

Implementing the Realms of Meaning as a Process for Selecting Curriculum

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to discuss what constitutes learning for the 21st Century middle level students often emphasize the importance of higher-order thinking, problem-solving skills, and integrating technology into education as part of a coherent curriculum for developing meaningful learning. Equally important is the learners' ability in applying personal knowledge and meanings to the curriculum and content presented. Combining these elements will both amplify and augment student learning, comprehension, and application. 21st Century middle-level students need to acquire the skills, personal knowledge, and experiences for helping to determine their learning and educational processes. By facilitating the exploration of synnoetic and postmodernist tenets, educators can discuss and examine what strategies are effective and tantamount to middle-level students' achievement and success.

How do students acquire, recall, and apply knowledge? From Vygotsky and Piaget, to Dewey and Skinner, educational theorists have produced and espoused a myriad of ideas to help create curricula and delineate the "learning process." Curriculum scholars obviously are in the business of generating knowledge, as are practitioners when they test ideas and techniques to solve curricular problems in their school settings (Wraga, 1997). John Dewey, the leading authority in the progressivism movement, wrote: "our whole policy of compulsory education rises and falls with our ability to make school life an interesting and absorbing experience to the child. We can have compulsory physical attendance at school; but education comes only through the willing attention to and participation in school activities." Foundations of education are built around academic disciplines and activities. It follows that the teacher must select these activities with reference to the child's interests, powers, and capacities (Ellis & Fouts, 2001). One tenet that educational theories share is that human beings are born with some innate abilities that influence thought processes, problem solving ability, and emotional behavior. Sometime, these abilities are reflexive and primal in nature. More often than not, these are learned abilities.

Those who have attempted to integrate various curriculum areas have always faced the question of which subjects lend themselves to this endeavor and how those subjects might most be advantageously combined. Literature and history seem a natural fit, but does it make sense to try to integrate, for instance, music and life sciences or mathematics and art? Persuasive arguments have been made that such is the case (Ellis & Fouts, 2001). In his landmark book on curriculum development, *Realms of Meaning*, Philip Phenix espouses that students and teachers alike are prone to take the curriculum as they find it, as a traditional sequence of separate elements, without ever inquiring into the comprehensive pattern within which the parts are located. Phenix spells his abstract schema for curriculum, based on what he divides into six realms: symbolics, empirics, esthetics, synnoetics, ethics and synoptics. Each realm is comprised of specific curricula and disciplines, all of which are focused on the development of the "total" student – complete in mind, body, and spirit. A student must learn the meaning of words, gestures, and symbols before he/she can respond to them in a "culturally" accepted manner. Learners of all ages can successfully decipher these many messages, images and objects if given the opportunities and learning strategies (Villeneuve, 2003) Student behavior is sometimes guided by society's expectations, rules, and demands. When a student cannot meet these "conditions" set out by society, that student may be classified as defiant. Intelligence is no longer traced to verbal and nonverbal categories, but instead is understood as being reflected in various modes of expression and behavior (Sweeder, Bednar & Ryan, 1998).

Each student has a unique and particular learning style. Curriculum design and the method of instruction should be tailored to meet the student's comprehension and abilities – not the instructors. Unfortunately, in extreme circumstances, labels such as mentally challenged or special needs may be inappropriately applied to students that do not “fulfill” the learning expectations of others. Sweeder, Bednar & Ryan (1998) believe that knowledge can be represented in different modes, and that student's process knowledge in a variety of ways. In reality, that student may be progressing at a rate that is entirely appropriate for his/her own particular learning style.

Wraga (1997) speculates that the general curriculum must, out of necessity, be organized in terms of purposeful activities connecting the general interests of pupils with the social objectives through the use of stimulating as well as immediately satisfying subject matter. In today's global and technologically challenging environment, it is imperative that education focuses upon developing the “total” student. Given the great changes in modern life, there is at present a real need for a new synthesis of knowledge and, correspondingly, for a new grouping of the materials of the school (Wraga, 1997). Instruction in a traditionally based academic education, historically known as the “three r's” (reading, riting, and rithmatic), should go the way of the dodo bird. Vocational education, physical education, technology education and fine arts education should receive the same emphasis as core curriculum subjects.

At this point in time, fine arts educators who are considering integrating music into the regular curriculum will need to find compelling reasons to do so apart from the available research evidence of its effectiveness for increasing learning (Ellis & Fouts, 2001). Surely, there has to be more than one way to “skin a cat.” After all, as the old adage goes “all work and no play make for a long and boring day.” One way to increase the esthetic character of education is to stress “estheticization” of the lessons. Fromel, Vasendova & Krapkova (2000) define this “estheticization” using these esthetic features repeatedly:

- applying esthetic episodes,
- using music that motivates performance,
- using a suitable color scheme, and
- Determining esthetic settings (cleanliness, lighting, mirrors, etc.)

Research indicates that the brain seeks patterns and that this is a basic process Sweeder, Bednar & Ryan (1998), believe that inter and intrapersonal, spatial, musical and kinesthetic intelligences are true intelligences like their more traditionally accepted mathematical/logical and linguistic counterparts.

The aim of education is to indoctrinate students into a broad array of these disciplines and subjects, in an attempt to develop a comprehensive understanding of the culture and society in which we live. According to Ballangee-Morris & Stuhr (2001), the term and idea of culture is often misunderstood and thought of as a static and esoteric entity that is outside of one's lived experience. On the contrary, culture is the heritage of the future that provides a dynamic blueprint of how we live our lives (Villeneuve, 2003). Students apparently resist information that is fragmented, personally meaningless, and presented in isolation. Conversely, it is noted that knowledge is learned more quickly and remembered longer when constructed in a meaningful context in which connections among ideas are made. (Ellis & Fouts, 2001). Thoughtful attention to the interaction of research and curriculum development can assist students' engagement with ideas and their construction of robust, productive, personal meanings. Such possibilities lie near the heart of America's great experiment in educational democracy (Davis, 2002).

Is it more fun to be bad than it is to be good? Are human beings born with a sense of right and wrong, or are these learned behaviors? What is ethical and what is not – who develops the standards? The answers to these questions are important as the majority of students will have had little, if any, life experiences to draw upon. But an ethic of responsibility also requires that we, as adults, must demonstrate thoughtfulness in our daily lives, a respect for others, and moral discernment in our choices. We cannot expect our children to aspire to higher standards than we ourselves exhibit (Cichucki, 2005). Students will inevitably make mistakes and need guidance during the early learning years. Young people today are being bombarded with information - they need the skills to decode that information (Villeneuve, 2003). Mistakes are a natural and expected part of the learning process. Mistakes and their resolutions may be successfully encoded into the student's memory for later recall and usage. If mistakes are not understood and accepted. It will lead to frustration for all concerned parties. When adults require specific behaviors from a child and that child cannot conceptualize or understand what is expected, repeated failures will occur.

Pinar (2004) asserts that synoptic textbooks have played an influential role in the advancement of U.S. curriculum studies, in that curriculum studies scholar's research "through lines" along which subjectivity, society, and intellectual content in and across the academic disciplines run. Synoptic textbooks typically play a vital role in the synthesis and dissemination of codified, specialized knowledge (Wraga, 1997). Contemporary curriculum research is nothing less than the intellectual formation of a public sphere in education, a resuscitation of the progressive project in contemporary subjective and social terms, in which we come to understand that self-realization and democratization are inextricably intertwined. Education must take a more student initiated approach in incorporating curriculum. This may encourage student ownership of their educational experiences (Villeneuve, 2003). We, curriculum studies scholars, must renew our commitment to the pedagogical processes that require the psycho-social and intellectual development of the subjectively-existing individual (Pinar, 2004).

In conclusion, virtually all the research on cognitive and curriculum development shows students to be far more capable than many adults suspect. Students should not be passive receivers of stimuli, but rather active seekers of information. Political leaders and policy makers have yet to fully understand the intricate details of curriculum planning, student instruction, and cognitive development and learning styles. This is borne out by the myriad of unfunded state and federal mandates and unrealistic educational expectations currently being thrust upon public education. A push is at hand in Texas that would require school districts to spend a minimum of 65% of the total education dollars directly upon core academic instruction. This leaves very little, 35%, left for all other educational expenses (administration, staff development, ancillary services, athletics, fine arts education and vocational education) – it would appear that these politicians and policy makers do not consider these costs relevant to educating students. Especially during this time when the academic field of education is under savage attack by politicians, it is incumbent upon us to maintain our professional dignity by reasserting out commitment to the intellectual life of our field (Pinar 2004). One form such a reassertion of our intellectual commitment might take is the study of those academic subjects that speak to social and subjective reconstruction in this time of right-wing authoritarianism and cultural decline (Pinar, 2004). The ultimate question is who is responsible for ensuring that a child receives the proper instruction, tools, and environment to develop the cognitive skills necessary to function as a contributing member of society?

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