

Curriculum

Construction and Critique

MASTER CLASSES IN EDUCATION SERIES



Alistair Ross

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Curriculum

Construction and Critique

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Curriculum: Construction and Critique

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Series Editors' Preface

It has become a feature of our times that an initial qualification is no longer seen to be adequate for lifelong work within a profession and programmes of professional development are needed. Nowhere is the need more clear than with respect to education, where changes in the national schooling and assessment system, combined with changes in the social and economic context, have transformed our professional lives.

The series, *Master Classes in Education*, is intended to address the needs of professional development, essentially at the level of taught masters degree. Although aimed primarily at teachers and lecturers, it is envisaged that the books will appeal to a wider readership, including those involved in professional educational management, health promotion and youth work. For some, the texts will serve to update their knowledge. For others, they may facilitate career reorientation by introducing, in an accessible form, new areas of expertise or knowledge.

The books are overtly pedagogical, providing a clear track through the topic by means of which it is possible to gain a sound grasp of the whole field. Each book familiarizes the reader with the vocabulary and the terms of discussion, and provides a concise overview of recent research and current debates in the area. While it is obviously not possible to deal with every aspect in depth, a professional who has read the book should be able to feel confident that they have covered the major areas of content, and discussed the different issues at stake. The books are also intended to convey a sense of the future direction of the subject and its points of growth or change.

In each subject area the reader is introduced to different perspectives and to a variety of readings of the subject under consideration. Some of the readings may conflict, others may be compatible but distant. Different perspectives may well give rise to different lexicons and different bibliographies, and the reader is always alerted to these differences. The variety of frameworks within which each topic can be construed is then a further source of reflective analysis.

The authors in this series have been carefully selected. Each person is an experienced professional who has worked in that area of education as a practitioner and also addressed the subject as a researcher and theoretician. Drawing upon both pragmatic and theoretical aspects of their experience, they are able to take a reflective view while preserving a sense of what occurs, and what is possible, at the level of practice.

Curriculum: Construction and Critique

The notion of curriculum seems obvious—‘what is taught’ as opposed to ‘how you teach it’. However, a few minutes in a classroom shows that there is no easy and obvious distinction between the two. Is it possible to separate what we teach from how we teach it? If ‘problem-solving’ is an item on a curriculum list, this precludes certain types of didactic teaching. If ‘tables facts’ have to be taught and will be assessed, discovery learning may go out of the window. What guarantees a particular subject a place in the curriculum? What makes a curriculum subject a ‘subject’ at all? How are its boundaries sustained and a necessary homogeneity assured? And then there are the political questions, with a small and a large ‘p’. Who decides what is included in the curriculum and what is not? One stage further back, who should decide? Is the curriculum decided on the basis of utility, pragmatics, or educational theory?

Questions surrounding the curriculum touch on fundamental issues for education. When the chips are down, do we believe that education is a ‘drawing out’ or a ‘putting in’? Are we educating to produce good citizens, creative innovators, competent operators, contented members of society, or none of the above?

When faced with such a complex array of questions and issues, what can we expect in a book on curriculum? Alistair Ross has started with the assumption that the least the reader has a right to expect is that the ground of the argumentation should be laid out in a clear and unambiguous fashion. This enables the reader to appreciate the parameters of the various debates, the ways in which particular arguments are positioned and polarized, and the political alignments that emerge for historical as well as pragmatic reasons. Professor Ross provides a clear overview of curriculum debate. Starting from an historical perspective, he charts specific lines of argument through their various transformations, and their adaptation under different guises in new political circumstances. However, his view is not only that of the interested historian. There is a political dimension to this book, which allows the reader to engage with both the theoretical ideas and the practical positionings that are constantly present in the politics of curriculum construction and critique. The chapter on curriculum and reproduction in particular, should be required reading for every person working, or with an interest, in education; the ideas and debates discussed are central to the endeavour of the educational process at all levels.

Discussing curriculum, we as readers may look for a comprehensive and clear coverage of the complex issues involved, and this is certainly provided in the pages following this preface. However, there is a much harder and more important criterion by which Professor Ross also succeeds, and that is the hallmark of fairness. The classicist, S.J. Tester, when reviewing Coppleston’s *History of Philosophy*, wrote that histories tend to be interesting in inverse proportion to their accuracy! Certainly, it is rare to find an account of a theoretical construct as central and important as curriculum that displays an unswerving faithfulness to the various thinkers and writers who have played a part in the articulation of this concept at the various stages in its development. If such an account exists, it is likely to be only a little less lengthy (and dull) than the proverbial *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. But in his book, Ross has succeeded in presenting us with a

fascinating yet objective (in the post-postmodern sense of the word) narration of the argumentation around the construction of the curriculum.

The book starts with an extended metaphor—that of the curriculum as garden. It finishes with another metaphor—that of ‘Englishness’ as Roast Beef. The book is written in a style that draws heavily on metaphor and simile in order to elaborate and exemplify a series of abstract and difficult concepts. Thus is the reader provided with the opportunity to ‘surround’ some of the more theoretical ideas, coming at them from different sides and in a variety of contexts, until they appear as familiar and comfortable as gardens and roast beef. It is only when we reach the end of the book that we are, like innocent back-packers who have traversed a high mountain pass, aware of the difficulties and dangers in the terrain that we have negotiated and the distance we have travelled.

Can a book on a subject as contentious and disputed as curriculum, provide definitive answers? Not if its author is to remain both honourable and faithful to his task. But it can and should provide readers with a clear outline of the history, the parameters, and the political constraints within which these arguments continue to be waged. It should explain and elaborate the theories underlying some of the argumentation. And finally, it should allow the reader to emerge with a series of questions which are peculiarly his/her own; questions which arise not simply from the debates but rather from the reader’s particular engagement with those debates. As series editors, we are happy to recommend *Curriculum: Construction and Critique* as just such a book.

John Head and Ruth Mертens
Series Editors