

TRYING TO UNDERSTAND CURRICULUM IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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Abstract: *This paper is focused on presenting curriculum as a core issue of any educational reform, and as a very controversial concept. Two core concepts are underlined within curriculum definitions: learning situation and learning experience and their complementary relation is analyzed. The pyramidal model of curriculum is explained as a new approach. All this presentation aims to present a point of view about the thorny issue of curriculum and it tries to synthetically put together different approaches of the topic in modern and post-modern society. The necessity to rethink and enlarge the competence concept represents a conclusion which could be the basis of a further more detailed analysis of the curriculum development.*

Key words: *curriculum, learning situation, learning experience, values, competence.*

1. Curriculum as a Controversial Concept

It will be clear that the curriculum can be considered a controversial concept and my concerns begin with the reality that there is no common agreement around which (key issue(s)/ dimension or component) curriculum should be designed. Some definitions consider 'content' to be the core issue of curriculum, others hinge around learning experience, social context or defined goals or outcomes.

No matter what core issue is at stake, curriculum theory and curriculum reforms often begin by recounting the corpus of existing models or theories and then beginning a new proposal from the one that is deemed to be superior to existing alternatives. The term curriculum is thus applied to a whole variety of structures and can be made to carry a range of classes of meaning.

One class of meaning concerns the breadth of the area of curriculum

reference. The same term can concern a classroom, a specific university faculty or even a national program. It is applied to formal structures and to informal education. It is applied equally to youth-clubs, to pre-schools and even to industrial training

A second class of meaning concerns time-frames for curriculum and can refer to a moment in life, an entire life or to a cycle of activity. It can refer to a three year degree program or a single week of specialized field-work.

The term curriculum is also used to refer to the actual material that comprises curriculum. Curriculum in these terms can be a syllabus to be transmitted or it can be a product or an intention. The material can be concerned with praxis or a manual of detail. It can refer to something that is supported by research or an on-going process guided by the preferences of the user. Some scholars have even talked about the take-away curriculum or the

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MacDonald's curriculum to describe what is actually taken away by the student. This is the amalgam of the effects of formal activity within a school as it is mediated to a child who for instance, has been persistently bullied. What is then taken from the institution is far from the declared curriculum. Equally a university graduate may be crippled by a take away curriculum that has been the result of experiences that have induced a low sense of self-worth or an obsession with personal appearance.

Each manifestation of curriculum claims somewhere a supporting model which lays claim to a fundamental philosophy about the learning process or the nature of education. We can see examples of this in work by Franklin Bobbitt (1918; 1928); Ralph W. Tyler (1949); Lawrence Stenhouse (1975); Grundy (1987); Newman & Ingram (1989) and Smith, M. K. (1996, 2000).

Typically a teacher in a pre-university system is confronted with a package of syllabus and support materials provided by a higher educational authority. However good these materials, this curriculum is not the one received by pupils. A teacher-perception process intervenes, turning these official materials into something that is personal to the teacher, but which is never identical to the received materials. This perceived curriculum is the reality of curriculum that is implemented in the classroom. Thus we could talk about the perceived curriculum as an important regulatory mechanism in turning the ideal curriculum (that is the curriculum as it was originally designed), into real curriculum.

Because of this teacher-perception mechanism there have been examples of innovative curriculum activity that have "failed" because it was impossible to include a clone of a charismatic innovator with every resource booklet!

There are comparable situations at university level. Here it is the academic

staffs that are charged with the design and implementation of curriculum. As they make their plans, staffs is aware of pressure from political sources, international innovation and concern as well as the establishment view of how a graduate should be. There are further pressures from the real and imagined processes of intra and extra-institutional peer-review.

There is some common ground among the many definitions and manifestations of curriculum. All hold the main players to be the student and teacher and there is generally a reference to the educational context in which the curriculum is to be applied. Normally, there is also reference to the content that has to be delivered and in consequence, the 'content' that needs to be learned.

I have also noticed that almost all definitions of curriculum seem to use the term learning experience. Whilst this can be a useful term I am concerned that it is generally used without definition both at the 'design level' of curriculum and at the same time to day-to-day curriculum realization. I want therefore to consider the term learning experience alongside its near conceptual neighbor, learning situation.

Inside the formal education, people normally experience quite distinct and different learning situations as they progress through schooling and then higher education. At the same time those same people are asked, or choose to put themselves in many different non-formal learning situations. Indeed, life itself frequently places us in non-formal education without any preparation and without any apparently related context. These chosen or random learning situations, (whether shared without others or not,) become for the learner a private learning experience. The personalization occurs when a shared educational experience is filtered via the learners'

personalities which are also influenced by a variety of personal contextual factors. I note for instance that every teacher has a private learning experience each time he/she interacts professionally with a group or even a single student.

2. A New Definition of Curriculum

With this confusion in mind, I would like to suggest this working definition of curriculum for the purposes of this paper. Curriculum could be considered, in its widest possible manifestation as the totality of learning situations connected to the subsequent learning experiences which occur during a human being's life. The learning situations are specifically designed and implemented within formal education (1) but are also specifically designed in non-formal education (2); the life itself, for sure, put us into various learning situations, without a previous project but with doubtless educational outcomes (3). Each learning situation, purposely designed or incidental, shared or not with others, becomes a private "learning experience" being filtered through the learner's personality, and influenced in this filtering process by a lot of contextual factors. It is important to not forget that even the teacher is a "learner" involved within the learning situation created or projected by the teacher himself or herself.

As we then look at informal education we see a process that lacks intentional educational design, but it comprises a large number of learning experiences. These experiences may have positive or negative connotations, according to the power of the individual to filter or to utilize the diffuse surrounding educational field of influence effectively. Where this power comes from? It is obvious that the value of the outcomes preserved by the learning experiences of the learner involved in learning situations

within formal or non-formal contexts are the source of this power.

The relationship between the learning situation and the learning experience has now become a key curriculum issue.

Both terms embrace nuanced connotations according to their domain of reference; however, they maintain a defined structure no matter in what context.

The structure of a learning situation/experience in education now requires certain following revisions to some familiar elements:

- **Outcomes** are now considered in terms of a learner, who having been put into a learning situation is living out the more or less permanent consequence of a learning experience. These outcomes are described in terms of competencies or components of competencies: knowledge, capacities, (as operational structures), attitudes and attributes of personality. Generally speaking they are determined by the socio-educational context (Cornbleth, 1990) in which the student learns and they will be nuanced by the social and professional context in which the graduate will operate and specifically by the occupation towards which the training is aimed. Outcomes appear in formal and non-formal education as being planned. In informal education we see outcomes as accidental.

- **Aims, goals, and objectives** now become *paths to be followed* by the educational process in order to achieve designed outcomes (components of the competence); they are to be considered explicitly only in formal and sometimes non-formal education (Corte et al., 1996; Voogt, 2004).

- **Content** is selected according to specified outcomes and in formal education, structured according to the philosophy of the curriculum designers. However we recognise non-formal and unplanned educational 'content' in every

learning situation of life. No matter where the contents are considered they should not be understood as genuine targets to be learnt but as vehicles towards desirable competencies.

- **Suggested methodologies of teaching and assessment** are determined by aims, goals, objectives and desired outcomes. They are related to the selected and structured contents. Methodologies in this context must respond to the specific situations of each learner as he or she relates to each concrete designed learning situation.

- **The appropriateness and timetabling of elements of activity and the allocation of time to units of curriculum activity.** This planned structural component of curriculum is obvious in relation to formal education and partially to non-formal education. However, it is important to be aware that timing and appropriateness are also essential components of informal education

3. The Pyramidal Model of Curriculum

These five structural elements lead to the so called pentagonal model of curriculum structure, which has been suggested by Wragg (1997) in his “Cubic Curriculum”.

The author suggestion is focused on the idea of the necessity for a multiple view of analysing curriculum. What I consider as being important is the three dimensional perspective involved in Wragg’s presentation.

Whilst these five core structural elements of a learning situation are strongly interconnected we must also recognise that the concept is essentially a functioning system. Because of this every change in one element necessarily calls for adjustment in each other. Unfortunately the pentagonal paradigm of curriculum structure cannot adequately express this complex, almost kinetic systemic activity.

It is because of this weakness that I propose the pyramidal model of curriculum structure. (Fig. 1) and offer its explanation as a possible basis for a new paradigm of curriculum design appropriate to all educational levels.

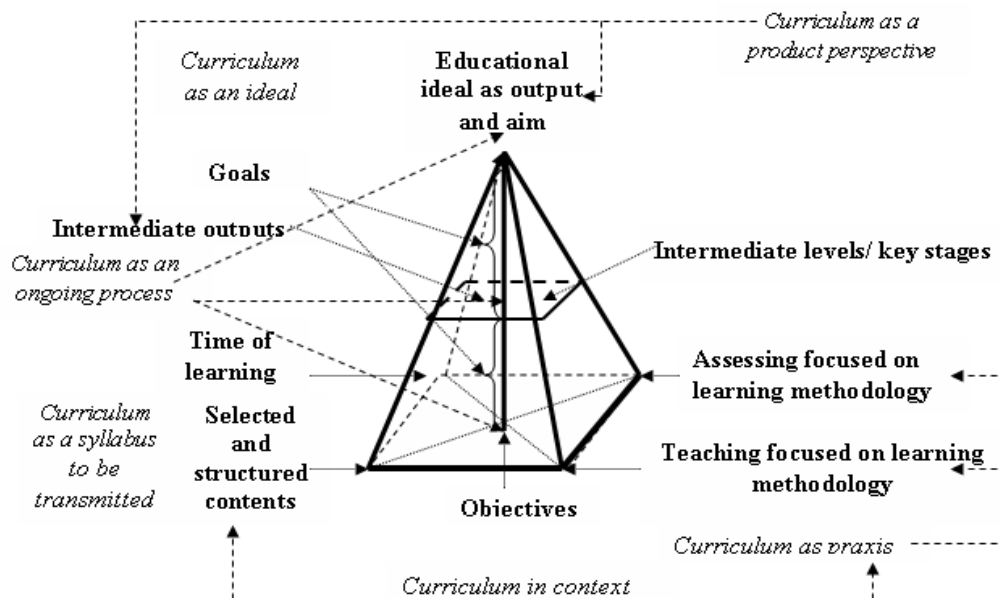


Fig. 1. The pyramidal model of curriculum

I have already emphasised the strong interconnection among the five structural elements of a learning situation and I am reluctant to add to the debate over the priority, importance and timing of these five elements.

When we turn to consider the priority of importance of one or another among these five elements, we move into the philosophy of curriculum. The literature of speciality abounds with “curriculum models” which are founded upon the priority of importance of one or other structural element. Rather than engage in unprofitable analysis of these models I suggest that educational reform will be better served by discussion of the balance between the focus on competence and the focus on taught and learned content according to the effectiveness of teaching-assessing methodology, in curriculum design and implementation.

Notionally there is unanimous recognition that attainment targets or overall expectations (in Canadian curriculum terms) are the most important issues and the first to be determined.

In my opinion these overall expectations should be expressed in terms of competencies detailed in their components: knowledge including understandings and not remaining memorized information, operational capacities, attitudes and values. I consider that the topic of competence and competencies is another extremely interesting one, but it should be the issue of another paper. It then becomes the nature of these growing competences during the personality-genesis process that determines both the selection of content and the ways in which content is structured. Some competencies call almost naturally for working within a single discipline, interdisciplinary activity, and a topic approach or plural-discipline exploration. Here we recognise, of course, that these terms

themselves are not beyond controversy. However, experience has shown that each competency tends to commend itself to specifically structured contents and, further to specific methods of teaching and assessment.

A further distraction from the proper concerns of curriculum, in my view, is the thorny and extended debate about objectives. Whilst I accept that it is not unproductive to have in mind (not necessarily to write) detailed objectives for each sequence of an educational plan, I would argue that defining and reaching objectives should not be the core task. Instead, we suggest an alternative significance for aims, goals and objectives, (depending on the level of their generality) as redefined instruments which become routes to be followed by the educational process itself in order to achieve the designed outcomes. A teacher who has decided the competencies to be developed, and the nature of the intended content has then to set out his or her particular route by which to enrich the outcomes, to particularise the aims and the goals, and to formulate the objectives for study units. These will recommend specific methodologies for the teaching-assessing process which are focused on learning. In arriving at such design decisions the teacher will have taken account of the rhythm of learning of the particular students concerned. The teacher will be the final decision maker in respect of the detailed timing for each learning situation.

I have stressed those competencies as outcomes are the pivotal determinants of curriculum design. Competencies are determined objectively by the requests of the professional fields.

4. “Over” or “behind” Curriculum a Trans-disciplinary Approach

A curriculum approach focused on outcomes (defined in terms of competencies) could be considered as a trans-curricular one; this means that no matter what contents are considered, in what kind of structure they are put, or

which are the methodological way of teaching and assessing process involved within the designed learning situations, the core issue of the educational concern is to enrich the outcomes as expression of genuine learning experiences, behind or over the curriculum as set of learning situations. This becomes a principle of designing and implementing curriculum. I suggest a deeply thinking about the education as a process and a product connected to these two terms: behind or over curriculum.

When we consider the education in the hypostasis of a product we should think in terms of overall expectations/ outcomes; they will be enriched after the learning situations turn into learning experiences. So, somewhere behind curriculum design and implementation the educators have as main target to obtain assessable competencies. Their main concern should be the resulted leaning experiences. When we consider the education in the hypostasis of a process we should think in terms of aims, goals and objectives leading the educational process, on different levels of generality, towards the overall expectations. The educators' main concern should be in this case the curriculum design and the implementation of the designed learning situations. The term "over curriculum" may be appropriate for this hypostasis of education.

Several sets of competencies may become transversal competencies, or general ones, having real possibilities to perform in different areas of work. They aim to develop what is usually named, within the cognitive area, as "lateral thinking", a topic which focused the interest of a lot of specialists and open the door for interesting sequences within the context of international debates (Burt, Bird, Beynon, 2005). Other competences may be strictly associated to a specific professional field.

5. Instead of Conclusions

The great debate among the traditional, modern and post-modern theories of curriculum should be reconsidered from the point of view of the curriculum determinants and its beneficiary- the educated human being of a new millennium. Centring curriculum on competence means to rethink the concept of competence itself. It is not the aim of this paper to analyse in deeply this concept but, together with the post-modern representatives and "ultra-modern" philosophy (Negreţ –Dobridor, 2008) I underline the necessity to go back to the values, to reconsider the structure of competence in terms of focusing it on accepted attitudes and active values. We do need a curriculum which develops a complex human personality able to understand the world with its history, to prefigure its future, to be adapted to a reality no matter how complex it is and to be enough creative to contribute to change the reality in a right direction.

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