

Setting Forth on the Gobbly Sea of Curriculum

Most curricula at the secondary school level present courses as if they were islands separated one from another by stretches of sea, the student a barge stopping randomly at one port or another. Likewise, most secondary school programs assume that all barges travel at the same speed, no matter what the density of cargo or the horsepower of the engine. Similarly, the student who fails to journey successfully is re-tracked or re-labeled tugboat among steamships. One might well dispute that what is, should be. Careful planning of any curriculum should assert that there is a linkage between the islands of each discipline, archipelagos of courses, which each student must travel past, but the rate of passage should be regulated according to the seaworthiness of the ship.

Curriculum reform in general is uniformly feared and despised by teacher and administrator alike, knowing that the sirens who serenade us weary voyagers may indeed lead us to our demise with the most dulcet of tunes. Such curricular reforms as the open classroom and bilingual education come to mind as examples of innovations whose effects are dubious in value if not indeed monstrous. Naturally, one might hesitate in journeying past another such Scylla or Charybdis. Nonetheless, had Odysseus been satisfied with his protected life with Circe, he would not have ventured forth to a triumphant union with Penelope.

Curriculum reform should chart as its destination two goals: first, to meet the needs of all students in their diversity; and second, to prepare students for the rigors of a college education. A restructuring of curricula to accomplish these goals could be accomplished by any secondary school, public or independent, especially those with a nearby college or university interested in cooperating in a joint venture. The most difficult aspect of charting such a new course is in finding the academic dean, the headmaster or principal, or the maverick teacher monomaniacal and tyrannical enough to serve as the Ahab who impresses into service the faculty and administration to attempt such an odyssey. That person would have to persuade everyone that the search has as its goal the white whale and not the white elephant or the red herring.

To accomplish any academic reform, schools should incorporate three levels of academic planning: (1) instructional planning. (2) program planning. and (3) curriculum planning.

Instructional planning involves individual teacher decisions regarding what should be taught in a specific course and the strategies for that course. In the Ship-That-Dewey-Built, the teacher is the laborer or carpenter.

Program planning involves decisions made by separate departments about what students should learn in a specific discipline over four years. Departments, then, are the Ship of Education's subcontractors.

Curriculum planning involves the entire school's overall plan for the learning experience and the academic objectives of its students. The school's faculty and administration as a whole are the Ship of Education's architects and engineers.

One would expect that in designing and building our academic structures, the engineers and architects would investigate and explore suitable plans, decide upon a design, and send the blueprints to the subcontractors who employ skilled artisans to realize in symmetry and

stability the actual ship. In practice, however, there is seldom any clear blueprint, and as a result inspired artisans create "magnificent monuments to their own immortality" without any integration into an overall architectural plan. Thus, the Ship-of-Dewey may turn out to be part of a flotilla that leaks badly.

Without first settling upon a curriculum design, a school may find its three plans working at cross-purposes. For example, a curricular goal may be to develop in students the qualities of intellectual resourcefulness and synthetic and intuitive thinking, the marks of a true scholar. Yet the instructional plan of a geometry course may undermine that curricular goal if the course rewards the student who arrives at the wrong answer to a problem because of a computational error, although he or she follows the right procedure, while the course penalizes the student who arrives at the right answer in an unorthodox, intuitive fashion-the student who fails to follow the prescribed method of proof.

Similarly, a curricular goal of an English program may be to nurture independence of thinking predicated upon the development of skills of analysis and persuasive argument. An English department's program planning theoretically addresses this curricular goal by matriculating students to senior English, a course in which the student independently reads and reflects upon a survey of English and American literature, only meeting with his teacher occasionally to discuss his writing style. The instructional planning in prerequisite courses may have prepared the senior English student for this independence: Each English course supposedly taught a methodological approach to the genres of literature and a formulaic approach to the writing of compositions. Thus, in theory, we have the integration of all three plans. In reality, however, we would be likely to discover that something in the plan ran amok: Students may not desire to be weaned from their English teachers. They may well prefer the lecture-discussion-assigned paper topic-regurgitation of information approach, what one may label the Great Burp Theory of Learning.

The questions, then, for school faculties considering curriculum reform are the following:

- Do we have a blueprint?
- Is the blueprint an attractive, efficient, and inspiring design?
- Do all the planner, designers, laborers, and navigators agree on the dimensions of the ship?
- Is the ship we've built seaworthy?
- Does the ship take us where we want to go?
- Once rebuilt and refitted, will the passengers ride in it?

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