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“What knowledge is of most worth?”

The Foundational Character of Curriculum Inquiry

by William H. Schubert

What is the purpose of arguing that curriculum studies should be considered an area of academic thought and inquiry within the foundations of education? If it is principally to aggrandize curriculum scholars or scholarship, it is inappropriate, unethical, and probably a poorly conceived strategy for achieving aggrandizement, as well. (I say this as both a curricularist and one who feels great allegiance to foundational studies.)

If, however, the purpose of including curriculum among foundational studies is to enrich both curriculum and foundational studies, thus enabling them to provide more worthwhile educational experiences for children and youth, then the coalition of these studies would indeed be worth pursuing.¹

It is the latter position that motivates the remainder of this paper. I want to call for a deeper integration between curriculum and foundational studies. Too many proponents of curriculum studies are guilty of mere tactical decision making that avoids the interpretive, normative, and critical² probing of assumptions and consequences of the techniques that they advocate. Likewise, too many foundational scholars pursue issues of philosophic, historical, sociological, and other disciplinary merit without directly addressing questions of how individuals and specific situations might benefit from such inquiry, i.e., from the curricular and instructional correlates of their work. Despite this too frequent myopia of curricularists and foundationalists, I suggest that there exist precedents for the productive integration of curricular and foundational concerns.

i.

The question that is probably considered to be the most basic curricular question is also a basic foundational question. Although its form varies with place, time and circumstance, this question is well summarized by Spencer's query: “What knowledge is of most worth?”³ Clearly, this

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question is much older than is curriculum studies as a specialized area of inquiry. The concern for the best subject matter to enable children and youth to live worthwhile lives, personally and socially, has perplexed the greatest of philosophers, historians, and social thinkers from the earliest of their writings.

One has only to survey a history of educational thought, such as Robert Ulich's *Three Thousand Years of Educational Wisdom*,⁴ to see clearly that curriculum is at the heart of much of the most important pre-20th century inquiry. The course of the race toward the good life was central to ethics; it was necessitated by and necessary for metaphysical and epistemological speculation. Likewise, philosophers from Plato and Aristotle through Froebel, Herbart, and Dewey, exemplify a quality of curriculum inquiry that goes beyond *techne* to *arete*, the search for excellence or virtue, that characterizes aesthetics, axiology, and political philosophy.

What is interesting, but depressing, is that these early threads of curriculum inquiry were overshadowed by a turn to the technical when curriculum became a specialized area of inquiry early in the twentieth century.⁵

ii.

At the turn of this century, curriculum specialists began to be invented in schools for the purpose of supplying substantive content to the rapidly accelerating process of universal schooling. Departments of education responded to this demand by supplying credentials for curriculum consultants and by developing a rudimentary body of knowledge couched in curriculum books.

By the end of the 1920s, 115 books had been contributed to this emerging field of inquiry known as the curriculum field.⁶ During this time period, technique was indeed prominent with Bobbitt,⁷ Charters,⁸ and Harap⁹ providing guidelines or recipes for curriculum-making. At the same time, other writers emerged to ask that assumptions be carefully explored, e.g., Dewey,¹⁰ Kilpatrick,¹¹ Bode,¹² Hopkins,¹³ and Whitehead.¹⁴

Notable in the latter regard is the Twenty-sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education.¹⁵ Here, those who most prominently represented dominant, and quite different, orientations to curriculum inquiry debated the foundational character of curriculum studies directly. Their deliberations bridged more than two years, resulting in a set of eighteen central questions, a consensus statement, and carefully argued “minority opinions” by each participant.

iii.

Unfortunately, the consensus statement developed for the Twenty-sixth Yearbook brought more of an amalgamation of extant tendencies in curriculum thought than a critical differentiation at the level of assumptions as illustrated by Bode's¹⁶ comparative analysis of theories in curriculum and educational psychology. Thus, there existed side-by-side the following: a) those who subscribed to Bobbitt's social behaviorist predisposition to accept as worthwhile curricula, the values and activities of the culturally successful as defined by those who wield power and money; b) those who subscribed to Dewey's notion that curriculum should be built upon the experiences of learners and their sources of meaning and direction; and c) those who with W.T. Harris saw a liberal education, the structure of its disciplines and their perennial questions, as windows on the soul.¹⁷

In the 1930s the flow of curriculum books continued to

proliferate and fork in many directions. Nearly as many were published as in the three preceding decades.¹⁶ A need for manageability was evident. It was clear that novices seeking to be curriculum specialists in schools could not become acquainted with more than 200 curriculum books. Hollis Caswell and Doak Campbell pointed to a solution by constructing a synoptic curriculum text in 1935,¹⁷ followed by a collection of readings in 1937.¹⁸ Together, these two volumes provided a summarized account of curriculum knowledge that set the precedent for the kind of curriculum books that would socialize curricularists for the next four and one-half decades.

While synoptic texts and books of readings solved the problem of rapid socialization, they perpetuated the problem of amalgamating diverse orientations and provided watered-down versions of complex foundational issues. Granted, nearly every synoptic text praised the necessity for understanding curriculum within a foundational context, but few provided more than cursory treatment. Synoptic texts by Smith, Stanley, and Shores, Taba, Zais, and Tanner and Tanner are notable exceptions.²¹

Meanwhile, the questions that curricularists addressed became smaller in number, thus, more manageable. This was largely due to Ralph Tyler's *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* in which he identified four categories for curriculum study: purposes, learning experiences, organization of learning experiences, and evaluation.²² His book and his numerous commentaries²³ on it clearly indicate that he wanted deliberation on these categories to be quite thorough, embracing both the practical and the foundational.

Despite this, the predominant response was to translate them into recipes for quick curriculum development in schools. First, one was to think up a philosophy, a sort of quick prerequisite to doing curriculum—something to be completed. Second, purposes were to be stated operationally, preferably in behavioral terms. Third, learning experiences (translated as activities or subject matter) were to be selected to be vehicles to convey the predetermined purposes. Fourth, one considered the question of how to organize learning experiences vis-a-vis instruction, materials, and learning environments. Finally, the question of evaluation was considered.

It is obvious that by the end of the 1960s curriculum, through specialized study, had become a technical enterprise. The quest for *arete*, virtue or excellence that once brought great philosophers to think about curriculum, seemed far away indeed.

iv.

Despite this dominance of *techne* in the curriculum literature of the 1960s, as an elementary school teacher during this time period I felt that my work was closely involved with the search for virtue and excellence. I wanted to introduce my sixth grade students to what Mortimer Adler calls the great conversation.²⁴ Having realized the personal sense of meaning and direction that can obtain from exposure to a liberal arts education in undergraduate school, I wanted to share it through teaching and believed that a sense for the value of liberal education needed not be relegated to collegiate studies. It was precisely this motivation that dominated my decision to become a teacher.

As a teacher, however, I was faced not with the abstract notion of *arete*, but with specific students from particular backgrounds. To what literature could I turn for help? Curriculum literature seemed the reasonable resource. I found

two kinds. The first was acknowledged to be scholarly. It is the kind that I have been thus far discussing. With a few exceptions, notably Dewey who was a curricularist only by a stretch of the imagination, I found little that treated the quest for excellence and less that addressed how it might be pursued in the elementary school. From Dewey, however, I learned to be attentive to expressed interests of students and how to see these expressed interests as symbolic representations of genuine interests, or what Robert Ulich called "the great events and mysteries of life: birth, death, love, tradition, society and the crowd, success and failure, salvation, and anxiety."²⁶

The other kind of curriculum literature that I found is what non-curricularists usually think curriculum literature is. It is the recipe-type of material usually found on the shelves labeled "education" of good bookstores for the general public in larger cities. This literature relates specific techniques and approaches that the authors offer as something that worked for them. I found that these "how-to" manuals seldom related to the problems of my students, infrequently dealt with foundational issues, and almost never addressed the overarching question of what is worthwhile to know.

Thus, as a teacher I found the greatest help in neither the formal nor the popular curriculum books, but in reading Dewey. Reading Dewey led me back once again into the books of the great conversation. In them I found a spirit of searching for excellence, something that the emergence of a specialized curriculum field somehow lost. This led me to search for serious treatment of curriculum in educational literature, curriculum here interpreted as the experiences that I might create with students in the classroom.

Thus, I was drawn back into the literature of educational foundations to which I had been introduced during my master's degree work when I came to appreciate Dewey. The foundations served as an intellectual context, or repertoire that enabled me to imagine possibilities, project probable and actual consequences, and invent solutions to situational problems as my students and I shaped curricula that helped us all better deal with our personal meaning and direction. It often did so by enabling us to become better acquainted with perennial sources of human meaning and direction available in the disciplines.

v.

I suppose that there are numerous alternative explanations of this moving of curriculum discourse away from foundational knowledge. Ironically, the specialization of curriculum studies was designed to make curriculum discourse more relevant to curriculum practice, and it did essentially the opposite. Through specialization, it substituted techniques (*techne*) and certification for the search for virtue (*arete*) and for wise and prudent judgment in situational problems.

This is, I believe, precisely the problem that Schwab wrote about when he called curriculum inquiry *moribund* and admonished not only curricularists but all educational researchers to move from the principles of the *theoretic* to the *practical, quasi-practical, and eclectic*.²⁷ His essential argument to explicate differences between the *theoretic* and *practical* is based on Aristotle's four notions of causation.²⁸ The formal cause, or problem source, of theoretic inquiry is a highly generalized problem in the mind of the researcher; it is contrasted with practical research which sees problems in concrete situations. The material cause, or subject matter under inquiry, of the theoretic is a faith in

law-like generalizations; this is contrasted with practical explication of the detailed fabric of situations. The efficient cause, or method of inquiry, of the theoretic is the presumed possibility of objective induction; that of the practical is interaction within the problematic arena. The final cause, or end of theoretic inquiry is knowledge *qua* knowledge at best (knowledge *qua* publication, more often); and for practical inquiry the end is decision and action.

Schwab adds that the practical is not atheoretical at all in the sense that it ignores foundational knowledge. Moreover, he proposes developing "arts of eclectic"²⁹ that presume a comprehensive and penetrating foundational background. From such a background those who do curriculum (especially teachers and students) must learn to match foundational knowledge to practical problems. They must realize that direct matching is seldom possible, and must learn to tailor and adapt foundational knowledge to practical problems. Realizing that this, too, is necessary, but insufficient, they must realize that the great value of foundational knowledge, when integrated deeply and broadly within the personality of educational decision-makers (especially teachers) resides in its power to generate alternative possibilities and to imagine short-term and long-term consequences. Schwab adds that such consequences must be seen within a new conceptualization of curriculum,³⁰ not as a reified entity such as a curriculum guide or syllabus prespecified in some celestial realm and bestowed upon classrooms; instead, Schwab asserts that curriculum is the dynamic interaction among four classroom commonplaces: teachers, learners, subject matter, and milieu.³¹

What Schwab fails to say in his treatment of the practical in curriculum, seems partially implicit in his writing on liberal education and science,³² and is more evident in many of Dewey's writings which often seem archetypical of Schwab. First, he leaves the door open for criticism that his practical is nothing more than a naive **disjointed incrementalism** (to use the productive Braybrooke and Lindholm term).³³ In other words, his practical inquiry can be seen as a floundering pragmatism with no basis for critique. I submit that to counter this argument, Aristotle's treatment of **arete** as the guiding force of practical inquiry must be made explicit.³⁴

Secondly, the commonplaces of teachers and students must be seen as the agents, not primarily the recipients, of curriculum inquiry.³⁵

What I am suggesting is that in the practical educational situation, curriculum implementation must become curriculum inquiry for the persons and the community in that situation. I submit that a practical curriculum inquiry in which teachers and students see curriculum creation as that which can give meaning and direction to their lives is indeed foundational. It is foundational in the sense that the classroom becomes a microcosm of foundational inquiry. Teachers and students search together for the educational history that has forged their lives. They investigate the social and cultural contexts that shape their decision and action. They continuously reconstruct the philosophical assumptions that are tenets of the "theories" inside of them, living theories that provide images of their world and how it works.³⁶ Such theories provide an evolving basis for critique, not by and for philosophers, but by, for, and of teachers and students as they encounter problems, address what is worthwhile, decide, and act.³⁷

This kind of curriculum creation probes more deeply and broadly than the classroom. It empowers teachers and students to realize that curriculum creation is not merely a

function of schooling, but a function of living. Thus, curriculum inquiry becomes embedded in the life of the culture, not of schooling alone. To understand and direct the curriculum of one's life, curriculum inquiry must embrace the teachers, students, subject matter, and milieu of the culture that creates the classroom.

vii.

Thus, curriculum inquiry is foundational because curriculum is embedded in and created by historical, philosophical, cultural, economic, social, and psychological contexts. To seek a technical study of curriculum that disregards these contexts is to seek a will-o'-the-wisp.

Curriculum inquiry is foundational in another sense as well. As a feature of its practical character, it focuses on particular persons in particular situations. When practical curriculum inquiry is conducted by teachers and students in an effort to discover more worthwhile lives for themselves, it is foundational in a personal and concrete sense, deep within the fabric of human life.

Curriculum inquiry is foundational because it fashions foundational questions into the situational problems of human lives. It is here that curriculum and foundational inquiry merge, and curriculum becomes the seeking of curricular experiences that gives foundation or grounding to lived lives by those who live those lives themselves.

To enable others to better pursue such foundation should give practical worth to scholarly pursuits in the foundations, and it should give substance of greater depth to curriculum work. It is by inquiring together about improving the foundations of actual human lives that both foundationalists and curricularists can mutually enrich their work.

Notes

1. I wish to thank Ann Lopez Schubert for many discussions that contributed centrally to ideas expressed here, and for help in preparing the manuscript.
2. The reference to "interpretive, normative, and critical" analyses of assumptions and consequences draws upon my work as a member of the American Educational Studies Association Task Force on Academic Standards: "Standards for Academic and Professional Instruction in Foundations of Education, Educational Studies, and Educational Policy Studies," *Educational Studies*, 8 (1977-1978): 329-342.
3. Herbert Spencer, "What Knowledge is of Most Worth?" In Herbert Spencer, *Education* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1860).
4. Robert Ulich, Editor, *Three Thousand Years of Educational Wisdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954).
5. William H. Schubert, *Curriculum Books: The First Eighty Years* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1980): 341-348.
6. *Ibid.*, 11.
7. See, for example: Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918); *Curriculum Making in Los Angeles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922); *How to Make a Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924); *Curriculum Investigations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926).
8. W.W. Charters, *Curriculum Construction* (New York: Macmillan, 1923).

9. Henry Harap, **The Techniques of Curriculum Making** (New York: Macmillan, 1928).
10. See, for example: John Dewey, **The School and Society** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900); **The Child and the Curriculum** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902); and **Democracy and Education** (New York: Macmillan, 1916).
11. William H. Kilpatrick, **Foundations of Method** (New York: Macmillan, 1926).
12. Boyd H. Bode, **Modern Educational Theories** (New York: Macmillan, 1927).
13. L. Thomas Hopkins, **Curriculum Principles and Practices** (New York: Benjamin H. Sandborn, 1929).
14. Alfred North Whitehead, **The Aims of Education and Other Essays** (New York: Macmillan, 1929).
15. National Society for the Study of Education, **The Foundations of Curriculum Making**, Twenty-sixth Yearbook, Part II, Harold O. Rugg, Committee Chairperson (Bloomington, Illinois: Public School Publishing Company, 1927). The committee consisted of William C. Bagley, Franklin Bobbitt, Frederick G. Bonser, Werrett W. Charters, George S. Counts, Stuart A. Courtis, Ernest Horn, Charles H. Judd, Frederick J. Kelly, William H. Kilpatrick, Harold Rugg, and George A. Works.
16. Bode, op. cit.
17. See Lawrence Cremin, **The Transformation of the School**. New York: Vintage Books, 1961:19.
18. Schubert, op. cit. 1980: 11.
19. Hollis L. Caswell and Doak S. Campbell, **Curriculum Development** (New York: American Book Company, 1935).
20. Hollis L. Caswell and Doak S. Campbell, Editors, **Readings in Curriculum Development** (New York: American Book Company, 1937).
21. See: B. Othanel Smith, William O. Stanley, and J. Harlan Shores, **Fundamentals of Curriculum Development** (Yonkers-on-the-Hudson, New York: World Book, 1950) and revised (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1957); Hilda Taba, **Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice** (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962); Robert S. Zais, **Curriculum: Principles and Foundations** (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976); Daniel Tanner and Laurel Tanner, **Curriculum Development: Theory into Practice** (New York: Macmillan, 1975), revised 1980.
22. Ralph W. Tyler, **Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).
23. I refer principally to a three-hour interview conducted with Ralph W. Tyler, taped in Chicago by William H. Schubert and Ann L. Schubert, October 12, 1981.
24. I am indebted to Harry S. Broudy, Thomas Green, William Frankena, and Robert Ulich who remind us to distinguish between **arete** and **techne** in contemporary society.
25. I refer here to a quotation attributed to Mortimer J. Adler by Clifton Fadiman in the dedication to: Clifton Fadiman, **The Lifetime Reading Plan** (New York: Crowell, 1978).
26. Robert Ulich, "Comments on Ralph Harper's Essay on Existentialism and Educational Philosophy" in: National Society for the Study of Education, **Modern Philosophies of Education**, The Fifty-fourth Yearbook (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955): 255.
27. Joseph J. Schwab, "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum," **School Review** 77 (1969): 1-23.
28. This was developed in: William H. Schubert, "Recalibrating Educational Research: Toward a Focus on Practice," **Educational Researcher** 9 (January 1980): 17-24 and 31.
29. Joseph J. Schwab, "The Practical: Arts of Eclectic," **School Review** 79 (1971): 493-552.
30. Joseph J. Schwab, "The Practical 3: Translation into Curriculum," **School Review** 81 (1973): 501-522.
31. *Ibid.*
32. See: Ian Westbury and N.J. Wilkof, Editors, **Joseph J. Schwab: Science, Curriculum, and Liberal Education; Selected Essays** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
33. David Braybrooke and Charles E. Lindholm, **A Strategy of Decision** (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).
34. I wish to thank Max van Manen of the University of Alberta for emphasizing the point about the lack of explicit treatment of **arete**, in conversations at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Summer 1981.
35. The idea of students as agents of curriculum inquiry is developed in: William H. Schubert and Ann Lynn Lopez Schubert, "Promising Directions in Curriculum Knowledge: Focus on Students; a Non-School Perspective," A paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, April 17, 1981; and in William H. Schubert and Ann Lynn Lopez Schubert, "Toward Curricula that are Of, By, and Therefore For Students," **Journal of Curriculum Theorizing** 3, no. 1 (1981): 239-251.
36. The idea of viewing teachers as evolving theories is discussed in "Teacher Education as Theory Development," **Educational Considerations** (1982) forthcoming. This idea applies not only to teachers, but to students as well.
37. See sources in note 35.