

Uncaging Learning: A Curriculum Proposal

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Is the Tyler rationale "a cage, with children inside having things done for them by adults who have goals or ends for them"? These authors present an alternative approach that emphasizes learner participation as an integral element.

We want to raise some crucial issues regarding curriculum development as we see it: (a) Is the Tyler rationale¹ the appropriate model to be used today? ANSWER: In our opinion, no! (b) Looking at Tyler's extensions and current modifications, are these changes significant enough to make a real difference in curriculum development? ANSWER: We'd like to say yes, but our answer is no! (c) Is Tyler alone responsible for today's approach to curriculum development? ANSWER: How could any one person have that power over American education! (d) Is a new curriculum model needed now? ANSWER: No, not in our opinion. (e) So, where does that leave us? ANSWER: Let's explore that shortly.

Response to Question (a): We think it is vital for American education to challenge Ralph Tyler's rationale for curriculum and instruction. To us, his syllabus is like a cage, with children inside having things done for them by adults who

have goals or ends for them. In 1950, Tyler felt that: "Many educational programs" lacked "clearly defined purposes." Therefore, he included in his rationale studies of the learners in order to develop objectives for children; but such inclusion was to give adults the power to do just that—establish purposes *for* children. He proposed quite different cages for different schools, but cages they were, nevertheless.

We request the right to invert Tyler's cage to enable each child to reach in and take from the wealth of human experiences those components that make sense to each learner. We believe, with Aristotle, that human beings have the need to make sense of, and get meaning from life's experiences. Biologically and experientially, each learner is unique. We believe there is enough information on the process of learning and on

¹ Ralph W. Tyler. *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. The University of Chicago, 1950. pp. 1-3.

child growth and development to propose the inversion.

We like the way John A. Zahorik² identifies the value position of Tyler's model with its suggestion that the human not only separates goals or ends from the activity or means, but also that such ends or goals must precede and direct the activity or means. We believe this value position may explain why so many children are turned off and tuned out—seeing that school, with its predetermined objectives, is something

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apart from the living and learning they have done without these same adult-determined objectives.

Response to Question (b): In modifying his rationale,³ Tyler simply stands the cage on any one of the other three sides. While this might disturb the strict behaviorists with their pressures on teachers to identify first what objectives they want for children, it scarcely changes anything.

Tyler claims his questions are general and nothing about them dictates how they are to be answered. We say this is not true. If all four questions must be considered for each curriculum decision, then they are not value-free, but do indeed offer the strictures of a box in which children are placed to have them receive the four-sided treatment.

Response to Question (c): When Tyler said, "Education is changing behavior," he led the behavioral movement whether or not he chose to do so.

We sense within the Tyler model and the processes now widely used a conscious and calculated attempt to modify and change the behavior of children. The underlying and unifying theme that seems to be present is that, since

learning is a change in behavior, we must be certain we control that learning. Our third concern rests solely on the behavioristic tone of such assumptions.

Within our perspective, learning is not more nor less than making sense of what we experience. Whether or not "making sense out of something" results in immediate, observable behavioral change is really inconsequential. The true test is whether the world makes more sense to children today than it did yesterday.

Response to Question (d): In all honesty, we hesitated with our answer. In no way do we wish to convey the message that Tyler's model is appropriate, but on the other hand, we do not wish to give the impression that the mere creation of an alternative model will change directions in curriculum development. We are concerned about the tendency of any model to produce a curriculum design that soon becomes arbitrary and frozen. Such a design requires teachers and children to fit into it as best they can. Manning⁴ suggests that a curriculum design should serve teachers and learners rather than rule them. We agree. Thus, we are cautious about models in the traditional sense of the word.

Response to Question (e): We propose some alternative thoughts for those who might feel as we do. We do not believe these thoughts will be applicable for all teachers, although we do believe them to be appropriate for all children. Our philosophical orientation is humanistic. We trust all children and teachers to want to learn, to grow, to become more fulfilled. We accept their life events as valid experiencing. We project that each constructs his or her own curricular web, unique to his or her valuing, feeling, and survival.

Our curriculum schemata would include the following characteristics:

² John A. Zahorik. "A Task for Curriculum Research." *Educational Leadership* 33(7):487-89; April 1976.

³ Frances M. Klein. "Tyler and Goodlad Speak on American Education: A Critique." *Educational Leadership* 33(8):565-70; May 1976.

⁴ Duane Manning. *Toward A Humanistic Curriculum*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971.

1. *More flexible ingress and egress for this institution called "school."*

We believe children ought to be able to initially enter school on their fifth birthday, as is done in Australia and Britain. This not only makes entering school a very special birthday, but also enables the teacher to have the opportunity to view this youngster as an individual with whom to plan. We also believe temporary dropouts and easy reentries should become more commonplace.

In addition, we believe schools can provide a number of mini-courses, as now found in some high schools. Thus, children can choose more frequently, from more options, and more nearly match their peak-plateau physiological and emotional cycles. We also recommend earlier and more frequent out-of-school work-study experiences that enable children to apply life skills and to space academic studies.

2. *Verbal, visual, or tactile explorations between child and adult for curricular development, in more personalized ways of learning.*

Weekend experiences, evening experiences, and all the varied kinds of materials found in such experiences should be available in the schools for possible exploration by the children, with adult help in planning for the expansion of such explorations. We believe that paper-pencil pretests, and group examinations of pupil achievement provide very limited knowledge about the skills, attitudes, and applications of knowledge possessed by children. We see this process as integrating the means-ends dichotomy.

3. *Learner and teacher explorations for sharing the child's insights with others.*

As explorations progress, we believe the learner and teacher have a professional obligation to share processes, problems, solutions, or products with those in the total school who care to participate in the sharing. Not only does this offer others a more natural motivation cycle, but it also provides immediate feedback from a wide circle of caring participants.

4. *The examination of experiencing, and critiquing its meaning, by each learner.*

We believe that learners, as part of the preceding point, will derive personal satisfaction and benchmarks for future decision making, as

they examine in a variety of appropriate styles their experiencing, and critique its relevance for them, since they own their learning and are their own goal-setters.

5. The cycle would be repeated from number 2 above.

Beginnings

Since we are strong, field-oriented teachers, we would like to offer you some "beginnings"

"No goal or end established for a learner without the learner's participation in the development of that goal or end can be considered valid."

that might work for you as they have worked for teachers we know.

1. The first day of the school year, or the first day after the next holiday, or the first Monday after you read this article, begin with a circle discussion of "What's Great About Our Room?" or "How Can We Make This a Really Special School Year?" or something similarly positive. Actually listen to the children, and then, in small steps, with additional daily circle talks, plan ways this kind of idea can be implemented and frequently evaluated for continuous action.

2. Keep all "established standards" for your grade level(s) far back in your mind, and develop and redevelop standards *with* children. Actually, many standards already being practiced will emerge from the group, but as they are allowed to really examine them, sometimes excellent modifications arise. Caution: You must be ready to give up being the "angel" or the "beast" to your class.

Continuing with "standards," try putting yourself into the position of "breaking the bank"; record and share how many ways and times children *surpass* the previous established standards, both academically and affectively!

3. Stand back and take a look at the commercial attitude of school materials—notebooks,



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doing "a" ("b," etc.) help you if you were studying any of the others? What processes are common to all of our studies? What processes are different? What kind of evaluation makes the most sense with each of our studies? What do these explorations stimulate?

5. Evaluation assumes a more natural stance—all of Bloom's taxonomy becomes evident, with lower levels showing an increase through increasing evidence of the higher levels of intellect. What we see is more analysis, more synthesis, more application, more accurate evaluation. To us, this is better education!

What we are really saying is—NO GOAL OR END ESTABLISHED FOR A LEARNER WITHOUT THE LEARNER'S PARTICIPATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THAT GOAL OR END CAN BE CONSIDERED VALID. We believe validity lies in the learner's owning his/her learning goals, ends, processes, and evaluation. Bronowski⁵ urges us "to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power." He continues, "We have to close the distance between the push-button order and the human act. We have to touch people." [F]

⁵ J. Bronowski. *The Ascent of Man*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973. p. 374.

pencils, pens, crayons, and films. We are suggesting that you encourage and enjoy the materials that children use as they develop their goals for learning: animals, models, games, real physical things, experiments. Again, some students will want books because they soon learn that books have so much information to answer their many questions. Dittos and other paper-pencil activities return to their most effective usage as support activities.

4. Explore "webbing" children's own curriculum. Instead of 30 children studying the Eskimo, you now have: (a) three children collecting, counting, and storing pop-can rings for environmental education; (b) seven making paper doll clothes of First Ladies' Inaugural Ball gowns; (c) five children developing a contract on values; (d) six preparing the scenery for a Thanksgiving play; (e) eight writing and practicing that play; and one child developing a musical game.

Questions to help children develop webs include: What science (art, math, etc.) skills and concepts are found in "a" to "f"? How would



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