Three trends in curriculum theory: A study of general curriculum development and its relation to religious education

Author: Robert R. Newton

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2439

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Published in PACE, vol. 1, pp. 490-507, 1970

These materials are made available for use in research, teaching and private study, pursuant to U.S. Copyright Law. The user must assume full responsibility for any use of the materials, including but not limited to, infringement of copyright and publication rights of reproduced materials. Any materials used for academic research or otherwise should be fully credited with the source. The publisher or original authors may retain copyright to the materials.
Three Trends in Curriculum Theory

A Study of General Curriculum Development and Its Relation to Religious Education

Robert Newton, SJ

Bases of a Curriculum Theory

Curriculum generally means the content which is taught, the subjects, and their sequence. It includes not only the "what" but also the "how," the way in which teaching or learning is made or allowed to take place. It may also describe or specify how teachers and students are to interact to produce learning or growth.

Curriculum theory is a midpoint. It is not a philosophical investigation but depends heavily on answers to philosophical questions. It is not the everyday practice of teaching but a guiding principle which offers both direction and rationale for what is done in the classroom. Curriculum theory leans backward to philosophy for its direction and forward to give direction to classroom practice.

Anyone who devises a curriculum must have some notion of the answers to a set of fairly profound questions: What is knowledge? How does one evaluate the social context in which the education is taking place? What is one's philosophical position on man's nature and purpose, on what constitutes human fulfillment, on man's relationship to society? The answers to these questions should feed down into a series of educational goals—perhaps a description of the behaviors, attitudes and characteristics of the ideally educated person.

The questions which follow in this column are editorial observations; they are not Father Newton's.

Is religious education curriculum concerned only with "what" and "how" but also "who"? What does "content" and "method" have to do with coming to know a "who"?

How does the religious educator answer these questions? What questions does the religious educator ask which are not here, and which he feels are equally basic and profound?

Copyright 1970, St. Mary's College Press, Winona, Minnesota, 55987. Permission to reproduce any portion of the material on this page is granted only to subscribers of PACE and may not be used without the explicit permission of the publisher.
Implicit in any theory of curriculum is also a view of the learner, the ways in which he learns, his motives, the various stages of growth through which he passes and which in some way influence what he is able to learn. The curriculum itself consists of both substantive and methodological elements—what is taught, or perhaps better, what is the content with which the student interacts? How does he interact with this content? What is the learner's role? What role does the teacher play—director, guide, mediator, partner, observer? In a society that encourages a variety of viewpoints it is natural that there will be conflicting positions on these basic questions. As a consequence there will be differing theoretical positions on the nature and function of the curriculum or more generally on how and what learning should take place. Obviously there are a great many trends and theories, too many to describe in detail. The intention here is to concentrate on three major curriculum trends which have been seriously and consistently proposed.

These three theories separate into fairly well defined groups on the major educational issues:
the goals of education,
the psychology of learning and the nature of knowledge,
the content of the curriculum and how it is determined and organized,
the way in which children and teachers should interact.
In all of these areas there is, to be sure, some overlapping; but the schools seem different enough and convinced enough about the various emphases they select to merit consideration as different and opposing curriculum trends.

Individual Fulfillment

The aim of education according to the first important school can best be expressed by the words "to be." Terms such as individual fulfillment, self-actualization, the fully functioning person, indicate not only the direction and emphasis of this school but also suggest some of the key names associated with it.
Maslow: Self-actualization

Abraham Maslow (1968a, 1968b) is one of the leading exponents of a new "third force" psychology which he sees as reacting against the gross inadequacies of behavioristic and Freudian psychologies and developing a third, more inclusive image of man. Third Force psychology takes a very positive view of man. Every individual possesses a self, a kind of intrinsic nature which is very subtle, which is not necessarily conscious, which has to be sought for, uncovered, and then built upon, actualized, taught, educated. The aim of the parent or teacher (or psychotherapist) is to help a person uncover what is already there rather than force him into some pattern which has been determined a priori by someone else. "In the normal development of the healthy child, it is now believed that, much of the time, if he is given a really free choice, he will choose what is good for his growth . . . This implies that he 'knows' better than anyone else what is good for him. A permissive regime means not that adults gratify his needs directly but make it possible for him to gratify his needs, and make his own choices, i.e., let him be. It is necessary in order for children to grow well that adults have enough trust in them and in the natural processes of growth, i.e., not interfere too much, not make them grow, or force them into predetermined designs, but rather let them grow and help them grow in a Taoistic rather than an authoritarian way" (1968a, pp. 198-99).

If self-actualization is seen as the goal of the educational process then the role of the teacher becomes receptive rather than intrusive and directive. The teacher accepts the person and tries to help him learn what kind of person he is rather than trying to form him to some ideal. He tries to provide an atmosphere of acceptance where the student can discover himself, his aptitudes, his style, an atmosphere which reduces fear and anxiety to a minimum.

Rogers: Freedom to Learn

Carl Rogers' fully functioning person—with the notions of openness to experience, living as a process and...
trust in one's own experiencing—are important components of Maslow's eclectic Third Force psychology.

In his most recent work, *Freedom to Learn* (1969), Rogers describes the role of the teacher in terms clearly in agreement with Maslow. Rogers would shift the focus from teaching to "facilitation of learning—... how, why and when the student learns, and how learning seems and feels from the inside..." (p. 125). He urges a transparent realness in the teacher (facilitator) and a willingness to be a person, to be and live the feelings and thoughts of the moment. This realness should involve a prizing, a caring, a trust and respect for the learner. "Then it includes a sensitive and accurate empathetic listening, then indeed a freeing climate, stimulative of self-initiated learning and growth, exists. The student is trusted to develop" (p. 126).

Open Education

The term "open education" has been applied to schools which practice this orientation. The main assumption of this group about the learner is that he is innately curious and, if given the chance in a rich environment, will begin and continue to explore and learn. Children are seen as having both the competence and the right to make decisions about what they want to learn and when they want to learn it. It is important that the individual student be allowed to make these decisions since each develops at his own rate and in his own way. The teacher should withdraw or remain in the background.

The aspects of a person's learning which can be accurately described or measured are not the most important elements of his learning. The quality of being is more important than the quality of knowing. It is also questioned whether there is a common body of knowledge which everyone must know.

For the open educator, openness characterizes the general spirit of the school: there is a physical openness, observable in the buildings and rooms; there is freedom and openness of movement within and between classrooms; there is an openness in the choices of students;...
there is an openness of self on the part of both students and teachers; there is an openness to the possibilities inherent in children and a corresponding openness to the richness of the real world.

Scholarly Discipline

Bruner: The Process of Education

The second school of curriculum theory, the school which emphasizes knowledge and the scholarly disciplines, is probably the most familiar. It is generally agreed that the impetus for this curriculum trend stems from Jerome Bruner’s seminal book, *The Process of Education* (1960). In this post-Sputnik work, Bruner remarked that the mark of our generation was a widespread renewal of concern for the quality and intellectual aims of education. An important part of this renewal was the unprecedented participation in curriculum development of university scholars and scientists, men distinguished for their work in their respective disciplines.

Bruner’s work is based on a central conviction: that intellectual activity anywhere is the same, whether at the frontiers of knowledge or in a third-grade classroom. This continuity is established mainly by insisting that the curriculum of a subject should be determined by the underlying principles that give structure to that subject. Bruner maintains that the most fundamental concepts of a discipline can be understood by children provided that these concepts can be reduced to materials and terminology that is comprehensible to them. He argues: if it is true “that any subject can be taught to any child in some honest form—then it should follow that a curriculum ought to be built around the great issues, principles, and values that a society deems worthy of the continual concern of its members” (p. 52).

Bruner is concerned with the motives for learning. He emphasizes the danger of passivity in an age of spectatorship and urges that there should be more effort to arouse interest in what there is to be learned. There should be a conscious effort to encourage intuitive leaps in thinking.

If it is so that “any subject can be taught to any child, etc...” does that mean that any subject which can be taught should be taught? What would constitute adapting a religious belief to accommodate the capacities of a child?

Bruner’s concern with motives for learning seems to mean that our environment has “turned kids off,” and that their innate capacity to know what they want to know isn’t operative, as Rogers would hold. Do you think that our en...
and to lead the student to the thrill of discovery. The teacher should be a model, someone who can see and communicate a sense of intrinsic excitement about the discipline he teaches, someone who can give play to his own intuitiveness and encourage and stimulate the student to the same type of activity within the discipline.

Phenix: Realms of Meaning

The most articulate and searching defense of this school has been made by Philip H. Phenix in his *Realms of Meaning: A Philosophy of the Curriculum for General Education* (1964). Phenix works from the premise that human beings are essential creatures who are able to have significant or meaningful experiences, i.e., to experience meanings. General education is the process of engendering essential meanings.

Four principles for the selection and organization of the curriculum are proposed:

First, the content of instruction should be drawn entirely from the fields of disciplined enquiry, i.e., there should be exclusive use of materials that have been produced in disciplined communities by men of knowledge who possess authority in their fields.

Second, those items chosen should be representative of the field as a whole, so that the student is provided with clues to the entire discipline.

Third, the content of the curriculum should be chosen to exemplify the methods of enquiry and the modes of understanding in the disciplines studied.

Fourth, materials should be chosen to arouse the imagination, to stimulate the student to actively assimilate and recreate the materials of instruction.

Phenix discounts the value of employing everyday situations, arguing that the problem of meaning is far better served by using materials that tap the deeper levels of experience. He sees the curriculum for general education as transmitting to the student his cultural heritage: “The present philosophy of the curriculum is dedicated to the proposition that the finest treasures of civilization can be so mediated as to become the common inheritance of persons who are seeking to realize their
essential humanness” (1964, p. 14). This inheritance is found within the disciplines. “If anything is used from sources outside of the disciplines, the students are to that extent deprived of their due as members of a civilized order” (1964, p. 314). The teacher is to mediate the knowledge of the specialists of the disciplines, to make available and vital to the student the understandings developed within the disciplines.

The curriculum reform movement which gathered momentum in the 1960’s drew its inspiration from ideas like those proposed by Bruner and Phenix.

Goodlad (1966) comments that if previous eras of curriculum development can be described as child-centered or society-centered, the current curriculum reform movement should be designated as subject or discipline-centered. “The ends and means of schooling are derived from organized bodies of knowledge. Further, the curriculum is planned by physicists, mathematicians, and historians, and students are encouraged to think like these scholars. The word ‘structure’ has replaced ‘the whole child’ in curriculum jargon” (p. 15).

The key notions connected with these curriculum projects and with the scholarly discipline school are the structure of the disciplines as the guide to curriculum content and the emphasis on discovery within the mode of enquiry employed by the particular discipline. The stress is very definitely on “knowing” and the student is expected to learn mainly through contact with the wisdom and modes of enquiry already accumulated in the scholarly disciplines. The teacher is expected to mediate, to humanize the content of the discipline and to bring the student along the path set forth by the discipline to an intuitive grasp of its basic concepts and ways of knowing.

Behaviorist

If the emphasis in the individual fulfillment school is on being and the student, and the emphasis in the school-
Early school is on knowing and the disciplines, the emphasis in the behaviorist school is on *doing* and behavioral change. The foremost theoretician of this movement is the prominent behaviorist, B.F. Skinner.

*The Technology of Teaching*

In *The Technology of Teaching* (1968) Skinner comments on the inadequacy of past popular formulations of teaching and concludes that any act of learning must incorporate the three classical learning theories—*learning by doing* which emphasizes the response, *learning from experience* which points to the occasion on which the response occurs, and *learning by trial and error* which emphasizes the importance of the consequences of the action.

Skinner's success with laboratory subjects convinced him that we are now in possession of the conditions which control behavior in the learning process of any organism. "The Law of Effect has been taken seriously; we have made sure that effects *do* occur and that they occur under conditions which are optimal for producing the changes called learning" (p. 10). The desired complex performances have been shaped by progressively reinforcing the subject through successive stages. Equally important has been the advance in technique which allows maintenance of behavior over long periods of time by the use of various schedules of intermittent reinforcement. Skinner emphasizes that his success in working with both animal and human subjects has been achieved by analyzing the effects of reinforcement and by designing techniques which manipulate reinforcement with considerable precision. "Only in this way can the behavior of an individual organism be brought under such precise control" (p. 14).

Proceeding from this behaviorist base, Skinner criticizes the inefficiency of the typical classroom in which one teacher is expected to supply reinforcement for a large number of students and which relies, as a result, on negative, aversive rather than positive reinforcement. As a result of the reform of schoolroom practices the student is no longer subjected to corporal punishment.
According to Skinner this has meant little more than a shift to noncorporal measures—ridicule, scolding, sarcasm, criticism, incarceration, extra school or homework, the withdrawal of privileges, forced labor, ostracism, being put on silence, fines. The pattern remains and the student spends a great deal of time doing tasks he does not want to do. Skinner does not blame the teacher; such aversive reinforcement is necessary unless there are radical changes in the educational process. He concludes: "The simple fact is that, as a mere reinforcing mechanism, the teacher is out of date" (p. 22). Skinner calls for the use of mechanical devices to aid the teacher.

The role of the teacher in the Skinnerian ideal is clear. "Teaching is the arrangement of contingencies of reinforcement under which students learn" (p. 64). Though children learn in their natural environment without teaching, the function of the teacher is to arrange special contingencies which expedite learning. In this way, the teacher assures the appearance of behaviors which might never appear or hastens the acquisition of behaviors which might be achieved at a much slower pace.

Skinner’s objection to the role of the teacher in open education is made explicit. "A Summerhill is therapeutic not educational: by withholding punishment teachers may help students who have been badly treated elsewhere and prepare them to be taught, but something else is needed" (p. 102). That something else, in Skinner’s view, is a carefully devised strategy of reinforcement. Skinner likewise rejects the vague principle of learning through intuition or insight. He holds that these goals are meaningful only when they are restated in terms of explicit changes in behavior and effective schedules of instruction are devised to achieve these changes.

Skinner views the behaviorist educational theory as the first really scientific approach to the problem of teaching and learning. Effective research into teaching is becoming possible for the first time. Carefully controlled experiments can supply the precise information on what is required to produce the desired behavioral
changes. The behaviorist position on the design and content of the curriculum follows logically: "The first step in designing instruction is to define terminal behavior. What is the student to do as the result of having been taught?" (pp. 199-200). As experiments provide educators with more and more information, teaching and learning will become truly scientific. Skinner concludes that a technology of teaching is imminent.

A Taxonomy of Educational Objectives

To make any advance in the technology of teaching, Skinner has said that it is necessary to define the behavior at which the teaching is directed. What does the teacher want the student to be doing as a result of the learning experience? One major project which fits into the drive to define educational objectives in behavioral terms with accuracy has been the work of Benjamin S. Bloom and David R. Krathwohl et al (1956; 1964). Through an exhaustive search of educational literature, the authors attempted to work out a taxonomy of educational objectives. They developed a classification system in three major areas: cognitive, affective and psychomotor, as an aid to educational research as well as a guide to curriculum development. Behavioral change is the key to the definition and classification of objectives: "By educational objectives, we mean explicit formulations of the ways in which the students are expected to be changed by the educative process. That is, the ways in which they will change in their thinking, their feelings, and their actions" (1956, p. 26). The goal is educational efficiency, the avoidance of wasted time and effort by the identification of the most efficient means of producing the specific behaviors desired.

Systems Theory in Education

Another important force in American education which is moving schools toward this general orientation is the application of systems theory to educational institutions. Dissatisfaction with effectiveness of the public schools has combined with the unwillingness of taxpayers to continue to support spiraling educational costs. The result has been a demand that educational systems become both more effective and efficient in
their operation. At the basis of the systems approach is the need to define clearly the outputs of the system. Harry J. Hartley (1968), in a discussion of the application of systems theory to education, identifies well defined outputs as a prerequisite. “Education has been defined as a change in behavior, so it appears that behavioral understandings are a prerequisite for systematic program analysis of schools before one attempts to improve budget narratives” (p. 50).

The Planning-Programming-Budgeting-System which has been introduced into many urban school systems is pushing these systems to define their objectives in behavioral terms. The PPBS approach requires a definite statement of objectives and a clear identification of alternate programs designed to achieve these objectives. Built into PPBS is a system of evaluation, measurement of how effective the programs selected have been in producing the desired changes.

This same orientation is likely to be reflected in resource allocation for education by federal and state governments. Performance contracting like the much publicized Texarkana experiment (Lessinger and Allen, 1969) will force educators applying for funds to specify the standards by which change in student behavior can be measured so that evaluators can verify that “it has been a change in the direction desired which meets pre-established criteria formulated before instruction began—criteria which clearly specify what it is the student is expected to do; the circumstances under which he should be able to do it; and the degree of accuracy expected” (p. 136).

Through the introduction of notions of systems analysis, PPBS and performance contracting into education is proceeding on a level quite different from that of Skinner, it seems to me that its effect will be to move American schools in the same direction. To operate successfully it requires that goals and objectives be clearly defined in terms of observable behavior. Implicit is the assumption that those methods and materials will be used which are most efficient in producing the de-
sired behavioral changes. It is, on a grand scale, the behavioral engineering Skinner would introduce into the individual classroom.

Concluding Summary

In the previous sections, an attempt has been made to describe three major curriculum positions currently observable on the American educational scene. In the individual fulfillment school the emphasis is clearly on the student, on self-development and self-direction. The guiding principle is not external but the inner dynamism, the unique personality of the individual striving for expression and fulfillment. The teacher stands back, ready to help but reluctant to direct; noninterference is the key. The content of the curriculum is determined by the student's interest. A rich environment is provided and the student learns what he wants to learn.

The scholarly discipline school is centered on and guided by the disciplines. The content and structure and ways of knowing that have been initiated and elaborated through the years by top scholars is the focus of the curriculum. Through the efforts of the teacher—a scholar devoted to mediating the discipline to the learner—the student is placed in contact with the essential wisdom mankind has thus far produced. In understanding, in knowing the essential meanings, he becomes more human.

For the behaviorist, education means change in behavior. Once the terminal point is clearly defined, the task is to discover experimentally the appropriate steps and reinforcements needed to produce the desired changes. The curriculum is a carefully designed behavioral strategy; the teacher is a technician following a scientifically established procedure.
Bibliography

**Individual Fulfillment**


**Scholarly Discipline**


**Behaviorist**


The statements which follow could be used to take a reading on the curriculum position of an individual or group. There are 21 statements, referring to each of the three curriculum trends discussed above. Respondents should be asked to react to each statement in one of the following ways:
1) agree strongly (1)
2) agree (2)
3) no opinion (3)
4) disagree (4)
5) disagree strongly (5)

The weights indicated in parentheses could be assigned to each of the possible responses to construct a profile of the individual or group.

Statements 4, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, and 18 refer to the individual fulfillment school; statements 2, 5, 8, 13, 15, 17, and 19 refer to the scholarly discipline school; statements 1, 3, 6, 11, 16, 20, and 21 refer to the behaviorist school.
Three Trends in Curriculum Theory

1) All knowledge can be broken down into an order of items from simple to complex.

2) Whatever else schools may do, their major purpose is to transmit the wisdom and modes of inquiry as represented in the scholarly disciplines.

3) Schools exist to identify and produce as efficiently and accurately as possible the behavioral changes the individual needs.

4) What a person knows is not nearly as important as what he is; the school should recognize that the quality of being is more important than the quality of knowing.

5) The teacher is the mediator between the structure of a discipline and the cognitive processes of a child.

6) Nothing can be known about “subjective states of mind” unless it can be inferred from observable behavior.

7) There is no absolute such as knowledge, but only an awareness of points of view—interpretations of experience. Ultimately there can be only personal knowledge.

8) Structured knowledge is the vehicle through which man makes sense out of the world.

9) Learners should be engaged in a continuing dialogue with a rich and open environment; through this dialogue learning occurs.

10) Knowledge is knowing of self and others that comes from a concern for creating meaning out of human experience.

11) All knowledge can be ultimately defined as doing something.

12) At best a teacher can only be an experienced partner to the learner in the exploration of experience.

13) The learner gains greater knowledge and understanding by undertaking experiences similar to those that would be followed by a scholar in a given subject.

14) The role of the teacher is to provide materials, opportunities, freedom, lack of constraints, to give help when it is needed, to give guidance when asked to guide.

15) Schools are formal institutions which organize the child’s understanding of facts and concepts and give him a framework for viewing his world.

Copyright 1970, St. Mary’s College Press, Winona, Minnesota, 55987. Permission to reproduce any portion of the material on this page is granted only to subscribers of PACE and may not be used without the explicit permission of the publisher.

EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS—School—A
PACE 1—505
Three Trends in Curriculum Theory

16) The role of the teacher is to determine the optimal instructional strategy for teaching a particular student a particular behavior.

17) The teacher is a scholar who does not create new knowledge but rather interprets and presents the structure and concepts of a discipline to the student.

18) The learner more than anyone else knows what he should learn. He should be trusted to develop.

19) The curriculum ought to be built around the great issues, principles and values that a society deems worthy of the continual concern of its members.

20) Presented with the right stimulus and materials and judicious reinforcement, any student can learn the skills he needs.

21) Teaching is the arrangement of patterns of reinforcement under which the student learns.
Another possible approach to making explicit the theory of curriculum which is actually directing the work of a particular teacher or faculty is an attempt to analyze actual classroom performance by asking the questions indicated in the boxes below. It seems possible to start at any point, with any question, since they are all interconnected and an answer to any one suggests the direction that answers to the other questions might take.

- what are your educational goals and objectives?
- what is the concept of man on which these goals are based? what is your concept of knowledge?
- How do you view the social context in which education is occurring?

- what is your view of the curriculum in the concrete—the how and the what of the learning situation?
- with what materials should the student interact?
- how should the teacher and the student interact?
- what is the role of the teacher? what is the role of the student?

- what is your concept of the learner? what are his stages of growth? what can he learn? what should he learn? what does he want to learn?

---

Copyright 1970, St. Mary's College Press, Winona, Minnesota, 55987. Permission to reproduce any portion of the material on this page is granted only to subscribers of PACE and may not be used without the explicit permission of the publisher.