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Curriculum Theory Is Many Things to Many People

My first feeling when Gail McCutcheon asked me for my views on curriculum theory was anger, hostility. This surprised me. I did not see any reason for anger. I write curriculum theory myself, I suppose; certainly others regard what I write as theoretical. I have no ideological bias against theory in the sciences, the social sciences, or any other discipline. Yet undeniably thoughts of curriculum theory were accompanied by feelings of anger.

As I reflected on the subject over the months when this paper was in preparation I began to realize that every time a viewpoint on curriculum theory entered my thoughts, images also entered of angry opposition from those who advocated other points of view. It began to dawn on me how pervasive was contention on the subject of curriculum theory. I thought of all those sessions at AERA and ASCD in which 'contending views' were debated, of all the books and articles on 'conflicting conceptions', of all the accusations and rejections directed at the Tyler rationale, at objectives, at the open classroom, at technology, at rationality, and so on and on. Talk of curriculum theory is associated in my mind with all this aggression and hostility! I may be unique in this respect, but I doubt it. I suspect this association would be hard to avoid for anyone who has followed the field in the past decade.

As a result of these reflections, I changed my strategy for writing this paper. Instead of searching inside myself for my own unarticulated opinions, I decided to look again at the curriculum theories I most admired and respected and in this way to discover the source of contentiousness. Perhaps, in the process, I would also discover my own views. What follows is a report of my little inquiry and, based upon the results, recommendations for better treatment of theory within curriculum in the future.

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Four Traditional Types of Curriculum Theory

The body of literature that identifies itself as curriculum theory or is so obviously like self-confessed curriculum theory as to be clearly of the same genre is not overwhelmingly large. The first mention of the two terms *curriculum* and *theory* in the same phrase that I encountered was in Boyd Bode's *Modern Educational Theories* (1927); he titles a section "Theories of Curriculum Construction." I did not find the phrase in Bobbitt, Charters, or Dewey. It does not appear in Caswell and Campbell's monumental textbook (1935) nor in the accompanying book of readings. Ralph Tyler and Virgil Herrick organized a conference in 1947 with the theme "Toward Improved Curriculum Theory." In the introduction to the published version of the papers Herrick reports that all assembled agreed that curriculum theory had shown lamentably little progress in the preceding twenty-five years.

The recent spate of self-confessed curriculum theory, since about 1960, has as antecedents, therefore, primarily a few classic documents later identified as curriculum theory. These amount to perhaps fifty books and perhaps twice as many articles. I used this body of work to define the boundaries of my initial survey of curriculum theory. Then, I supplemented this with other writing that seemed to me quite clearly to have the same purposes and form whether or not the authors had adopted the label curriculum theory.

I found I could distinguish in this body of work four types of curriculum theories. One type *rationalizes curriculum programs.* An early example of this type of theory is the plan W. T. Harris put forward after the Civil War. Historian Lawrence Cremin characterizes Harris as "the leading figure of (the) postwar generation of schoolmen" (1971, p. 207). As superintendent of the St. Louis school system, Harris proposed and implemented a plan that called for systematic instruction based upon textbooks which would ensure coverage of all the accumulated wisdom of mankind, both that having to do with nature and with man. Teachers would conduct recitations to ensure that students mastered the material. Student performance would also be monitored by system-wide written examinations which would objectively grade and classify students as they progressed through the system. Cremin comments that Harris's plan was "unique in its time. . . . (for its) comprehensiveness, detail, and theoretical coherence" (p. 210). If the plan sounds familiar, it may be because Harris's plan has been adopted as the prevailing pattern of schooling, displacing the oral pattern of instruction and recitation by each individual teacher without outside examinations and with no textbook in the modern sense that Harris introduced.

This first type of curriculum theory proposes content, aims, and approaches to education—in short, it proposes a program. It describes the program in detail and justifies it by giving reasons why it would be good and should be adopted.

Curriculum theory as program rationalization is one of the oldest and most honored senses of the term. With hindsight, we can identify Plato's *Republic*, the part of it that pertains to education, as this type of curriculum theory. The writings of the sophists, of the traditional luminaries of the Western educational tradition—Bacon, Erasmus, Locke, Pestalozzi, Herbart, Herbert Spencer, and so on—insofar as they address curriculum questions do so in this way. Among recent writers, prominent clear examples of this type of curriculum theory include Philip Phenix, whose *Realms of Meaning* makes a case for a curriculum based upon the six modern disciplines of academic knowledge; Benjamin Bloom, whose mastery learning program aspires to bring all students to levels of academic achievement otherwise attainable only by the most gifted students; Jerome Bruner, whose ideas about the structure of knowledge and the importance of discovery in learning were so influential in the post-Sputnik reforms of science education; and Paolo Freire, whose program of literacy training for peasants is based upon a curriculum theory that emphasizes the importance of dialogue and the development of critical consciousness. These are but a few prominent instances selected mainly for notoriety and to illustrate the variety of work within this type.

A second type of curriculum theory *rationalizes procedures* for curriculum construction or curriculum determination, rather than rationalizing the program itself. The first clear example of this type that I encountered was Franklin Bobbitt's *The Curriculum* (1918), followed in 1924 by *How to Make a Curriculum,* a title that might well stand as a label for the entire tradition. Bobbitt drew from scientific management (popularly called time-and-motion study) the idea that an ideal curriculum could be determined by studying the best performances of the most educated people and adopting these as standards for all people. This was exactly the procedure followed in the rationalization of occupations. If bricklaying were under study, for example, the bricklayer with the highest output of good quality work would be identified on the basis of records and observations of performance. He would then be studied in minute detail to discover how he accomplished his feats, and other workers would be trained to follow his method.

Since Bobbitt, a great many curriculum writers have developed step-by-step procedures for every aspect of curriculum planning, development, and evaluation. The most influential by far of these writers is Ralph Tyler, whose rationale poses the four now-classic questions he urges all curriculum developers to raise as a means of building curriculum programs:

- What purposes should the school seek to attain?
- How can learning experiences be selected to help attain these?
- How can learning experiences be organized for effective instruction?
- How can learning experiences be evaluated?

More detailed and specific step-by-step procedures have become prominent in certain circles within the curriculum field, notably those theorists interested in applying science and technology to curriculum work.

A third type of curriculum theory *conceptualizes curricular phenomena.* This type is more removed from the immediate task of curriculum making. It sets out to advise those who directly address curriculum problems on helpful ways of thinking about the work. John Dewey's most influential writing on the curriculum takes this form. For exam-

ple, in his essay, "The Child and the Curriculum" (1902), he sets out to resolve the apparently opposing curricular demands of the child's nature and the accumulated wisdom of the culture. Children, ignorant of the culture and what it offers, may ignore or despise material they will later wish they had learned. The culture, oblivious to the needs and characteristics of the individual child, may be imposed upon the child in an arbitrary, authoritarian, and counterproductive way. Dewey, characteristically, treats these competing considerations as needing to be peacefully reconciled. From the culture we curriculum planners gain an inventory of what is available to be taught. From the child we learn when, how, and where to attempt to teach which particular items from this inventory if we are to be most effective from the viewpoint of both the child and the culture. The essay contains no specific recommendations for either program or procedure. Rather, it presents a way of thinking about some matters likely to be important to anyone building a program.

A fourth type of curriculum theory, closely related to the third but importantly more scholarly, attempts to *explain curricular phenomena.* The dominant concern of the first three types of theory is to improve the curriculum. The third type begins to distance itself from this aim in favor of seeking increased understanding. The fourth type frankly pursues understanding, leaving the application of the ideas to practice for others.

The most common variant of this type seeks explanations for curriculum change. What accounts for the transformation of the school brought about in the progressive era in the U.S.? How do we explain curricular fads and reform movements? What factors in the society influence curriculum change? Other variants seek to explain achievement test score differences between different populations receiving different programs. The concern is always to create scholarly or scientific accounts which relate the curriculum to other things, either as explicans or explicandum, as dependent variable or as independent variable. The theorist of this type has no program to rationalize, no procedure to put forward, and seeks to go beyond mere conceptualization. Ong (1971) has developed some fascinating explanations of the disappearance of rhetoric as a school subject in the eighteenth century. Since the renaissance, rhetoric had been the dominant school subject. It declined, says Ong, because it was essentially oriented to the demands of an oral culture, one in which those in power argued face-to-face and therefore had need for the skills rhetoric supported. With the invention and spread of print, written expression became much more important, and many of the demands formerly made upon speakers to remember verbatim, to organize thoughts on the spur of the moment, were no longer essential. More generally, Ong maintains that the content of schooling interacts with the forms of expression dominant in the culture. Ong does not seek to revive rhetoric nor to make curriculum changes lead cultural changes, but merely to comprehend the relationships involved.

Observations on the Salient Features of Curriculum Theories

What are we to make of these different types of curriculum theories? First, we must acknowledge that there are important, fundamental differences among theories, even among the classics. When we talk of curriculum theory, we should use the plural. We must think of a family of theories with different purposes and forms bearing on the same problems. This diversity is not likely ever to vanish because each type of theory takes its own vantage point, each of these vantage points has validity and importance for some situations, and each appeals to some consumers. We must not be deluded into a search for a single type to which all theories should conform. How much useless wrangling could have been avoided by recognition of this seemingly obvious fact! Think of all the energy wasted arguing that scientific theory is the model for curriculum theory, or that literary or artistic criticism is the proper form. Theory takes many legitimate forms in curriculum. Even the most honored and distinguished examples exhibit irreducible and substantial differences in form, content, and purpose.

A second observation is that these different types of theories are alike in one important respect. They are theories *of* practice. They attempt to rationalize practice, to conceptualize it, to explain it, but all deal with practice, rather than with some purely natural phenomenon of universal scope, such as the sciences, natural and social, deal with. Language might reasonably be the object of scientific study in the pure sense; practices in teaching language might be objects of study for the purpose of improving language teaching and learning. Learning itself is a reasonable object of scientific study, but the methods for facilitating learning are a different matter. Curriculum theories are like theories in law, or business, or journalism, or social work, criminal justice, or city planning, not like theories of sociology, psychology, physics, chemistry, biology.

A third observation: curriculum theories rely upon a variety of working assumptions and presuppositions. Some are built for practical use in realistic school situations; some are built for an abstract ideal situation that may not exist anywhere. Some are optimistic about such matters as the availability of funds, the cooperativeness of teachers, and the support of community leaders while other theories are built on the assumption that whatever can go wrong will go wrong. Some theories accept the society as it is given, others are designed for a new and better society to come. So long as difference of judgment continues among people about the world and how we should treat it, there will be need for theories built upon different assumptions.

Theories draw from different disciplines. Philosophy appears to be the most popular source for help with curriculum theories. Psychology is of particular use when considering the student as a factor in curriculum theory. Sociology and anthropology help curriculum theorists deal with the society in their thinking. Again, this diversity would appear to be an asset.

Curriculum theories seem to treat value questions in one of two ways. Either the theorist builds the theory on values espoused by some and rejected by others, or else the theorist seeks to build on values so widely shared as to constitute a virtual consensus. Since no values are universally held, a theorist can only approach this ideal. But the distinction between one who actively espouses controversial values as a partisan and one who tries to minimize and avoid controversy as much as possible remains an important distinction. Both types of theories can be found. Both would seem to have their place.

My final observation is that theories exhibit a wide variety of formal features. Some are worked out in great detail, some only sketched. Some are presented as formal systems rivaling Euclid's geometry, while others are in the language of a newspaper or novel. Some are tightly focused on one specific issue, while others range over dozens of related issues.

Concluding Thoughts

We *must* learn to cherish variety in curriculum theory, to nurture it, to celebrate it, to cultivate it.

The most important role of theory in curriculum is probably to help us see things in a different light, to interpret things in a way we wouldn't otherwise have dreamed existed. Sir Geoffry Vickers speaks of this as the *appreciative* role of theory. Even scientific theory of inanimate phenomena helps us appreciate our world in ways we could never have done before; one who knows the stars are billions and billions of miles away and as large as the sun sees them differently than before. But in theories that deal with human affairs, how we appreciate our situation makes an enormous difference in our actions and in our fate. As we suspected, theory is, therefore, very important, even if it is not verifiable in the same sense as some advocates of scientific theory as models would insist.

Curriculum theories are verified in substantial part by careful, systematic application to cases. If a theory cannot be applied to important cases, it is not adequate. If, when applied, theory yields unsatisfactory results, theory is not adequate. Obviously, for these tests to work, theory must be applied correctly, for there are wrong ways of applying a perfectly good theory. In my opinion, we would be well advised in curriculum to devote much attention to the careful, critical application of theories to important cases. If we were then to document the actual occurrences in these cases, we would have a test nearly as rigorous as the pure sciences. If one-quarter of the energy that currently goes into creating theory were devoted to careful, critical application of theory, I believe we would all be better off.

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