

MAKING CURRICULUM GUIDES

"Go Right"

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SOME years ago in a neighboring school district, the superintendent proudly presented to his top staff members an attractive booklet on the teaching of mathematics and science before its intended distribution to the public. This was in the early post-Sputnik era, and parents and other taxpayers were demanding to know what the schools were doing to "catch up with the Russians."

What happened when the superintendent showed the math and science report to the staff, however, was something like taking a one-way walk in space. An illustrator had used for background on the cover a series of mathematical formulas and symbols. However, copies of the report had not been in the hands of the staff 30 seconds when a deputy superintendent, who had been a math teacher himself, discovered that a formula prominently displayed on the cover was incorrect. This was embarrassing to the school district, especially since it was located in a community featuring electronics and aircraft industries—thoroughly infested with specialists in math and science!

School systems throughout the nation are producing guides, courses of study, pupil materials, and reports of curriculum progress which can very easily fail in achieving deserved success because of lack of understanding of principles and precautions necessary when educators turn publishers. Questions of need, purpose, competence of committee members, and evaluation involve basic aspects of the task which are also significant. This article, however, is simply to remind supervisors, consultants and other staff specialists that one aspect of their job concerns effective educational communication. A curriculum guide can sometimes "go wrong" between the time that the ideas are first drafted and the day when the printed version appears.

Although proof of the importance of precautions is evident in every school system, here are a few examples for emphasis:

Publication Title. "This is an educable mentally retarded teacher's guide." (From a midwest city. Did the supervisor perhaps mean a guide for teachers of the educable mentally retarded?)

Foreword. "This is a study of the harbor in depth." (From pupil material

developed by a coastal school district. It is good to know that we will be able to get to the bottom of this subject. Let us hope it is not too sandy.)

Suggested Learning Activities. "Illicit creative pupil reactions." (This is typical. The committee no doubt wanted "elicit," but a confused substitute typist must have had her mind on other matters. In addition, the supervisor did not proofread carefully enough to catch the error.)

Evaluation. "Evaluation provides opportunity to detect areas of weakness and strengthen them." (Teacher reactions in the schools may be a trifle negative. Why cover classes for another teacher who was released to go to the Curriculum Center to help strengthen weaknesses? They are healthy enough as it is.)

Guiding Principles

True, the supervisor or superintendent bent on avoiding disgrace to the school district because of editorial slips which do not pass in the night may have trouble finding a laugh on every page. Most of the time his job will be frustrating and exasperating. It will also be harder work than an onlooker could possibly imagine. Yet keeping curriculum guides from "going wrong" when they have been prepared with so much time, talent and promise is certainly a worthy goal. Here are a few principles, based upon considerable experience, that may help get the job done:

1. *Prepare a detailed publication plan or "blueprint."*—After the content of a guide has taken shape, be sure that the way it is presented to the consumer will make sense. No matter how rudimentary they may seem, such details of organization as these often are overlooked:

- a. Headings in the table of contents must agree with those in the actual content.
- b. Major headings and subordinate headings must be in a parallel form.
- c. A list of instructions should be prepared which will anticipate problems in typing or typesetting.
- d. If running heads are to be used, selections need to be made in terms of right- and left-hand pages.

2. *Arrange committee, typing, artwork, and other schedules so that deadlines will be met.* If funds have been set aside to print a publication at a certain time, or if teachers have been promised a guide by the opening of the fall semester, financial resources and public relations with the schools—not to mention the instructional program—will suffer if the job does not arrive on time.

3. *Use a consistent style for editorial content.* Once the reader has been introduced to the spelling catalog, he will be slightly confused if reference is made to catalogue two pages later. The teacher will be distracted if he discovers the same piece of equipment is referred to in the guide as Planetarium Model, planetarium, model planetarium, and planetarium model. It may be difficult to defend one choice as better than another; but, once the curriculum specialist has decided on style, he only undermines content by varying the spelling, capitalization and punctuation.

4. *Remember that simplicity and conciseness will mean that the ideas to be communicated will be more readily understood.* Samuel Johnson once aptly observed that "A man who uses a great many words to express his meaning is like a bad marksman who, instead of aiming a single stone at an object, takes up a handful and throws at it in hopes he may hit."

5. *Avoid rhetorical booby traps.* In other words, be sure that your manuscript says what you intend it to say. Such slips as those cited earlier are more common than most curriculum specialists would ever dream.

6. *Assure that the subject matter is accurate.* In the pressure of publication development, it is easy to make errors in dates, names, descriptions of events, and even locations of cities and rivers. The amount of material to be treated is no excuse. You may never receive a reaction to 1,000 correct statements, but you will hear 100 times about just one slip.

7. *Prepare material to be submitted for final typing or for typesetting so that it will be clearly understood.* A number of comments already made apply to this point. Yet it is worth treating separately. One of the best courses of action is to sit down with the typist or printer and review each page carefully, even after you have prepared a list of instructions. Then it may be desirable to request a few sample pages to verify that production will proceed as planned.

8. *Proofread carefully.* Truly, this advice is not intended to insult the curriculum specialist's intelligence. It is a task which seems mechanical and thus may be assigned to someone unfamiliar with content or special terminology. The results can be disastrous. Books on writing and publishing contain ample instructions concerning the job of proofreading and the techniques to employ.

9. *Avoid author's alterations.* Unless the manuscript for a publication has been edited with great care, the supervisor is likely to discover that the text reads much differently after the final typing or when it has been typeset. He then will proceed to rewrite sentences or even paragraphs while production is delayed. This technique will cost time and money. No matter how obvious the latter warning may sound, the majority of prospective publication producers fail to anticipate the problem adequately.

10. *Stay within the publication budget.* This advice sounds about as necessary as telling a housewife not to spend beyond her income. As lending institutions and collection agencies will report, however, the admonition is most appropriate. Even though the curriculum specialist may not realize it, getting the most out of the publication dollar is an art in itself. Since the topic is too broad for treatment here, the supervisor simply is reminded to obtain sound professional advice.

The curriculum specialist who has learned from his experience in the production of instructional materials will no doubt add 10, 20 or more principles to the foregoing list, but those cited are basic. Such guidelines are worthwhile even if they only help people to recognize and anticipate the problems which will be faced in assuring that curriculum guides go "right" instead of "wrong."

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