

Curriculum Theory

Curriculum theory and theorizing may be characterized as being a rather formative condition, for essentially there are no generally accepted and clear-cut criteria to distinguish curriculum theory and theorizing from other forms of writing in education. The present situation may be summarized by saying that curriculum theory and theorizing exists because a fair number of thoughtful and respected professional persons say they do it and that it exists. Still others refer to the work of these persons as theorizing and their efforts as theories. A reasonably knowledgeable look at the curriculum “situation” readily reveals some of the problems which create the present confusion.

To begin with, one would suspect that theory would be focused upon a clearly identified realm of phenomena. Unfortunately, this is not so in curriculum for the definitions of curriculum are as narrow as “the subject matter to be learned” and as broad as “all the experiences students have in school.” Thus, writings called curriculum theory have varied on one pole from essentially epistemological statements to the other pole of statements of a “philosophy of living.”

There is also some disagreement among “theorizers” about the purpose of theorizing. Among those few who give much thought to this problem there appear to be three major camps. One group (by far the largest) sees theory as a guiding framework for applied curriculum development and research and as a tool for evaluation of curriculum development.

Thus, theory becomes a springboard for prescribing and guiding practical activity in relation to curriculum. Theory in this sense functions like a philosophy in that it is not directly thought of as open to empirical validation. That this approach is not called curriculum philosophy may perhaps be so primarily because the persons who engage in it are not usually trained philosophers regardless of the fact that much of it is a form of philosophizing.

A second "camp" of ofttime younger (and far fewer) theorizers is committed to a more conventional concept of scientific theory. This group has attempted to identify and describe the variables and their relationships in curriculum. The purpose of this theory is primarily conceptual in nature, and research would be utilized for empirical validation of curriculum variables and relationships, rather than as a test of the efficiency and effectiveness of a curriculum prescription.

A third group of individuals looks upon the task of theorizing as a creative intellectual task which they maintain should be neither used as a basis for prescription or as an empirically testable set of principles and relationships. The purpose of these persons is to develop and criticize conceptual schema in the hope that new ways of talking about curriculum, which may in the future be far more fruitful than present orientations, will be forthcoming. At the present time, they would maintain that a much more playful, freefloating process is called for by the state of the art.

A further interesting and sometimes complicating factor is that individuals who theorize may well operate in all three realms upon different occasions as specific professional pressures and tasks appear. Thus, any piece of curriculum theory must be looked at carefully as a specific piece of theorizing in order to assess its intent.

Huebner¹ offers an analysis of theoretical statements which is of considerable interest here. Curriculum theory he proposes can be categorized in terms of the various uses of language by theorists. Thus, he finds that there are six kinds of language used: (1) descriptive, (2) explanatory, (3) controlling, (4) legitimizing, (5) prescriptive, and (6) affiliative.

If we accept this analysis it becomes clear that "curriculum theory" varies with the intentions of theorists, as witnessed by their use of language, in any particular time and place. This may appear to be unusual in relation to the history of scientific theory at first glance, but a little reflection shows that there are similar varieties of theory in many fields. The problem that variety creates for curriculum is perhaps of a different order. It would appear that the variety is less troublesome than the confusion among theorists about

the variety and of the intentions of other theorists. The result has been something like a series of theoretical exchanges which have often been at cross purposes, together with an essential lack of historical development. Instead, the historical state of the field looks much more like a set of out-of-phase cycles. It is suggested from this that curriculum theory is much in need of historical study, with the goal of untangling what Huebner referred to as the different uses of curricular language.

Kliebard² offers an insightful perspective on the history of curriculum issues. He highlights the idea that curriculum has been essentially plagued by “an ahistorical posture,” an “ameliorative orientation,” and a lack of definition. He concludes that “our basic framework and our intellectual horizons have been severely limited.” He further suggests that “the task of the future is the development of alternative modes of thinking to the dominant ‘production model’ of the past 50 years.”

The production model Kliebard speaks of is that associated with Bobbit³ and others in the early part of the 20th century and later with the Tyler⁴ rationale. In Huebner’s terms this is variously a “controlling” and “prescriptive” use of language. But even here the elements of control and prescription are fundamentally grounded in a technological rationale rather than in philosophical and/or scientific theory.

This technical model has been developed to its greatest sophistication by vocational education workers. An excellent recent “state of the art” review was edited by Smith and Moss⁵ who summarize the process as: (1) specifying the role for which training is to be provided, (2) identifying the specific tasks that comprise the role, (3) selecting the tasks to be taught, (4) analyzing each of the tasks, (5) stating performance objectives, (6) specifying the instructional sequence, (7) identifying conditions of learning, (8) designing an instructional strategy, (9) developing instructional events, and (10) creating student and curriculum evaluative procedures and devices.

For all intents and purposes this has been what has passed for the prevailing “theory” of most curriculum workers (with variations and alterations for different areas). Many curriculum theorists, however, have not found this to be a satisfactory model for a variety of reasons; perhaps most fundamentally because the technical process begins with an acceptance of contemporary social values (thus eliminating the value question of what to teach).

The Concerns of Curriculum Theory

Philosophies of education, according to Frankema⁶ are either analytical or normative. That is, they are essentially attempting to describe, discriminate, and establish meanings for terms, or they are essentially sets of statements about what should or should not be included in education and what should or should not be done during the educational process.

Curriculum theorists have found such neat categories difficult to parallel, since the concerns of curriculum at some times must be related to what is learned by persons. Thus, curriculum always has action implications with a broad directional concern for outcomes. Under these circumstances, one is always involved in assumptions and implicit (if not explicit) statements which could be classified at various times and places as ontological; axiological, and epistemological. Concern for the nature of human "being," value theory, and the nature of knowledge are intricately interwoven in action contexts. But in many ways curriculum theorizing can be conveniently categorized as oriented toward statements about knowledge, statements about the curriculum realities, and statements about valued activity.

Knowledge-Oriented Statements

Undoubtedly, the most prolific group of curriculum thinkers in the past decade have been those persons concerned with knowledge. This is a reasonable and important development since the curriculum has a substance which is drawn from the accumulated cultural development of a civilization. It is indeed quite difficult to comprehend the justification of schooling outside this context. (Although whether the school is the best place to learn about it has been challenged.)

In some ways, the recent concern for knowledge has been a reactive phenomena to critics' perceptions of education as life adjustment and broad social pressures to keep up with the Russians. Whatever the motivational source of the energy in the process, a sizable number of academically talented persons have entered the curriculum arena.

Bruner⁷ sounded the clarion call for the movement toward reconceptualizing the subject matter of the schools around the structure of the disciplines and the modes of disciplined inquiry. This has been picked up by persons from many disciplines and has

resulted in a veritable landslide of curriculum revisions, new programs, revised and/or new materials, and in-service programs for teachers.

Essentially, as Brownell and King⁸ so ably state, the rationale for the priority of disciplines lies in the assertion that man's essential nature is most reasonably fulfilled by his symbolic capacities with priority on general ideas and especially those most teachable and learnable. Thus, the curriculum needs to be fundamentally grounded in a conception of those general structures of symbolic systems which can be most communicated to and learned by others.

Schwab⁹ and Phenix¹⁰ have also been in the forefront of this general approach. Schwab has provided a fundamental analysis of the organizational, substantive, and syntactical structures of the disciplines. Phenix contributed a conceptual reorganization of the fields of knowledge with the intention of facilitating learning and use of knowledge. Vandenberg¹¹ edited a useful volume of readings in which he presented selected articles by a variety of persons, which help put the theory of knowledge into educational perspective.

As far as the new impetus for the disciplines and structure have moved us, there are still a sizable number of theorists who feel epistemology or knowledge is too limited a base for an adequate curriculum theory. Questions about the relevance of social, human, and personal qualities would appear to lead to broader vistas in order to cope comfortably with curriculum decisions.

Reality-Oriented Statements

At the risk of misusing the concept of ontology and in a heuristic spirit, there are a number of theoretical statements which talk about the "nature of things" as they are relevant to the consideration of the curriculum. Principally, these attempts focus upon the social, cultural, and personal context and fabric which is interwoven into a complex mosaic of living and being. The curriculum thus becomes primarily a focal point for a much more fundamental concern about reality which when conceptualized can be utilized to look at curriculum.

Goodlad¹² characterized the curriculum picture in terms of two eras, the progressive era and the discipline-centered era. He noted that major proponents of these eras have been heard selectively. Thus, Jerome Bruner as a major figure in the recent disciplines era has many secondary propositions which are directly corollary with concerns of the progressives; and John Dewey (as representative of progressives) warned about the tendency of some progressives to

forget the disciplines. This, of course, suggests that political forces may be quite important in influencing the perceptions of scholarly work in eras of curriculum theory development.

Mann¹³ made an initial foray into the relationship of politics to curriculum theory. He focused primarily upon student unrest and politics in relation to curriculum. As noteworthy as his contribution is, much more thought needs to be given and analysis needs to be carried on of the nature of the influence of changing climates of broad social and political circumstances as they impinge upon the development of curriculum theory and the selectivity of perceptions of curriculum developers when encountering this theory.

The significance of this concern should be clear. The question of whether an adequate curriculum theory can be formulated without a sophisticated awareness of political phenomena provides a dimension to theorizing that has only been noted in passing, hinted at, or broadly sketched in the past. Some theorists are beginning to wonder if these political influences may not be far more important than they generally have been thought to be.

Goodlad and Richter¹⁴ have presented the most elaborate contemporary model for curriculum. They identify four levels of decision making: social, ideological, institutional, and instructional.

This model is predicated upon the process of rational decision making and is an extension of the Tyler¹⁵ rationale. However, contrary to Tyler they assume that values are beginning points not only screens to be introduced after analysis of society, learners, and subject matter, thus avoiding one of the major criticisms of the work of Tyler.¹⁶

The intent of this conceptual model is clearly to control, explain, and describe. However, limiting a conceptual model to rational decision-making processes may well rule out important descriptive and explanatory phenomena, such as that discussed by Mann, and thus weaken the long-range usefulness of the model for more short-term needs for control of the curriculum processes.

Macdonald¹⁷ proposed a conceptual model which views "actions" as the central unit of curriculum theory (rather than the decisions of the Tyler-Goodlad variety). The attempt here was to explain the activity found in relevant contexts of schooling and to describe the various levels of activity that go on and at least hint at their relationships.

Johnson¹⁸ pointed out some conceptual confusion in this model between curriculum and curriculum development. The criticism was well put and his modifications were an important clarification of the

intended meaning of the conceptualization. He went on to spell out the flow of activity between curriculum development and instruction and to provide a schema for curriculum.

Again, however, it is clear that the intentions of theorists differ. Johnson clearly is seeking the kind of control that Goodlad and Richter are after, whereas Macdonald's attempt was not predicated upon a control factor in terms of specific output.

Huebner¹⁹ has been exploring at a different level. His approach has dealt with language systems and the ways in which language shapes the process of building conceptual models and/or facilitating processes and decisions in curriculum. Thus, the technical, scientific, political talk is noted in many models; but one may imply from Huebner's discourse that the ethical and aesthetic talk about schooling has been limited, inconsistent, and of much lower priority.

It would appear then, that one central concern of theorists is identifying the fundamental unit of curriculum with which to build conceptual systems. Whether this be rational decisions, action processes, language patterns, or any other potential unit has not been agreed upon by the theorizers.

Further, it seems clear that the intentions of theorizers influence the selection of the unit. In Huebner's²⁰ terms, it would make sense to suggest that the intent to control predisposes selection of scientific and technical language and the conceptual system which develops reflects this initial bias. Thus, the value question has not been transcended by the curriculum models that are presently available.

Value-Oriented Statements

Curriculum designs are value-oriented statements. The literature is replete with suggested designs. Designs, in contrast to epistemological theories or reality-oriented statements, attempt to project a theoretically based pattern of experiences as desirable.

It should be noted that curriculum designs are implicit and sometimes explicit in other kinds of models. Yet the intention of designs is clearly to prescribe, legitimize, and win advocates rather than simply describe, explain, and/or control.

Over the years we have witnessed a succession of designs; from the subject-centered, to broad fields, to problems of living and the child-centered approach. Other prominent forms have been called the "activity curriculum," the "core curriculum," and the "emerging needs curriculum." Johnson, in an article on design, mentions that there appear to be from three to a half dozen current designs.

Designers, however, have not escaped the problem of the conceptual modelers. In fact, Herrick²² suggested that in the end the designers may well be faced with the task of theorizing at the same level. There is still the problem of the basic unit around which designs are built; and the value commitment, perhaps at a different level, is central to design.

Just as rational decisions have been the predominant unit for conceptual models, designs have often utilized learning experiences as a basic unit. Other units frequently proposed have been instructional objectives, learning tasks, and functional social roles and skills.

Value priorities have generally been set in one of the basic referents of curriculum. Designers have generally opted for priority on subject matter, social phenomena, or people (learners). As arguable as this either-or position appears on a philosophical level it is extremely difficult to avoid on a practical design level since the nature of rational thought is linear and it does make a difference which one of the three one begins with. This is frequently so because the choice of priority often implies a value position about a referent that makes the definition of this referent different from what its definition would be if it came later in the set of priorities.

The problems of design are, in fact, what fostered the current interest in curriculum theory. It is reasonable to suggest that as crucial as designs are in terms of the exigencies of practical decision making, the curriculum theorist needs to do much more work before many of the design problems can be solved.

Conclusion

One may conclude that we have only touched upon the area of curriculum theory here, certainly excluding more than has been included. It is a difficult task to formalize such a diverse and wide ranging field. Yet it is an exciting venture for persons whose dispositions lead them in this direction. There is an article of faith involved which is analogous to Dewey's comment that educational philosophy was the essence of all philosophy because it was "the study of how to have a world." Curriculum theory in this light might be said to be the essence of educational theory because it is the study of how to have a learning environment.

Notes

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3. Franklin Bobbit, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918).
4. Ralph Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950).
5. Brandon B. Smith and Jerome Moss, Jr., "Process and Techniques of Vocational Curriculum Development," (Minneapolis, Minn.: Research Coordinating Unit for Vocational Education, University of Minnesota, April 1970).
6. William R. Frankema, "A Model for Analyzing a Philosophy of Education," *High School Journal* 2 (October 1966).
7. Jerome Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961).
8. John A. Brownell and Arthur King Jr., *The Curriculum and the Discipline of Knowledge* (New York: Wiley, 1966).
9. Joseph J. Schwab, "Structure of the Disciplines: Meanings and Significance" in *The Structure of Knowledge and the Curriculum*, ed. Ford and Pugno (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), pp. 1-30.
10. Phillip Phenix, *Realms of Meaning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).
11. Donald Vandenberg, ed., *Theory of Knowledge and Problems of Education* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969).
12. John Goodlad, "Curriculum: A Janus Look," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 1, no. 1 (November 1968): 34-46.
13. John Mann, "Politics and Curriculum Theory: An Informal Inquiry," *Curriculum Theory Network* 5 (Spring 1970).
14. John Goodlad and Maurice Richter, "The Development of a Conceptual System for Dealing with Problems of Curriculum and Instruction," Cooperative Research Project No. 454, ED 010 064 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1966).
15. Tyler, *Basic Principles*.
16. See, for example, Herbert Kliebard, "The Tyler Rationale," *School Review* 78 (February 1970): 259-72.
17. James B. Macdonald, "Structures in Curriculum," *Proceedings of the Conference on Curriculum Leadership* (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin State Department of Public Instruction, 1966), pp. 28-46.
18. Mauritz Johnson, "Definition and Models in Curriculum Theory" *Educational Theory* 17 (April 1967): 127-40.
19. Dwayne Huebner, "Curriculum Language and Classroom Meanings," *Language and Meaning* (Washington, D.C.: ASCD, 1966).
20. *Ibid.*
21. Mauritz Johnson, "On the Meaning of Curriculum Design," *Curriculum Theory Network* 3 (Spring 1969): 3-9.
22. Virgil E. Herrick "Curriculum Structure or Design," mimeographed (School of Education: University of Wisconsin).