

A View of

Curriculum Content

"Subject matter, processes, approaches, feelings—the curriculum always contains some of all of these but it takes deliberate planning to capitalize on this wide range of content."

MANY ARGUMENTS in education revolve around content and process. We accuse fellow educators of overemphasis on one or the other. Sometimes we seem to insist that people choose between them. "Are you for process or for content?" we almost ask.

It is intriguing to see what happens to such arguments if curriculum content is viewed as *all the potential learnings* contained in experiences for which schools and colleges assume responsibility, all the potential learnings sought through both general and specialized education.

Value of an Inclusive View

Such a view leaves room for the learning of facts, which most people, except in the heat of debate, recognize as important. We value facts which hold us together as a nation. We value facts which help us maintain health or spend our money well. We know that laboratory technicians, teachers, farmers and all other occupational groups need certain facts in order to pursue their vocations. No one is against facts to think with.

A view of curriculum content as potential learnings includes processes also—processes like observing, listening

and reading, like speaking, writing and figuring; processes like searching out and organizing information, interpreting facts and making generalizations out of observed relationships, solving problems and evaluating. We value all such processes for we want our young people to be developing competence in independent learning, in planning and decision making, in communicating with others, in building useful meanings.

This view of content includes approaches to situations and materials—creative approaches, experimental approaches. We are concerned with approaches, for we value initiative, creativity and inventiveness in our society.

This view includes feelings—good feelings toward one's self and toward other people. We are concerned with feelings because we want to develop a sense of worth and integrity in our youth and we want them to be able to sympathize and empathize with others.

Importance of Objectives

Experiences sponsored by organized education contain varied possibilities for learnings, whether or not the persons planning curriculum content take

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them into account in making decisions. Unfortunately, other, more negative learnings are also available. Generally bad feelings toward self and others may be learned and so may mechanical responses with little meaning back of them. Overdependence on the judgment of others and a habit of jumping to conclusions without much thought or evidence are potential learnings also.

Clarity as to objectives, then, is most important. It makes no sense to leave acquisition of desirable learnings to chance. It makes less sense to emphasize certain learnings in ways that, in effect, make other desirable learnings next to impossible. It makes least sense thoughtlessly to invite negative learnings. These points may be clarified by examining several decisions affecting curriculum content.

Influence of Time Use

Curriculum content is affected by decisions as to how time at the disposal of the school or college is to be used. Learnings may be broadened, narrowed or cut off completely by the nature and extent of requirements, as well as by the richness or scarcity of opportunities given to individuals and groups for choice in their learning activities. Learnings will be affected also by the way time is blocked, by how long and frequently a given teacher meets with a group. When schedules force frequent change of activity, what may happen to opportunities to know individual students well, to plan and evaluate cooperatively with them, to

pursue thoughtful discussions, to allow for self-directed learning, to go on lengthy excursions?

Influence of Materials

Decisions as to materials of instruction also affect curriculum content. What happens to chances to learn to select, weigh and organize facts when only a single textbook in history, geography or other social science is made available to students rather than a number of references by different authors? What happens to feelings of self worth on the part of certain individuals when none of the materials afforded is within their range of reading ability? What happens, on the contrary, when an entering first grade child who already has considerable reading ability is made to suffer through preprimer materials even with the "fast" group?

If emphasis in materials is mostly on the written word, what happens to ability to be critically perceptive in learning from television, radio, motion and still pictures, paintings, drama, dance, music and various graphic means of reporting quantitative data?

Influence of Methods

Methods of teaching-learning that are fostered in the classroom further influence the content of experiences which make up the curriculum. For example, certain learnings are made available if teachers help learners to apply and test other people's generalizations and formulate some of their own. These learnings are not possible if generalizations are treated as a matter of rote learning without regard for developing meaning. Attitudes toward

further learning are greatly dependent upon methods which help individuals to assume increasing responsibility for their own learning.

Influence of Classroom Climate

Classroom climate also contributes to curriculum content. Potential learnings with regard to human values, to feelings toward one's self and others, are bound up in ways people listen to one another, in ways groups are formed, in ways behavior is rewarded or punished. A sensitive child can become nauseated at harsh treatment of another member of the group even though he himself is never reprimanded. Sometimes individuals first become able to look upon themselves as competent because of a series of successes within a supportive group.

Influence of Skills Valued

Curriculum content is, in addition, affected by the skills for which practice is provided. If concern is limited to the three R's, development of important social skills is left to chance. If the three R's are interpreted narrowly, communication skills seriously needed in a complicated modern democracy may be quite neglected. Skills in other types of communication will also be left to chance development if those who are arranging for educative experiences do not encourage learners to express ideas in a variety of forms.¹

More Than Subject Matter

Discussions of content often stay with problems of selecting and organ-

¹In this connection, see a thought-provoking article by Francis Shoemaker, "Communication Arts in the Curriculum," *Teachers College Record*, November 1955, p. 111-19.

izing subject matter, rather than dealing inclusively with content as a medium for accomplishing all of the objectives of education. Of course, learning cannot proceed in a vacuum; learners must have stuff to work with, something with which to build meanings. However, unless an entire experience is so planned and arranged that it may yield meanings and other types of desirable learnings, the factual content may be sterile and even negative in value. This adds responsibility beyond selecting subject matter and facilitating use of it in learning.

Importance of Subject Matter

To note a responsibility beyond selecting subject matter is not to belittle the importance of this part of the process of planning curriculum content. Developing informed citizens is one worth-while aim of education. While experiences are being provided in the hope that they will contribute to positive attitudes, straight thinking, and other such learnings, there is no reason that thought should not be given to the relative value of the subject matter content itself for the learner in his social setting.

Since the general learnings desired in our society may be achieved through experiences involving an infinite variety of subject matter, curriculum planners are free to use as vehicles of content the specific subject matter that will be most meaningful and significant for the particular learners involved.

With the whole wide world to choose from, where to dip in with a group of learners is a continuing problem for educators. Some subject matter has generally more potential for

useful meanings than does other subject matter. Some may be better utilized by learners when they are of a certain age or have had certain experiences in their background or have certain purposes.

In Conclusion

Practices in selecting and organizing curriculum content may well be judged by the extent to which they reflect concern for an over-all objective of developing thinking-feeling-acting people—

people who have facts to think with or know where to get them; people who are doers; people who have good feelings to make their thinking and acting humane. Subject matter, processes, approaches, feelings—the curriculum always contains some of all of these but it takes deliberate planning to capitalize on this wide range of content. A broad view of curriculum content helps to ensure learnings of high quality.

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Choice of Content

This article examines two assertions about the nature of man, to illustrate a way of thinking about the choice of curriculum content.

I WANT to tell you of the process I went through in developing the present article. It represents, I think, a transition from one level of thinking to another that many of us will have to struggle with as we try to raise the level of importance of our thinking about the significance of the content we choose for the curriculum.

My first outline for this article had headings like these:

- What limits choice?
 - among children:
 - interests
 - perceptions
 - maturity of various kinds
 - among teachers:
 - personal experience and knowledge
 - materials and other resources
 - in the school's social context:
 - the prevailing local opinion concern-

- ing the place and function of the school
- public stereotype of teaching method
- public notion of acceptable behavior by teachers and children
- in the school:
 - sequence—how content is related to child's past; to his future
 - balance of learning: firsthand and vicarious; self and non-self; skill, understanding, conceptualizing.

Now, this isn't a bad outline. There are fresh things that might be said under some of these headings, and an article written from them would be understandably organized. But there are two things wrong with the outline: it doesn't allow me to say what is uppermost in my mind, and many of the readers of such an article probably could write it better than I. As it hap-

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