

To Foster Kinship Among Curriculum Workers

Theodore J. Czajkowski and Jerry L. Patterson

These writers analyze "the gulf between curriculum theorist and practitioner." They state several guiding principles that seem to influence curriculum development decisions and activities. They suggest that these principles are to be extended into a framework that is more widely usable—whether by theorist, practitioner, professor, or field-worker.

The gulf between curriculum theorist and practitioner has contributed to some unhealthy polarization in our field. At its worst, the curriculum field-worker stereotypes the professor of curriculum as a dreamer in an ivory tower, hopelessly trapped into talking and writing about things that have little relationship to the real world.

At the other extreme, the curriculum professor pictures the practitioner as an overpaid administrator who, armed with coffee, donuts, and innocuous jargon, tries to convince teachers to adopt trivial innovations. The field-worker suspects that the professor would crumble at the sight of a live child or a practical curriculum problem, while the university professor suspects that curriculum coordinators sleep with a copy of Dewey's or Popham's work (depending on which path each has mindlessly taken) under the pillow, unable to comprehend either even if they tried.

Unfortunately, a human tendency is to frame life and all its complexities into a collection of "either-or's": either classrooms are open or they are traditional; learnings are either cognitive

or affective; curriculum workers are either theorists or practitioners. Such stereotyping behavior contributes to polarization, which in turn widens the gulf as each "pole" overstates its case, justifying a particular point on the continuum. Curriculum workers who might contribute to their field or their respective student groups through dialogue and shared perspectives seldom interact and often regard each other with contempt.

So much for a brief description of an unhealthy situation. What can we do about it? It seems to us that we must begin by establishing some kinship among curriculum workers—whether they are called teachers, curriculum coordinators, professors, or something else. Most of us are offended at the polar labels that get tossed at us, because, as is usually the case with labels, they deny our uniqueness as individuals. When it comes to the theory-practice labels, most of us are hybrids anyway, with our specific location on the continuum shifting depending on the situation and what we bring to it. Whether we are helping Pulaski Elementary School improve its reading program or tracing the history of the

production metaphor in curriculum development, most of us are proceeding with our curriculum work in a deliberative manner, using the best knowledge available to us at any given time. If nowhere else, we should find kinship in our shared interest in curriculum development, our desire to improve curricular decision making through an improved knowledge base, and a common disposition to approach our related problems in a thoughtful, caring fashion.

In an effort to transcend the theory-practice dichotomy and to provide some substance for dialogue, we would like to pose some examples of guiding principles that are grounded in theory and which consistently seem to influence curriculum development decisions and activities. These principles are neither new nor complex, but we find them to be powerful in their applicability and in their effect on the relative success of curriculum development efforts. Perhaps these principles and the discussion that follows will encourage some curriculum workers to reexamine certain beliefs and practices or to consider the application implications of some of their ideas.

Substantive Change Is a Time-Consuming Process

This deceptively simple statement gets violated so much in curriculum development that it must be emphasized forcefully and often. Accountability pressures, budget deadlines, and general impatience often cause us to try to do much too quickly with too little. However, both experience and the literature on change emphasize that the change process can't be rushed; skipping steps not only limits the effectiveness of the results but usually renders them relatively inconsequential.

Strategies for Curriculum Change Must Fit the User Group

Most curriculum development activity is aimed at a particular group of educators working in an organizational context with a specific collection of students. Whether the group happens to be a high school science department or the faculty of an elementary school, each has its own culture, that is, configuration of norms, roles, and ways of dealing with the outside world. Each curriculum development venture must accommo-

date the complex structure of a given group and recognize the relationship of that structure to the behavior of individual members.

Curriculum development strategies that attempt to focus upon the psychology of individual behavior or treat all groups as if they were alike will probably be unsuccessful. It should be no surprise that such processes work well in some schools and not in others. The relationship between the change process and the culture of a group is a dynamic one requiring constant atten-

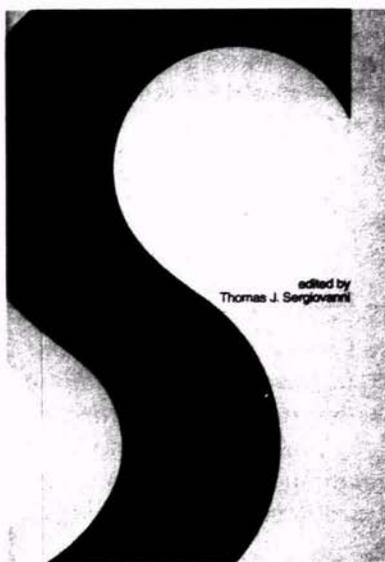
"... we should find kinship in our shared interest in curriculum development, our desire to improve curricular decision making through an improved knowledge base, and a common disposition to approach our related problems in a thoughtful, caring fashion."

tion and adaptation to new developments while the process unfolds.

Process Is an Influential Change Agent

The agent of change is not a person but the experiential process the users go through in developing curriculum change. Change occurs as a result of engaging people in processes that promote the development of new perceptions and beliefs or the alteration of "old" ones. In most cases, little change is likely to occur until people perceive a discrepancy between existing and desired beliefs or actions. In order to perceive this discrepancy, people need the opportunity to examine currently held perceptions, reconsider them in the light of new data, and then put their trial ideas to rational and empirical tests that will verify the extent of their utility.

Having experienced this type of process, most people will internalize their new perceptions and beliefs along with a sense of commitment that makes the change a lasting one. Following the same line of thought, those who experience the process only vicariously will probably demonstrate a reduced level of commitment to change. Teachers who are simply handed the product, the tangible results of the process, benefit little, if any.



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Thomas J. Sergiovanni

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Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Suite 1100, 1701 K St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006

The School Is the Primary Unit for Curriculum Change

To focus on the district as the *primary* unit of curriculum development often results in the illusion of meaningful change that has little bearing on the day-to-day interactions between students and teachers. To work at a district level is to work with the problems associated with trying to bring about change in any collectivity; there is little commonality across schools, and strategies become more or less appropriate depending on the characteristics of each sub-unit. There is no intent here to argue that it is inappropriate to establish such things as program guidelines and program goals at the district level. We would argue, however, that stopping at that point or slightly beyond usually provides nice window dressing but has little, if any, effect on classroom activity.

To focus on a *primary* unit smaller than the school, for example, the classroom or grade level group, often risks too much fragmentation and underestimates the influence of school culture on classroom interaction. Basic cultural features

of school staffs such as interpersonal norms, vested interests, and coping behaviors can interfere with curriculum change. Group-based norms often limit the range of options and protect the status quo to the extent that changes in norms must usually precede curriculum change.

If we want curriculum change to be integrated to some extent within a school and to be based on normative change, we should usually focus on the school as our primary unit of change. Of course, the district must always be a secondary unit of change, at least in terms of setting parameters and providing resources, and the classroom must always be a secondary unit at least in terms of individual teacher staff development needs and necessary classroom level modifications.

In larger schools, an intermediate unit between school level and classroom level implementation, for instance high school departments or elementary grade level groups, might be necessary. Often such groups represent subcultures within a large school that must be worked with in light of their idiosyncratic cultural characteristics.

So What?

Up to this point, we suspect that it has been easy for the reader to nod approval to most of the principles we have posed. Wrestling with the question of how these principles reflect on one's activities is another matter. A sequence of internal dialogue might go like this: Do I agree with these principles? How would I qualify them, if at all? To what extent are they reflected in my curriculum development activities—whether doing, writing, researching, or teaching? What are some of the implications of these principles?

- *Substantive change is a time-consuming process.* If curriculum workers agree with this principle, they should be willing to support the three to five year time commitment that is usually necessary for successful curriculum development to occur. They also should reflect this commitment in their planning for curriculum change and in the identification of resource needs. Too often assorted pressures force abandonment of adequate planning time because the pressure groups cannot accept the possibility that a year may slip by without some "action" or visible change in the curriculum. Sometimes the most legitimate

activity of the curriculum worker is to demonstrate and to defend convincingly the need for adequate time while resisting pressures to quickly produce something tangible. More than possessing patience as a virtue, curriculum workers must be able to foster it in others.

- *Strategies for curriculum change must fit the user group.* Application of this principle means that curriculum developers should not expect all teachers or all schools to function in the same way or to move at the same pace in a curriculum change effort. While it may be defensible to expect the district language arts program, for instance, to have a common philosophy and program goals, it would be equally defensible to expect each school's language arts program within the district to take a slightly different form. The important point is that each user group should have a program that is consistent with the complex culture of that group including the students. Responsibility lies with the curriculum worker not only to understand that each group has its own culture but to comprehend what that culture is and how it works so that the curriculum change process interacts successfully with the cultural characteristics of the group.

- *Process is an influential change agent.* Whether a user group is adapting someone else's curriculum to its situation, generating its own curriculum, or some combination of both, the quality of its involvement in the process is critical. This principle emphasizes the role of the process as change agent and suggests that, whatever its form or duration, the process must enable alterations in individual and group perceptions and beliefs. If the process does not do it then it is unlikely that meaningful change will result. Rather than constructing in-service sessions designed to orient teachers to curriculum innovation, curriculum workers should design dynamic processes that include opportunities to examine currently-held perceptions and beliefs and consider alternatives. Acceptance of this principle also means that not all teachers or groups will change in the same way or at the same rate.

- *The school is the primary unit for curriculum change.* Adherence to this principle should be manifest in the way the curriculum worker perceives his or her role. Too often this position is seen as the point where curriculum change deci-

sions should be made. Operating from a management posture, the curriculum coordinator, perhaps with a core of teachers, governs any curriculum change and requires that this change be district-wide in scope. This view of curriculum development violates most of the principles we have just outlined.

In a view consistent with principle four, the curriculum worker would focus most program development at the school level. Most of these activities, therefore, would involve a team of teachers, the principal, and the curriculum coordinator working together to bring about change. District curriculum development would be conspicuously absent except to establish parameters and general program goals. Further, the curriculum coordinator would be conspicuously absent much of the time from a central office location. Many curriculum workers would need to reconstruct their conception of role and develop breadth and depth in social psychological competencies to perform in accordance with this principle.

We do not claim, within the limits of this article, to present a comprehensive set of principles that should govern curriculum development. We do not even claim to offer a complete list of ideas that underlie the concept of *change* in curriculum development. We do claim, however, to begin bridging the theory-practice gap by offering a few well-established principles and discussing some of their implications for practice. As theorist-practitioner hybrids, we encourage others like us to begin extending these and other ideas into a framework that is usable—usable by theorist, practitioner, professor, and field-worker—and to help break down the artificial distinctions that limit our progress as individuals and curriculum colleagues. [E]



Theodore J. Czajkowski (left) and Jerry L. Patterson are Curriculum Coordinators, Madison Metropolitan School District, Madison, Wisconsin.

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