

Task No.1: Writing "Practical" Curriculums

Judith E. Siegel

Effective curricular effort results through the satisfactory interaction of particular commonplaces: a particular subject matter, one group of students, a specific milieu, a given teacher.

Although there is abundant evidence of concern about procedures for defensible decision making in the field of curriculum, little of substance about such procedures has been published since the Tyler rationale (1949).¹ The need for such a statement is immediately evident after a cursory glance at recent work in the field: inquiry about curriculum seems to want controlling forms that would define and direct it. There can be little quarrel with the assertion that "the curriculum worker is concerned with action and seeks such action because he is searching for forms of school experience which can be educative for students."²

There is a problem, however, in finding ways to talk about educational "action" and "school experience" that are neither one-sided (giving undue attention to one or merely a few elements of the many aspects of schooling) nor so general as to leave unclear implications for concrete curriculums. General categories abound in literature about education, as do proposals for basing curriculums on one vision of the child as learner or of the "good" society (but ignoring potential contributions from other theories or visions). Rarely are the issues addressed of widening the perspectives upon which curriculum decisions are made, or of moving among apparently isolated

perspectives toward well-founded solutions to particular problems.

Joseph Schwab³ has begun to develop a complex view of the problem of defensible curricular decision making that appears to bear great promise for use by teachers and curriculum makers. In Schwab's view, the field of curriculum has failed to provide sound solutions to the problems it should address primarily because of an over-reliance on theoretic legitimation. Because questions of educational content and methods are highly particular and concrete, theories borrowed from the behavioral sciences are inadequate for the task of generating particular curriculums; they generally address only one of the many aspects of their subject matter. The varying prin-

¹ Ralph W. Tyler. *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949.

² Ian Westbury and William Steimer. "Curriculum, a Discipline in Search of Its Problems." *School Review* 79:251-71; 1971.

³ Joseph Schwab. "The Practical I: A Language for Curriculum." *School Review* 78:1-24; November 1969; "The Practical II: Arts of Eclectic." *School Review* 79: 493-542; August 1971; "The Practical III: Translation into Curriculum." *School Review* 81:501-22; August 1973.

ciples of inquiry that distinguish the "schools" of the social sciences are necessarily addressed to particular, small parts of the complex whole of the educational situation. These theories arising from different inquiries are each "... incomplete to the extent that competing theories take hold of different aspects of the subject of inquiry and treat it in a different way."⁴

To Reconcile the Concrete and the Theoretical

Schwab describes arts of the practical and arts of eclectic that can reconcile the demands of concrete situations with the resources of theoretic inquiry about subjects pertinent to schooling. What might be done in a particular school situation—the curriculum—can be concluded only after a thorough, deliberative examination of the situation itself and of the theories brought to bear. We cannot meaningfully generate, for example, "secondary school curriculum." Rather, we generate curriculum in a specified subject matter (or one concluded as a result of the deliberation) for a particular group of students in a specified setting.

It is important to note that eclectic arts are difficult to describe (they are "unsystematic, uneasy, but usable") (Schwab, *ibid.*, pp. 1-2) and that "practical" does not connote mediocrity or ordinariness, but rather "... a complex discipline, relatively unfamiliar to the academic and differing radically from the disciplines of the theoretic."⁵ Unlike the theoretic, which is concerned with knowledge, the practical is concerned with "choice and action" (Schwab, *ibid.*).

Ironically, Schwab's work may be seen as presenting shortcomings similar to many educational theories in the sense that it speaks to the field of curriculum and to particular curriculum problems in general terms. This generality constitutes a communication barrier between the work as so far published by Schwab and its potential users—teachers, curriculum makers, and teachers of teachers. There seems clearly, then, to be a need for a transitional presentation that would make Schwab's work accessible to its potential audience. The competence of curricular deliberation needs exemplification.

This need, along with persistent personal wrestling with such basic questions as, "What is

a curriculum?" "What is a good curriculum?" and "How can we decide what to teach?" led me to begin to explore ways to develop curriculum both consistent with Schwab's observations and readily understandable to program planning constituencies. I asked myself how the competence of curricular deliberation (which I had learned as Schwab's student) could be both described and exemplified. These questions provided the focus to a lengthy study of the process of curricular deliberation,⁶ the broad outlines of which are described here.

A More Manageable Plane

It became clear to me that these questions had to be moved to a more manageable plane. I

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chose to beg the broad question of "What is a deliberation like?" and began, instead, with "What is a deliberation about a *Hamlet* curriculum like?" While a rigorous and complete exercise in the humanities would have left the question of specific subject matter as a genuine curricular issue, I felt, for a number of reasons, justified in using a more limited approach. In practical terms, there must be a starting point in any deliberation. Furthermore, specific situations often proscribe real choice—a state agency may mandate the choice of a particular subject matter, tradition may dictate it, parents or students may favor it or forbid it. *Hamlet's* richness in itself may be used to justify its perhaps premature selection: it is difficult to imagine a student group for whom it could not be rewarding in some way.

⁴ *Ibid.*, "The Practical I," p. 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

⁶ Judith S. Siegel. "Curricular Deliberation About 'Hamlet': An Exercise in the Practical." Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Chicago, June 1975.

For purposes of this study, curricular alternatives about *Hamlet* were generated for a designated group of high school juniors, to be taught by me.

Practical deliberations do not promise to produce the "best" curriculum, but, rather, a considered, defensible curriculum. I set out not only to produce some *Hamlet* curriculums, but also to provide a rational (simulated) model of an activity (curricular deliberation) and thus to show what is really required to produce an adequate curriculum proposal: consideration of a concrete example, a conspectus of relevant theoretical resources, and other kinds of less traditional sources such as personal observations, perceptive fiction, and unobtrusive measures. The attack on a particular, concrete curriculum problem was intended to clarify the sense of Schwab's proposals and to indicate means of implementing them. It was also to show how one field of inquiry (in this case, literary criticism) is searched for materials useful for curriculum-making, which then are interpreted and applied in the light of multiprincipled social science research and other kinds of data.

To Produce a "Practical" Curriculum

Five bodies of disciplines must be examined in order to produce a "practical" curriculum. Four of these bodies of disciplines appear as "commonplaces" in literature about education. These are: student, teacher, subject matter, and milieu. The warrant of these commonplaces is comprised in their repeated use in the field of education. The fifth body of experience—that of the curriculum specialist—is addressed toward the concrete embodiments of curricular deliberation, that is, the curriculum itself. The four commonplaces, when considered together in the light of particular situations and with the help of the curriculum specialist, can be made to generate both anticipated and unanticipated consequences for educational action.

The commonplaces become meaningful as they are invested with particular characteristics. It is the role of the curriculum specialist to help to generate choices implicit in the four commonplaces specifically in question, and then to pick and choose among them (always, with an eye toward the three not under direct consideration) as the curriculum is produced.

For the student commonplace, for example,

several factors are relevant to curricular inquiry, for example, socioeconomic class origin in respect of the factors relevant to the teaching of the subject (here, *Hamlet*), ethnic background, habits, abilities, and relevant preparations. For each of these factors, choices must be presented, that is, we must have available alternative conceptions of how children learn, how they may view the future, and what they can do. We do not then pick and choose at whim, but, rather, in light of the other specific commonplaces. The scannings must be "deliberately irrelevant"⁷ as well as purposeful. In this way, we see more than we may have expected to see had we based our scanning on merely one theory of the learning

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child or one view of personality development. A similar scrutiny is applied to each of the commonplaces.

As I defined the curricular task, *Hamlet* provided the starting point for the deliberation. The field of literary criticism gave a logical entry point to the problem of teaching *Hamlet* to one group of students in one setting. In a particular critical theory or in a particular interpretation of the play are a method and a point of view that can be made to provide a reading of the play. In the deliberation in my study, wide readings of literary criticism were made to provide an initial array of alternatives which were subsequently narrowed in view of considerations drawn from the remaining alternatives. For example, a particularly complex psychoanalytic reading was determined to be beyond the moral sophistication of 16-year-olds.

Any of the commonplaces, however, may provide a starting point for the deliberation. For

⁷ Schwab, "The Practical II," *op. cit.*, p. 496.

example, various learning theories about the student commonplace could be arrayed, alternative visions of the "good" life might be articulated from the milieu, or varieties of teaching styles could be considered as generating sources for curriculums.

It becomes obligatory that considerations from the remaining commonplaces be weighted heavily against the considerations provided by the initial generative commonplace. This ensures against perversions of the deliberation by unwitting overattention to considerations drawn from

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any one commonplace. Furthermore, the array of alternatives assembled as representatives of the starting point restricts the alternatives that could represent the other commonplaces. If, for example, we array ten interpretations of *Hamlet*, our students can be recipients of only those ten, and not a hypothetical eleventh that might be more appropriate.

Educational alternatives are generated from the commonplaces by sets of arts that often overlap and merge. Practical arts identify the concrete situation fully, especially the aspects of the situation ignored by theory by virtue of theory's characteristic generality. There are some eclectic arts that recognize the inadequacy of each subject of the behavioral sciences to account for real situations, and others that overcome the partial nature of behavioral science theories through selection, accommodation, and/or judgment. It is the exercise of these arts that constitutes curricular deliberation. Each alternative, representing a commonplace (in the exemplary case of my study, subject matter), is subject to discrimination and to continuing constraints drawn from the other three.

For example, the search for considerations about the student commonplace is in part char-

acterized by the attempt to identify patterns that will be considered in the selection of a reading of *Hamlet* for the particular students. We might conclude that the students have a strong sense of obligation toward their families; that they sense they must fulfill certain clearly defined expectations. Such a conclusion might lead us to choose a reading concerning Hamlet's obligations deriving from his rank; knowledge of student capabilities would lead us to believe that our students would readily understand such an interpretation.

The characteristic activity of the curriculum maker, then, is a process of estimation and weighing. Consequently, deliberation produces a defensible curriculum, not "the best" curriculum. The curriculum produced as a result of the deliberation is not even certain to be "good," but can be defended on the ground that, to the best of the deliberator's ability, considerations have been conceived and applied with the result that this curriculum, among the alternatives considered, seems to be the best. Because people, subject matters, and other factors, are so complex, the aim of the curricular effort is the satisfactory interaction of particular commonplaces: a particular subject matter, one group of students, a specific milieu, a given teacher. Optimum actualization of such interaction is not defined prior to the deliberation; it cannot be. Yet that might be decided after a thorough, systematic, and semi-systematic search of the participating elements. The curriculum produced as a result of the deliberative process will thus speak not merely to the demands and/or capabilities of one of the curricular commonplaces, but to all of them. And in this way, curriculum efforts will begin to be addressed to the real demands of educational problems. [E]



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