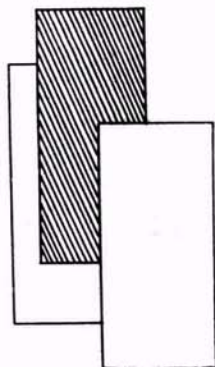


Use of the DESIGN ELEMENT in Curriculum Change



PAUL R. KLOHR

Visiting Professor of Education
University of California, Davis,
on leave from The Ohio State University

THOSE concerned with humanizing the instructional program are faced, time and again, with the difficult problem of how to simplify an increasingly complex curriculum. The proposal made here is that we attack this problem by making more effective use of the design element in curriculum planning.

That we have not paid sufficient attention to curriculum design is obvious if we but examine the current scene. Many seem to assume that curriculum is good if everything judged by someone to be "innovative" is to be found in some form or another in the school. Indeed, the so-called "best" schools, as they frequently are identified in both professional and journalistic writing, are those where everything is being tried. And, so often, the common shoptalk among school people has the flavor of "Do you have *this*, and *this*, and *this*?" as if the more of these one could "have," the better the curriculum.

Clearly, the problem is intensified by the great wealth of new content studies and other resources now available for curriculum making. In many instances, however, there is little concern to assess whether the innovations sought are consistent with one another or that they, in any way, foster common purposes. They may, in fact, cancel each other out.

One might also look at the basic questions which have been raised about bigness and comprehensiveness, themselves, as these affect curriculum. A part of our curriculum folklore holds that we can individualize a program and, in turn, make it more responsive to human needs if it is sufficiently large and complex.

The work of Barker and Gump should cause us to reexamine this assumption. Their study,¹ among other things, raises a real issue between versatility of experience and opportunity for specialization. In short, bigness, comprehensiveness,

¹ Roger G. Barker and Paul V. Gump. *Big School, Small School*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964.

complexity may not, in fact, provide for the versatility of experience we seek in meeting individual differences and in humanizing the instructional program.

More often than not, it seems that the comprehensiveness we have sought to provide for variety leads us down the road to increased standardization in order to cope with the resulting complexity of program. As a consequence, there is a very real danger of overstandardization.

Nature of Design

The design element is central in many applied fields. "Utmost simplicity" is sometimes seen as a desirable characteristic of good design. Our concern in curriculum planning is more than just simplicity. We seek a larger context in order to cope with necessary diversity and complexity.

Virgil Herrick, more than any other curriculum theorist, helped to clarify the role of design as an element in curriculum planning. He defined design this way:

Curriculum design is a statement of the pattern of relationships which exist among the elements of curriculum as they are used to make one consistent set of decisions about the nature of the curriculum of the child.²

With this definition, Herrick then identified several functions to be served by design. He visualized it, for example, as "a definer of the elements of curriculum and their pattern of relationships."³ Moreover, he saw design as having a key function in selecting and organizing learning experiences and in clarifying the roles of teachers and learners in the total curriculum development process.

Herrick's concern that we see curriculum design, or pattern, as he sometimes referred to it, on at least three levels is especially helpful in trying to cope with the complexities of the curriculum process. His concept embraces, in one dimension, the various approaches which we commonly think of as design—namely, patterns such as core, broad fields, or problem-centered programs. At another level, his concept deals with organizational patterns within a single subject field. Finally, we may be concerned with design as it relates to teaching plans, themselves. The point to be emphasized here is that the construct "design" is useful in coping with curriculum problems.

Applications of Design

Several illustrations of how the design element functions in curriculum thinking may help us to see its usefulness.

The NEA Project on Instruction held several seminars prior to the publication of its four major reports. One of these was convened to consider the nature of the various disciplines. To come to grips with the problem of design, the participating scholars posited two components essential to the design of a curriculum—the nuclear and the cortical.

² James B. Macdonald, Dan W. Anderson and Frank B. May, Editors. *Strategies of Curriculum Development*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1965. p. 18.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

The nuclear, they saw as containing "materials from the disciplines, selected to fulfill those objectives of education which are determined primarily by the needs of the developing child and the aims imposed by our culture and society."⁵ The cortical component consists of "materials chosen specifically because they are representative of the major disciplines."⁶

Furthermore, this report conjectures about the ratio of nuclear to cortical components, suggesting that an overall ratio of 60 per cent nuclear and 40 per cent cortical might be desirable. In the earlier grades, the scholars asserted, the cortical part might be as small as 10 percent, rising to as high as 80-90 percent in the last two years of high school.

This report seems to show that this group, starting "fresh" to look at the schools, ended by facing the problem of curriculum design with a set of constructs not dissimilar to the more common general education-specialized education concepts.

John Goodlad, writer of one of the final reports of the Project on Instruction, identified as one of the most serious problems of schools the "anonymity of students who somehow get lost in the curriculum or the relentless organizational machinery of the educational enterprise."⁷

In this report, he addresses himself to the problem of curriculum design and discusses his concept of an organizing center as an element of design. The organizing center, Goodlad contends, may be selected to develop elements within a single discipline, or it may be very broad in scope cutting across subject divisions.⁸

Speculating about the overall pattern of organization, one of the dimensions of Herrick's use of curriculum design, Goodlad predicts a move toward some features of the core and broad fields patterns.

In effect, Goodlad seems to need both the discipline-centered component and the problem-centered component to describe the total curriculum. This position is borne out in one of his recommendations following his analysis of current school curriculum reform—namely, that "special efforts be made to encourage projects designed to combine related disciplines so that concepts from hitherto excluded subjects are included in the pre-college curriculum."⁹

Alice Miel's concrete proposal¹⁰ for an elementary and secondary school curriculum using both the problem-centered and the discipline-centered approach is another example of a curriculum builder using the design elements.

⁵ *The Scholars Look at the Schools*. A Report of the Disciplines Seminar. The Project on Instruction. Washington, D. C.: National Education Association, 1962, p. 51.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷ John I. Goodlad, *Planning and Organizing for Teaching*. Project on Instruction. Washington, D. C.: National Education Association, 1963, p. 112.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁹ John I. Goodlad, *School Curriculum Reform in the United States*. New York: The Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1964, p. 78.

¹⁰ Alice Miel, "Knowledge and the Curriculum." Chapter 4 in *New Insights and the Curriculum*, 1963 Yearbook. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1963, p. 71-104.

A New Resource

These are but a few examples of curriculum planners giving attention to the problem of design. The Phenix¹¹ and the Broudy-Smith-Burnett¹² proposals for general education are also concerned with the design element. In each instance, they require one to face up both to matters of purpose and to simplified, clear-cut curricular designs.

As additional new content studies are made available for curriculum planning, the efforts of those working with curriculum design will become even more significant. Those who seek to humanize the increasingly complex curriculum many schools are drifting into and standardizing can take an important first step by making use of these efforts. We need many alternatives which have been tested out in widely differing school settings.

¹¹ Philip H. Phenix. *Realms of Meaning*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964.

¹² Harry S. Broudy, B. Othanel Smith and Joe R. Burnett. *Democracy and Excellence in American Secondary Education*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1964.

New and Interesting from ASCD

Theories of Instruction

Papers from the ASCD Ninth Curriculum Research Institute

Edited by James B. Macdonald and Robert R. Leeper

Latest in ASCD's popular "Learning" series; focuses upon theory relating to a teaching-learning interaction or instructional system, viewing the behavior of both pupils and teachers in an instructional setting.

Pages: 120

Price: \$2.00

New Curriculum Developments

A report of ASCD's Commission on Current Curriculum Developments
Robert S. Gilchrist, Chairman; Edited by Glenys G. Unruh

To inform you about current major national curriculum projects in subject matter areas and in the fields of learning and technology.

Pages: 106

Price: \$1.75

Strategy for Curriculum Change

Papers from the ASCD Seminar on Strategy for Curriculum Change
Kimball Wiles, Chairman; Edited by Robert R. Leeper

Contains proposals of elements of strategies of curriculum change and raises questions leading to possible additional hypotheses to be tested.

Pages: 88

Price: \$1.25

ASSOCIATION FOR SUPERVISION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

Copyright © 1965 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.