

The Pedagogy of Japan Studies for Japanese University Students

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Abstract

Content-focused language teaching approaches such as Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) continue to gain both recognition and credibility. This short article introduces both the theory and practice of such approaches. After looking at the various benefits and challenges of a content-focused approach, the author offers an example of a theme-based CLIL program that is currently being used in a tertiary-level English program for management course students in Japan. Specifically, we explore how a required Japan Studies course for second-year students has been designed and developed. The aim here is to highlight for readers the instructional design process as well as some of the various considerations at both the macro (curriculum) and micro (task) levels. Readers are then challenged to consider the motivational merits of implementing a content-focused approach in their own teaching contexts, and presented with a list of suggested readings for further exploration.

Keywords: Content-Based Instruction (CBI), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Japan Studies, Affective Learning Domain, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Instructional Design (ID)

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Introduction

This paper provides a brief overview of the design, development and delivery of a content-focused English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program for university students in Japan, with a specific focus on a Japan Studies course for non-English majors in a business faculty. Content-focused language teaching approaches such as Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) continue to gain both recognition and credibility (Coyle, 2007; Jones & Palmer, 2017), though a number of challenges in implementation still exist (Jones & Palmer, 2016). The main purpose of this article is to outline the rationale for and pedagogical considerations involved in CBI/CLIL approaches to EFL teaching and inclusion of this specific course in the required curriculum at a private university in western Japan. Aiming at a balance of theory and practice, we offer some of the early design decisions for the program (now in its tenth year), curriculum development strategies and considerations, and support structures for both learners and teachers.

Historical Context

Work on the overall curriculum for these learners began in mid 2007 when official approval was handed down on the creation of a new faculty conceptualized as a hybrid between business administration and economics. Key features of the new department were project-based learning, healthy doses of liberal arts study and communicative approaches to language learning. One underlying aim of the program was to draw on innovative teaching methodologies that provide students with more opportunities to apply and experiment with the knowledge and skills they are learning in all of their courses.

In preparation for inauguration of the new faculty, a content-focused curriculum was outlined based on the principle of “the integration of general education with content-based English education,” delivered via an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program and integrated communicative approaches. The primary goals were to (1) develop English communication skills for global communication, (2) foster cultural, cross-cultural and global literacy needed to contribute to local and global communities, and (3) nurture critical and analytical thinking for effective self-expression in English. One key concept that emerged from the early curriculum design sessions was a shift from studying English (*eigo wo benkyo suru*) to studying “in” English (*eigo de benkyo suru*). The analogy we like to use is that we do not learn to ride a bicycle by reading and studying about bicycles (history, physics, engineering) but by actually getting on, peddling, steering, and even falling down sometimes.

The required English curriculum that emerged and was included in the proposal to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT) included two twice-a-week courses and one once-a-week course in both (Spring & Fall) 15-week semesters of the first year, and four once-a-week courses in the Spring semester of the second year as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Required English Courses

| <i>Semester One</i> | <i>Semester Two</i> | <i>Semester Three</i> |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| American Studies (2) | Global Challenges (2) | Japan Studies (1) |
| Speech & Discussion (2) | Discussion & Debate (2) | European Studies (1) |
| Active Listening I (1) | Active Listening II (1) | TOEIC/TOEFL (1) |
| | | Business Communication (1) |

* Numbers in parentheses indicate how many times these classes meet per week.

Although the aim has been to help learners develop all four language skills in all of their English courses, both Global Challenges and American Studies (since swapped in the curriculum) were conceptualized as reading-writing focused, while the Speech & Discussion and Discussion and Debate courses would emphasize development of speaking confidence and proficiency. The Active Listening course was subsequently renamed and the listening focus was balanced with study skills.

Elective English courses (all meeting once a week) were offered in the fourth semester and beyond under the headings of (a) Regional Studies, (b) Media Studies, (c) Liberal Arts, (d) Communication, and (e) Business Skills. Aiming at increased flexibility and choice for learners, two additional categories were subsequently added (Studies in Literacy, Cross Disciplinary).

Early on, we adopted the following vision and mission statements for the English language program at CUBE:

Vision Statement: We aim to create and maintain a program that inspires students to reach for and achieve their language-learning potential. At the same time, we hope to foster a sense of wonder and develop critical thinking skills that will help students in their academic pursuits and beyond.

Mission Statement: Toward this vision, we will utilize the combined knowledge and skills of the faculty in offering a learner-centered, communicative approach to instruction in all classes. Courses will generally center on problem-based, project-based and task-based activities aimed at helping learners develop themselves as both individuals and as contributing members of various communities of practice.

With the above pieces in place, we began designing and developing the courses in a way we felt best addressed and integrated the tenets of the overall program as well as the above vision and mission statements. Much of the groundwork for each course was done from early 2008 until the doors opened in April, 2009. Our main inspirations in designing the curriculum were Brown (1995), Van Leir (1996) and Brinton, Snow & Wesche (2003). The guiding principles and design decisions are outlined in Appendix 1 to provide readers with a more intimate understanding of our aims.

Curriculum Development Strategies and Considerations

A number of instructional design models were consulted when setting out to design the overall curriculum and specific courses (see, for example, Branch & Kopcha, 2014), but we eventually settled on significant learning experiences (Fink, 2003) as the framework of choice.

Significant Learning Experiences (SLEs)

Instructional consultant L. Dee Fink (2003) starts from the fundamental question of how we can create courses that provide significant learning experiences for our learners. His book offers several key ideas and suggestions for instructional design, including his concepts of backward design, forward assessment and the twelve steps of integrated course design (Appendix 2). Another contribution was his attempt at updating and broadening Benjamin Bloom's (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill & Krathwohl, 1956) taxonomy of learning to accommodate a broader range of learning. In constructing this new taxonomy (Fig. 1), Fink (2003) defines learning in terms of change (i.e. for learning to occur, there has to be some kind of change in the learner). Fink stresses that each kind of learning is related to the others, and that when a teacher finds a way to help students achieve one kind of learning, this can enhance student achievement in other kinds of learning.

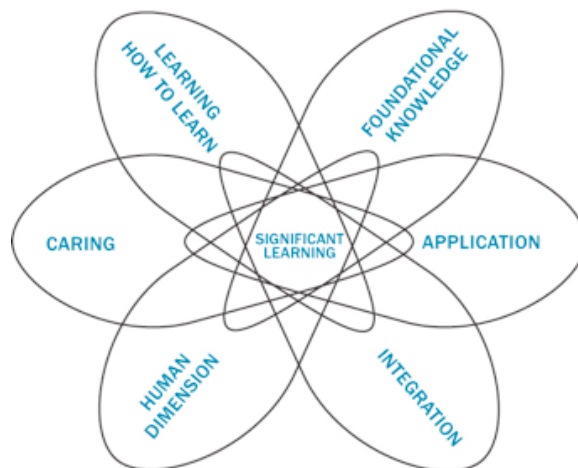


Figure 1. Significant learning experiences (Fink, 2003)

Appendix 3 includes key concepts related to each of the six categories in this taxonomy of learning. Fink (2003) also stresses that the intersection of all of these kinds of learning is the sweet spot, what he calls significant learning experiences. These ideas seemed especially applicable to our curriculum development endeavors, especially as related to content-focused language instruction.

Content-Focused Language Instruction

Our decision to adopt a content-focused curriculum was greatly influenced by findings and developments in the fields of language teaching and second-language acquisition related to Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and more recently Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Although the practice of learning (and teaching) a new language via authentic subject matter has a long history, it is only the

past thirty years or so that empirical studies have been seriously undertaken and that clear examples and viable templates have been published (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 2003; Coyle, 2007). The rationale outlined by Brinton, Snow and Wesche (2003) is that a CBI curriculum:

- offers learners the necessary conditions for second language learning by exposing them to meaningful language;
- builds on the learner’s previous learning experiences in the subject matter, the target language, and in formal educational settings;
- takes into account the interests and needs of the learners through their engagement with the academic subject matter and discourse patterns that they need to master;
- allows a focus on (communicative language) use as well as on (accurate) usage; and
- incorporates the eventual uses the learner will make of the language through engagement with relevant content and L2 discourse with a purpose other than language teaching.

The dominant models of CBI that have appeared are (1) Theme-Based Language Instruction, (2) Sheltered Content Instruction, and (3) Adjunct Language Instruction. These and other CBI models differ from one another in terms of being content or language driven. Table 2 highlights some of the characteristics of each.

Table 2. Characteristics of Content and Language Driven CBI Curriculums

| Content-Driven | Language-Driven |
|--|---|
| Content is taught in L2. Content learning takes priority. Language learning is secondary. Content objectives determined by course goals or curriculum. Teachers must select language objectives. Students evaluated on content mastery. | Content is used to learn L2. Language learning takes priority. Content learning is incidental. Language objectives determined by L2 course goals or curriculum. Students evaluated on content to be integrated. Students evaluated on language skills/proficiency. |

Theme or topic-based language courses are used to bring subject matter into the language classroom. The materials chosen provide a springboard for analyzing and studying language. In comparison, sheltered courses are content courses that include help with target language meaning and subtleties. Finally, the adjunct model involves separate but coordinated classes, one with a focus on the content and the other with language support related to that content. In terms of instructional format, the three models differ in the degree of explicit integration of language and content (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 2003). Figure 2 shows how each of these models fall on a CBI continuum.

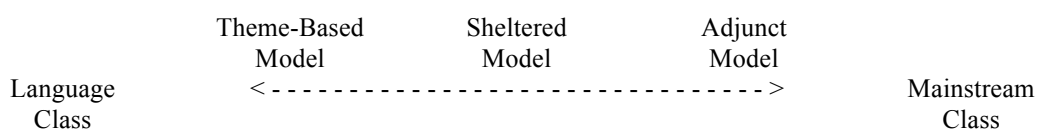


Figure 2. A Content-Based Continuum.

The CBI approach is somewhat related to (1) English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which usually is for vocational or occupational needs, and (2) English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The goal of CBI is to help students acquire a new language using the context of specific subject matter. The assumption is that students learn the language by using it within the specific context. Rather than learning a language out of context, it is learned within the context of a specific academic subject. The following section includes some of our other assumptions.

Assumptions

Some of our underlying assumptions are that (1) supporting teachers in their classroom endeavors is potentially the most effective path to supporting learners in our program, (2) teachers come to our program from a variety of educational backgrounds, have a range of pedagogic experiences, and possess diverse skills, knowledge and beliefs related to teaching and learning language, and (3) learning a new language is a complex, social endeavor that is hindered rather than helped by mechanical, technocratic processes or approaches. Second Language (L2) teaching assumptions are that (4) learning vocabulary is fundamental to language learning and high frequency vocabulary provides the strongest foundation, (5) extensive reading will help learners improve reading competence and confidence, and (6) a genre-based approach to literacy based on sound systemic functional grammar (SFG) perspectives will facilitate a better understanding of the reading-writing connection and increased overall proficiency.

Japan Studies

In this section, I outline key components of the Japan Studies course to illustrate some of the major considerations at the macro (curriculum) and micro (task) levels. The course description and course goals are offered here to give readers some context. This is followed by brief introductions to each of the modules.

Course Description

Japan Studies is a content-based English course, with an integrated skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) focus. This course will be taught in three-week modules, and will cover four broad themes as they relate to Japan: (1) society/culture, (2) business/economy, (3) the environment, and (4) politics/government. Students will be challenged to build on their existing background knowledge, and reflect more deeply on what it means to be Japanese and Japan's role on the world stage. Weekly reading and/or listening assignments will be used as a basis for in-class discussions and activities. Students will write short multi-paragraph texts (narrative, recount, report, hortatory) on Japan-related themes.

Course Goals

The overall aim of the course is to develop English language and critical thinking skills through engagement in the course content. Upon completion of the course, students will demonstrate the ability to do the following for Japan-related topics: (1) read and comprehend extended texts, (2) listen and comprehend short lectures or

videos, (3) write narratives, recounts, reports and persuasive texts, (4) discuss confidently, and (5) think critically.

Module One – Society/Culture

Using the SLEs framework described above, we developed a course handbook, teaching/learning materials and detailed lesson plans for each of the fifteen ninety-minute lessons (<https://tinyurl.com/js-lessonplans>), including both content and language learning outcomes, summary of tasks (including time estimates), materials/equipment, supplemental resources, and out-of-class assignments. Time is spent during the first meeting eliciting student-generated course goals, including discussion of how these relate to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) “can do” statements that are a cornerstone of the English program.

There are three main components in this first module. First, the class generates a list of common expressions or sayings in Japanese such as *ito bata kaigi* (literally “around the water well), which is used to describe the tendency for housewives to gather and chat about daily events. This is an ongoing task for the whole semester, and groups of students are assigned the task of coming up with literal meanings in English as well as short descriptions of how the expressions/sayings are commonly used.

The main listening components for this module are a twenty-minute documentary about Japanese education aired on NHK World (www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/) and short videos on social phenomena in Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs - mofachannel on Youtube) such as *kawaii* (liking of things cute), *mirai* (high tech industries), *oishi* (local delicacies), *takumi* (craftsmanship) and *omotenashi* (hospitality). The rationale was that learners would be familiar with the topics and could thus be pushed harder on the language. The education video is split over three meetings, with worksheets that include language focus (e.g., fill in missing information, find the changes, paraphrasing) and discussion prompts, while the MOFA videos are assigned as out-of-class assignments.

The new writing assignment for the society and culture module is a narrative based on a school-related *anime* (animation), *manga* or television drama. This change was introduced so that students would have further practice with this genre and also because the topic is more closely linked with the listening material. We also believe that learners will be more invested in the assignment if they can choose a story of their liking. We also upload final versions of the narratives written by higher proficiency students as examples for future cohorts.

Supplemental topics and tasks for this module are related to the dark side of *manga* and *anime* (such as child pornography) and the social phenomena of *hikkikomori* (or social withdrawal).

Module Two – Business/Economy

The transition to the second module includes a return to the Japanese expressions/sayings task, and students are guided to business related concepts such as *amakudari* (literally “decent from heaven”), which is the practice of high-ranking bureaucrats taking golden-parachute positions at major corporations. The main

listening materials are (1) a short Youtube video in which a Dutch student introduces his internship experiences at a stevedoring company in Japan, and (2) news stories related to the company Rakuten, its founder Hiroshi Mikitani, and their English-only policy.

The writing genre targeted in this module is the recount, especially biographies of Japanese business leaders. The teaching cycle starts with a discussion of the genre (including what students remember of earlier attempts), and this is followed by an in-class deconstruction of a sample biography (the subject being Mikitani). Small groups of students are then assigned biographies of other business leaders to analyze in terms of structure and content, after which individual group members need to present overviews to students from other groups. Students are assessed on their own writing as well as how much they learned from the other student presentations, with the help of Cornell style notes (taught in the first year and reinforced throughout the program).

The final component of this module is a transition to the topic of the environment, with readings, audio/video segments and discussion of general corporate social responsibility and specific environmental policies of select companies.

Module Three – The Environment

Earlier in the program we developed lesson plans for this module around the topic of Japan's eco-model cities, which provided a nice segue into the government/politics module. Eventually, the focus shifted to Japan's nuclear power program and endeavors to switch to renewable energy sources. Again, lesson plans and materials center on incrementally longer reading assignments and audio/video listening clips.

A small group research project is also assigned in this module where students choose an environmental issue, research causes and effects, and report their findings to other groups. Past topics include quite broad issues such as noise pollution or the over-reliance on vending machines to specific problems such as environmental threats to local coral reefs or individual animal species.

Module Four – Politics/Government

Intuitively, this is the least popular topic or theme for these learners. However, we are convinced that inclusion of the module can help prepare these learners for active civic engagement and meet the goal of developing critical thinking skills. The main components of this module are (1) short introductions to the branches of government, (2) group research on one of the political parties, and (3) peer interviews as the final assessment for this module and the overall course.

As with other group tasks in this course, the group research project includes convergent and divergent activities. Normally, groups of three or four students are assigned a unique topic/subject of inquiry, individual members work on their own, the group comes together to confirm their findings/understandings, and finally individuals present these findings/understandings to learners from other groups.

Ideally, teachers can bring their classes together for the peer interviews. Normally, two students from one class will interview one student from the other class. With this

arrangement, each student will take the role of interviewer twice (once as the lead interviewer and once as an assistant) and be interviewed once. These interviews are audio recorded (using digital voice recorders or smart phones), and evaluation is based on both teacher (70%) and peer (30%) assessments.

Perceived Challenges

One challenge we anticipated when designing this course was gaining student buy-in with regard to the value of studying about Japan. Also, as this and other third-semester courses meet only once a week, teachers are limited in how deeply they can go into each of the topics/issues. We designed this as a survey course, but there are times when it feels like there are missed opportunities where students would benefit from delving deeper into the content and/or exploring the language more. There is also a danger with this type of course that materials will become outdated. As one example, the video clips and short readings focused on Hiroshi Mikitani and the English policy at Rakuten has lost some of its freshness. Another challenge in the past has been finding good biographies of famous Japanese women in business. We are finally seeing more female business leaders like Tomoko Namba, Founder and Chairman of the Board for DeNA, and hope to gain a better gender balance. Finally, as with other courses with a genre reading-writing focus, gaining teachers' understanding and acceptance of this approach has been a challenge. At the same time, we are not sure whether or not individual teachers are using the intended teaching-cycles (or other best practices) for each of the target reading and writing assignments.

Current & Planned Support

We continue to make extensive use of Moodle to support students in the JS class. There are links to practice tests, videos and other online resources, as well as PDF or Word versions of worksheets, transcripts and writing frameworks. One further plan we have for JS and other courses where genre writing is taught is to prepare short, focused instructional videos for students, with an understanding that these videos will also help teachers better understand the instructional cycles we expect in the program. We see these types of videos as also being an important support structure for other parts of our program.

In terms of program-level teacher support, course handbooks and other resources are reviewed and updated year by year, and both print and digital versions are maintained. Furthermore, semester-end meetings are organized for July and January. The July meetings are course-specific and chaired by the course leader with the aim of sharing ideas and opinions regarding course improvement. The January meeting is a gathering of all full- and part-time instructors with the aim of (1) reviewing each Fall-semester course, (2) preparing for all Spring-semester courses, and (3) providing focused faculty-development workshops. Course leaders again coordinate these reviews and previews of specific courses, while the faculty development workshops are designed and delivered by one or more of the full-time teachers or by an invited guest speaker.

Discussion & Conclusion

In this short article, I have attempted to describe the design and development of a content-focused English language program at a private university in Japan, the challenges we are experiencing in the delivery of a specific course (Japan Studies), and how we are addressing these challenges. Earlier studies (Jones & Palmer, 2017) identified three main areas that we identified where support is being provided for teachers and learners. Our current understanding is that these three areas (Fig. 3), namely, faculty development, organizational tools and instructional resources, will continue as the pillars of our support structure.

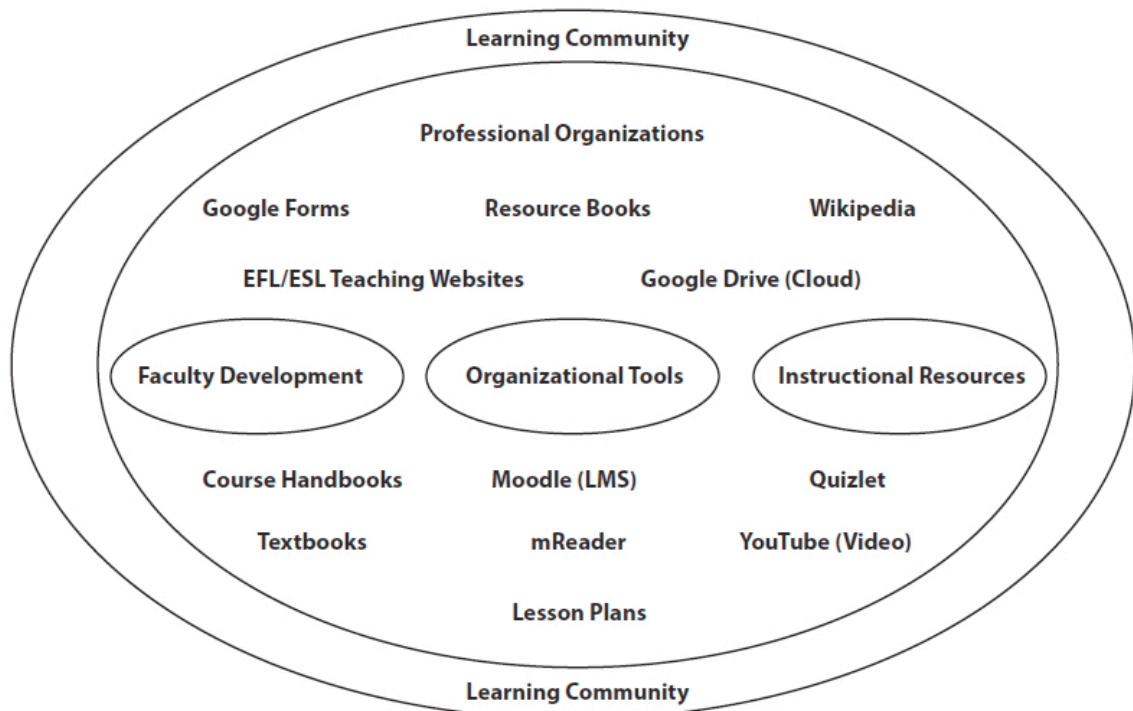


Fig. 3 Tentative Conceptualization of Teaching/Learning Support Structures/Frameworks (Jones & Palmer, 2017)

We see faculty development as being all-important in that teachers need to continue struggling toward best practices, especially for a content-focused language program. At the same time, we view that support for teachers in their classroom endeavors is potentially the most effective path to supporting learners in our program. Another core element is organizational tools, by which we mean a place like Moodle or Google Drive where teachers and students can access and share materials, links and other resources where and when they need them (just-in-time). Instructional resources, such as handbooks, lesson plans, and worksheets form the final pillar of support.

As mentioned earlier, we are making efforts to address the various challenges, and some of these are listed around the core elements of faculty development, organizational tools and instructional resources. Many of these are not neatly categorized under any one banner, which is why we arranged them around the core elements. Appendix 4 is a short list of useful online resources and I earnestly hope the

discussion in this paper will stimulate dialog among the wider community of teachers in similar teaching contexts.

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I wish to thank the many colleagues (past and present) that have helped us develop ideas and contributed to the program. At the same time, I appreciate the efforts and enthusiasm of past and present students who have suffered my zany antics and kept their good humor.

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Appendix 1 – Guiding Principles and Design Decisions

Guiding Principles

- Effective and efficient use of existing resources,
- Balance between face-to-face meetings and self-access materials,
- Balance between concept learning and procedural learning,
- Activities and materials that appeal to various learning styles,
- Activities and materials that are intrinsically motivating,
- Teaching methodology based on accepted and emerging theories of learning,
- Activities and materials that promote success and boost confidence,
- Get students active within the first five minutes of any encounter,
- Include non-native varieties of English

Design Decisions

1. Clear performance objectives will be established at both the macro (curriculum) and micro (task/activity) levels (see, for example, Mager, 1997).
2. The curriculum will include work on all four language-skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) but will concentrate more effort on improving the receptive skills of reading and listening at earlier stages and productive skills later in the program.
3. Criterion-referenced test items will be developed to clearly measure progress and performance (see, for example, Shrock & Coscarelli, 1989).
4. All components will have the underlying goal of increasing familiarity with the most frequent words in the English language. (Nation, 2002)
5. Attention will be focused on improving both language competencies (including communication strategies) and social skills.
6. Attention will also be directed at raising cross-cultural awareness and nurturing positive language learning attitudes and beliefs.
7. Individualized instruction will be implemented whenever possible.
8. Emphasis will be placed on transfer of knowledge/skills to outside pursuits.

Appendix 2 – Twelve Steps of Integrated Course Design (Fink, 2003)

Initial Phase

Building Strong Primary Components

1. *Where are you?* Size up the situational factors, including specific context, general context, nature of the subject, student characteristics, teacher characteristics and special pedagogical challenges.
2. *Where do you want to go?* What are your learning goals for the course? Ideally, what would you like students to get out of this course in terms of different kinds of learning: *Foundational knowledge, Application, Integration, Human Dimension, Caring, and Learning how to learn:*
3. *How will the students and you know if they get there?* How will you know if the students have achieved these goals? What kinds of feedback and assessment would be appropriate?

4. *How are you going to get there?* Select or develop learning activities that reflect the principles of active learning.
5. *Who and what can help?* Find resources.

Intermediate Phase

Assembling the Components into a Dynamic, Coherent Whole

6. *What are the major topics in the this course?* Create a thematic structure for the course.
7. *What will the students need to do?* Identify the specific learning activities necessary for the desired kinds of learning and put them into an effective instructional strategy.
8. *What is the overall scheme of learning activities?* It can be helpful to create a diagram of the course structure and the instructional strategy, and then find ways to enhance the way these two components work together.

Final Phase

Taking Care of Important Details

9. *How are you going to grade?* Develop your grading system.
10. *What could go wrong?* Debug the design by analyzing and assessing this “first draft” of the course.
11. *Let students know what you are planning.* Now write the syllabus.
12. *How will you know how the course is going?* How it went? Plan an evaluation of the course itself and of your teaching performance.

Appendix 3 – Six Categories of Significant Learning (Fink, 2003)

Foundational Knowledge

- Basic understanding
- Necessary for other kinds of learning

Application

- Knowledge and how it’s applied
- Skills

Integration

- Making connections (other courses, work, life)
- Power: the whole - more than the sum of the parts

Human Dimension

- Human significance of topic
- Learning about self, others

Caring

- Caring engenders energy for learning
- Nothing significant happens without caring

Learning How to Learn

- Learning more effectively
- Life-long learning

Appendix 4 – Online Resources

Dr. L. Dee Fink - <http://finkconsulting.info>

Significant Learning - <http://www.significantlearning.org>

ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines - <http://actflproficiencyguidelines2012.org/>

Compleat Lexical Tutor - <http://www.lextutor.ca>

EIKEN Comparison Table - <http://stepeiken.org/comparison-table>

Lextutor Vocabulary Profiler - <http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/>

Spreader - <http://www.spreader.com>

Readability - http://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp

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