Who Will Engage in Curriculum Evaluation?

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Instead of who, we should be concerned about how affected persons will engage in curriculum evaluation. “We should work toward making evaluations more systematic (in contrast to subjective), more public (in contrast to private), and more sensitive to differences in data needs at the differing levels of decision making inherent in the differing groups.”

The title question for this article is a multi-edged sword. Considered one way, it seems to ask for a prediction of the lineup. Who or what agencies will be in on the action at some point in the future? Considered another way, it asks who has the right to evaluate curricula. Should the federal government be messing around in curriculum evaluation? Should the courts? By what right do they enter this arena?

Considered still another way, the question seems to ask who has the obligation, the responsibility, to engage in curriculum evaluation? Who has got to do it? Finally, from still another vantage point, the question seems to be a plea. Will anybody engage in curriculum evaluation? Please?

Some people will fuss that the “Feds” don’t have the right to evaluate the curriculum. After all, the Constitution gave control of education to the states! So, why should the government get into curriculum evaluation. Others will fuss about the involvement of parents or community groups, after all, they aren’t trained in education! And the courts, what do they know about education?

All of these concerns are moot. The fact is, all of these groups, and more, will evaluate the curriculum. There is no way we can stop them. Judging, contrasting, comparing, and assessing are continual behaviors of humans. No, we don’t have to worry about which group will evaluate the curriculum, or which group has the right or the responsibility. They all do, and they all will! Trying to stop them would be like trying to keep the reader of this material from making judgments about how good or bad it is.

Our concern ought to shift to how these different groups evaluate the curriculum. That’s where the problem is! Will these evaluations be systematic or subjective? Will the inevitable evaluations be public or private? And, will the evaluations be structured so that they are not rendered useless by the levels problem?

Curriculum evaluation is both simple and complex. It is a problem-solving process. As such, it is uniquely effective when we intend to make a choice, and when we don’t have information that tells us the relative worth of the different options.

Curriculum evaluation focuses on four general classes of choice making. The first class is choosing between goals. Educators and their pub-
lies can conceive of far more goals than can be attended to by the curriculum. Our resources are limited, and so is our time. We need to choose which goals our curriculum is to be oriented toward.

The second class of choice making comes when a specific educational goal has been selected and there appear to be several programs or ways of accomplishing it. Now a choice has to be made as to which program plan seems best. The third class of choice-making occurs once a plan is selected and implementation is underway. Now the choice making focuses on the modifications that may be needed to keep the program moving toward accomplishing the chosen goal.

The final choice-making class comes when a program has been carried out. Are the results good enough that we should build the new program into the continuing operation? Or, are the results such that another test run with some modifications is warranted? Or, are the results so bad that the program or goal ought to be dropped?

The activities that make up the curriculum evaluation process include: (a) the specification of the alternatives that are going to be considered in the choice making; (b) the determination of the variables the decision makers will use in making their choice; (c) the collection and analysis of data; and (d) reporting the relative worth of the alternatives to the decision makers.

As asserted earlier, our problem is not who will evaluate the curriculum, but rather, how will they evaluate. Systematically or subjectively? Publicly or privately? Most evaluations are subjective and private. For example, as a reader, you have perhaps considered several options as you have read to this point in this article: continue reading; put the article aside until some other time; put it aside and forget it. As you have been reading, you may or may not have been conscious of considering those options. And, you probably did not consciously consider the array of variables (for example, clarity of the message, quality of the logic in the message, the importance of the concepts) that could be used in deciding to read on, set it aside, or throw it away.

But, you have made a decision. You are still reading. You have been evaluating at least some of the options, and you have made a choice. That evaluation is a subjective and a private evaluation. You did not do it by design. You did not articulate the alternatives. You did not specify the variables to be used in determining the relative worth of all of the options. And, you probably would have a hard time describing when and how you chose to continue reading.

Subjective, private evaluations are not all bad, particularly when an individual is making choices for himself or herself. But, when the decisions to be made involve many people and when the options considered are complex, systematic and public evaluations are preferred.

Three Types of Information

Systematic evaluations start with the delineation of the decision situation. This requires the determination of three types of information.

1. Who will make the decision? Is it an individual? If so, who? Is it a group? If so, are they functioning as a group or sequentially? At what decision levels are they going to make the choice? (More on this levels problem later.)

2. What are the alternatives? What set of options will be considered by the decision maker(s)? What are the characteristics of each of the alternatives?

3. What variables will the choice maker(s) use in determining the relative value or worth of the alternatives? (For example: cost, political acceptability, ease of implementation, extent to which learning is increased aesthetic character, and so on.)

Once this information is in hand, the systematic evaluator constructs a matrix for each
decision-making level involved. The rows of that matrix are labeled by the alternatives being considered; the columns by the variables to be used to differentiate their worth. Each cell in those matrices indicates a type of data that needs to be generated and interpreted in the evaluation study.

Notice the imperative in points 2 and 3 mentioned earlier. In designing an evaluation, it may be possible to identify more alternatives than the decision makers can or will consider. A systematic evaluation is one in which the evaluator first checks to see if the selection of alternatives and variables is a closed or open matter. If it is open, the evaluator identifies those other options (program alternatives and criterion variables) and calls them to the attention of the decision maker(s) for possible inclusion in the study. In this action, the evaluator assists the decision maker(s) to a conscious consideration of the options in a decision situation.

In an evaluation that does not delineate the options before collecting and interpreting data, it is possible to close out options on incomplete data. Two problems develop in such evaluations. Sometimes we examine the alternative programs sequentially and decide that one of them is not possible for one reason or another. As we move on to the remaining alternatives, we may forget about the alternative we have closed out. In so doing, we do not consider that alternative on all of the criteria. If that alternative rated poorer than the others on that first criterion but in fact was better on all the other criteria, a poor evaluation report would be submitted.

The second difficulty encountered when alternatives and criterion variables are not articulated in advance is also one of applying differential criteria. In this case, we consider program alternative A using a known set of criterion variables. The same occurs for program alternative B. Another program, option C, is uncovered, and we set out to evaluate it. As we apply the set of variables, we learn about another criterion that someone wants us to use. We apply it to program option C, but not to the other options. Again, the relative worth of all the programs can be distorted. Evaluation, done systematically, should produce data about the relative worth of all the program alternatives on all the criteria to be used in the decision.

The public-private dichotomy presented earlier is basically a concern for reliability in evaluation. Public evaluations are done in a manner in which the procedures to be followed are made known. Private evaluations can sometimes be reconstructed after the fact. However, we are all well aware of major differences between reconstructed logic and logic in use. Think back for a moment to a recent evaluation you made; perhaps the judgment of how good that meal was in a restaurant. There are a number of qualitative labels you could have used ranging from excellent (“Among the best meals I’ve had.”) through average to terrible (“I wish I’d refused to pay for it.” or, at least, “I’ll never eat there again.”). Or you could have used some other qualitative labels, for example, “The best (or worst) Italian meal,” “The best (or worst) service I’ve received,” and so on. Were you conscious about considering all of those options? Did you think about the criteria you used to determine which of these worth labels was the best one for that situation? Probably not; you were performing a private evaluation (even though you may have made the results of it public by communicating your appreciation or lack of it to the waiter or management). Another person in that same situation would conduct his or her private evaluation. The two of you might come to different conclusions about the quality of the meal. Or you might come to the same conclusion but for different reasons.

We make a great number of private evaluations. That is how it should be. But, when we are faced with decisions that involve many people, decisions among complex alternatives, decisions in which there is a degree of accountability involved, we need to do public evaluations.

The many people and agencies who will evaluate the curriculum should understand one
more point about public evaluations. The public aspect of an evaluation is determined by the degree to which the evaluative procedures are specified in advance and replicable by other competent evaluators. It does not necessarily mean that the results of the evaluation are broadcast from the front page of the newspaper.

At two earlier points in this article the phrase, "the levels problem," was used. This is another facet of the evaluation process that must be understood by those who would evaluate curriculum. Failure to understand it and deal with it in an evaluation effort can render the work useless.

An illustration of the levels problem can be seen in an example used by Mary Jean Bowman at a 1969 meeting of the National Symposium for Professors of Educational Research (NSPER). She made the point that the first thing that must be attended to in a cost-benefit analysis is the nature of the specific decision(s) being served. She asked the NSPER participants to consider the decision milieu in which offering or participating in additional higher education activities is involved. One decision in that milieu is made by the individual about participating or not. Another decision is made by the institution about offering additional higher education opportunities or not. Still another decision in that milieu is made by society, are those opportunities needed or not.

Bowman called the group's attention to the fact that the alternatives in each of these three decisions are different, associated but different. Further, the data needed to determine the relative worth of the options differs from one decision level to another. For example, consider costs. The costs to participants include tuition, fees, and foregone earnings. None of those are costs at the institution level of decision making. At this decision level costs include facilities, faculty salaries, and maintenance. Tuition is a benefit at the institution level of decision making. This illustration points out that a move from one level of decision making to another creates subtle changes in the alternatives being considered and subtle changes in the criterion variables.

We can see a levels problem in the evaluation of teaching. If we are evaluating my teaching to help me become a better teacher, we are at one level of decision making. If we are evaluating my teaching to help administrators make decisions about placement, pay, or termination, we are at another level of decision making. The data needed for these two levels are different. The same holds for curriculum. A teacher's evaluation of curriculum to help a child learn is one level of decision making. An administrator's evaluation of the curriculum of a school (undertaken to help children learn) is another level. The state or federal evaluation is still another. So is the parental, the teacher's union, and so on. Each of these decision making levels will be concerned with a somewhat different set of alternatives. Because of that, their data needs will differ.

Educators, politicians, and the lay public continually overlook the decision levels problem in evaluation. They act as if the same data bits can (and should) be used at all levels. Failure to recognize this and to design evaluations appropriate to the decision level can have a very harmful effect as the many groups and agencies carry out their inevitable evaluations of the curriculum.

In summary, the question, who will engage in curriculum evaluation, is misleading. It suggests that some should and others should not. The fact is all of us, and all of our groups and agencies, will evaluate—we are humans and that is the nature of the beast. Our concern should be modified! We should be concerned about how they will engage in curriculum evaluation. And in that concern we should work toward making their evaluations more systematic (in contrast to subjective), more public (in contrast to private), and more sensitive to differences in data needs at the differing levels of decision making inherent in the differing groups.

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