The Five Most Significant Curriculum Events in the Twentieth Century

Born in the work of Thorndike and Dewey, in the movement to professionalize curriculum making, and in the progressive experiments of the 1930s, modern curriculum development captured a new vision of student learning and transformed the purposes of schooling.

I first gave serious thought to which events in the field of curriculum development have been of most significance when I was asked to address this topic last June at ASCD's dedication ceremony for its new headquarters. I realize, of course, that there have been many significant events and that others could very likely select different events and have good reasons for their selection. But let us begin with something we can all surely agree on—the significance of the research and publication of the monumental work of Edward Thorndike in empirically refuting two long-accepted beliefs: that the study of the subjects of the school curriculum resulted in disciplining the mind, and that particular subjects developed particular faculties of the mind.

Curriculum Significance of Thorndike's Work
For many, many years curriculum discussions focused on the presumed educational values of different subjects and the place of each in the curriculum. The study of geometry was believed to develop the logical faculty of the mind; the study of Greek and Latin was believed to develop the verbal faculty. The study of any subject that was tightly organized and difficult to master was believed to discipline the mind to think cogently. Yet it was not until 1893, with the publication of the NEA's Report of the Committee of Ten, that science became widely accepted as a proper subject for the high school curriculum. It had been accepted in the college curriculum only 30 years earlier.

When Thorndike's studies demonstrated that students who completed courses in geometry were no better at solving logical problems than were students who had not taken geometry, and that students who completed courses in Latin were no better in their English composition than students who had not taken Latin, it was clear that the traditional justification for the subjects in the curriculum could no longer be accepted. Thorndike maintained that there must be identical elements in what was encountered outside of school in order for students to apply what they were taught. He referred to this as transfer of training...
The nature of curriculum construction was profoundly changed by Throndike’s work. His students and many others began to investigate the demands and opportunities in contemporary society for the application of school learning. For example, researchers started looking at the quantitative problems that adults encountered in particular communities in order to select arithmetic topics relevant to those problems. They also studied the kinds of reading and reading materials found in particular towns or cities in order to establish objectives for reading and the materials to be used in the reading curriculum.

Thus, Thorndike turned curriculum inquiry away from discussions of the relative values of different subjects to empirical studies of contemporary life in order to identify learning activities that could help students carry on more effectively in their own lives.

**Dewey’s Monograph on Interest and Effort**

A second significant curriculum event was the publication in 1913 of John Dewey’s monograph on interest and effort in education. The Dewey School at the University of Chicago was the forerunner of the Laboratory Schools of the university. In Dewey’s school, learning activities largely involved group and individual projects. He reported that when students became interested in a project or lesson assignment, they put forth more effort and learned more than when the project or lesson was not interesting.

This generalization was a direct denial of the pedagogical dogma of the day. When I was in elementary school in Nebraska in the early 1900s, a guiding principle in the selection of curriculum content and learning experiences was that the material should be distasteful to students—not interesting but quite the opposite. The theory was that students really had to discipline themselves and work hard on topics they found unpleasant, while topics of interest would offer no challenge and require little effort. When Dewey’s monograph was published, it caused great debate and was not widely accepted until more and more teachers reported that they had selected materials of interest to their students and found results similar to those reported by Dewey. When I began teaching in the Pierre, South Dakota, High School in 1921, I found the faculty nearly evenly divided between those who sought to identify interesting topics, activities, or illustrations in their courses and those who were firmly against such a practice. But by 1925 it was widely accepted that students’ interests should be taken into account when formulating learning objectives and selecting experiences for the school curriculum.

**The 26th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education**

The 1927 yearbook of the NSSE was published in two volumes: Part I, *Curriculum Making: Past and Present*, and Part II, *The Foundations of Curriculum Making*. It furnished the rationale and justification for establishing curriculum as an area of professional study and a field of professional practice. The Society devoted both Parts I and II to a review of the development of curriculum work in the schools of America and an analysis of curriculum development activities, progress, and problems. The members of the yearbook committee and the authors included almost all of the leaders in this rapidly growing field. There were progressives like Harold Rugg and essentialists like William Bagley. There were those busily engaged in constructing or revising curriculums and those whose contributions dealt with basic principles and criteria. All agreed that the prevailing curriculum in the elementary and secondary schools of the United States was not adequate or even appropriate to a democratic society in the modern world. It was time to develop a cadre of professionals who could work on the curriculum in the schools of every city and state in order to fulfill the American dream of an educational system that would help all young people to develop into responsible, productive, and happy citizens.

When the yearbook was presented in Dallas at the annual NEA meeting, it provoked much discussion not only by college and university professors but also among supervisors, principals, and superintendents. I was in my final year of graduate work at the University of Chicago. My professors—Judd, Charters, Bobbitt, and Gray—initiated in their classes discussions of the yearbook and its implications. My field of specialization was educational psychology and statistics and my dissertation supervisor was Charles Judd. However, I was employed part-time on the Commonwealth Teacher Training Study, a national project headed by W. W. Charters to improve the curriculum for preparing teachers. I was so impressed by the yearbook’s emphasis on the need for professionals to reconstruct the curriculum that I resolved to make that my field of professional practice. The next two years, 1927–29, as a faculty member of the University of North Carolina, I had my chance. I spent three days a week working with teachers in their schools as they reviewed and rebuilt their curriculums. This yearbook provided the stimulus and the guidance for a new professional, the curriculum specialist.

**The Society for Curriculum Study**

In 1930, at the annual NEA meetings, 20 of us who considered ourselves students of curriculum spent two evenings talking about the projects in which we were engaged. I was then at the Ohio State University in the Bureau of Educational Research. W. W. Charters, Edgar Dale, and I were working with instructors of freshman and sophomore classes who were stimulated to re-examine their courses by the fact that more than half of the students dropped out of the university before they finished the sophomore year. Charters and I were also working with the faculty of a novel institution, the Rochester Athenaeum and Mechanics Institute, which had recently been reconstituted to furnish technical education for the children of artisans employed by the great technical firms of Rochester, such as Eastman Kodak, Bausch and Lomb Optical, General Railway Signal, and Stromberg-Carlson Electrical Appliances. We were also working with the faculty of a liberal arts college—Muskingum College in New Concord, Ohio—on the improvement of curriculum and instruction.

Among members of the group that met on those two evenings in 1930.
were Charters, Dale, Henry Harap, and Hollis Caswell. We found that our discussions of particular projects were not only informative and instructive but that they raised significant issues for reflection, study, and discussion. Believing that we should become a more formal group to provide for correspondence, newsletters, and face-to-face discussions, we formed the Society for Curriculum Study. Some years later, the division of the NEA called Directors and Supervisors of Instruction suggested a merger with the Society for Curriculum Study, which led to the formation of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. The original group of 20 was the ancestor of this large and great organization.

The Curriculum Experiments of the 1930s

The Great Depression of the 1930s created serious educational problems and daring challenges for curriculum workers. Youth in large numbers, unable to find work, enrolled in high schools, and most of them found little meaning and interest in their high school tasks. Only a few were able to gain admission to the Smith-Hughes programs in vocational education, which were designed to prepare students for a number of occupations.

Recognizing this fact, many teachers and principals favored a move to reconstruct the general high school curriculum and instructional program in order to meet the needs of the Depression-Era students and to respond to pressures for greater opportunities for self-direction in learning. At the same time, however, they did not want to jeopardize any students' chances for college admission. This was their dilemma.

The Progressive Education Association took the lead in attacking the problem and was soon followed by some states and accrediting organizations. The Progressive Education Association developed the Eight Year Study in which 30 schools and school systems from Boston to Los Angeles demonstrated the effectiveness of curriculums designed by each school to meet the needs of its own students. The Michigan State Education department established a somewhat similar project, and the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools sponsored a similar demonstration in southern white institutions, while a pioneering group of southern Negro schools conducted their own experiments. In all of these projects, the schools were permitted and expected to develop educational programs that each believed appropriate for its students without regard to current college entrance requirements. Along with the curriculum developments, each school was expected to participate in a comprehensive program of evaluation.

What resulted from this spate of curriculum projects? I can speak most knowledgeably about the Eight Year Study since I was director of the evaluation staff for the project. Perhaps the most significant in terms of current practices in curriculum development was the widespread acceptance of the idea that schools could develop educational programs that would interest a large proportion of their students, help to meet some of the students' needs, and at the same time, provide students with the preparation essential for success in college. Because of that project, most state departments of education and most colleges and universities greatly reduced their specific requirements for the high school curriculum and relied more upon each school's taking responsibility—although recent trends have been in the opposite direction.

A second outcome of the study was the recognition by colleges and universities that they could find among high school graduates who had not met specific subject requirements many who would succeed in college work. They learned that they could select successful candidates for admission on the basis of their ability to read, write, solve quantitative problems, and show evidence of strong interest in further education. This led to the wider use of entrance examinations, such as the SAT, that did not test specific content but appraised general skills.

A third outcome was the development of the inservice workshop, which was invented during the project to furnish time and assistance to teachers in developing instructional programs and materials and in acquiring new knowledge and skills for their work. This device is now recognized as an effective means for the continuing education of professional personnel in many fields.

A fourth outcome was the wide acceptance of educational evaluation instead of testing. Previously the effects of educational programs or procedures, if appraised objectively, were judged by the pupil's performance on achievement tests, which commonly measured simple skills and the recall of information and reported results in a summarized single score. The Eight Year Study reminded educators that teachers usually seek several educational objectives in their conduct of a course. It also demonstrated that it was possible to appraise the progress of students toward each of these major objectives by using questionnaires, observations, and samples of products as well as tests. This became the common conception of evaluation.

Clearly, the experiments and demonstrations of the 1930s have profoundly influenced the curriculum and instructional activities of the Western world.

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