

In Search of Ambiguity

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IT IS my contention that curriculum workers will be most effective and best justify their existence when they are prepared to devote much of their life's energy to the pursuit of ambiguity. This may be a difficult claim to substantiate, however, since curriculum workers already have difficulty explaining to people outside their field just what it is they do; and, what is worse, they often have equal difficulty communicating with their own colleagues. For although educators share the same language, they attach different meanings to their symbols; they use the same syntax but employ diverse semantics. Even the simple term "curriculum" has little generality of meaning in the reality of educational endeavor.

Furthermore, this seemingly flagrant plea for ambivalence is likely to be regarded as a very dubious proposal by a large majority of readers who, despite the fact that Rokeach¹ categorizes such a frame of reference as positive and open, will find it not only highly confusing but actually suggestive of imminent disaster. Educational practitioners typically regard such an orientation as peculiar, misguided, and potentially dangerous. They become even more perturbed when it is suggested that curriculum workers might

well combine a tolerance for ambiguity with an insistence upon becoming generalists rather than specialists. In fact, even those convinced of the validity of such a union frequently succumb to the influence of their linear-thinking associates and valiantly strive for order and certainty in the curricular domain, if for no better reason than to establish some semblance of credibility with their professional peers.

This paper analyzes the implications of the quest for order and certainty that presently characterizes the behavior of most curriculum workers.

The Curricular Domain

One of the criteria traditionally associated with professionalism has been the exclusive possession of a prescribed body of knowledge. Most physicians offer generally similar if not identical explanations of pathology, and most lawyers agree in delimiting jurisprudence. For the doctor and the lawyer the circle is already drawn which defines and delimits, which specifies that which is included and that which is excluded from the areas of concern. It is generally assumed

¹ Milton Rokeach. *The Open and Closed Mind*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1960.

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that as professionals these persons have a clear understanding of the boundaries and the substantive content of their fields.

However, curriculum workers find it difficult if not impossible to delimit the subject of their concern. Curriculum reality is as illusory as a mirage, as fluid as mercury, and as shapeless as an amoeba. Is it any wonder that there is widespread misunderstanding in curricular communication when the identification of the phenomenon itself is so ambiguous? Unless one can explain and limit that with which one is concerned, it becomes exceedingly difficult to build and to share common understanding.

Some curriculum workers thus continue to plead for more concise definitions of curricular phenomena, even though in the past there has been no scarcity of explicit statements upon the subject. Here, for example, are a few:

The . . . curriculum is a planned series of encounters between a student and some selection of communities of discourse.²

A curriculum consists of the means used to achieve or carry out given purposes of schooling. . . . Every student has a curriculum entirely his own.³

The curriculum is not *one* thing—it is the immediate output of the guided interaction of . . . four sets of sub-systems and it is essentially a hypothetical construct which can be “known” . . . after the fact.⁴

Curriculum encompasses all learning opportunities provided by the school.⁵

A curriculum is a plan for learning.⁶

Curriculum is a set of events, either pro-

² Arthur R. King and John A. Brownell. *The Curriculum and the Disciplines of Knowledge*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966. pp. 121-22.

³ Edward A. Krug. *The Secondary School Curriculum*. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1960. pp. 6-7.

⁴ James B. Macdonald. “An Example of Disciplined Curriculum Thinking.” *Theory Into Practice* 6: 170; October 1967.

⁵ J. Galen Saylor and William M. Alexander. *Curriculum Planning for Modern Schools*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966. p. 5.

⁶ Hilda Taba. *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962.

posed, occurring, or having occurred, which has the potential for reconstructing human experience.⁷

. . . consider as a synonym for “curriculum” the term “the educational program” . . . the total environment planned by the school.⁸

With all these erudite statements from which to choose, it might be expected that curriculum workers could profitably select some common ground upon which to agree to agree. But that has not nor, more important, need not necessarily follow. In fact, one of the leading theorists in the curricular field, John Mann, maintains that there are and should remain as many definitions of curriculum as there are students of curriculum. Defining curriculum “is a matter of how, for the convenience of enacting a commitment,” the student of curriculum “decides to imagine the in fact unsliced and unsliceable pie to be sliced.”⁹ These are rather disconcerting words to anyone who sees curriculum as an absolute and discrete set of phenomena, unique and separable from all others.

Mann is proposing that curriculum is whatever each individual *imagines* it to be; its boundaries are limited only by the conceptual power of that individual. Many persons will undoubtedly reject this approach as nonscientific and insist that curriculum workers restrict themselves to more structured means for knowing reality, or at least not rely so completely upon the intuitive or tacit dimension¹⁰ as a mode of knowing.

Modes of Curricular Inquiry

The scientific. In keeping with this rational approach, many educators have asserted that carefully designed research which

⁷ James K. Duncan and Jack R. Frymier. “Explorations in the Systematic Study of Curriculum.” *Theory Into Practice* 6: 183; October 1967.

⁸ Albert I. Oliver. *Curriculum Improvement*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, Inc., 1965. pp. 3 and 7.

⁹ John S. Mann. “The Curriculum Worker.” Paper presented at ASCD Annual Conference Pre-Conference Seminar, Chicago, March 1969. p. 3. (Mimeographed.)

¹⁰ The term is borrowed from: Michael Polanyi. *The Tacit Dimension*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966.

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includes explicit operational definitions makes it possible to describe curricular phenomena empirically and thus resolve the matter of boundaries and content at least within the limits of certain probabilities. Duncan and Frymier¹¹ attempted this but found that, in classifying curricular events according to actors, artifacts, or operations, they had lessened the validity of their observations.

It seems that when curriculum is separated into discrete elements in reductive fashion, the reality of the whole is sacrificed. Trying to isolate the basic units of irreducible minimum for investigation seems not to be an entirely satisfactory mode of inquiry for revealing the true nature of the area in question. Like the human being reduced to less than two dollars worth of raw materials, something is lost in the process.

The praxeological. Others contend that a holistic principle is more appropriate for conducting curriculum inquiry. We might better profit from viewing curriculum in terms of its functions rather than its elements. If we ask what purposes curriculum serves, it may be possible to work backward to identify its structure and define both what it *is* as well as what it *is not*. Like Dewey's man,¹² curriculum will become known by what it *does*. Curriculum workers could then be charged with devising an environment which controls the quality and quantity of experiences necessary to accomplish these specific outcomes.

Logically, the most perfect strategy to accomplish this is the systems approach: identify the outcomes to be achieved, select experiences needed to achieve them, order this selection, and finally evaluate the results in terms of the original objectives. Tyler provided the basic model twenty years ago!¹³ Yet, although this procedure may contribute order and rationality, could it not also encourage *rigor mortis*? Might educators not become locked into this pattern and never see

¹¹ Duncan and Frymier, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-89.

¹² John Dewey. *Experience and Nature*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1958. p. 8.

¹³ Ralph W. Tyler. *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950.

other possibilities which might be "out there"? Could they become so expert at building more and more intricate cuckoo clocks that they fail to realize that cuckoo clocks have become anachronisms?

Wasn't this circular process also what Macdonald¹⁴ cautioned against when he argued that we might become so efficient and effective in meeting our original objectives that we could lose contact with reality? He drew an analogous relationship between this point of view and the rational irrationality of the militarists in predicting how many thousands of Americans would be killed before an enemy population could be eradicated while completely ignoring the implications of calmly discussing the destruction of hundreds of thousands of human lives. Therefore, in addition to such *technical* rationality, Macdonald pleaded for the need for *aesthetic* rationality, a rationality of means applied to *open* ends. The systems rationale appears to have humanistic limitations in its applicability to education.

The philosophical. Any consideration of curriculum thus eventually brings us to the realization that making choices, selecting among alternatives according to some ordering of priorities, is very fundamental to our understanding of the curricular domain. It appears to be difficult if not impossible to establish a rationale for curriculum development without giving consideration to the relationship between *valuing* and curricular phenomena. Without some clear awareness of value problems, one is restricted to the *scientific* or the *praxeological* as a basis for educational decision making and generalizations about curricular phenomena.

This avoidance of recognition of value concerns, coupled with the fact that valuing has been permitted implicitly rather than explicitly to permeate curricular language, may explain why the line between the descriptive and the prescriptive in curricular theorizing has become so blurred. To complicate the issues, the *supposedly* valueless terms in curricular language have directed and limited our understanding of reality.

¹⁴ Macdonald, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

For example, Huebner¹⁵ has shown that such words as "learning" and "objectives" which have so long been acceptable curricular language actually restrict the kinds of questions curriculum people ask. Furthermore, such words carry certain value connotations which often remain unexamined. He proposed that curriculum workers recognize the existence of five value frameworks from which "valued educational activity" may be built: technical rationality, scientific rationality, political rationality, ethical rationality, and aesthetic rationality. By means of these new substantive structures, he felt that curricular language could become more specific but less restricted to existing patterns of speech which hinder curriculum workers from going beyond presently known meanings. Curriculum talk thus would gain both reliability and validity.

Although fruitful for reviewing curricular ideology, Huebner's approach still does not account for the added consideration that, when one seeks to identify valued educational activity, it becomes imperative to admit that schools do not exist in a vacuum and that the reality of curriculum is not the express province of either curriculum workers in particular or educators in general. One needs also to consider the larger world of reality and its symbiotic relationship with curricular phenomena.

The United States has long been an exemplar of political plurality, but until recently less attention had been given to value pluralities. Today the diversity of values which exists among subgroups in the society generates not only variance but divisiveness as well. Schools, which change considerably more slowly than does the society as a whole, and the accompanying inadequacy of educational institutions to cope with the changing social order are matters of record. Whether a free, public, and universal educational system can ever reflect a value pluralism, given all the other factors which impinge upon the

¹⁵ Dwayne Huebner. "Curricular Language and Classroom Meanings." In: James B. Macdonald and Robert R. Leeper, editors. *Language and Meaning*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1966. pp. 12ff.

formation of educational policy and practice, remains both a serious and an unresolved issue.¹⁶

The historical. In a recent article, Thomas F. Green suggested a typology which may be useful for viewing the primary functions of education which are encouraged or discouraged by the basic values reflected in the society. Of four functions, managerial, traditional, humanistic, and religious, it is the managerial type that Green foresees as continuing to dominate American schools.

Because of the strength of this managerial motive, the emphasis of which is upon mass education committed to the formation of a product which has utility for other institutions, Green sees little chance of schools being able to accommodate divergent values, which might be possible if there were increased emphasis upon humanistic education.¹⁷ Green's argument is based in large part upon the assumption that schools are bound more by continuity than by change and that societal change has far outstripped educational change. He proposed that rather than inquire, "Dare the schools build a new social order?" educators might more appropriately ask, "Dare the social order build a new system of schools?"¹⁸

If Green's analysis has validity, then further credence is garnered for the position that understanding of curricular phenomena comes through consideration of their *historical* context. But to accept curriculum as a temporal phenomenon is not to agree that one can completely rely upon historical analysis for full understanding of the entity. It suggests instead that the curriculum worker might apply the mode of the historian in addition to that of the scientist, the practitioner, and the philosopher to his attempts to grasp the meaning of his reality. Even though looking backward is a necessary com-

plement for gaining perspective and for identifying that which one did not anticipate, even the integration of this approach with the historical, scientific, praxeological, and philosophical modes is not yet sufficient for deriving emergent meanings. Polanyi's notions, that higher levels can come into existence only through a process not manifest in the lower levels and that nothing that *ought* to be can be determined by knowing what *is*, also reinforce the need to look beyond the past and the present for further meaning.¹⁹

The intuitive. *Totally different imaginative approaches to conceptualizing curriculum are yet required.* Otherwise curriculum workers will continue to be time-bound in the manner Korzybski asserts is typical of Western man.²⁰ Curriculum workers who break away from traditional frames of reference to new orientations may contribute immensely to deeper, more insightful understanding of curricular phenomena.

A number of proposals for utilizing heretofore uncommon constructs for envisioning curriculum have recently been conceived. Berman's²¹ process curriculum based upon development of eight skills—perceiving, communicating, loving, decision making, knowing, organizing, creating, and valuing—offers promise for escaping the venerated discipline-centered emphasis. Frymier's analogy for identifying educational "nutrients" necessary to maintain intellectual and emotional life, just as there are those necessary for maintaining physical life, offers another alternative. A nutrient-based inquiry would provide answers to such questions as, "What is essential for every child, for some children, for a particular child? In what amounts? Under what conditions?"²² Klohr has

¹⁶ Polanyi, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

¹⁷ Alfred Korzybski. *Science and Sanity*. Fourth edition. Lakeville, Connecticut: Institute of General Semantics, 1958.

¹⁸ Louise M. Berman. *New Priorities in the Curriculum*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1968.

¹⁹ Jack R. Frymier. "Conceptualizing Curriculum for the Future." Paper delivered at the Kimball Wiles Memorial Conference in Gainesville, Florida, February 1969. 25 pp. (Mimeographed.)

¹⁶ For a discussion of educational policy and its relationship to valuing, see: Willis W. Harman. "The Issues Behind the Issues." A talk presented at the Second National Conference for Innovative Educators, December 1967. 20 pp. (Mimeographed.)

¹⁷ Thomas F. Green. "Schools and Communities: A Look Forward." *Harvard Educational Review* 39 (2): 221-52; Spring 1969.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

posited the productivity of studying the curriculum entity as an ecologist might view it, emphasizing its energizing and integrating aspects.²³

My own speculations have led to a conceptualization which seeks to sort out curricular phenomena through replicating the universe of Man, a composite of the world of self, the world of culture, and the world of things.²⁴ In this view, Man exists as a five-dimensional being who "becomes" through his potentialities for survival, love, choice, emotion, and abstraction. These five universals transcend the world of self and emerge in the world of culture in the form of economic systems, social systems, political systems, belief systems, and information systems. Curricular phenomena, like Man, take their meaning from this multi-dimensionality.

These four constructs are offered merely as illustrations of the manner in which curriculum conceptualization can become a heuristic device for escaping the restrictions of the past and the present. These intuitive devices are a very vital mode of curricular inquiry and have equal legitimacy with scientific, praxeological, philosophical, or historical endeavors.

The Curriculum Worker

An effective curriculum worker, therefore, must recognize that there are numerous modes for revealing curricular reality and that the nature and meaning of that reality will vary with the mode applied. Curriculum workers must be prepared to pursue alternate routes; they must seek ambiguity, an ambiguity arising from the utilization of alternative modes of inquiry.

²³ Paul R. Klohr. "Seeking New Design Alternatives." Unpublished paper, January 1968. 18 pp. (Mimeographed.)

²⁴ Patricia Mills. "The Universe of Man: A Basis for Curriculum Theorizing." Unpublished paper, May 1969. 18 pp.

Developing such an orientation may tax some individuals to the utmost. Humans are prone to seek certainty, not uncertainty.²⁵ The desire to "know" has been a directing force shaping man's endeavors throughout the ages. It is therefore not surprising that a quest for certainty rather than a tolerance for ambiguity characterizes present educational endeavors. Failure to follow questions with clear answers typically elicits frustration, misunderstanding, and skepticism concerning the value of the endeavor. To insist that curriculum remain a stronghold of proponents of ambiguity is to invite cynicism and disrespect.

It has been my purpose in this paper to communicate what I consider to be a significant set of realizations. First, there is not one mode of inquiry or one set of data which adequately describes curricular phenomena. Second, it is not only futile but destructive to insist upon *certainty* as the goal of curricular inquiry. To remain emergent, humans must escape from their ontogenetically or phylogenetically based need for resolution of questions and strengthen instead their openness to search. They must value ambiguity as the stimulus by which they are forced onward and thus escape obsolescence and extinction.

Curriculum workers as the integrative agents in the educational enterprise must likewise avoid the closed and noxious realm of certainty. They must be prepared to accept the challenge of struggling with the unknown and unresolved as contrasted with the known and resolved. They must strive to reveal the curricular domain to others in all its complexity, diversity, and expansiveness. Finally, those who would generate, translate, and evaluate curricular events must not be assessed by their ability to resolve the ambiguities they identify. Their greatest accomplishment must instead lie in the pursuit of uncertainty. □

²⁵ John Dewey. *The Quest for Certainty*. New York: Minton, Balch, Publications, 1929.

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