

CURRICULUM PAST and CURRICULUM PRESENT

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"The great value of curriculum history . . . lies not in providing us with answers, but with daring us to challenge the questions that our intellectual forebears have willed us."

MATURITY in nations, persons, and in fields of study means, in part at least, having a history. This is not the same, of course, as having lived or existed a long time. It also does not even mean necessarily that someone has compiled a comprehensive record of the events in the life of a nation, person, or field of study. Having a history, in its most significant sense, means a consciousness of who one is and where one stands in relation to where one has been.

In the case of a field of study, it should not take the form of excessive veneration of one's forebears, intellectual or otherwise, but, instead, exist as a kind of continuing dialogue among people, some perhaps dead, who have addressed themselves to the perplexing and persistent issues that serve to define the field. It involves an awareness, on the part of those identified with the field, of the best of what has been done and said in regard to these issues, as well as the worst—especially the worst! According to these criteria, curriculum as a field of study has little by way of history.

The field does, however, have a past, and its outlines are reasonably well known, if only to a few. It may even be said to have two pasts: one consists of efforts over many centuries to deal with certain timeless questions that have surrounded the practice of teaching and the institution created to promote it. They are questions that inevitably arise when one begins to think seriously about teaching, questions we have come to call curriculum questions. These range from inquiries into purposes, such as whether virtue can and should be taught, to questions involving the relative merits of particular school subjects, such as why we should teach geometry or French. This past, in other words, may not be encapsulated in a neat definition of curriculum, but consists instead of the practices and ideas that represent ways of addressing oneself to questions like what should be taught and why.

A Special Field of Study

The second past, rooted in the early part of this century, consists mainly of the practices and ideas expressed by a particular group of educators who self-consciously iden-

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tified themselves as curriculum specialists and were mainly responsible for the development of a field of study called curriculum. Unlike the other past, this one has many of the earmarks of a movement, a group of influential leaders, sharing certain common assumptions, who sought to influence educational practice in certain ways. Their efforts at educational reform gave rise to curriculum as a special field of study. Manifestations of curriculum as an identifiable field of study are now evident in university and college departments of curriculum, a large professional organization, books published on the subject, and professional journals devoted to it.

As in the case of psychoanalysis,¹ the identification and distribution of certain curriculum ideas have spawned a network of institutional structures, satellite structures, and, most important, a particular way of ordering our thinking with respect to the great and complex questions that the field addresses. It is for this reason that this past is of such critical importance. Given the

¹ See, for example: Peter L. Berger. "Towards a Sociological Understanding of Psychoanalysis." *Social Research* 32 (1): 26-41; Spring 1965.

process by which most of us become professionally socialized into the field of curriculum, this way of ordering our thinking on the field's central questions seems normal and natural. Although we may differ on the details of our conclusions, our ways of addressing ourselves to the questions as well as the questions themselves only with great effort become the subject of self-conscious examination.

Perhaps a few examples will suffice: A cardinal tenet in the field of curriculum, dating back to the days of Franklin Bobbitt's first book on the subject, *The Curriculum*,² has enjoined us to begin the process of curriculum planning with a statement of objectives. These objectives should not be general, so our folklore goes, but highly specific or "particularized" statements of what people should be like and how they should behave. (In recent decades, there has been an emphasis on stating these objectives in behavioral terms.) The objectives represent ideals of human behavior, and the curriculum consists essentially of the efforts to correct "the errors and shortcomings of human per-

² Franklin Bobbitt. *The Curriculum*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918.

formance.”³ That this is a particular conception of the curriculum and not *the* universal one is difficult for many of us to grasp.

The means by which we arrive at these objectives is another case in point. Both Bobbitt and his equally influential contemporary, W. W. Charters, advocated that the objectives are to be *discovered* in the actual activities that human beings perform. In this way, idle speculation about the purposes of schooling can be avoided through methods that embody scientific objectivity and precision. Thus we do not create objectives for the curriculum; we *find* them presumably in the ordinary activities that people perform such as balancing a checkbook and filling out income tax forms. In thus labeling our procedures and techniques as “scientific,” consciously or unconsciously, we create an aura of professional exclusivity about the nature of the task.

Still a third example is the tendency on the part of curriculum practitioners to seek utilitarian justifications for school subjects. When we ask ourselves what good is French or geometry, we usually expect answers phrased in terms of practical and tangible results. Thus career education engenders great enthusiasm in the curriculum world, in part at least, because of its promise of a direct “pay-off.” All these ingrained tendencies have origins in our ancestral legacy as a field of study.

The Most Complex of Questions

A promising development of the past decade or so is the emergence of a body of historical studies which subjects ideas and practices such as these to critical scrutiny. Although these studies have not, to any noticeable extent, influenced policy makers and practitioners in the field of curriculum, they at least form a basis on which current practices may be examined. Although useful criticism may, of course, derive from a variety of intellectual traditions, this historical criticism does offer some distinctive

perspectives. Historical studies, for example, seem to have the capacity to bring a sense of complexity to the problems we deal with. We become cautious about proclaiming new panaceas and making universal claims. This would be a most welcome ballast in a field where there has been the tendency to offer simplistic solutions to the most complex of questions.

Thus, in addressing ourselves to the question of what should we teach, our characteristic response has been to set forward a list of steps to be followed in seeking an answer. Once a particular sequence of steps gains some acceptance, it becomes embodied in a technological rationale, which serves to guide research and influence practice. By tracing the fate of the efforts to deal with complex questions through simplistic solutions, historical studies can have the effect of urging upon us the necessity of dealing with difficult problems not as simple “how to do

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it” questions, but as issues requiring a variety of intellectual and ideological analyses.

A related tendency that may emerge from the developing literature of historical criticism of the curriculum field is the sense that the development of the curriculum field may not be represented as an unbroken line of progress advancing from a benighted past mired in, let us say, mental discipline to an enlightened present illuminated by the glow of scientific precision and an advanced technology. In the same way, then, the consideration of curriculum theory and practice in historical perspective may serve to curb the field’s persistent but uncritical penchant for novelty by tracing the course of ideologies and movements and analyzing their consequences in curriculum practice.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Structure of the disciplines as the predominant curriculum ideology of the 1960's is a case in point. For about a decade, it was the virtually unchallenged slogan in the educational world eliciting not only loyal adherents but huge amounts of federal support for curriculum change. Then, abruptly, it was gone, a victim, perhaps, of the new "relevance." If it merely slips away into the field's collective unconscious, then it may be regarded as a failure, not because the federal government has found such new causes as career education and competency-based teacher education, but because it did not educe a body of criticism and analysis which could serve as a basis for contemporary evaluation of curriculum movements and ideologies. Out of such a record of curriculum movements may also emerge a healthy wariness about so-called innovations which flow so regularly out of Washington and elsewhere. "Anything new should be questioned and tested with caution," Carl Jung once warned, "for it may very easily turn out to be only a new disease."⁴

Giving Shape and Meaning to Activities

To have a curriculum history, in short, is not to fix names, dates, and events into our memories or merely to set them down in written form; it is to add one invaluable way of giving shape and meaning to the confusing welter of activities that now fall into the category of curriculum activities. The value of the study of history is somewhat analogous to the study of a foreign language. Until we study a foreign language, we are prone to assume that the language we grew up with is so right and natural that other language systems must somehow be inferior, or at least peculiar. In this respect, the value of studying a foreign language lies chiefly in the perspective it gives on our own.

Likewise, once we have become social-

ized into the curriculum field, our inherited ways of addressing ourselves to curriculum problems seem so right and natural that alternative lines of inquiry hardly ever occur to us. This is not to say, of course, that there are particular answers to curriculum questions to be found in our history if only we dig hard enough. Rather, history makes our inherited ways of addressing ourselves to curriculum issues more susceptible to criticism and reform. Our inherited ways of addressing ourselves to curriculum problems, we discover, were creations of mere mortals and the products of particular ideological perspectives and particular intellectual traditions, and not, after all, written in the stars.

The great value of curriculum history, therefore, lies not in providing us with answers, but with daring us to challenge the questions that our intellectual forebears have willed us. The key problem, often, is not to answer a question, but to get rid of it. John Dewey touched on this point in one of his most brilliant essays:

Old ideas give way slowly; for they are more than abstract logical forms and categories. They are habits, predispositions, deeply engrained attitudes of aversion and preference. Moreover, the conviction persists—though history shows it to be a hallucination—that all the questions that the human mind has asked are questions that can be answered in terms of the alternatives that the questions themselves present. But, in fact, intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume—an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. We do not solve them: we get over them.⁵

After more than half a century of an identifiable field of study called curriculum, the time may be at hand for abandoning at least some of the half-conscious ideals and preferences we have inherited from our professional forebears. Having a history may help. □

⁴ Carl G. Jung. "The Gifted Child." In: Carl G. Jung. *Psychology and Education*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954. pp. 125-35. (First delivered at the annual meeting of the Basal School Council in December 1942.)

⁵ John Dewey. "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy." In: John Dewey. *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1910. p. 19.

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