

1-1-2010

Understanding Curriculum Perspectives: A lesson in frustration

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Recommended Citation

Mee, Molly (2010) "Understanding Curriculum Perspectives: A lesson in frustration," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*. Vol. 8: Iss. 4, Article 79.

DOI: 10.58809/ETPM4937

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss4/79>

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Academic Leadership Journal

During a heated discussion in my master-level *Curriculum Theory and Development* class on whether or not a given curriculum borrows more from the experientialist or the constructivist perspective, Suzy, a 45-year old veteran math teacher interrupts the discussion and in an agitated tone asks, “Professor will you please just tell us the answer?”

This is typical of the responses I receive when my students read about curriculum perspectives to interpret them in light of their own teaching. Anticipating frustrations like Suzy’s I open my first class session with a lesson on Posner’s notion of reflective eclecticism which is an overarching and recurring theme of the course. “Reflective eclecticism is based on the assumption that...there is no panacea in education. People who are looking for ‘the answer’ to our education problems are looking in vain.”

The key to deconstructing a curriculum is to understand that an effective curriculum is one that reflects a myriad of alternatives rather than prescribing to just one.

This article outlines a series of lessons I implement in my *Curriculum Theory and Development* class that I believe get at the core of curriculum analysis. I contend that if as teacher educators we want teachers to be able to critically examine curriculum we need to challenge them to see beyond the collection of lessons in front of them and examine the many theoretical perspectives (e.g., traditional, experiential, structure of disciplines, constructivist) that underlie their curriculum. It has been my experience that the areas of divergence and overlap amongst these orientations provoke the students in my classes to the point of frustration. Early in the semester I explain that experiencing mild amounts of discomfort as they sort through the frustrations of defining and understanding curriculum is to be expected. I let students like Suzy struggle for some time with the goal in mind that eventually (and often occurring at the end of the semester) they see that in the world of curriculum studies with angst comes understanding. I approach them with the “no pain no gain” mentality.

The Lessons

Defining Curriculum

Even after several years of teaching this class, I still find myself surprised when students come to my first class wanting answers and definitions. I have always rejected the traditional professorial role of one who dispenses knowledge and information preferring instead the role of facilitator. “There has to be a standard definition of curriculum, right?” Ben asks in our first class session. “I mean isn’t there one definition that the industry subscribes to?” he continues. I direct them to the question Posner asks, “What should we do once we realize that the experts in our field are in fundamental disagreement?” I provoke them further by telling them that this class is not an easy one partly due to the fact that I will not be delivering answers to them on a silver platter. I make it very clear that they will leave the semester with a greater understanding of curriculum studies but at the same time they will have many more questions than answers.

During the first class session we explore as a group many definitions of curriculum until we come to one

that we can all temporarily live with. Typically this involves looking at our own classroom practice, reflecting on our own curriculum, and yes we have even consulted Wikipedia. The idea is to arrive at a general understanding and a common definition of the word *curriculum*, knowing that this definition is a starting point not the final answer.

Theoretical Perspectives

At about the second or third class session we delve into theoretical perspectives looking at them through the lens of how these perspectives frame our curricula and our practice. My goal is for students to see beyond the scope and sequence of their curriculum to examine how theoretical perspectives have contributed to the shaping of their curriculum. I call for the students to engage in the following activities:

1. Independent reading of the text
2. Critical dialogue with peers about the text
3. Deconstructing the perspectives to identify unique characteristics
4. Linking curriculum to the perspectives

Independent Reading of the Text

Students read about the five perspectives: traditional, experiential, structure of the disciplines, behavioral, and constructivist. Each perspective is defined, put in historical perspective, and associated with key figures (e.g. Hirsch, Dewey, Thorndike). Students respond to the following journal prompt: In one to two sentences summarize each perspective and decide with which perspective(s) your curriculum is most closely aligned? It never fails that students come to class having completed the assigned reading and feeling defeated and deflated with the density of the text as well as the grey areas among and between the perspectives. I have come to expect this and thus the next step in the lesson is to engage the students in a dialogue of the reading to deepen understanding.

Critical Dialogue

David comes to class a few minutes early, approaches me and says, "I had a really hard time with that reading last night. I am not sure I really understand these perspectives and I certainly cannot figure out which one my curriculum is most closely aligned with. Really I am not sure I am cut out for this grad work." I temporarily, and gently, put off his concerns as I arrange the desks in a circle in preparation for a class discussion. Once in the circle I tap into my former middle school teacher realm and begin a Socratic-style discussion with the opening question "what connections did you see between the five perspectives and your own curriculum?" I am returned with blank stares and a few darting looks to their peers that seem to say *help!* Experience tells me that many students are reluctant to share their responses for fear that their interpretations are not correct or that there is one specific answer for which I am searching. What seems like ten minutes is really only about ten seconds and eventually David speaks up with his earlier concerns and the discussion begins. Most students are engaged verbally in the discussion and all are attentive and appear to be keenly aware of their deepening levels of understanding.

As the discussion comes to a close I ask for feedback by saying, “Give me a glimpse into your levels of understanding of the five perspectives prior to the discussion in comparison to now at the conclusion of the discussion.” Unanimously the group says that the discussion has clarified prior questions and that they are now able to define each perspective clearly and concisely. There is always at least one student wanting further clarification on how to chip away at the overlap among the perspectives. Comments like “I think I understand this better now but I am still not sure which perspective my curriculum fits best with” are typical.

Students are uncomfortable with the blurred lines among and between the perspectives and the overlap seem to suggest to them that they do not fully understand or that the “correct answer” is not clear. Like a protective parent who wants to solve her child’s confusion about the world my inclination is that I have failed because I have not been able to provide more clarity. Tough love prevails and my response is that curriculum analysis is not black and white, that gray areas exist, and that it is up to them to find comfort with the gray areas while at the same time being able to unpack defining characteristics of each that are uniquely separate from the others.

Deconstructing the Perspectives

The next step in the lesson is to deconstruct the perspectives with the ultimate goal of locating qualities unique to each. Students are divided into small groups and each is assigned a perspective. I provide a guiding question. “What distinguishes your perspective from the other four?” Their task now is to delve back into the text and deconstruct the perspective in an effort to find its distinguishing characteristic(s). Some groups start with looking at what the perspective is “not.” For example, the traditionalist is “not” child centered or the constructivist does “not” adhere to a fixed curriculum. Once the group has come to a consensus on what the curriculum is “not” they can more readily identify its unique characteristics. This task typically takes about 30 minutes or so. Students spend their time discussing the perspective, looking back for textual support to redefine and reconfirm their prior understanding, and brainstorming on qualities unique to the perspective. I circulate the room and help to point them in the right direction. Gentle reminders that the task is to find qualities of the perspective that are not present in the other perspectives are needed. When the task is completed, each group presents their findings to the whole class and each student completes the following graphic display. Responses look something like the graphic depiction below.

Perspective	Distinguishing Characteristic
Traditionalists	Cultural heritage should be preserved and taught via the curriculum
Experientialists	Curriculum should be unique to the experiences of the child
Structure of Discipline	Curriculum should focus on subject matter and the subject should be examined in the same manner by which scholars in the field examine it.
Behavioralist	Curriculum should focus not just on content but on what students should be able to do (e.g. certain behaviors).

Constructivists	Knowledge exists within and originates from the child
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Linking Perspectives to Your Curriculum

Identifying the distinguishing characteristics of each perspective is a major hurdle in deepening understanding of curriculum. Once the students are able to identify the perspectives' differences they feel more comfortable in their understanding and are ready to find links between the perspectives and their own curriculum. Students are again grouped but this time according to their curriculum (e.g., first grade math teachers, high school English teachers, third grade reading teachers, and so on). There are always anomalies like the Community College adjunct professor of Mortuary Science, the infant and toddler care giver, and so on. The key in proper grouping for this activity is to find students who share curriculum that fall under the same or similar perspectives. Once they are grouped the task is for each student to reexamine the five perspectives in light of their own curriculum. The lessons come full circle at this point and it is as if I see the wheels turning inside their heads and the connections being made. Levels of anxiety are lower and levels of understanding higher.

Conclusion

At the end of each semester I read my course evaluations and relish in comments from students like Suzy, who want answers to complex questions delivered simply and systematically, who write "the professor challenged me to examine my practice from multiple perspectives" and "curriculum is much more than I ever realized." During our last class, I remind my students of our first class session together and the frustrations we felt. We discuss how far we have come and measure our level of understanding. We all agree it has been a long and arduous semester but one well worth the effort.

Notes

1. George Posner, *Analyzing the Curriculum* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 4.
2. Posner, 4.