Introduction: *What's Worth Teaching?*

by Marion Brady 1989

"Why do we keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl?" "Why does the master have the final word at home?" "Why are the brides chosen for sons, and daughters taught to mend and tend?" In Fiddler On the Roof, Tevya questions why the people of his little village follow certain customs. He then explains: "Tradition." What is done is done because that is the way it has always been done. Period.

Those committed to the general education curriculum offered by most American schools and universities are likely to give explanations of current practice only a little more satisfactory than that provided by Tevya. What we teach is determined primarily by what has been taught. The assumed validity of the content of traditional education stems largely from a powerful assumption: if one knows something, and most other well-educated people know the same thing, then it must be worth knowing and should be taught to the next generation.

There is abundant evidence that the traditional general education curriculum is not doing the job. Ernest Boyer: "The undergraduate curriculum is a disaster area." Harlan Cleveland: "It is a well-know scandal that our whole educational system is geared more to categorizing and analyzing patches of knowledge that to threading them together." Robert Stevens: "We have lost sight of our responsibility for synthesizing learning." Neil Postman: "There is no longer any principle that unifies the school curriculum and furnishes it with meaning." John Goodlad: "What students are asked to relate to in school [is] increasingly artificial, cut off from the human experiences subject matter is supposed to reflect."

Within individual academic disciplines, there is no less criticism. Greg Stefanich and Charles Dedrick: "Mathematics and science education in America's schools is sorely defective." Paul DeHart Hurd: "Biology, chemistry, physics, and earth science . . .no longer exist as they are portrayed in the simple division of school science into subjects." Philip Curtin: "Historians are narrower in their knowledge and understanding than they have ever been."

Perceptive observers are insisting that much that students need to know they are not being taught, and much that students **are** learning is a waste of time and money. The traditional curriculum is tolerated primarily because what is being taught is no longer considered particularly important. What really matters are the symbols--the grades, certificates, degrees, and titles. There is little demand (except by industries interested in the schools doing specialized training for them) that education bear a demonstrable relationship to real problems, situations, and needs.

To the casual observer, it may appear that we educators are aware of our problems and are attempting to deal with them. In the last decade or two, we have tried flexible scheduling, open schools, longer school days, team teaching, computer technology, middle schools, programmed instruction, diagnostic testing, lengthened school terms, ability grouping, and a variety of other educational innovations. What could escape notice, however, is that almost all the activity has been **administrative** in nature. Innovations have altered various aspects of the delivery system, but the intellectual content and organization of that which is delivered has remained basically unchanged since the nineteenth century.

The problems with the curriculum that critics were discussing before the turn of the century are still with us, most of them more serious than ever. Information is growing exponentially, yet we still have no objective criteria to guide our decisions about what to teach. Learning theorists insist that teaching for understanding requires the building of conceptual structures, but we hardly know what they mean. We know that certain very powerful ideas should be introduced early and developed year after year, but we make almost no provision for doing so. Great thinkers have said for centuries that everything is related to everything else, yet we organize instruction so as to send just the opposite message. It takes no more than a moment's thought to verify that almost everything worth knowing is too complex to test, yet we are increasingly gearing instruction to match our crude ability to measure.

Ernest Boyer is right. The general education curriculum is a disaster area.

A long time ago, general education missed the path. Dazzled by the rewards of specialization in industry and other areas of life, it seemed appropriate to adopt a similar approach to the instruction of the young. There is, of course, a place for specialization. The student with mathematical ability ought to be helped to develop that ability to the utmost. The same should be done for the student of history, language, music, or automatic transmissions. But some of this and some of that, no matter how carefully selected, cannot a coherent curriculum make, cannot provide an educational experience that welds language, mathematics, the social sciences, the humanities, and the natural sciences into a mutually supportive, logical, conceptually unified whole.

The problems are fundamental. They cannot be solved with any sort of mandated multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary mix of subjects or courses, cannot be solved by making philosophy or some other discipline the core of the curriculum, cannot be solved by institutional reorganization.

But the problems can be solved. I offer as a basis for solution an approach based on two propositions. The first is the lesson taught by Galileo's and Descartes's contention that knowledge is nothing more nor less than the power to manipulate the world according to the principles inherent in the model used to represent it. The second is summarized by Stephen Jay Gould's observation in *The Panda's Thumb* that "information always reaches us through the filters of culture, hope and expectation."

I will argue that the primary objective of general education is to expand our understanding of reality; that in our attempt to understand reality, our perceptions are structured by our differing native sociocultural systems; that these differing systems must therefore be understood, a task necessitating the use of a conceptual model; and that such a model, if it is comprehensive, will reflect our present level of understanding of the "sociocultural screen" through which we view reality, and reality itself, and will serve as a relatively simple and practical tool for selecting, organizing, integrating, and expanding the content of instruction bearing on reality.

This is not a familiar idea in education. The traditional view is that the curriculum derives from the needs of learners, the problems of societies, the content of the academic disciplines, or some variation or combination of the three. These are all valid sources of curriculum content, and there will be passages in this discussion which are supportive of them. But those who try, on the basis of a sentence here or a paragraph there, to bend the basic propositions herein advanced to make them fit within the bounds of Parker, Counts, Dewey, or other curriculum theorists will

almost certainly find the argument impossible to follow, or will join in the conclusion of one reviewer that what is being said "borders on pure schlock."

It may seem presumptuous to advance a theory of curriculum and make almost no reference to the massive literature on the subject. We tend to assume that new insights come from piling up existing knowledge and gaining a fresh view from the elevation supposedly thus provided. That is not the process that led to my conclusion that a formal model of the concept of culture provides a structure for the curriculum. The idea is not an extension or an elaboration of the work of those considered to be the major thinkers in the field of curriculum design. There seems little reason, therefore, to restate their positions or to argue the relative merit of those positions.

If there is an identifiable "father" of my central thesis, it is David Potter, from whom I took a class when Potter was chairman of American studies at Yale. The idea was not his, but Potter raised the broad questions which led to its eventual development. Carroll Quigley, professor of history at Georgetown University's School for Foreign Service; Robert Redfield, chairman of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago; a year or so of conversation with Alvin Toffler and Michael McDanield discussing a possible joint project under the sponsorship of Prentice-Hall; and Howard Brady, my brother and collaborator on other books and projects, were also major sources. Letters of support in response to an article published in the *Phi Delta Kappan* in October 1966 played a role. The article outlined the basic ideas which are herein presented in greater detail.

Although well over half the book is devoted to a discussion and illustration of the kind of content likely to grow out of a curriculum structured by a formal model of the concept of culture, no attempt will be made to lay out a complete sequence of instruction. Neither will much be said about procedures for implementing new curricula, about the present near impossibility of significant curriculum change, or about prior or alternative efforts to create a more coherent curriculum. Those matters are beyond the scope of this intentionally lean book.

I have but a single purpose: to outline a new theoretical base for the general education curriculum. I want to show that, in general education's pursuit of an understanding of reality, a formal model for the study of the concept of culture is the most powerful tool available. I will maintain that such a model can encompass all knowledge, suggest new disciplines, identify areas of study now neglected, indicate the content most appropriate for general education, suggest relative degrees of content significance, organize content logically, provide students with conceptual structure, integrate every part of the curriculum with every other part, and furnish mechanisms by means of which knowledge can be systematically expanded.

These are, admittedly, extravagant-sounding claims. The centrality of the concept of culture in a curriculum dedicated to expanding an understanding of reality is as yet generally unappreciated and unexplored. I will try to suggest its enormous promise, and give at least a glimpse of the potential power and elegance of a general education curriculum built upon it.