

Covert Syllabuses

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The term covert syllabus: 'the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives that students learn in school' (edglossary.org/hidden-curriculum/) usually has a negative connotation. According to Ornstein & Hunkins (2004), for example, a hidden curriculum is often to be found in the gender and racial roles that are conveyed in textbooks and sometimes in classroom behaviour. This extract from the 1964 *Ladybird* Peter and Jane books, whose overt aim is to teach reading, clearly has such a hidden curriculum:

Jane likes to help Mummy. She wants to make cakes like Mummy.

'Let me help you Mummy,' she says, 'Will you let me help please? I can make cakes like you.'

'Yes,' says Mummy, 'I will let you help me. You are a good girl.'

'We will make some cakes for Peter and Daddy,' says Jane, 'They like the cakes we make.'

(Book 6b, p.4)

There are in fact two layers of covert syllabus operating here. The first, probably intentional, is to teach the values of 'helping' and 'giving'. The second unintentionally conveys messages about the roles of women – the kitchen is their realm and they make food to serve to men.

Some older ELT textbooks contain many stereotypes of the roles of men and women, such as;

Mrs. James: You've been drinking whisky.

Mr. James: Only one, dear.

Mrs. James: You've been smoking cigars.

Mr. James: Only one, dear.

Mrs. James: You've been kissing girls.

Mr. James: Only one, dear.

(Hicks & Granger, 1978, p.18)

Nowadays a conscious effort is made by authors and publishers to avoid race or gender bias – and indeed to avoid anything that could give offence: the acronym PARSNIP defining topics that are taboo in coursebooks (politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms (eg. atheism), and pork). However other unintentional messages may be conveyed by coursebooks. At my presentation at IATEFL, participants from many different countries discussed more modern covert agendas in textbook and suggested: a middle-class cast of characters, an emphasis on travel and holidays which their students were unable to afford, an

emphasis on competition, materialism or glorification of the celebrity culture.

Covert syllabuses may thus stem from a lack of inclusion – a lack of women, a lack of cultural diversity etc. – this type of covert syllabus has been called the 'null curriculum' (Eisner, 1979) – but sometimes they may spring from over-inclusion: too many units centred on celebrities for example. Of course over-inclusion may also imply under-representation and vice versa: a lack of representation of female role models implies over-inclusion of male role models, a focus on celebrity culture implies a devaluation of normal life.

So far we have looked at covert agendas presented through choice of topic, but Richards & Rogers (2001) suggest that it is also possible to have a covert syllabus presented through language items: 'All methods involve overt or covert decisions concerning the selection of language items (words, sentence patterns, tenses, constructions, functions and topics)[...] to be used within a course' (p.25). The decision of a PARSNIP publisher to omit the words pork, bacon, wine, beer from a unit on food is a covert agenda based on non-inclusion or 'null curriculum' (Eisner, 1979). This example from a 1982 Lithuanian textbook is another example of an agenda being realized through omission of language items:

What political party do you belong to?

I am a Communist.

I don't belong to any political party.

(Svecevicus, 1982, p. 41)

I would argue that a covert agenda can also be realized through selection of activity types, again either by exclusion or over-inclusion. In an article, 'Materials writing principles and processes: What can we learn for teacher development', in *The European Journal of Applied Linguistics and TEFL*, 2014, I discussed 'Core Energies': my term for the deep-seated preferences and particular forces that drive a writer and give colour to their writing but also mean that their writing shows a bias towards certain types of activity (Hadfield, 2014). One writer may have a predilection towards writing analytic and logical-argumentative activities, for example, another may have a preference for playful and imaginative activities. These energies can, of course, be positive in themselves, leading the writer to design creative and engaging activities, but the writer should be careful that their own bias does not lead to an over-reliance on one kind of activity. It could be

argued, for example, that online courses which depend on a limited range of mechanical exercises with only one right answer, such as drag and drop, matching and gap fill, have the covert agenda that creativity, experimentation and affect have nothing to do with language learning, whereas research shows that they have a positive effect.

So far we have looked at covert syllabuses in the sense in which they are usually viewed, as both unintentional and undesirable. But covert syllabuses can be built into materials in a way that is both intentional and desirable. Schools, for example, play important roles in socializing children, inculcating a sense of social responsibility and duty and developing social skills in a way that is not overt or planned but resulting from everyday interaction and organizational patterns. In the rest of this article I would like to describe three kinds of positive covert syllabuses that can be built into course design.

I first used the term covert syllabus in a positive sense when writing the book *Classroom Dynamics* (Hadfield, 1993). In that book I divided activities into cognitive activities and affective activities. The cognitive activities had an overt group dynamics aim: to make some aspect of the group dynamic process explicit to the learners, for example, the need to listen to others or to actively help each other learn. The affective activities, on the other hand, had an overt *language learning* aim but a kind of 'secret' group dynamic aim tucked inside the language learning aim: that is, invisible to the student and thus non-overt. In such activities the teacher does not say to the students, 'Now we are going to do an activity which will help you empathize with other group members', but instead does an activity which overtly practises, say, the present simple, but in a way that encourages empathy by asking students to complete a questionnaire as if they were their partner (see 'I Am You' from *Classroom Dynamics*). To take another example, if a teacher wishes to practise the past simple, setting a homework task called 'Last Weekend' will achieve this object, but will not encourage group cohesion. An activity like 'Group History' where learners find out what happened in the lives of the group every year from the year the oldest was born to the present year and compile this information to write a history of the group, will both practise the past simple and reinforce the learners' sense of belonging to a group. Other examples of such activities are language practice activities that encourage empathy, provide opportunities for exchange of personal information, bridge gaps between people, foster a sense of group identity, maintain fluidity and interaction between all participants, provide a sense of belonging to the group, encourage positive feelings and give the group a sense of shared achievement.

Why is this a positive covert syllabus and why is it

covert? Firstly, the inclusion of such activities is not just to provide a feel-good atmosphere. Several studies have shown that a cohesive group is more productive. Argyle (1989) comments that 'cohesiveness increases output when the work requires interaction because it is socially motivated and a source of social satisfaction.' (p.6), Douglas (1983) supports this: 'A group is a resource pool that is greater in any given area than the resources possessed by any single member' (p.189) while Stevick (1980) comments; 'In a language course success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses and more on 'what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom' (p.4).

Dornyei & Malderez (1997) see successful groups as encouraging motivation and learning: 'the way learners feel in their L2 classes will influence their learning effort considerably[...] groups can directly facilitate L2 learning' (p.67).

Senior (2002) observes that 'learning takes place most effectively when language classes pull together as unified groups' (p.402) and Dornyei & Murphey (2003) echo this when they conclude that:

If group development goes astray, it can become a serious obstacle to learning and can 'punish' its members by making group life miserable. However, when positive group development processes are attended to, they can reward the group's members and can provide the necessary driving force to pursue group learning goals beyond our expectations (p. 4).

An attention to developing and maintaining a cohesive and harmonious group can thus significantly benefit learning. Such an agenda has to be covert or subordinated to another aim for two reasons. Firstly many teachers cannot afford the apparent luxury of overt group dynamic activities since they have a language syllabus to adhere to. Giving such activities a dual aim: a primary language learning aim and a covert group dynamic aim, can thus twin progression through a language syllabus with an affective group-building syllabus. Secondly, since group-building works in a non-explicit way through unconscious affect rather than conscious cognition, it would rather undermine the activity if it were made overt, for example if the teacher introduced it by saying, 'This activity will get you all to bond with each other'.

Since then I have expanded my use of positive covert syllabuses in materials written for *Motivating Learning* (Hadfield & Dornyei, 2013). I also deliberately included a group building syllabus in this book: since Dornyei's theory of the Ideal L2 Self, on which the book is based, is based on individual vision, I wanted to balance activities based on creating and realizing an individual vision with activities that fostered group cohesion, to prevent possible fragmentation of the group.

I also wanted to include a 'hidden' L2 identity-building

syllabus which could co-exist with the overt syllabus throughout the course. My rationale was to reinforce the learners' sense of their L2 Self in affective ways as well as through cognitive activities. This was in part achieved by the emphasis on visualizing the Ideal Future L2 Self implicit in the theory, but I wanted to include more, and different, activities to develop a learner's sense of L2 Identity, and chose to do this through including activities which required creativity on the learners part. This is based on research by Bonny Norton (1995), Tan Bee Tin (2007) and others showing that creative activities increase student sense of empowerment and contribute to L2 identity.

Murugiah, (2013) citing Craik & Lockhart (1972), states that 'as learners manipulate the language in interesting and demanding ways, attempting to express uniquely personal meanings (as they do in creative writing), they necessarily engage with the language at a deeper level of processing' (p.8). Such engagement constitutes 'investment' of the self in Bonny Norton's terms, which contributes to the learners' sense of identity. Tan Bee Tin (2007) states this explicitly, finding that through creativity learners 'become themselves' in the foreign language.

Alan Maley (2012) echoes this, finding that it is the playful element in creative writing that fosters a sense of L2 identity.

In some ways, the tsunami of the Communicative Approach has done a disservice to language teaching by its insistence on the purely communicative functions of language. Proponents of 'play' point out, rightly, that in L1 acquisition, much of the language encountered by and used by children is in the form of rhythmical chants and rhymes, word games, jokes and the like. Furthermore, such playfulness survives into adulthood, so that many social encounters are characterized by language play (punning, spontaneous jokes, 'funny voices', metathesis).

(Maley, 2012, p.6)

Cook (2000) and Crystal (1998) have also emphasized this vital role of play:

'Reading and writing do not have to be a prison house. Release is possible. And maybe language play can provide the key'

(Crystal, 1998, p.217).

In creative writing learners are encouraged to play with language. This playful element encourages learners to take risks with the language, to explore it without fear of reproof. By manipulating the language in this way, they also begin to discover things not only about the language but about themselves. They effectively begin to develop a 'second language personality'.

Finally, Hadfield & Hadfield (1990) explain that, 'By thinking up new ideas of their own in the foreign language, students begin to make a personal investment in the language and culture. In a way they begin to 'own' part of it, so they are no longer 'foreigners' and 'outsiders' (p.viii).

I would argue therefore that inclusion of creative activities such as writing and drama should be part of a positive covert syllabus, written in by the author. For example in *Motivating Learning* (Hadfield & Dornyei, 2013), I designed activities to heighten awareness of language learning strategies and possible obstacles to learning as a rap creation and a film scene creation respectively, rather than analytic or discussion activities, in order to build a sense of L2 identity through creativity. As with a group dynamics syllabus, such identity building works through affect, not explicit cognition, and therefore is best when used as a secret aim operating parallel to and in conjunction with an overt aim such as language practice, or, in the case of *Motivating Learning*, study skills and strategies.

My final covert syllabus is a learner preference syllabus.

In an article in *RELC Journal* (Hadfield, 2006), I proposed a framework for task design:

	Thinking	Feeling	Creating	Organizing/ Factual
<i>Modality</i> visual auditory kinaesthetic tactile				
<i>Grouping</i> self/ interpersonal others/ intrapersonal				
<i>Structure</i> Single- minded / competitive cooperative				
<i>Reaction Time</i> immediate reflective				
<i>Mood</i> serious playful				
<i>Outcome</i> open-ended closed task				

(p.389)

Any of the vertical parameters can be combined with

any of the horizontal parameters to create a wide variety of tasks.

A discussion, for example on the advantages and disadvantages of living in the country or town, would tick the following boxes in the 'Thinking' column:

- auditory
- interpersonal
- cooperative (unless a formal debate in which case it would be competitive)
- immediate
- serious
- open-ended.

If the activity were changed to, for example, 'write a letter from the point of view of someone who has recently moved from the town to the country, expressing your feelings about the move', the activity would change to:

Feeling/Creating

- visual
- intrapersonal
- single-minded
- reflective
- serious
- closed task.

Including activities on courses that involve different combinations of task design parameters can thus result in a richer variety of activities and appeal to different learner preferences. The framework can be used as a checklist during writing to ensure a sufficient variety of activity types. As well as being a positive covert syllabus, ensuring appeal to individual difference, use of the framework can also act as a counterbalance to a writer's core energies, to ensure that unconscious bias does not result in imbalance of activity types.

It is thus important for the materials writer not only to be vigilant in order to avoid various types of negative covert syllabus, whether present through over- or under-inclusion, topic, language item or activity type, but to be aware of positive covert syllabuses that could be actively built into materials to foster positive affect and enhance learning.

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