

PROGRAM EVALUATION: METACOGNITION IN A
BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Background

For weeks, I had been sitting on a warm concrete French fountain across from the Rio de Janeiro Library and contemplating how research on comparative race formation in early colonial Brazil and America was relevant to the homeless children running in the streets in front of me. The constant presence of these children made me more curious about the Brazilian public education system, leading to deeper insights about the impact of race and street learning versus classroom instructions. Little did I know that these thoughts and reflections would provide a ground for my future trajectory in education and scholarly research.

In the end, I abandoned my doctorate in history and returned to the United States in order to pursue two educational goals. I returned convinced that every student could learn, but I was equally convinced about the existence of structural, systematic inequalities—particularly related to housing—that presented enormous obstacles to poor American children’s academic success. However, the thing I haven’t not yet fully understood is how destructive the institutions that implement such laws truly are. I was aware of the school-to-prison pipeline argument and knew that educational funding was tied to property tax, but I did not realize that we were in the midst of one of the greatest migratory patterns in American history, and that both the existence and impact of this pattern were difficult to detect.

It is important to note that this dissertation stems from previously chronicled action research prior to the creation of the present system. Initially, my rationale to continue working with the population of underprivileged children came from my experience as a teacher of students attending alternative education programs. One such teaching experience in 2008 produced a film *Interrupt the Pipeline* that I made in collaboration with current and past students.

As I continued teaching language arts at Harvard Elementary, the insights I developed from making this film expressed themselves in real-world pedagogy. My pupils wanted to know how we were going to fix the problems of high mobility, disrupted education, and scarcity of jobs, as they themselves were victims of policies that fostered dependence on the system. As they witnessed their own neighborhoods gentrifying and could now identify specific policies responsible for disappearing neighbors and family members, Language Arts 101 needed to take it up a notch. What ensued was the development of a social engine to keep track of the kids. Subsequently, I created a critical pedagogy reading program to help my student teach younger kids. What is particularly interesting is that, because the students dictated the growth of the system and the relevance of how to apply the process, they became experts in both understanding and applying the right principles to, in the words of the film, interrupt the pipeline.

As years passed, I went to other schools, but I continued to keep track of the kids through the social engine and other means. One by one, my former students went to jail, dropped out because of pregnancy, or were kicked out of school. The common theme among these students was that of waiting for other solutions to arrive that they could ensure their future. I became familiar with this attitude as I continued to visit students while I either taught or worked as an administrator on the West Side of Chicago. I also noted other changes. I was introduced to an alternative charter school—very close to the area where I filmed the Chicago portion of *Interrupt the Pipeline*—which soon became home to many students I had worked with at an Academy for Urban School Leadership. This charter school was known as the Community Youth Development Institute (CYDI); over the next 24 months, I would see more than 30 of my students at Harvard Elementary transition to CYDI.

At this point in my career, I came to believe that the most important part of my work was to find a way of keeping students in school.

I realized that encouraging students required a means of tracking their paths to the COMPASS, ASVAB, or trade school exams. It was evident to me that certain pillars had to be in place in order to reach the students effectively. Our school's expensive and popular means of tracking and managing the right type of data had become antiquated and inadequate. A new type of tracker forcing both instructors and students to think differently about the learning process had to come into fruition immediately. This tracker was an instrumental part of the program.

The inquiry transitional tracker (ITT) is designed to initiate a conversation between a student and an administrator regarding obtaining diploma. The goal is not to detail how to earn credits, but how to augment skills. Therefore, the design of the tracker requires a built-in universal screener as well as a creatively designed game board that permits students to see exactly where they are on their path to a diploma. The ITT has to be able to tell students precisely what they should be able to do once they have earned this set of skills. The ITT identifies lacking skills (through teacher feedback), areas for improvement, times for remedial activity, and progress towards a diploma through a dot-based color system instead of numerical grades. Pacing guides and leveled charts detailing high expectations for each grouping of learners are byproducts of ITT. The data demonstrate who can move up the game board the quickest, who stays after school, who needs four more years of high school, who can circumvent two years, etc.

Ultimately, the ITT accomplishes a customization of educational goals for each student, thus facilitating the student's desire to own the program. What was necessary was an approach

that could not only track the students, but also assist previously unsuccessful students to thrive in a schedule suited for their lifestyles.

Role of the Researcher

As a former teacher and administrator, and as a current educator, my research stems from being a student first and foremost. For the purpose of the dissertation and the conceptualizing of this new management system, I have assembled and helped to lead a team of engineers, educators, film-makers, and activists alongside students in order to create an ideal blended learning community. The students have helped to construct the flow of the tracker and have had the same level input as coders and school administrators of the school. My role therefore is parallel to that of the students, a role focused on symbolic interaction and active listening. Interaction and equity have been important themes in the context of the ITT. Both students and instructors have had input on the tracker, all the way from design to implementation. Teachers and staff not only interact with student data but also reflect on their roles through feedback and monitoring. As an action researcher, I will continue to stay in touch with these teachers.

One of the most important components of the program is to encourage growth in the use of the system through organic referrals. Therefore, students are asked to bring in currently non-involved relatives and friends. There are roughly 5,000 seats, and 70,000 students are not participating. I am also interested in high-school students utilizing the trackers to target younger students so that the number of involved students could increase.

Because of what I am trying to encourage students to create, my stance is closest to poststructuralism. This stance is in alignment with the search for answers, and with means of analysis, that are rooted in the need for positive change. I believe that students cannot be homogenized, and that the ITT is a means of assisting children break the bonds of dependency

and poverty that customization, a game-like interface, and close engagement with the design and implementation of an approach like the ITT

As an action researcher, I will be an active participant in the study. I am not only the researcher but also a stakeholder in the ITT; therefore, as is often the case in action research, I will report on the study in the first person and make my own position—as both researcher and stakeholder—explicit in the discussion of methodology and findings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the development and operation of a blended learning program based on the application of the ITT program. Blended models are acquiring greater popularity in school settings and deserve further exploration in the form of action research. The ITT project reflects an opportunity to gather and analyze data from multiple stakeholders in order to better understand what makes blended learning using an approach such as ITT successful.

One of the purposes of the study is to determine how various stakeholders in the ITT program find the tracker useful. In an attempt to reduce possible bias associated with this research, another of the purposes is to identify aspects of ITT that users do not currently find to be useful.

Rationale

The importance of this study is that the program setup may help in breaking the cycle of dependency that jeopardized the prospects of many poor and otherwise underprivileged children. Specifically, the ITT can provide clear information to previously unsuccessful students with respect to what they need to do to keep progressing towards their diplomas. The ITT is thus a

tool that can be studied in the context of a larger educational management program. Rather, the aim of the study is to deploy a constructivist approach within the paradigm of critical theory.

According to Gagnon and Collay (2006), “constructivist epistemology assumes that learners construct their own knowledge on the basis of interaction with their environment” (p. 17). Four epistemological assumptions are at the heart of what is known as constructivist learning:

- ❑ Knowledge is physically constructed by learners who are involved in active learning.
- ❑ Knowledge is symbolically constructed by learners who are making their own representations of action.
- ❑ Knowledge is socially constructed by learners who convey their meaning-making to others.
- ❑ Knowledge is theoretically constructed by learners who try to explain things they don't completely understand (Gagnon & Collay, 2006, p. 17).

The ITT program and approach includes an approach to knowledge that is largely defined by the people who interact with the system. Even though the ITT system contains and makes use of data from various sources, the system is designed to allow students to make use of the information within the system in a flexible and non-constraining manner. Thus, the ITT system itself is well-suited to an analysis that draws upon the foundational basis of constructivist learning.

Nature of the Study

The study constitutes an example of qualitative action research. The study can be described as qualitative in nature because it shares the epistemological, axiological, and other

orientations of qualitative research as described in Table 1 below. The study can be described as action research (Revans, 2011) because (a) it is being conducted on an ongoing project, (b) findings from the study will be utilized to improve the project, and (c) the researcher is closely involved with both the project and the research and improvement of the project.

Table 1

Differences between Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Philosophical Foundations	Qualitative Research Designs	Quantitative Research Designs
Ontology (perceptions of reality)	Researchers assume that multiple, subjectively derived realities can coexist.	Researchers assume that a single, objective world exists.
Epistemology (roles for the researcher)	Researchers commonly assume that they must interact with their studied phenomena.	Researchers assume that they are independent from the variables under study.
Axiology (researchers' values)	Researchers overtly act in a value-laden and biased fashion.	Researchers overtly act in a value-free and unbiased manner.
Rhetoric (language styles)	Researchers often use personalized, informal, and context-laden language.	Researchers most often use impersonal, formal, and rule-based text.
Procedures (as employed in research)	Researchers tend to apply induction, multivariate, and multiprocess interactions, following context-laden methods.	Researchers tend to apply deduction, limited cause-and-effect relationships, with context-free methods.

Note: Quoted from McNabb (2010, p. 225)

The orientations of the study are closely aligned with the characteristics of qualitative research defined by McNabb (2010). Further detail on the methodology and study design has been provided in the third chapter of the study.

Organization of the Rest of the Dissertation

The dissertation contains six chapters. Chapter 2 is the literature review. The literature review contains an analysis and critical synthesis of studies related to blended learning and alternative education. The literature review also examines the specific demographic the systems are designed to track and how, if at all, they have benefited students. Other areas of review

include critical pedagogical theory, its impact on taxonomy, and how critical pedagogy might release students from the cycle of dependency. The literature review will also contain an analysis of quantitative research on school climate and its relevance to a newly conceptualized sophisticated management system.

Chapter 3 provides the methodology of the program evaluation, with special reference to the causal inferences of the program. The findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4. The conclusions and recommendations of the study are made in Chapter 5. In addition, a newly developed constructivist learning survey modified to measure the success of the program is presented. Finally, suggestions have been made for further development of the ITT, including recommendations that can be utilized by others to duplicate the success of the program while overcoming its deficiencies.

References

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