

The Here and Now as Curriculum

Of all the problems of general education, the most difficult seem to be those having to do with the curriculum. We are decades into an information explosion, and we still have no criteria to tell us what new knowledge to teach and what old knowledge to discard to make room for the new. We know that ideas vary enormously in usefulness and power, yet we have not decided which are most significant and deserving of attention. We are charged with helping our students understand a world in which everything is related, and we represent that world using disciplines which have little or no apparent relationships to each other.

That we do not yet know how to select, organize and integrate general knowledge stems, I believe, not from the complexity of the task but from our refusal to approach it from directions other than those suggested by the traditional academic disciplines. The fundamental purpose of education is to help us answer the question, “What is the nature of reality and of human experience?” To assist us, the academic disciplines were devised. Now, however, the disciplines loom larger than the reality they were designed to explore. Means have become ends. We are more comfortable with our textbooks than with the reality the textbooks are supposed to explain; are more at home in our classrooms than in the world outside.

Trying to deal with the curriculum’s inadequacies, we experiment with disciplinary, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary strategies. Even those educators who believe that the needs of individuals or the problems of society should be the focus of general education talk of “bringing the perspectives of the disciplines” to bear on their concerns. Our thinking is so structured by the disciplines that we can hardly imagine alternatives to their use.

But there are alternatives. Forget the disciplines for a moment. There is a place for them in formal education, but in the search for a philosophically and theoretically sound general education curriculum, they have not served us well. Consider instead the merit of the simplest possible approach to the study of reality: the direct study of our perceptions of it.

How do we begin? In the same way those in the Western cultural tradition have sought understanding at least since Copernicus. We identify parts. We note the relationship of the parts to each other and to the whole. We follow the movement of parts and whole to grasp, as best we can, causes, effects, meaning and purpose. And we build mental models reflecting this—outlines, guides, frameworks of words and symbols representing parts and processes, structure and function. There are other ways to seek understanding, but we use the methods we know.

Helping adolescents build mental models encompassing and organizing reality may appear to be a task too formidable to undertake. But each of us already has a conceptual model of reality. The task is merely to move that model into consciousness where it can be thought about, played with, organized and systematized, and alternatives considered.

How well can 10-to15-year-olds handle such complexity? Well enough. Here is one of many possible versions of a core assignment that can lead students to develop a formal conceptual model of reality:

“When we say we understand something (say, a clock) we usually mean that we (a) can identify its pieces, (b) know how the pieces fit together, (c) know how the whole thing works when it’s assembled, (d) know what the thing does or what it’s for.

“Choose some familiar class of thing (bicycles? insects? flowers?) Using reference material, put together an outline for a report designed to help someone unfamiliar with that class of thing understand it.

“Be sure you’ve dealt with a, b, and c above.”

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“Okay. Your school is a ‘thing.’ Other schools are similar things—things which can be studied and understood in the same organized, systematic way as whatever you chose for the above activity.

“Put together an outline for a detailed report designed to help someone unfamiliar with schools to understand them.

“Be sure you’ve dealt with a, b, and c above.”

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What will gradually take shape as the above assignment is pursued is a formal model for the description and analysis of a society. Think of the school as a kind of small country. It has a size and shape that can be described in detail and with mathematical precision. The exact nature and location of its internal features can be noted. The usual geographic distribution of its citizens and other demographic data can be mapped, quantified and represented graphically. The school’s tools, technologies and infrastructure can be identified, described and analyzed. The citizens’ habits and customs can be traced (and the descriptions thereof can put incredible demands both upon students’ powers of observation and their ability to translate those observations into precise language). Formal and informal patterns for social control, for displaying status, for making decisions and for other activity can be traced and analyzed. Shared attitudes and assumptions, those that make it possible for the school to function (always present but almost never verbalized), can be identified and clarified and their possible origins discussed.

When all the pieces are in place, questions can be raised about relationships among them. How, for example, are perceptions of the relative power of various individuals created or reinforced by the physical organization of the school? Of classroom furnishings? What are the bases for status within the school and within classes, and what are the costs and benefits of these bases? What kinds of leadership are exercised? In which situations? How do the citizens’ attitudes and patterns of action change as various instructional tools and techniques are used? How are assumptions about self and others related to ways the school is organized and functions?

Other assignments can explore the dynamics of change: Alternative shapes, sizes, locations and furnishings for the school and for classrooms can be imagined and the possible consequences of each traced. Hypotheses can be generated about the probable and possible consequences of various technologies, of, say, tying together by computer or fax every desk, home, library, school, religious institution, business and social service agency. New tools for transport or for communicating can be invented and their potential impacts on the school’s

physical form, demographics, student patterns of action and perceptions of reality can be considered.

Mind-stretching work like this requires no textbook, no equipment, no larger budget. What is required is a reasonably self-confident teacher and a willingness to experiment. The first such effort might last only a few days, but the teacher who keeps at it will eventually discover that just about every major aspect of human experience manifests itself in some form in the school, where it can be dealt with first hand. It will become apparent that the here-and-now is a textbook far richer, far more powerful, more relevant, real, useful and intellectually stimulating than anything a publisher can produce. (This is not to say that formal instructional materials would not be of great value. Schools could develop their own situation-specific reference materials that succeeding generations of students would find useful.)

That reality itself is appropriate for study is, of course, not a new idea. Eighty years ago, Alfred North Whitehead observed that “the secondhandedness of the learned world is the secret of its mediocrity.” John Dewey had much to say about learning by doing. The whole of the inquiry movement was a recognition of the teaching power of direct experience. Most of us recognize that the really complicated things we know we learned through active involvement.

Thoughtful educators, research and common sense testify to the power of “hands on” experience. Nevertheless, traditionalists will almost certainly find much to criticize in what is being proposed. Some will consider it trivial. How, they will ask, can a focus of study so mundane be justified? Steeped in tradition and textbooks, it will be difficult for many to accept that the present moment is significant, that the here-and-now is, in fact, what life is all about. And the subject matter is real, with all the attendant implications for relevancy and student interest. Finally, to study with thoroughness and precision some small manifestation of reality is not to ignore the wider world. The student who studies immediate experience is creating a comprehensive conceptual structure--a model of reality--that allows events and conditions in the larger, parallel world of work, of neighborhood and of nation to be systematized and thereby better understood.

Still other, probably more determined critics will maintain that what is being advocated lacks balance, that it is weighted toward certain disciplines to the neglect of others. They should note, first, that what I am describing is a general education core, not the whole of the curriculum. Such a core would leave ample time for specialized study of the traditional disciplines. They should also recognize that life itself is not “balanced,” is not equally concerned with the subjects we happen to have chosen to require students to study. The traditional “equal time” curriculum has helped to create a citizenry of specialists who are often unable to see the larger picture, unable to discern the trends of the era, unable to grasp the relationship of their lives or their work to the whole of human experience, unable to explore significant moral and ethical issues their specialties raise, unable to maintain a balance between personal benefit and civic responsibility. We should be seeking balanced people, not an arbitrary, artificial balance of subjects in the curriculum.

A few critics will have no philosophical objections to what I am suggesting for a curriculum—may even find my proposal intriguing—but will be convinced that it cannot work because school hallways, classrooms, cafeterias and playing fields do not provide sufficient depth of experience for continuous intensive and worthwhile study. Those who object on those grounds are not in touch with the complexity of everyday life. They should give thought to the

old saying, “A fish would be the last to discover water.” Every school is filled with endless opportunities for studies in science, mathematics, geography, and every other discipline, at whatever level of complexity is desired.

A conceptual model of reality relates all academic disciplines, identifies vast and important areas of study not now part of the curriculum, and provides criteria for selecting, organizing and integrating the content of general education. Perhaps its greatest value, however, lies in its capacity to create new knowledge. The basic process by means of which knowledge is generated is through the exploration of relationships. A formal conceptual model of reality provides comprehensive banks of concepts which are potentially relatable. It is necessary only to juxtapose two or more concepts and speculate about the nature of their intersection.

Is what I am advocating controversial? Who will argue that we should not study our perceptions of reality? That such models should remain unconscious and unexamined? That studying reality requires no model? That such a model should be random rather than organized and systematized? That a single model is more complicated than the collected, unintegratable models of the various disciplines? One could perhaps argue that the idea, although utterly simple, is too unorthodox to implement. But how much sense does it make to adhere to something that is not working simply because it is familiar?

Broad interest in the content of the curriculum is just now emerging. Loud voices are insisting that the solution to curriculum problems is simply to teach the traditional academic disciplines in disciplined ways. Other voices call for the curriculum to support this or that political agenda, help in the cure of various social ills, or focus on the distinctive needs of individual students. Some think the important curriculum issues have to do with race or sex, with course distribution requirements, with the mix between classical and contemporary or between process and content.

Of all prescriptions for what ails the curriculum, those most appealing in eras of uncertainty are those that push “cultural literacy,” those that demand that the young know what the elders know. It is, of course, essential that every society have a language of allusion, else it cannot function. To stop at that however, to base a curriculum merely on what the “educated” know, is suicidal. The static nature of such a curriculum would make its implementation relatively easy, but while we settled back to enjoy comfortable communication with our clones, the sociocultural systems within which we must function would become increasingly mysterious, propelled by the dynamics of social change. Eventually, our good conversation would become quaint. Nothing more.

It is not what the educated know, but what the educated ought to know that should structure the curriculum. As any good conceptual model of reality will demonstrate, there is a great deal of difference.

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[Note: If I were writing this today, I’d put more emphasis on the ease of the transition from its “micro-scale” phenomena to the study of any reality, large or small, at any point in time or space. MB]