3 Designing workplace ESOL courses for Chinese health-care workers at a Boston nursing home

Johan Uvin

Johan Uvin, originally from Belgium, has extensive experience in workplace ESOL with immigrants in the Boston area. He has taught immigrants, worked in staff development, written proposals, and directed workplace literacy programs. He has managed workplace education grants and, since 1993, has supervised adult basic education development efforts for the Massachusetts Department of Education. In this chapter he gives us "a tale of two courses." He designed and taught a course for Chinese health-care workers in Boston using the competency-based methods in widespread use at that time. He spent over ninety hours doing an exhaustive needs analysis that involved not only the students but also nursing staff, supervisors, patients, and administrators. He decided, however, that even though the course did what it was designed to do, it had failed his students. In this chapter, he tells us why he felt this to be the case and how he radically redirected the course as a result.

The course development focus for this chapter is needs assessment. Consider the following questions as you read:

In this account of course development, who determined what the students' needs were? How were those needs defined?

Uvin describes two approaches to course design. In each approach, how were the students involved in determining needs?

In my third year as a teacher at the Chinese-American Civic Association (CACA), we received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's National Workplace Literacy Program to provide a course for Chinese health-care workers at the South Cove Manor Nursing Home in Boston. I was asked to design the course, which would be taught by me and by my colleagues in two 22-week cycles.

Getting started: Collecting information about what is needed

Based on past experiences, CACA had allotted ninety hours for me to collect data and familiarize myself with the nursing home prior to actually writing the course. I spent three weeks familiarizing myself with the goals and processes involved in the delivery of patient care. I worked alongside nursing assistants and got to know the workers who had expressed an interest in the program. I spent time at the nursing station and learned about technical aspects and the language demands of the various jobs. I recorded samples of interactions that workers engaged in. I talked to workers individually and in groups. I spoke with residents. I interviewed supervisors, nurses, and trainers. I attended a training session. I went through a facility orientation. I read the employee manual and looked at training materials. I met with the administrator and her department heads. I tried, through these activities, to solicit the perspectives of workers, supervisors, nurses, residents, and administrators regarding what the course should do to be considered successful.

One of my major tasks was to analyze the jobs of workers by identifying the literacy requirements of the key tasks they needed to accomplish daily and by analyzing the main communicative situations or target situations where workers needed to understand or speak English to get their jobs done. More specifically, I was asked by CACA to list all tasks, break them down into chronological steps, and identify where English was needed most in delivering and documenting restorative care.

The development process: Working with the gathered information

After immersing myself in the nursing home community for about three weeks, I used the information I had collected to create a course outline and to develop units of work. This process consisted of the following steps, which I accomplished before instruction began:

1. Identify the competencies that enable nursing assistants to perform their jobs, focusing on competencies that facilitate direct communication and hence promote the quality of patient care.
2. Develop a test that reveals which competencies workers can perform already and which they cannot perform yet to identify the individual needs of learners.
3. Determine instructional objectives using the test results.
4. Select and sequence the content of instruction:
   - Define the function, setting, interlocutors, register, and medium of the communication for each competency.
   - Select language samples from the initial investigation.
   - Identify grammar points and pronunciation contrasts.
   - Define the cultural information that learners need to acquire.
   - Organize the material from linguistically less to more complicated.
   - Recycle critical language.
5. Write activities to teach to the competencies.
6. Develop materials that facilitate teaching and learning.
7. Design assessment situations to measure achievement and performance objective checklists to document it, specifying the conditions and expected performance level.

The product: Something to teach from

Using this process, I developed sample units of work. Each unit met the following criteria:

- It grouped certain tasks that learners needed to perform on the job.
- It listed the skills that enable learners to perform each task, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy, and math skills.
- It defined the communicative context of the tasks, specifying the function or purpose, the setting, the interlocutors, the medium, and the register of the communication.
- It provided some language samples and vocabulary.
- It identified grammar points and pronunciation contrasts.
- It gave information about American culture in general and about patient care delivery in particular.
- It suggested activities and resources.
- It ended with a series of assessment activities that teachers could use to measure the attainment of competencies and provided checklists to document achievement.

Following are the units I developed initially, as well as the tasks included in each.

Unit 1: Training for the job
- Introducing self to Staff
- Participating in tour of the facility
- Participating in orientation and on-the-job training

Unit 2: Starting the day
- Getting dressed for work
- Getting to work
- Signing or punching in, reporting to the nursing director
- Relating to staff
- Checking assignments
- Organizing care
The implementation stage: Detecting strengths and weaknesses of my initial course design model

The first 22-week cycle of instruction allowed me to assess the effectiveness of the course I had designed as my colleagues and I were implementing it. We identified both strengths and shortcomings.

STRENGTHS

Once in the classroom, I recognized certain strengths. My course did address competencies that promoted quality of patient care—the nursing home's basic reason for wanting the program. In addition, the course outline I had produced gave classes direction. Furthermore, the correspondence between the competencies and the language requirements described in the skills section of the National Nursing Assistant Examination was almost one-to-one. Finally, the test scores and performance objectives checklists met the various demands for accountability as expressed by funders, sponsors, and managers.

SHORTCOMINGS

Though funders, sponsors, and nursing home administrators and managers felt comfortable with the mainly work-related focus of the curriculum and its accountability mechanisms, learners expressed several concerns. Through active listening, I was able to identify the following shortcomings of my initial approach.

Content  I had addressed only the work-related needs of the learners, and my perception of those needs had guided my initial decision making about what to include or leave out. I learned quickly, however, that learners wanted more than just the language to perform their jobs. As many of the learners in the programs were recent arrivals, they had language needs that went beyond the workplace and so demonstrated resistance, inconsistent attendance being the major one. I had also failed to accommodate the affective, social, cultural, cognitive, and metacognitive needs that learners expressed. I had overlooked the issues posed by entering a new culture, such as culture shock, or loss of social status. Nor did I address skills, strategies, and attitudes that enabled learners to acquire the competencies they needed to develop. For example, many learners did not know how to go about learning a language or used an extremely limited number of learning strategies. Consequently, what they learned was not sustained or internalized. Quite a few learners learned by rote and for the short term only. They memorized the language to describe a tray of food (Unit 5) but
failed to recall it or use it freely in the actual communicative context. In designing the course outline, I had also assumed the equality of teaching and learning time, whereas learners, depending on a variety of factors, needed more and varying amounts of time to attain certain competencies than the estimated teaching time I had envisioned.

**Methods** Content aside, most of the methods I suggested were inappropriate — culturally or personally biased. Initially, much to my surprise, they turned out to be incompatible with the preferred learning styles, strategies, and activities of Asian learners.

The suggested activities also did not facilitate the learning of each individual learner and took for granted that learners knew how to learn. In other words, they were geared toward the educated learner. In fact, some learners had received little or no formal education in their home country, China. Some learners, for example, needed exposure to basic learning strategies such as repetition and substitution.

Another shortcoming was that the teaching activities did not fully take into account the multilevel nature of classes. I also learned that most of the activities I designed were teacher-centered in the sense that they required me to assume the role of the intermediary between learners and the materials, unlike real-life situations, where the learner interacts directly with the material. For example, during several classroom activities, learners were able to read their biweekly assignment sheets with my facilitation. Out on the floors, however, both workers and supervisors reported that the reading of assignment sheets continued to pose problems.

**Assessment** In addition to the content and methods, the assessment activities in the curriculum were inappropriate as well. They were not always compatible with the assessment needs and preferences of learners. Older learners in particular perceived tests or quizzes as threatening.

As my awareness of shortcomings grew, I became convinced by the end of the first cycle that change was needed for two reasons: Learners did not participate actively in course-related decision making and therefore could not always identify with the suggested content and methods, and I had completed course design and development activities before instruction. The course consequently failed to absorb changes at the nursing home as they occurred or were planned. I concluded that the product I created was unworkable and could not be implemented and replicated with various groups of learners in similar contexts and at various points in time. Rather than trying to fix the product, I decided to involve the people who had a vested interest in the course on an ongoing basis (learners, supervisors, residents, and administrators) in the process of developing a course.

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**The second approach: A process view of course design**

As a result of my evaluation of the first planning and implementation of the course, I realized that I needed to involve the learners at each stage of the process: preplanning, teaching, and assessment or documentation of learning. This process is cyclical and consists of the following stages:

1. Collaborate with learners and facilitate their participation as researchers in the investigation of their daily experiences.
2. Identify issues learners are facing.
3. Find out what needs to be done to resolve the issues we identified, and avoid them in the future.
4. Negotiate with learners as to which activities promote their learning in and outside the classroom, and fine-tune my teaching accordingly.
5. Involve learners in documenting their achievements and in evaluating the process.
6. Develop units or records of work (curriculum products) that account for the work done along the way.

As with the development of the first course, learners were not the sole agents in this process. Residents, trainers, supervisors, and administrators were involved as consultants. They helped us identify and understand the issues the nursing home was facing and provided valuable information about the contexts of the learners’ work-related communication needs. They also assisted us in clarifying the link between the nursing home’s needs and goals and those of learners.

To find out what the issues were, I began my investigation before instruction started and continued it throughout instruction. During the initial weeks of classes, I focused on the experiences of learners that relate directly to the goals of the program. To be able to identify issues along the way, I established various feedback and input mechanisms.

**Investigating the daily work experiences of learners to identify issues**

Table 1 shows who was involved in the initial investigation prior to the start of a course. It also lists the various activities used to facilitate it and which decisions were made.

The initial investigation did not necessarily reveal the significant issues in the daily lives of workers. It didn’t always enable me clearly to define the needs and goals of learners either. Therefore, I did two things. I established input mechanisms to identify needs and issues along the way, and I facilitated a classroom-based investigation of the daily experiences of workers during the initial weeks of instruction.
### Table 1  Initial investigation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Focus of investigation</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meet with learners individually</td>
<td>Backgrounds, Reasons for enrollment, Needs, goals, and abilities, Availability, Preferences: preferred learning arrangement, activities, and assessment instruments, Communication issues and barriers</td>
<td>Admit or refer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet with residents, supervisors, nurses, department heads, trainers, and administrators</td>
<td>Issues they feel need to be resolved, Goals and processes in patient care, Language requirements</td>
<td>Negotiate (or renegotiate) goals, design, and logistics, Allocate (or reallocate) resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet with learners in a group</td>
<td>Common issues, Preferred and favorable learning arrangement, Common goals, Methodology</td>
<td>Select learning arrangement, Scheduling, Grouping, Consensus on initial teaching ‘mode’, Select issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with learners</td>
<td>Technical aspects of individual jobs, Communication patterns and language use requirements, Communication issues, Health, safety, and cultural issues</td>
<td>Select written materials that are essential, Select issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet with Advisory Board consisting of managers, administrators, supervisors, learners, and program staff</td>
<td>How program goals translated into objectives, Evaluation needs and preferences</td>
<td>How assessment and evaluation will be done</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2  In-class investigation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Chinese immigrant experience</td>
<td>To validate experiences, To build a group, To establish trust, To establish a support network, To identify common experiences and issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past experiences</td>
<td>To increase self-esteem by identifying where learners use English already</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reasons for immigrating</td>
<td>To increase the learners’ abilities to describe their working environment and their daily work experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences entering a new culture</td>
<td>To identify the learners’ understanding of their role in the delivery of patient care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Histories of Chinese immigrants in the United States</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>History of the Chinese community in Boston</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support services in the Chinese community</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Daily work experiences of immigrant workers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Whom workers speak English with, where, how often, about what, and why</td>
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<tr>
<td>What, when, and why workers read and write at work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roles of individual workers and the role of their departments in patient care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working conditions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Roles in decision making</td>
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<tr>
<td>Channels of communication accessible to workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenges for immigrant workers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Recordkeeping</td>
<td>To identify which written materials cause difficulty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working conditions</td>
<td>To identify health, safety, and cultural issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Underemployment</td>
<td>To identify barriers to job advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification</td>
<td>To identify challenges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I established the following input mechanisms to identify issues and needs on an ongoing basis:

- Keeping dialogue journals with learners
- Meeting with supervisory and administrative staff
- Participating in the meetings of the advisory committee
- Establishing classroom rituals (e.g., What happened at work today?)
- Keeping and reviewing learners' work
- Feedback sessions at the end of class
- Planning house visits and field trips in the learners' communities
- Listening actively to learners in class and outside class (e.g., on breaks)
- Spending time in the working environment

Table 2 describes the classroom investigation and its goals.

The following example demonstrates what a classroom-based investigation looks like as it relates to the bottom section of Table 2. It is an assessment of the needs of learners on the basis of interactions they engaged in. Workers were asked to indicate which interactions were difficult and to specify why. A classroom chart of these interactions was made. Here is an uncorrected excerpt from the responses:

What are you doing? Why?
I am in the dining room take the patients to eat encourage patients.

What are you saying?
Mary please open your mouth to eat lunch.

What is difficult?
Patients don't cooperate.

Working with issues and needs

Once I had identified significant themes or issues in the daily work experiences of learners, I worked with them in a variety of ways. I analyzed them. I specified what needed to be done—taught and learned—to resolve them. I implemented activities that enabled learners and me to do so, and we documented outcomes jointly.

Problem posing

One way I used to integrate these tasks was the problem-posing approach (Wallerstein 1983). In this approach, the issue is presented to learners as a problem. Various means can be used to represent the issue, including audio and video recordings, visuals, photographs (e.g., two in contrast), printed text (e.g., dialogues or stories), and skits.

For a representation of an issue to work well, I make sure that learners can recognize the problem immediately, that different aspects of the problem are included, that no solutions to the problem are suggested, that the problem is represented in a nonthreatening way, and that the representation is not overwhelming.

When introducing a problem in class, I go through the following steps:

1. Discussion
   - Describing what happens
   - Defining what the problem is
   - Connecting the problem to the experiences of learners
   - Identifying the causes and consequences of the problem
   - Listing what can be done, drawing from success and failure stories

2. Planning
   - Listing various actions that can be taken to resolve the issue
   - Identifying the resources needed
   - Exploring the consequences of actions
   - Deciding who will do what, when, and why

3. Action
   - Implementing what was planned
   - Practicing what is needed

4. Feedback
   - Identifying what was learned and how
   - Identifying areas for further learning

AN EXAMPLE

From my meetings with supervisors, I identified the following issue. Supervisors pointed out that the use of single-word sentences and the misuse of forms of address upset residents. I wrote two dialogues between a resident and a housekeeper. One dialogue, based on input from the learners, consisted of three lines. The other dialogue was based on the minimal language requirements workers are expected to meet as specified in the skills section of the National Nursing Assistant Examination. By contrasting the two, I was able to present the issue in its complexity without suggesting any solution to resolve it.

1. Dialogue based on National Nursing Assistant Exam language requirements

Jin: Hello, Mr. Smith. Can I come in, please?
Joe: Sure. Come in.
Jin: Mr. Smith. I am Jin. I am your housekeeper today. I'm going to clean your room. Is that OK?
Joe: Go ahead.
Jin: How are you today, Mr. Smith? 
Joe: Not too bad. By the way, you can call me Joe. 
Jin: OK, Joe. Could you sit on the bed, please, while I clean over here? 
Joe: Sure. 
Jin: Thanks a lot. 
Joe: You're welcome.

2. Dialogue based on learners’ input

Joe: What are you doing? 
Jin: Clean. You on bed. 
Joe: Get outta here! Leave me alone! 

We worked with the dialogues in the following way:
1. I read the conversations several times. 
2. Learners asked clarification questions about the language used. 
3. We discussed the two versions with learners, clarifying why Joe got angry in the second dialogue but not in the first. 
4. I made a chart listing for each learner when residents had gotten angry at them and why. 
5. Learners wrote about their experiences independently or with the help of a bilingual peer who transcribed verbatim where the interaction took place, when, how often, and why. 
6. Learners reenacted the stories of learners, decided how they could change them, rehearsed the changes, and planned to use what they learned on the job. 
7. I solicited feedback on the outcomes of the learners’ attempts 
8. I documented which competencies learners achieved and recorded additional changes in my progress notes.

Other ways

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING METHODOLOGIES

Problem posing assumes some preinvestigation. Sometimes, however, issues must be resolved immediately. In those cases, experiential learning methodologies (Erkamp 1981) can facilitate a classroom-based course design process. These are the steps that enabled me to integrate course design tasks into the classroom agenda:
1. Learners shared their daily work experiences with one another. 
2. Learners compared their experiences and identified similarities and differences. 
3. Learners investigated the context of their experiences and identified causes and consequences.
4. Learners identified aspects of their experiences that they wanted to explore further. 
5. Learners identified their strengths and weaknesses. 
6. Learners and teachers discussed which individual and group activities would enable them to learn what they needed to learn or know. 
7. Learners practiced or carried out their assignments. 
8. Learners gave, received, and responded to feedback on what they learned and how.

AN EXAMPLE

1. Learners shared their daily work experiences with one another: 
D.T. walked in very upset and told her classmates that she had been hit by a patient. 

2. Learners compared their experiences and identified similarities and differences: 
D.T.'s experience triggered many others. An emotional discussion revealed that all workers who worked on the second floor had had similar experiences. 

3. Learners investigated the context of their experiences and identified causes and consequences: 
D.T. described what happened, where, when, and why as she saw it. In collaboration with her peers, D.T. described the resident and the room and listed step by step what she and the resident did and said. We acted out the incident twice. During the first reenactment, D.T. participated. During the second one, she stepped back, observed herself, and gave feedback on the accuracy of the reenactment. In a follow-up discussion, learners said that this situation was stressful and that they were scared when assigned to take care of this resident. Some said that they had been seriously injured as well. They said that the resident's abusive behavior was caused by loneliness and depression over a recent stroke. Subsequently, all learners wrote about their experiences with angry residents and developed frequently needed reporting language in doing so. 

4. Learners identified aspects of their experiences that they wanted to explore further: 
Learners wanted to know what their own rights and those of the resident were and what they could do or say to protect themselves. 

5. Learners identified their strengths and weaknesses: 
Learners knew all the patient's rights. They did not know what their own rights were. All agreed also that they did not know what to do or say in situations like this one.
6. Learners and teachers discussed which individual and group activities would enable them to learn what they needed to learn or know:

I asked learners if they thought that training would help and if it would be useful if they could know how to ask for training. They didn’t think so. Instead two learners wanted to find out more about the patient’s condition and decided to ask the charge nurse about it. Three learners wanted to know their rights. I suggested that they read the bilingual nursing home manual and report to class next time. We decided to practice how to ask for emergency help, how to ask the charge nurse for information, and how to put a resident at ease.

7. Learners practiced or carried out their assignments:

In small groups, learners rewrote the transcript of step 3 as a play. I asked them to include full sentences instead of single words and to think of ways to calm down a resident. They acted it out several times.

8. Learners gave, received, and responded to feedback on what they learned and how:

I asked learners if and why the play was helpful and what should come next. They said they needed additional practice.

As the example shows, learners do not go through these steps chronologically. They can go through several steps at the same time. Overlap occurs, and very often learners will switch back and forth following the natural flow of the learning process where action and reflection feed into each other constantly.

**Strengths and weaknesses**

**STRENGTHS**

As in the first version of the course, learners attained the competencies that are critical to the delivery of patient quality care and certification. However, because they had a say in what was learned, how, and why, their learning went beyond the job-specific competencies. Our collaboration enhanced their sense of ownership, motivation, and self-esteem. Attendance stabilized, and retention improved. The classroom atmosphere became more enjoyable both for learners and teachers and there was a spirit of collaboration and solidarity. Learners also became better language users and learners as they participated actively in the investigation of the contexts where they needed English most and identified all factors that shaped them. Through its responsiveness to learner needs and preferences, classroom activities also became more compatible with the preferred learning activities of learners. Classes were more responsive to the personal, affective, cognitive, and metacognitive needs of learners. Materials were highly relevant because they stemmed from the workplace or were generated by learners.

**WEAKNESSES**

Problem posing and experiential learning methodologies do not always work as a means to make course design an integral part of what is happening in the classroom, at least not initially. Learners may feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences at first. They may also feel overwhelmed at first, and their self-confidence may go down as classes reveal how much they still need to learn. More important, however, is that learners may not identify with this approach and may perceive it as inappropriate for a language class. To overcome these obstacles, I established the necessary trust and mutual respect first. I explained the purpose of the approach and gave clear examples that demonstrated that it is possible to learn English by analyzing one’s experiences. I also adjusted my teaching activities to the preferences of learners.

An ongoing and negotiated or participatory approach to course design also requires more preparation and follow-up time. This may be an additional drawback unless the working conditions are such that they allow for this extra time investment.

An additional drawback is that it is virtually impossible in this view of course design to predict at the onset of the program precisely what the needs will turn out to be. As funders tend not to commit themselves to a program or course unless the extent of need has been clearly demonstrated and documented, this may jeopardize the implementation of a more dynamic and more participatory approach to course design. Even if learners are involved in establishing the need for a course and in the initial contract negotiations, it will still be impossible to set future needs in advance.

Another issue is that to negotiate course content and methods with learners – particularly beginning ESOL learners – bilingual assistance is often required for complete effectiveness. In the early stages of our program, this type of assistance was lacking and posed an additional barrier.

**What I learned**

Finally, I would like to reflect on my experiences and identify what I have learned about course design as I evolved from a teacher-directed competency-based system that defined course content and methods a priori to a more participatory process where I engaged in a process of negotiation with learners, my ultimate goal being to make courses more worthwhile and more responsive to learner needs. A key learning point has been that course
design does not take place in a vacuum. Several factors shape the process and directly affect its outcome. Although further investigation is needed, from my experience at the South Cove Manor Nursing Home I have identified the following seven factors as important to acknowledge.

PARTICIPANTS

As when designing any course, I considered the participants. The number of participants informed my decision making. The fact that courses had to serve as many people as possible, for example, directly determined the goals I chose and their achievability.

Several other factors influenced how I went about designing a course. Key personal factors were age, educational and occupational background, mother tongue, motivation, first language literacy, needs, goals, abilities, availability, previous language-learning experience, views of teaching and learning and roles that go hand in hand with them, individual styles and strategies, preferred learning arrangements (such as group versus individual instruction) and activities, and assessment preferences.

Cultural factors also influenced both the process and the product. For participants to identify with the course goals, content, methods, and assessment procedures, I had to acknowledge their cultural expectations. For example, most participants were used to knowing in advance what the course content would be and requested materials for review as well as preview. The commonalities among participants with regard to what a "good" class should look like were also striking and could not be denied to avoid a mismatch between their cultural views and mine.

TEACHER EXPERIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

The design of a workplace ESOL course also depends on my own experiences and values. My beliefs about language, literacy, teaching, learning, and the process of course design—and by extension curriculum development and education—governed my actions and greatly determined how I set goals, selected and sequenced content, designed or chose activities and materials, and specified how assessment was to be done. These beliefs also defined how I viewed the role of the learner, my own role, and, in the case of ESOL courses in the workplace, the roles of supervisors, managers, union officials, sponsors, and funders.

In addition to my beliefs, my knowledge of and skills in course design influenced the process directly and the outcome indirectly. At first I was not adequately trained. I was not formally introduced to what course design entails for workplace ESOL courses to be successful. Over time and as a result of teacher sharing sessions, training, and mentor coaching, my understanding of the course design process became gradually more sophisticated, and my course design skills developed accordingly.

PARTNERS

Besides the experiences and views of learners and myself, I also had to acknowledge the views of more players than is usually the case in designing a course in a more traditional educational setting. Residents, workers, supervisors, nurses, administrators, managers, funders, and sponsors all had agendas. Sometimes these agendas overlapped; at other times, they seemed in conflict. The challenge was to strike a balance between the agendas of these people and mine and to mediate their viewpoints on several occasions.

Closely related to the different agendas were the ranging and fluctuating levels of interest in and support for the program. Depending on a variety of factors (staff changes, personalities, etc.), I could not take ongoing and nursing home-wide commitment and support for granted. When designing a course, therefore, I needed at times to make a conscious effort to strike a balance between the various sources that informed the course design process.

PHYSICAL CONSTRAINTS

Another factor I had to work with was the learning environment. On the one hand, the learning environment at South Cove Manor was not optimal. One classroom was used as a physical therapy room when there were no classes. Another one was so small that certain classroom activities were excluded. It also did not have a chalkboard, and no newsprint could be put up. The noise level in one class was high during the morning tests of the emergency generators located on the classroom's roof. There were also an almost uninterrupted stream of announcements over the paging system, regular fire and evacuation drills, and other distractions.

An additional drawback of the learning environment was the varying amounts and types of English that workers on different floors were exposed to. Whereas workers on the second floor, for example, interacted mostly with English speaking residents and Chinese residents in good mental condition, workers on the third floor had less exposure and fewer opportunities to practice English due to the condition of residents. In designing a course, I had to address these differences in the goals I set and the activities I chose to achieve them.

On the other hand, the learning environment was optimal. I had easy access to human and material resources and, as a result, was able to develop a clear sense of where English was used or not used. In contrast to ESOL
programs outside the workplace, I did have the opportunity to examine the context of the learners' needs, to see how their needs and goals related to the nursing home's, and to observe for myself any transfer of classroom learning to the job or to involve supervisors and nurses in doing so.

**TIME CONSTRAINTS**

In addition to physical constraints, time constraints guided my decision making. Participants felt that four to six hours of instruction per week was manageable and that courses should last no longer than twenty-two weeks. Also, the irregular schedules that go hand in hand with patient care delivery would make attendance irregular. Furthermore, most participants had family responsibilities and pointed out that they could do very little studying at home.

These time-related factors, in addition to time constraints of the grant, guided me in prioritizing goals and in keeping them achievable as well as in sequencing the content.

**IMPACT OF FUNDING GUIDELINES**

As the project depended largely on external funds to cover the cost of courses, I had to take the funding guidelines into consideration. These guidelines were very specific and addressed several aspects of the program. I had to design my courses within the confines of the federal grant. Courses were funded for one year initially. The project and course goals had to reflect the needs of the workplace. An evaluation plan had to be put into place that would make the achievement of these goals measurable and provide quantitative information not only on learner achievement but also on organizational change in the areas of improved worker productivity, job performance and quality of work, worker attendance, worker safety, and worker retention. Therefore, the grant recommended that the curriculum processes and products (e.g., materials) reflect the needs of the workplace. The grant also dictated the project management structure, which made me accountable to all the members of the partnership: the learning provider who employed me, the management company who operated the nursing home, the nursing home administration, the federal government, and the workers. Needless to say, the impact of these guidelines on course design processes such as needs assessment; the setting of goals; the selection and sequencing of content, activities, and assessment and evaluation procedures; and the development of materials was far-reaching.

**POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC CLIMATE**

The funding guidelines as they applied to the South Cove Manor project established the link between the nursing home's needs and goals and the political, social, and economic needs of the nation as it enters the twenty-first century in general and the situation in the health-care industry in particular. In designing courses, I had to be aware of the implications of these political, social, and economic factors.

According to political and business leaders, workplace ESOL and literacy courses should support organizations (businesses, unions) at the local level, and the nation at the global level, in meeting the demands created by a more technically sophisticated manufacturing and service delivery process and restore or enhance their ability to compete. They should also help organizations cope with the implications of recent demographic changes, that is, assist them in upgrading the skills of minorities, immigrants, and refugees who are now making up the labor pool that organizations recruit front to fill entry-level positions.

To do so, a view of course design — and, by extension, curriculum and program design — has been promoted that begins with an analysis of the goals of the organization and defines the needs of learners in relation to the needs of the organization. In this approach, the critical skills or competencies that workers need to develop to meet the demands required by a more competitive manufacturing or service delivery process are identified. Tests are used to determine the discrepancy between the actual skill level of workers and the minimal skill level the organization requires to achieve its newly defined goals and to decide whether a course is necessary. If so, resources are allocated. Instructional goals are set to bridge this gap drawing from the needs assessment. Activities and materials are developed and measures are put into place to assess achievement and evaluate the course. When all these tasks are accomplished, the course is implemented. Initially, I was advised to take these common course design practices into account. My experience has led me to question them.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have used my experiences with two very different models of course design to identify some key factors that affect the course design process and its outcomes. Course design for ESOL in the workplace is not done in a vacuum. Several factors shape the process, including the participants, the teachers, the partners, the funder, physical constraints, time constraints, the political, social, and economic climate, the specific culture of the workplace, and common course design practices. Both of the models I
Johan Uvin used had advantages and drawbacks. My experiences, however, have demonstrated the importance of viewing course design as an ongoing process that involves learners actively in identifying course content, methods, and assessment tools.

ANALYSIS AND TASKS

One of the most striking aspects of Uvin's experience is that he followed a seemingly logical set of steps—doing a needs assessment, defining competencies based on the assessment, developing a diagnostic test, determining objectives based on the results of the test, selecting and sequencing the content of the instruction, writing activities, developing materials, and designing assessment tools—but discovered that doing so did not produce a course that he felt worked for his students. The content was too narrow: Although it reflected their working needs, it did not account for cultural and affective needs such as adjusting to a new country or to diminished social status. Moreover, the teaching methods did not match students' expectations and abilities, and so attendance was low. The main problem, as Uvin saw it, was that the course had been designed without student participation, a method of planning he calls a priori design because it was done prior to in-class contact with the students.

There is an apparent contradiction here because the extensive (three week) needs assessment included consultation with the students and even working side by side with them. This situation underscores the fact that a needs assessment is not an objective, context-independent undertaking. It depends on how the analyzer defines (or is asked to define) needs. In this case, needs were defined in terms of competencies, the language and behavior necessary to complete given tasks. A competency-based view of needs was the prevailing view in workplace course design at the time and partly an outgrowth of the necessity to document progress and outcomes for funders. This particular course was designed to correspond to a state exam for nursing home workers. Thus the students and their perceptions of their needs were only one part of the process of determining needs.

Uvin made the decision to reorient his course radically so that it would include and respond to input from the students. His rationale for the change was that one syllabus could not serve each group of learners, as both their learning needs and their working conditions would vary. One way to view the shift in approach was that the first approach had presented him with a predefined problem—how to improve the workers' English competence on the job—and a series of steps that would lead to its solution. Teaching the course and observing and listening to his students forced him to problematize his situation: to recognize their dissatisfaction and to figure out ways to meet their needs within the considerable constraints of the situation. He developed a set of steps that included learner involvement at each stage of the process: identifying issues to work on, determining how to address the issues, choosing activity types, developing ways to assess progress and achievement, and producing materials and records of the work done. Be-
cause the course content developed as it unfolded and because the learners were involved in its development, he called this new approach a process view of course design. Classroom-based investigations and activities for involving students relied on experiential learning and problem-posing techniques, which require students to identify issues of concern, explore the issues with the teacher, and devise ways to address them.

Ironically, Uvin’s exhaustive needs analysis in the long run may have given him both the criteria for judging his initial course design as unsatisfactory and the ability to negotiate a syllabus with his students. In other words, he would not have been able to undertake the kind of collaboration and problem-posing activities he describes without an intimate knowledge of the context and the students’ trust in him. Furthermore, he was able to gain the continued cooperation and involvement of supervisors and administrators and thus ensure the survival of the course in its new form.

Uvin’s narrative highlights questions regarding the extent to which a teacher can be responsive to students’ needs. Many, if not most, teachers cannot undertake the kind of comprehensive initial needs analysis Uvin did. Hence determining student needs must become part of classroom instruction time. Many teachers do not have the liberty to negotiate a syllabus with their students but must instead work from an existing one.

It is possible to involve students in determining their needs, goals, and preferences as learners, but that takes time. As Uvin points out, it also requires a view of learners as collaborators in a process, a view that many learners may not initially share. Nevertheless, teachers like Uvin show us that it is possible to change one’s conception of the role learners play in determining and responding to needs.

FOCUS ON NEEDS ASSESSMENT

1. Freewrite or brainstorm for three minutes in response to this statement: When I think of students’ needs, I think of . . .
2. Uvin conducted an extensive initial needs assessment. Review page 40 and list the needs assessment activities he did. What kinds of information does each activity provide concerning learners’ needs? Which activities are feasible in your context?
3. Uvin changed his course because the learners weren’t involved in its development and he felt he was being unresponsive to their needs. His solution was to work in such a way that learners were involved with each step. Review the steps on page 45.

Which steps do you consider to be both feasible and desirable in your context? How would you go about them? List the steps you would like to explore further.

4. In the second (process) view of the course, Uvin conducted precourse and ongoing needs assessment activities.
   a. Precourse needs assessment. Review Table 1. In the column headed “Focus of Investigation,” which items provide objective data and which provide subjective data? (See page 13 for definitions of objective and subjective data.) Is this distinction useful?
   Which needs assessment activities are feasible in your context? List the ones you consider desirable, and explain why?
   b. Ongoing needs assessment. Review the list of input mechanisms on page 48. Which steps or techniques are feasible in your context? List the ones you consider desirable and why.
   Review Table 1. Which activities were designed to build the learners’ trust in the process of negotiating a syllabus? List the kinds of activities you consider desirable.
   c. Look over the lists you made for parts (a) and (b), and select three to five activities that you could (or do) undertake in designing your course. Why did you choose these?

5. Uvin felt that the methods he used in his first course did not match his students’ expectations of how they would be taught or take into account their learning styles and educational background, what might be called the students’ learning needs “what they need to do in order to learn.” (see page 15) He included an assessment of their expectations and learning preferences in his second course design. What are your students’ expectations of the way they will be taught? Do your methods match these expectations? Give an example of a mismatch (real or hypothetical). How could you resolve such a situation?

6. Review the examples of problem posing and experiential learning techniques on pages 49–52. What do they have in common? How do they involve learners in negotiating the course content? What principles of such techniques could you apply to your context?

7. Review Uvin’s wrap-up on pages 54–57. He lists the constraints and resources that he had to take into consideration. Does the list make sense to you? How would you change it to fit your context?

8. A course outline provides a sense of direction for both teacher and students. A course designed prior to meeting with students will not meet their needs.
   Are these statements contradictory? Can they be reconciled? How? Develop an example based on a course you have taught.
4 Designing a seventh-grade social studies course for ESL students at an international school

Pat Fisher

In addition to teaching transition classes for ESL students entering the academic mainstream, Pat Fisher also teaches English literature and chairs the English Department at an international school in Japan where she has worked for more than a decade. Her department has been instrumental in curriculum development efforts at the school, having piloted different approaches and conducted workshops on the writing process and alternative assessment, such as portfolio use. In this chapter, she describes how she developed an ESL social studies course for seventh graders (middle school). Although the students’ needs were clear to her, how to translate those needs into objectives and how to organize the objectives into meaningful, teachable categories constituted a challenge. Meeting the challenge involved hours of studying the objectives and content of ESL and mainstream textbooks and searching for a way to represent the organizing principles of her syllabus graphically. A pie chart proved to be the answer, and its development is described in this chapter.

The course development focus for this chapter is determining goals and objectives. Consider the following questions as you read:

What is the relationship between Fisher’s overall goals and the specific objectives?
One of Fisher’s main challenges was how to organize the objectives. What helped her to meet this challenge?

“The new ‘Freddy’ is awesome, man! It’s really exciting!” Like all adolescents, my students were reluctant to give up their weekends to return to the classroom that morning. I tried a transition, seeking a connection between their favorite monster and Ghengis Khan, whom we’d started studying the week before. What would happen if Freddy met the Mongol scourge? “Ghengis is tough, man,” my best student defended. “The Mongol army was awesome.” “What did they do that was so effective?” I asked Hiroshi. “Unh... uh... uh – they were really good, ya know.”

I was back at a familiar place. Did Hiroshi not answer the question because he hadn’t understood my earlier explanation, replete with whiteboard diagrams, of Mongol military organization? Had he understood the ideas but lacked the language to restate them? Had he understood my...