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Theorizing about Curriculum: Conceptions and Definitions

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ABSTRACT

There are many conceptions and definitions of the curriculum: as content, as learning experiences, as behavioral objectives, as a plan for instruction, and as a nontechnical approach. Most curriculum leaders in schools are comfortable with four out of the five conceptions and definitions of curriculum. The nontechnical approach to curriculum represents a rejection of traditional curriculum planning, a rethinking of curriculum. In this article, I examine curriculum as content, as learning experiences, as behavioral objectives, as a plan for instruction, and as a nontechnical approach.

Most textbooks on curriculum and many treatises on educational theory have offered a particular conception of the curriculum. Many of these conceptions have contained similar elements. Some authors refer to the curriculum as a formal course of study, emphasizing *content* or subject matter. Others define the curriculum as the totality of *experiences* of each learner, stressing how subject matter is learned or the process of instruction. Still others point out the importance of statements of expected learning outcomes or *behavioral objectives*. Behavioral objectives are typically identified within some framework such as the subjects offered in the school program. Some describe the curriculum as a *plan for instruction* specific to a particular school or student population. And others advocate a wider conception of curriculum—a nontechnical and more philosophical, social, and personal approach.

Curriculum as Content

Over the years and currently, the dominant conception of the curriculum is that of content or subject matter taught by teachers and learned by students. For example, Philip Phenix (1962) defined the curriculum as *what* is studied, the "content" or "subject matter" of instruction.

According to Phenix the content includes the whole range of matters in which the student is expected to gain some knowledge and competence. There are the obvious academic subjects that are customarily associated with the idea of curriculum, such as

language and literature, mathematics, the natural and social sciences, and the fine arts. These are primarily intellectual in nature. The curriculum may also include practical studies that develop skill in the industrial arts either for personal enjoyment or for vocational purposes. Other studies combine the intellectual and practical in preparation for the professions, such as law, medicine, or teaching. Still another group of academic subjects, neither primarily intellectual or practical, may best be described as personal in orientation. In this category are provisions for physical and mental health education, for sex and drug education, for development of mature human relationships, and for growth of desirable attributes and values.

Curriculum as Learning Experiences

The conception of the curriculum as the experiences of the learner, complemented by organized content or subject matter was introduced in many curriculum publications. Selecting the content, with accompanying learning experiences, is one of the central decisions in curriculum making, and, therefore, a rational method of going about it is a matter of great concern according to its most ardent advocate, Hilda Taba (1962).

Taba asserts that to develop criteria for rational priorities in selecting learning experiences, it is necessary to clarify some significant issues. She points out the importance of understanding that the curriculum consists of two different things: the content (subject matter) and the *learning experiences* (the mental operations that students employ in learning subject matter). Although in the actual learning act the two are in constant interaction: one cannot deal with content without having a learning experience. Nevertheless, the two, content and learning experiences, need to be distinguished. According to Taba, it is possible to deal with significant content in a manner that could result in inadequate teaching, or to apply fruitful learning processes to content that in itself is not worth knowing. One can speak of effective learning then as consisting of both content and processes that are fruitful and significant.

Taba further asserts that the failure to make this distinction has caused many misunderstandings in the discussion of curriculum theories. Many reasonable criteria for selecting and organizing curricula have been misapplied or misunderstood by critics, because what was intended as a criterion for selecting learning experiences was also used as a criterion for selecting curriculum content or even for organizing the entire curriculum. For example, the discussion of the role of subjects as a means for training in disciplined thought has been obscured because of the assumption that disciplined thought is the direct function of the content rather than of the mental operations employed while learning it.

Taba argues that it is possible to learn mathematics by rote, and to learn welding by analyzing and applying some basic principles. In other words, depending on the nature of learning experiences, any subject can be reduced to *learning about something* or become the means for the learning of the *how* of disciplined thinking. A clearer distinction between the content of the curriculum and the learning experiences (or the processes that students employ in dealing with content) would be helpful in classifying

such problems of selection as determining which criteria apply to which aspect of curriculum—content or learning experiences.

The discussion of behavioral objectives, according to Taba, also shows that some educational objectives are served by the content, whereas others are best implemented by certain learning experiences. On the one hand, the objectives described as acquisition of knowledge—the concepts, ideas, and facts to be learned—can be implemented by the selection of content. On the other hand, the attainment of objectives such as thinking skills, attitudes, and values cannot be implemented by selection and organization of content alone. To attain them, students need to undergo certain experiences that give them an opportunity to practice the desired behavior. If curriculum is a plan for learning, and if objectives determine what learning is important, it follows that adequate curriculum planning involves selecting and organizing both the content and learning experiences.

Curriculum as Objectives

Past and present efforts at curriculum improvement have made much use of goals and objectives as bases for curriculum planning. Noteworthy is the work of a group of scholars, under the direction of Benjamin Bloom (1956), who attempted to devise some means that would permit greater precision of communication with respect to educational objectives. The taxonomy was this means.

The *taxonomy* is a scheme for classifying educational objectives into categories descriptive of the kinds of behavior that educators seek from students in schools. It is based on the assumption that the educational program can be conceived of as an attempt to change the behavior of students with respect to some subject matter. When we describe the behavior and the subject matter, we construct an educational objective. For instance: The student should be able to recall the major features of Japanese culture; he should be able to recognize form and pattern in literary works. The two parts of the objective, the subject matter and what is to be done with respect to the subject matter by the student are both categorizable. It is, however, the latter, what is to be *done* with the subject matter that constitutes the categories of the taxonomy.

The taxonomy is divided into three domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. The cognitive includes those objectives having to do with thinking, knowing, and problem solving (Bloom, 1956). The affective includes those objectives dealing with attitudes, values, interests, and appreciations (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964). The psychomotor covers objectives having to do with manual and motor skills (Harrow, 1972).

The classification scheme in each of the three domains is hierarchical in nature; that is, each category is assumed to involve behavior that is more complex and abstract than the previous category. Thus, the categories are arranged from simple to more complex behaviors and from concrete to more abstract behaviors.

According to Bloom and his associates, there are at least four values of using the taxonomy for curriculum making. First, the taxonomy provides a basis for working with objectives with specificity and a precision that is not generally typical of such statements.

Second, this specificity and precision in the description of a student behavior make it easier to select the kinds of learning experiences that are appropriate to developing the desired behavior. Third, the hierarchical nature of the taxonomy facilitates scope and sequence in curriculum planning. And, finally, the taxonomy may be useful in evaluating teaching. Specifically, the content of norm-reference and criterion-referenced tests, in addition to educational experiences and innovations in teaching, can be analyzed using the taxonomy as a framework, which may reveal and over- or under-emphasis on particular objectives.

The movement toward outcome-based education complements and builds on the pioneering work of Bloom and his associates. Program goals, classroom objectives, and learning outcomes are integrated with teaching strategies that focus on higher-order thinking skills in Bloom's taxonomy and the use of authentic assessment procedures, including constructed response, performance testing, and portfolios (Burke, 2009; Cambridge, 2012; Marzano, 2010; Odendahl, 2011; Popham, 2011).

Curriculum as a Plan for Instruction

Most textbooks on curriculum have dealt with issues of curriculum development or improvement, thus focusing on the production of curriculums. A few books have dealt with thinking about curriculum implementation and evaluation. The processes of developing, implementing, and evaluating a curriculum may be considered as the essential elements of a curriculum plan. A *curriculum plan* is a system for both decision making and action with respect to curriculum functions directed at a specified population. Thus, a curriculum plan has three primary functions: to produce a curriculum for an identifiable population, to implement the curriculum in a specific school, and to appraise the effectiveness of the curriculum developed.

The theory and research of John Goodlad (1994, 1998) supports this perspective. Goodlad argues not only that curriculum development results in a plan for instruction, including elements of evaluation and the potential for school improvement, but also that the key unit for educational change is the individual school; and the chief decision makers in effectuating a curriculum plan are the school principal, teachers, students, parents, and local community. Thus, the primary ingredient of teaching and learning is the local school site.

Curriculum as a Nontechnical Approach

A wider conception of curriculum—nontechnical and more philosophical, personal, and interesting approaches—includes numerous theories and ideas that are aesthetic (Elliot Eisner, 2006), feminist (Carol Gilligan, 2010), pluralistic and diverse (James Banks, 2011), political/social (Henry Giroux, 2011; Peter McLaren, 2007), moral/ethical (William Reid, 2012), visionary and imaginative (Michael Apple, 2001, 2005; Maxine Greene, 2008), and spiritual (William Pinar, 2009, 2012). These new theories and ideas represent a rejection of traditional curriculum planning, a rethinking of

curriculum, but not necessarily a "practical" interpretation (a term used by Reid) that assists teachers and curriculum leaders (directors, supervisors, chairs, principals, etc.) in the organization and operation of classrooms and schools. Although some of these new concepts may be considered dysfunctional and divisive, as well as impractical for practitioners, among theorists and academics they are considered relevant, or at least interesting. Much of this "new" approach to curriculum is considered more speculative, expressive, emotional, argumentative, and political—based on controversy and crisis, far different from the rational, logical, behaviorist, technocratic ideas that have characterized mainstream curriculum making.

Conclusion

There are many conceptions and definitions of the curriculum: as content, as learning experiences, as behavioral objectives, as a plan for instruction, and as a nontechnical approach. Most curriculum leaders in schools are comfortable with four out of the five conceptions and definitions of curriculum. The nontechnical approach to curriculum represents a rejection of traditional curriculum planning, a rethinking of curriculum. Advocates of the latter approach reject the assumption that reality can be defined and represented by symbolic forms—by boxes, arrows, and graphs. People like Elliot Eisner, Carol Gilligan, James Banks, Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, William Reid, Maxine Greene and Michael Apple, and William Pinar feel that the world is much more complex, involving subjective, personal, aesthetic, heuristic, transactional, and intuitive forms of thinking and behavior. The argument is that curriculum cannot be precisely planned—it evolves as a living organism as opposed to a machine which is precise and orderly.

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