Practicing What We Preach: Emergent Curriculum in Early Years Teacher Education Programs

Alaina Roach O’Keefe

University of Prince Edward Island, aroach@upei.ca

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Summary
Traditional models of teacher education programmes of early literacy instruction encourage participants to plan, prepare, and present literacy lessons and integrated units of study for early grades. Literacy in the Early Years courses are often grounded in constructivist theory and designed to help pre-service teachers provide balanced literacy instruction for elementary grades. Even though many of these educational institutions are beginning to introduce new courses and programs that focus on problem-based learning, discovery learning, experiential learning, cooperative learning, service learning and inquiry-based learning (Justice, Rice, Roy, Hudspith, & Jenkins, 2009), there is little attention paid to emergent practice (Stacey, 2009) in early literacy pre-service education programs. The goal for this workshop is to “practice what we preach” by introducing concepts of play-based, emergent curriculum that model flexible, inquiry-based approaches to curriculum content. In Early Literacy courses, one module can be left to explore ideas, questions, interests, and theoretical concepts that the students identified.

Keywords
emergent curriculum, active learning, inquiry-based curriculum, early childhood education

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**Practicing What We Preach: Emergent Curriculum in Early Years Teacher Education Programs**

Alaina Roach O'Keefe, The University of Prince Edward Island

**SUMMARY**

Traditional models of teacher education programmes of early literacy instruction encourage participants to plan, prepare, and present literacy lessons and integrated units of study for early grades. *Literacy in the Early Years* courses are often grounded in constructivist theory and designed to help pre-service teachers provide balanced literacy instruction for elementary grades. Even though many of these educational institutions are beginning to introduce new courses and programs that focus on problem-based learning, discovery learning, experiential learning, cooperative learning, service learning and inquiry-based learning (Justice, Rice, Roy, Hudspith, & Jenkins, 2009), there is little attention paid to *emergent practice* (Stacey, 2009) in early literacy pre-service education programs. The goal for this workshop is to “practice what we preach” by introducing concepts of play-based, emergent curriculum that model flexible, inquiry-based approaches to curriculum content. In Early Literacy courses, one module can be left to explore ideas, questions, interests, and theoretical concepts that the students identified.

**KEYWORDS:** emergent curriculum, active learning, inquiry-based curriculum, early childhood education

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this seminar, participants will be able to:

- develop an appreciation of and identify ways to practice emergent (literacy) curriculum, or inquiry-based learning; and
- critically reflect on emergent curriculum and briefly articulate how it is carried out in their own practice

**REFERENCE SUMMARIES**


Inquiry-based learning is an approach that improves the quality of education by moving towards a more student-directed, interactive method of learning while focusing on learning how to learn. Justice et. al (2009) assert that there are extra-pedagogical challenges of introducing and maintaining inquiry-based learning in the curriculum. The authors delineate how inquiry can be embedded in curriculum and present perspectives of administrators at McMaster University. One of these ways is to embed inquiry as a component of a course (p. 844), where students begin with a question, do some background reading, and engage in critical writing and discussion.

McMaster University is a pioneer in inquiry pedagogy and this article provides a succinct introduction to inquiry at the post-secondary level. In this workshop, this article provides
background information for introducing inquiry pedagogy, as well as a discussion on some of the general barriers to implementation. This article is used in the PowerPoint presentation to provide discussion and information.


This book explores emergent curriculum as an invitation to learning. Stacey (2009) uses stories of other educators’ work with children to show that emergent curriculum is not linear; rather, it is organic, constantly growing and evolving. Sometimes it is circular, as educators observe, discuss, and examine documentation, raise questions and observe again. The process is similar to action research in that observations promote discussion among early childhood education practitioners who examine the documentation, the stories of learning from the children, frame questions around what they observe and understand and work to answer questions through action and reflection (Stacey, 2009). Overall, this article highlights that emergent curriculum:

- while framed by the teacher, it is student initiated, allowing for collaborations, giving everyone a voice;
- is responsive to the student, thereby allowing teachers to build upon existing interests;
- the teacher is a facilitator, encouraging students to discover, dig deeper and construct further knowledge;
- is flexible in curriculum planning, constantly developing (versus planned well in advance), dynamic, and changing;
- enables student and teachers’ thinking to be made visible through various forms of documentation (as a part of the process); and
- builds on constructivist theories of Dewey, Vygotsky, Piaget (p.6).

This workshop makes references to this book alongside a handout from the University of New Brunswick (Appendix E) to provide participants with definitions of Emergent Curriculum to help participants discuss and understand their role as an educator in the process.


This article outlines emergent curriculum so that teachers, children, and families can easily initiate and build upon children’s interests during learning opportunities. Seitz (2006) explains that emergent curriculum is “a process of learning about what a child or a class is interested in and then planning a positive authentic learning experience around and beyond that interest” and therefore is negotiated, organic, and engaging to all involved (p.1). Seitz’s plan, which includes practical examples rooted in theoretical frameworks of socio-cultural learning, is comprised of 1) sparks or provocations; 2) conversations; 3) opportunities and experiences; and 4), more questions and more theories.
This workshop makes reference to this article and is the source of a potential handout for participants.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION
The content of this seminar draws heavily on Stacey (2009) as the rationale for emergent curriculum in the early years. Note that participants will need a laptop or mobile device with video capabilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration [min]</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 5-10           | Overview and introductions       | Welcome all participants and introduce yourself. Review learning objectives and invite participants to contribute to a roundtable discussion on what they know about play-based or project-based learning.  
Suggested roundtable prompts:  
• What do the following terms mean to you: play-based learning (PBL), project-based learning (PBL), emergent curriculum, inquiry?  
• Based on participants’ responses, use the references provided to build links between these concepts. Emphasize how language is important when talking about pedagogy.  
See Appendix A and B for corresponding handout for this section. *Note:* Participants will use Appendix B for the remainder of the seminar. | Provide an overview of the workshop and its learning outcomes. |
<p>| 25             | Video Review and Quick Write     | Distribute video handout Assign a video to each participant (or groups if you have a large session) and have participants view it. If the videos are lengthy, excerpt a 10-minute (maximum) portion. Following the video, ask participants to engage in a “quick write”. This may consist of reflective journaling, facebooking or tweeting about how they implement | Critically reflect on participants’ own practice in early learning. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>15</th>
<th>Powerpoint Presentation: Introducing Emergent Curriculum in the Early Literacy Classroom</th>
<th>Using the reference summaries and sources provided in this article, create a PowerPoint presentation that defines emergent curriculum (Stacey, 2008) and makes connections to other key terms used in higher learning such as project based learning and inquiry (Justice, Rice, Roy, Hudspith, &amp; Jenkins, 2009). Review key points of the reference summaries. Emphasize that the instructor should modeling this in their post-secondary experience by identifying interests of the class.</th>
<th>Identify ways to practice emergent (literacy) curriculum, or inquiry-based learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mini-break</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Barriers to Problem-Based Learning</td>
<td>Depending on the number of participants, divide participants into smaller groups or facilitate a whole group discussion. Ask participants to share what they wrote about some of the barriers to practicing PBL. Some topics for discussion include: • Time • Observational skill level • Organization on the part of the teacher</td>
<td>Facilitate an opportunity for participants to ask questions and discuss the challenges of implementing emergent curriculum in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Invite participants to evaluate your session based on the following questions: • What did you learn? • What has changed in your thinking? • When will you find this information useful? • Why were these topics of interest to you?</td>
<td>Review of key concepts and evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(or do not implement) emergent, play-based pedagogy in their classrooms. Ask participants to consider any barriers, challenges, successes and critical questions. See Appendix B and C for corresponding handout.
What would you like to know more about?

**Total Time:** 85-90 minutes [including 10 minute break]

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES
This presentation can be easily modified to include a wide range of presentation strategies. The ones included here include audio-visual aids such as powerpoint and videos, group discussions, reflective journaling and a video review.
APPENDIX A: Handout: Key Terms

What is Emergent Curriculum?
(Stacey, 2008)

- student-led/self-directed
- learning centres
- individual or group
- intrinsitc motivation
- exploratory
- discovery, hands-on
- freedom of choice
- problem based
- inquiry
- meaningful
- creative, flexible
- involves authentic assessment: such as observation, listening, documentation and learning stories
- cyclical, based on children's interests

REFERENCES:

APPENDIX B: Discussion Guidelines (Handout)

• **Roundtable:** What do the following terms mean to you: play-based learning, project-based learning, emergent curriculum, inquiry?

• **Video Review and Reflective Journaling:** Watch one video each (max 10 min) and quick write – reflective journal how you implement (or not) emergent, play-based pedagogy in their classrooms; including barriers/ challenges, successes, and critical questions you ponder.

• **Coffee Shop Discussion #1:** What are some of the barriers to practicing play based learning or project based learning? Pair/share.
### APPENDIX C: Suggested Video List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title/Topic</th>
<th>Video Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning to Change / Changing to Learn: Student Voices (4:27)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHSehFV98TY">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHSehFV98TY</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning and Motivation in the 21st Century (1:01)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_6GUx1Zx0w">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_6GUx1Zx0w</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did You Know? (4:56)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cL9Wu2kWwSY">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cL9Wu2kWwSY</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NB Dept of Education (5:25)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjJg9NfTXos">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjJg9NfTXos</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st Century Skills Culture at High Tech High (6:25)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYe4q8LscBs">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYe4q8LscBs</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is Next Generation Learning? (3:32)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBT9mnizL8">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBT9mnizL8</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Vision of K-12 Students Today (4:00)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-ZVcJfWf8">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-ZVcJfWf8</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Sense: An Overview of Integrated Studies (10:00)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.edutopia.org/integrated-studies-overview-video">http://www.edutopia.org/integrated-studies-overview-video</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin Hanlon 21st Century Teaching Spotlight (3:26)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wFRW_103WA">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wFRW_103WA</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The North London International School – Kindergarten (1:43)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3lGxNJmJA">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3lGxNJmJA</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five-Year-Olds Pilot Their Own Project Learning (9:01)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyucHMifto">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyucHMifto</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation and Kindergarten (10:00)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIRtbChy0Y">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIRtbChy0Y</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupy Kindergarten (20:00+)</td>
<td><a href="http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TEDxSantaMonica-Kurt-Schwengel">http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TEDxSantaMonica-Kurt-Schwengel</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuart Brown says play is more than fun (26:00+)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital.html">http://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Launch with a Read-Aloud: Integrated Literacy Unit with an Engaging Text [Virtual Tour] (1:33)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElbZpb8R05I">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElbZpb8R05I</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry-based Learning (3:25)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLQPXd8BilA">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLQPXd8BilA</a></td>
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