

The Continuing Quest for Rationality in Curriculum Practice

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Increasingly, curriculum specialists are forced to deal with societal forces that impinge on their domain. Yet sensitive workers can weave these demands into a model curriculum that will serve all their constituents.

Has the leadership role of curriculum workers in instructional program planning been usurped by recent trends in back to basics and minimum competency testing? Is curriculum development a *fait accompli* of educational funding policies, pressure politics, and legislative mandates? Has the current crisis in education restricted the role and function of curriculum specialists to that of "manager of the process for orchestrating mandates," instead of providing creative curriculum leadership as we typically understand it? These are questions theorists and practitioners alike are asking as they assess the changing role of curriculum workers in the context of contemporary educational affairs.

Place of Theory in Practice

Unquestionably, current trends in American education are demanding that curriculum work-

ers operate in ways quite different from what many of them have been accustomed to. We cannot deny that such factors as funding policies, federal and state legislation, court rulings, and interest group politicking delimit many of the things curriculum specialists must contend with in the actual practice of curriculum development. These realities, however, do not invalidate or minimize the importance of process conceptualization and design theory in curriculum making. If anything, theory becomes more important than ever for it provides the practitioner with a means for describing, interpreting, and guiding curriculum activities. It reminds the curriculum worker of the need to consciously conceptualize how instructional program planning occurs so as to increase the effectiveness of the development process. An interactive interrelationship exists between theory and practice in curriculum making. "Theory without

practice is idle speculation while practice without theory constitutes little more than blind or random groping."¹

Curriculum Specialists Still Necessary

Rather than usurping the role and function of curriculum specialists, current education policies and priorities may have merely reshaped the process of curriculum development. Instead of beginning with an overall theoretical conceptualization of the intended programs, curriculum development now begins with needs and goals mandated. And although more instructional areas and populations are being targeted by legislation and funding policies, the substantive particulars of the curriculum and how they are to be produced

¹ Robert S. Zais. *Curriculum: Principles and Foundations*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976. p. 87.

are left to the curriculum specialists to determine.

However curriculum needs are established, it is imperative for curriculum workers to be familiar with different ways of conceptualizing the development process. Such an understanding can be an invaluable tool for providing focus and direction to planning. In spite of criticizing curriculum construction as piecemeal, vogueish, transient, and frequently incoherent, Robert Zais tells us that a "theoretical framework, judiciously conceived and utilized, is . . . essential for the rational, orderly, and productive conduct of the curriculum enterprise."² Hilda Taba adds that "any enterprise as complex as curriculum requires some kind of theoretical or conceptual framework of thinking to guide it."³ Therefore, it seems plausible to argue that understanding different conceptual models of curriculum making will increase the effectiveness and rationality of the development processes, and, by extension, the overall quality of the resulting plans for instruction.

Orchestrating the Curriculum Development Process

Whether creating IEP's for mainstreaming the handicapped, developing lists of functional literacy competencies with specified levels of minimum proficiency, or developing programs to meet the guidelines for career education, bilingual and multicultural education, or elimination of sex role stereotyping, curriculum workers employ theoretical constructs to provide order and focus to their activities. These constructs may be either explicit or implicit, and may stem from conscious acts of thinking or personal inclinations of behaving.

Four conceptual models of the curriculum development process are suggested here as the ones operating most frequently in practice.

These are empiricism, rationalism, pragmatism, and humanism. None of these processes is a mutually exclusive category. All curriculum making includes some components of each one. The distinguishing features are their different points of departure and primary areas of emphasis. For example, the initial source or catalyst for minimum competencies and mainstreaming the handicapped, the curriculum projects of the 1960s, and multicultural education was basically political. Each one was stimulated by legislation, funding policies, and pressure politics. In this sense, all of these programs can be described as emanating from a pragmatic process of curriculum development. However, when one looks analytically at how the actual development process occurred in each of these curriculum priority areas, the image changes somewhat. On this basis, mainstreaming the handicapped and multicultural education are heavily weighted toward a humanistic process of curriculum development, although in different ways. The curriculum projects of the 1960s appear to have derived more from a classical or rational model of development. Minimum competencies programs result more from empirical processes. Each of these four conceptual models of the process of curriculum planning are explained separately to suggest in greater detail how they permeate curriculum practice.

The Empirical Process

The process used to develop lists of minimum competencies today is similar, in many ways, to what Franklin Bobbitt called "scientific curriculum making" in 1918. To him the essence of curriculum development was the analytical assessment of the total range of skills, abilities, forms of thought, values, and ambitions people need to succeed in life. The results of these analyses comprise the objectives and dictate the content of the curriculum. Bobbitt's theoretical basis for describing instructional planning in this fashion was a simple one. He maintained that:

Human life, however varied, consists in the performance of specific activities. Education that prepares for life is one that prepares definitely and adequately for these specific activities. However numerous and diverse they may be for any social class, they can be discovered. This requires only that one go out into the world of affairs and discover the particulars of which these affairs consist. These will show the abilities, attitudes, habits, appreciations, and forms of knowledge that men need. These will be the objectives of the curriculum.⁴

² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³ Hilda Taba. *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962. p. 413.

⁴ Franklin Bobbitt. *The Curriculum*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918. p. 42.

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Practical preparation for life is as much a concern of curriculum designers in 1979 as it was for Bobbitt in 1918. It is the capstone of instructional programs deriving from performance-based education and minimum competency testing.

Two basic process questions underly this approach to curriculum planning. They are: (a) How does one determine what constitutes adequate preparation for life; and (b) How can educators determine when students have mastered these competencies? The techniques many curriculum developers use to answer the first question are basically what Bobbitt advised. They consult societal studies, such as employment records, political action patterns, entry level vocational skills, college entrance requirements, and student performance on standardized tests, to derive lists of competencies necessary for effective functioning in society. Discrepancies between what skills are needed and actual capabilities exhibited by the citizenry are examined to identify educational priorities. Concern for mastery of basic skills of functional literacy, sex role liberation, vocational competence, global awareness, ethnic literacy, and critical thinking are among the critical issues identified as the major goals of education. They provide directionality for subsequent curriculum planning. The activities involved in developing lists of minimum competencies and how

they are executed compose, in part, an *empirical* process of curriculum development.

The empirical model of curriculum making also places high priority on management principles and performance-based criteria to demonstrate that learning has occurred. It uses an industrial model of behaviorism to provide focus for selecting and organizing content, activities, and evaluation. When asked how we know if or when learning has taken place, curriculum developers who orchestrate their development activities according to empiricism are likely to respond, "on the basis of demonstrated, easily measurable performance or behavior." This perception of learning fits the empirically based process of curriculum development for several reasons: (a) it operates on the assumption that if anything exists it exists in some amount and is therefore measurable; (b) once skills necessary for effective living are identified, each one can be factored down to its components, and learning activities appropriate for each component can then be designed; (c) once desired behavioral changes are identified, the conditions under which the performance of these behaviors are to occur and the minimum levels of proficiency can be specified; and (d) scientific measures of observable behaviors provide more objective and dependable bases for assessing student performance, and

making more viable educational decisions about program planning.

The time and resources allocated to developing scientifically based goal statements, describing objectives in behavioral terms, and specifying minimum levels of proficiency to signify mastery of competencies are cogent operational expressions of the empirical model of curriculum planning. Robert Thompson acknowledges this point in his observation that in this approach more emphasis is placed "upon reliably measurable and clearly communicable behavioral objectives than . . . upon any other dimension or element of the entire system [of curriculum development]." ⁵ Anyone who has been closely associated with preparing competency tests, competency-based teacher education programs, IEPs for the handicapped, and many of the IPI programs would find it difficult to deny this allegation.

The Rational Model

Like empiricism, the rational model of curriculum development places priority on identifying educational goals and objectives; however it differs in the methodology used to determine them. This process, as explicated in the Tyler Rationale, claims that there is a logical and systematic order to curriculum planning that begins with the identification of objectives and proceeds sequentially through the selection of content, learning activities, and evaluation procedures. The objectives are derived from a rational analysis of learner needs and characteristics, the nature of learning, the nature of society, and the subject matter disciplines. The expanding horizons design patterns of elementary social studies, the spiralling order and increasing complexity of cur-

⁵ Robert B. Thompson. *A Systems Approach to Instruction*. Hamden, Connecticut: Linnet Books, 1971. p. 145.

ricula across school levels, the use of prerequisites to determine instructional sequence, and the pre-eminence of disciplinarity in the national curriculum projects of the 1960s stem directly from a rationalistic perception of the curriculum development process.

At some point in any planning process academic rationality is likely to come to the fore. The established principles of learning and human growth and development cannot be ignored in determining the scope, focus, sequence, continuity, and articulation of the content, activities, and evaluation of instruction. For example, while the impetus for minimum competencies and career education was basically political, the specification of the curriculum plans in these areas is often governed by principles of academic rationality. Plans for attaining mastery of basic skills are arranged so that expectations for students in elementary, middle, and high schools are compatible with their maturation and development. Decisions about *how* to incorporate reading instruction in the content areas are based on what we know about the importance of maintaining consistency between curriculum objectives and content, human growth and development, what constitutes reading instruction, and the basic principles of learning. Therefore, reading exercises selected for inclusion in a biology curriculum must be appropriate for the developmental (intellectually and experientially) levels of the students for whom they are intended, and must be pertinent to the subject matter of biology.

The Pragmatic Model

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Effective curriculum workers take these facts into consideration in orchestrating the activities of curriculum development. Acceptance of the political nature of curriculum decision making, and using this to guide planning activities, is the core of a pragmatic perception of the curriculum development or planning process. The political nature of curriculum development may explain, in part, why Zais, Kliebard, and others have described it as a fragmented, piecemeal, and incoherent process. Political behavior is not always logical, rational, systematic, or coherent.

Politics permeate curriculum work in several different dimensions. First, education falls within the jurisdictional auspices of state and local governments. Just as school budgets are allocated by state legislatures, so are the basic components of the curriculum. The minimum competency movement is extending the role of state legislatures in determining school programs. Once these instructional parameters are established, the functions of curriculum workers in local school districts are restricted accordingly. To contend that the degree to which curriculum specialists are free to exercise curriculum leadership is a function of the extent to which state legislatures dictate the details of mandated instructional needs is a political argument. It is also a *real* pragmatic one.

Second, when curriculum workers make decisions about who should be involved in curriculum development, and how or under what conditions, they are engaging in politics. School personnel have many different constituencies to whom they are accountable. Meeting these obligations requires "an authoritative allocation of values containing some organization of influence and some distribution of resources."⁶ The politically adept and pragmatic curriculum worker is alert to this fact in appointing curriculum design and advisory committees, in determining what instructional issues will receive priority, and in determining how these issues will be treated in the planning for instruction. It would be politically naive and potentially destructive to the success of a program in sex education, for instance, to ignore the environmental forces (interest groups' concerns, community attitudes, human and economic resources, student readiness, teacher attitudes, and so on) that will resist and/or support the program. Similarly, any politically wise curriculum leader will ensure that members of different ethnic

⁶ Lawrence Iannaccone. "The Politics of Curriculum/Educational Decision-Making: Who Should be Responsible for What." Panel presentation given at the Annual Conference of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Detroit, Michigan, March 1978.

"A more appropriate way of perceiving curriculum making is as an eclectic process, which employs the differential application of many models of process planning. . . . Actual curriculum creation results from differential phase development."

groups are represented on those planning committees involved in developing curriculum for bilingual and multicultural education. Such representation is often mandated by legislation.

Administrative expediency demands that the composition of curriculum committees be representative of the different constituencies of given school buildings and districts. Care is taken to see that parents, students, central administration staff, teachers, and professional associations are represented, and that all are kept informed of the development activities. To do less would be to ignore some basic principles of politics, human relations, and group dynamics, and run the risk of jeopardizing the credibility and broad-based sense of ownership of the product.

The pragmatic model of curriculum development is political in another way—that is, in the funding policies that dictate curriculum priorities. As a result, actual school curricula, and by extension the roles of curriculum workers, are shaped by what monies from which sources are available under what conditions. The decision of a school district to go after monies earmarked for career education, ethnic heritage, or education for the handicapped is also a decision

about what the curriculum development processes will be in that district should the funds be awarded. The allocation of state and federal funds reserved for targeted populations is contingent upon the recipients meeting specified regulations. These stipulations suggest that more of a curriculum specialist's professional time be devoted to writing proposals and seeking funds. Under these circumstances the curriculum worker spends more time managing the project process to see that it meets the funding regulations than providing leadership in instructional planning as we typically think of it. Obviously, this posture is both political and pragmatic. Education is an expensive enterprise, and having money under prescribed, somewhat restrictive conditions is better than having the enterprise default because of no money at all.

The pragmatic curriculum developer finds it difficult to anticipate education programs very far in advance of their occurrence. However, he or she is an astute manager of "events of the moment," is well aware of the politics of education impinging upon program planning, and is capable of orchestrating a multitude of values and concerns emanating from different special interest groups into some kind of instructional coherency.

The Humanistic Model

A humanistic orientation toward curriculum making places prime importance on collaborative efforts, the quality of the human interactional dynamics in the development process, and instructional content, and learning experiences must directly relate to the personal needs and interests of individual students.

The development of IEPs for handicapped children, programs to eliminate sexism, and plans for multicultural education provide excellent examples of the place of humanism in the overall theoretical schema of curriculum development, as well as its operation in actual practice. We have already established the fact that all of these curriculum concerns originated initially out of the pressure politics of interest groups, and subsequently state and federal legislation (Public Law 94-142, Title IX, Ethnic Heritage Act). On that level they are all political. However, once we look beyond the source of their creation to how they are shaped in the design process, they become humanistic.

According to Public Law 94-142 curriculum plans must be made to integrate handicapped children into regular instructional programs if they are intellectually capable of handling the course work. The strategy for achieving this end is Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) that are to be performance based and specific to each individual student. This process becomes humanistic when we understand how curriculum workers come by these IEPs. The law stipulates that all instructional plans must be developed in collaboration with the student (when health permits), the student's guardians, the counselor, and the teacher. Therefore, for curriculum workers to produce viable IEPs for the handicapped, they must operate both politically and humanistically—politically to meet

the regulations of the law, and humanistically by sharing the decision-making power in the designing process and individualizing each IEP.

The creation of IPI, phase electives, and mastery learning programs enlists humanistic processing in ways similar to the development of IEPs. The syntactical order of these curriculum designs is more empirical and rational than political and humanistic in that learning experiences are reduced to their component parts, desired outcomes are stated in behavioral terms and are arranged in logical, developmental, and cumulative sequences. Curriculum workers are operating humanistically when provisions are made for alternative learning strategies, individual interests, differential entries into the learning process, and differentiated rates of development. All of these techniques acknowledge the significance of individual differences in learning styles and rates, and make allowances for individual options in ways of learning. Thus, student needs, interests, and characteristics are utmost in the minds of curriculum workers as they strive to humanize education through individualization and personalization of learning.

Instructional plans for liberation from sex role stereotypes and bilingual/multicultural education present a different perspective on the operation of humanism in the curriculum development process. Although initially politically motivated, the goals and substantive content of these plans are humanistically oriented, and the processes used to actualize them in practice are inclined toward both humanism and academic rationality. The curriculum worker appeals to racially, ethnically, and socially mixed advisory and design committees for assistance in identifying critical issues pertinent to ethnic diversity, cultural pluralism, and sexism, and ways these should

be addressed in instructional plans so that comprehensiveness, balance, and accuracy of divergent perspectives are maintained.

Academic rationality comes into play in these development processes when appeals are made to the logic of curriculum construction, the persuasiveness of principles of learning, and the reasoning of sound pedagogy to decide what, when, and how content about human and social issues should be incorporated into different components of the school curricula. For example, a decision to include ethnically specific and sex role related stereotypes, and ethnic poetry in reading curriculum is both a humanistic and a rational one. The terminology of stereotyping and ethnic poetry have a high quality of affect, emotion, and personal meaning to children from different ethnic groups and to female students; the vocabulary-building skills, attitude examinations, and exposure to different kinds of reading materials represent sound pedagogy relative to what constitutes reading instruction, increasing motivation and meaning of reading, and social skill building for effective living in a culturally pluralistic society. Deciding when to introduce awareness of sexism into the school curricula, in which subjects, and at what levels of sophistication requires that curriculum developers take into consideration the nature of the topic itself, the developmental level of the students, and the overall structure of the existing school curricula. These examples are merely illustrative of the fact that while a particular education issue may not appear to be overtly humanistic, the way it is addressed in the process of curriculum making may be; conversely, an issue that is obviously humanistic in nature may require other kinds of processing as well to make it pedagogically feasible in curriculum construction.

Conclusion

From this discussion it seems apparent that no single model of curriculum development operates totally independently of the others. A more appropriate way of per-



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ceiving curriculum making is as an *eclectic process*, which employs the *differential application* of many models of process planning, given the particular social/cultural context and conditions in which the planning occurs. Actual curriculum creation results from *differential phase development*. The products of any given planning process may be shaped in one phase of development by politics, in another by appeals to the principles of scientific curriculum making, in a third by sensitivity to humanism, and in still another by academic rationality. Such a perception of the processes of curriculum development should be helpful to practitioners in *consciously conceptualizing* their curriculum practice, and in better understanding their own processing, as well as improving the effectiveness of that processing. The extent that curriculum workers understand theoretical constructs of the development process and are aware of these operating in practice is the degree to which they can better facilitate and increase the quality of the curriculum development process relative to maintaining focus, direction, order, and coherency.

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