



The Language of Learning: Tiered Education and At Risk Youth

I have been trying to learn Spanish for ten years now. I began by purchasing workbooks and working through the exercises. I learned how to locate a taxi, order a taco, and identify myself. After a few years however, I forgot these rudimentary phrases. Accordingly, I returned to school and attended a computer-mediated Spanish course at a local community college. I faithfully attended weekly classes, which focused on short lectures and audio-based tutorials. I came away from the experience with fewer Spanish skills and less excitement about the project of learning Spanish. Today, I am working through an online workbook. My desire to speak Spanish is strong, yet my motivation seems to dull with each passing experience.

A colleague began this journey with me. Together, finding ourselves living in a Latino culture in inner-city Chicago, we understood the importance of the nuances of language and culture. We understood that our inability to communicate in the language of our students weakened our cultural understanding, communication with students, and communication with parents. We understood how language became a barrier between us and the students we served. My colleague took a different journey than I did. She took a sabbatical from her teaching profession and moved to Mexico in order to become fluent in Spanish and better understand the nuances of Mexican culture. She returned after several months well equipped to continue her acquisition of the Spanish language.

As an educational curricularist, I understand that the likelihood of my becoming a fluent Spanish speaker is almost nil. Pedagogically, my strategies are flawed. I am alone. I converse with no one. I work (self-paced) through a program of instruction. My workbook instruction lacks interest, meaning, and relevance. The problem-solving skills, higher order skills, and leaps of intuition that are present in real language experiences and conversations are missing. Complex learning is replaced by rote instruction, and in the process joy is replaced by boredom. The pedagogical strategies experienced by my colleague, on the other hand, are necessarily complex, enlivening, and moving her to complex ways of learning. Accordingly, the likelihood of her becoming a fluent Spanish speaker is high.

Recently I completed a study to determine how we in Western Canada are educating at-risk children and youth. I contacted School Divisions and searched their websites in order to develop a compendium of strategies used in the education of at-risk youth. During this study I discovered some interesting results.

I discovered that Western Canadian School Divisions used astonishingly similar pedagogical strategies. Primarily, they turned to scripted, computer-mediated, or self-paced instructional modules in order to meet the needs of at-risk youth.

As I contemplated this trend, the benefits were readily apparent. Like my own self-paced computer-mediated study of Spanish, these strategies will allow at-risk students to study at their own pace. They can work flexibly, at home in their bathrobes or together in the evenings after a long day of work. Of course this system is inexpensive and allows for greater student flexibility, individualization and fine-tuning to focus on specific standards and skills.

However, the pedagogical concerns with this orientation also became readily apparent. How challenging is scripted, self-paced instruction? How can motivation be maintained? What skills are missing? Can students develop the more

complex problem solving and thinking skills they need within this pedagogical framework?

As I examine this issue, I perceive that we have created a tiered educational system within Western Canada. My children (White, middle-class), when exhibiting risk behaviours or learning difficulties, receive enriched pedagogical instruction. They are provided with ample opportunities for pedagogically rich instruction, mediation, intervention, resources, and care. These strategies bring out their best in learning, motivation, and engagement.

Other children (the poor, the downtrodden of society), when exhibiting risk behaviours or learning difficulties, are sent to alternative programming. There they are provided with a different pedagogical model. Within this model students experience 'individualized' instruction in the form of workbooks and computer-mediated classes. This 'individualized' instruction lacks pedagogical richness in terms of teaching strategies, the role of the student, and the centrality of the meaning and worth of learning. Within these disparate forms of intervention, a tiered educational system for those who have and those who don't have develops.

Today I continue to struggle through my Spanish vocabulary workbook. I harbour secret hopes of rescue. Perhaps I will move to Mexico, or a Latino family will adopt me and speak to me in the secret language of Spanish. More importantly however, I hope that someone will rescue our at-risk students sitting before computers or workbooks, quietly working their way through high school. I hope that someone will remove the workbooks and offer progressive, challenging, and stimulating education. I hope that a place called school will adopt them and speak to them in the secret language of learning. |

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