

What Is Curriculum?

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Originally published in *Curriculum Inquiry*, volume 8, number 1 (1978): 66–72. Reprinted with permission from Blackwell Publishers.

(<http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/asp/journal.asp?ref=0362-6784>).

In all human societies, children are initiated into particular modes of making sense of their experience and the world about them, and also into a set of norms, knowledge, and skills which the society requires for its continuance. In most societies most of the time, this “curriculum” of initiation is not questioned; frequently it is enshrined in myths, rituals, and immemorial practices, which have absolute authority. One symptom—or perhaps condition—of pluralism is the conflict and argument about what this curriculum of initiation should contain. Today, however, the conflicts and arguments are even more profound and undermine rational discussion of what the curriculum should contain. Much discussion in the professional field of curriculum, at present, focuses on the basic question of what curriculum is, and this suggests severe disorientation.

At a superficial level, confusion about what curriculum is, and thus what people concerned with it should do, involves argument about whether curriculum subsumes instruction—and thus whether a student of curriculum

should also be a student of instructional methods—or whether curriculum involves all learning experiences, or refers simply to a blueprint for achieving restricted objectives in a school setting, or includes the statement of objectives as well, or also the evaluation of their achievement, and so on. The field seems to have no clear logical boundaries. Most accounts that try to make sense of the current state of the professional field of curriculum study describe a set of more or less distinct activities carried on in its name and then argue for a preference, or suggest a compromise or further alternative. Those who try to make sense of the present confusion by reference to the past, rarely go back beyond the emergence of the curriculum field as a profession in North America in this century.

In this brief essay, I want to take a somewhat longer perspective to see whether even a very general sketch of some relevant influences might not provide a clear picture of the present situation and offer some guidance for the future. It will be useful to begin with a brief look at the history of the word “curriculum,” touching down almost randomly through the centuries to see what changes there have been in its meaning.

It is, of course, a Latin word carried directly over into English. Its first Latin meaning was “a running,” “a race,” “a course,” with secondary meanings of a “race-course,” “a career.” By picking out just two of Cicero’s uses of the word, we can get a sense of the direction in which it has developed. Defending Rabirius, he tossed off the neat epigram: “*Exiguum nobis vitae curriculum natura circumscipit, immensum gloriae*” [Nature has confined our lives within a short space, but that for our glory is infinite] (Pro Rabirio 10.30). “Curriculum” is used here to refer to the temporal space in which we live; to the confines within which things may happen; to the container, as opposed to the contents. Later in his life, Cicero described his current work—he is on the seventh volume of his *Antiquities*, is collecting further historical data, revising speeches for publication, and studying law and Greek literature—“*Hae sunt exercitationes ingenii, haec curricula mentis*” These are the spurs of my intellect, the course of my mind runs on] (*De Senectute* 11.38). “Curriculum” here refers, however slightly, to the things he is studying, the content. This metaphorical extension, firstly from the race-course and running to intellectual pursuits, and then from reference to the temporal constraints within which things happen to reference to the things that happen within the constraints, prefigures the general movement of the term through the ancient and modern world. The kind of questions one might ask about a race-course—How long is it? What obstacles are there?—extend easily to the kind of questions one might ask about an intellectual curriculum—How long is it? What kinds of things does it contain?

These remained the important curriculum questions throughout the medieval world. The questions for the designers of curricula may be for-

mulated as “What should the curriculum contain?” and, following the answers to that question, “What is the best way to organize these contents?” Questions of method and instruction were taken largely as given. Lacking our ready supply of printed sources of knowledge, the most obvious source about a subject was a person who was already a master of it. The master told the novices about the subject, in lecture and argument.

Through the early modern period in England, we see little change in the use of the word. It apparently did not find its way into the vernacular until the nineteenth century. In 1643 the Munimenta of Glasgow University refer to the “*curriculum quinquae annorum*” [curriculum of five years], maintaining the ancient Latin ambiguity, in our terms, between container and contained; that is, reference is made to the contents of the curriculum in terms of its temporal constraints. The questions curriculum designers asked changed little during this period, even though the old questions gave rise to violent and polemical debates. Though the common seventeenth century opinion assumed that “all the Faculties of the Mind, both active and passive, are mightily heightened and improved by exercise” (Rymer, 1965), there were profound disagreements about what content should be used to exercise the Mind.

Even during this period of violent debate, questions of method were largely ignored, and questions about the organization of content were still considered unimportant. There was little change in this state of affairs over the next century. Boswell, searching around for a topic of discussion one Tuesday morning, asked Dr. Johnson what was the best thing to teach children first. Johnson replied: “There is no matter what you teach them first, any more than what leg you shall put in your breeches first. Sir, you may stand disputing which is best to put in first, but in the meantime your backside is bare. Sir, while you stand considering which of two things you should teach your child first, another boy has learnt ‘em both” (Pottle, 1950, p. 323)

When brought into the English vernacular, apparently following the German lead, “curriculum” had still some way to go along the metaphorical extension from indicating the container—the period of study—to indicating the contained—the course content. In 1824, John Russell noted after his travels: “When the [German] student finishes his curriculum, [he] leaves the university” (p. 134). In a similar sense, item 39 of Glasgow University’s calendar for 1829 states: “The Curriculum of students who mean to take a degree in surgery [is] to be three years.” By the end of the nineteenth century the word has changed very rapidly, and typical uses have lost any lingering sense of the “container,” or temporal constraints, and mean simply the content. Thus, Matthew Arnold might write in *Friendship’s Garland* of “the grand, old, fortifying classical curriculum.”

The gradual, and relatively small, metaphorical shift in the meaning of “curriculum” over two millenia suggests stability and clarity. To deal with

curriculum issues was to address the question of *what* should be taught. What has happened to disrupt this stability? Why the sudden confusion? I think we can best trace its source to the development in influence over the last two centuries of a second curriculum question: *How* should things be taught?

I will indicate briefly two examples of the early appearance of methodology questions becoming important in curriculum. The first is practical and the second more general and theoretical.

During the middle and latter part of the eighteenth century, France—like Russia a century later—combined the most advanced intellectual and social activity with a rigid and primitive political structure. One practical expression of advanced intellectual and social ideas was the school for deaf-mutes founded in Paris under the influence of Pinel. Pinel believed that deaf-mutes could be trained to communicate and become functioning members of society. He believed, too, that the insane could be cured and should be treated as patients, not kept as more or less entertaining inmates of a human zoo. Because of the nature of his subjects and task, the most important curriculum question for Pinel was not what should be taught, but how could he teach—what methods and procedures were best for educating his charges? The question of content was more or less taken as given.

The physician appointed to the new institute for deaf-mutes was the young Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard. Shortly after he began work at the institute, Itard read about the capture of a wild boy in the woods of Aveyron.

The child had apparently survived alone in the woods from his early years, could neither speak nor understand language, and seemed entirely savage. Itard arranged for the boy to be brought to the institute, and later to his own home, where he worked to civilize and educate him. The results of Itard's first six or seven years' work with the boy are contained in two reports which he wrote for the Minister of the Interior.¹ The reports attest to Itard's ingenuity in devising methods to teach the boy basic perceptions and skills. Again, his first curriculum question was *how*—*what* was taken as more or less given.

One of Itard's pupils was Edward Seguin, who formalized many of Itard's methods in developing a program for the education of the mentally handicapped. Seguin's more general success than that of either Pinel or Itard earned him the title, "Apostle of the Idiot." Seguin in turn had a profound influence on Maria Montessori, whose early work was with mentally handicapped children. The story of Montessori's adaptation of these methods for use in educating children of normal intelligence and the enormous influence of her work is familiar enough so as not to need recapitulating here.

The point of this brief overview is to indicate how concern with methodology in education moved, slowly at first and then with accumulating speed, from an interest confined to those dealing with extreme cases to the main-

stream of normal schooling. One expression of the second broad influence that stimulated and supported this move may be found in the writings of Rousseau.

The first chapter of *Du Contrat Social* opens with the words: "L'homme est ne libre, et partout il est dans les fers" [Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains]. Earlier than Itard, and no doubt profoundly influencing him, Rousseau expressed a new kind of optimistic view of man and man's potential. He claimed that people are basically good, and if they do not seem so most of the time, it is because of the inequities society's institutions impose on them. It is hard now to appreciate the amazing power of this idea and the romantic flood that gave it impetus through the nineteenth century.

To simplify dramatically: the belief that children are naturally good, and will naturally incline to the good if not prevented by social and institutional constraints, leads one to believe that educational methods which allow the freedom to attain this goodness will by definition be beneficial. Thus, methods and procedures became important focuses of attention for educators. Furthermore, if children will naturally choose the good given freedom of choice, then children's own interests should be allowed to decide at least some part of *what* their curriculum should contain. That is, the question of *what* became less crucial for the curriculum designer. These implications, of course, were not felt in practice overnight, but we may trace their accumulating force through the nineteenth and early twentieth century. One of their apostles in America, of course, was John Dewey. His criticisms of Montessori in *Democracy and Education* are about her rigidity in specifying activities for children and not trusting the children's ability to learn from their own "experience." The story of Dewey's caveats and qualifications being ignored in the romantic onrush of his "progressive" followers is, again, too familiar to need retelling here.

One strand of this development needs picking up and emphasizing. The emphasis on the question *how*, as distinct from *what*, led to focusing on the individual learner as an important variable. Thus individual differences, in styles of learning, ability to learn, developmental stages, interests, socioeconomic background, and so on, had to be taken into account before one could begin to specify *what* the curriculum should contain. That is, curriculum decisions in the traditional sense required dealing initially with the range of data provided by psychological and sociological inquiries.

During this century, then, we may see the confluence of trends that have created considerable difficulties in dealing with curriculum. (Needless to say, the trends whose development are crudely sketched above have won ground only against persisting opposition from traditionalists who support the primacy of the question, *what*.)

One difficulty has developed as a result of the unusual concurrence of the professionalizing of the field of curriculum study and the remarkably rapid

spread of that field across almost the full range of educational concerns. Typically, a field becomes professionalized as it becomes distinct and restricted. The traditional curriculum question about *what* should be taught can no longer stand as a distinct question in the face of discoveries about individual differences. Questions of method are unquestionably relevant to curriculum decisions. The difficulty in admitting the question, how, into curriculum matters is that there becomes little of educational relevance that can be excluded from the curriculum field. This means that one can do almost anything in education and claim plausibly to be working in “curriculum.”

While the significance of methodological questions increased, a further influence was helping to undermine the centrality of questions about content. We have seen during this century the stumbling, (at least), and in many quarters the destruction of bourgeois confidence and optimism that was embodied in the nineteenth century revolutions—technological, aesthetic, intellectual, and political—that have affected the way people nearly everywhere on earth now live and think. We have seen what may be called a general failure of nerve, of vision, and of direction. To know *what* the curriculum should contain requires a sense of what the contents are for. If one lacks a clear sense of the purpose of education, then one is deprived of an essential means of specifying what the curriculum should contain. More commonly now, this problem is stated in terms of the accumulating pace of change, making decisions about a content-based curriculum meaningless. Who can specify what skills will be needed in the future? This manner of stating the problem *exemplifies* the failure of nerve: it suggests we have no control over the future; we cannot make of it what seems best to us. A typical Victorian would have had contempt for this abnegation of responsibility and opportunity.

The accumulation of the trends indicated above—a romantic view of man, the perception of the educational significance of individual differences, the failure of nerve, and the consequent desire to avoid responsibility for specifying curriculum content—is best exemplified in movements like those that fit under the umbrella title of Open Education. Children’s needs or interests are held largely responsible for the selection of curriculum content. (The popular term “needs” is, of course, systematically ambiguous; it serves, however, to permit people to decide covertly what these needs are without having to take responsibility for their decisions.) Teachers are not seen as responsible for transmitting any particular knowledge; rather they are “facilitators” who may organize learning activities. Students are not to learn specific things so much as *how* to learn. At all points where the question of *what* the curriculum should contain arises, a procedural answer is given.

I mention Open Education because it seems to exemplify the completed transition from questions of content to questions of method. Someone can

spend time researching and promoting Open Education and be considered to be engaged in curriculum work. That is, curriculum professionals may reject any concern with the question of *what* the curriculum should contain, except in so far as their primary concern with *how* the educational process should be organized leads to implications for content.

The problem for curriculum as a distinctive field of inquiry within education that is suggested by this rapid gallop through the centuries is that once opened up to the *how* questions, it loses any comprehensible boundaries. That is, curriculum does not exist as a distinctive field of inquiry within education. Curriculum inquiry is educational inquiry; both properly address the *what* and *how* questions together and deal with all the ramifications of trying to answer, "What should children learn, in what sequence, and by what methods?"

If one considers the writings that characterize the field of curriculum, they can be read either as fitting readily under at least one of the other currently available labels within education—educational psychology, philosophy, sociology, administration, policy studies, etc.—or they are about curriculum as a field of inquiry. There is no literature that exclusively belongs to the field of curriculum except that which offers meta-level comments on the crises of, the possibility of, the appropriate activities of, the curriculum field.

This may appear a damning conclusion—that distinctively "curriculum" literature is not about the curriculum, but is navel-gazing rumination on the status of the field of curriculum. But there is another way of interpreting this conclusion, one which may help explain why curriculum as a field of inquiry seems to have been in crisis since its professionalization. There is a common view in which education is seen as an area divided among overlapping but generally distinctive sub-areas of inquiry, such as educational psychology, sociology, philosophy, curriculum, policy studies, and so on. This view is reflected in the divisions within typical schools and colleges of education.

But if "Curriculum" is coterminous with "Education," this model is wholly inappropriate, and any attempt to locate the proper area for curriculum inquiry within education is bound to produce confusion. Rather, one may characterize curriculum as a field populated by those who profess not to draw their expertise about education from some noneducational discipline.

The stronger claim may be to see "curriculum" as the field which implicitly rejects the appropriateness of importing into education methodological tools devised to inquire into different phenomena—whether psychological, philosophical, sociological, etc. These tools might provide their users with a greater sense of security and methodological rigor, but these are bought at the cost of any *educational* value of their use of the tools within education.

To use, for economy's sake, the popular sense of Kuhn's terms, we may say that working with a paradigm drawn from a particular field of inquiry

can only produce knowledge of interest to that field. Educational psychology, for example, has produced much knowledge of psychological interest but little of value for education. Education, and so curriculum, may be characterized as “pre-paradigmatic.” *Of necessity*, inquiry in these fields will lack the methodological security and rigor of inquiry in such relatively secure fields as psychology or sociology. Common sense can offer much more to education and curriculum than any rigorous methodology.²

What is curriculum? Curriculum is the study of any and all educational phenomena. It may draw on any external discipline for methodological help but does not allow the methodology to determine inquiry. *Of necessity*, it will be methodologically looser and less secure than disciplines with developed “paradigms,” but this is a condition of studying education at this stage and producing knowledge that may have educational value.

A further conclusion for the practice of curriculum inquiry is that focus on either *how* or *what* at the expense of the other is improper. The present fashion that elevates *how* questions leads to disproportion and undermines good sense in talking about education. While we ponder *how* questions, another child has learned two things where our children have learned none, and our educational backside remains bare. Proportion and good sense demand that we turn our attention increasingly to *what* questions and present strong arguments for or against specific curriculum content. We have to summon the nerve to believe that we can make the future what we want and better prepare children to deal with it.

Notes

1. Available now as Itard (1962). The reports have been used faithfully in the making of Truffaut’s moving film *The Wild Child*. See also Malson and Itard (1972) and Lane (1977).
2. For an elaboration of this argument see my book *Educational Development* (1979).

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