

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN EDUCATION

AN ADDITIONAL LEARNING CHALLENGE FOR CERTAIN STUDENTS

CONTEXT

For our new teaching team, the establishment of a new nursing program at Cégep Gérard-Godin has been an opportunity to take another look at the values underlying our concerted educational approach. With a view to promoting the success of as many of our students as possible, several of which are new immigrants and unfamiliar with Quebec’s educational context, we wanted to use strategies that would foster the development of their professional judgment and reasoning ability.

The diversity of students’ prior educational and school-related experiences in college and university classrooms today has resulted in students with a wide array of learning strategies, conceptions, and values. Some of these elements can constitute serious obstacles to learning when they diverge from what is expected in a particular program or on the job market. As teachers, we must not underestimate the potential impact of these factors on the success and interpersonal relationships of students as well as the consistency of their education.

Do all education systems value critical thinking and its expression? Does everyone have the same understanding and perception of the autonomy we generally expect of students in higher education? Are all students comfortable with active learning? Are the inherent values of certain subjects and their issues taught explicitly, on par with technical, scientific, and practical knowledge (Raisky & Loncle, 1993)? Are the fundamental values behind the stance and paradigm in which teachers conceive their professional actions explicit enough to enable students to adjust their attitudes and behaviours and then go on to achieve academic success?

This article shares a reflection we have undertaken on the usually implicit elements of our various teaching and learning activities that fall within active pedagogy. Examining the hidden curriculum behind our program helped us bring it up to date and make it explicit so as to eliminate the obstacle that it presents to the learning of some of our students, particularly in the areas of relationships to knowledge, interpersonal relationships, and professional relationships.

THE CHALLENGES OF MIGRATION

Students with immigrant backgrounds¹ go through difficult personal and social times when they arrive in a new community, including a loss of social and financial status, unrecognized studies, a maze of bureaucracy, and more. The lack of familiar points of reference further hampers their integration, such as being unfamiliar with their new city, local habits and customs, ways of greeting or addressing others, and administrative services. If they initially hoped to settle in a country where their lives would be problem-free and they would be greeted with open arms, disillusionment and isolation soon find them. Furthermore, some have received help and support from their home communities and consequently feel a strong sense of

indebtedness to them. Immigrant students must cope with these issues even as they pursue their higher education. The result is that they are more vulnerable than others who know the local customs, are familiar with the education system, have friends and family they can count on, and have less adjustments to make.

Consequently, when they start college, immigrant students have twice as much to learn – they must both assimilate educational content and adjust to the local culture – all within their program’s planned completion time.

THE FORMAL, ACTUAL, AND HIDDEN CURRICULA

What exactly do students learn during their college education? What does their schooling focus on? Perrenoud suggests that we approach this question in terms of the curriculum as a pathway:

¹ Here we explicitly refer to international immigrants, but Canadian or Quebec students may face the same migration-related challenges, especially young Aboriginals who must leave their communities behind to study at colleges and universities. The secondary–college transition may also create a need for students to adjust to varying degrees.



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“In the field of education, [the curriculum] is an educational pathway. And this is where the complexity begins: Are we talking about their actual pathway? Or a pathway imagined, envisioned, organized, and ‘programmed’ to produce certain learning? Most likely, there is always a potential and even unavoidable gap between the intention and the effects of instruction, and even between the imagined educational path and the actual experience of [learners]. Yet, because such a gap exists in all human endeavour, it seems trivial. In education, the gap is further widened by the complexity of [learners’] minds, by autonomy, and by the actual possibilities for continuously adapting instruction and reorganizing students’ pathway according to the resistance of the individual or reality” (1993, n.p.).

Thus considered, an educational pathway comprises at least two levels of curriculum: the planned pathway (or imagined/formal curriculum) and the actual pathway as it unfolds during classroom instruction, shapes experience, and transforms learners, i.e., the actual or real curriculum.

The ‘formal curriculum’, as we define it, reflects the specifications of the Ministère de l’Éducation et de l’Enseignement supérieur (MEES). In technical programs, the official curriculum is made up of educational directives to follow in order to produce an anticipated exit profile and the professional skills required to earn a professional title. Based on these ministry specifications, each college is responsible for developing a plan for their program and a resulting academic outline for each course therein. The formal curriculum is a common basis each teacher uses to determine the content and teaching/assessment strategies to employ. In the words of Perrenoud,

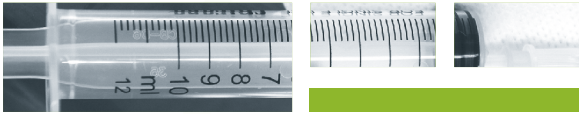
“even when codified in writing, the formal curriculum is first and foremost a matter of representation. There are as many interpretations as there are political and pedagogical currents, positions, advocacy groups, and regional or activist perspectives” (1993, n.p., freely translated).

Hence the existence of the ‘actual curriculum’, i.e., what is actually taught in the classroom, after a teacher has instructionally transposed the content according to their own view of things, educational background, epistemological stance, preferences, values, beliefs, etc. (Graber, 2013). This means the actual curriculum varies according to each teacher – and even each group they teach – without mentioning that certain factors of the context or classroom climate can also interfere with what the teacher initially had in mind.

The actual curriculum is therefore mainly forged from the formal curriculum, but also other components that are not necessarily spoken, observable, or even conscious. Given that each institution has its own cultural issues, each institution and even each subject area will also have its own hallmark culture, which is conveyed implicitly (ibid.). Thus, education can engender, “learning that is foreign to the educational intent,” in other words, that escapes precise wording and belongs to the realm of the unspoken, systems of thought, patterns, or habitus (Perrenoud, 1995, p. 240). We refer to this implicit culture of a program as the ‘hidden curriculum’. Perrenoud refers to this concept as, “the conditions and routines of school life that regularly give rise to unknown learning that are in fact foreign to what the school knows and declares that it wants to impart” (1995, p. 243, freely translated).

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM AS AN OBSTACLE TO LEARNING

No reference is made to these elements in the formal curriculum, and students are unaware of them until they are confronted with values that diverge from their own or to a learning system that differs from what they have previously been exposed to. This phenomenon can be even more striking in programs where interpersonal relationships are central to the competencies to develop, professional judgment is a key part of the skills to master, and an active pedagogy is employed as an instructional strategy to promote a reflective stance in students. For example, some active-learning strategies, such as simulations involving formalized and validated scenarios in nursing, are not commonly used across the world today. Some novel pedagogical practices used in Quebec, based on socio-constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), among others, are, in fact, little known in countries with high migration rates, where the predominant pedagogical paradigm is rooted in lecturing, rote learning, and repetition (Bégin, 2008). Much hidden learning takes place in a program, even if teachers are not necessarily aware of it while they are focused on teaching activities and on the formal content to be learned. The result is that immigrant students can come up against two major difficulties during their learning: their relationship to knowledge and their interpersonal/professional relationships.



Students' relationship to knowledge

Whereas, in our classes, it is common to work on reflectivity by critically examining scholarly articles, in other education systems, texts are considered to be authoritative bearers of truth and may not be subjected to criticism. Some of our immigrant students have received an education where authority cannot be challenged, and they could never permit themselves to critique a teacher, researcher, or anyone older or more educated than them.

Additionally, having access to a multitude of resources (Internet, books, CD-ROMs, videos, etc.) poses a major challenge for some students who are not used to finding information on their own. Overwhelmed with information that they have not learned how to sort through, they no longer know how to learn. Their usual learning strategies (such as reading texts or learning by heart) are turned upside down with methods more common in Quebec, such as writing summaries, taking notes, finding articles, and discussing with their peers.

Another challenge for certain immigrant learners is the information contained between the lines, especially when French is their second language. For example, implicit meanings can make it hard for them to understand instructions: they interpret questions asked in class, written assignments, and exams according to their cultural representations and their level of knowledge of the language. This issue is unrelated to their ability to learn or to demonstrate what they know. These students are sometimes viewed as weak or struggling in school, when the problem is actually their interpretation of what is being asked of them, because they might be unaware of a word or expression having another meaning than the one that they know. Hence, language can also be part of the hidden curriculum, given that, for some students, the meaning assigned to words contributes to a form of implicit expectation.

Interpersonal and professional relationships

In addition, not all students interpret the teacher's role the same way. Immigrant students also have to adjust to new relationships with teachers and peers. For example, it may be commonplace in Quebec to write emails to teachers, ask them questions in class, and even comment on their instructions. In some countries, this would be unthinkable and even punishable. For some students with a different background, such actions would be considered impolite and disrespectful.

This absolute respect for hierarchy can also produce misunderstandings in the workplace. For example, in some countries, a nurse under the authority of a doctor would never defend a patient's desired care, whereas such representation is expected

in the healthcare settings of Quebec. Moreover, some activities in other parts of the world can come under the purview of the nurse (prescribing medication, making incisions during childbirth, etc.), whereas this is not the case in our province. In short, conceptions of professional roles vary from country to country, and require explanations and adjustments on the part of teachers in order to make sure students are aware of the professional requirements in our part of the world.

If they are not shared with students, the underlying values of an education program can raise significant obstacles to learning

ADJUSTING TEACHING, EXPLAINING VALUES

Teachers in the college system can support students in their learning process by making an effort to bring the hidden curriculum behind their teaching to light. Immigrant learners need to be explained the prevailing scholastic and professional values, as well as the cultural, institutional, or societal values in which they are embedded.

Graber (2013) examines the need to explain the hidden curriculum and the specific challenges and issues posed by active pedagogies to certain students, especially when developing professional judgment. She recommends that teaching teams carefully identify the learning goals of a course or even a lesson in order to make explicit the main values involved in the educational context at hand. This is exactly what we have done in our new nursing program: drawing inspiration from Schwartz's (1999) theoretical framework, we used a deductive and associative analytical process to uncover the cultural and pedagogical values of our program (Fournier, 2013). Schwartz's framework distinguishes between six fundamental values:² conservatism, mastery, hierarchy, autonomy (intellectual and affective), harmony, and egalitarianism.

Some values are predominant in multiple cultures or education systems, whereas in others they are not. If not shared with students, the underlying values of an education program can raise significant obstacles to learning, especially for those who are used to navigating other social codes (Graber, 2013). **Figure 1** illustrates the 6 focal points of fundamental values and their associated concepts and attitudes (Schwartz, 1999).

² Editor's note: Readers interested in learning more about Schwartz's values can consult an AQPC interview conducted with Ms. Fournier in the winter of 2013: Developing Cross-Cultural Competence (vol. 26, no. 2, p. 25-29) [www.aqpc.qc.ca/en/journal/article/developing-cross-cultural-competence].

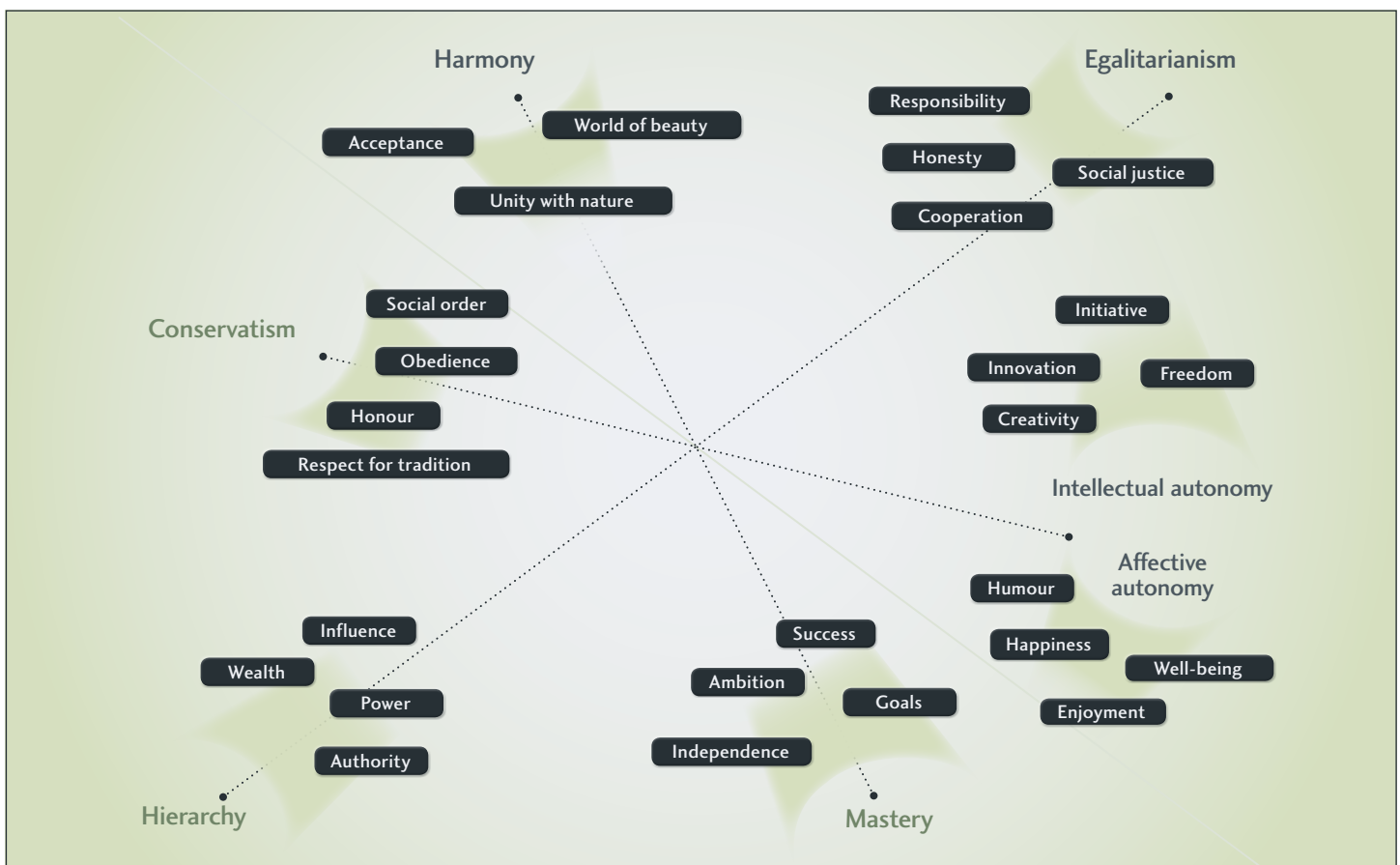


Active pedagogical approaches (authentic professional situations, flipped classrooms, problem-based learning, simulations, etc.) fall within the learning paradigm and require learners to use a number of learning strategies, including information processing and execution strategies as well as metacognitive and reflective ones such as anticipation and self-regulation (Bégin, 2008). More specifically, the instructional strategies that we use in our nursing program³ that aim to simulate authentic professional situations through high-fidelity clinical simulation (HFCS), or standardized patients, are rooted in socio-constructivism. The strategies are

aimed at helping learners develop critical thinking, clinical reasoning, and professional judgment (Tanner, 2006). The instructional activities are thus situated within the value of intellectual autonomy, which is characterized by the expression of ideas, definitions, and unique and personalized critical analysis. The construction of knowledge by student groups (during debriefing sessions) and the attitudes of cooperation and collaboration needed to meet learning objectives connected with the value of egalitarianism, runs contrary to a hierarchical relationship with authority and knowledge.

FIGURE 1

KEYWORDS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHWARTZ'S (1999) VALUES



³ Editor's note: This pedagogical approach involving debriefing sessions was presented in an article entitled Developing Judgment in Authentic Situations. Experience-Based Learning in a Simulated Scenario for Safe Professional Practice (vol. 30, no. 1, fall 2016, p. 14-22), by Marie-France Deschênes, Viviane Fournier & André St-Julien [www.aqpc.qc.ca/en/journal/article/developing-judgment-authentic-situations-experience-based-learning-simulated].



Hence, in this pedagogical approach, teachers can be situated squarely within the value of egalitarianism: the authority of the knowledge does not come from them, but rather from the entire group, which grounds its analysis on evidence-based data and available knowledge. In the context of active pedagogy, the teacher is responsible for the proper conduct of educational activities and for identifying gaps in performance according to certain models (Simon et al., 2010) as well as the theoretical contributions needed to improve problem-solving within (lived or examined) professional situations. The means used to bridge performance gaps between students draw on theoretical contributions and are defined by the learners. These innovative approaches reflect the value placed on mastery; students are responsible for their own learning and are the architects of developing their own professional competencies, leveraging their individual autonomy.

Pinpointing the values underlying the learning paradigm and the form of the active pedagogy used in our program helped us to then determine anticipated attitudes (such as autonomy, reflectivity, the expression of critical thinking, or even metacognition) and associated behaviours (Beauchamp, 2013 ; Gosselin, 2010). These expectations stem from both the program's exit profile and from elements required to give students a sense of pedagogical security (INACSL, 2016) in order to preserve the personal and professional integrity of each individual. It is important to emphasize that, unlike clinical internships with real patients, simulations provide a learning context free of actual physical risks; mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn how to do better. However, in a poorly supervised or unhelpful environment, the visibility of mistakes can constitute a danger for learners faced with humiliation resulting from inadequate communication or interventions and can therefore potentially undermine their integrity.

Table 1 presents one aspect of our departmental reflection on the behaviours expected of nursing students during simulations. Based on the values derived from this reflection, behavioural expectations are now spelled out to all students at the beginning of the program during a course on the learner's role in college and on their professional role. When authentic simulations begin, we remind them of these values and expectations in an orientation notebook, and have each student sign a commitment form. During the debriefings, teachers adopt a stance of supporting learning, and focus on developing attitudes, supervising behaviours, and managing group dynamics.

The values, attitudes, and behaviours established by the teaching team should also be consistent with the applicable professional code of ethics, especially since simulation activities are considered an extension of students' internship hours. Any student who fails to abide by them may be excluded from the activity. So far, the expectations we have explained seem to have helped avoid such a scenario. Instead, they have facilitated engagement and cooperation by clearly defining expectations and responsibilities. They have also nurtured a bond of trust within multicultural groups by supplying a clear and specific common ground.

promoting the integration and success of immigrant students, clarifying expectations can contribute to the full engagement and participation of all learners, regardless of their backgrounds, and nurture a bond of trust within multicultural and diversified groups.

TABLEAU 1 ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS EXPECTED OF STUDENTS DURING SIMULATIONS

SCHWARTZ VALUE	EXPECTED ATTITUDE
INTELLECTUAL AUTONOMY	CRITICAL THINKING
Observable behaviours: Giving a respectful opinion, suggesting improvements to peers, constructive questioning	
EGALITARIANISM	RESPECT
Observable behaviours: Respecting others' turn to speak, listening, managing emotions, allowing for mistakes, refraining from mockery, upholding confidentiality	
MASTERY	OPENNESS TO CRITICISM
Observable behaviours: Openness to feedback from peers or facilitators, listening, asking questions for clarification, reflection	



CONCLUSION

School plays an important role in,

“acquiring certain aspects of common sense and forging intellectual routines that bring us to take multiple facets of reality for granted, as obvious and indisputable, and the ability to describe them, organize them logically, and transform them” (Perrenoud, 1995, p. 247, freely translated).

If students have another way of seeing, understanding, and explaining reality – i.e., if they are faced with pedagogies that are foreign to them, if they have another vision of teaching methods, or if they have a different representation of teachers and their role – they will find themselves confronted with these implicit elements. The arbitrariness of these elements pervades culture, common sense, general mindsets, values, pedagogical strategies, and instructional methods, all of which teachers rely on to impart educational content and vocational knowledge (Graber, 2013). Students from other cultures and unfamiliar with the implicit aspects of our province will encounter the hidden curriculum in their programs. To learn an occupation and succeed in school, they will first have to discover and incorporate new mindsets and ways of learning.

This makes it essential to prepare all students – and especially immigrant students – for the hidden arbitrariness we have discussed. Teaching teams must bring to light and make explicit the knowledge, know-how, skills, values, and attitudes required to first learn how to learn so that they can develop program-specific competencies and adequately prepare students for their future professional endeavours. In addition to promoting the integration and success of immigrant students, clarifying expectations can contribute to the full engagement and participation of all learners, regardless of their backgrounds, and nurture a bond of trust within multicultural and diversified groups. ●

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