

A BIT ABOUT CURRICULUM

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Introduction

"A Bit About Curriculum" was meant to jump start the curriculum conversation at a curriculum sharing day at the Adult Literacy Resource Institute/Greater Boston SABES. It came from a request for an overview of different kinds of curriculum by those teachers who were doing the bulk of the curriculum and lesson planning sharing at the day.

I used the document to help teachers talk about multiple definitions of curriculum by posing larger questions, such as: "How is curriculum defined?" "Who defines it this way and why?" "How has the definition changed over time?" "Where do I locate myself as a teacher and a program in this discussion?" "How do my students articulate what they need and what they want and need from their learning and then go on to get it?" From there we were able to cross the bridge into practice and, in particular, walk through some of the Curriculum Frameworks.

The document is not meant to be a definitive overview. It was designed to support our sharing activities and discussions. I hope it will help teachers feel assured about their own curriculum approaches and ideas about organizing what is being taught in their classrooms, while at the same time inviting them to stretch their own thinking, to think differently about what they're doing in their classroom and for what purposes.

I.

"...It [the word curriculum] has its origins in the running/chariot tracks of Greece. It was, literally, a course. In Latin curriculum was a racing chariot; *currere* was to run."
—Mark Smith, educational philosopher, 2008

Curriculum encompasses "all the learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside the school."
—John Kerr, educational philosopher, 1983.

This definition presumes that learning is planned and guided and that the learning that takes place is in relationship to formal schooling.

II.

This next definition takes into account larger social forces, dynamics and relationships that are sometimes visible, sometime invisible. This definition was developed twenty years after the previous one by a teacher who is still in the field. Informed by Freire and the notion of co-intentionality" where students and educators together formulate the scope of learning—what gets taught, how and why—it still locates the course of learning in a given classroom or program. Again, though, it broadens the definition to include the larger forces that act on that learning environment.

"...Curriculum includes not only the entirety of activities, methods, materials, and physical and social environment of the whole learning center, but also the dynamic processes that shape and change these components. Multiple bodies and forces, a program's funders, the students themselves, as well as community and national or international events, shape these processes. While the term 'curriculum' can refer to the entirety of learning occurring within a center...I often use the term to refer to the environment of my class, including students' input alongside the program's criteria for my level."

-Charissa Ahlstrom, teacher, Jamaica Plain Adult Learning Program Program, Focus on Basics, Vol. 6, Issue 6, September 2003.

III.

Curriculum as a syllabus to be transmitted—Here curriculum is a body of knowledge-content and/or subjects. Education in this sense, is the process by which these are transmitted or "delivered" to students by the most effective methods that can be devised."...In the form that many of us will be familiar with, it is connected to courses leading to examinations.

Curriculum as product—The dominant forms of describing and managing education are today couched in the productive form. Education is most often seen as a technical exercise. Objectives are set, a plan drawn up, then applied, and the outcomes (products) measured. It is a way of thinking about education that has grown in influence since the late 1970's with the rise of vocationalism and the concern with demonstrating competency.

Curriculum as process—Another way of looking at curriculum theory and practice is via process. In this sense curriculum is not a physical thing, but rather the interaction of teachers, students and knowledge.

Teachers enter particular schooling and situation with an ability to think critically, in-action, an understanding of their role and the expectations others have of them, a proposal for action which sets out essential principles and features of the educational encounter.

Guided by these, they encourage conversations between, and with, people in the situation out of which may come thinking and action.

Associated with the above, given the uniqueness of each classroom setting, it means that any educational proposal, even at a school level, needs to be tested, and verified by each teacher in his/her classroom.

Curriculum as praxis—Curriculum as praxis is, in many respects, a development of the process model. While the process model is driven by general principles and places and emphasis on judgment and meaning making, it does not make explicit statements about the interests it serves. It may, for example, be used in such a way that does not make continual reference to collective human well-being and to the emancipation of the human spirit. A praxis model of curriculum theory and practice brings these to the centre of the process and makes and explicit commitment to emancipation. Thus action is not simply informed, it is also committed.

Curriculum in context—One criticism that has been made of the praxis model is that it does not place a strong enough emphasis on context. Curriculum is what actually happens in classrooms, that is “an ongoing social process comprised of the interactions of students, teachers, knowledge and milieu.” (Catherine Cornbleth, 1990)

Smith, M. K. (1996, 2000) 'Curriculum theory and practice' the encyclopedia of informal education, <www.infed.org/biblio/b-curric.htm>. Last updated: 11 April 2008

IV.

One last framework to consider from Amy Prevedel's article in *Focus on Basics* (September 2003), “Values and Beliefs: The World View Behind Curriculum.”

THREE APPROACHES TO CURRICULUM

| Issue | Traditional Approach | Learner-Driven Approach | Critical Approach |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Who determines curriculum? | Curriculum developer (publisher, state, institution) sets goals and chooses learning experiences, evaluates, plans and proposes curriculum | Students articulate learning goals that spring from their real-world roles Students help plan curriculum | Teacher leads the class while following the lead of learners Students, rather than “outsiders” become experts |
| What does knowledge look like? | Appears neutral and equitable in its availability Exists “out there,” can be organized and transmitted Is observable and measurable | Created through the interaction of student and text Builds on what learners already know Relevant to students real life context | Not fixed—dependent upon interaction, among students, text, teacher Autobiographic Complex interaction between text, teacher and what is taught Knowledge is created |
| What are the underlying assumptions? | Pre-determined goals Learning happens in a linear, step-by-step fashion Expert knowledge is important | Learning happens in social contexts Instruction is transparent and based on purposes students determine Learners actively build on knowledge and experience | Education is political Language and power are connected |
| What might this look like in action? | A classroom with lesson plans, homework, grades possibly | Apolitical on the surface Drawn from adults' lives in their everyday contexts | Abandons technician mentality Addresses social and community issues of importance Curriculum not set in advance—emerges |
| How is learning assessed? | Objective, observable “scientific” means Can provide comparative scores | Performance of the students' contextualized goal Continuing, involving meta-cognitive strategies | Portfolios, self-assessment Measures of social and personal change |

V.

Starting with a wide view (the theories, questions, discourses and frameworks) and then moving into a close up (activities, lessons, notes) and then back out again, or starting with the concrete description of what happens when it "hits the classroom" and then moving out into theory and others' reflection, and then revising what happens in the classroom based on that information, this movement between the two poles is what comprises the act of developing curriculum. In this way curriculum is never static.

VI.

QUESTIONS ...QUESTIONS.....QUESTIONS....

In thinking about one of your classrooms or instructional units, what curriculum approach have you taken (traditional, participatory, hybrid, etc) Why this approach? How have you organized your teaching in this way?

What was the first step, e.g. finding out what students wanted, operating within a prescribed program-wide curriculum, and if so, who created this program wide curricula and what were the inputs and revision that took place to come to that, or something else?

What content and skills does this curriculum intend to teach? How, if at all do you know that the content and skills are being taught? How do your students know if they're progressing? How do you define and measure progress? Are students involved in measuring their own progress? How? Was this material/lesson/approach constructed in the classroom with learners?

What happened when this material "hit" the classroom?

Was there a period of revising what you hoped to accomplish and cover? How did you go about doing this?

How have you been documenting what happens in the classroom? And beyond the classroom? Is that important?

Are students involved in documenting the curriculum? Have students been involved in refining the curriculum?

Do you have time/ give yourself time to reflect on the curriculum?

What anchor questions or premises do you use to reflect on the curriculum?

Have you changed as a teacher because of this curriculum process? What has changed in your practice, if anything? What has felt difficult about developing and implementing this curriculum idea or approach?