay and Airasian (2003) highlight four basic steps involved in action research. They argue that the researcher should (a) identify the problem or question to be investigated; (b) brainstorm to gain information about the problem or question; (c) analyze data from a preliminary probe; and (d) take an action to rectify the problem. In the case of this research, I wanted to know how contextualized activities in the FL (Spanish) classroom would enhance communicative competence and learner autonomy. With this in mind, I developed and implemented a programme of contextualized experiences to enhance communicative competence and learner autonomy in the FL classroom. In this research the initial idea or problem, inferior communicative
competence, was re-examined and sharpened continually, until there was consensus (Gay and Airasian 2003). This research was conducted cyclically as I planned, took action, monitored progress, and reflected on the process and meaning continually (Water-Adams 2006) (see figure 1).

I engaged in a ‘systematic inquiry’ to collect and study information that can help FL teachers to explore and improve their practice. I constantly reflected on my teaching, identified areas of weaknesses, for improvement or exploration, collected and analyzed data relevant to the weakness, then made assumptions from the results as to whether the students’ communicative competence had improved or not.

**Procedures**

The data collection sources used were consistent with those used in a qualitative design. Several sources of collection were used to gather data and to ensure that
the data collected were reliable and valid. These data sources included: observations, questionnaires, interviews, and oral and written tests in the target language, Spanish. Focus groups and the development and maintenance of a student participant journal were also employed to aid in gathering information.

The context and participants

The research was conducted in a traditional co-educational high school in rural Jamaica among a group of grade 10 students studying Spanish as a foreign language. There were 18 participants in the study: three boys and 15 girls. Participants were between 15 and 16 years of age. In preparation for the research permission was sought from the school administration, parents and students. Students were assured that their participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any stage of the process.

The study had several limitations which may have impacted the generalized use of findings among FL learners. First, the research was conducted among just one group of grade 10 students. Furthermore, the larger percentage of the sample was female and so a true picture of actual male participation was limited. This may have impacted the results of the study. Second, a few students tended to prefer using the L1, therefore their responses were generally in English. These students had to be encouraged to use the target language. Third, since I, the researcher, was a participant in the study, some student reactions may have been lost to me. In addition, some comments made by students may have gone unheard, and others were not recorded at the moment of occurrence so I may have forgotten or had to rely on memory to record such. Fourth, some students tended to be reluctant to make journal entries of their impressions of individual lessons, and those who did make entries for the most part did so inconsistently.

Procedure for data collection

Data were collected over a period of six weeks. The research was divided into three phases: pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention.
Pre-intervention

Having garnered permission to conduct the study from the school’s administration, parents, and participants, I administered questionnaires and had informal discussions with students to find out their preferences for activities and their perceptions of Spanish and the need to be proficient speakers of the language. These conversations were initiated in Spanish to determine students’ levels of oral competence and to identify limitations which were to be addressed during the intervention. The conversations were recorded and transcribed for further use in the analysis of data. This information was also used as a guide for the development of the intervention.

The intervention

The intervention ran for a period of six weeks, on Wednesday afternoons. Classes on Wednesdays generally lasted one hour and twenty minutes. A programme of interactive contextual experiences was implemented in a bid to improve students’ communicative competence in the target language, Spanish. Ur (1996) points out that it is important to teach meaningful chunks of language in context rather than decontextualized items such as lists of vocabulary or isolated examples of grammatical structures. Grounded in this knowledge, I ensured that every activity used was contextualized and authenticity of the language adapted.

The intervention included dramatizations, discussions, role-play, and interviews, giving speeches, and reporting. Most importantly, contextual announcements and contextual dialogues were also included to improve language competence. All activities in the intervention were conducted in the target language as much as possible. A wide range of vocabulary and tenses as well as the Subjunctive Mood was introduced and used during the intervention. Students were provided a list of vocabulary at the beginning of each class. Students’ work was corrected, and copied as far as possible.

Post-intervention

At the end of the period of intervention, the researcher again conducted inter-
views. Students also made presentations on a given context, and this was used to measure and mark improvements in language use.

Data Analysis

The aim of the research was to develop communicative competence in the group of FL students through interventions using contextualized activities. Throughout the intervention process students were taught using Spanish as the language of instruction. During interviews and focus group discussions in the pre-intervention stage, I confirmed that students did not like to speak because they did not know what to say and they tended to think in English then translate to the L2. In addition, participants declared that they felt inhibited by their limited vocabulary in the target language hence they were hesitant to participate in class activities for fear of making errors. Stemming from this, an intervention programme of contextualized activities was planned and implemented over a period of six weeks. Upon completion of the intervention, students were again interviewed, tested and asked to fill out a questionnaire about their impressions of the intervention and their L2 use.

A rigorous process of data analysis ensued as I tried to make meaning of the data collected from multiple sources. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the process of the research. Stake (2010) maintains that there is no particular moment when data analysis begins in qualitative research; it occurs throughout the study, rather than at the end of the study (Gay and Airasian 2003). Analysis in the case of the study was a matter of giving meaning to data collected from the beginning to the end of the study (Stake 2010). In an effort to produce the richness of the data, all responses to interviews, discussions, and questionnaires were meticulously reviewed, coded, interpreted, and then presented in a narrative form.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion thus far has set the stage for the basis of this article, which is exploring how the use of contextualized activities impacts communicative competence among a group of students studying Spanish as a foreign language.
Grounded in the belief that when students are competent in communicating, their chances of gaining autonomy are heightened, I used contextualized activities to improve competence in the language skills. Through the analysis of the data gleaned from multiple sources (observation, interviews, focus group discussions, written and oral tests, questionnaires), it was deduced that there was marked improvement in all areas of language applicability, as students participated in contextualized activities and experiences. Throughout the intervention, students grew in confidence as they perceived that they had the potential to act independently in using the target language in other situations than those described or provided in class.

An important feature of the intervention was that students were provided with a list of vocabulary relevant to the context at the beginning of each lesson. Students were encouraged to use the target language (Spanish) and to assume a considerate attitude toward other class members, thereby allowing each classmate the comfort and opportunity to speak without fear. I praised every attempt and demonstration of communicative competence in the target language. Furthermore, error correction was minimal because I wanted students to participate free of inhibition. I observed that over time students began to explore use of the target language and tried speaking from memory.

By the end of the intervention there was a noted improvement in all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Data indicated that continuous use of contextualized activities would result in improved writing and speaking among participants. Students, through repetitive oral practice, began hearing and internalizing correct grammatical patterns, which in turn were reflected in their writing. Throughout the intervention students’ written and oral competencies were monitored.

Examples of written tasks completed by SP2 and SP12 are given in figure 2. At the beginning of the intervention, both students were reluctant to participate because they felt they could only ‘think in English’ before doing any communicative task. The examples presented highlight an improvement in writing. Both activities required students to respond to the written communicative cues presented. Students were presented with the activity and asked to write their response. They had the opportunity to think in the L2 and give appropriate responses. Notably, student responses saw them using the language in creative
Figure 2: Examples of students’ written work after the foreign language intervention.
ways as they thought in Spanish and manipulated structures to approximate appropriate responses. Before the intervention, this was difficult for students because they felt less capable to produce such responses in the target language.

From the very first lesson, I employed group work as a strategy to get students to take responsibility for their learning by participating in class activities. Some students objected and expressed the desire to work alone. They were, nevertheless, encouraged to work in the groups assigned, since I thought that working together as a group would enhance their chances of attaining communicative competence as they negotiated and approximated appropriate responses to cues in the L2. I adopted the role of facilitator and monitored each group as they worked. This was done primarily to ensure that they were using the L2 – Spanish – and to ascertain that each person participated actively. According to Ur (1996) supervision of group work is necessary if it is to be productive and not chaotic. There was maximum participation and everyone was engaged in speaking and writing in Spanish. Students were observed to be working keenly on task while negotiating appropriate responses.

Working in groups gave participants the opportunity to discuss, negotiate and express themselves better than they would if they had worked individually. Proponents of group interaction also suggested that working in pairs increases language use, since students will feel more comfortable speaking in small groups rather than in front of a large class (Omaggio-Hadley 2001; Curtain and Dahlberg 2004). Group activities also prepared students for ‘whole class’ presentations. Over time, it was noted that group discussions grew in productivity and almost all students were actively involved and participated fully in activities. It was observed that responses were generally correct approximations in the target language. SP2 journalled

Dear Journal

Today in class we presented orally. We formed groups and presented on the topic “At the travel agency.” I was able to participate a lot. I felt comfortable throughout the presentation even though I knew I was making mistakes. It helped me to be more confident.

Oral competence over the period of the intervention improved and continued improving. At the beginning of the programme more than 50 per cent stated
that they preferred to think in English and then translate to the target language, Spanish. However, at the end of the intervention indications were that they were thinking and speaking more in Spanish. Students began to feel less inhibited and spoke more freely as they grew in confidence. Over time, the grammatical errors also became fewer. This may be as a result of students’ continuous practice, but more so because the language was presented to them in ‘whole chunks.’ They were able to listen, read, internalize, and model correct and appropriate language in speech and writing.

SP10’s journal entry after an activity was

Dear Journal,

Good God I am learning Spanish! Today was spectacular, overwhelming. I can’t even explain. Can you believe that I spoke Spanish with small inconsistencies nearly whole class today*? Today was a perfect day.

Students were now able to think on their own and give appropriate responses in the target language according to the context and situations provided by the teacher. For example, SP14 wrote

Well I guess my previous wish is coming true, of course I did not get the chance to go on a trip to a Spanish speaking country, but I had the chance to practise what I would say if our teacher decides to take us there and I enjoy doing that!

Over the past few weeks we have been practising dialogues in Spanish. Each pupil is given the opportunity to express his/her self in Spanish. By doing this I am able to listen to myself and others speak in Spanish and identify both their mistakes and mine. I enjoy this activity because it makes me feel “Spanish literate.” I look forward to Spanish class in order to talk to someone in Spanish…

In the focus group discussion at the end of the intervention students indicated that they thought the intervention greatly aided them with their communication in Spanish. When asked how, the following were common responses:

- I feel more comfortable
- I feel more confident
- I remember vocabulary given in class and feel I can apply them to whatever situation.

* Indicates an error
Additionally, SP3, SP8 and SP11 made journal entries that corroborated what other participants articulated that they felt their communicative competence had improved during the intervention (see figure 3).

![Journal entries of three students expressing confidence in using Spanish.](image)

**Figure 3:** Journal entries of three students expressing confidence in using Spanish.
The positive reactions and unbridled enthusiasm of students to speak and write in the target language, coupled with the positive feedback they shared, led me to deduce that they were now more enthused about in-class activities that led to interaction among themselves. Students willingly engaged in class activities and in the target language (Spanish).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Indications from data collected and rigorous analysis were that participation in contextualized activities points to improved communicative competence in Spanish among students. Throughout the intervention, students negotiated language and took responsibility for their participation. Participants were also able to use the target language appropriately in context. The fact that students were able to accomplish these objectives led to the conclusion that the use of contextualized experiences and activities leads students to become autonomous learners. Students were presented with a wide range of vocabulary and language contexts from which they learnt to communicate appropriate structures. All students indicated that they benefited from the intervention, however, some experienced more success than others. The experience left students with a new attitude towards speaking Spanish as they were able to do so without being coerced, which speaks to autonomy. Students, in showing autonomy, began speaking among themselves and with the teacher outside of general classroom time.

From this research I developed a clearer understanding of the fact that all four language skills are important in the development of communicative competence and that they also aid in making students more autonomous in their learning. No skill can be taught independently of the others, rather there has to be an integration of all four language skills. Making students comfortable and responsible is an important step to ensuring improved competence in the L2.

Group and pair work were useful strategies used in improving students’ target language competence and in the development of autonomy, as they took responsibility for their own learning through the activities provided. The interaction and negotiation among students allowed them to develop confidence.
within themselves and their weaker areas were strengthened. Stronger students supported and aided weaker ones. Group work essentially prepared them for individual work. Although students were able to speak effectively in the target language within the given contexts, there is concern as to whether they can apply this knowledge to a new context. This suggests that additional activities within other possible contexts would prove beneficial to students.

With the improved results garnered from the use of interactive contextual experiences, it can be deduced that the use of interactive activities should be encouraged in the teaching of any foreign language to assist teachers in developing autonomous learners. Students tended to favour these interactive activities, hence, these should be considered as a major part of the foreign language experience.

In concluding, foreign language teachers, in seeking to attain autonomy in their students, should employ the use of authentic materials and activities that reflect the needs of students. These authentic activities should allow for student involvement in the class and in varying language contexts. Cubillos (n.d.) held that FL learners develop proficiency in the target language by actively participating in linguistic exchanges (output). Therefore, we see the undeniable need for student involvement in the learning process and the need to give them the opportunity to participate in language classes. They should not only be given the opportunity to speak, but to use the language meaningfully to carry out communicative tasks that are engaging and useful to students in other contexts. In so doing, the students will be motivated to learn and participate in class activities and use the L2 outside the domain of the classroom. Thus, the class becomes more effective as students feel that they have played a role in the programmatic and pedagogical dynamics of the class and that their concerns and needs are important to the process.

References


Introduction

Effective writing is critical to students’ success in academic studies (Crusan 2011; Fernsten and Reda 2011). However, many students at the University of Guyana (UG) continue to be seriously challenged with writing in their studies. Anecdotal evidence from lecturers suggests that too many students across faculties demonstrate inadequate writing proficiency even though they are exposed to at least two English Language courses in their first year of study. Writing produced by these students is often vague and incoherent. These issues are not peculiar to the University of Guyana. Universities in the Caribbean (Dyche 1996; McLaren and Webber 2009); the UK (Newman 2007; Gill 2008) and Australia (Dann 2008) are faced with similar challenges where researchers identify problems such as students submitting assignments that are often plagiarized (Pecorari 2003) and confessing that they do not know how to transform their thoughts and knowledge into written discourse (McLaren and Webber 2009).

Many universities have attempted to address these problems by implementing a range of practical approaches at the institutional level (Read 2008; Wingate 2012) as well as at departmental levels (McLaren and Webber 2009). The University of Auckland administers a Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) to first-year undergraduates and uses the results to direct students to appropriate forms of academic language support (Read 2008). The University of London developed online academic writing courses for different departments as a part of its academic writing support initiatives (Wingate 2012).
At the University of the West Indies (Mona), Writing Across the Curriculum strategies were successfully applied in an ecology content course (McLaren and Webber 2009). These universities and their departments have recognized the importance of developing and applying practical methods to support and develop academic writers in an environment that fosters learner autonomy. To date, the University of Guyana has not done likewise, despite there being increasing concerns about students’ writing proficiency. This paper seeks to raise awareness of this gap between the University of Guyana and other global institutions of higher education. By drawing on global scholarship about academic writing instruction in higher education, this paper suggests a framework that this regional institution could draw on to provide support for academic writing development.

Background

The University of Guyana (UG) was established in 1963 with a mission to “discover, generate, disseminate, and apply knowledge of the highest standard for the service of the community, the nation, and of all mankind within an atmosphere of academic freedom that allows for free and critical enquiry” (University of Guyana website). It is a public institution with a main campus located in Turkeyen, Georgetown, and a much smaller campus located in Berbice (established in 2000). UG serves a combined population of approximately 7,000 students and offers more than 60 undergraduate and post-graduate programmes through six faculties (Agriculture and Forestry, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Health Sciences, Education and Humanities, and Technology) and three schools and institutes (School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, School of Professional Development and Institute of Distance and Continuing Education).

Linguistic context

UG is located in a linguistic environment where Guyanese, a largely English-based Creole, is the native language, and Standard English is the official language. The majority of the students at UG are from this Creole-speaking
background. Most students are speakers of Creole and varieties of the Standard and can be considered Creole-Influenced speakers (Milson-Whyte 2015). At UG, institutional support for its mainly Creole-speaking students’ academic writing development is provided through three cross-faculty English language courses, namely ENG 1105 (Use of English I), ENG 1205 (Use of English II) and ENG 1203 (Technical Communication) – formerly ENG 115, ENG 125 and ENG 123, respectively. These courses are offered by the Department of Language and Cultural Studies in the Faculty of Education and Humanities.

**Origins of the Cross-faculty Courses**

To the best of my knowledge, no formal (official) document exists in the Department of Language and Cultural Studies to indicate the original impetus for assigning the English Language courses across faculties. In the absence of official documentation, explanations for the courses were accessed from different sources, including a former head of the Department of Language and Cultural Studies who suggested that the courses were introduced because there was a need to have Creole-speaking students produce error-free English. Wilkinson (2011, 56), another member in this department, proposed that the courses were originally named after one of their recommended texts, *The Use of English*, by Quirk (1968) who was a Professor of English in the University of London. Reference to Caribbean literature on English language instruction (Dyche 2006) seemingly points to possible similarities between developments in UG and those in the University of the West Indies (UWI) where in 1963 an interfaculty ‘survey course’, The Use of English, was offered as a compulsory requirement for most first-year undergraduates. This course which was used in UWI throughout the 1960s and which had focused on critical reading and language-related study skills such as expository writing and logical reasoning, was believed to originate from international developments in English studies (Dyche 2006). However, in response to ongoing global developments, The Use of English course at UWI has since evolved into a number of English for Academic Purpose courses (Dyche 2006), and there has been a shift from the study skills approach to teaching writing across the curriculum (WAC) (Milson-Whyte 2015). More than two decades after the introduction of the Use of English courses at UG, no sub-
stantial changes at the institutional level have occurred in the provision of academic writing support for students. This response could be due in part to beliefs about and attitudes to writing development.

Beliefs and Attitudes to Writing Development

The writing produced by many students at UG has received criticisms from academics within the institution and employers across both the private and public sectors (Banwarie 2008). Most of these criticisms are usually about micro-surface features, especially mechanical and grammatical errors. These criticisms mirror attitudes to writing development seen in the UK (Lea and Street 1998), the USA (Horner 2013) and the Caribbean (Milson-Whyte 2015) where the problem is not regarded as something complex but is shortsightedly attributed to deficiencies in one of the following areas: the English Language courses, the course instructors, the entry requirements, the secondary schools, or the students themselves. As Milson-Whyte (2015) points out, these attitudes reflect misconceptions about the complexity of written literacy, especially how it develops. In particular, they do not acknowledge that writing is more than grammar and the mastery of a single skill. These misconceptions overlook its multi-layered process where students need to know what to do and how to do it, and where they need to control different levels of language competence and performance (Kellogg 2008) in a process that is constantly changing (Miller 1989). These attitudes also ignore possible mismatches between students’ perception of their writing development and their actual development (Rose and Sookraj 2015).

Indeed, it appears that the attitude of criticizing students’ writing and not acknowledging the complexity of the situation and the complexity of written literacy has possibly contributed to the gap between the academic writing support programme in UG and the academic writing support programmes in other institutions of higher education. In this case, a change in the underlying attitude to writing development, especially the tendency to believe that the mastery of grammar in one or two courses is sufficient to develop academic writers, would be required for UG to bridge this gap. An analysis of the current Use of English (UoE) course suggests that this gap is unlikely to be bridged if these courses are
the only ones provided to support students’ developing autonomously as academic writers.

The Use of English Courses

Over the years, the UoE courses at UG were offered as compulsory courses to the following students:

- first-year undergraduates in transition from secondary schools who passed CSEC English ‘A’ (Grade 1–3). Students with Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) in Communication Studies are exempted from these courses
- first-year undergraduates who did not pass CSEC English ‘A’ but passed the University of Guyana English Qualifying Examination
- mature students (26 years and older) who passed the University of Guyana Entrance Examination (UGEE)
- second-year undergraduates who completed two other English courses in their first year: English Grammar and Comprehension Skills for Teachers I & II (EEN 2104 and 2204).

The UoE courses are delivered across two 15-week semesters. In semester one, students across all the faculties were offered ENG 1105. In semester two, students mainly in the faculties of Education, Social Sciences, and Agriculture and Forestry were offered ENG 1205. In both of these courses, 50 per cent of the total marks is awarded for course work assessments and 50 per cent for final examinations. Coursework assessments consist of in-class tests.

Thus, institutional support for academic writing development begins and ends in the first year for the majority of students. Students are hardly likely to learn – in 30 weeks – all that they require to write effectively in academic contexts. According to Hyland (2006), students do not acquire language features in the order that they are presented by teachers; they acquire these features as they need them.

A course outline from the 1980s identified the course as designed to provide skills for students to improve written expression required for academic writing through attention to grammar, vocabulary, paragraphing, and comprehension.
Other course outlines were only available for 2004 to the present, and they reflected shifting aims but consistent content. The aims of ENG 1105 shifted from “to cultivate students’ ability to produce clear and concise academic writing free of grammatical errors” (2004–2010) to “to provide interactive settings to develop and increase their language awareness about Guyanese linguistic context, skills in listening, viewing, reading and responding to English use in academic settings, critical thinking and level of comprehension of written English and skills in writing-well developed essays on topical issues” (2011–2012). From 2013 to the present, the course is described as a “foundation course required for students who enter the University of Guyana and are largely from Creole-speaking backgrounds” and which “introduces students to language as it is used in academic settings and targets the development of reading and writing skills for the tasks required at university.” Its current aim is “to provide interactive settings for students to develop and increase their language awareness and attain confidence to aim for mastery of oral and written Standard English.” Except for the inclusion of the topics “Introduction to Guyanese Linguistic Context” (2011) and “Introduction to Academic Writing” and “Referencing” (after 2011), the content has remained the same over the years: reading comprehension, essay writing and grammar.

A similar pattern is evident in ENG 1205. The aim shifted from “to provide students with opportunities to apply the skills of sentence construction and correct grammatical expression to which they are exposed in ENG 1105” and “to expose students to the style of writing relevant to the office” (2004–2010) to “to develop skills that will enable students to critically analyse information and write arguments, adapt their writing to suit different purposes and audience and produce simple critical reviews and write business correspondence” (2011–2012). Its current aim is similar to that of 2012: “to help students develop the skills that will enable them to critically analyze information and write logical arguments, adapting their writing to suit different purposes and audiences.” Except for the exclusion of the topic “Analysis of statistical data” after 2010, and the shifting of the topic “Referencing” to ENG 1105 in 2013, the content of this course outline has also remained fairly consistent over the years: style, argument, logic, summary writing, business correspondence, and critical reviews.
The focus of the UoE courses on using English in academic settings makes them appear to align with the tradition of English for Academic Purpose (EAP), an influential tradition in academic writing, which was developed in response to the need to provide support for students’ study in academic contexts (Jordan 1997). However, because students are taught features that are believed to be common to all disciplines, and they are not grouped according to academic disciplines or taught features that distinguish one discipline from another, the courses are aligned with Position 3 on Dudley-Evans and St John’s (1998) continuum of English Language Teaching course types. The UoE courses fit with English for General Academic Purpose (EGAP) and not English for Specific Academic Purpose (ESAP). Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) advocate that EGAP courses make sense if they are supplemented with specific work, and Long (2005) suggests that most times these courses teach too much or too little. In the case of the UoE courses, there are consistent complaints from students about the volume of work and the relevance of some areas (Rose and Sookraj 2015).

In addition, organizing courses around general academic study skills (Jordan 1997) is informed by the mistaken view that learners will transfer a set of generic skills or rules to other disciplines (Wingate 2006; Hyland 2002; Gimenez 2008). This organization also mistakenly assumes that a “single overarching literacy” and a single set of core skills are required for producing effectively written academic texts (Hyland 2006, 12). Gimenez (2008) also suggests that course developers who organize English language courses around study skills do not place much emphasis on explicitly introducing students into the nature of discourses which form a part of the academy and on orientating them into the academic writing practices that might be required by specific disciplines. These areas are critical to students being able to develop as academic writers.

However, despite the inclusion of a Technical Communication course (ENG 1203) which is taught to students in the sciences and which falls within the tradition of ESAP in English language instruction, other issues with the UoE programme would suggest that UG has not aggressively responded to global developments where various forms of academic writing support are provided for students to develop autonomously as academic writers.
Issues and Challenges with the Use of English courses

Instructors

The UoE courses have been and continue to be controversial (Wilkinson 2011; Rose and Sookraj 2015). There are disagreements over the meaning and purpose of the courses – the most common question being “Use of English for what purpose?” Relevance of course content and forms of assessments are also controversial matters. Many instructors believe that the courses do not effectively address writing problems (Wilkinson 2011; Rose and Sookraj 2015) and are concerned that while individual writers have different problems, finding a strategy to address the multitude of problems appears difficult, particularly when instructors have large numbers of students in one class and limited time to provide feedback, and also when they teach students who are more interested in receiving grades than receiving the feedback on performance.

Students

Also, perpetual challenges are faced by many students. Some students, like the instructors, argue that they do not see the relevance of some parts of the course outside of the English language classroom (Rose and Sookraj 2015). Some students lament to their instructors that while they have ideas, they do not know how to write them. This challenge is suggestive of cognitive gaps existing between students’ declarative and procedural knowledge (DeKeyser 2001; 2014), and it is also suggestive of students having to coordinate different processes to be able to write effectively (Kellogg 2008). Other students complain that they are confused when they are told to write in a particular way in one course, and then they receive negative feedback when they apply the same strategies in a different course in the same faculty.

Although both instructors and students recognize many of the challenges involved in developing academic writing proficiency, the continued use of the UoE courses in the form that was used in the 1960s would suggest that not much has been done to provide empirically grounded understanding of the higher education context in which these students write. Not much has been
done to feed this kind of evidence into course design and institutional structures to offer more support for developing academic writers. There is only one documented attempt (a proposal) to restructure academic writing support in UG.

The Proposal to Address Academic Writing Support in UG

In 2005, a proposal from the Dean of the Faulty of Education and Humanities of UG was submitted to the Academic Board. This very detailed proposal offered, in part, approaches to deal with the challenges of supporting academic writing development at this university. It was premised on the need for “improving the delivery of the Use of English courses to meet the falling standards of English Language competence among university students and also to address the diverse needs of these students” by “assessing the validity of the courses in the programme, hiring new staff; creating a pool of teaching and learning material which is continually updated and enlarged, and by giving recognition and administrative support to the coordinator of this programme” (Mangar 2005, 3–4). Specific areas that were identified to be included in Use of English programme are as follows:

- a placement test
- one course each in English as a Second Language
- courses in ‘Introduction to Grammatical Structures’ and ‘Specialized Use of English’ for communication majors.

The course outlines for the proposed courses were attached to the proposal. In addition, the proposal included the idea of establishing a Language Centre as the main coordinating body for language programmes and services offered by the university. This proposal was approved at Academic Board, and subsequently the position of Coordinator of the Language Centre was created and additional staff was hired. A physical structure was not constructed for this centre, and no official document could be accessed to indicate why other areas of the proposal were not implemented.
Authoritative top-down language planning

To its credit, this proposal targeted some important areas to support academic writing development, such as establishing a Language Centre and considering diverse needs and discipline specific practices. The proposal also acknowledges that the current UoE courses need to be restructured, and the validity of courses in the programme needs to be assessed. However, what appears to be missing is information on how the validity of the courses would be assessed and whether the course outlines provided were informed by and supported with data arising from scholarship on academic writing development. Not identified in the proposal are academic writing practices and situational and target needs from multiple stakeholders in the academic environment – students who take the courses and instructors across disciplines who conduct other courses. Moreso, what should be noted is that in the absence of these features, this proposal presents an authoritative, top-down trajectory of planning for academic writing development. In light of current scholarship on planning for academic writing development, the course outlines that were presented in the proposal, like the current UoE outlines, are likely to be controversial.

Though numerous academic writing challenges exist elsewhere and little provable solutions appear to exist for solving these problems, academic writing support continues to be informed by current research. This type of research displaces authoritarian teacher attitudes of the mid-to-late 20th century and attaches prominence to approaches and interventions that increasingly use research evidence from dialogic processes to put learners at the centre of pedagogy (Eaton 2010; McLaren and Webber 2009; Read 2008) and help them to develop autonomously (Benson 2006). An important question arises: What theoretical and practical considerations could guide the approach of UG, regarding developing academic writing support programmes?

The approach suggested in this paper extends the approach of the 2005 proposal. It draws on current global scholarship about academic writing to propose a framework that could allow UG to begin to address the gap between its academic writing programme and those programmes which global institutions of higher education engage to support students developing as academic writers. This framework is necessary for UG to understand the transformation processes.
in academic writing instruction, which current global developments point at, and it is also necessary for UG to understand how to create effective programmes not only to teach academic writing but also to provide an environment conducive to learner autonomy.

**A Review of the Literature on Academic Writing Programmes**

**Theoretical approaches**

Many academic writing programmes in higher education draw from several theoretical approaches. These models include study skills, which focus on generic language skills such as referencing, summary and essay writing, and reading comprehension, believed to be required across all courses (Jordan 1989). Another approach is academic socialization, which focuses on socializing students into the culture of academic writing, its linguistic structures, codes and conventions within disciplines (Hyland 2000). Newer insights into academic writing propelled other approaches in different contexts. In the UK academic literacies, a holistic, integrated methodology which interrogates the institutional culture in which academic writing occurs, materialized in response to researchers recognizing that institutions and their disciplines in higher education are not neutral sites free of ideological underpinnings (Lea and Street 1998). Students’ induction into disciplinary cultures is not unproblematic as EAP tradition seemingly suggests. In the USA the influential tradition of Writing-in-the-Disciplines (WID) began, and contextual factors affecting literacy practices, especially what disciplines use, value and teach became critical elements of academic writing and were embedded in disciplinary instruction (Russell 2002). Because of its holistic and integrated methodology, the lens of academic literacies seems a good model to offer useful guidance for UG to begin the process of restructuring its UoE programme at the institutional level.

**Academic literacies**

This approach has increasingly become an important focus in higher education (Turner 2011; Lea and Street 1998). In fact, it is valued in higher education...
not only because it is a field of inquiry that considers epistemological and ideological issues that are embedded in students’ writing (Lillis and Scott 2007), but also because it draws on multiple disciplines to explain what may hinder or encourage students’ writing (Turner 2011). These disciplines include sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociocultural theories of learning and applied linguistics.

This approach is also valued because it considers practices surrounding texts, which students have to adapt and produce (Turner 2011; Lillis and Scott 2007). These practices include new ways of knowing, understanding, and interpreting information (Lea and Street 1998). Many students in transition from secondary schools to universities find adjusting to academic writing difficult, particularly because “what constitutes academic literacy is often implicit” (Morss and Murray 2001, 36–37). Though samples of academic writing may be readily available to novices, the forms and functions of these samples are often not very clear to them. Because UG draws the majority of its students from the fifth form in many secondary schools (Rose and Sookraj 2015), the lens of academic literacies seems useful for framing academic writing support in this institutional context.

Another value of the academic literacies approach lies in its accommodation of several contested areas that are barriers to students producing successful academic texts. This approach recognizes that the university as a community of practice is not homogeneous. There are variations in the types of writing required in different disciplines as well as in the interpretations of these variations (Hyland 2008; Lea and Street 1998). Lea and Street (1998) have shown that differences exist between students and staff and even among staff in understanding the nature of academic writing, the writing process, requirements of different levels of academic writing tasks and elements of successful writing.

In sum, in comparison with the study skills approach used in UG, the academic literacies approach offers richer insights into students’ writing difficulties in higher education because students’ challenges with academic writing are framed from the complexities of both academic writing and the contexts in which they produce this kind of writing (Lea and Street 1998; Scott 2000). Perspectives of staff and students on various literacy practices that characterize different disciplines can be made visible (Lea and Street 1998). In spite of its potential to yield information critical to identifying and supporting disciplinary specific writing needs, academic literacies has not been without criticisms.
Limitations

Academic literacies has been criticized for its limited accommodation of newer forms of communication and modes of learning associated with technology (Lea 2004), and it has also been criticized for its limits in terms of practical applications to pedagogy (Wingate 2012). Wingate notes that it privileges “identity, power relationships and institutional practices over text” (Wingate 2012, 1). Despite these criticisms of its limitations, an academic literacies approach could prove useful for pointing out gaps that need to be bridged for academic writing to be more effectively taught and learnt.

However, given limitations in its practical applications to pedagogy and the necessity of drawing on more than one theoretical approach for effective writing instruction (Wingate 2012), it seems appropriate to combine the academic literacies approach with another approach – needs analysis – which has been successfully used in a number of contexts as a tool for developing and assessing the effectiveness of courses (Serafini, Lake, and Long 2015). This combined approach would allow for academic writing issues to be addressed at both the broad institutional level and the disciplinary levels. In the subsequent sections, I examine needs analysis and then show how combining it with academic literacies could bridge gaps between the academic writing support provided in UG and the academic writing support provided in other global institutions of higher education.

Needs Analysis

Needs analysis involves identifying learners’ language needs in situated contexts of work and study, and identifying constraints and possibilities in these situations for course development (Hyland 2008). It refers both to a stage in the process of developing a course and a stage in assessing the outcome of a course (Basturkmen 2010; Dudley-Evans and St John 1998). It provides information on target needs that could be included in a course, and it also assesses and refines course elements and methods according to learner factors and the situated contexts in which they learn (Basturkmen 2010). Like academic literacies, needs analysis draws on an eclectic range of theories, including genre and critical the-
ories (Belcher 2006). Hyland’s statement (2006) that needs analysis is not a “done once then forgotten activity” directs attention to its dynamic and reactive feature of “questioning and revising” that is “behind every successful EAP course.” (p. 74) Needs analysis is a useful tool for developing, implementing and assessing language courses.

**Needs analysis in higher education**

Using needs analysis as a tool for defining and redefining curriculum orientations in their academic writing programmes, several institutions in higher education have been able to either suggest or provide varied and differentiated academic writing support for diverse groups of students (Serafini, Blake and Long 2015; Leki and Carson 1994). As part of a larger study, Leki and Carson (1994) conducted a needs analysis survey of English as a Second Language (ESL) students’ writing tasks in writing courses and other courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels in several universities in the USA. In their seminal study, they found important differences between what students reported that they did for their writing courses and what they reported that they did for their other courses, and they recommended encouraging text-responsible writing in these courses. In Lebanon, Bacha and Bahous (2008) investigated business students’ writing needs in a Lebanese American university in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. In response to the findings that faculty and students held different views of writing ability and needs, they recommended ongoing interdisciplinary collaborations between the Business and English faculties.

Elsewhere, in the UK, Wingate and Dreiss (2009) developed an online course to help Pharmacy students at King’s College London to understand and to write the text genres required for their academic study and professional practice. They recommended using online tools as introductory methods and providing additional support to help students develop academic literacy in their disciplines. In a later project Wingate (2012) reports on her journey to create writing development initiatives and provide academic writing support for students of all backgrounds in the same university. She drew from academic literacies, genre-based models, and disciplinary collaborations to create an online writing
support programme, embedded writing support and genre-based writing instruction. These studies which drew on needs analysis point to the potential of needs analysis to contribute information useful to providing differentiated academic writing support and useful for promoting learner autonomy which is also becoming increasingly important in the provision of academic language support in higher education contexts (Benson 2006).

Learner Autonomy

Although there is much debate in the literature about how learner autonomy should be defined, especially whether it should be defined from the perspective of a capacity or behaviour, or from the perspective of psychology or politics with respect to self-instruction, or learners’ control or responsibility for managing their own learning (Little 2015; Benson 2006), there is consensus that learners can be encouraged to achieve some degree of autonomy, be proactive, insightful, and reflective in terms of taking initiatives to manage or direct their own learning, if appropriate approaches are used within and beyond the classrooms (Benson 2006).

However, supporting learners to become autonomous with respect to developing their academic writing proficiency cannot be achieved with the use of one-shot remedial courses; various angles and perspectives on academic writing development have to be considered. It is here that the multidimensional nature of needs analysis could provide useful sets of data with potential to create a learning environment where students have access to other forms of academic writing support beside remedial courses. It can be assumed that needs analysis will highlight specific writing needs and wants from students’ and instructors’ perspectives and thus provide information critical to supporting an institutional framework that caters for these needs so that students can take initiatives for meeting their needs and managing their own academic writing development. Thus, gaps between the academic writing instruction provided in UG and the academic writing instruction provided in other higher education institutions can be addressed.
Bridging the Gaps: Combining Academic Literacies with Needs Analysis and Promoting Learner Autonomy

Adopting an academic literacies-based approach means adopting a certain position when conceptualizing and teaching academic writing. This position entails conceiving writing as non-generic, contested and developmental, and it also requires considering students’ identities and not excluding them from opportunities to succeed autonomously with academic writing. The needs analysis approach involves an orientation that is responsive to learners, their needs and their situated context of learning. With a framework that combines the two approaches – academic literacies-informed needs analysis – course instructors could potentially bridge the gaps between the academic writing support provided in UG and the support provided in other global institutions of higher education. This type of response is examined in the next section.

Reversing the top-down trajectory of language planning

One area that needs analysis examines is the situated context in which language learning takes place. Adding the academic literacies lens, course instructors could collect data from both instructors and students in the university community (Lea and Street 1998). Course instructors could collect data from the different disciplines to identify their ways of making meaning. As was shown in the work of Turner (2011) where she identified how different stakeholders conceptualized the practice of proofreading, course instructors could examine disciplinary practices by comparing students and instructors’ expectations of writing within courses to identify the gaps between students’ and instructors’ expectations and understanding of meaning construction within the disciplines. If course instructors accommodate a range of people’s voices in the provision of academic writing support, especially if they allow students to reflect and report on their academic writing expectations and outcomes and use this data in course designs, they could potentially move planning for academic writing support out of the realm of an authoritative top-down trajectory and into a realm that includes a more learner-centred bottom-up approach. This action could be conducive to promoting learner autonomy because it stimulates critical
reflection and self-awareness on the part of students and helps students put areas related to their academic writing into perspectives that need to be managed. The course instructors’ role then would be to provide opportunities for students to manage these areas. Achieving this feat also depends on interdisciplinary collaborations.

**Fostering interdisciplinary collaborations**

The academic literacies lens considers that students’ difficulties with academic writing are due to numerous factors, not just students’ inability to write grammatical structures. As was shown in the academic writing initiatives of Wingate (2012), students’ struggles with academic writing are, in many cases, discipline related. Thus, it is important for instructors who conduct academic writing courses to engage subject instructors in various disciplines so that information about the writing required in the disciplines could be accessed, and together they can provide the necessary support required for students to develop as competent writers in these areas. Needs analysis could prove important for data collection in this regard (Hyland 2008) as it can potentially identify disciplinary texts and their distinctive features, specific target wants which the institution needs to categorize and accommodate if it is to remove barriers that prevent students from succeeding autonomously with academic writing.

**Promoting learner autonomy**

Accepting the perspective of academic literacies that power relations are involved in the provision of academic writing instruction, course instructors could integrate needs analysis data, especially data where students identify their difficulties and what they consider relevant to their academic writing development, into academic writing support systems, which they can access. These academic writing support systems could materialize in various forms and modes, including general and specific courses and instruction through self-access workshops, blended and distributed learning (Benson 2006), and online platforms (Crusan 2011; Wingate 2012; Wingate, Andon, and Cogo 2011; Milson-Whyte 2015). With opportunities to access differentiated instruction, students could potentially
develop awareness of their own academic writing challenges and be positioned to take control and make decisions to change their situations with less of the power relation issues that come with someone else making those decisions.

Conclusion

From an instructor’s perspective, the landscape for the teaching of academic writing has changed and continues to change. More students from different backgrounds have access to higher education and are entering higher education institutions with different levels of writing competency, and while there are no instant solutions to academic writing challenges that beset institutions in higher education, this paper has shown that attention to academic writing in this context does not begin and end with one or two general language courses offered across faculties or theoretical top-down approaches that determine course designs. As was shown in this paper, persons involved in providing academic writing support engage scholarship when planning for academic writing development, and they also implement practical strategies so that multiple opportunities can be provided for students to develop as academic writers. The current cross-faculty Use of English courses in use at UG appear not to be informed by these areas.

If students at the University of Guyana are to be taught to develop as competent academic writers, as other students in global institutions of higher education are taught, much will depend on policy makers creating conditions and opportunities for meaningful and autonomous language learning to take place, encouraging a change in attitude to writing development, and supporting a framework where a range of data can be drawn and knowledge shared across the disciplines to collectively address academic writing challenges. Much will depend on an understanding of academic literacies and data gathered from needs analysis. In essence, then, by aligning academic literacies with needs analysis, the University of Guyana could use a framework that could possibly allow it to access information on both practice and text and to use this information as a starting point for developing academic writing support programmes with potential to accommodate institutional and disciplinary needs and also foster learner autonomy.
References


Abstract

This is a case study of curriculum reform and reflection on the development of a curriculum reform project in the Anglophone Caribbean. The paper reports on an ongoing project. Four phases of the curriculum reform process were identified which were considered important for the institutionalizing of best practices. These were the curriculum assessment and evaluation, visioning, programme and course development and coordination. An important aspect of the project was to create space for Caribbean concerns to be engaged, to develop the autonomous learner and to deal meaningfully with approaches to the development of the ideal Caribbean person/worker. Some important practical approaches to the process of continuous curriculum development were highlighted, including time, data collection and ongoing quality assurance checks.

Keywords: Continuous curriculum development, Caribbeanization, autonomous learner

Introduction

Curriculum design and development should be an ongoing process in institutions of higher education. In many cases, when curricula are developed there are recommendations for curriculum reform to take place at a later date. Some-
times these recommendations are not heeded. Further, depending on the educational bureaucracy at work in a particular educational institution, changes to curriculum might be cumbersome, requiring many processes and sometimes extending over a prolonged period. Academics, who would be expected to be involved in curriculum development are often engaged in so many activities on campus that curriculum reform and redevelopment is not accorded the time it deserves. In order to improve the curriculum and to ensure its on-going relevance, evaluation mechanisms should be in place in every curriculum and should be followed rigorously on an annual basis. Each year, there needs to be a review of courses taught and decisions made about how they might be improved. Similarly, programmes should be reviewed after each cohort of students has graduated. In this way, curriculum development becomes an ongoing process and ongoing curriculum improvement will become institutionalized with every succeeding cohort of students. It cannot be overemphasized that curriculum reform and development is important in higher education.

The concept of continuous curriculum development and the “Caribbeanization” of the process were part of the framework of a curriculum reform project that is being reported on in this paper. Many of the procedures and activities that were done might readily find resonance with many institutions of higher education in the Caribbean. In fact, they hold out much hope for strengthening the process of curriculum development in higher education. Accordingly, there is much merit in communicating these practices and making a case for the institutionalising of these approaches for ongoing curriculum reform and curriculum development/re-development in the Anglophone Caribbean

Problem Investigated and Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to report on a curriculum reform project undertaken at an institution of higher education in the Anglophone Caribbean. In this institution, the curriculum which was lopsided, dated, and utilized traditional minimalist approaches of listing content without significant attention being paid to the other elements of the curriculum. The philosophical orientation, although unstated, could be inferred as knowledge was “out there” and it was to be embraced as given. The curriculum documents were presented in such
ways that the dominant concerns seemed to have been disciplinary and hence, subject matter content was the overriding priory in delivering the curriculum. This curriculum was largely concerned with knowledge transfer. A major challenge was how to reconceptualize the curriculum along broader theoretical lines, yet having greater levels of practical relevance, making it more learner-centric and with an orientation to support the development of the Caribbean. In this way, the curriculum would provide a basis for the development of the Caribbean thinker, worker, citizen, and the autonomous Caribbean learner. Accordingly, this paper is being presented as a case study of a large curriculum reform project in progress at a Caribbean institution of higher education.

This case study will provide information on how the problem of the lopsided curriculum with an orientation to subject matter content without rootedness in major Caribbean realities and ways of life was engaged. Further, other objectives include the communication of the attempts that were made at the “Caribbeanization” of the process and how continuous curriculum improvement was introduced. It also presents information on how this approach might be utilized in other similar projects in the region.

**Literature Review**

In this review of the related literature, curriculum design is underscored as a creative process. The benefits of using frameworks is engaged. The commonplace of the curriculum (Schwab 1969) as a major way of understanding the curriculum and in fact, as a framework, is identified. Various models of curriculum design are discussed from the literature, including the ADDIE, model, the Continuous Curriculum Development model (Wolf 2007), the Integrated Course Design Model (Fink 2007a) and the Backward Design model (Wiggins and McTighe 1998; 2005).

The designing of a curriculum is understood to emanate from some kind of core philosophical or conceptual understanding and rationale. Curriculum development begins with curriculum design. It is useful to remember that design is an activity that people engage in that improves the quality of their subsequent creations. Rowland (1993) defined design generically as “a disciplined inquiry engaged in for the purpose of creating some new thing of
“practical utility” and designing as “... requiring a balance of reason and intuition ... and an ability to reflect on actions taken” (p. 80).

In designing curricula, the use of models or frameworks helps to enliven the curriculum and promote an ‘intellectually rich’ application of the conceptualizations. Imaginative and practical oriented curricula that are designed to actively engage students in process-based learning enable students to develop skills and competencies that can position them as independent and autonomous learners. In designing curricula, institutional support and stakeholder buy-in are extremely important (Chisholm 2008). In fact, when there is institutional support for curriculum reform and curriculum development, there is likely to be greater buy-in and ownership. The development of curricula to promote ‘intellectually rich’, yet practical and meaningful applications has been seen in multiple sites of higher education, for instance, through the progressive developments in curriculum in the activities of the UK Higher Education Academy’s (2007), Imaginative Curriculum Project. This initiative drew together “a network of practitioners who believed that designing a curriculum was a creative process in which knowledge, skill, imagination and passion for a subject come together.” The presence of these qualities enabled the thorough-going success of the curriculum design project since ownership and buy-in were realized.

**Theoretical/conceptual framework**

Schwab (1969) called attention to the commonplaces of the curriculum; these included the subject matter, students, learning environments/the milieu, and teachers. From this framework, the learning milieus are those environments related to learning, deepening awareness, creating knowledge, and sculpting lives. This framework sought answers to questions such as: what assumptions are held about learners – how do they learn and what do they need to learn? What expectations are made about the role of teacher? Who should have power over curriculum making? There is a role for the investigation of contextual dimensions that inform curriculum processes, including the wider social/community/political context of curriculum. There is also the context brought by individual academics involved in delivering the curriculum, as well as the context in which learners, indeed different types of learners, find themselves. The
commonplaces offer one set of powerful analytic and yet directional tools that should inform curriculum design and development.

Four models are presented that underscore the thinking about curriculum, and these provided theoretical and conceptual illumination for this curriculum development project. In these models, curriculum is understood in three ways: as intention, delivery, and outcome. These models include the ADDIE model, the Continuous Curriculum Development model (Wolf 2007), the Integrated Course Design Model (Fink 2007a), and the Backward Design model (Wiggins and McTighe 1998, 2005).

Instructional design is an important aspect of curriculum work and many models of instructional design have been developed. In some way or shape they incorporate the Tyler rationale. However, there is one model that seems to have great dominance in the field: the ADDIE model (see figure 1).

The ADDIE Model

This model was first developed in 1975 by the Center for Educational Technology at Florida State University. Originally, it was used by the US army in training programmes for soldiers. This model is one that is systematic and logical. It provides a systematic approach to course development efforts and is a basic model that has tremendous versatility in relation to its usage in face-to-face and online modalities of teaching and learning. There is no doubt that it provides instructional designers with a framework that will enable them to ensure that their instructional products are effective and that their creative processes are as efficient, since evaluation is a big part of the ongoing process of development. Therefore, the quality management/quality assurance component of the programme must be given sufficient attention.

ADDIE stands for the steps of the model:

• Analyze: define the needs and constraints
• Design: specify learning activities, assessment and choose methods and media
• Develop: begin production, formative evaluation, and revise
• Implement: put the plan into action
• Evaluate: evaluate the plan from all levels for next implementation
The Continuous Curriculum Development Model was the major theoretical and conceptual framework used. Wolf’s (2007) model (Continuous Curriculum Development) was very influential. For Wolf, curriculum development must be faculty-led and data-driven. This approach calls for the systematic assessment of the curriculum and in turn, the outcomes of the assessment should be used to make improvements to the curriculum. In this approach, three major stages of the curriculum development process must be engaged.

In Stage One, curriculum visioning is the important process. The designing of a complete programme must commence with statements of the outcomes of the process (Curriculum visioning). In this phase, reflection on the existing curriculum is recommended and this would be done to delineate weaknesses or important gaps. Then much brainstorming is done to develop the vision that the curriculum developers would love to see become reality. Further, there is the call for the examination of curricula from major universities worldwide to inform the thinking of the reviewers and to assist in visioning. This process should lead to Stage Two.

Figure 1: The ADDIE Instructional Design Model
In Stage Two there ought to be the writing of the actual courses. This will invariably lead to Stage Three or the stage that calls for the reviewers to ensure the alignment of the curriculum.

Stage Four focuses on coordination and additional development (where necessary) of the programmes and courses. The notion of continuous curriculum development was always affirmed and this should be continually addressed. As the process proceeds, additional recommendations for quality assurance and continuous improvements are engaged.

In Stage Five the curriculum is implemented and the vision of the graduate developed in Stage One is now a major concern in this, the implementation phase. This vision is used to engage in ongoing curriculum assessment and evaluation so that the process of continuous curriculum development and improvement is realized.

The Integrated Course Design Model

Fink’s (2007a) Integrated Course Design Model is also important. In this model, the familiar triad of learning goals, teaching and learning activities, and feedback/assessment are privileged. From this perspective, the following components of the curriculum are to be fully understood and find meaningful expression in the design and development phase.

1. **Learning goals**: the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students will learn
2. **Learning activities**: the strategies that will be employed to get students to learn, and
3. **The feedback/assessment**: the activities that will be used to determine if learning has indeed been realized.

These important elements of the curriculum – learning goals, learning activities and feedback/assessment – should be guided by the important concern of the kind of impact that this course will have on students. The learning goals must be crafted in such a way that they lead to learning activities which will enable significant learning to take place. This will be demonstrated as various outcomes are realized; assessment activities will measure the learning outcomes. In this regard, there must be an integrated approach to achieve “significant
learning” (Fink 2007b). The crafting of the learning goals and learning activities will incorporate the areas identified by Fink in his diagrammatic representation of significant learning (see figure 2).

The Backward Design Model

Another approach to curriculum design that was important in this curriculum development was the so-called “backward design” (Wiggins and McTighe 1998; 2005). In this approach, there are three clear stages that should be followed in the design of the curriculum. The stages in the backward design process are

1. Identifying desired results
2. Determining acceptable evidence
3. Planning learning experiences and instruction.

Figure 2: Interactive Nature of Significant Learning
From “A self-directed guide to designing courses for significant learning”, L. Dee Fink, PhD. http://www.deefinkandassociates.com/GuidetoCourseDesignAug05.pdf
Caribbeanization and Learner Autonomy

The Caribbean islands were once colonial societies, and vestiges of colonial times and their heritage linger. For its part, the Anglophone Caribbean has emerged out of slavery, with the peasantry and rural villages. The African and Asian heritages of these societies have influenced them to value community and communal ways of existence. Hence, in these Caribbean societies, community, communalism, and communal existence are important ways of self-understanding and existence. Accordingly, in these societies, community, humanity, and morality are seen as values that are of absolute importance in the pursuit of a meaningful and fulfilling life (Smith 1984, 1991).

In the burgeoning knowledge society there is a continuous need for learning. In fact, society is now being described as a ‘learning society’ reflecting the increased need for learning (Edwards and Usher 2001; Wain 2000). The movement to the learning society in many developed and developing societies (including the Caribbean) comes with some problematic concerns. Much of the discourse about this learning society is framed within the context of neoliberal philosophy which is one system of thought that undergirds the free market system. Neoliberal perspectives privilege individualism, which is problematic in light of the traditional orientation of Caribbean societies to communal expressions.

For Miller (2009), there are some defining features of the social context called the Caribbean. He identified six contradictions that he offered as important features of Caribbean societies: These characteristics are

- immigrant mainstreams
- dominant minorities and marginal majorities
- modern societies of modest means
- cultural cradle on the economic periphery
- common history, identity and destiny punctuated with insularity
- the creative folk and the conforming intelligentsia.

Miller’s six contradictions or characteristics constitute some of the most salient defining societal features of the Caribbean. From this perspective, the Caribbean experience is punctuated by various contradictions and existence is
exemplified by a sense of being uprooted, some amount of marginality, modest economic existence, and creativity. There is formal, informal, and non-formal communal living. Smith (1991) also noted that Caribbean people were uprooted, indeed potted plants. This understanding underscored the transported nature of the Caribbean person: the immigrant, and the forced migrant, and this is true certainly of the African majority. This historical perspective points to some elements of an unresolved separation, especially when viewed from the scenario where domination and subjugation were realities. These aspects of Caribbean life have contributed to the problems of identity that many Caribbean people seem to have. The issues of freedom/liberation, power and powerlessness, superiority and inferiority loom large and are played out in the educational landscape.

Caribbean persons have been freed from slavery and indentureship, but there are still elements of bondage that dominate many lives. This bondage is certainly not physical, but mental and otherwise (Smith 1984, 1991). It is therefore important that curriculum development in the Caribbean seek to focus on the development of the emancipatory aspect of life; this might be achieved through Caribbean emancipatory pedagogy (CEP). This is one way of “Caribbeanizing” the process. In pursuing CEP, this must be understood as an approach to teaching and learning that is rooted in dynamic central concepts of Caribbean life, and must use pedagogies that help in offering identity clarification, Caribbean rootedness, and personal liberation.

The need for emancipatory pedagogy and for resisting hegemony arise because Caribbean education systems have promoted conformity to the status quo, engaged in exclusionary educational practices, and perpetuated notions of superiority and inferiority. Domination and subordination have also been observed as overt and subtle as well as covert and deliberate (Chisholm 2008, 2009; Hickling-Hudson 2004; Miller 2009; Smith, 1991). In some of these Caribbean educational sites, these relationships were expressed in processes of cultural and intellectual violence that undermined the dignity of persons and inveighed against their culture (Alfred 2010; Hickling-Hudson 2004). Such perceptions about superiority and power were internalized and were later manifested in oppressive, elitist, even racist behaviours.

Many educational institutions in the Caribbean (in the past and present)
alienated and disempowered students through the use of culturally oppressive curriculum processes and practices. Much of our educational activity then and now elevated white cultural norms and forms as the dominant and the preeminent way of human expression. Several who were privileged to access secondary and postsecondary education were indoctrinated with ideologies of power, superiority and subordination that were to be used in the service of the status quo. However, some of the educated elites have resisted the educational project aimed at conformity to the status quo. Many of these persons have been involved in the search for counter-hegemonic pedagogies.

Resistance to hegemony is demonstrated in various ways. It can be detected in multiple forms, for instance in nonconformance, passivity, activity, knowledge, and meaning (Kaufman 2000). The development of Caribbean identity and learner autonomy can be embraced as meaningful efforts to educate for thoroughgoing resistance to hegemony. Accordingly, in developing a curriculum with an emphasis on Caribbean realities and way of life, it is important to note these realities of life in the Caribbean, including the contradictions, and introduce mechanisms to deal with them in terms of defining who Caribbean people are and how we might resolve some of these contradictions. The definition of the ideal graduate and especially the attributes of the ideal Caribbean citizen found exposure in this project. Further, the Caribbean Community (Caricom) Secretariat’s approved Regional Qualification Framework (RQF) and the Regional Vocational Qualification Framework (RVQF) were used in developing programmes, and especially in relation to entry requirements, and proficiencies/competencies to be developed.

**Learner autonomy**

Autonomy is usually understood to be the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one’s own learning. The idea of taking charge of one’s learning has sometimes been seen as devolving from teachers who give students the set of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective skills or techniques that they can use to learn in meaningful and successful ways (Holec 1981 as cited in Benson 1997). Hence, the student would develop skills and the facility to determine some of the learning objectives, the content, monitoring learning, and even self-assess-
ment and evaluation. Another understanding of learner autonomy is seen in relation to the development of the internal capacity of the learner for independence and self-authorship. This facility for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action in pursuit of learning (Little 1991 as cited in Benson 2001) is certainly in keeping with the objectives of this project.

Learner autonomy might be well served through curriculum development processes that are invested with the vision of developing the kind of learner that will be given to taking responsibility for learning and personal authorship. This might be accomplished through an outcomes-driven curriculum especially where the outcomes of learning are developed to achieve the kind of learner who is a critical thinker and committed to lifelong learning. There is much hope in an emerging Caribbean approach to continuous curriculum development that foregrounds learner autonomy. Teachers are responsible for taking the initiative to stimulate autonomous learning in their classes, but in effect they should develop partnerships in learning. This must commence from the course design and development phase of the curriculum project. It is from this point that decisions about teaching and learning must be informed by concerns about the quality of the output or outcome of the educational process, and how the autonomous learner might truly be developed. The importance of the common places of the curriculum (Schwab 1969), learning goals (Fink 2007) and the overall vision of the curriculum (Wolf 2007) must be clear. It is important to start with the end in mind or embrace aspects of backward design (Wiggins and McTighe 1998, 2005).

Method

Stage One: Curriculum assessment and evaluation

The research methodology for this project was the case study approach. In a curriculum development or curriculum reform project, a needs assessment and situational analysis require the collection of rich data that will inform the process. A modified version of the Wolf (2007) model of continuous curriculum development was adopted. In this project, continuous curriculum development was initiated by engaging in the curriculum assessment and evaluation of the
various programmes (Stage One). A single holistic case study was done. As in many case studies, data collection and some analysis occurred together. There was a needs assessment and the investigation of the contextual factors that were likely to impact the curriculum. The situational analysis complemented the information gathered during needs assessment.

In these curriculum development/redevelopment projects, the needs are usually revealed through meetings with students, faculty, departmental leaders, administrative leaders, meetings with stakeholders, interviews, content analysis of documents/documentary review, surveys and analysis. In terms of the multiple stakeholders associated with an institution of higher education, the following are usually included:

- policy makers in government
- educational and other government officials
- employers
- the business community/private sector
- politicians
- parents
- alumni
- professional groups
- sector interests groups (e.g. mining, agriculture, forestry, manufacturing)
- NGOs.

The first act of assessing and evaluating the curriculum was a SWOT analysis. This was done to ascertain the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that might have been present with respect to the existing curriculum. It was done by collecting data from the faculty and students. Data collection strategies used included focus group discussions; meetings with students, faculty, departmental leaders, administrative leaders; town hall meetings with stakeholders; focus groups discussions/interviews with stakeholders; and other interviews with members of the communities served by the institution. There was also the use of rating scales to determine the quality of the various components of the curriculum. Content analysis/documentary review and analysis of previous reports of the institutions academic endeavours were also undertaken. Workshops and seminars were also held to develop concepts of the ideal
Caribbean student, learner autonomy, and the pedagogical strategies that would promote greater levels of personal responsibility for learning and professional development.

Data were gathered through conversational interviews (Patton 2002). Focus group meetings with campus stakeholders were held to determine the contextual realities. These focus group meetings provided opportunities for informal conversational interviews and questions were raised about the nature and content of the existing curriculum, the academic programmes, courses, student enrollment, areas of emphases, the needs of the faculties, the needs of the students, and the needs of the other stakeholders. These meetings also provided opportunities to interface with faculty, outline and further negotiate the approach to the curriculum reform, and determine readiness for the project. Various documents were available that provided information on the existing curriculum, and these were collected and reviewed. Accordingly, content analysis of the following documents was achieved:

- academic programme documents
- student handbooks
- course outlines
- specialist reports
- reports on the environmental concerns
- government policy reports with relevance to higher education.

Data were also gathered by interviewing key stakeholders and holding town hall meetings with students and members of the wider community. In these meetings, the curriculum reform specialists determined through questioning, the objectives, content, delivery approaches, assessment tasks, and impact of the existing curriculum. Information on what was needed in a new curriculum was also provided. There was an effort to determine the impact of the curriculum on developing the ideal Caribbean citizen and the learner-centredness of the curriculum. The issue of the autonomous learner was also addressed in the data gathering phase of the project.

There were approximately 20 data gathering meetings over a five-month period. All meetings were approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length and were held on the campus and at sites convenient to the parties concerned in nearby
communities. Checklists and rating scales were also used to determine if the programme objectives were actually realized. Examination results and work samples all assisted in providing data about how the curriculum was delivered and the outcomes of the curriculum implementation. Previous reviews and programme objectives were examined and analyzed.

Teaching-learning facilities including classrooms, the library, the farm, laboratories, internship sites, and work experience venues were observed and evaluated. Verbatim notes were taken and transcribed for the focus groups and meaningful notes were taken of the interviews, town hall meetings, and observations.

The research/curriculum assessment strategy was developed based on Kirkpatrick’s (1998) four levels of the evaluation process. However, Kirkpatrick’s approach only provided guidance and was not followed in a slavish way. The four levels of the process consisted of the following:

**Step 1: Reaction** – How well did the learners like the learning process?
**Step 2: Learning** – What did they learn? (The extent to which the learners gain knowledge and skills)
**Step 3: Behaviour** – What changes in job performance resulted from the learning process? (Capability to perform the newly learned skills while on the job)
**Step 4: Results** – What are the tangible results of the learning process? (In terms of reduced cost, improved quality, increased production, efficiency, etc.)

Every effort was made to use the questions in the Kirkpatrick’s framework to guide the conversations and especially the questions.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using traditional qualitative methods for qualitative data including, deep reading of notes, identifying of categories and themes. For the archived quantitative data, descriptive statistics were used to make sense of the data. However, the project lent itself to ongoing evaluation and interpretation of the findings. Four major stages of the curriculum review and development activities were engaged and the fifth stage will be the implementation which cannot be reported in this paper since it has not yet occurred.
Summary of Findings

Five of the major categories or themes that were identified and are important in curriculum work are identified and highlights are presented in this summary. These factors were

1. The constraints of the institution – Institutional Factors
2. The dissatisfied student – Student Factors
3. The underpaid faculty – Faculty Factors
4. The supportive and expectant society – Societal Factors
5. The under-resourced learning environment – the Learning Environment.

Institutional factors

It was recognized that curriculum reform and redevelopment do not take place in a vacuum. There are institutional factors that must be present to ensure the new curriculum is successfully implemented. The situational analysis unearthed several institutional factors that were important, and it was felt that they would impact in major ways, the success of the project, that of revising the curriculum and its subsequent implementation.

Some aspects of the physical space of the campus did not support learning in helpful ways and this was very disconcerting to students. Many classrooms were problematic for learning, the labs were insufficient, and necessary items were missing. Overall, the physical infrastructure was not supportive of the educational mission of the institution. Students pointed out that when it rained heavily, classes were affected due to the poor drainage around classrooms and walkways. Further, they opined that there were very limited dormitory or halls of residence facilities available to students.

Administrative processes including hiring were often delayed and this caused immense problems. Other concerns included the payment of salaries and allowance. There was a general feeling that the university needed to do more to support its faculty. The approval process for new curricula was also cause for concern since the process tended to be overly long and drawn out. In terms of quality assurance, the lack of a functional oversight body was noted. Hence,
attention was called to the constraints of the institution or the constraining institutional context and how this could undermine and devalue efforts at curriculum reform.

**Faculty factors**

There was general openness and willingness to engage in curriculum reform on the part of the faculty. In fact, the team felt that 85–90 per cent of all faculty members were supportive. However, some faculty members indicated their reluctance to proceed without training. Others indicated that they had engaged in significant curriculum reform, and hence the process in their departments was almost completed.

Much concern was expressed about teaching loads and lack of meaningful remuneration; hence, underpaid faculty was a dominant complaint, which has huge implications for staff morale. In many instances there were concerns about curriculum implementation since faculty with the requisite skill and level of education were not in place. Staff morale was another concern especially for curriculum implementation.

**Student factors**

There were concerns about the quality of some matriculants to the degree programmes. The basic requirement for entering the degree programme was passes in 5 CSEC subjects. It was noted that the science background of some students was problematic, especially in cases where physics was needed and a substitute was used. Students felt that electives were forced upon them and expressed the concern that they had to do many filler courses that had no relevance to their degree, for instance a biology major forced to do computer graphics.

The level of dissatisfaction that students had with programmes and facilities stood as a dominant factor. Students complained about the lack of impact of the Student Evaluation of Teaching and the fact that the outcomes, in relation to faculty were not known. More academic counselling was requested by the students since there was insufficient attention paid to structure academic counselling. Some students felt there was need to create opportunities for more
engagement with content outside the focus of the degree. They also indicated that more opportunities should be created for student voices to be heard. There were also concerns about the value of the degree globally and insufficient attention to Caribbean realities. In summary, some students were very negative about the university, the skills and competencies of students being developed, or lack thereof, and the high level of theoretical courses, the lack of resources, infrastructure, extracurricular activities, poor laboratory facilities, and little exposure to technology.

**Learning environment**

All the participants in the focus groups and town hall meetings indicated that there were pockets of good and meaningful activities within the university learning environment. However, there was much that was unacceptable with the general teaching and learning environment, for example, the library facilities, the lack of computer facilities and Internet access. Accordingly, the dominant response in the findings to the learning environment was the under-resourced factor which had undermined learning potential and had serious implications for the successful implementation of a new/revised curriculum.

The students complained about the pedagogical practices of lecturing. Issues in assessment were problematic for some. Students complained especially about the lack of transparency and perceived victimization during assessment. Some students expressed dissatisfaction with the pedagogical choices since theoretical material dominated the approaches and linkages to the practical relevance were not always done. Issues of language barriers, the need to complete syllabus, and lack of objectivity and alignment in assessment were some of other major complaints.

Many students expressed doubt about the added value of field education and practicum portions of courses. In some programmes, especially those with practical/field trips components (e.g. geography, environmental studies, agriculture), the reactions were that they needed to be more structured and educationally beneficial field trips and practicum were requested. The limited exposure through the internship programme was noted. A number of gaps in the curriculum in the programmes offered were identified by the stakeholders, for
instance report writing skills, computer skills and an orientation to environmental sustainability.

There were expressions of concern about the gaps in some of the programmes in the Sciences. Respondents voiced the opinion that Agriculture and Forestry needed to develop programmes based on local and Caribbean needs. Further, they pointed out that online programmes were needed.

**Societal factors**

Throughout the data collection phase, several stakeholders indicated their willingness and readiness to support the efforts of the university in developing the high quality graduate that the society expects the university to produce. However, concerns were expressed generally about the deficiency in graduates owing to a mismatch of the curriculum and the knowledge relevant for the various industries. Overall, there was much lament about the lack of work readiness of many graduates. Some stakeholders recommended additional competencies for engineering students, especially those who were to be employed in engineering departments in agricultural enterprises/firms; hence, agricultural and manufacturing engineering should be addressed by the curriculum or the areas where additional competencies were needed. The stakeholders wanted the university to work more with industries to develop the curriculum, and hence respond to the actual needs of the society instead of following outdated content – thereby producing the graduate that would be most valuable to the society.

**Curriculum Development**

The needs assessment and situational analysis phase of the investigation informed the actual curriculum development/redevelopment exercise. The modified Wolf (2007) model made Stage One of the process the curriculum assessment phase, and Stage Two the curriculum visioning stage.

**Stage Two: Curriculum visioning**

Having carried out the initial curriculum assessment and evaluation and reviewed the findings the next phase of the project was curriculum visioning.
(Stage Two). This incorporated five focus groups discussions lasting approximately 90 minutes each and a workshop and brainstorming session/meeting lasting three hours or 180 minutes, to ascertain the attributes of the graduates to be developed and the various qualities that should be seen in these graduates. This phase of the process included visioning in relation to overall programmes and in this regard, special attention was paid to the graduate attributes as each programme was evaluated and restructuring recommended. In fact, each programme developed actual indicators of programme inputs leading to desired outcomes and this was facilitated in the workshop by break-out sessions. The indicators were descriptors of what students must do to be considered competent in an attribute: the measurable and pre-determined standards. These would also be used in the continuous curriculum development approach since these measurable indicators would become the basis for annual evaluation of the curriculum outcomes and provide the basis for review and continuous improvement.

The contradictions of Caribbean life (Miller 2009) also informed the development of the concept of the Caribbean person that the curriculum should produce. The importance of an autonomous learner, a thinker, and worker was certainly considered and discussed in the curriculum visioning aspect of the project. This phase of the curriculum development project also incorporated visioning concerning the “Ideal Caribbean Citizen” as developed by CARICOM and the qualities offered were mapped to the recommended content, pedagogical engagements, and assessment tasks that were to be included in the curriculum. This was to ensure that the objectives, content, pedagogy, and assessment tasks recommended were well aligned and could deliver the graduate that the curriculum was designed to produce. Constant examination and re-examination of the process, a feature of the continuous curriculum development (Wolf 2007) process was facilitated.

The use of the CARICOM Secretariat’s approved Regional Qualification Framework (RQF) and the Regional Vocational Qualification Framework (RVQF), as reference points for establishing entry requirements and academic and occupational competencies, when developing the concept of the ideal graduate, provided opportunities for the contextual realities of the Caribbean to be discussed and visioning done along those lines. This, of course, was in addition
to using international tertiary level benchmarks and accreditation standards. Relating the curricula to the CARICOM qualification and certification protocol was important since qualified Caribbean nationals will want to travel freely within the region to obtain employment.

A major concern of this phase was to ensure that the curriculum was developed to provide learning opportunities for the students to embrace the importance of the sustaining of the Caribbean environment. Specific content, pedagogy, and assignments relating to low carbon development and general environmental stewardship were recommended to be included and these were to be done in the writing of the actual programmes and courses. Hence, environmental sustainability in the Caribbean was treated in the programmes so that graduates would be environmentally conscious. In fact, a major goal was to develop programmes in order to graduate students who would be committed to sustainability in general but Caribbean sustainability in particular. Each programme delineated the structure, contents, and the various components, including the courses based on the year of study.

The outcome of this stage of the process was a vision of what the curriculum would be. A skeletal framework and measurable indicators completed the process. These would inform stage three.

**Stage Three: Programme and course development**

It was now possible to engage in programme and course development. Programme development as a part of the curriculum design process is essentially a creative endeavour which seeks to meet the needs of specific target groups. It is a process of conceptualization, projection, and clarification. Course development is also a design activity that looks at the specific content to be studied in the course and arranges them in ways that will enable teaching and learning to occur in short segments (one course), usually for a period of 39–45 contact hours per semester. In both programme design and course design, rationale, learning objectives, programme/course content and pedagogies were important. Each programme required the enlivening of the set of indicators developed in Stage Two including that of the autonomous learner that would express the attributes of the ideal graduate of the programme. There was a special require-
ment to demonstrate in tangible ways, the specific approaches that would be used in the courses to facilitate Caribbean identity development. Since the whole process was informed by continuous curriculum development (Wolf 2007), there was examination and re-examination of the activities and the processes in an ongoing way.

The courses were written with a clear understanding that care should be taken to ensure that they were designed to foster the identified programme objectives and as much as possible be relevant to Caribbean realities, especially in relation to indigenous communities and indigenization in general. Basically, the content, the teaching and learning activities engaged, and assessment strategies utilized were all chosen to assist in the achievement of the course objectives and the programme goals and objectives. These were checked and rechecked to determine the major content and skills development areas that were being addressed as well as an identification of programme objectives that were currently being fostered effectively and those which were not. In this way curriculum mapping was realized.

The approaches to teaching and learning were driven by the need for the curriculum to be student-centred, constructivist, experiential and to promote critical, creative, and innovative thinking. In short, learner autonomy and self-authorship as major outcomes were to be achieved by curricular and co-curricular measures, especially in relation to pedagogical engagements. Instruction would also be technology driven, and integrate face-to-face and e-learning (blended learning) methods. Assessment would be multi-dimensional and emphasis would be placed on the performance of understanding. The assessment activities would provide openings for feedback and feedforward. Feedback focuses on current performance (and may simply justify the grade awarded); feedforward looks ahead to the next assignment, offering constructive guidance on how to do better in future work.

**Stage Four: Curriculum Coordination**

The next phase of the process (Stage Four), the Coordination phase took into account curriculum assessment, the level of effort expected by students, and the level of sophistication required at each level. Hence, curriculum mapping and
alignment became major practical activities of this stage. Curriculum mapping was one of the checks and balances introduced in this phase to ensure that a quality curriculum was produced. It was a way to document and share curricula across programmes and examine the whole from gaps, overlaps, and redundancies. This approach provided a way of finding out where and how knowledge and skills were developed and enabled programmes to assess how well programming and processing were aligned to intended learning outcomes. This created an opportunity to determine if the objectives were carefully selected, if the content was properly related, and would the pedagogies or teaching learning strategies recommended lead to the realization of the objectives.

Alignment of courses and course objectives, teaching methods, and assessment activities have been considered extremely important in higher education (Biggs 2002; Wolf 2007). Accordingly, the developing courses were revisited and re-examined with specific concerns about alignment in the following areas:

a. programme and course objectives
b. foundational knowledge and course content
c. course teaching and learning activities
d. assessment.

The next phase of the project will be the implementation of the revised curriculum. Of course, the piloting of new courses will be done as well and this will be followed by revisions for full implementation at a later date.

Conclusion

Curriculum development can certainly be engaged as an ongoing process but it requires enormous planning and a commitment to best practices. In this project, it was clear that there was an interest in product, process, and praxis. With respect to outcomes-based curriculum development, it was engaged as a process of the continuous improvement of sustainable practices. A scholarly approach to curriculum development guided the process and this is important. The processes engaged were faculty-driven, data-informed and literature-supported. All processes were examined and re-examined through the prism of “Caribbeanization in curriculum development.” The process was further sup-
ported by a scholarly approach to analysis, application, teaching, and assessment. In terms of pedagogy, the development of critical thinkers, and in particular the autonomous learner, underscored the choice and use of pedagogy. Of importance was the opportunity to utilize the CARICOM Secretariat’s approved Regional Qualification Framework (RQF) and the Regional Vocational Qualification Framework (RVQF) as reference points for establishing entry requirements and academic and occupational competencies. In this way, there were concrete steps taken to develop the ideal Caribbean citizen.

References


Abstract

A majority of tertiary-level language education students are not confident in their abilities to deliver an English language/writing curriculum at the secondary level, because of their tenuous content knowledge of the English language/writing curriculum; shaky grammatical competence; and, lack of confidence. Faced with this dilemma, an intervention to strengthen the content and pedagogical knowledge, as well as the philosophy of the ‘ideal’ English language teacher was implemented in a final-year writing course at the School of Education, The University of the West Indies, Mona, between 2012 and 2015. The objective was to boost learner autonomy within the course as well as within the real-life classrooms in which the students would eventually teach upon certification. This intervention encouraged reflection on class assignments, integrated incremental grammar into class seminars, and afforded students the opportunity to work collaboratively with peers to implement genre-specific writing workshops and e-portfolios as part of their confidence building towards personal and professional autonomy. At the end of the course, many of the student teachers self-reported that they felt a greater sense of confidence about teaching in the real world setting. Such an intervention has implications for institutional programmes seeking to foster learner autonomy within pre-service and in-service teachers of English preparing for the challenges of local and/or regional secondary school classrooms.

Keywords: English language, writing, professional development, technology, teacher leadership, reflexive practitioner, learner autonomy.
Introduction

THE ROLE OF TEACHER LEADERS IN FOSTERING student teachers’ pedagogical and professional autonomy, in an age of diversity and educational reform is the central concern of this paper. The paper begins by exploring the roles of teacher leaders, especially within the context of preparing pre-service and in-service teachers of English for the educational landscape within Jamaica and/or the Caribbean Region. Next, the characteristics of the ideal English language specialist, in light of the taxonomies proposed by Craig (2014) and Bryan (2014), are discussed. Segueing from that discussion, we describe an intervention aimed at fostering teacher-learner autonomy in a group of pre-service and in-service teachers of English at The University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona who were doing a course on the teaching of writing. Our focus to improve the student teachers’ learner autonomy was to enhance their ability to “develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitude” for themselves as teachers in cooperation with others (Smith 2003, 1). Insights are then provided on the way forward for delivering an English language curriculum within Jamaican/Caribbean secondary classrooms. As such, this paper, situated within the qualitative paradigm, “deliberately enfranchise[s] and give[s] voice to the research participants” (Ballinger 2008, 45) through the student-teachers’ narratives, personal experiences, and their developing consciousness as they grapple with taking charge of their learning on the pathway toward becoming autonomous practitioners.

Teacher Leaders Scaffolding Pre-service and In-service Teachers of English

The concept of teacher leaders is not a new one within the global field of teacher education and teacher development. While as a concept it might recently be gaining popularity among educators within the Caribbean, it has long been practised without being recognized for its potential to transform teaching and learning. Rosenboltz (1989) identifies teacher leaders as those who “reach out to others with encouragement, technical knowledge to solve classroom problems, and enthusiasm for learning new things” (p. 208). Katzenmeyer and Moller (1996) are of a similar opinion, that teachers are leaders when they are...
“contributing to school reform or student learning (within or beyond the classroom), influencing others to improve their professional practice, or identifying with and contributing to a community of leaders” (p. 5). Killion and Harrison (2007) also offer ten roles of teacher leaders – as resource providers, instructional specialists, curriculum specialists, classroom supporters, learning facilitators, mentors, school leaders, data coach, catalysts for change, and learner – that, like the definitions before, resonated with us as we sought to scaffold and support final year pre-service and in-service teachers of English at the UWI, Mona, while teaching the course EDLA3110: *Writing in the Secondary School*.

Viewing our roles and responsibilities as educators through the prism of the teacher leadership framework, and witnessing the shaky grammatical competence, tenuous content knowledge and low confidence level of a majority of our final year students, we went beyond the course’s curriculum boundaries to inspire within our students a sense of agency and disposition as autonomous language specialists, to be confident in content and pedagogical knowledge to teach secondary level English, as an “arena” (Bryan 2014), in post-independent Jamaica and/or the Caribbean region. Teacher leadership and learner autonomy for us entailed the following tenets, according to LeBlanc and Shelton (1997): (a) modeling positive attitudes and enthusiasm; (b) devoting time to doing whatever it takes to make the school work better; (c) enhancing student learning through working with other teachers on improving pedagogy and; according to Danielson (2006), managing change by motivating colleagues to become more skilled and thoughtful regarding their work, and encouraging them to do things better (p. 9).

### Preparing Pre-service and In-service Teachers to Be Autonomous English Language Specialists

The Jamaican/Caribbean educational landscape of the 21st century, with its attention to diversity and educational reform at the secondary level in the areas of equity, access, parental support, and community engagement, is demanding far more of teachers than before. With the call for students to perform more commendably in school exit examinations such as the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) and the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Exam-
ination (CAPE), to be effective communicators in writing and speech, and to enhance their critical thinking and literacy skills, it is no longer sufficient for teachers to wear only the badge of certification without the accompanying skill of expertise, demonstrable knowledge of the subject area, and the ability to critically assess and re-tool pedagogy in response to the evolving culture within Jamaican/Regional classrooms. Teachers must be in pursuit of a “pedagogy for autonomy”, according to Smith (2003). In the case of the Jamaican English language classroom environment, Craig (2014, 131), as early as the 1990s, made the point that “with education becoming progressively more egalitarian, even the more prestigious high schools will feel the increasing impact, as they are in fact already doing, of Creole language influences in their populations, and the absence of home experiences in reading among the children of the poor.” Given this situation, which is indeed the reality today, Craig’s (2014) charge to teachers and teacher educators is that they need to “find more explicit ways of teaching [English]” (p. 131), underscoring the need for a specific skillset to help our students excel in English. Based on these expectations then, we assumed the role of teacher leaders, with a view towards assisting our students with this transformation.

Bryan (2014), extending Craig’s point, offers four suggestions for teachers of English operating within a Creole-speaking environment. According to Bryan (2014), today’s teachers need to have knowledge of both English and Jamaican. First, they must know the structures – mechanical and grammatical, as well as the orthography – of the languages that children use within and outside of the English language classroom. This knowledge will better equip teachers to assist students with establishing a relationship between the two languages, and to build their language awareness through risk-taking and a “spirit of inquiry” (p. 28). The second suggestion, of a “principled post-method practice” (p. 29) – since one method is not sufficient – should be employed. Here, the teacher is aware of and is guided by the principles of input, authenticity, culture, planning, and awareness, proposed by Bryan (2014), for teaching English in a Creole-speaking environment (TECSE). Hence, the teacher in this “post-method” setting, teaching according to the TECSE principles, has to be a skilled and “knowledgeable language professional” (p. 29). Next, the teacher has to cultivate a disposition of critical language awareness. She or he must have a “culturally
situat ed understanding of English as arena — as contested and ideological, and as an instrument of social stratification, but also presenting opportunities for empowerment” (p. 29). Finally, the teacher ought to be a reflective/reflexive practitioner, that is, one who understands the impact of self-conscious reflection on himself/herself as agent and will provide his/her students with “meta-cognitive opportunities” to reflect on their own language use, for example, through language autobiographies (p. 29). In sum, Bryan (2010, 2014) envisages for today’s ideal teacher of English an engagement with what Smith (2003) characterizes as a “pedagogy for autonomy”, whereby, teachers are actively involved in their own retraining to enhance their knowledge, skills, and awareness so that they are more equipped for the real-world classroom.

Given these qualities that the ideal teacher of English ought to master means that teacher trainers serving as teacher leaders within higher educational institutions must take their responsibilities of mentorship seriously. Responding to Craig’s (2014) and Bryan’s (2014) charges, and cognizant of our roles as teacher leaders, we devised and implemented supportive strategies within the undergraduate course, EDLA3110: Writing in the Secondary School (for students pursuing the B. Ed. Language Education programme), to help bolster our students’ content and pedagogical knowledge, their confidence, as well as their disposition as teachers of English. Our intervention, which privileged students’ self-reflections, included collaborative peer-writing workshops, the integration of technology into writing portfolios, and favoured an incremental approach to the teaching of grammar. These strategies had institutional relevance for the vision and core values of the Mona School of Education, to “strengthen the quality of . . . professional training for teachers . . . and approaches to the improvement of student learning” (Griffith 2013). Consequently, the intervention intersected several teacher leadership conceptual frames, specifically, promoting professional development of self and peers by focusing on teacher professional growth plans (Fenwick 2004); and teaching and learning in schools, primarily focusing on curriculum and teaching; staff programmes or professional development (Danielson 2006); as well as on developing teacher-learner autonomy (Smith 2003). These all held relevance for the pre- and in-service teachers as they sought to prepare themselves for the Jamaican/Regional educational landscape.

Given this theoretical background, the argument being proposed in this
paper is that within teacher training institutions, it is the responsibility of faculty to serve as teacher leaders, mentoring pre-service and in-service teachers towards professional readiness and learner autonomy within their respective disciplines, in the areas of content acquisition, pedagogical skills, and professional development. With regard to the English language specialist, there is also the need to inculcate grammatical competence and confidence in delivering an English language curriculum within the Jamaican/Caribbean secondary school system. With these measures in place, the transformation towards teacher-learner autonomy becomes that much closer to being realized.

**Description of the Course, EDLA3110: Writing in the Secondary School**

*Writing in the Secondary School* is an undergraduate level course delivered over one semester, intended to help participants understand the nature of writing, and examine contributing factors to some of the difficulties which secondary level students within Jamaica or the region experience in their attempts to complete writing tasks. This course is offered in the two-year (60 credits) and three-year (90 credits) Bachelor of Education programmes, and is offered before students commence their final year teaching practice experience. The course further seeks to introduce participants to assessment practices and instructional strategies that will help students who struggle with writing to experience growth and development in this area. By the time participants complete the course, they should be able to

1. demonstrate an understanding of, as well as familiarity with various writing approaches and strategies, such as process writing and writing across the curriculum
2. demonstrate an understanding of the nature of the problems secondary students face with writing, particularly within the setting of a Creole-speaking environment
3. demonstrate an understanding of the nature of a portfolio
4. explore the different strategies used to assess writing
5. effectively utilize technology in the teaching of writing
6. organize and demonstrate a writing workshop for the purpose of teaching writing at the secondary level.

The learners and their challenges

Between 2012 and 2015, there were three cohorts of students who completed the course, EDLA3110: Writing in the Secondary School. Table 1 provides information on the composition of each cohort in terms of class size, gender and their prior teaching experience or certification. A brief synopsis of their perceived attitudes to teaching and learning, based on our observations, is also shared below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographics of student teachers</td>
<td>27 students (4 male and 23 female students)</td>
<td>39 students (3 male and 36 female students)</td>
<td>29 students (all female students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18–25 age range</td>
<td>20–30 age range</td>
<td>Predominantly within the 18–25 age range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student teachers’ academic qualification</td>
<td>In terms of teacher training, 3 students had attended teachers’ college</td>
<td>In terms of teacher training, 13 students had attended teachers’ college</td>
<td>In terms of teacher training, 5 students had attended teachers’ college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student teachers’ attitudes to teaching/learning which surfaced during the course</td>
<td>Eager and enthusiastic group, Welcomed ideas to build their pedagogical skills, Determined to raise their confidence level to effectively deliver the English language curriculum</td>
<td>Keen and interested in learning from their peers who had prior teaching experience, Eager to incorporate new English language Teaching strategies for Teaching Practice</td>
<td>Enthusiastic group seeking to build their pedagogical skills, Eager to try new methods of English language teaching for teaching practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As we taught the course within the first few weeks to Cohort 1, it became obvious to us that in addition to learning the areas of the course’s curriculum, the students had other critical issues which needed to be addressed, specifically, their shaky grammatical competence; their tenuous content-knowledge of the English language/writing curriculum; and their lack of confidence in their teaching abilities. Their demeanour and disposition as professionals – to ‘grow’ into that ideal teacher of English/writing – were woefully lacking, to the extent that some students could not visualize themselves being inside a real-life classroom effectively teaching the syllabus. Confronted with the dilemma of their challenges, and although this fell outside the remit of the course EDLA3110, we asked our students the following questions to see how we could assist them to become autonomous learners, equipped with the necessary skills and content for language teachers:

1. What are your weaknesses in English grammar?
2. What do you consider to be your weak areas in the CSEC English language curriculum?
3. How confident are you when it comes to delivering a lesson based on the CSEC English language curriculum?

In responding to the questions some of the students shared the following:

Before I started this course I feared writing as it was one of my weak areas. I realized that my weakness were in the areas of sentence structure and vocabulary. (Paula)

Statistical report writing and summary writing are elements of the CSEC English A syllabus in which I am particularly deficient. I have almost no recollection of these topics and I do not believe I was taught these areas very well. Thus, I will have to completely re-examine this content, so as to be equipped to teach it to my students. (Tara)

Upon entering this course, the first thing that I took notice of was its title which entailed a most significant word – “writing”. As I reflected upon this word, I thought to myself, how am I going to possibly teach writing, when I have not yet mastered its art? As this thought darted through my mind, I started to feel anxious and uncertain about wanting to stay in the profession. To me, writing meant putting words on paper in a coherent and cohesive manner and making it sound ‘pretty’; I can’t do that. (Joan)
Interestingly, despite their self-reported weaknesses and fears, each student’s articulation was quite cogent. Having students ‘voice’ their problems, and in so doing also hinting at their potential, helped us to frame the ‘hidden curriculum’ or intervention needed within the course to assist these pre- and in-service teachers of English to become and feel better about their craft.

The Intervention: ‘The Hidden Curriculum’

The intervention strategies selected were not overtly stenciled into the course’s curriculum; they were determined based on the weaknesses we observed and those which were self-reported by the pre- and in-service teachers of English, and were incorporated incrementally within the course’s curriculum to foster teacher-learner autonomy. The purpose of the intervention was two-fold: (1) to improve the grammatical competence of the pre- and in-service teachers; and (2) to shape their professional deportment and philosophy of the ‘ideal’ language teacher, equipped with a range of useful pedagogical skills for English language/writing classrooms. As we focused on these two goals, our data collection included gathering information based on our observations of students during their presentations over the last three years from 2012 to 2015, document analysis of students’ reflective assignments for each cohort, and email interviews with three past students, which asked them to provide us with information about their continuing practices after they joined the teaching profession, and to respond to the following questions: (1) What strategies and philosophies of language teaching – shaped by Writing in the Secondary School – have resonated with you? (2) What philosophies and English language teaching strategies from your core Language Education courses have you integrated into your classrooms?

The Intervention: Grammatical Competence

To improve our students’ grammatical competence, we taught them via mini-contextual grammar sessions, making sure to seize language awareness windows whenever they presented themselves in the course, Writing in the Secondary School, or within any other courses that they did with us. The grammar sessions
were usually seven to ten minutes, either at the start or end of a class, or sometimes seized at relevant moments during the execution of a lesson to discuss matters ranging from etymology to usage, to specific rules and how they worked regularly or irregularly, and how they factored into the expectations of students’ writing. These short teaching moments were purposeful, to help heighten students’ language awareness, while also providing them with ideas about how they too could teach grammar to their students, contextually. The students appreciated the mini-moments taken to augment this critical aspect of their language development, as explained below by one pre-service teacher:

One of the best lessons in this course was grammar teaching. This was my area of weakness, but it has since improved significantly. This course has helped me in many ways. The lessons in grammar also taught me some “best ways” of teaching grammar, which I plan to use with my students. (Debbie)

Debbie’s reflection reports on, but more importantly demonstrates her improved grammatical competence and confidence to teach grammar, based on the modelling of best practices provided by educators functioning as teacher leaders. This gives credence to the positions outlined by Katzenmeyer and Moller (1996) and Killion and Harrison (2007), that teacher leaders serve as resource providers, thereby “contributing to school reform or student learning (within or beyond the classroom), influencing others to improve their professional practice, or identifying with and contributing to a community of leaders” (p. 5).

The Intervention: Deportment, Philosophy and Pedagogy for Autonomy

Mentoring and nurturing our student teachers towards becoming that ‘ideal’ language teacher, of which Bryan (2014) writes, was executed deliberately as well as incidentally over the 13-week period of each of the semesters. As teacher leaders we did this through a variety of avenues, including modelling effective teaching aimed at cultivating within our students a sense of confidence, security, and pedagogical know-how – of taking charge of their teaching – when delivering an English language curriculum. We also utilized specific teaching strate-
gies within the seminars to enhance the student-teachers’ professional development, to increase their confidence, attitude and disposition, namely the student-led teaching-writing workshops, viewing of a film titled *Take 20: Teaching Writing*, and, the electronic portfolio which contained written pieces. Each strategy is outlined below, followed by selected students’ experiences of engagement and our analyses.

**The Writing Workshops**

Atwell (1984) shared the experience of her success with a reading and writing workshop for middle-school students. Her approach took the form of a literary immersion, where students selected their own books or authors to read in class and at home. At the start of class each day, she discussed a literary element, or a particular author, or approaches to reading. Afterwards, students read for the rest of the class. While reading, they wrote letters to Atwell, their teacher, about how the book or author impacted them, and she responded, generating much literary dialogue, comparable to conversations that occur at dinner tables, or that adults have when discussing recent readings. At the end of the workshop, Atwell (1984) reported that the students emerged as avid readers and strong writers as a result of engaging with the experience.

Within EDLA3110: *Writing in the Secondary School*, we saw where Atwell’s (1984) idea of the workshop could be adapted, with great benefits for the students. Through the experience of actively participating in the student-led teaching-writing workshops, the potential for collaborative and constructivist learning was possible. The process began with students self-grouping around their favourite colours. Once done, the groups consisting of five or six students were to make plans for simulating a student-led, teaching-writing workshop in which they were to share with the entire class innovative pedagogies for teaching an aspect of writing that was a part of the CSEC syllabus. Below are Group Blue’s and Group Yellow’s tasks:

**Group Blue’s Tasks**

You are teaching **summary writing and writing statistical reports** to a group of grade 10 students (*consisting of 6 girls and 30 boys*) who are being introduced to
the topics for the very first time. These students attend a technical high school in East Kingston. Design the lesson so that it is in a workshop format, meaning, students do practical activities to learn the skills and content of summary writing and writing statistical reports.

**Group Yellow’s Tasks**

You are teaching writing an argument to a group of grade 8 students (consisting of 33 girls) who are noted to be keen, attentive, critical thinkers, and who show much academic promise. These students attend an all-girls’ high school in Kingston & St. Andrew, and some of them are contemplating sitting the CXC English A exam at the end of the school year. Design the lesson so that it is in a workshop format, meaning, students do practical activities to learn the skills and content of writing an argument.

The above tasks were to be guided by the following questions during the planning phase of the workshop:

1. Consider the following while contemplating the design of your workshop:
   - What type of research is necessary to become sufficiently informed about the topic(s)?
   - How should the workshop be arranged (i.e. the physical space and the actual structure for executing the workshop)?
   - What media types and authentic resource materials can be used, effectively, within the actual workshop?
   - How can skills to heighten students’ awareness of spoken and/or written language, reading, literacy, etc. be encouraged?
   - How can students’ interest in and love for the topic be nurtured?
2. Do a practical demonstration of ONE aspect of the workshop experience from which the students will benefit. Call upon the members of your group or the entire class to role-play this experience. *(The group gets 30 minutes to present their response to the above task)*.

The student-led teaching-writing workshops, usually six of them for each of the cohorts, took place in the regular three-hour seminar sessions allotted to
the course. If additional time was needed, it was taken from the next week’s session, prior to discussing the strengths, weaknesses and assessment of the workshops.

For the students, planning the teaching-writing workshop usually began with some amount of trepidation and uncertainty, on account of their being asked to facilitate an unfamiliar activity and to deliver it as a teaching-learning experience for peers. One group member, Marcia, in representing her group, revealed aspects of the dynamics, which emerged as they negotiated and worked towards a common goal in the workshop planning:

For the assignment on the writing workshop, I would have appreciated the viewing of a workshop as an example. My classmates and I had many questions just before we presented . . . Many persons had different ideas about the mode of presentation that should have been used. The personalities in the group ranged from being ‘extremely quiet’ to being ‘very active.’ It was difficult for us to find that middle ground which meant compromising. At one point, I wished I could have done the assignment on my own. The group members demonstrated respect for each other and were able to finally make decisions collectively that would help us to get the highest possible marks.

Reflecting on the outcomes of the student-led teaching-writing workshop, Sharon, from another group, shared these thoughts on its teaching-learning benefits:

Included in the course’s content was an important strategy necessary for creating that ‘Grade A classroom’, the “Workshop”. Teachers were taught how to devise an effective student-based workshop for English language. The workshops presented ranged across the board, inclusive of different age ratios and gender ratios; transforming the lecture/seminar room into various different groups or styles of classroom environment we may come upon. This strategy, I am convinced will allow for a proper preparation for any given classroom environment.

Another student-teacher, Paula, highlighted benefits such as encouraging students to overcome writer’s block, getting students to confront language and to be aware of its features, providing students with face-to-face feedback on their writing, group work and the skills learnt from it for future life roles, and also, how being a presenter helped to boost her confidence. She explains:
Moreover, the writing workshop is indeed a fantastic idea for imploring students to write in various genres. This allows students to be independent writers as they must develop their own topic and create their unique pieces within the English context. This may be time consuming but works best for the students’ benefits as they develop an interest for practising writing as they are facilitated by their instructor and provided with feedback which will help them to realize their mistakes. Students will learn to appreciate language awareness while practising it during their presentations. The writing workshops also would help them to appreciate group work, as it did for me. It involves cooperation which is important to real life or holistic situations. The writing workshops have helped to boost my confidence due to my level of involvement in the presentation. My confidence being boosted will help to eradicate my shyness and to improve on my lesson delivery as a future teacher.

The students recognized the challenges of a workshop, but focused instead on its positive impact on future classroom practice, the students that they will eventually teach, and their own developing awareness towards learner autonomy. Their accounts demonstrated personal and professional growth, occurring within the evolving learning community of EDLA3110. By virtue of participating in and witnessing the student-led teaching-writing workshops facilitated by their peers, students were empowered, not only in the area of grammatical competence, but also in their pedagogy and emerging philosophy of language teaching. A marked improvement was also noticeable in their deportment and disposition as language teachers becoming more confident and well suited for the Jamaican/regional English language classrooms.

**Viewing of the film, Take 20: Teaching Writing**

In the fourth class of the semester, students viewed the film *Take 20: Teaching Writing* (Taylor 2009). In the film, 22 renowned teachers of writing and composition responded to 20 questions posed by Taylor (2009), with respect to their perceived roles, their first experiences upon entering the profession, some of the mistakes made and the life lessons learnt along the way, as teachers. Prior to viewing, the student teachers were given the following prompts to consider while watching the film:
1. Watch the film *Take 20: Teaching Writing* by Todd Taylor. As you view it, note any pertinent issues that you find striking because of their implications for:

   a) the teaching of writing in the Jamaican/Caribbean school context.
   b) the student (teacher), regarding how to teach writing.
   c) your emerging conception or philosophy of writing or the teaching of writing.

2. At the end of the film, discuss your notes as well as articulate your personal philosophy regarding the teaching of writing at the secondary level.

After watching the film, one cohort participated in a general discussion of the question prompts; while for another cohort, students submitted exit slips with their responses. For the final cohort, students’ reflections on the prompts were included in their electronic portfolios. Below are excerpts, from across the cohorts, tracing ways in which the film impacted student teachers’ emerging consciousness as soon-to-be professionals:

The film showing veteran English language teachers reflecting on their own teaching profession was powerful for me, because I was impacted by the fact that even veterans can talk about their missteps, and be reflective about their journey as teachers. They admitted that they never always had it together, and at times they had to learn from trials and errors. I find this reminder encouraging for my own imminent journey. *(Michael)*

One of the many advices I received from the film ‘Take 20’ is the need to help students believe in themselves and the subject. *(Sharon)*

The viewing of the ‘Take 20’ film was motivational. I was truly inspired. As I listened to renowned practitioners of English share their experiences (failure and success) in the teaching of writing, I was moved on the inside. Just as the video started, I remember thinking about what had led to the selection of this particular set of educators. Half-way into the film, I found the answer. These teachers taught from their souls, were highly committed to their students and were proud to be offering the service of training. I made it my goal to ‘catch their fire’ and try some of the secret strategies that they shared about their classrooms. *(Marcia)*
The film “Take 20” really resonated with me as I felt like I was among the premiers of teaching while watching it. The teachers presenting took you back to when they first started teaching and this made me see that we all have to start somewhere and we won’t perfect the art overnight. I particularly liked some points that Nedra Reynolds made regarding encouraging students to write. She encouraged us to get students more involved in their learning by perhaps having them select their own topics or give them assignments that will allow them choices. She also urged for innovation in the classroom by noting that writing doesn’t have to be limited to a paper. (Ingrid)

Students were obviously pulling ideas and best practices from the film to inform their own pedagogies for autonomy, strengthening their own philosophies of language teaching, and, while doing so, becoming more confident and competent teachers of writing/English. For each student teacher, the teacher leader mentors referenced by Killion and Harrison (2007) were those within the film; not us, the lecturers, in this instance. Through the advice, passion, and shared experiences of the teacher leader mentors within the film, our student teachers in their reflections underscored their heightened levels of motivation and inspiration, as well as the knowledge they gained for improving their professional practice in real-life classrooms. The power and influence of the teacher leader, as Rosenboltz (1989) outlined, to “reach out to others with encouragement and the technical knowledge to solve classroom problems” in fact led to “enthusiasm for learning [and taking risks to try out] new things” (p. 208) for these student teachers, as confirmed in their reflective accounts above. Additionally, their reflections revealed their emerging consciousness, of what it meant to be teachers, the rises and falls along the way, coupled with the accompanying joys of the profession, to the extent that one wanted to “catch their fire” and transform her classroom using some of their “secret” strategies for effective teaching. Therefore, based on the “input” and “authenticity” provided by the film, the student-teachers began “planning” for effective teaching and comfortably visualized themselves transforming classroom “culture” and being catalysts of change for teaching and learning (Bryan 2014, 29). Their newfound consciousness and evolving autonomy mirrored the “principled post-method practice” that Bryan (2014, 29) envisaged for English language specialists teaching English in a Creole-speaking environment (TECSE).
Electronic portfolio (with reflective written pieces)

The final course assignment – publishing an electronic portfolio on the Internet – caused the pre-service and in-service teachers to reflect, very deeply, on the totality of the course, accounting for its contribution to their holistic development as students and soon-to-be-certified teachers. The reason for insisting on an electronic portfolio (e-portfolio), published on the Internet, was to encourage students to consider using technology in their own classrooms, to increase their comfort level with new media, and also to generate beyond the life of the course a list of culturally-specific e-sites relevant for teaching writing in Jamaican/Regional secondary schools.

The electronic portfolio assignment was made available to students from early because of its reflective and sequenced approach to writing that was embedded in these three tasks explained below:

A. Nature of writing
   1. Explain in no more than 400 words one theorist’s theory of writing, making sure to discuss the theorist’s conception of the stages that facilitate good and effective writing.
   2. Discuss three implications of teaching writing (at a secondary grade level determined by you) when you apply the theorist’s conception of the teaching of writing.

B. Approaches to teaching an aspect of the CXC English A syllabus
   1. Select an aspect of the CXC English A syllabus (e.g. short story writing, statistical report writing, summary writing, essay (argumentative) writing, etc.
   2. Present a classroom lesson (that spans 35 to 50 minutes) in which technology figures prominently.
   3. Provide supporting e-resources to complement the lesson.

C. Reflection
   Throughout this course, you are expected to assume the role of a reflective practitioner. The course starts with each student orally reflecting on his/her experiences with the teaching of English and what motivated him/her to consider joining or continuing the teaching profession. In
your lectures and tutorials, you will explore many issues pertaining to teaching writing in the secondary school. For this assignment, you are required to write a reflective entry (not exceeding 500 words) that traces:

1. content and pedagogical ideas, garnered in this course, that have aided your professional development (please provide concrete examples);
2. your personal conception – shaped by number C1 (above) of how you will or are likely to approach the teaching of writing in the Jamaican/Caribbean secondary school classroom.

Below are excerpts from selected students’ reflections on the experience of creating the e-portfolio within the course:

The creation of the E-portfolio was one of the most rewarding experiences for me. At first, I wished we were allowed to work with a combination of print and electronic media. I wondered how I would have pulled off a website . . . I feel led to keep this website even after the examination period and further develop it to aid pupils whom I will teach. I raise my ‘hat’ to my lecturers who unearthed the best in me. I accomplished something I thought I could not have done. (Marcia)

Now I must look back at the first time we were told about doing the electronic portfolio and how I became frightened. I have technology phobia and don’t care much about learning or using it. However, I later became enthused about this task when I accessed You tube and saw the myriad of fun ways and activities available at my finger tips to teach and motivate my students. I started to get very excited and appreciative of this activity even more. As I worked on, I could not stop myself from dreaming about the days when I return to the classroom and the strategies and skills that I will now employ. (Dian)

The most important pedagogical skill I obtained in this course is how to implement technology in teaching writing. Initially I was skeptical about this approach until I learnt how to configure a lesson using educational websites and step away from the chalk and talk instructional methods. I believe that technology should be a principal means of teaching writing at the secondary level as we are living in a technological age and it is what students are interested in. (Joan)

Each of the student-teachers began the electronic portfolio development from...
a place of fear and skepticism as they were not at all confident in their abilities to be technologically savvy and creative. As they continued to engage with the technology, however, they began to appreciate its attendant benefits of acquiring a relevant skill that many teachers, despite the proliferation and promotion of e-learning technologies within secondary schools within Jamaica, still cannot claim as a personal competence; of wrestling with a new high-stake learning challenge and emerging successfully with a tangible product – a teaching-learning resource site likely to motivate and captivate today's generation of technologically attuned learners; and, most importantly, learning to plan and execute lessons that relevantly incorporate technology in TECSE contexts. These were only a few of the competencies that the pre- and in-service teachers took away with them as markers of learner autonomy, professional growth, and personal capacity building (Danielson, 2006) from engaging with this particular assignment.

Of equal importance to the assignment was the fact that several of the student teachers published their e-portfolios for global viewing at the end of the course, attesting to their heightened state of autonomy. Unfortunately, a majority of these Internet sites became unavailable after the free 30-day trial period expired, as many students opted to use this option only because they did not have the financial wherewithal to keep the sites indefinitely viewable. There were some students, however, who maintained their websites long after they completed the course. Below is a listing of some of them that remained accessible at the time of writing this paper:

http://leijeaduncan.wordpress.com/
http://spelltechnology.wordpress.com/?ref=spelling
http://teachingwritingwithtechnology.weebly.com/
https://engarde876.wordpress.com/

Viewing them will reveal the creative and interesting work evident within the student teachers’ e-portfolios, that later led – across the cohorts – to the creation of a post-class blog space and emailing list to encourage continued viewing, using and referencing of the websites, on the one hand, and networking among the community of learners of EDLA3110, on the other, for the effective teaching of writing at the secondary level. Interestingly, although these pre-
service and in-service teachers started out being mentored by us the teacher leaders, by the end of the course, having now organized themselves as learning communities (Mitchell and Sackney 2001) and armed with individual professional growth plans (Fenwick 2004) and conceptions about how language ought to be taught in TECSE contexts (Bryan 2014; Craig 2014), they were well on their way towards learner autonomy and assuming teacher leadership roles for institutional capacity building within the schools to which they returned or would eventually be employed.

Reflecting on the Intervention Strategies in Developing Teacher-Learner Autonomy

In looking more closely at each of the intervention strategies, we found that for the mini-grammar lessons, students appreciated the time taken to augment this critical aspect of their language awareness development, to differentiate the rules of Standard English (separate and apart from Creole rules), and to minimize their crossing of the two, an approach supported by several Caribbean linguists and educators (Pollard 1993; Christie 2003; Craig 2006; Bryan 2010, 2014). Not knowing the rules of English grammar, and, by extension, not being able to teach them effectively, were probably the main reasons for their lack of confidence in their abilities. With the intervention focusing squarely on this problem, to provide student teachers with the tools to help themselves and their students, the mini-grammar lessons took on greater significance – as markers fostering professional autonomy – for them.

With regard to the writing workshops, there were three enriching aspects: (1) that the student teachers were keen to get copies of their peers’ presentations, or to get email links/websites that were referenced by the groups during their presentations, because they saw their relevance to teaching the same topics in real-life contexts; (2) student teachers learnt life skills of negotiation, collaboration, and teamwork in organizing and delivering the workshops, tantamount to teacher-learner autonomy (Smith 2003), and finally; (3) student teachers embraced the workshops as a potentially powerful pedagogy for teaching varied genres in the English language (or literature or communication studies) classroom, similar to what was achieved by Atwell (1984) in her literacy workshop.
Overall, students reported that they found the contents of the workshops useful for their future teaching, suggesting that they pulled key methodologies from it to complement their professional dossiers.

The film, *Take 20: Teaching Writing*, gained the most mileage for our ‘hidden curriculum’ initiative, impacting students tremendously. It was while viewing the film that a majority of the student teachers became fully aware of our intentions to transform them professionally towards autonomy and becoming the ‘ideal’ teacher of English. As such, the film provided a tangible model, a point of departure for them to think about how they too could approach and navigate the interior spaces of their real-life classrooms. The film, due to its reflective nature, was quite instrumental in getting many of the student teachers to adopt the principle of reflective practice for better teaching. This focus on the processes and substance of reflecting on the film, vis-à-vis what could be effectively transferred from it to their real-life classroom contexts, was critical to their continuing professional learning outcomes, as Tillman (2003) maintains, and also for the kind of impact they would wish to make on students when they eventually enter the profession.

The e-portfolio, the final intervention strategy, helped to develop the students’ craft as teachers and equipped them with a practical, accessible, hands-on pedagogical tool to teach the English language curriculum within a TECSE context. It encouraged them to become comfortable with technology and to think about effective ways of utilizing it within language classrooms, consequent of the collaboration and cross-fertilization of ideas they benefitted from as they viewed and engaged with their peers’ e-portfolios. The power and pervasiveness of technology are attested to by Sidler, Morris, and Smith (2008), who make the point that “digital technology has become an integral part of education, impacting teaching, writing instruction and literacy”, and that students “interact with technology every day, by editing drafts, exchanging information, creating multimedia writing projects, and doing a host of other activities” (p. 2). Through the experience of the e-portfolio task and its spin-off blog space, the student-teachers came to agree with and accept this position, appreciating how the technology facilitated networking within the EDLA3110 community, demonstrating for them how they too, within their individual real-life classroom spaces, can intelligently negotiate and manage technology for effective teaching.
Given this analysis, we felt that the e-portfolio assignment was the apex professional development exercise attesting to teacher-learner autonomy, if for no other reason, certainly for the tangible evidence of students’ work that was made available online as e-resources to expand student-teachers’ pedagogical store and novice teachers’ classroom repertoire.

Within the course, the reflexive activities of retracing their emerging awareness, growth and development as professionals helped the student-teachers to see the extent to which, over one semester they self-actualized, becoming autonomous learners. Most importantly, they realized and were able to self-report significant shifts in their conceptions of language teaching and learning, as well as in their disposition as subject experts, occasioned by their growing confidence in their knowledge of English language grammar, content, and pedagogy for teaching students in a Creole-speaking environment. When asked about the ‘hidden curriculum’ and its impact on students in the course, two of the more compelling responses were that:

The ‘hidden curriculum’ aspect of the course has revealed to me that being a teacher of English is not just about teaching for an exam; we teach for life. We help students to have a voice, to express themselves, and that is a lifelong tool. I now see English teachers as the biggest motivators especially in the Jamaican secondary schools. With Jamaica being bi-dialectal we as teachers have to equip our students with the confidence to compete in a world that goes beyond the country or the region. Communication is key to succeeding in this world and it is our job as English teachers to afford our students this opportunity. I now realize that a student’s learning is as much the responsibility of the teacher as it is the student. (Karen)

The “hidden curriculum” in this class has given me a little more confidence to stand up in front of a class and deliver. It has also helped me to consider my ideas as big, no matter how small. (Renee)

These two quotes – and several others not shared here – attest to the fact that the pre-service and in-service teachers who took the course, EDLA3110: Writing in the Secondary School, showed incremental signs of growth, not only in the content of the teaching of writing, but also, through deliberate effort and incidental occurrences, in the areas of grammatical competence, pedagogical
confidence, and professional deportment – all the key skills necessary for teacher-learner autonomy as described by Smith (2003).

The Way Forward: Teaching in Jamaican/Regional Secondary Classrooms

As teacher leaders, we accepted our professional responsibility to help improve our students’ professional practice and to facilitate the deepening of their competence for teaching within the Jamaican/Caribbean secondary school system. Our motivation to see this intervention through was anchored by the fact that within this exit course (*Writing in the Secondary School*), for soon-to-be English language specialists, were students who had limited confidence in their abilities to meet the demands of the profession when they graduated from UWI. Since these students would represent to the wider world the undergraduate Language Education programme at the UWI’s School of Education, we focused our ‘hidden curriculum’ intervention on

1. strengthening our teaching to ensure student-teachers’ learning, so as to “enhance [their] professional practice” (Danielson 1996, 16)
2. empowering student-teachers towards the profile of the ‘ideal’, a teacher who “knows English as both ‘arena’ and ‘subject’, as both ideological and pedagogical” (Bryan 2014, 30).

As teacher leaders, by beginning with the (above) “professional growth plans” for our students – a concept borrowed from Fenwick (2004, 259) – we were hoping that our students would grow into and eventually actualize these plans through a demonstration of professional knowledge skills/competencies in real-life secondary level classrooms. When polled, reports from three of our past students (now teaching in high schools) confirmed that they were poised to succeed as English language specialists and educational professionals, based on the competencies they took away from the course, insights gleaned from their colleagues, and the practical pedagogical strategies they were able to adapt for their classroom settings.
Past Student # 1 reported:

I have mostly taken the newer strategies associated with language teaching like workshops or even writing across the curriculum. However they may not be very strict versions of them but many of the ideas associated with them have framed many of my lessons.

Past Student # 2 shared:

Now in my classes, I use social media and other online platforms which I know students are very familiar with to aid in my delivery. An example of this was when I assigned the task of creating Facebook profiles for different characters of the play “Julius Caesar.” Students were all eager to complete the task and found pleasure (scoring good grades as well) in doing the assignment.

Past Student # 3 relayed:

Another aspect of the course that was very significant to my professional development was the workshop we had to participate in. My previous teaching experiences did not give me a chance to instruct slow learners. However the task my group was given was centered on teaching grade nine boys with reading and comprehension deficiencies. This was quite an enlightening task for me as planning for these students was completely different from what I was used to. This exposure has helped to prepare me to teach writing to students with different reading levels. The chance to observe my colleagues’ presentations was informative as I was able to discover numerous techniques for different writing tasks, some of which now feature in my current classes.

Interestingly, these language education specialists (and we hope several others of their EDLA3110 contemporaries) are beginning to demonstrate “a deep and powerful knowledge of English as a subject to be taught, and pedagogical knowledge of how to teach it” (Bryan 2014, 30). Starting with the support of their learning community within the course, which continues to impact the present, they are developing their “personal capacity,” which will later impact “interpersonal” and “organizational” capacities (Mitchell and Sackney 2001) of English departments in Jamaican/Regional secondary schools. Already at the level of the past student teachers who are now trained teachers, through their reports and dialogue, we are seeing fruition of the intervention, of them “reclaiming their own professional growth and assessment by engaging in reflec-
tive processes” (Fenwick 2004, 262). At the level of teacher leaders, we continue to remain cognizant of the ten roles proposed by Killion and Harrison (2007), coupled with modelling best practices in teaching, to mentor our students towards pedagogical and professional autonomy in this age of diversity and educational reform. In going forward, our thoughts from our journals are that

... as we prepare for the next cohort of students doing Writing in the Secondary School, we continue to approach it from the perspective of “how can we help our students (who are a combination of pre-service and in-service teachers) to become more competent and confident as English language teachers when they enter the “real” classroom space? We will continue to engage in much reflection and pre-planning to ensure that lessons we deliver are of a high standard. We are always conscious of the fact that we might be models for our students... We are confident that our students will grow to become strong, solid teachers, with a wealth of content knowledge and pedagogical ideas to share with their students. They will demonstrate learner autonomy...


ANY PERSON WHO HAS PASSED THROUGH THE HANDS of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) would be familiar with the feeling of anxiety that the examinations administered by this regional body have the potential of arousing. My first glance at Griffith’s book – *School-Based Assessment in a Caribbean Public Examination* – transported me back into the very classrooms in which I was instructed and assessed on several CXC subjects. This I undoubtedly attributed to the familiar image of a teacher guiding students through the use of computers, and a series of lines at the top resembling those of a ruler, which probably highlight the common role between that instrument and the CXC-based SBA: measurement.

This book stands out for the way in which Griffith has taken what could ordinarily be boring data on the theory of educational assessment and research and presented an easy-to-read, factual, and engaging piece of literature which could easily find itself in the company of a wide audience of teachers, researchers, parents and students alike. The author’s use of references, including some of his own works, reiterates the scholarship, depth and breadth that frame the book. Another noteworthy feature of the book is the well-executed organization of content, which goes from general to specific details – a feature which contributes greatly to the comprehensibility and flow of the text. This enables the reader to appreciate the level of authority and clarity, which are testament to the author’s wealth of knowledge and his personal experience with the subject matter. It is especially commendable that the CXC appears as a copiously used
source of information, taking into consideration that the Council is heavily implicated in the main subject of the publication. The book’s design displays practicality and deliberate structuring in the form of a list of abbreviations, which is strategically placed after the (table of) contents. This is useful for those readers who, like me, might forget some of the abbreviations in text, which curiously, are not many. Some of these abbreviations, for example, CAPE (Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination) and GSAT (Grade Six Achievement Test), are well known, while others of considerable importance, such as CCSLC (Caribbean Certificate of Secondary Level Competence) and CPEA (Caribbean Primary Exit Assessment) are not so popular. Additionally, the index of important words and terms at the back of the book facilitates browsing for specific content, including cited authors and other types of sources.

With further regard to the structure of the book, the thin size of the publication does not betray, perhaps intentionally, the fact that it has a total of twelve chapters. On that note, it seems to me that some of the chapters could have been combined using appropriate subheadings to result in fewer chapters. From my point of view, this could have been done to Chapters 7 and 8, for example, the former being a theoretical exposition on the different types of assessment, and the latter explaining the role of the teacher in carrying out the types of assessment outlined in Chapter 7. This, I believe, would not have detracted from the commendable layout of the book, which already appropriately categorizes the chapters into three distinct parts: (i) The History and Context, (ii) Key Issues, and (iii) New Directions, each covering a total of four chapters, according to the content, and in conformity with the overall purpose of the book, which is to contextualize, define and highlight the nature and benefits of the school-based assessment in public examinations.

In the first chapter of the book, the author engages and leads the reader into a skillfully penned chapter which begins with rather enlightening accounts of biblical tests; one based on the obedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the other on the pronunciation of the word “shibboleth”. By later incorporating some more contemporary examples, Griffith provides a succinct historical background of the origins and evolution of public examinations from China to England to the Caribbean. The author proposes to set his book apart by paying tribute to the Chinese, for their contribution to public examinations —
as “inventors of the psychological test” (Dubois 1966, 29), in comparison to the scant recognition that has been given to them in other books. To achieve this objective, Griffith dedicates an entire subsection entitled “Acknowledging the Chinese Legacy in Public Examinations”, in which he also clarifies the misconception that the English invented public examinations. Chapter 1, in reconciling the past and present of public examinations, advances to define the modern concept of said examinations, and defines them as “typically formal, summative, and controlled by an agent external to the school where the student has studied” (World Bank 2002). In further developing the historical context, Griffith employs several carefully chosen organizing principles, including the chronology and exemplification of public examinations in the Caribbean, leading up to the regional concerns and needs out of which the Caribbean Examinations Council was established in 1972. The author highlights that the formation of the council eventually resulted in “the Caribbeanization of the secondary curriculum” (p. 10) in fulfilling its mandate, and how the strategic administration of the organization maintained equity in representing territorial interests following the demise of the West Indian federation in the early 1960s. Chapter 1 was of particular interest to me, as I was afforded a condensed and contextually relevant lesson on the history of the Caribbean vis-à-vis public examinations, which preceded my own existence by several decades.

Starting in Chapter 2, Griffith provides the reader with a more detailed illustration of the response of the CXC to the need for a regional examination body. More specifically, the reader is given a look into the history of the well-known Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) which, according to the author, was tailored to fit the needs of Caribbean candidates, facilitating all candidates, including those who would have been deemed “unexaminable” by its British precursor. This chapter focuses on the fact that the Council is diverse in its offerings to the Caribbean public at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of education.

The CSEC was designed as a number of schemes, viz. general, basic, and technical, which would give candidates the opportunity to be placed at different levels of proficiency. However, due to several factors which made distinguishing these levels a difficult task, administrators and teachers alike were more inclined towards the general proficiency. Subsequently, a definitive decision was taken
to move away from the basic proficiency when the candidate numbers for this level declined. On the other hand, the technical proficiency, by proving its usefulness on the job market, has been maintained. Notwithstanding, Griffith interprets the dwindling number of candidates for those subjects to be the need for some reformation to be effected if they are to meet the demands of stakeholders. The chapter further details the other offerings that CXC has conceptualized and is currently offering to its candidates. These include the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) – which assumed the place and role of the British-based Advanced level examinations – and the Caribbean Certificate of Secondary Level Competence (CCSLC). This information could be potentially important to a number of persons who would be interested in arming themselves with information on the Council’s products and services. Griffith further highlights certain accomplishments of the CXC in the form of incentivizing candidates with certain grades in CAPE subject units, with university credits at some institutions in the USA and Canada. Furthermore, in making reference to documented evidence from CXC news, the author illustrates the convenience of shortened degree programmes as a result of the agreement between the regional body and the international signatories.

Griffith, in voicing his own stance, contributes an analysis of the facts that he has thus far presented and reconciles his recommendation that the previously dismissed basic proficiency be seen “as a foundation for general proficiency” (p. 15), with the conclusion that the CCSLC, which was designed at the pre-CSEC level, was finally confirmed to be just that, following a review by an internationally recognized agency. This, the author points out, was essential in maintaining the inclusiveness that the Council had established in its mandate. The chapter concludes by briefly mentioning the role of the school-based assessment, and later indicates that the CXC has also extended its reach into the region’s primary schools and has developed the Caribbean Primary Exit Examination (CPEA), which is expected to “provide the foundation for a seamless transition to secondary education” (p. 11).

Chapter 3 directs the reader’s attention to the bearing of standards by the CXC as Griffith makes a strongly supported case for the examination body in outlining its role in assuring and maintaining the quality of its examinations through internationally established standards. These standards, according to the
author, are captured in the syllabuses for the CPEA, CCSLC, CSEC and CAPE, which by delineating the learning outcomes of its candidates in the interest of the various stakeholders, (i) ensures internationally comparable competencies in the different subject areas, and (ii) demonstrates how these are particularly developed to prepare the candidate for life in the Caribbean. Syllabuses are developed in a rigidly planned and executed manner, which involves various stakeholders and end users of the CXC’s products.

Griffith explains that CXC provides training and workshops for teachers to become more competent in their respective subjects and also to be able to teach their subject to students. This information could allay the doubts of parents and students alike, especially for those who might be worried about the quality of education and the qualifications of the providers. The chapter further advances this objective by outlining the marking process for the various examinations. Here the author seeks to assure readers that the Council takes the utmost care in ensuring fairness and transparency in grading. This chapter gave me the impression of being on a guided tour of the standardization and marking sessions of the examinations, and could even be classified as a peek over the examiners’ shoulders while they are in action.

Four chapters into the book and I encountered the second mention of “school-based assessment” (SBA) on page 34, when Griffith makes a passing reference to the SBA as a typical component of a CXC examination, depending on the subject. This urged me to glance at the Contents page to be reminded of when the principal issue would be addressed, seeing from the title of the book that the SBA is assumedly the focal point in the book. However, this eagerness to read about the SBA which, from personal experience, can be the cause of many feelings of angst, did not distract me from the currency and relevance of the information which duly leads up to the first explicitly dedicated section on page 40, that discusses the SBA in great detail – a noticeable trend in later chapters.

In this chapter, which is entitled “Innovations by CXC in the Offer of Public Examinations”, the author highlights the Council’s level of innovation in examination scoring in the form of profile grades which indicate how well a candidate performs “on various dimensions for each of the subjects taken” (p. 34). Griffith further states that these profiles provide the potential for candidates to be better
assessed and even compared to each other in the case of a job opportunity, for example. Nevertheless, I believe the author could have provided concrete examples or cases in which this very useful tool has been employed. This would give even more credibility to that particular facet of the CXC examinations and could give impetus to the student audience especially, to put out an even greater effort in ensuring that their profiles are as close to outstanding as possible. In the sub-section on the “School-Based Assessment”, the author gives a brief explanation of the nature of the assessment tool, and reiterates that it represents innovation on the part of the CXC, which pioneered the use of SBAs in the region. The Council continued to defend its usefulness even after the UK – which started using SBAs in their schools – were predicted to discontinue them amid concerns which also resided in the minds of CXC’s stakeholders.

Chapter 5 outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the use of the SBA as part of the CXC curriculum, and Griffith not only opens the eyes of the reader to the level of consideration that must be given to the design and assessment of the SBA, but he also causes the reader to marvel at how any teacher in the Caribbean secondary school system could possibly find the time to meticulously follow these suggested guidelines – considering the large class sizes in some institutions – while helping the students to “cross whatever hurdles challenge their progress” while completing the SBA (p. 51). By analyzing the careful way in which Griffith interweaves his own experiences as teacher and researcher, he demonstrates that he is not far removed from the realities and challenges which teachers face with class size, among other issues, as he substantiates certain points by citing personal communication with the educators involved in SBAs. The author also puts forward several recommendations to ministries of education for dealing with the issue of class size, which has ostensibly had a negative impact on teachers executing their duties efficiently. This is of special significance since central to the generalized assessment of students’ SBA, is the latitude given to teachers, and the provisions made by CXC, to allow for individualization and personalization of the work produced by students.

Chapter 6 begins by outlining the conventionality of public examinations, like those administered by CXC, and even gives the duration of each examination. This information invites the reader, perhaps involuntarily, to try to remember how long his/her examination actually lasted. Griffith seizes the opportunity
to present the SBA as an answer to the shortcomings of the conventional examination, as it provides an avenue to assess those skills which may go untested by said examination.

The chapter builds on a climaxing set of points as Griffith highlights a major concern of the various stakeholders in public examinations – the performance of the students as it relates to the teacher’s execution of his or her duties. The author cleverly points out that “teaching to the test”, though inveighed against by some, is not necessarily malpractice if the examination is designed to assess those skills taught by the teacher. To culminate, the author once again steers the reader to the SBA as an aptly recommended complement for testing those competencies, which could fall into disregard by the typical public examination. The functionality of the SBA is put on display as Griffith resolves to affirm the validity and authenticity that the assessment adds to educational measurement; this he ably justifies by referring to the actual testing practices of the CXC, by use of the SBA in various subject areas, which are akin to real-world practices.

Chapter 7 begins with some very insightful information and admonition to those involved in providing feedback, wherein the author maintains that feedback must be meaningful to the student. Griffith theorizes that good feedback bridges the gap between what is produced by the student and what is expected by the teacher. The author takes the reader through a brief theoretical excursus in which he delineates the concept of summative, contrasting it with formative assessment. He later goes on to explain how the latter gave rise to ‘assessment for learning’, which recognizes that feedback-generated data are equally as essential to the student as it is to the teacher, in guiding the student towards a proposed objective. This chapter was as cogent and succinct as it was informatively engaging; I believe special attention should be paid to it, especially by teacher readers who could benefit significantly from its content.

Chapter 8 elaborates on fairness as an essential element in assessment, which the Chinese, being vanguards of public examinations, treated with several centuries ago. Griffith authoritatively demarcates what would constitute good, versus unfair practice in assessing the school-based assessment, in which the role of the teacher is indispensable as both formative and summative assessor. The rest of the chapter paints a very comprehensible picture of the roles of the teachers in managing the school-based assessment. Griffith outlines the different
support systems which exist for teachers, who need to be properly trained to assess students’ work, and also turns the spotlight on the *modus operandi* of the CXC in moderating teacher-assessed SBAs to assure fairness, validity and reliability in student assessment.

In Chapter 9 the author underscores the CXC’s commitment to provide equal opportunities to all its candidates, and therefore has established an alternative to the typical school-based assessment. He informs that this move is important for the inclusion of those candidates who do not take the examinations ‘in-school’, but who may be working individuals studying part-time at private institutions, for example. The author assures that the alternative paper remains parallel to the SBA in developing and testing the same skills for both types of candidates. Thorough knowledge and research on this particular point is evidenced by the detailed illustrations and comparisons that Griffith presents with regard to the more popular of the Council’s examinations and the alternative assessment. On that same note, the incorporation of research conducted on candidates’ performance on the SBA and Alternative Paper was very useful in illustrating and corroborating information on the perception of the Alternative Paper as a softer version of the SBA. Griffith concludes by pointing out the advantages of the Alternative Paper, which in some respects is more representative of what a public examination should be, and also advocates for its continued use in assessment. Leading up to this point, I noticed as I read that the chapters were getting shorter; however, the following chapter turned out to be a little lengthier than the immediately preceding chapters. This is in consonance with the structure and intent of the chapter which is to suggest, justify and validate the use of group work as part of school-based assessment.

In Chapter 10, the author does well in anticipating the reader’s thoughts and either affirms, dispels, or resolves critical considerations which may arise. Griffith cites several authors to give theoretical and scholarly credence to his postulations by explicating the use and place of group work in the SBA. As I read, I could not help but assent on many of the points presented in the chapter. Here, Griffith is able to capture a clearly thought-out set of ideas and suggestions as he recommends that CXC consider incorporating group work into the SBA. This agreement on my part was particularly triggered by memories of the interpersonal adjustments that I needed to make in order to transition seamlessly
into my own university whose system relies heavily on group collaboration in many courses.

Griffith’s enterprising intellect is unequivocally highlighted in Chapter 11 as he undertakes to marry the SBAs of various subjects, for the production of a single assignment which incorporates the skills and develops the competencies of a cluster of closely related subjects, such as the business oriented ones. Such a move, he suggests, would “avoid duplication in the assessment of skills and competencies” (p. 111). The author rightly points out that this initiative would produce a graduate who is ready for the real world, and who would be able to apply skills learnt from such assessment, instead of compartmentalizing their knowledge of the various subjects. It is evident that Griffith has given due consideration to the teachers, as he further buttresses his point by alluding to and outlining how a cluster-based SBA would reduce the amount of work on the teachers who might otherwise have to assess hundreds of scripts depending on student numbers. He also mentions the appreciable cost-cutting benefit to be derived by the students who have to invest financially in some of the single subject SBAs. Nevertheless, to provide balance to his points, Griffith outlines some problems which could possibly arise from the proposed move: instrument design, implementation and assessment; monitoring by the respective subject teachers; similar assessment for out-of-school candidates and the time for completion of assignments.

Chapter 12, which is the last, is one in which Griffith lays a theoretical foundation in the form of definitions of Continuous Assessment, according to other authors. The rest of the chapter follows a logically conceptualized problem-solution organizing principle. First, the challenges, which may arise from attempts to popularize this type of assessment are outlined, most of which are associated with concerns for the teacher regarding assessment, training and workload. Second, the author proposes strategies and ways in which these challenges could be addressed and resolved before finally concluding by highlighting another of his own research endeavours on the implementation of the school-based assessment requirements. To bring the book to a close, Griffith invites the reader and all necessary stakeholders in public examinations to reflect on how continuous assessment might be improved through institutionalization. This chapter at first glance, due to its seemingly inconclusive title “Adoption of the Benefits of
School-Based Assessment through Continuous Assessment”, did not seem like much of a conclusion to the book, as I was expecting more theoretical perspectives on assessment, which had already been discussed in previous chapters. However, a close reading and analysis of the content revealed it to be just that – the closing chapter. Griffith adeptly achieves the goal of both theorizing and concluding in Chapter 12 by (1) prefacing the principal ideas of Chapter 12 by stating that “school-based assessment and continuous assessment are often used synonymously in the literature”, and (2) demonstrating the overall cohesiveness of the book through referencing the content of previously presented chapters. In sum, although this chapter is approximately four and half pages in length, the content justified its being a chapter by itself.

This publication demonstrates a noteworthy effort to contextualize and display the transition that the Caribbean has experienced with respect to public examinations, innovation and assessment by the Caribbean Examinations Council. Griffith must be commended for providing an effectively written piece of literature, which could go a far way in charting a path for further improvement in assessment in the Caribbean context and beyond. The language used in the book is laudable, for by using a mix of elevated and reasonably simple diction, Griffith has ensured that his work can be understood by not only the erudite, but also persons with at least a secondary level education. This feature of the book will certainly bear positively on its ability to reach and appeal to a wide audience. The author has also displayed an outstanding level of scholarship that can be appreciated due to the quality of his sources which range from personal communications, articles, and books to websites and edited volumes. Griffith has also positioned the CXC itself as a notable source of information on matters concerning its practice and development, evidenced by the 32 CXC sources ranging from 1972 to 2013 that the author has documented in the list of references.

In conclusion, Griffith has produced a well written piece of literature which contributes a compact wealth of knowledge on the use of school-based assessment in the Caribbean context. Nevertheless, it is my belief that the book could have benefitted from fewer chapters, as the 12-chapter division compartmentalizes content that could have otherwise been conflated to result in more substantial chapters, in terms of the amount of information presented in each. Also,
in my estimation, it would have been beneficial to include a preface to the publication in order to provide a concise description of the key concept of the book – the SBA. This would have been useful for those readers who might want to take a glance at the treatment of the SBA in the book for purposes not limited to deciding to purchase the book, or for an introductory reference to the popular SBA in Caribbean secondary assessment, especially considering that the reader has to digest 40 pages of information before arriving at the first detailed discussion of the SBA.

References


LO RNA D OW N is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, The University of the West Indies, Mona. She has co-authored a number of language text books and has published in the areas of literature and education for sustainable development. Her current research focus is in the field of literature, ecocriticism, and education for sustainable development. Dr. Down is also the Editor of the Caribbean Journal of Education.

CA RO L I N E DY C H E is Lecturer in the Language Section of the Department of Language, Linguistics and Philosophy of The University of the West Indies, Mona. Her research interests include English language education policy-making, communication across the curriculum, and writing and reading in the academy.

STAFFO RD A. GRIFFITH is the Director of the School of Education and Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Education, University of the West Indies, Mona. He holds a Professorial Chair in Research, Measurement and Evaluation and has extensive work experience at professional and senior management levels in fields that include educational measurement and evaluation and teaching.

VI VETTE MILSO N- W HY T E, is Lecturer in the Department of Language, Linguistics and Philosophy at The University of the West Indies, Mona, where she serves as one of the coordinators of academic writing courses. Her presentations and publications reflect her experiences in teaching at the secondary and post-secondary levels in Jamaica, France, Martinique, and the USA, as well as her interests in the production, circulation, and reception of discourse; in language ideology and writing; in linguistic inventiveness in literacy development; and in cross-national studies of the teaching and assessment of writing.

EZ RA K. M U G ISA is a Senior Member of IEEE, Chartered IT Practitioner (British Computer Society). He is Senior Lecturer and Head of Computer Studies at The University of the West Indies, Mona, and specializes in component-based software engineering and IT for development.

PA U L ET T E A. RAMSAY is Senior Lecturer and Head, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, at The University of the West Indies, Mona. She is an established researcher in Hispanic studies and in language pedagogy, and a writer of prose fiction and poetry.