

When Curriculum Should Be Locally Developed

Two issues cloud the practice of curriculum development: local versus generic planning and discipline-centered versus topical design. As William Van Til (1986) testifies in his history of our organization, ASCD's founders had firm positions on both matters. They wanted democratic participation in planning programs that would draw upon, but not be dominated by, the academic disciplines. Then as now, those were controversial positions. "It's hard to convey today," Van Til writes, "how important ASCD was to those of us who came early to the Association. ASCD was ... a rallying point when our views were attacked by reactionary forces ..." (p. 3).

Most present-day American theorists continue to advocate local curriculum planning, and most educators remain committed to the idea (Martin and others, p. 40), although the kind of local development our intellectual forebears had in mind is rare. Instead we mostly have curriculum *revision*: the endless rewriting of curriculum guides that Fenwick English (p. 50), who has examined hundreds of them, declares worthless.

On-site curriculum work is essential, of course. Only with the full participation of teachers and interested others can leaders of local schools assemble a coherent program of studies. But an exclusive emphasis on local planning obscures the rightful role of development at other levels. The published materials teachers use in planning for their districts and for their own classrooms are clearly the products of curriculum development—and the processes by which such generic materials are produced should reflect our shared professional knowledge.

Several of the articles in this issue contribute to our understanding of these processes. For example, drawing upon nearly 30 years of experience producing successful materials, Joseph McInerney (p. 24) lists criteria for selecting curriculum content used by the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study. Taking a different perspective, Australian Peter Fensham (p. 18) con-

tends that the content of a curriculum intended for all students must be chosen by generalists, not specialists. Fensham has a Ph.D. in chemistry (and another in social psychology), but he believes that chemists should not decide what chemistry to teach, because they have been too thoroughly socialized into a disciplinary point of view.

While Fensham is concerned with curriculum in science, John Goodlad (p. 8) makes a similar point in his discussion of interdisciplinary programs. He reminds us that the term "core curriculum," which in recent years has been debased to mean a set of required but unrelated courses, at one time meant unified programs designed around themes like "heroes" and "community." Such programs, by the way, were necessarily planned at least partly at the local level.

That suggests partial resolution of one of the issues I mentioned earlier. For curriculums in the established disciplines, while it is certainly desirable that teachers should review and adapt the material to local circumstances, much of the conceptualizing and field-testing can be done more efficiently on a larger scale. For other programs—what Allan Glatthorn (in press) calls "team-planned"—local teacher involvement is not just advisable; it is essential.

Which brings us to the second question: should the entire curriculum be defined in terms of the existing course structure? The question is seldom considered these days, but Goodlad states his position as boldly as our ASCD predecessors did: "To define a core curriculum as constituting x number of courses in mathematics and y number of courses in the native tongue is to sidestep and dangerously postpone the curricular and pedagogical issues that we must address" (p. 15). □

References

- Glatthorn, Allan. *Curriculum Renewal*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, in press.
Van Til, William, ed. *ASCD in Retrospect*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 1986.

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