

Curriculum Development:
Emerging Trends

A Research Paper
Written by
Khaled Sellami, Ph.D.

Abstract:

For many decades during the 20th century, the majority of educational institutions across the United States had imposed prescribed curricula on their *curriculum users* (teachers, administrators, and students). The users had very little input or feedback in the process. Because of their non-involvement, teachers, in particular, had to implement and follow largely contradicting directives with hardly any conviction. This situation led to an obvious disconnect between curriculum and instruction. Several schools of thought made great strides to deal with this issue, notably, the progressivist-experimentalist thinkers, who called for making teachers not only active participants but also most accountable in the process of curriculum development, from conceptualization, to design, to implementation, to evaluation, to finally, revision and improvement.

In what follows, I will allude to the place of the teacher within two major components of curriculum development; curriculum design and instructional design. I will explain the theoretical foundations of curriculum development in my workplace. I will also suggest a few practical implications for teachers to integrate approaches for developing curriculum and managing instruction for *all* learners. I will then refer to current issues and future trends in the fields of education and curriculum and analyze strategies for improvement in both fields. Finally, I will conclude with my own thoughts and aspirations for fundamental, not superficial, change.

Introduction:

Education and curriculum are a reflection of life and society; constantly changing at increasingly faster paces, with the explosion of information and technological advancements, the rapidly diversified social, economic, political, and cultural makeup, and a host of unresolved, more entangled, *emerging* issues and conflicts, locally, nationally, and globally. More demands have been put on further improving, or rather optimizing, student skills and abilities, curriculum quality and vitality, and educational accountability and reinvention.

Over the second half of the 20th century, several curriculum reform and innovation movements took place. They ranged from ultra conservative to extremely liberal and were rather trendy and short-lived. Almost all of those attempts either left insignificant impressions or failed altogether because of a myriad of reasons. Tanner and Tanner (2007, p. 363) listed ten such reasons behind this *perceived* curriculum failure: (1) the segmental approach to curriculum design; (2) irrelevance of most developed curricula's contents and learning experiences to the social life of the learners; (3) adoption of a singular approach with no variations; (4) researchers' biases; (5) neglect of validated research; (6) avoidance of formative evaluation and field trials; (7) manipulation of experimentation; (8) distortion of the nature of the learner; (9) avoidance of available evidence; and (10) lack of teacher involvement in the development and evaluation of curriculum. Due to the limited scope of this paper, I will only be able to elaborate a little on the first two and the last of these *legitimate* factors.

Curriculum Design:

Ralph Tyler (1949) maintains that a curriculum designer must first determine the school's purpose; identify the educational experiences associated with that purpose; decide on how to organize those experiences, and finally evaluate the learning outcomes. Hilda Taba's (1962)

curriculum model resembles Tyler's except in giving teachers and curriculum users a voice in the process. Seven steps need to be followed: (1) diagnosis of needs; (2) formulation of objectives; (3) selection of content; (4) organization of content; (5) selection of learning experiences; (6) organization of learning activities; and (7) evaluation of learning outcomes.

Selecting the proper experiences is essential to curriculum design. This procedure entails optimizing instructional strategies and educational activities. Instructional strategies include lecture, discussion, demonstration, and learner inquiry. Educational activities correspond to listening to speakers, interacting with computer programs, conducting experiments, taking field trips, viewing films, etc. Other criteria for choosing curriculum experiences (summed up from Ornstein and Hunkins, 2009) are the following: (1) applicability; (2) feasibility; (3) learnability; (4) allowing for developing thinking skills and rational judgment; (5) stimulating students' self-understanding as individuals and as members of society; (6) fostering openness to new experiences and tolerance of diversity; (7) facilitating learning and motivation to continue learning; (8) addressing students' needs; (9) broadening their interests; and (10) promoting students' cognitive, affective, social, physical, moral, and spiritual development.

Instructional Design:

When it comes to developing a robust curriculum, the key factor remains the applicability of the learned knowledge in the social lives of the learners. This practice requires from program designers and implementers to address the need for curriculum articulation and integration, not segmentation and isolation. Education and curriculum must be treated not in terms of end-products but as emergent processes where learners' differences, individualities, and creative talents often lead to various interpretations of contents and learning experiences, and thus diversity, authenticity, and uniqueness.

The expertise of instructional design specialists is undoubtedly essential to curriculum development. These specialists are often experienced and well-trained teachers who are familiar with effective subject content and teaching strategies. The primary participants in a curriculum development team should be a select group of those instructors. Also required in a *balanced* team is the school's principle (or program director) for admin and logistic support, as well as a curriculum expert, for theoretical background support. Indirectly involved in the development process should be coordinators, consultants, master teachers, and of course, student representatives.

Curriculum Development at Work:

The works of Merrill, Kolb, and Bloom influence my workplace's (DLIFLC) Curriculum Development's approach to instructional design (see *dliflc.edu* website for more information). David Merrill's (1994) principles of instruction are: (a) activation of prior experience; (b) demonstration; (c) application of parts and whole in practice; and (d) integration in real-world and field applications. As for David Kolb (1984), his theory of experiential learning posits that knowledge is continuously gained through both personal and environmental experiences where certain abilities are required. Thus, according to Kolb, the learner must: (1) be willing to be actively involved in the experience; (2) be able to reflect on the experience; (3) possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience; and (4) possess decision-making and problem-solving skills to use the new ideas gained from the experience.

Most widely known of educational objectives are the ones stated in Benjamin Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning domains. The cognitive learning skills mentioned by Bloom are taken into account by course developers when creating activities as they appear to correlate with the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) proficiency levels. They are known in the field of

Second Language Acquisition with these acronyms: LOTS (Lower Order Thinking Skills) and HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills). They are thus ordered from low to high: Knowledge (remembering)-Comprehension (understanding)-Application (applying)-Analysis (analyzing)-Synthesis (evaluating)-Evaluation (creating). The active verbs between parentheses are referred to by Pohl (2000) in order to simplify those concepts.

Instructional Implications:

The six-step approach to improving instructional strategies as mentioned in Coyne et al. (2007) works for all subject areas and all learners. *Big ideas* can be applied to any content. *Explicit teaching of strategies* can be quite effective. *Mediated scaffolding* of new ideas is required. Those big ideas can be assimilated and applicable to multiple contexts via a *strategically integrated* curriculum. To adequately understand the new content, teachers must make sure that students possess the required *background knowledge*. *Cumulative, balanced, and extensive review* should be an integral part of the overall curriculum design.

To be inventive and progressive, teachers must pursue continual professional development. To address the needs of their students, they must differentiate instruction and evaluation, avoid standardized, uniform, and predictable approaches and treatments, engage and cooperate with the learners to come up with creative and personalized ideas and solutions to problems and situations. This type of practice requires teachers to acquire adequate knowledge about curriculum development and improvement and to establish and enhance a professional culture via professional interaction and participation for their own professional growth and for the sake of boosting student learning and advancement.

Best practices in teaching are multifaceted. Teachers must vary their ways of instruction in and outside of the classroom to *reach* and *enrich* their students. Based on valid educational

research and evidence from longitudinal observations and data collection, teachers must strive to expand their repertoires of teaching and learning strategies and techniques by employing several approaches, such as student participation, research projects, experimentation, analysis, conceptualization, and so on. There is now a call for “constructive idea-oriented teaching” (Tanner & Tanner, 2007, p. 416), in addition to involving both teachers and students in the planning stages of an integrated, authentic, and emergent curriculum, while teachers, as they implement that curriculum, must be open to adjust and adapt to their students’ needs, using action research as a collaborative activity in the contextual setting of the classroom and school where a lot of significant learning takes place. Finally, to quote the Tanners (2007, p.425), “the process of curriculum improvement must be inclusive.” All those who use or are impacted by a curriculum must be involved in its planning, design, development, implementation, evaluation, and revision.

Current Issues and Future Trends:

One of the most limiting issues that the field of education is currently not doing enough to resolve is perhaps research bias and questionable validity. Educational research is marred with pseudo-empiricism, arbitrariness, and researchers' bias. Under the pretext of obtaining quantifiable data and utilizing *purely scientific* approaches, those researchers often ignore the essence of educational inquiry; valuation or the qualitative conceptual design. Protecting against bias is actually the core of meaningful research. Myrdal (1969) asserts that qualitative and quantitative data are *complementary* as they constitute the mainstays of theory, policy, and practice. Educators need to look for possibilities, opportunities, and practicalities of balanced research findings; not for limitations in testing instruments, research design, sampling, interpretations, and conclusions. Manipulated statistical data, maintains Myrdal, will not reveal the truth for they are seldom objective or factual knowledge.

Other issues that need tackling are curriculum balance and equality in educational opportunity. Those two ideals are what all parents would prefer for their own children. Coleman (1968) affirms that heterogeneous schools and mixed ability classrooms tend to inspire and energize the disadvantaged students much more than the opposite practice in terms of educational attainment. Those *diverse* students are more likely to significantly improve achievement when they socialize with different groups, particularly mainstream, advantaged students and when they are enjoying a sound and inclusive curriculum, as well as enhanced resources, expenditures, and school facilities.

Perhaps the future of the curriculum field resides in the hybrid or holistic approach, or more realistically, in the *correlation design* (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2009) where a logical linkage between related subjects is established, without losing a subject's proper identity and distinctiveness (e.g., the idea of a broad, overarching theme as a unit of organization). To this end, an integrative approach to curriculum design reflects the humanistic and progressivist theories' emphasis on the *whole* person, being a thinker, a feeler, and an actor. In addition to the thinking, feeling, and acting (also termed the intellectual, emotional, and social), there are three other important aspects to be accounted for: the physical, aesthetic, and spiritual. All six elements must be integrated and assimilated within comprehensive content components so that to address the various learners' facets and make learning truly meaningful and purposeful.

Summary and Conclusion:

In this condensed paper, I tried to shed light on the role of the teacher within two major components of curriculum development: curriculum design and instructional design. I described the theoretical bases of curriculum development in my workplace and pointed out practical recommendations for teachers to integrate approaches for developing curriculum and managing

instruction for *all* types of learners. I also referred to select current issues and future trends in the fields of education and curriculum.

There seems to be an urgent need to go back to the future and re-examine the purpose of education. The purpose is to reinstall the ideas advocated by the progressivist-experimentalist thinkers, such as John Dewey (1916); that the essence of education is enlightenment of individuals and citizens, and the creation of a true democratic culture, where rights and responsibilities are understood and practiced by all.

The teacher/educator is the scaffolder, mediator, mentor, and guide of the learning process. The school, as a cultural and human development institution, has an essential mission: assisting students to become strategic and independent learners. Other social, political, economic, and cultural entities should integrate their effort at creating well-balanced and effective individuals. These individuals must contribute to the well being of society at large; must be considerate of other people's needs and opinions; be willing to lead principled, interdependent lives, based on worthy social and universal outlooks in an increasingly intertwined world, where communication and collaboration are essential for progress and growth. This philosophical conception of education would ensure human culture to survive, reinvent itself, and ultimately thrive.

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