

**Alberta's Languages Initiative –
Education as a Commodity in a Globalized World**

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Introduction

“The word ‘marketing’ used to be a negative concept to educators. Not anymore... School marketing has been transformed into an essential management function” (Vining, 2000).

Although not all educators might agree with Vining's position, traditional models of education are giving way to hybrid models, incorporating business philosophy and practice. From this perspective, the phenomenon of marketing in educational institutions has been critically examined by Vining, Topor (2001) and Sevier (1986, 1996). However, no studies have yet been undertaken to examine the marketing of language programs in public education.

A timely study is needed to examine the promotion of a recent educational program: the Alberta Languages Initiative which strongly recommends second language education by 2006.

The goals of my research are to examine critically:

- Why marketing techniques were used with this initiative and not other program renewals,
- How business models are being adopted by educational systems and government agencies, and in particular,
- How marketing and branding have become part of educational jargon and practice.

Three more specific research questions inform my proposal:

1. Why were marketing techniques used?
2. How is the Alberta Languages Initiative being marketed?
3. How is the Languages Initiative being received in Calgary public and separate school districts?

The new Languages Initiative slated for grades 4-9, scheduled to launch in 2006, represents a significant shift in the curriculum for these grades. The provincial government's marketing tactic has been to produce a '[Tool Kit](#)', distributed to all Alberta schools which includes materials such as stock articles to fill school newsletters, advertisements and prose that schools can use to encourage parents and students to 'buy in' to the concept of mandatory second language learning. It is this promotion of the initiative that I plan to study in order to understand why there is resistance to second language programs, how the government has responded to this resistance and what effect their efforts to combat this resistance have had. By studying this initiative from the perspective of marketing, I will be introducing a new research dimension which focuses, not on curriculum, instruction, program outcomes or content, but on program promotion.

There is a difference between the government's marketing approach to second language education, the promotion of language programs to an international clientele, and political propaganda. In the first case, the purpose is to inform, in the second case, to generate revenue, and in the third case, to persuade the public to believe in only certain political views. Although marketing and propaganda are similar in that they focus on promotion, public relations, and the

production of materials that inform and convince a targeted audience of their worth, there is a difference in how this is done. In the case of second languages, business models have been borrowed and adapted to persuade Albertans to accept it.

Sensitive to the economic pressures of globalization, education in Alberta has been in an intensive twenty-five year process of educational change (Mazurek, 1999). A New Right agenda has been applied to education to market the universities (Pocklington, 1999), to construct a perpetual learner (Easton, 1999) and to privatizing public choice with the rise of charter schools (Kachur, 1999a). Based on economic liberalism in combination with social conservatism, ideas about the free market, individualism and a minimal state play a dominant role in Alberta government rhetoric whereas hierarchy, authoritarianism and a public-order state play secondary roles. “This new thinking shapes the way the government adjusts the province’s staples-based economy and reorganizes contemporary education to meet the demands of globalization” (Kachur, 1999b: 60). The commodification of second language education follows as well as the use of marketing techniques. What has not been examined however is the possible relevance of the long standing contested nature of second language education in Alberta, coupled with a deeply-rooted resistance to the acceptance of models mixing business with education. What is innovative about this research is the focus on the marketing of language programs themselves, rather than educational programs as a whole. The findings will increase understanding of marketing techniques to promote certain educational programs, their impact on student enrollment, and their acceptability to the educational public in local and global contexts. This study is important as it explores how and why promotional means have been chosen and what implications this may have for educational programs in the future.

My M.A. in Spanish Literature brought me to a critical awareness of language as power, the politicization of discourses and a familiarity with critical theory. My subsequent employment involved the international marketing of language programs at a local university, the recruitment of teachers, and program administration. Subsequently, I founded a consulting business to offer services to private language schools and non-for-profit immigrant agencies to market their revenue-generating programs. I also presented on marketing techniques at second language conferences, namely, TESOL, TESL-Canada, and ATESL. These unique experiences have amply prepared me to recognize and analyze marketing techniques in language education.

Methodology and methods

The new critical theory is of particular interest to my study as it would allow me to focus on the internal and external politics of schooling, the social conditions and historical relations in which language education is positioned. The constitutive role of language in the social construction of knowledge is particularly relevant to knowledge as discourses. Habermas' use of critical theory is relevant given his concern with discourse and power, which led to his development of a theory of communicative action, as well as Bourdieu's re-conceptualization of a critical sociology, and Foucault's focus on the relationship between knowledge and power. This body of work will inform my study as marketing is the practical application of discourse as knowledge and power.

Qualitative case study methodology frames my study. The participants to be invited into the study include educators currently and formerly with the provincial department of education as well as administrators, teachers and parents affiliated in two local school districts, with respect to the use of the Tool Kit provided by Alberta Education. Three research techniques will be

utilized: documentary analysis of policy statements, promotional materials and various ministerial and district documents, in-depth interviews with key players, as well as a more broadly distributed questionnaire.

There are several people I have already identified and contacted to informally ask if they would be willing to be part of my study. Thus far, they have all agreed. They include:

- John Sokolowski – Team Leader, Languages (retired)
- Janice Aubry – Team Leader, Languages (She was involved in the initiative before she took on her current position as Mr. Sokolowski's successor.)
- Wally Lazaruk – Consultant, Alberta Education
- Christine Bexte – Consultant, Alberta Education

The use and genesis of the Tool Kit developed by Alberta Education will figure prominently in the interviews and questionnaire. The questionnaire will be based on preliminary interviews with several interested parties. Following this, feedback from the interviewees would be sought on the revised questionnaire. The final version would be distributed a broader selection of participants in both school districts.

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