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The Field of Curriculum: What Approach? What Definition?

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Curriculum as a field of study is elusive and fragmentary, and is subject to a good deal of debate and even misunderstanding as to what it is supposed to entail. Curriculum is both a subject to be taught at colleges and universities and a field in which practitioners work. Students who enroll in curriculum courses, as a minor or major field of study in education, usually study these courses at the graduate level. People who teach or train others, who engage in program development, instruction, supervision, and/or evaluation in schools and colleges, businesses, hospitals and health agencies, as well as governmental agencies are practicing curriculum.

What we mean by curriculum, what it involves, and who is involved is best understood by analyzing curriculum in a broad context. This suggests that we look at curriculum in terms of *approach* (or what others call an orientation or position), and *definition*. In much of our discussion, we will point to various curriculum texts published since 1980. This should not only help introduce the field, but it should also help put recent texts in context with the various approaches and definitions to curriculum.

Curriculum Approaches

An approach to curriculum reflects the person's view of the world, including what the person perceives as reality, the values deemed important, and the amount of knowledge he or she possesses. A curriculum approach reflects a *holistic* position or a *meta-orientation*, encompassing the foundations of curriculum (the person's philosophy, view of history, view of psychology and learning theory, and view of social issues), domains of curriculum (common and important knowledge within the field), and the theoretical and practical principles of curriculum. An orientation expresses a viewpoint in relation to how curriculum is developed and designed, the role of the learner, teacher, and curriculum specialist in planning curriculum, the goals and objectives of the curriculum, and the important issues that need to be examined.

A curriculum approach reflects our view of schools and society, and to some extent it may become an all encompassing view if we feel strongly about these views. By understanding one's curriculum approach, and the prevailing curriculum approach of the school or school district that one works in, it is possible to conclude whether one's professional view conflicts with the formal or organizational view.

Although schools, over time, tend to become committed to a curriculum approach, many educators are not strongly committed to one approach. Many of us don't have a single or pure approach, rather we emphasize one approach in some situations and in other cases we advocate several approaches. In still other cases, we fail to recognize that we even reflect a curriculum approach in terms of our attitudes and behaviors, or that we are influenced by many approaches. Similarly, we need to recognize that curriculum textbook writers sometimes adhere to more than one curriculum approach. The curriculum specialist, even the curriculum student, needs to examine his or her approach. A number of curriculum approaches are defined below, but they are not mutually exclusive or precise categories.

Behavioral-Rational: This is a means-ends approach, logical, and prescriptive. It relies on technical and scientific principles, and includes models, plans, and step-by-step strategies for formulating the curriculum. Goals and objectives are specified, the exact specificity varies according to the author, activities are sequenced to coincide with the objectives, and there is evaluation of learning outcomes in relation to the goals and objectives. This is the oldest approach and still represents the major thought in curriculum, rooted in the University of Chicago approach (see Bobbitt, 1918; Charles, 1923; Tyler, 1949; Taba, 1962).

This curriculum approach has been applied to all subjects for more than the past two-thirds century and constitutes a frame of reference against which other approaches to curriculum are compared (Feinberg, 1985).

Other names have been used to identify this approach, including "logical-positivist," "conceptual-empiricist," "experientialist," "rational-scientific," and "technocratic" (Kliebard, 1975; Pinar, 1978; Schubert, 1980)—suggesting that the approach, also, is technical and scientific and deals with principles for theoreticians and practitioners.

Textbooks written in the 1980s that fall into this category include those by Francis Hunkins (1980), Peter Oliva (1982), David Pratt (1980), J. Gaylen Saylor, William M. Alexander, and Arthur J. Lewis (1981), and to a lesser extent by John P. Miller and Wayne Seller (1986) and Glenys and Adolph Unruh (1984). (The latter two texts can also be classified in other approaches below.) Each text presents its own theoretical model and blueprint for curriculum making and guidelines (usually referred to as principles or practices) for the practitioner. Even though based on more than seventy years of research in the field, both the theoretical and practical boundaries of this behavioral approach remain elusive.

Managerial-Systems Approach: This approach perceives the school as a social system, whereby students, teachers, curriculum specialists, etc. interact according to certain norms and behaviors. Curricularists who rely on this approach seek to plan the curriculum in an organized way and in terms of programs, schedules, space, materials, equipment, personnel, and resources. This approach means, among other things, to select, organize, and supervise people involved in curriculum decisions. Consideration is given to committee and group processes, communication processes, leadership methods and strategies, human relations, and decision making.

An offshot of the behavioral-rational approach, the managerial-systems approach also includes technical and scientific principles, but not necessarily behavioral approaches. The managerial aspect of the approach tends to zero in on supervisory and administrative aspects of curriculum, especially the organizational and implementation

processes. Advocates of this approach are interested in related themes such as change and innovation, and how curriculum specialists and supervisors can facilitate these processes. The curriculum specialist is seen as a practitioner, not a theoretician, and educational leader—a change agent, resource person, and facilitator.

The approach is rooted in the early organizational and administrative plans of school superintendents such as Frederick Burke (Superintendent of Schools, Santa Barbara, Calif.), John Kennedy (Superintendent of Schools, Batavia, Ill.), William Wirt (Superintendent of Schools, Gary, Ind.), and Carlton Washburne (Superintendent of Schools, Winnetka, Ill.). These educators developed a host of innovative curriculum and instructional plans, centering around individualization, departmentalization, grading, and work-study-social activities. Many of their ideas became part of the “Cult of Efficiency” movement (focus on efficiency, specialization, and standardization) of the 1920s and 1930s, which was considered a fringe movement in curriculum and mainly part of administration.

The managerial approach became the dominant curriculum model in the 1950s and 1960s for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the various school principals’ and school superintendents’ associations. It was the era in which the midwest school administrators and professors dominated the field of curriculum in terms of setting the priorities and agenda, the direction of change and innovation, and the planning and organization of curriculum. The pace setters for this era were school superintendents such as Robert Anderson (Superintendent of Schools, Park Forest, Ill.), William Cornog (Superintendent, New Trier Township High School, Winnetka, Ill.), Robert Gilchrist (Superintendent of Schools, University City, Mo.), Arthur Lewis (Superintendent of Schools, University City, Mo.), Sidney Marland (Superintendent of Schools, Winnetka, Ill.), Lloyd Michael (Superintendent of Schools,

Evanston, Ill.), Gordon McAndrew (Superintendent of Schools, Gary, Ind.), and J. Lloyd Trump (Superintendent of Schools, Waukegan, Ill.) (For a sample of their writings, see Chase and Anderson, 1958).

These superintendents were very active politically and used the administrative associations, and their respective journals and yearbooks, as a platform to publicize their ideas. Many, like Anderson, Gilchrist, Lewis, and Trump became professors at major universities, and others became active as board directors and executive committee members of the professional organizations that had major impact on curriculum, supervision, and administration. Furthermore, they had intellectual support and agreement from many professors of curriculum at major universities—Ohio State University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Illinois—where curriculum leadership prevailed during this period. These school administrators (and most of these professors) were less concerned about content and more concerned about organization and implementation. They were less concerned about subject matter, methods, and materials and more concerned about improving curriculum in light of policies, plans, and people on a system-wide basis. They envisioned curriculum changes and innovation as they administered the resources of the schools and restructured the schools.

Today, texts written by Ronald Doll (1986), John McNeill (1985), Unruh and Unruh (1984), and Wiles and Bondi (1984) express this approach, although McNeill has also been classified in the next category and the Unruhs have also been classified as behaviorists. One must note that these authors have come up from the school ranks as supervisors or administrators and all of them, except Doll, have written texts on supervision. What are often called principles and processes for these authors, however, are often “how-to-do” guidelines and recipe orientations in disguise; theoretical and serious discussions that undergird major curriculum questions are sometimes placed in the background

while practical recommendations are emphasized.

Intellectual-Academic Approach: Sometimes referred to as “traditional,” “encyclopedic,” “synoptic,” or “knowledge-oriented” approach (McNeil, 1985; Schubert, 1980), the attempt is to analyze and synthesize major positions, trends, and concepts of curriculum. The approach tends to be historical or philosophical, and to a lesser extent social in nature. The discussion is usually scholarly and theoretical (not practical or based on scientific principles of curriculum making), and concerned with many aspects of schooling as broad as the study of education. This expansion of curriculum boundaries relative to the subject of schooling and the treatment of curriculum as intellectual thought are reflected in a good deal of background information and broad overview of events and people. The approach is rooted in the philosophical and intellectual works of John Dewey (1916), Henry Morrison (1926), and Boyd Bode (1927), and became popular between the 1930s and 1950s, as illustrated by the lengthy and intellectual approaches of Hollis L. Caswell and Doak S. Campbell (1935); L. Thomas Hopkins (1937); John and Mary Norton (1936); B. Othanel Smith, William Stanley, and J.H. Shores (1950); and Florence Stratemeyer, et al. (1952). The influx of new topics related to curriculum during this period expanded the boundaries of the field to include a good number of trends and issues, and the integration of various instructional, teaching, learning, guidance, evaluation, supervision, and administrative procedures. The field became all-encompassing as the books published served as a great accumulation of curriculum knowledge and subject matter.

After the 1950s, major interest in curriculum centered around the structure of disciplines and qualitative methods. Thus this approach lost some of its glamor among curricularists. In the 1980s, texts written by Miller and Seller (1986), Orlosky and Smith (1980), Schubert (1986), Shepherd and Ragan (1985), and Daniel and Laurel Tanner (1980) reflect

this approach. Most of these texts tend to overwhelm beginning curriculum students who usually lack sufficient background information and philosophical and theoretical insights on the subject. They tend to be more appreciated by advanced students of the field and by professors of curriculum.

Humanistic-Aesthetic Approach: Others involved in reflecting on the field contend that the above curriculum approaches are lock-step and rigid, and that curricularists, in their attempt to be scientific and rational, miss the artistic and personal aspects of curriculum and instruction, do not consider the need for self reflectiveness and self actualization among learners, and ignore the sociopsychological dynamics of classrooms and schools. This view is rooted in Progressive philosophy and the activities curriculum movement of the 1920s and 1930s, which highlighted the needs and interests of the child, and which was spearheaded by Teachers College, Columbia University, with such people as Frederick Bosner (1920), Hollis Caswell (1932), William Kilpatrick (1925), and to a lesser extent by Ellsworth Collings (1923); L. Thomas Hopkins and James E. Mendenhall (1934); and Harold Rugg and Ann Schumaker (1928).

From this movement, a host of curriculum strategies emerged, mainly at the elementary school level, including lessons based on life experiences, group games, group projects, dramatizations, field trips, social enterprises, interest centers, and child and adolescent needs. These activities included problem-solving and active student participation; they emphasized socialization and life adjustment for the students, as well as stronger family and school-community ties. The humanistic approach became popular again in the 1970s as the themes of “relevancy,” “radical school reform,” and “alternative education” became part of the reform movement in education. Current texts that reflect the humanistic-aesthetic approach are authored by Elliot Eisner (1985), and to a lesser extent Glenn Hass (1983), and Gene D. Shepherd and William B. Ragan (1985).

Various socio-psychological and child-centered approaches to curriculum are presented. The formal or specified curriculum is not the only curriculum to consider; the informal and hidden curriculum are also worthwhile considerations. The whole child is considered, not only the cognitive dimension. Humanistic theories of learning are given equal billing, and sometimes greater emphasis, than behavioral and cognitive theories of learning. Music, art, literature, health education, and the humanities are just as important as science and math (and other academic subjects).

The curriculum specialist, who believes in this approach, tends to put faith in cooperative learning, independent learning, small group learning, and social activities as opposed to competitive, large-group learning and only cognitive instruction. The child has greater input in the curriculum than with the other approaches, and shares responsibility with the parent, teacher, and curriculum specialist in planning the curriculum. In the present era, which demands educational excellence and tougher academic standards, and puts increasing stress on higher forms of cognition (i.e. problem solving, critical thinking, intellectual discovery, and divergent thinking), and on subject, such as science and math (not art or music), the humanistic-aesthetic approach represents a minority position in curriculum.

Reconceptualists: Some curriculum textbook writers consider the reconceptualists to represent an approach to curriculum (McNeil, 1985; Miller and Seller, 1968). These people lack a model for developing and designing curriculum (or for dealing with technical matters), rather they tend to focus on larger ideological and moral issues of education (not only curriculum) and economic and political institutions of society (not only schools). For this reason, coupled with the fact that they lack a model for planning curriculum, we feel they should be discussed in a philosophical or political context—not a curriculum approach.

Reconceptualists view schools as an extension

of society, and they hold that the purpose of curriculum ought to be emancipatory, but instead it has become focused on controlling and preserving the existing order. Most of these curricularists are not textbook writers (broad based, objective, nonpolitical, nonpartisan); rather they tend to be educational critics—advocates of a particular philosophical and political position (Giroux and Purpel, 1981). Rooted in the philosophy and social activism of early reconstructionism, including Counts (1932), Rugg (1939), Rugg, et al. (1936), and Benjamin (1939), these new curricularists wish to rethink, reconsider, and reconceptualize the curriculum. Not only do they challenge the traditional, scientific, and rational views of curriculum, but they also criticize those holding them for embodying their own set of values that are subjective and imperfect. They assert that there are other ways of knowing that are not quantifiable or objective as the dominant notion of “good research” in education. Their approach to curriculum is subjective, political, and ideological, and they do not rely on the hard sciences or empirical methods for answers.

Definition of Curriculum

What is curriculum? What is its purpose? How does it affect students and teachers? The way we define curriculum, by and large reflects our approach to curriculum. The relationship is not perfect, nor mutually exclusive; there is overlap between approaches and definitions. We can organize five basic views or definitions of curriculum. The first two are the most popular views and may be considered as two extremes, specific and prescriptive vs. global and all-encompassing.

A curriculum can be defined as a plan for action, or a written document, which includes strategies for achieving desired goals or ends. Popularized by Tyler (1949) and Taba (1962), most behaviorist and managerial-systems people today take this position (what we mean by overlap). For example, J. Gaylen Saylor defines curriculum “as a plan for providing sets of learning opportunities for persons to be educated” (Say-

lor, Alexander, and Lewis, 1981, p. 10). Writes David Pratt, "Curriculum is an organized set of formal educational and/or training intentions" (1980, p. 4). Wiles and Bondi (1984) view "curriculum as a plan for learning (whereby) objectives determine what learning is important" (p. 135).

On the other hand, we can define curriculum broadly as dealing with the experiences of the learner. This view considers almost anything in school, even outside of school (so long as it is planned) as part of the curriculum. This definition is rooted in Dewey's (1938) definition of experience and education, as well as Caswell and Campbell's (1935) view that curriculum was "all the experiences children have under the guidance of teachers" (p. 69).

Humanistic-aesthetic curriculumists subscribe to this definition, including some intellectual-academic curricularists, and over the years this meaning has been interpreted more broadly by textbook writers. State Shepherd and Ragan (1985), "The curriculum consists of the ongoing experiences of children under the guidance of the school." It represents "a special environment...for helping children achieve self-realization through active participation within the school" (pp. 3-4). Eisner (1985) points out that the curriculum "is a program (the school) offers to its students." It consists of a "preplanned series of educational hurdles" and an "entire range of experiences a child has within the school" (p. 41). Finally, Hass (1983) contends that "curriculum is all of the experiences that individuals have in a program of education...which is planned in terms of...theory and research or past and present professional practice" (p. 41).

In between these two definitional extremes, there are three other definitions. Curriculum can be considered as a system, whereby we deal with people and processes, the organization of personnel, and procedures for implementing it. Most managerial-systems curricularists adopt this definition (Doll, 1986; McNeil, 1985; Unruh and Unruh, 1984). Next, curriculum can be viewed as a *field of study*, comprising its own foundations and

domains of knowledge, as well as its own research, theory, and principles. Intellectual-synthesizers, such as Orlosky and Smith (1980), Schubert (1986), and the Tanners (1980) subscribe to this view of curriculum.

Finally, curriculum can be considered in terms of *subject matter* (mathematics, science, English, history, etc.), and sometimes subjects by *grade levels* (elementary, secondary, or college level). The emphasis would be on facts, concepts, and generalizations of a particular subject (or group of subjects), as opposed to generic concepts and principles of curriculum making that cut across the field of curriculum. No one curriculum approach adheres to this definition. Of all the current texts, only Shepherd and Ragan (1985) examine school subjects at the elementary school level, as the focus of their discussion. Wiles and Bondi (1984), similarly, are the only ones who talk about curriculum at the elementary, middle, and secondary school levels.

George Beauchamp (1975) asserts that only the first three definitions listed in Table 1 (plan, system, and field of study) represent "key" or "legitimate" uses of the word curriculum. But the other two definitions (experiences and subject/grade levels) are also consistent with good theory and practice. Surprisingly, there are no real curriculum advocates of subjects and grades. Since most school systems across the country develop curriculum in terms of different subjects and grades, it would seem that we need to view curriculum more along this definition than others. The fact that practitioners use this form of curriculum on a daily basis, while theoreticians rarely do (usually under the guise that they wish to examine generic concepts and principles that are applicable to most subjects and grades), suggests that both groups are not really talking to each other. Although a few curriculum departments in universities offer courses in elementary school curriculum and secondary school curriculum, they rarely, if ever, offer curriculum courses by subjects—mathematics curriculum, science curriculum, etc. (The com-

Rational/Scientific.....Aesthetic/Philosophical				
Approaches				
Behavioral	Managerial	Intellectual	Humanistic	Reconceptualist
Specific/Prescriptive.....Broad/General				
Definitions				
Plan	System	Field of Study	Grades/Subjects	Experiences
<p>Note: Although there is a good deal of overlap between approaches and definitions of curriculum, the relationship is not perfect. Most behaviorists adopt the definition of a plan, and the managerialists tend to use the system definition. The intellectuals feel comfortable with the field of study definition. Most humanistic curricularists tend to include experiences as part of their definition of curriculum. Any curriculum approach could adopt the grades/subjects definition, and reconceptualists really do not care about the definition of curriculum since they are concerned with larger philosophical and political issues.</p>				
Table 1: Approaches and Definitions of Curriculum in Terms of a Continuum				

mon reason given is there would be too few students enrolled in these courses to justify them.)

The Problem of Definition: The varied definitions of curriculum create confusion and trivialize the field. Time and energy are taken away from substantive problems and issues, from research, theoretical, and practical approaches. Because we lack agreement on just what is curriculum, it follows that we lack common terms and have trouble communicating with each other. Consider the two most common definitions. The more precise our definition of curriculum, it can be argued, the more rigid our approach to curriculum. The more we rely on a preconceived plan or document, the greater the tendency to omit, ignore, or miss relevant factors related to teaching and learning because they are not part of our written plan. As Doll (1986) points out, "Every school has a planned, formal acknowledged curriculum," but it also has "an unplanned, informal and hidden one" that must be considered (p. 7). The planned, formal curriculum focuses on goals, objectives, subject matter, and organization of instruc-

tion; the unplanned, informal curriculum deals with social-psychological interaction among students and teachers, especially their feelings, attitudes, and behaviors.

If we consider only the planned curriculum, or if we are too prescriptive in our approach, we ignore the unintended and dysfunctional (negative) consequences of our plans and actions (i.e. the student begins to dislike history or English, but our intention was to teach Tolstoy). The point is, we cannot be too rigid or close-ended, and try to fill in all the boxes. There are too many gray areas in education, and too many human variables that we cannot control or plan for in advance. The curriculum must consider the smells and sounds of the classroom, the intuitive judgments and hunches of the teacher, and the needs and interests of the students that evolve and cannot always be planned by the student, teacher, or curriculum specialist.

On the other hand, the broad umbrella-like definition of curriculum as school experiences results in other problems: almost everything that goes on in school can be classified

or discussed in terms of curriculum. It even suggests that curriculum is synonymous with education. It also connotes that almost every field or discipline in school of education has implications for curriculum or is part of the curriculum field. If nearly everything in schools and in the study of education is related to curriculum, the classification of what is not curriculum is meaningless. The content of curriculum is so diffuse that no one can have sufficient knowledge or knowledge that is agreed to be of sufficient value in the field. Given this macro view of curriculum, it is extremely difficult to become a specialist or expert in the field. When the content and scope of any field becomes all-encompassing, or too enlarged so that it overlaps with many other fields, then it becomes too difficult to delineate that field (say curriculum) and separate itself from other fields.

Background Issues for Defining the Field: There are content or subject matter issues too. Is it appropriate to talk about a social studies or mathematics curriculum or about curriculum in general? Are there general principles of curriculum that apply to all subjects, or specific principles that apply to specific subjects? Should subject matter be organized around separate disciplines or based on interdisciplinary and core approaches? To what extent is subject matter a matter of student choice, professional choice, parent choice, or is it a matter to be determined by the community, state, or nation? How should subjects be organized: around graded or non-graded approaches, behavioral objectives, student activities, social or community values, future jobs? What portion of subject matter should be classified as "general," "specialized," or "elective"? What is the appropriate mix of common subjects vs. optional subjects? And what is the appropriate stress on facts, concepts, and principles of subject matter? As Beauchamp (1975) writes, "The posture...one assumes with respect to the content of a curriculum inevitably will be of great influence upon...theory and planning" (p. 81). Actually, it will have major influence on everything that follows, from

developing, designing, implementing, and evaluating the curriculum, from the policies and programs to the processes and products of the curriculum. Then there are issues related to people. Who are the major participants? To what extent should students, teachers, parents, and community members be involved in curriculum planning? Why are school administrators assuming a greater role in curriculum matters, and curriculum specialists assuming less of a role? What are the roles and responsibilities of researchers and practitioners in curriculum making? And, how do we improve their communication?

Curriculum has been discussed in a variety of terms of approaches and definitions from which the reader may pick and choose. In effect, I have told the reader that he or she can focus on one or more approaches and definitions to curriculum, but eventually the individual must make a choice. In presenting this broad overview of curriculum, I have tried to show, also, how current texts in curriculum examine these theoretical dimensions. However, the reader is cautioned that it is not easy to categorize authors and textbooks into pure types. Not only may overlap exist in some cases, but also some people may represent more than one approach or definition.

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