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Designing Language Courses: A Guide for Teachers

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Designing Language Courses: A Guide for Teachers

Kathleen Graves (2000)

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Designing Language Courses comprises 10 chapters on various aspects of course design, including “Formulating Goals and Objectives,” “Developing Materials,” and “Adapting a Textbook,” “Articulating Beliefs” (i.e., the teacher’s own beliefs about language teaching and learning). The book, with a couple of exceptions, reflects a fairly conventional sequence of processes of course design that she thinks in terms of a “systems approach” to the activity; she regards the various elements as a systematic whole, what she calls a “framework” for course design, where “as a course designer, as long as it makes sense to you to begin where you do” (p. 3). Graves feels that conventional course design is a highly organized, linear one, in contrast to the “messy, multi-faceted, two-steps-forward, one-step-back” approach experienced in designing courses and which she feels is the reality for the majority of teachers.

So this is no do-it-by-numbers instruction manual in course design; rather it is a book where design—sometimes at considerable length, as the page count indicates—and where comments frequently appear. It is intended to be thought-provoking, to get teachers to assess the ideas with their own ideas, which may change and develop as a result. In the words of the preface of the TeacherSource series, of which this book is a part: [\[1\]](#)

As a reader, you will find this book has a personality; it is not anonymous. It comes as if to create a relationship with you rather than assume your attention. As a practitioner, it works by providing a sounding board for your ideas and a metric for your own thinking. It explains why these make sense to the author. And you can take from it what you will, and it does not tell you what to think; it is meant to help you make sense of what you do. (pp. ix-x)

All of this sounds very positive. It also, perhaps, sounds very pedagogical, and it may come from a course based largely on courses which the author has given on course design, as well as on her own. Furthermore, it is intended to be used by teachers working in groups: “I . . . strongly recommend using it in groups of three or four” (p. 11). The book contains recurring features which are very training-course

Each chapter includes three elements . . . frameworks, teachers’ voices, and investigations. The frameworks and guidelines about what I think is important for teachers to know about each of the features. The teachers’ voices provide reflections on how they carried out the processes, the dilemmas they faced, and the results. The investigations are a combination of reflective tasks which require thinking and response, and problem-solving tasks which require you to arrive at a solution. The reflective tasks which ask you to design a curriculum product. [-1-]

In effect, the investigations ask you to “co-author” the book by questioning and adding your own examples. (p. 10)

In short, this book is probably best viewed as a teacher training course for groups rather than for individuals. It is probably most suitable for teachers with some experience; teachers with no classroom teaching experience have little basis for providing their own input. On the other hand, teachers with substantial experience may find the approach somewhat frustrating for what they got out of it.

Considered as a training course textbook, then, what are the strengths and weaknesses of this book?

The course instructor who selects this book will have to live with the strong (though ever faint) voice of the author. The book is not designed explicitly for use with a course instructor; Graves *is* the instructor. The instructor is the leader in running the discussion elements of the course, and perhaps also in re-presenting the material in each chapter; but it is likely to be a more limited role than some instructors will be used to. That is, the book is a bit of work, since it not only contains plenty of materials for group discussion, but also pro-

content. (The irony of letting someone else design much of your course on course design)

The ideas presented represent the often strongly held views of the author, but they are not the book allows plenty of room for disagreement to be expressed. For example, on develop

Materials development takes place on a continuum of decision-making and creativity and a timetable in which to “cover it” – least responsibility and decision-making – to do class “from scratch” – most responsibility and creativity. Neither extreme is desirable. To adhere to a textbook and timetable there is little room for them to make decisions and experience, which, in effect, “deskills” the teacher. . . . On the other hand, the majority of teachers spend a great deal of time in their schedules to develop all the materials for every course they teach. (p. 149)

Surely few in the mainstream of teaching would disagree here that “neither extreme is desirable” and that, given preferences at one end of the continuum or the other, all would find their views covered to some extent. (Graves’ views on developing materials and adapting a textbook. Graves herself appears to favour more rather than less teacher autonomy (and I can find little recognition that someone writing a book for teachers on course design!), and I can find little recognition that the book’s views may gain by fitting in more closely to what the teacher thinks the students need, may also be more realistic than it worked out. But that is a point that could easily come up in the discussion prompted by the book’s views on being extreme in her stated or implied views. [-2-]

If Graves is unlikely to offend by being too controversial, she may occasionally be open to criticism. Her language is easy to understand, but sometimes I found it quite hard to concentrate on the book’s views. I quote a lengthy passage to make my point, but consider this brief extract, which comes at the end of a chapter on exercises (more controlled output) and activities (more open-ended output):

When developing materials it is important to have a balance of activities and exercises. Too many exercises will impede development of the ability to communicate in the real world, while too many activities will deny students the opportunity to develop the language and skills they need to communicate.

It’s a perfectly reasonable point, of course, but it’s not exactly expressed in a way that gets across. It encourages the reader to ask, “Is the balance of exercises and activities right in the courses?” This particular point, like others in the book, is in considerable need of expansion, while other points are where a good course leader may come in, promoting further discussion of relevant points. And in fairness, it cannot be expected that the book will cover everything in depth; after all, there are virtually any topic you care to mention in the field of language learning and teaching.

So there are some parts of the book that it can be quite hard to plod through. But I have to say that there were definitely times as I read when I thought, “Do I do this sort of planning as much as I do when teaching my current groups?” The wealth of materials provided for discussion, many of them

design, do provoke thought and comment. Take the chapter on “Designing an Assessment” which “plays three interrelated and overlapping roles in course design: . . . assessing, evaluating the course itself” (p. 207). Assessing needs is considered mainly in a separate chapter, and to course evaluation. The fact that assessment of what students have learned or are learning, and to course evaluation. The fact that they are considered together means that we do not lose sight of the fact that the success of a course is measured by how students feel they have learned. It is an approach that contrasts with the more traditional division of labor in the design of teachers’ assessment plans for actual courses, while often lengthy, introduce forms of assessment, and particular forms which involve the students in assessing their own progress. The ways in which assessment also forms an interesting topic for discussion. Descriptions of problems which actually can be solved by the plans prevent the material from being of the “look, this is how to do it” type. More conventional forms, though the reader who is looking for instructions on how to create multiple choice tests will find them.

There is no index to the book, and that is a problem for anyone who wishes to use the book. I was trying to look up “what does Graves have to say about X?” for this review, and there would have been no way to find something in the book quickly and easily. I appreciate that to some extent “it’s not that easy to find” for teachers shouldn’t be designed in such a way that you have to re-read large sections to find what you need.

If you’re a teacher educator who will be running a series of seminars on course design, having a book like this for your students to buy it if you like the style and approach. If you’re fairly new to teaching and designing courses, or systematic lists and examples of different exercise types and their advantages, this book is worth looking elsewhere. If you’re an experienced teacher looking for some quick and interesting ideas, this book is with too much that is already familiar territory. If you are a teacher who doesn’t want to sit through a curriculum development, but who would like a structured framework within which to discuss and share ideas with colleagues, and who is prepared to devote time to some serious reading and thinking in preparation for a course, could be exactly the type of person this book was designed for. Am I being over-cynical in saying that? In what category? It would be nice to think I am.

End Note

[1] Other books in the TeacherSource series which have been reviewed in *TESL-EJ* include

- Anderson, N. (1999). *Exploring second language teaching: Issues and strategies*. Vol. 4, No. 1, [R-8](#), J
- Campbell, C. (1998). *Teaching academic writing: Interacting with text*. Vol. 4, No. 1, [R-8](#), J
- Freeman, D. (1998). *Doing teacher research: From inquiry to understanding*. Vol. 4, No. 1, [R-8](#), J
- Irujo, S. (1998). *Teaching bilingual children: Beliefs and behaviors*. Vol. 4, No. 1, [R-8](#), J
- Bailey, K. M. (1998). *Learning about language assessment: Dilemmas, decisions and dilemmas*. Vol. 4, No. 1, [R-8](#), J
- Johnson, K. E. (1999). *Understanding language teaching: Reasoning in action*. Vol. 4, No. 1, [R-8](#), J
- Stevick, E. W. (1998). *Working with teaching methods: What’s at stake?* Vol. 4, No. 4, [R-8](#), J

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