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A Practical Approach to Organizing Curriculum

By William Harkins

Each school has its own curriculum story. An important leadership role of the principal is to focus the search for curriculum and curriculum improvement around specific questions. The basic journalistic questions—who, what, where, why, etc.—provide such a focus.

What follows are seven questions about curriculum. The questions are so simple they may seem simplistic. And, since school administrators talk about curriculum all the time, one could argue that administrators need answers, not more questions. After all, principals must respond to formal school board inquiries about how a new curriculum will be implemented; and principals must respond to the less formal curriculum questions of parents about how well the curriculum prepares students for college, for the workplace, for life. So why propose more questions?

The reason is that curriculum means different things to different people. Everyone is an expert, and feelings on curriculum run high. Discussion of curriculum is inevitable, especially with national committees continually offering new

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curriculum reform proposals. What school administrators need to do is organize discussion of curriculum in a way that makes sure people can talk with each other, not at each other. Unless this happens it is not likely that people will work together constructively.

If we think of every school as having its own curriculum story, a story not quite the same as any other school's, then it is the responsibility of the principal to lead the school community in discovering and stating that story. The community then may reaffirm its story or rewrite it.

The seven curriculum questions are the same questions any reporter asks—who, what, when, where, why, and how—plus one additional question. These questions will not produce a simple, common response from members of the school community interested in curriculum. In fact, discovering that different people read the curriculum story differently is one of the fruits of curriculum inquiry. Fortunately, however heated the opinions that surface, the principal can productively refocus the discussion by asking: Which of the curriculum questions are you addressing?

The questions, with topics related to each, are organized in outline form in Table 1. The outline form provides a quick vehicle for organizing discussion. It aids in the hunt for the local curriculum story, past, present, and future.

1. What curriculum are we talking about?

When people talk about curriculum, they may be referring to any of the following: curriculum as found in published documents (published curriculum); or curriculum that a teacher actually teaches (taught curriculum); or curriculum as measured by test results (tested curriculum); or curriculum the student actually learns (learned curriculum). Critics may be referring to what they see missing from the curriculum (null curriculum). Still other observers of schools insist that “what you do speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you are saying.” These observers want to look at the day-to-day lessons a school teaches through its policies and practices (the hidden curriculum). Before the curriculum discussion gets hot, the principal should ask: “Which of these curriculums are you taking about?”

• Published Curriculum

The published curriculum refers to the curriculum as it appears in an authoritative curriculum guide or a compendium of approved syllabi. The published curriculum takes many forms, and may vary greatly in scope. It may be school-wide in scope; for example, the local school's listing of required courses and sequence of courses together with acceptable elective courses in a total package of graduation requirements. Or, the published curriculum may designate only one component of a school's course offerings,

for example, “the science curriculum.” The published curriculum may be little more than an outline, or it may be comprehensive in scope and exact in specifications on topics, time allotments, sequencing, and methods. It may refer to a particular subject, or to the total package of school course offerings.

- *Taught Curriculum*

One cannot presume that what appears in a published curriculum makes its way into daily classroom teaching without alteration. What goes on in one class may match the published curriculum, while in another class there may be only a vague resemblance between what is taught and what is published. This means that if an administrator has a curriculum committee put most of its efforts into changing the old published curriculum, and if there was a large unexamined gap between the old published curriculum and the old taught curriculum, one might guess that the curriculum committee’s work will contribute to a new and larger gap.

- *Tested Curriculum*

There may also be a gap between what students are asked on exams (the tested curriculum) and the published curriculum. For example, the published curriculum may include items never tested. Likewise, there may be a gap between the tested curriculum and the taught curriculum. This happens when a teacher gives priority to topics that interest the teacher but are unlikely to appear as exam ques-

tions. Similarly, an experienced teacher may “teach for the test” by ignoring items in the published curriculum that experience suggests will not be on a final exam.

When students are required to pass statewide tests, school administrators do well to ask how well their published curriculum and their taught curriculum match up against the state tests.

- *Learned Curriculum*

When there is a bad match between the tested curriculum and the taught curriculum, test results will tell us little about what students learned in class. We have a good sense of what they did not learn, but we do not know what they did learn, if anything. For example, a sophomore social studies test has questions about the 10 countries of Asia and Africa that sophomore teachers are expected to cover. But the teacher of one class spent most of the semester on China. Test results may accurately reflect what students did not learn about the other 9 countries; but test results do not tell us what students learned about China.

Even when there is a close match between the tested curriculum and the taught curriculum, “student learning” includes attitudes and dispositions toward a subject. Test scores do not tell us whether a student learned to love or hate a subject. The student who gets a high mark on the third year English test may come away from the test in love with Shakespeare; or the

student may be determined never to read another word of the Bard.

- *Null Curriculum*

The null curriculum refers to what is not included in the published curriculum. On college campuses, the null curriculum has sparked bitter arguments: Why is so little non-western learning included in the core curriculum? Questions about the null curriculum arise whenever someone suggests that a new subject be added to the school curriculum. This is an occasion for the school administrator to review the entire process by which subjects are added to or removed from the school curriculum. It is useful to know whether a particular subject is in the curriculum for specific reasons, such as state mandate and school philosophy, or whether the reasons for course offerings are unexamined status quo or faddish accretion.

- *Hidden Curriculum*

Finally, response to the question, "What curriculum?" may be "the hidden curriculum." This refers to the ethos or overall environment of the school. Each school has its own particular climate or *ethos* that is more than the sum of the parts.

Research into school climate and environment has produced some very useful tools for school administrators. For example, NASSP provides a Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) that lets a school take a systematic look at the school environment. The instrument helps the school make a

"case" by collecting satisfaction, climate, and other important input data and relating those findings to school output measures.

A curriculum committee may decide that its first project should be an assessment of the school environment, the environment that furnishes the context for other curriculum efforts.

2. Why does the school have this curriculum?

The "Why" question is about school philosophy: It asks about the fundamental rationale for the total curriculum orientation.

Traditionally, four rationales have been offered, with many variations, much mixing-and-matching, and frequent insistence on additional rationales of equal rank.

- *One: Academic.* The purpose of high school is to prepare the student for college acceptance and for higher learning. Schools should exercise the mental muscles of students the way gymnasias exercise their physical muscles. Schools should develop in students an appreciation of the liberal arts and sciences. Case closed.

- *Two: Societal.* The purpose of the high school is to prepare students to be productive citizens, primarily by making certain they have the training necessary to take their place in the work force. Curriculum planners need to look to emerging workplace needs and prepare high school students accordingly, or our nation will fall further behind in the world

Table 1
Curriculum Questions

1. What curriculum?
 - The published curriculum: the one in the documents
 - The taught curriculum: what the teacher teaches
 - The tested curriculum: what students are tested on
 - The student-learned curriculum: what students learn, whether or not it is tested
 - The null curriculum: what is not in the curriculum by design, by accident, or by tradition
 - The hidden curriculum: the overall ethos, environment, or climate, the lessons taught by the school's value system
2. Why this curriculum?
 - Demands of the discipline and college preparation
 - Needs of society for good workers
 - Developmental needs of the youngster
 - Desire for social change
3. Where does this curriculum come from?
 - A mandate from one of the sources listed below
 - A clear orientation or set of guidelines from one of the sources listed below
 - Tradition, rooted in one of the sources listed below
 From which source?
 - ✓ The federal government
 - ✓ The state
 - ✓ The local school district
 - ✓ The school itself
 - ✓ A subgroup within the school: academic department; cocurricular demands; teachers; schedulers; students; parents
 - ✓ The local community or community subgroups
4. How is curriculum done?
 - Traditional curriculum development: needs, goals, programs, evaluation
 - Curriculum alignment
 - Alternative curriculum processes
5. Curriculum when?
 - Sequential: vertical sequencing and integration
 - Concurrent: horizontal sequencing and integration
6. Where is curriculum?
 - National, regional, and local agencies and corporations
 - National, regional, and local mores and customs
 - Print and electronic media and resources
 - Textbooks
 - Outside the classroom
 - Inside the classroom
7. So what?

community. Case closed.

- *Three: Developmental.* The place to start is with the needs of the child and the adolescent facing all the problems of growing up in today's world. Students are not sponges to sop up facts, and they are not cogs in the productivity assembly line. Students are unique individuals and the job of the school is to awaken student interest and creativity. Then students will find new ways to solve old problems. Case closed.

- *Four: Reformative.* U.S. society allows incredible disparities between males and females, whites and non-whites, rich and poor. Unless school curriculum addresses these disparities, schools implicitly teach students to accept the status quo. School must get students to challenge and change what is unjust, to build a new future. Case closed.

The four rationales respond to the "why" question in uncompromising ways. They are the four corners of the curriculum ring.

Most curriculum battles are fought somewhere away from the corners. Every school's curriculum story involves battles won and lost, and reviewing these four rationales can help an administrator clarify the terms of the curriculum contest waged locally. These orientations are stated in their least compromising form. A much-nuanced and very helpful analysis of these basic curriculum rationales is offered by Schiro (1978). Other authors, like Eisner and Vallance (1974) prefer to split the academic orientation in two:

- Cognitive processes
 - Academic rationalism.
- To these they add three others:
- Personal relevance
 - Curriculum as technology, with an emphasis on "how," and
 - Social adaptation/social reconstruction.

Whichever list of curriculum orientations it uses, some clear statement of the common responses to the "why" question will help a group analyze its own rationale. But each school will find that no prepared list of rationales fits it perfectly. It is then that creative and challenging curriculum conversation begins. It is then that the curriculum story gets interesting.

3. Where does this curriculum come from?

This is not another philosophy question. It is a power question, posed as concretely as possible: Who decides what? At the start of curriculum work, it is important to specify what is mandated, what force various mandates have, and from whom the mandates come. Obvious sources of binding mandates are the state and the district. Less obvious sources exclude things like teacher contracts and bus schedules. It is important to know what can and cannot be changed or negotiated.

Likewise, it is important to know areas in which the state or the local board indicate a clear orientation but allow leeway within certain limits of accountability. For example, the state or board may specify that

the high school offer a semester course in health but leave the specification of the course up to the school to work out, within specified guidelines and subject to final approval.

Perhaps most important is to know where there is no mandate or even any orientation parameters from the state or local board or from any binding contractual arrangements. Sometimes "tradition—the way we have always done it" exercises a veto power stronger than formal mandates. Such implicit mandates seem integral to the fabric of a school. They come with the schedule, with departmental practices, with curricular priorities, and so forth.

In asking, "Where does this imperative come from?" a curriculum group is also asking, "Who says so?"

4. How is curriculum done?

How do we do or undo curriculum? Most people equate curriculum work with a traditional curriculum development and implementation model. The steps are familiar:

- Clarify goals.
- Assess needs.
- Develop a plan and secure the necessary resources.
- Implement the plan and monitor implementation.
- Evaluate the results and make necessary adjustments.

More recently, partly in response to the need for students to do better on state tests, some schools and districts have scrapped the traditional planning process in favor of a more

straightforward attempt to make sure that the taught curriculum matches up with the mandated curriculum and the tested curriculum. This is called curriculum alignment. It concentrates on achieving congruence between the content of textbooks and the state test.

Curriculum alignment also matches textbook content and teaching strategies with test format. Curriculum auditing, a more comprehensive version of curriculum alignment, takes a comprehensive look at whatever affects the match-up between the mandated curriculum, the taught curriculum, and the tested curriculum (English, 1987; 1988).

A third way to think about doing curriculum is to begin with the premise that teachers are at the heart of the taught and the learned curriculum. Then the challenge is to involve teachers, not simply in designing and implementing programs, but in reflecting on their own experience, their personal stories, their interpretations of curriculum research and literature. This way of doing curriculum has traditionally been least popular, and it continues to be a counter-trend approach. Recent work by Connelly and Clandinin (1988) does clarify this approach and make it more accessible.

5. Curriculum when?

This is a little question, directing attention to two possible ways of organizing the temporal connection

between courses. The most common way is sequential or vertical. For example, “How does what is studied in freshman English relate to what is studied in sophomore English?” The vertical arrangement describes the sequence in which topics are presented.

Much less common is horizontal arrangement: what is going on concurrently. Reading across the curriculum is an example of a horizontal curriculum theme. So, too, are multi-disciplinary plans that have students look at the same topic from the vantage point of several disciplines. The horizontal arrangement is also involved in cross-curriculum planning that targets specific thinking skills and has students practice each skill in different subject classes, so that each class reinforces the skills learned or practiced in other classes.

6. *Where is curriculum?*

This question can be rephrased in two different ways. First, “What do students learn that they do not learn in school, and where do they learn it?” Everyone knows that kids learn a great deal in their neighborhoods, from television, from social mores, from comparing teacher salaries with athlete salaries. Even so, it is easy to begin talking about curriculum without mention of these extra-school influences.

Making an informal inventory of things students learn outside school can help a school focus on what the school can and cannot do. It may

also point to some extra-school influences or agencies that could support a school’s curriculum efforts.

“Where is curriculum” can be rephrased another way: “Why are you blaming the schools?” National reports invariably equate “education” with schools. When schools are criticized for perceived national failures in trade and commerce, those in school who talk curriculum reform may too easily accept the blame unfairly directed to them. School leaders may increasingly need to ask other societal leaders what they are doing to improve education and schooling; what resources are they providing at the workplace; what incentives are they providing, etc.

It is common for sponsors of successful television programs to have their products shown in the background as a subliminal reminder to viewers that Product X is alive and well. Perhaps school curriculum leaders need to petition for curriculum infusion on television—inserting scenes of likable people doing serious reading, working at mathematical or scientific questions, speaking foreign languages, and so forth.

In the school itself, the “where” question directs attention to textbooks, the practical source of most taught curriculum. Does the textbook selection process need attention?

Finally, “where” raises the question of what school curriculum topics are best pursued outside the classroom: field trips, independent study, service projects, etc.

7. So what?

So what? Is all the talk and planning and follow-up worth anything? Does curriculum make a difference?

Despite widespread portrayals of schools as deserts, the local school is for many youngsters an oasis. At least it has that possibility. A safe, consistent, and caring school setting is for many students a complete contrast from life at home or in the neighborhood.

Important, but not enough. The challenge of a school is to face the what, why, and how of curriculum in a way that results in students who do think better, know more, contribute significantly to society. A school must challenge a youngster's imagination with visions of a better life and must translate that challenge into the workaday world of school curriculum. That is the real curriculum story.

The final curriculum question is not "So what," but, "What if. . ."

Conclusion

School administrators need the help and full participation of the school community in designing and redesigning curriculum. Curriculum theory alone will not help, because curriculum theorists have been notoriously unable to plot commonly accepted coordinates for mapping curriculum. Nor will any one

methodology of curriculum implementation help, because it may be the wrong method for the local situation; and methodology may not be the problem at all. Long ago Schwab (1970) pointed out the need for arts of the practical in doing local curriculum work. The questions proposed here are offered as a practical way to organize curriculum discussion and decision making at the local level.

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