

Improving Curriculum Design; A Look Through the Lens Of  
Stakeholders, Policy Makers and Educators

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*Introduction*

Curriculum design is a crucial part of education. Creating an effective plan is essential to the success of virtually any program, including education. Curriculum design, also called curriculum organization is defined as the arrangements of the elements of the curriculum into a substantive entity (**Hunkins & Ornstein, 1998**). Designers must consider how to arrange these elements and what relationships exist between them. Effective curriculum design considers all of the available components and how each one affects the overall plan. Designers must identify the stated mission and goals, available resources, target population, stakeholders and any other factors that may have a bearing on the eventual outcome of the design. Curriculum design needs to assess the way each component intersects and what role each should play in the plan (**Hunkins & Ornstein, 1998**).

Curriculum designers benefit from identifying their own philosophical and social views and from clarifying their views of how individuals learn. These views are referred to as sources of curriculum. These philosophical underpinnings affect the views of curriculum designers and their ultimate work. To ignore this clarification often leads to limited or confused rationales (**Taba, 1962**). **Dewey and Bode** identified 3 sources of curriculum design that **Tyler** later expanded upon. They were the learner, knowledge and society.

Curriculum design is generally thought of in two dimensions, horizontal and vertical organization. Horizontal organization refers to scope and the side-by-side relationship of components. Scope is defined as all of the activities, learning experiences, content and topics (**Tyler**). It examines how skills and content are presented in one period of time and the relationship between them. Vertical organization refers to sequence and continuity. This is the arrangement of content and skills so that they build on one another and that they align with the general sequence of cognitive development. This also referred to as a “spiral curriculum”. Content is introduced on a remedial level in the early grades and then reintroduced with greater complexity at a later time (**Bruner, 1959**).

Curriculum design can be used as a noun or a verb. As a noun, it names the arrangement of the curriculum components. As a verb, curriculum design refers to the development of the curriculum. In the context of this paper, curriculum design will be used interchangeably.

Instructional design is concerned with the specific activities and materials created and used to teach and measure the goals and specified objectives articulated in the curriculum. It refers to the potential experiences for students. Instructional design determines what teaching methods and materials will best facilitate learning.

### *Describe a Process and Requisite Components of Curriculum Design*

There are three widely accepted processes that may be employed when designing curriculum. They are subject-centered, learner-centered and problem-centered. This paper will describe and explore the problem-centered process of curriculum design.

Problem-centered designs focus on life's problems. These problems include those of society as well as those of individuals. The purpose of this design is reinforcing cultural traditions and addressing community needs. According to **Hunkins and Ornstein**, problem-centered design has three variations. The variations include life situations design, social problem and reconstructionist design and core design. The variations result when the emphasis varies from social needs to the needs of individuals.

Problem-centered designs are planned before students arrive unlike learner-centered designs that rely heavily on student input in the design process. Because this process focuses on authentic problems and experiences, designers need to be willing to make adjustments to consider the situations of the learners. The nature of the problem being addressed will often dictate the way the curriculum will be organized. The content must be relevant, work horizontally, and consider the academic abilities, concerns and needs of the students. Considering content and the learners equally distinguishes this design process from others.

#### *Life-situations design*

This is founded on the work of **Herbert Spencer**. His work on curriculum emphasized using activities that sustain life, enhance life, aid in rearing children, maintain the individual's social and political relations and enhance leisure tasks and feelings. This design deals with health, vocation, citizenship, home life, leisure and ethical character. There are three assumptions associated with this design. The first is that life situations are crucial to society's successful functioning. The curriculum is organized around these situations. The second assumption is that students will see greater relevance in curriculum that includes content organized around their community and its issues. The

third assumption is that as students study life situations or community problems, they will actually be a part of solving the problems and not simply having academic exercise.

**Forkner, McKim & Statemeyer (1947)** stated that education should play a role in shaping society and that society could be a basis for shaping curriculum. These authors concluded that at the time they were writing that society was being shaped by industry and the influence of the home, religion and other traditional institutions were losing their influence. They stated that spiritual, economic, physical and social life were being negatively impacted and that this curriculum design was a powerful tool to address these situations by equipping students with the tools to cope with life as they were encountering it. They acknowledged some weaknesses in this curriculum such a lack of ability to address every need or interest of every student. Their rationalization was that other community groups or institutions should fill those voids and schools would address those needs that were suited their mission.

A strength of this curriculum is that it develops problem-solving skills. Most educators agree that this skill set is very useful. It requires the development of a wide range of cognitive abilities (**Bloom; Gardner**). In this way process and content are integrated in to the curriculum. It integrates subject matter as it focuses on social life.

Those critics of this design see flaws in determining the scope and sequence. As social life is fluid, how can present learning transfer to future situations? They also argue that it doesn't introduce students to their cultural heritage. It is accused of indoctrinating students to contemporary conditions, which perpetuates the status quo. Advocates counter that the answer is to teach the students to think critically and analytically.

### *Core design*

This design focuses on problems related to students' common activities. It is sometimes referred to as social functions. This problem-centered design is well planned prior to the implementation with the students. It calls for flexibility on the part of the teacher if adjustments are deemed necessary. This design can be equated to learner-centered design in that it focuses on learner needs, concerns and problems. It is distinct because it simultaneously stresses the importance of content.

**Bossing & Faunce** helped popularize core design and made a number of recommendations related to its structure and design process. Some of the recommendations include having the students and teachers select the problems to be addressed, gaining consensus on the importance of the problem or issue, set criteria for selection of problem, clearly define all terms, stay organized, analyze and interpret information and evaluate data and conclusions.

Core design is highly motivating to students because it centers the curriculum around their needs, interests and what is relevant to them. **Alberty & Alberty** conclude that this design allows students to study and confront contemporary issues. It allows students to use the community as a classroom. It also fosters democratic values as defined by **Dewey**. It creates a community of learners as the students work cooperatively to understand and solve a societal or community problem (**Apple, Beane**).

### *Social Problems and Reconstructionist Design*

Those educators that consider themselves of the social orientation or social reconstructionists believe that it is the role of education to directly and indirectly affect social change. The curriculum, according to this design should address social problems

and the activities and projects should be designed to reconstruct society. The curriculum is designed to address economic, political and social problems and that students, through their work will create a more just society.

Educators in the 1920s and 1930s such as **George Counts** addressing the political climate at that time believed society needed to be overhauled and the role of the school system and therefore the curriculum designers was to redesign society by advocating and implementing change. **The Progressive Education Association** was a leading advocacy group. **Counts** accused them of not embracing curriculum design as a true agent for change. His rebuke was an effort to affect social change through the use of education and elicit the support of educational leaders.

Another influential leader in education was **Harold Rugg**. He advocated for using schools to teach critical analysis of society. His support for reconstructionist curriculum was related to his belief that it was a design that should displace the child-centered design. He was a supporter of focusing on the external issues beyond school walls and taking the emphasis off of students as a source of curriculum.

#### *Role of stakeholders in curriculum design*

Stakeholders have multiple roles in the design of curriculum. The roles change depending on the stakeholder. Parents, teachers, administrators, community leaders, politicians, school board members and policy makers each affect the development of curriculum in their own ways. The common characteristic each stakeholder shares is an understanding of the power of education as a catalyst for change (**Pinar**).

The roles of stakeholders range from political advocates to policy makers to school-site leaders to actual curriculum designers and beyond. Parents hold schools

accountable and advocate through committee membership PTOs and PTAs. Legislators mandate curriculum standards as well as content through programs such as character education, sexual education and other programs such as multicultural education and ESOL (**US Department of Education**). Administrators implement the policies mandated and develop the environment for all to work and learn. They direct policy, hire the staff and influence the curriculum by the choices they make and the way they interpret and implement policies.

### *Constraints and policy considerations in curriculum design*

Curriculum designers have certain parameters within which they must work. For example, Florida sets forth standards articulated as the **Sunshine State Standards**. For a curriculum to be adopted, it must meet the standards set forth by the state. In addition, **NCLB** sets forth criteria that must be met such as ELL standards, teacher quality standards and others (**United States Department of Education, 2007**). Universities are mandated to set their curriculum to meet governing and accreditation bodies.

As public k-12 schools, universities and private schools develop curriculum, they must consider policies set forth by several layers of government. Federal, state and local governments set policies and even rule on the interpretation of policies. These decisions can influence every aspect of education from funding, hiring, the actual curriculum and even the instructional material used to realize the curriculum (**Darling-Hammond**).

### *How colleges and school districts might improve curriculum design.*

Recruiting teacher leaders to play an increasing role in the creation of curriculum and the instructional material would be beneficial (**Pinar**). While colleges of education offer degrees in Curriculum & Instruction, there is little emphasis on the actual development of curriculum and instructional material. There is emphasis on research, philosophy, assessment, policy, literature review, history and whatever specialization is selected. Colleges may encourage greater participation in curriculum design by making design at least one course or components of several other courses in education degrees.