

Curriculum Narrative

Jackie M Beyer

CIED 5053: Curriculum Issues

Oklahoma State University

Instructor: Jennifer Schneider, Ph.D.

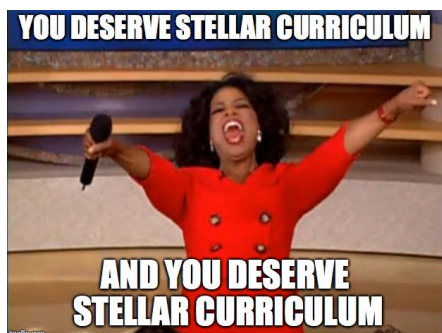
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Where were you?

Please describe how you understood the nature of curriculum prior to our time together this semester. What was your understanding of curriculum like at the beginning of the semester?

Although I have learned a great deal about curriculum this semester and am still surprised this class is not required for undergrads, I still feel very much like I did at the beginning of the semester when I wrote:

“On page 45, Null refers to “a good curriculum *system* is one that identifies what pieces of information must be delivered at what state and then establishes careful measures to determine whether this information has been delivered efficiently by the workers (i.e., teachers).”



I keep thinking of the meme, shared last week where Oprah is handing out “stellar curriculums.” This year, I find myself teaching middle school for the first time, and our Office of Public Instruction (OPI) in Montana has approved the free science curriculum, OpenSciEd, whose [about page](#) states:

“OpenSciEd creates free, high quality, NGSS-aligned science materials and outstanding professional learning support that empowers educators to inspire all students with the beauty and wonder of science. One classroom at a time, OpenSciEd is proving that when given the opportunity to experience high quality curriculum facilitated by teachers who have had the professional learning they deserve, **all students can excel in science.**”

I was not impressed with OpenSciEd. I frequently thought, “What does this look like in the actual classroom?” I can not imagine students really following along with these lessons. I also thought, “Who can help me prep all of these materials so they are correct for my students?” My first demonstration light box was a complete flop, and the one my teacher assistant made was even worse. Perhaps it was my lack of professional training, but I truly believe that five years

from now, if not sooner, they will decide that this method did not meet the majority of students' needs, and we will go back to basics.

I am almost positive the reason MT OPI chose OpenSciEd because it is only one of two curriculums approved by EdReports. So I did a little research into EdReports, the brainchild of genius Bill Gates (Lowe, 2019) who was bored in school because he had an exceptionally high IQ and particular way of thinking, and other educational elites who may have the right goal, but not the right solution. According to their website:

“EdReports empowers districts with free reviews of K-12 instructional materials. Our reports offer evidence-rich, comprehensive information about a program's alignment to the standards and other indicators of quality.”

I belong to a variety of professional learning communities (i.e. Facebook groups for middle school teachers), and I hear teacher after teacher say, ‘I reviewed curriculum for EdReports, and their review form was more scripted than any curriculum I’ve ever used.’ Apparently, the review form does not allow teachers to give any feedback on how engaged students are, how well they understand the concepts or standards being taught, or how it felt to present the lessons, but instead focused on how aligned to the very specific Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) each unit or lesson is.

So, I believe that educators, more than ever, deserve a “stellar curriculum” that is palpable for classroom use. One that engages students, while embracing their thirst for knowledge, and covers the essential skills they need to excel in twenty-first century careers. I hope AI will have a place in developing curriculum that is accurate, accessible, and engaging for

students. I feel like IXL is a concrete example of how that can work. Students love it, teachers trust it, and the data shows it works. Of course, it is more of a response to intervention than a curriculum, but I feel the future will come from their mission statement: "We apply technology in thoughtful and innovative ways to unlock learners' innate curiosity, creativity, and desire for knowledge."

Where are you now?

CURRICULUM AS SUBJECT-MATTER UNDERSTANDING:

- Considering all the study of curriculum you have done this semester, what have you come to understand about the nature of curriculum?

Curriculum will always evolve and grow as society progresses and people's needs change. Before this class, I basically thought there was just the systematic curriculum and behaviorist theories, student-centered or teacher-directed. Learning about the roots of liberal arts and the backgrounds of the other curriculum theories has been enlightening. I have been encouraged by classmates and the different perspectives to understand how we can incorporate our personalities, student ideas and learning styles, and content to provide a comprehensive experience for students.

- How has your understanding grown through study?

Learning about the different curriculum styles and theories has made me a better teacher because I feel that I can combine different practices and do what is best for the students before me. In Null, page 165, he states that "curriculum can only be meaningful to students (and teachers) if it connects with them on a personal level."

One of the biggest differences I am learning about middle schoolers is they need lots of limited choices. For example, you can give them an assignment but maybe let them pick how they want to present it, write a paper or give an oral report. But you also do not want to give them too many choices or an open-ended amount where you say pick a topic and find a way to show what you learned. You can offer for them to create a powerpoint, make a video, or write a report, but if you give them more than three specific choices, they likely will get lost in the decision-making process and end up doing nothing.

- What does curriculum mean to you now?

Curriculum has more depth to me now. I realize how it can represent who I am as much as what I teach. I strongly related to the existentialist model and the systematic tradition, which seems contradictory. Even though I like a lot of structure, I think it is important to incorporate as much student interest as possible. I like the radical curriculum beliefs that the teacher is respected as a master of the curriculum and their classroom. I think the problem-based learning model the pragmatics follow is a positive way to engage students in learning. I feel the deliberative model seems to take classroom teachers the most seriously of all the traditions we studied.

- What has remained the same for you?

To say I am stuck in my ways is an understatement. I am constantly trying to remind myself as I grow older, I need to keep an open mind. My disdain for the constructivist approach to learning that my university promoted has grown, especially now that I know all of these other options exist. I still feel the most critical aspect of a curriculum is to provide students with the fundamentals they need in order to develop into critical thinkers, problem solvers, and citizens

who can fully participate in society. If they do not know how to read, they will not be able to participate at the most basic level, if they can not understand a science passage, they will not be able to make decisions about proper medical care for not just themselves but also their community. If they have no background in history, they will not be able to make appropriate choices for their future. They will struggle forever in school and life if they can not complete basic mathematical problems, such as adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing, with precision and fluency. Teaching the fundamentals is essential for students to learn how to construct viable arguments, apply concepts or develop sound reasoning in order for them to live their lives to the fullest.

- What from the course materials has informed your understanding of curriculum?

I enjoyed reading classmates' posts and responses to the material. I benefited greatly from the weekly videos provided by our instructor, especially when I compared other classes where this was not an option. They highlighted material and helped me seek the essential understandings in our readings. The extra videos and selected readings also helped develop a comprehensive appreciation for each week's subject matter and brought the textbooks to life. Writing several lesson plans using the different approaches in our text (MCU, 2020) and implementing them in my classroom gave me first-hand experience with these new formats, especially the eco-mindedness one I had never seen before.

CURRICULUM AS SELF-UNDERSTANDING:

- How do you understand curriculum's interconnectedness with who you are as an educator and/or as another educational stakeholder (student, parent, counselor, etc.)?

Learning about the different theories and teaching methods made me realize that I need to incorporate more of myself into my lessons and ensure that I meet the needs of the students in my particular community. After years of having the specifics of my classroom dictated to me, my schedule down to the minute, scripted curriculums, and assessments, to find myself the curator of not just my schedule but multiple middle school curriculums, this class could not have come at a better time. I am teaching a multi-grade 5-8 classroom and we ordered a new math curriculum this year. After just a few weeks, I put it up and returned to the old 2006 curriculum, which came with many more opportunities for my students to practice, only to decide two weeks ago, that my best approach for the majority of my class is to use the alternative hands-on lab materials and basic skills lessons found on the discs that accompanied the old curriculum.

I went through a similar process with science and social studies, dragging old textbooks out of the basement with graphic organizers and comprehensive activities that bring lessons to life, ensuring my students develop learning foundations. We have a science and math focus wall this year, where we review essential vocabulary words and concepts.

- In what ways has what you studied this semester expanded your understandings of your selfhood and nature of educational experiences?

Many of my students have never used manipulatives to learn mathematical concepts, and to see the light bulbs go off over their heads daily is genuinely satisfying. I am extremely concerned we will not come close to covering all the material they need this year, but I feel they will at least have a strong foundation for the future. But to say this has been an intimidating challenge would be an understatement, and I am thankful I have this class to help guide me.

CURRICULUM AS SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING:

- How do you understand curriculum's interconnectedness with society?

This class taught me more about how curriculum ties together within the population where it is being used. Teachers need to understand the students and community in which they live and work and ensure that they are meeting the individual needs of the public. From Paulo Freire, the revolutionary reformer who educated thousands of peasants, to Maria Montessori, who transformed the systematic approach to education, developing step-by-step techniques to reach every child, the impact of the curriculum can be felt for centuries.

- What contemporary social issues around curriculum have come to your attention because of the readings and discussions this semester?

It has been fascinating reading my classmates' posts this semester and seeing how curriculum is transforming everything from primary elementary classrooms to Jennifer Rudd's graduate veterinary medicine classes. Seeing the perspectives from around the country and classmates with different learning styles has made me question my beliefs and practices and develop a more robust understanding of colleagues and students.

WHAT MIGHT YOU DO?

- As we found in studying Null's and McConnell, Conrad, an Uhrmacher's books, curriculum is never just one thing. Considering this, how do you envision yourself working within this reality as an educator in your current (or future) classroom? How might you navigate the tensions and difficulties of this reality?

When I was still in college, the semester before my student teaching experience, there was a struggle between our professors and the school districts where we were placed to complete 75 hours of classroom experience. We were assigned to different schools around the community

and tasked with teaching seven lessons to various classes. Teachers in the schools wanted us to use the textbooks and curriculum the districts had approved, and our professors wanted us to use the constructivist approach and design our own hands-on lessons using the curriculum the university approved. Teacher candidates were stuck in the middle of this struggle, and two different teams were not allowed to move on to student teaching but had to be placed in other schools before passing the class. I, myself, was required to reteach several lessons during finals week. When universities preparing teachers for the future are so out of touch with what is really going on in the classrooms, everyone loses. As I have stated before, it surprises me that this class is not required for a bachelor's degree in education (along with classroom management instruction).

- What lingering quandaries and questions do you have surrounding curriculum and its issues?

My biggest question and quandary surrounding curriculum is how do we get rid of school boards, which are the ones that hold the power to decide what curricula are used in schools? How can people with no educational background, be charged with these decisions? I had the lowest reading group in second grade when I taught on the reservation. When we reached winter break, we had gone through the first 30 lessons of the kindergarten curriculum again with little improvement, so they wanted me to repeat it for these students for a fourth time. I voiced my opinion that students would benefit from Reading Mastery, I was told that even though my reading coaches, vice principal, and principal agreed, I was not allowed because the school board refused to approve it. This question still plagues me and makes me wonder if I should become a student advocate instead of a teacher.

Last year, I had a fourth grader who came in at lesson 13 of the kindergarten curriculum. By Christmas, he was reading, and by the end of the year, we were one-third of the way through the first-grade program. This little boy's life has been changed by following a systematic research-based program. What bothers me most is that the curriculum manuals were right in the special education room, all they had to do was follow it. Instead, they just downloaded assorted phonics papers off the internet. So, I suppose my second question would be, how do we get teachers this information?

I am in a Facebook group for parents of students with dyslexia that has over 65,000 members. When parents post pictures of student work handed back with red marks all over it, I am disheartened. I feel for the students, but also the teachers, because I am sure they just have not had the proper training. They blame the student for not trying hard enough, not completing their homework, or the parents for not reading to their child enough, when they simply need "stellar curriculum" and proper training. So, my final question is, how do we change this and make using a systematic research-based curriculum part of the standards?

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