

Workshop

Curriculum Development

**Benchmarks and Curriculum Design**

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The objective of the schools is to make possible better interactions among human beings, but to guarantee that better interactions take place we need a descriptive framework. However it is not easy to get everyone at school understand each other and “talk the same language” in terms of how good is good, how much is enough. It is required a lot of work and partnerships to come up with a document that clearly states that “descriptive framework”. The Canadian Language Benchmarks are the product of a great effort done by academics, since 1996. They describe where someone's ability to use English places him within the national descriptive framework of communicative language. These guidelines make possible for instructors and learners to understand each other and know what they are expected to do.

Schools should help build a society, where the experience from the others nurtures everyone's knowledge, and people can understand and foster each other's ideas. One way to promote this in the school is through hands-on activities, and specific tasks which make experiences and skills emerge. Thus in syllabus design, tasks are basic blocks, and the center of effective planning for language instruction. When schools focus on learners abilities or outcomes, they are promoting competency-based instruction that requires demonstrable application of knowledge and skills, gained by individual learners interacting and learning from each other's ideas and skills.

More important than the subject itself, is the strategies development to digest the different concepts about any subject. This will guarantee continuous learning and permanent growth. The Canadian Language Benchmarks promote strategies development. The students will apply different strategies being in Initial, developing, adequate or fluent levels of the basic, intermediate or advanced proficiency. This means three proficiency stages: basic, intermediate and advanced, and four levels in each stage: initial, developing, adequate, and fluent.

Students need a cycle to clearly grasp concepts. They need to get what has been said about the subject matter, then they need the opportunity to process that data at different cognitive and affective levels of knowledge. This will be done through practice and experience of the subject matter in the interaction with their peers. Finally they will go back to the initial concept provided to them and will add new insights to it.

However this process is not as simple as it looks when we take into account that there are different levels of subject-matter command, different affective levels of involvement and different learning styles. Thus the teacher must state clear performance objectives, that consider the subject-matter level of command, the affective involvement and the varieties of learning styles. This will help do the class-plan that provides the appropriate practice, experience and the necessary strategies to help students process data and interact at the stated affective level. The arrangement in the Canadian Language Benchmarks facilitate this process taking into account tasks, strategies, proficiency levels, and competences.

Using standards as the basis for curriculum design focuses the planning. It assists in the development of programs, curricula and materials that relate to a consistent set of competency descriptors for all ESL learners.

The standards facilitate the planning where the major focus identifies what students are to know and be able to do at the completion of the course of study, and establish the context for the learning. However there are a number of things to consider for curriculum development based on standards. Curricula must provide meaningful purposes for learning (life, issues, problems, or questions).

- Is the curriculum related to real-life?
- Is it providing a meaningful purpose?
- Does it engage students? is it relevant for them?
- Is it appropriate for their age?
- Does it demand higher level of thinking?
- Does it reflect personal, social, cultural and global concerns of students?
- Do the targeted standards include significant content and skills/ processes?
- Do the targeted standards reflect a manageable number for length of the unit?
- Do the targeted standards connect to the goals of the institution you work for?
- Do the targeted standards provide direction for the teaching?
- Are there materials (text-books) that fulfill the needs established by the standards?
- Is there a clear way to measure the goals achievement?

Finally we should be able to establish the product/and or performance that allows students to demonstrate their learning. This product requires the student to apply his/her learning related to each targeted standard. These are some of the products we can have.

- Audiotape or videotape
- Brochure
- Display
- Debate
- Portfolio entry
- Learning log
- Storyboard
- Journal
- Multimedia presentation
- Puppet show
- Web page
- Newspaper

Using a specific methodology and a number of formats can make curriculum design based on benchmarks easier, and help designers reach their objectives taking into account the administrators, educational goals, and students. Participants will be given a planning sheet with detailed guidelines on using benchmarks for curriculum development, formats to analyze textbooks and formats to design activities that go with the benchmarks. They will work in small groups and follow the steps based on one benchmark, thinking about their own school to come up with a proposal and a planner for their own school.