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DESIGNING LEARNING MATERIALS WITH THE FOUR C'S IN MIND

As we approach the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, we become more and more aware of how technology has revolutionized our lives and the way we access knowledge, acquire and share it, which makes us rethink what is taught and how it is taught. Some educators believe that it is better to teach less content, allowing more time and opportunities for skills development. It is often thought that focus on skills is more likely to guarantee intended learning outcomes. While designing the new syllabus for third-year students taking the course of Sociocultural Aspects of Communication, we have tried to redress the balance between the content and the skills taught by reconsidering the materials we offer and the abilities we expect our students to demonstrate after they have completed the course. It is hoped that the new syllabus will be much more in tune with the modern world as regards the subject matter and the four skills we seek to equip our students with – critical thinking, creative thinking, communicating and collaborating, so-called *four C's*.

The materials for the course have been selected with attention to diversity and their potential to engage our learners. It is newspaper articles and short videos that are at the core of the new course book. We have mostly used *The Guardian* and some other British, American or Australian quality papers and magazines. The YouTube videos we have chosen expose students to a number of different accents – British, American, Canadian, with some fragments featuring non-native speakers of English, enabling learners to ‘develop an ear’ for the language. It is expected that our students will enjoy the authenticity the materials display and the cultural

differences they reflect. It should be noted that most of the texts had to be changed to a varying degree due to their length and complexity. Similarly, some of the videos have been cut to suit our needs. However, we have gone to great lengths to ensure that we do not distort the meaning while tailoring the materials. The new syllabus also includes specific information to facilitate the learners' academic success – there is a course outline, course map, wordlists, handy tips for performing various tasks for the duration of the course and in the exam.

The first C we have in mind while working on the new content is critical thinking. By critical thinking we mean students' ability to analyze the learning materials, breaking them down into meaningful parts, noticing how the author develops and gets their message across. Critical thinking also refers to comparing and contrasting things, grouping or classifying things, defining and explaining notions and concepts, evaluating ideas, identifying the causes and effects of some phenomena and offering solutions. In addition, critical thinking implies arguing in favour of or against something by supporting one's opinion, backing it up with evidence and drawing a conclusion. The tasks to develop this in our learners take a variety of formats. They include thinking of suitable headings for the paragraphs in a text, completing mind maps, choosing the best summary, explaining why some sentences are true or false by giving the relevant phrases in the text, giving one's opinion on certain statements after reading or film viewing. There are ranking tasks too. In general, emphasis is put not on regurgitating the facts students read about or come across while watching a film but on training our learners to think critically, to question the truth of some statements, thus making them intelligent readers, selective viewers and thoughtful, precise speakers.

Next come creative thinking skills. The course book includes a number of activities to flex the learner's creative muscle. There are numerous tasks that involve brainstorming. It is often incorporated in the lead in and in pre-reading and pre-viewing activities. However, it is the follow up that is primarily associated with creativity. We encourage students to create things like a *Why Learn to Play Music?* advocacy brochure or a language school flier. They are also invited to design a music tour or a questionnaire, eco posters or placards. Some more creative tasks include writing a story in American English, an acrostic poem about music, a blog post about a music festival, replying to a forum thread by leaving a comment. In brief, the students who take the course have ample opportunity for creative thought.

Finally, there is communicating and collaborating that we have in mind while designing the new learning materials. These 2 C's seem to be entwined, they walk hand in hand. Judging by the instructions which accompany most of the activities in the new course book, it becomes obvious that we prioritize pair work and group work. After all, at a speaking practice class, it is important to ensure that everyone gets to speak. We often have students change seats in our classes, so they become more motivated. It adds freshness to classroom work too. Learners often work in teams, which incentivizes them to learn to manage their time effectively and cooperate, compromise, delegate responsibility, resolve conflicts. An illustration of

how all these are at work is a topic-based project the students are required to prepare at the end of each of 6 broad topics (Languages, Media, Music, Environmental Issues, Social Issues, Youth culture). Not only are the students supposed to use visuals and incorporate the new vocabulary into their presentations, but they are also required to interact with the audience by throwing in an activity for their groupmates. Ultimately, this approach gives students opportunity to improve their interpersonal skills and raises their awareness of the skills that will come in handy when they become teachers themselves.

In conclusion, we are still working on the learning materials and are not in a rush to print the course book. We take our time to proofread and actively make the necessary changes, taking into consideration the students' and teachers' feedback, keeping an eagle eye on other materials that become available, hoping to find an adequate replacement for some content that did not live up to our expectations. The course is starting to take shape and seems to be exciting and challenging enough. It is aimed at developing students' ability to think critically, there is room for creativity, emphasis on communication and collaboration... and of course cultural sensitivity which is vital in the 21st century. A fifth C? It is our fervent hope that the learning journey will mean both hard work and enjoyment to our students, and the learning outcomes will last beyond the duration of the course itself.