

Practical Curriculum Study

Douglas Barnes



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Introduction

Practical Curriculum Study presents a view of how the curriculum should be studied. It is intended for use in colleges of education, teachers' centres and university departments of education, both in initial training and in courses and workshops for experienced teachers. The core and purpose of the book is to be found in the wide range of practical tasks which constitute a large part of the text. Some of these tasks require readers to reflect upon and analyse their preconceptions about teaching; others suggest ways of planning work for their pupils and trying it out; some require them to analyse and evaluate textbooks and worksheets, to study other teachers in action, to consider alternative ways of organising the curriculum, and so on. It is these tasks – which can be carried out by teachers working alone or in groups – that implicitly define a way of studying the curriculum.

The purpose of the text which accompanies the tasks is solely to provide a context for them: it seeks to present the issues briefly and without dogmatism. Explanatory text is often very resistant to interrogation by the reader; indeed textbooks by their simplification and compression of issues tend to discourage critical reading. In this case the tasks encourage reflective and critical thought by giving, as it were, institutional status to comparison, analysis, criticism, discussion and debate. They provide heuristic methods through which students, with or without a tutor, can explore the curriculum as it is, look critically at their own values and purposes, and plan and choose more reflectively than is often possible in the rush of classroom teaching. The reader, whether an experienced teacher or a student in training, is thus characterised as a responsible professional who does not wish to be given ready-made opinions, since teaching should be based upon considered

principles. It would be absurd to treat curriculum theory as an esoteric body of knowledge, and thus ignore the reader's existing understanding of schools and schooling, particularly if he or she is a practising teacher who has daily commerce with aspects of the curriculum. Thus the practical tasks are so ordered as to encourage teachers to form systematic strategies for thinking about the curriculum, and to lead to the discussion of matters of principle as a basis for practical choices. It is in this sense that the book offers a model for the teaching of curriculum theory.

It is probably true that more study of the curriculum goes on in courses labelled 'primary education' or 'the teaching of geography' (or some other subject) or 'remedial and special education' and so on than in courses explicitly concerned with the theory and practice of the curriculum. Thus, although the overall structure of *Practical Curriculum Study* makes it suitable for courses concerned with the school curriculum as a whole, certain parts of it also take into account the needs of more specialised courses. For example, there is an extensive section concerned with life skills and socio-moral education; other sections suggest ways of studying a particular subject-area in detail, while the interests of both primary and secondary-school teachers are kept in mind throughout.

At a time when schools are being urged to take more explicit responsibility for curricula, the discussion of 'Course planning', 'The content of the curriculum', and 'Analysing and evaluating the curriculum' – the topics of the first three chapters of this book – is as useful to experienced teachers as to teachers in training. The final chapter, 'The control of the curriculum' takes some recent trends in the administrative and political control of education as an opportunity for raising permanent issues about the responsibilities of schools, the rights of parents and community, and the powers of administrators.

It is highly unlikely that one style of teaching or one view of curriculum priorities will ever gain universal approval, but this does not mean that any teaching is as good as any other. Although the research evidence is contradictory and imprecise, there are some general characteristics of good teachers that we can take the risk of naming. Good teachers reflect carefully on what they are doing, choosing on a principled basis the materials they use and the activities they give to their pupils: their work is deliberate rather than habitual or directed by fashion. They vary their teaching and organisational style according to the nature of the activity in hand, and according to their view of

its relevance to their pupils' learning. In spite of their clarity of purpose and careful preparation, they are quick to understand their pupils' contributions, understandings and viewpoints. Such teachers enlist the collaboration of pupils and the respect of colleagues. The tasks in this volume are intended to provide a repertoire of critical and analytical strategies that can form a basis for principled teaching, whatever particular educational values a teacher may espouse.

Many of the tasks, originally devised for teachers who worked with me during the last ten years, have since been revised. They are often framed in highly specific terms; actual examples are quoted, particular subject-matter is referred to, or imaginary situations are outlined in some detail. It was impossible, however, to supply so many examples and tasks that every subject specialism and every stage of schooling is catered for on all occasions, so that when the book is used by a lecturer with students, he or she may in some cases wish to select other similar materials more specifically related to the students' interests. Many of the tasks have been planned so that they can best be carried out by a group working together. This approach assumes the importance of colleagues taking joint professional responsibility for the curricula they are making available to their pupils. For this purpose teachers need the experience of working together in developing strategies for planning and analysing, and also in becoming more adept at communicating with one another about these matters. Teachers who do not — who perhaps cannot — talk explicitly to one another about their work are unlikely to persuade the public that they know what they are doing.

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Chapter 1

Course-planning

Teachers' responsibility for planning the curriculum varies from one country to another. In many countries, possibly in most throughout the world, there is an official set of goals for the school system, and curriculum guidelines are published by the government, which are intended to control, tightly or loosely, the content of the curriculum and, often, the teaching methods to be used. At this point all we need to notice is that in all countries teachers have some responsibility for planning their courses, and that in some countries they have – or at least seem to have – a great deal of autonomy.

In England and Wales the legal responsibility for curriculum lies with local education authorities under the loose supervision of the central government Department of Education and Science. In practice much of this control has been delegated, on the one hand, to the schools themselves and, on the other, to examination boards. In the USA, responsibility for curriculum is vested in local School Boards. These School Boards also control the financing of schools, and this has enabled them to play at times a very influential role in curriculum matters, for example in determining what biological topics can be dealt with and what works of literature read. Teachers in the USA and in England and Wales, and in a number of other European countries such as Denmark, are expected to take an active role in course-planning as part of their day-to-day professional work.

To take full responsibility for one's own teaching is not merely to plan and teach a series of lessons, but to be able to justify what one has taught and how one has taught it. This implies considerable reflection upon why one is teaching this rather than that, upon the methods one is using and why they are suitable, and upon what one hopes one's

pupils are gaining from the lessons. The purpose of this section is to provide practice in deliberate planning, and in looking critically at the results of one's own and other people's planning.

Explicit planning of this kind has two purposes: to improve the quality of one's own thinking about one's teaching, and to enable communication with other people. Practised teachers find that they do not need to write down exactly what they are doing and why: they find they can rely upon habit and well-formed intuitions. Yet this is precisely the stage at which they should be reflecting more deliberately upon their teaching; having mastered the elementary classroom skills they are in a position to choose to teach this way rather than that. In a study of an infants' school (Sharp and Green, 1975), one unfortunate teacher called Mrs Carpenter found when asked that she could not explain how she decided when a child was 'ready' to begin reading.

'You see it's all readiness really, when you're with little children, because you can't really (pause) they all do it at different stages and different times. The only thing you can do is just sort of provide as many different sorts of things so they've got every opportunity to go as far as they can – now I can't really, sort of (pause) I don't quite know how to put it (pause) again it's concentration, and if they're not really, sort of, ready, or going to understand something they're doing, then their concentration will go straight away, that's one of the first things.'

Of course, Mrs Carpenter *may* have been making admirable intuitive judgments, but since she was unable to say what criteria she was using, neither she nor anyone else was in a position to judge. It is valuable for every Mrs Carpenter to be clear about what she is trying to do and about the basis of her judgments, since otherwise she is not in a position to consider her teaching critically in order to improve it. Habit and unexamined intuition are the enemy of deliberate responsible choice. Explicitness is thus a tool of professional self-improvement. Moreover, the individual teacher is not the only person concerned: other teachers, parents, the pupils themselves, have a need or a right to know what the teacher's plans are, and why they have been selected. Collaboration and discussion is of great value to all teachers, both the more and less experienced.

In recent years, teachers have often been urged to base their planning

upon explicit objectives. Other writers argue that planning by objectives is not suited to some kinds of learning in schools. Alternative methods, not open to the same criticisms, will be put forward so that the reader can select appropriate methods for different kinds of planning.

General aims

A distinction is usually made between 'aims' and 'objectives'. Aims are more general: a school might include amongst its aims the fostering of self-reliance in pupils. Although this might be useful in providing a reminder to teachers about an overall goal, it does not commit anybody to doing anything in particular. It still remains to be decided what activities, experiences or relationships foster self-reliance, and which areas of the curriculum – indeed which lessons – should include them.

Similarly there may be more general objectives within a subject-area. A science course might have the general objective of encouraging in pupils a critical habit of mind. Again, this is a useful reminder which does not commit anybody. How and when pupils should criticise has to be decided. Some middle path has to be chosen between entirely dogmatic teaching and the encouraging of pupils to criticise everything whether or not they have good grounds for doing so. Thus the more general kinds of aims and objectives are potentially useful, but can prove to be pious statements that are never put into effect. For this reason, many writers advocate the writing of specific objectives, including the extremely specific ones called 'behavioural objectives'. The first tasks in this book are, however concerned with more general aims.

Task 1.1 Writing and analysing general aims

- 1.1.1 Write ten *general aims* that you think would be the most important ones for a primary-school class, or for a remedial group in a secondary school. Choose whichever age-group you are most familiar with. Arrange the aims in order of importance, and justify your choice.
- 1.1.2 Write eight general aims for teaching a particular subject or curriculum area to an age-group of your choice. Put these aims in order of importance and justify your selection of