

# CURRICULUM THEORY AND EDUCATIONAL CHANGE PROCESSES: Comments on the Role of Curriculum Theory in the Hawaii Curriculum Research and Development Group

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The work of the University of Hawaii's Curriculum Research and Development Group is guided to large degree by a single curriculum theory. The theory is one explicated by my former colleague, John Brownell, and myself in our 1966 publication, *The Curriculum and the Disciplines of Knowledge: A Theory of Curriculum Practice*.<sup>1</sup>

The work was a derivative of the Bruner, Schwab, and Phenix thinking of the early Sixties. It strongly asserted the significance of the disciplines of knowledge as a productive way of entering into the problems of curriculum theory and the practical processes of curriculum change. The heart of the theory lies in its definition of what intellectual activity is like. The intellectual realm, constituting man's use of symbols, is held to be the basis for liberal and general education. Intellectual life is established to be a set of semi-independent disciplines, or communities of individuals who share a common dialogue. More specifically, each discipline tends to reflect common characteristics:

- a community of persons,
- an expression of human imagination,
- a domain,
- a tradition,
- a syntactical structure — a mode of inquiry,
- a conceptual structure — a substance,
- a specialized language or other system of symbols,
- a heritage of literature, artifacts, and a network of communications,
- a valuative and affective stance,
- an instructive community.

Our book never made the best-seller lists, but, as the shifting currents of popular curriculum talk changed and moved away from the disciplines of knowledge theory, we stuck with our ideas. Our subsequent attempts to influence the design of new curricula and to assist teachers to use them have been based on these ideas.

Rarely does a curriculum theorist have the

opportunity to test his words. We had that opportunity in Hawaii and would like to give an initial report on that experience.

Most, but not all, projects at the Hawaii Curriculum Research and Development Group use the discipline theory. Project heads are expected to find the best solution to the curriculum problems facing them. A variety of approaches has the advantage of providing contrastive experiences for comparison.

The first effect of the theoretical work we did was to crystallize our thinking about the state of the art in educational change and to give us the desire and courage to try to do something about it.

Second, it gave us a rallying point around which to gather scholars and teachers who were also interested in the problems of educational change. The theory provided a fairly well-defined educational point of view with which a surprisingly large percentage of scholars and professionals were able to identify.

Content scholars found a ready home in our new enterprise at the University of Hawaii. The theory not only defined and dignified their work; but our Curriculum Research and Development Group offered an avenue to actualize the educative aspects of their specialties for the lower schools. They have performed marvelously (and mostly for free) on our various projects. A large number of teachers were similarly attracted. Their great value has been in imparting a strong reality base to the work that we do. On the other hand, there was a mixed reaction from our colleagues in teacher education, many who found the theory unacceptable and continue to remain unconvinced of its validity and value. Interestingly the theory found support among the majority of school board members, state legislators, and general citizens.

From our experience we can draw some tentative conclusions about how educational theory is received by different segments of the education community. We know that a specific curriculum



theory can both draw and repel people and we have some idea about what particular features of the theory are likely to attract or repel what groups of people. We know that school administrators and teachers are practical people; they want concrete products, materials, and designs in usable forms, not theories, concepts or promises.

A third effect of our theoretic stance was that it gave us a sound basis for staffing our center. Our notion of the "community of discourse," which includes scholars, practicing disciplinarians in the world of affairs, teachers, and students, gave us our formula for staff composition and development. It has been a potent model, and we have found that any design team which does not have a mix of these discourses is faulted. Our theory also recognized the special role of the curriculum theorist, so that each project has had one or more persons of this stripe, preferably the project leader, although there have been exceptions.

A fourth result of our use of theory can be seen in our approach to the design and development of curricula. Four major elements form the core around which the work of design and materials creation proceeds: knowledge, learners, instruction, and administration.

Our planners undertake a rigorous examination of the possible knowledge bases for the curriculum: What disciplines are relevant? What does each of them do? What thinking styles, what values, what powers of imagination are captured? How instructive is the community for the young? What are the payoffs of alternative approaches? And so on — a series of penetrating looks at what is proposed.

The learners for whom the curriculum is to be designed are also carefully studied: age groups, grades, developmental stages, special characteristics, presumed interests and expectancies, social background, achievement levels expected, learning characteristics, and others too numerous to mention in this brief statement.

We also account for much of the instructional dimension, including the role of the teacher and the administrative structure that the curriculum is to fit, including, the matter of approvals and

assents that must be forthcoming if the curriculum is to be used.

We have found that approaching the curriculum problem from this perspective of the disciplines of knowledge may well have substantial advantages over other approaches. Since our theory emphasizes the "community of discourse" among scholars, teachers, and students with the curriculum itself as part of the discourse, we tend to see the unity of these elements. We are not troubled by the dichotomies of either a student-centered or a subject-centered curriculum. I imagine less power in curriculum theories that find their initial home in the social or political ethos, the instructional dimension, or in the student and his particular needs, to name a few.

For example, Foundational Approaches in Science Teaching, a curriculum project discussed in a later article of this issue, used the theory of the activity in science to postulate roles for the student and the teacher — the student as *investigator*, and the teacher as *principal investigator*. These authentic scientific roles work especially well in the junior high schools even for the slow students. And the teacher can operate as a person of authority without the embarrassment of not knowing the fine points of the subject under study.

In the Hawaii Music Program we were similarly guided to examine roles in the community of musicians. We discovered that most of them engage in a set of musicianly activities: listening, performing, practicing, composing, conducting, critiquing, and theorizing. The project planners wove these activities into the music program at the appropriate levels, starting with the very young. One has a delight in store to see third graders conducting the class in a presentation of their own compositions. The performance becomes possible because the program offers the intellectual and technical tools for learner and teacher.

A fifth result of our theoretic stance can be seen in the development of the University Laboratory School, which is an important part of our establishment. The school has become an incubator for new ideas, a genuine laboratory for the early testing of innovative ideas and curricula.



It is a small school, with pupils from preschool age through high school. Its composition — ethnic, socioeconomic, and achievement — is representative of all student groups in the State of Hawaii, reflecting another aspect of our basic theory.

The school has provided us with a testing ground for another one of the assumptions of our theory of curriculum practice — that every student can and should engage in continuous interaction with the major intellectual areas throughout the school career. Our students, elementary and secondary both enroll in the major subject areas each year they are in school. Thus, every student now takes English, social studies, a foreign language, music, art, science, mathematics, and physical education. In addition, most of them participate in competitive athletics and student activities. To attain this goal required the invention of a schedule permitting nine specific offerings. Without our theory, it is doubtful that we would have had the ideal and the leverage to make such substantial changes.

Our curriculum theory has been significant in what it has kept us from doing as much as it has been instrumental in what we have done. Our theory is quite explicit in urging caution in the so-called integrative and inter-disciplinary approaches. We have been cautious in our claims and careful in their use, approaching them much more gingerly than have many other projects. We are gaining experience and becoming more consistent in our attacks on the problem, but we are always careful, making certain that integration does not destroy the authenticity of the intellectual building blocks that exist in the intellectual world today. A key idea of our theory requires us to take the disciplines of knowledge as they exist, not as

one would want them to exist or think they will exist. This stance has kept us out of much difficulty.

We have also tended to avoid curriculum themes which find their base in personality theory, organizational schemes, instructional tactics, and other non-disciplinary structures. Individualization, student motivation, modular scheduling, team teaching, worthy as they may be as features of a program, are not fruitful bases for curriculum design.

Our particular theory has been of some help in guiding evaluation work.

Finally, there are some problems where our curriculum theory has not been of much help. It has given only sparse guidance to the development of curricula for the teaching of direct skills, such as reading, writing, typing, listening, speaking, etc. These skills exist in the realm of human capacities and are not illuminated adequately by theory — at least theories we could use.

#### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Kreiger Publishing Co., Inc., New York, Reprint 1976. Original Edition by John Wiley & Sons, 1966.

*Arthur R. King, Jr., has been Director of the Curriculum Research and Development Group since its inception. He came to the University of Hawaii in 1965 from Claremont Graduate School, where he was Director of Teacher Training and a Teacher in Curriculum and Administration. His doctorate is from Stanford University and he has had extensive teaching and curriculum administration experience in public and private schools in California and Hawaii.*