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Alternative Approaches to Curriculum Design

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Introduction

For many teachers the word curriculum is synonymous with structure, timing, standardization, and control. Teachers do not have a lot of input about the materials, topics and experiences that will best suit students. This has become particularly evident in the last few decades when the federal government started to oversee educational policies at the state level. No Child Left Behind came to underline the idea that all students should have the same experience to meet the same standards. In this ever-changing world, it does not seem plausible to create such a rigid document that establishes doctrines in a classroom with multiple needs and expectations.

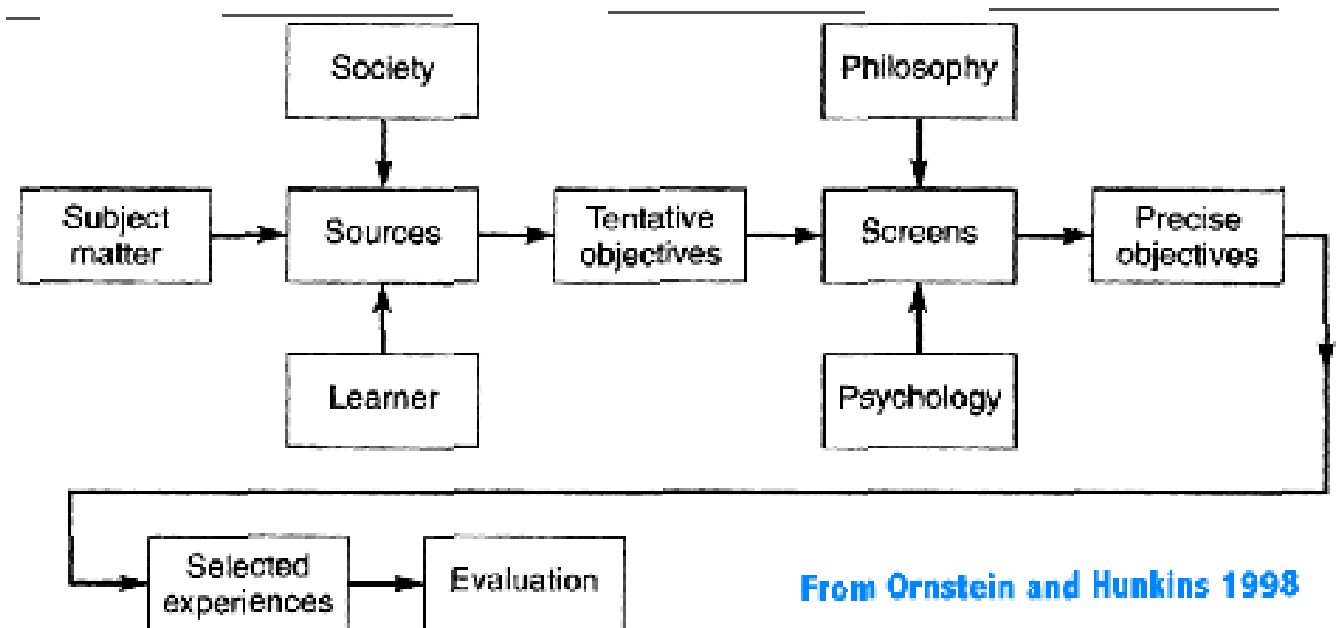
This paper aims at investigating the historical events, which led to our present state of educational affairs and to look at alternative curricula that give educators and students freedom to choose how they would like to achieve the goals imposed by the regulating institutions. Finally, we will also reflect on the pros and cons of making use of such curricula.

The Old and New Schools

There are different beliefs on what a curriculum is amongst educators and curriculum specialist. However, the modern understanding of curriculum does not fit into its first conception. The word “curriculum” comes from the action verb meaning “to run the racecourse”. However, etymology has transformed it into a noun, the “racetrack” itself. Thus, our modern curriculum was reduced to the production of a guide that tells educators how to implement instruction rather than the overall journey that pupils should travel in order to become mature adults (Slattery 1995, cited in Schwartz).

The word, in the sense it is used today, first gained popularity in the late 16th century through the Protestant Peter Ramus. He developed the Ramist map that created a method from what had been a quite loose approach to instruction. In his map, the specific is subordinated to the general in the same way that federal laws permeate down to the bottom, or the lesson plan. Later, Frederick Taylor, a leader in the efficiency movement, created a system (see Table I) designed to ensure standardized output (Rees, 2001). However, the framework they created did not allow skipping or moving in different directions like human thinking (Doll, 2008). It is in this context that North American contemporary mainstream pedagogy was delineated; one that bases itself on structure, precise goals and measurable achievements.

Table I



Nonetheless, a more recent school of thought has emerged. It contends that there can be structure within chaos. Thanks to modern science, it has been proven that the universe can create an “orderly disorder”(Doll, 2008). A similar principle applies to curricula that are stable yet flexible. Interconnectedness rather than isolated fact seems to be taking roots in the educational milieu. Translated into practice, a class can explore different media that present interrelated topics.

Albers (2006) advocates the use of multiple modes (multimodal) of communication that interests the students to help them “interpret and represent meaning” (p. 77): gestures, visuals, speech, writing, music, etc. Inquiry-based curriculum allows teachers become curriculum designers as they search for multimodal materials that enhance the presentation of the chosen theme. Even though Albers proposes a framework, it is can be adapted according to students’ engagement and development. Similarly, Schwartz (2006) suggests a “rehearsal curriculum”, which educates and emancipates the teacher. In other words, the curriculum serves as a guide to thinking in the direction of how to engage the student and what needs to be addressed.

Reflection

There are several drawbacks to the use of highly standardized curricula. The most critical one, in my opinion, is the fact that they drive away seasoned teachers that our schools desperately need. They may be appropriate for teachers beginning their career. However, senior teachers who value independent thinking and creativity may not feel inclined to follow them. An alternative curriculum would require both teachers and

students to use critical thinking. Students would develop skills that are not readily measured by standardized tests such as problem solving and social skills, not to mention that they would be more engaged in their own learning as they would identify in what direction they need to grow. As a result, the school would be forced to implement a more comprehensive assessment. Also, since the students would be in charge of setting goals for themselves and the teacher of identifying students' needs and engagement level, responsibility would be equally shared.

There can also be disadvantages to use an alternative curriculum. American society feels quite secure with percentiles, percentages and grade letters. Teachers and parents would have to be taught how to understand a more holistic form of teaching and assessment. Schools districts would also have to invest more on untrained and unimaginative teachers. With the recent budgetary cuts for education, unfortunately it costs less to provide teachers with step-by step lesson plans to follow.

Hopefully, the wheels of change will be set in motion by affluent and middle class suburban parents who realize that standardized curriculum is not providing their children with a comprehensive understanding of the world and of themselves.

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