

THE DOMAIN OF CURRICULUM

James B. Macdonald

FOREWORD

James B. Macdonald's contribution to curriculum thinking is enormous. For a 20-year period until his death in 1983, he was a strong influence on the curriculum field, helping to shape its boundaries and formulate its questions

An analysis of his work reveals patterns of emphasis. In the early years he focused largely on structures and relationships, probing such questions as, "What are the essentials of the field?" and "What are the relationships among curriculum, instruction, teaching, and learning?" In the middle years he explored the political implications of power and justice. In the later years, he explored basic questions of life and their meaning for schools as he sought to bridge the gap between the religious and transcendent and the academic. Yet, structural questions persisted throughout his work, and later concerns were foreshadowed in his early writings. Indeed, "The Domain of Curriculum," a paper delivered in 1971 at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New York City, clearly addresses structural and moral concerns. It is an important piece both because of its place in the evolution of the field and its timeliness for the present.

Two points are especially relevant to the current atmosphere. The first deals with Macdonald's search for curricular realities, which led him to propose as basic curriculum questions, what can be learned, what is learned, and why is it learned or not learned? He proposed that the analytic unit for answering these questions be the acts or events of students, teachers, and others. Because action is stressed rather than intention, plans, goals, and objectives do not form the nucleus of curriculum, it is composed instead of what actually takes place in the educational environment. This concept was a significant departure from the prevalent thinking in the early '70s. Its vitality for the present is evidenced in much of the qualitative and ethnographic work now under way.

A second significant point is Macdonald's prevailing concern for the ethical dimensions of curriculum planning. His clear statement 15 years ago that curriculum choices are moral choices helped strengthen the growing awareness of this reality among curriculum thinkers. What could be more relevant for the present time?

It is appropriate that the Journal of Curriculum and Supervision should honor the life and thought of James B. Macdonald by bringing this previously unpublished paper to the attention of its readers

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I would like to address two general questions. Question one is, "What are the fundamental concepts that must be clarified and defined before dialogue about curriculum can take place?" Question two is, "What do I see as the Domain of Curriculum?"

Answering question one is a prior requirement to coping with question two, and I would first like to share my thoughts about fundamental concepts.

Most curriculum thinkers and developers operate from one of three major philosophical orientations. I am not now speaking of their specific value patterns, but of their beginning point for conceptualizing their tasks. These three orientations are the primary groups of concerns that philosophers also have. Thus, I feel that curriculum thinkers (or at least a given statement of theorists) tend to fall into categories of ontologically oriented statements, epistemologically oriented statements, or axiological oriented statements.

What this means to me is that curriculum thinkers tend to originate their concerns from (1) what they consider to be the fundamental reality of curriculum as a part of the educational process, (2) what they feel is the fundamental nature of knowledge, or (3) what they feel are the fundamental value prescriptions necessary for curriculum.

Sooner or later everyone touches base in some manner with all three kinds of concerns, but the beginning point is of considerable importance in the conceptual schemata that occur.

Thus, if one takes an epistemological orientation, one's primary concerns are questions such as: "What knowledge is of most worth?" "What is the structure of knowledge?" "What are the logical scope and sequence patterns for acquiring this knowledge?"

If, on the other hand, one begins with an axiological orientation, one is primarily concerned with a prescriptive curriculum design and is prone to raise questions about the goals of education, the philosophy of the program, the commitments to students, and so on, as beginning points.

An ontological orientation is grounded in concern for the nature of reality that shapes curriculum—not only a social reality that the school reflects, but an underlying reality that reflects a concern for the nature of being and relating-in-the-world.

The orientation of my statement is from this third source—the ontological. However, the questions I raise are not on a fundamental philosophical level but rather a middle range, perhaps metatheoretical, level. From this point of view the fundamental questions to ask are: What can be learned? What is learned? Why is it learned or not learned?

These kinds of questions cast curriculum into a very broad framework. I have found it impossible to work in epistemological or axiological orientations, if for no other reason than centuries of human educational experience, as well as my own limited experience and some more recent (historical) research, indicate conclusively that neither good intentions nor carefully developed curriculum plans and materials for learning explain the fundamental questions I raised.

Thus, for me, the curriculum is what is learned (and immediately suggests what can be learned and why something is or is not learned as correlative questions) Thus, the domain of curriculum is the conceptual theory that encompasses the realities that are relevant for providing explanations to these questions

Let me be clear, then, that I am not talking about a curriculum plan (one of the realities) nor a curriculum design (another related reality) but a totalistic view of all relevant reality in schooling. And, it should be clearly realized that the position I take here leads to the conclusion, at least for the present, that the curriculum cannot be known before the fact. That is, it is not the course to *be* run, but the course that *was* run. It is my conviction that unless we know what courses can be run—and what courses are actually run and why—we are in a highly arbitrary situation in curriculum thinking.

FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS

This form of thinking leads me to project four fundamental concepts that need definition and clarification before much can be said about the domain of curriculum. These are (1) What are the boundaries of curriculum (e.g., the set of relevant variables)? (2) What is the fundamental conceptual unit for curriculum? (3) What are the relationships and principles (if any)? and (4) What are the ethical and/or moral dimensions in curriculum? When these questions are engaged, I can begin to see an outline for the domain of curriculum.

Boundaries One may hold that everything in time and space is related to everything else and that to explain anything one must explain everything. I suppose that this is at least a tenable philosophical position. However, I wish to suggest that some things are more important than others in their influence upon the curriculum, and that conceptual clarity necessitates the identification of boundaries if for no other reason than the problem of communication among interested parties.

There are a few curriculum thinkers who take a creative and/or highly imaginative approach to curriculum. They believe that the identification of boundaries at this time is a form of premature closure. Again, I am somewhat sympathetic to this position, but for the sake of discourse about a "domain" I shall project my own boundaries.

My thinking about boundaries begins with an assertion that the only data that are significant in curriculum are those data that may be observed or

inferred through observation to be relevant to the activity out of which learning emerges. In a sense, this says in our research parlance: "A difference which makes no difference is no difference."

Thus, I am fundamentally concerned about the specific actions of people, and the factors that directly affect these actions, rather than what someone had intended they should be.

The most useful conceptual tool that I know of in this sense is what has been called a general theory of action stemming from social-psychological theory.

Taking the general ideas of this theory and applying them to my thinking about curriculum, I find it fruitful to talk about action systems and sub-systems as they relate to learning. It will, of course, be impossible to develop the basic theory here, but this may well not be necessary since what I propose only loosely approximates it anyway, and probably had best stand on its own merits.

The boundaries of curriculums are, I suggest, the boundaries of the school systems. Thus, the boundary may be defined by the common agreement of members of our society to be an identifiable set of people, locations, and functions in which we can agree persons playing roles and having status are acting in an ascribed social setting with their major responsibility being to promote, encourage, and so forth, the learning of youngsters. Curriculum plans, materials, personnel, and pressures may come from outside these boundaries but the boundary of a curriculum is identifiable by the activity of those people who structure and utilize the outside data in the activity of the school system.

Within the school system I see five sets of activity variables that may be labeled as five sub-systems. They are: (1) the administrative sub-system, (2) the curriculum development sub-system, (3) the instructional sub-system, (4) the staff personality sub-system, and (5) the student personality sub-system.

Thus, if I wish to know what the curriculum is, I would want to look carefully at the events and their outcomes within the three social sub-systems (i.e., administration, curriculum development, and instruction) and in light of the two sets of personality systems (i.e., staff and students).

These five sub-system variables are, I believe, the minimum number of variables necessary to explain what can be learned, what is learned, and why learning does or does not take place.

What has been excluded is even more important than what is included in setting the boundaries and identifying significant variables. Thus, I am excluding, for example, legislative acts, the external production of commercial or noncommercial curriculum materials, the action of boards of education, voter referendums, professional expertise, and student and staff home life *per se*.

Thus, again, the focus upon what actually goes on and the people as they act in the situation determines the locus of boundaries and the significance of variables observed or inferred as they appear to be influential in explaining what is learned.

What is directly relevant are variables such as the organization of space, time, materials, resources and movement, curriculum plans, instructional patterns, the influence of specific persons and groups upon one another, and the personal and idiosyncratic actions and reactions of individuals. If whatever else may be said to influence schooling does not show or cannot be inferred from the variables above (and others in their sets), they are not considered to be important (i.e., they lie outside the boundary of curriculum).¹

Units of discourse The units of discourse and conceptualization are now clear. They are *acts* and *events*. They also may be observed and/or inferred from observation and always take place in situations. Thus, one may be situated in X school system, grade 3, Y school, where events such as reading periods take place and where actions such as reading a paragraph aloud to a teacher are identifiable.

Situations have boundaries, events have beginnings and ends, and acts are observable or inferred from observation. Situations provide character and scope to events, and events project patterns and are patterned by actions in a transactional process.

Again, perhaps one sees more clearly what is involved when we look at what concepts have been excluded as critical units rather than what has been included.

There are at least two major traditional sets of units one may apply to curriculum discourse. In technical terms these have been strung together in a linear process. This has been useful for technical purposes but not for theoretical purposes. I speak of the four-step process of (1) specifying objectives, (2) selecting experiences, (3) organizing experiences, and (4) evaluating.

In my way of thinking, there are two fundamentally different processes involved if one looks at these decisions from a perspective that is broader than a technical formula. Thus, objectives and evaluation are a paired set, and selecting and organizing are a paired set.

If the reality of schooling is captured by the conceptualization of boundaries and units proposed here, then the objectives-evaluation set is excluded as a critical unit of curriculum discourse, and selecting and organizing experiences may be translated into the language of events and will become the primary focus of curriculum.

In other words, objectives and evaluation cannot be considered as primary units since they are attached to curriculum plans and cannot account for the learning that takes place in the event structure of human activity.

They are, in effect, useful only for helping explain the contributions of curriculum plans to the learning that takes place. They are a part of an event and do not have any human activity boundaries of their own. Even the activity

¹*Editors' Note* For a more detailed presentation of Macdonald's sub-system variables, see his "An Example of Disciplined Curriculum Thinking," *Theory Into Practice* 6 (October 1967) 166-171, and his "Curriculum Theory: Problems and a Prospectus," unpublished paper presented at a meeting of Professors of Curriculum, Miami Beach, April 3, 1964.

of a staff planning behavioral objectives for use in school is an event and not an objective, and the final outcome of the specific plan cannot be explained solely by the objectives. There is, in other words, no fundamental reality divorced from the event and action structure of reality.

Rational decisions, per se, are also excluded as fundamental units of curriculum discourse. Rational decisions emerge from situations, events, and actions of persons. They are influenced by the character and quality (whether political, anti-intellectual, or what have you) of the events. Thus, to expect to explain what really happens in schooling by a linear chain of rational decisions abstracted from their event structure makes no more sense than attempting to explain what is actually learned in terms of a set of objectives.

The relationships of variables Events and actions are, however, related to each other. That is, events that take place in the domain of curriculum are influenced by events from all three social sub-systems. Thus, administrative events interact with curriculum planning events, and instructional events interact with administrative events, and so on. And, of course, in each of these event structures, personal actions (staff and/or students) have transactional relationships within the events.

The relationships of variables may be talked about in many ways. Thus (after Huebner)² we may talk in technical terms—that is, how one event relates to another in terms of getting some job done. We may talk in scientific terms—that is, what cause-effect relationships or principles there may be. We may talk in political terms—that is, what implications events have for the maintenance of the system and the alignment and access of persons to power, status, and role. We may also talk in aesthetic and ethical terms about the relationships of variables. For example, we may ask whether the flow and form of the interactions of events are pleasing and whether event relationships reflect our values and especially our concerns about how we wish to be treated as human beings.

There is, I would say, enough scientific and experiential data to validate the connections between at least some aspects of the variables in all areas of the curriculum domain with what is actually learned. Thus, for example, administrative events that lead to the reorganization of instructional events do influence what is learned as do curriculum planning events; and the characteristics of persons influence the quality of events and the eventual relationships of events to each other. It should be recognized, however, that there is also a great deal we do not know about the relationships of events to each other. One would hope that research efforts in curriculum would focus upon these relationships rather than be aimed primarily at technical problems as they presently seem to be.

²*Editors' Note:* Macdonald is referring here to various forms and uses of language cited by Dwayne Huebner in his "Curricular Language and Classroom Meanings," in *Language and Meaning*, ed. James B. Macdonald and Robert R. Leeper (Washington, D.C. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1966), pp. 8–26.

CURRICULUM PLANNING AND THE ETHICAL VARIABLE

If the domain of curriculum is characterized with any clarity and validity thus far, it becomes clear that the curriculum development sub-system has a critical role in curriculum.

My position is that curriculum should be, as far as is possible, a planned environment. This is to say, an environment will exist whether or not it is planned for. Thus, the question becomes whether or not the variables and events that make up the learning environment should be constructed by deliberative action (to the extent that they can be planned for). Thus, the task of curriculum planning is to exclude random or idiosyncratic events and actions from the environment *unless* the environment is deliberately constructed to produce these conditions.

Accepting a planned environment as a goal of curriculum development introduces two very important considerations into the deliberative process. (1) ethical variables, and (2) a recognition that planning must be planning that includes awareness of all the variables, events, and relationships in the system. I shall leave the latter consideration to your imagination except to reiterate that curriculum plans that do not include consideration of the administrative, instructional, and curriculum planning events, and the characteristics of the persons involved in these events, are incomplete.

When we plan we are engaged in a fundamentally ethical activity. We are, in essence, saying that certain events and actions are desirable and that certain other events and actions are not. Thus, *how to make a learning environment becomes related directly to what environment to make*. The latter set of questions are ethical ones, the importance of which cannot be overemphasized.

It is the answers to the ethical questions that provide curriculum with its own self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus, decisions about what environment to construct result in the structure of events and actions that more or less come to pass because they are all that is allowed to happen. Under these circumstances the evaluation of events and activities is surprisingly like the results of research studies. In most instances the research hypothesis is upheld, just as in most instances we find evidence of the achievement of planned goals in curriculum.

However, when evidence is not judged to be satisfactory, curriculum planners become concerned about the *how to* questions under the assumption that if we only knew how to do it we could improve the level of goal achievement for the system. When this shift takes place, the ethical questions are forgotten or buried in technical activity, apparently causing a form of tunnel vision, which shuts out the realization that the original ethical decisions provided the basis for what results are obtained.

Recognition of the ethical dimensions of curriculum planning is the major vehicle for maintaining awareness of human beings in the curriculum, and if we are concerned about humanized schooling, we must focus upon *what* environment is planned as well as *how* to bring it about.

But to be consistent with the definition of the curriculum domain put forth here, we must focus our ethical decisions upon the events and actions within the school system rather than the ethical implications of our plans for contexts outside the schools.

Thus, I find it untenable to justify, on an ethical basis, a planned environment of the school by social criteria that transcend the action context of the school system. Put in another way, I find it unsatisfactory from an ethical viewpoint to justify plans because the hoped for outcomes will be useful for later life or to present societal goals that are not reflected directly in ongoing events and actions in the school in light of the persons directly involved in these events and actions.

Ethical decisions have meaning only in the actual relationships and actions of persons in an environment. It is, from my point of view, a misnomer to call curriculum decisions made with reference to conditions outside the domain of curriculum ethical ones. They are, with reference to the planned environment of the school, more nearly political decisions whose ethical qualities are known only in the actual flow of events in the school. Thus, the ethical variables in curriculum planning cannot be eliminated as a concern by appealing to a broader system but must be dealt with in the context of the actual events and actions of persons in schools.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

At this point the normal temptation would be to discuss the problem of the design of curriculum variables. This would, however, take us out of the basic problem of the domain of curriculum, which I have interpreted to mean the underlying and fundamental reality upon which designs may be built. Therefore, I should like to summarize briefly my major propositions.

1. Discussion of the domain of curriculum implies an ontological orientation toward the problem (in contrast to an epistemological and/or axiological one).

2. The central concern of any conceptualization of the domain of curriculum, perhaps its criterion of validity, is the ability to explain what is actually learned (as well as what can be learned and/or is not learned)

3. The domain of curriculum is grounded fundamentally in the boundaries of the activity of schooling, and influences from outside the action context are only relevant as they can be observed and/or inferred from this context.

4. The conceptual schema of general systems of action is a powerful and useful tool for analyzing the action context of schooling.

5. This provides a minimum of five major sets of variables in curriculum—administrative, curriculum planning, and instructional sub-systems; and staff and student personal characteristics.

6. The critical units for analyzing the variables and their relationships are events (as patterns of action) and acts (in transaction within events).

7 The relationships of events to each other may be viewed in a number of perspectives (e.g., technical, scientific, political, aesthetic, and moral).

8 No matter what perspective(s) one takes, it is clear that the total set of events and their relationships within the system (domain) must be considered.

9 Curriculum planning is the most fundamental activity of the school system in that the goal is a planned environment for learning, which includes a consideration of all the other variables.

10 Planning introduces ethical questions, which become an important part of the total systemic set of variables, and are meaningful only in the context of the ongoing events and action.

In conclusion, this perspective of the domain of curriculum represents curriculum as the result of a highly complex and dynamic interaction of events and acts. It clearly denies the validity of any single variable or linear conceptualization of curriculum planning. It also clearly suggests that the impulse to control that characterizes most present day curriculum development activity violates a fundamental reality of the lack of knowledge about the total process. It further suggests, to me, that our best protection against short-term and short-sighted technical approaches to curriculum development lies in a continuous and fundamental effort to keep the ethical dimension in the action context of curriculum events in central perspective for the near future.

I would like to make one final aside before leaving the problem of the curriculum domain. Perhaps because of my own feelings of intellectual uncertainty about some aspects of what I have presented, and also because of my rather strong disposition toward what others have called a "romantic" view of what schools should be like, I would like to appeal briefly to two scholars whose works are, I believe, quite compatible with what I have said. They, of course, stand on their own merits. I refer to William James and Jean Piaget.

I am sure that if you wish to read, re-read, or remember the work of these scholars, you will agree that there is at least a plausible (and I hope a probable) connection between their views and what I have proposed. The connection that I would feel is crucial to the case is the selection of action as the central unit for curriculum discourse, and especially in contradistinction to rational decisions or objectives. Since actions are often understandable only in patterns, we arrive at events as a focal unit.

William James' "radical empiricism," for example, led him to the conclusion that knowing or understanding is not a passive awareness or seeing, but a form of activity. Thus, rather than be concerned with the nature of "objects" (read "objectives" here) "before" the mind, we must focus upon what we "do" or how we use what is "before" the mind. Cognition, for James, was not a matter of holding ideas or images "before" the mind, but a matter of using whatever may be before the mind to talk and think about the world.

Jean Piaget might have written his cognitive psychology strictly from James' philosophy, except that we know it came out of years of empirical research. In the end the correlations are startling. What James hypothesized,

Piaget described in different words. *Intelligence*, for Piaget, is not the figurative content of culture but the operations performed in relationships between objects. Again, it is the concept of acting, action, or activity that is central.

This has led Piaget to be a strong exponent of what has variously been called progressive, free, or open schooling with one major difference. What Piaget adds to spontaneous activity is what to him is a clear notion of the operations of intelligence in developmental terms.

In both cases, the epistemology is grounded in an ontological position. Neither of these men begins with knowledge as a primary starting point, but with "pure experiences" (James) or with developmentally monitored intellectual operations (Piaget). In each case the conclusion is similar—that it is in the doing that we find reality, knowledge, and intelligence.

Although perhaps neither of these men would accept a general theory of action as a framework for conceptualizing action, I would suggest that it is a useful metaphor for helping locate variables and their relationships without violating the concept of activity in events as the central unit of the curriculum domain.

Thus, it would appear to me that if we can entertain this concept of action as the central unit in the curriculum domain, we must raise serious questions about many of the current curriculum development projects³

³*Editors' Note:* At the time of his death James B Macdonald was working on a book that elaborated upon this conception of the domain of curriculum and grounded it more fully in philosophical and theological traditions, which he thought fundamental to sound education. Some of his former students and colleagues are now at work attempting to bring this book to publication.

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