

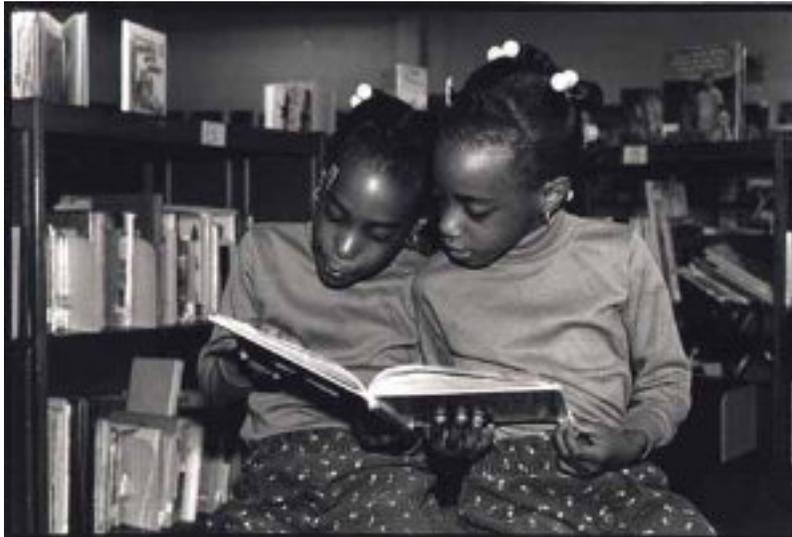
# CURRICULUM THEORIES\*

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## Waiting for class



**Figure 1:** Active readers love life

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## 1 Overview

### HOW TO BE AN ACTIVE READER:

The next few pages are challenging. They may require that you go back and re-read what you have read to fully take in what is being said. You may even wish to take notes as you go along and/or ask questions at the **TWB Learning Cafe** to dialogue with your global colleagues.

The idea of curriculum is hardly new - but the way we understand and theorize about it has altered over the years, and there remains considerable dispute as to meaning. Curriculum has its origins in the

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running/chariot tracks of Greece. It was, literally, "a course." In Latin **curriculum** was a racing chariot; the word, **curre**, was "to run."

Here, curriculum can be seen as: "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." This gives us some basis to move on - and for the moment all we need to do is highlight two of the key features:

1. Learning is planned and guided. (We have to specify in advance what we are seeking to achieve and how we are to go about it.)
2. The definition refers to schooling. (We should recognize that our current appreciation of curriculum theory and practice emerged in the school and in relation to other schooling ideas such as subject and lesson.)

In what follows, we are going to look at 4 ways of approaching curriculum theory and practice:

1. Curriculum as a Body of Knowledge/Product
2. Curriculum as Process
3. Curriculum as Praxis (practice)
4. Curriculum as Context

## 2 Curriculum as Body of Knowledge/Product

Many people still equate a curriculum with a syllabus. "Syllabus" originates from the Greek, and it basically means: a concise statement, the contents of a treatise, the subjects of a series of lectures. In the form that many of us are familiar with it is connected with courses leading to examinations.

Where people still equate curriculum with a syllabus, they are likely to limit their planning to a consideration of the content or the body of knowledge that they wish to transmit.

### Curriculum as Product

It used to be that there were certain skills to master and facts to know. Knowledge was seen as something similar to a product that is manufactured. Generally, one starts knowing nothing, is taught, and one transmits that knowledge to action. For the most part, this point of view worked for quite some time, as it organized learning quite neatly. There were a series of steps leading to the product, and curriculum could be designed accordingly. Those steps were:

Step 1: Diagnosis of need

Step 2: Formulation of objectives

Step 3: Selection of content

Step 4: Organization of content

Step 5: Selection of learning experiences

Step 6: Organization of learning experiences

Step 7: Determination of what to evaluate, and the ways and means of doing it.

### Concern

One problem with the product orientation is that students are generally left out of the picture. The product model, by having a pre-specified plan or program, tends to direct attention to teaching. For example, the focus is on: how the information is given.

## 3 Curriculum as Process

By contrast, if we look at curriculum as "Process" the learners in this model are not objects to be acted upon. They have a clear voice in the way that the sessions evolve. The focus is on interactions. This can mean that attention shifts from teaching to learning.

It needs to be emphasized that "Curriculum as Process" is not a physical thing, but rather the interaction of teachers, students, and knowledge. In other words, curriculum is what actually happens in the classroom and what people do to prepare and evaluate.

What we have in this model are a number of elements in constant interaction. Teachers enter particular situations with an ability to think critically; an understanding of their role and the expectations others have of them; and a proposal for action that sets out essential principles and features of the educational encounter. Guided by these, they encourage conversations between, and with, people - out of which may come thinking and action. They continually evaluate the process and what they can see of outcomes.

Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) produced one of the best-known explorations of a process model of curriculum theory and practice. He defined curriculum tentatively: "A curriculum is an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice."

He suggests that a curriculum is rather like a recipe in cookery. A curriculum, like the recipe for a dish, is first imagined as a possibility, then the subject of experiment. The recipe offered publicly is in a sense a report on the experiment. Similarly, a curriculum should be grounded in practice. It is an attempt to describe the work observed in classrooms. Finally, within limits, a recipe can be varied according to taste - so can a curriculum.

Stenhouse shifted the ground a little bit here. He was not saying that curriculum is the process, but rather the means by which the experience of attempting to put an educational proposal into practice is made available.

## 4 Concerns

When we come to think about this way of approaching curriculum, a number of possible problems do arise. The first is a problem for those who want some greater degree of uniformity in what is taught. This approach to the theory of curriculum, because it places meaning-making and thinking at its core and treats learners as subjects rather than objects, can lead to very different means being employed in classrooms and a high degree of variety in content. As Stenhouse comments, the process model is essentially a critical model, not a marking model.

The major weakness and, indeed, strength of the process model is that it rests upon the quality of teachers. If they are not up to much, then there is no safety net in the form of prescribed curriculum materials. The approach is dependent upon the cultivation of wisdom and meaning-making in the classroom. If the teacher is not up to this, then there will be severe limitations on what can happen educationally.

There have been some attempts to overcome this problem by developing materials and curriculum packages that focus more closely on the "process of discovery" or "problem-solving", for example in science. But there is a danger in this approach. Processes become reduced to sets of skills - for example, how to light a bunsen burner. When students are able to demonstrate certain skills, they are deemed to have completed the process. The actions have become the ends; the processes have become the product. Whether or not students are able to apply the skills to make sense of the world around them is somehow overlooked.

## 5 Curriculum as Praxis

First, this notion holds that **practice** should not focus exclusively on individuals alone or the group alone, but pays careful attention to the **way** in which individuals and the group create understandings and practices, as well as meaning.

For example, in sessions that seek to explore the experiences of different cultural and racial groups in society, we could be looking to see whether the direction of the work took people beyond a focus on individual attitudes. Are participants confronting the material conditions through which those attitudes are constituted, for example?

Second, we could be looking for a commitment expressed in action to the exploration of educators' values and their practice. Are they, for example, able to say in a coherent way what they think makes for human well-being and link this with their practice? We could also be looking for certain values - especially an emphasis on human emancipation.

Third, we could expect practitioners committed to praxis to be exploring their practice with their peers. They would be able to say how their actions with respect to particular interventions reflected their ideas about what makes for the good, and to say what theories were involved.

## 6 Curriculum as Context

Curriculum is a social enterprise. Many educationalists believe that curriculum, as practice, cannot be understood adequately or changed substantially without attention to its setting or context.

Curriculum is contextually shaped. Of special significance here are examinations and the social relationships of the school - the nature of the teacher-student relationship, the organization of classes, tracking, and so on. These elements are sometimes known as the **hidden curriculum**.

The learning associated with the "hidden curriculum" is most often treated in a negative way. It is learning that is smuggled in and serves the interests of the status quo. The emphasis on regimentation, on time management, and on tracking are sometimes seen as preparing young people for the world of capitalist production. What we do need to recognize is that such "hidden" learning is not all negative and can be potentially liberating.

By paying attention to the social context, we learn about how important the spaces between lessons really is; we can begin to get a better grasp of the impact of structural and socio-cultural process on teachers and students. Many problems in schools are due to the inability of teachers or school leaders to see the powerful factors behind learning. Economics, social structure, family dynamics, power struggles, and the rest contribute to the learning process.

## 7 Assignment 4: Reflecting Upon Curriculum

Assignment 4: Reflecting Upon Curriculum<sup>1</sup>

### HOW TO GET TO ASSIGNMENT 4:

#### One Way

To do this assignment, click on the link in color at the top of the page. When it appears, press "Save" and name the file so that you can work on this assignment "off-line." You can type right on the assignment template. Be sure to save your assignment on a disk or on your computer hard drive.

#### Another Way

You can also copy the text below, and save it to your disk or computer.

**GOAL:** To reflect on Curriculum as Body of Knowledge/Product, as Process, as Praxis, as Context through the use of a tool known as "Focused Freewriting."

**GIVE:** Feedback to others on their assignments at the **TWB Learning Cafe**.

### Assignment 4: Reflecting Upon Curriculum

We have examined 4 ways of approaching curriculum theory and practice:

- Curriculum as a Body of Knowledge/Product
- Curriculum as Process
- Curriculum as Praxis
- Curriculum as Context

1. Find a sentence or phrase within any of the previous few pages that captures your attention. Re-type that sentence or phrase; put it in quotation marks; and tell which section it came from: Curriculum as Body of Knowledge/Product, as Process, as Praxis, as Context. Now, use that sentence or phrase as a trigger to do a "Focused Freewrite" 2 - 3 paragraphs in length.

<sup>1</sup><http://cnx.org/content/m13293/latest/file:C2A4j.doc>

NOTE: A Focused Freewrite is when you use a phrase or sentence from something you've read as a trigger for free-form writing - that is, you write any thoughts, questions, stories that come to mind as it relates to this phrase or sentence. Focused Freewrites may end up 2 - 3 paragraphs in length, and sometimes you'll stick to the trigger topic and sometimes your mind will wander into seemingly unrelated places. Give yourself permission to move between "wandering" and coming back to writing about the topic.

#### **HOW TO GET TO THE NEXT MODULE:**

Usually, you just click "Next" to go to the next page. When you finish a section, however, (as you're about to do when you finish reading these two paragraphs), you need to click on the "Outline" button, which is on the bottom, right-hand side of the page. Look underneath the blue bar and click on the word "Outline."

When you click on "Outline," a screen will come up that will show you the outline for Course 2. Look for the next section to read and click on the first topic in that next section. For example, when you get to the outline now, look under the next section called "Thinking About Thinking" and look for the first topic in black lettering called "Questioning for Learning." Click on "Questioning for Learning."