Reflective Logs

01/15/06

Although I had been in the field of education for more than ten years, including doing research in China and teaching as a teaching assistant in the United States, I had never seriously thought about the curriculum issues before I took the course “Curriculum Construction.” What is curriculum? How do we design an effective curriculum? Although I may have had some implicit assumptions for these questions, I did not pay much attention to them. My career goal now is to be an instructional designer. For sure, instructional designers deal with various curricula and even are involved in developing curriculum. To be a good instructional designer, you cannot avoid thinking about and exploring these questions explicitly and seriously.

What Is a Curriculum?

For me, the first important thing to know is “what is a curriculum?” It is a starting point to deal with curriculum. Everyone has been a student at one time or another, nearly everyone has some experience with a curriculum. But, what is a curriculum? Individual performing different roles will generally have different understandings of curriculum. Similarly, differences in educational values lead to different idea about curriculum. According to Walker (1990), the curriculum refers to the content and purpose of an educational program together with their organization. In other words, a curriculum for a given educational program is:

♦ What to be studied and learned – the content
For what purpose the content is studied and learned – the purpose

How the content is studied and learned - organization

Basically, I agree with Decker’s definition but think it incomplete. Decker’ definition missed one important aspect of curriculum – assessment. How do we know how well students achieved the intended purpose? There should be recommended or suggested assessment strategies and activities in a curriculum so that the teaching can be informed and learning can be improved. For me, I would like to add one more item to his definition as my own working definition. The new definition now includes the following four aspects

- What to be studied and learned – the content
- For what purpose the content is studied and learned – the purpose
- How the content is studied and learned – organization
- How to assess how well students have achieved the intended purpose - assessment

In any real curriculum, content, purpose, organization, and assessment form one whole, the curriculum itself. Now, I know that a complete curriculum should contain the content, the purpose, assessment, and organization. To design a curriculum is not difficult, but to design a good curriculum is not easy. The next logical step is to know how to select and manipulate these components so that the curriculum is an effective curriculum.
Is there an ideology underlying any curriculum design?

Curriculum ideologies are defined as beliefs about what schools should teach, for what ends, and for what reasons (Eisner, 1994). Is there an ideology underlying any curriculum design? My answer is yes. Even if you do not explicitly use an ideology to guide your design, there must be something, which you value and think import, to guide your design. The ideology implicitly applied in your design may come from your experience and even intuition and even might be coincidently sharing same views with a widespread ideology. They might be appropriate or might be inappropriate or even incorrect for the curriculum you designed. The question here is not “whether there is an ideology underlying your curriculum design” but “what ideology is appropriate for your curriculum design.”

Any curriculum design should be grounded in a framework or approach which the designer believe appropriate to the curriculum he or she designs. Question “which approach is appropriate?” is not easy question. It deals with not only the approach per se but also the location and learners, and the content of the curriculum. My approach is to pick up the elements from various relevant ideologies which I think appropriate and combine them to form my own ideology.

There are various influential curriculum ideologies such as Religious Orthodoxy, Rational Humanism, Progressivism, Cognitive Pluralism, Critical Theory, and Reconceptualism (Eisner, 1994). However, some elements of these ideologies might be
too idealistic to be practical and feasible. For example, Progressivism claims that students’ internal and personal needs should be respected in the creation of learning activities (Eisner, 1994). If every student’s needs can be respected and met in learning activities, it would be great. But, if a class has 50 students who are widely diversified, to meet every student’s needs is almost a mission impossible. Another example in Progressivism ideology is that “Relate the problematic situation to the child’s experience” (Eisner, 1994). For several students, it will be fine. But more students, less it is possible to be implemented in curriculum. Some elements of an ideology actually just represent a direction for which we should pursue but the destination cannot be reached in most real life situations. As a designer, we have to seek balance between being ideal and practical.

The interpretation of some claims of ideologies has to be put in a certain social context. For example, Cognitive Pluralism maintains that “different intelligences have equal merit.” (Eisner, 1994). I admit that different intelligences per se do have equal merit. However, I do not think different intelligences have equal social merit or value. Different intelligences are valued differently in different societies or in different time. For example, Logical-mathematical intelligence was more valued than other intelligences twenty years ago in China. But, now linguistic intelligence is more valued than logical-mathematical intelligence. What a student is interested in and values might not be valued in the society he or she lives in. Education is to educate students so that they can be a productive person in the society. Therefore, curriculum only based on students’ interests may lead students to a less productive life. In my opinion, a good education should not be totally based on
students’ interests, but should lead students (may need to influence them to change their interests) to what the society as a whole values. If spatial intelligence, musical intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence are not valued at all by a society but enjoyed by a few students, do we need to design a curriculum to meet all these interests? Is yes, what they will do after they graduate?

In summary, my point is that there should be something there to guide our curriculum design. We can call it ideology, principles, guidelines, or something else. My strategy is: look for the existing curriculum ideologies and see if there is any element which can fit into our specific case (the site, the learners, the content area, etc.); if yes, pick it and combine them with elements from other resources to form your own ideology for this specific case. The origin of our own ideology is not only limited to the existing curriculum ideologies. Its elements can also come from educational theories, research papers, and even our own experience. What matters is that they should fit into our specific case.
Enduring Understanding

Teaching for in-depth understanding is a vital aim of schooling and also effective method to design curriculum (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998; Gardner, 1999). Enduring understanding is a critical issue in curriculum design and also a difficult issue to understand. To understanding what enduring understanding exactly means, I read through almost the whole book “Understanding By Design.”

The word understanding is a complex and confusing. According to Wiggins & McTighe (1998), to understand is to make connections and bind together our knowledge into something that makes sense of things. Without understanding we might see only unclear, isolated, or unhelpful facts. But the word also implies doing, not just a mental act: A performance ability lies at the heart of understanding. To understand is to be able to wisely and effectively use – transfer – what we know, in context; to apply knowledge and skill effectively, in realistic tasks and settings. When we understand, we have a fluent and fluid grasp, not a rigid, formulaic grasp based only on recall and “plugging in.”

According to Wiggins & McTighe (1998), enduring understandings are framed as full sentence generalizations or propositions. To be a worthy understanding, then, the proposition must be enduring: The understanding has endured over time and across cultures. The understanding should endure in the mind of the student because it will help the student make sense of the content and it will enable transfer of the key ideas.
To understand the enduring understanding for our curriculum is a painstaking process. First we did not realize that there were two types of enduring understanding. Understandings are of two kinds, topical and overarching. Topical understandings are unit-specific, and overarching understandings are broader and offer a possible bridge to other units and courses. We developed these two types of enduring understanding, each have 4 versions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overarching Enduring Understanding for the Whole Curriculum – Conversational Chinese</th>
<th>Topical Enduring Understanding for Unit 4 - Restaurant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V1: How to use the language correctly, and how to be responsible for their own learning</td>
<td>V1: Be able to use correct and appropriate conversational Chinese to effectively communicate with waiters/waitress/cashier to order a meal, ask for drinks, and pay bills and also be aware of cultural things associated with having meal at Chinese restaurant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V2: How to use basic conversational Chinese to communicate correctly and appropriately (in terms of grammar and culture) in Chinese-speaking situations.</td>
<td>V2: Be able to use correct conversational Chinese to effectively navigate through the process of having meals in restaurants in China in a way which is culturally sound.</td>
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<tr>
<td>V3: Students will understand that, to effectively and wisely interact and communicate with Chinese-speaking communities in the world, they have to be able to ♦ use correct Chinese (in terms of pronunciation and grammar) to communicate ♦ use the language in a way which is appropriate to the context and is culturally sound. ♦ use information from Chinese-language resources to complete authentic tasks</td>
<td>V3: Students should understand that, to effectively navigate through the process of having meals in restaurants in China, they have to be able to use correct conversational Chinese to communicate in a way which is culturally sound.</td>
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<tr>
<td>V4: Students will understand how to use basic conversational Chinese to effectively and wisely interact and communicate in Chinese-speaking situations. They have to be able to: ♦ use correct Chinese (in terms of pronunciation and grammar) to communicate ♦ use the language in a way which is appropriate to the context and is culturally sound. ♦ Navigate real life situations and environments that require flexibility and the ability to express wants and needs ♦ Ability to seek out Chinese language information from a variety resources</td>
<td>V4: Students will understand that, to effectively navigate through the process of having meals in restaurants in China, they have to be able to use correct conversational Chinese to communicate in a way which is culturally sound and may need to acquire information from available resources to support this task.</td>
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</tbody>
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I do not think in-depth understanding applies to every situation. There are clearly circumstances when teaching in-depth understanding is neither feasible nor desirable. For instance, learning English alphabet; acquiring certain technical skills, such as keyboarding; or developing the basics in foreign language do not call for in-depth understanding. In some cases, the developmental level of students prohibits the application of teaching in-depth understanding, because students might not be capable to understand what is taught. In other cases, the purpose of a course or program might be just familiar with certain topics. There is neither the time nor the need to go into depth on everything, and it would be counterproductive when the goal is to convey a sense of the larger whole.
Curriculum Decisions

In addition to ideological positions competing on what schools should teach and for what ends, there exist other agencies which influence curriculum decisions in a political marketplace. Responsibility for curriculum decisions and actions is dispersed very widely among school personnel, parents, public officials, professional organizations, and a host of voluntary groups pursuing public and private interests (Walker, 1990). Curriculum decisions are also influenced by politics and religions. For example, back to 50’s, China had a strong relationship with former Soviet Union. Soviet Union’s curriculum had influenced China for almost 30 years. As the tie with Soviet was broken, the curriculum in China was gradually shaped by Japan and the United States.

In this welter of overlapping and competing influences, no single agency is adequately powerful in determining what the school curriculum shall. There is a political process that inevitably must be employed to move from competing with each other to practical action. In pluralistic and democratic societies, the process almost always leads to certain compromises (Eisner, 1994). As curriculum designers, we should be aware that our power in determining the curriculum is very limited and therefore we should take into account all other possible influential factors and be practical instead of idealistic.
Ongoing Assessment

Assessment is the giving and using of feedback against standards to enable improvement and the meeting of goals (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Understanding can be developed and evoked only through multiple methods of ongoing assessment, with far greater attention paid to formative and performance assessment than is typical (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Effective classroom assessment is guided by three fundamental rules (McTighe & Ferrara, 1998):

♦ Inform teaching and improve learning: assess regularly throughout the unit or course of study

♦ Use multiple sources of information

♦ Provide valid, reliable, and fair measurements
  - an assessment measures what it was intended to measure.
  - an assessment should produce consistent assessment results.
  - all students should be given an equal chance to show what they know and can do.

There is no problem that we can design and apply multiple methods of ongoing assessment which is formative and performance-based and which can assess what we want to assess as well as reliable and fair. However, if we find the learning activities failed to elicit expected learning results, the key issue here is how to adjust the learning so that the current students can still benefit from the adjustment. From my own
experience, the current common practice is that, there are assessments to assess what they are intended to assess, but no recommendation and adjustments are made to improve learning. So in my opinion, there should be a suggested rescuing plan in the curriculum on what should be done if the instructional activities failed to produce expected learning outcomes. However, the problem is, in a very tight schedule (e.g. ten weeks) with so many topics needed to be covered, how can we adjust the instructional activities to enable expected learning outcomes but not affect the scheduled progress? Maybe, technology can solve this problem, but I am not sure. All lectures can be recorded and put online so students can review them. The teacher can also put online and explain what are still unclear to and are not understood by some students with online assessment to further assess their understanding. By doing so, the teacher does not need to use in-class time to rescue the learning and can still keep pace with the originally scheduled progress.
Big Picture

Now it has almost reached the end of quarter. After ten-week intensive and productive studying, it is the time to see the big picture and show my takeaways from the course “Curriculum Construction” – the design process: Backward Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

1. Study the site (affordances and constraints) and learners (needs, interests, developmental level, prior knowledge)

2. Select the curriculum ideology (ideologies) which is (are) appropriate to the site, learners, and the subject area

3. Study standards (national, state, district, or institutional) if there are, find big ideas, and formulate the enduring understanding if applicable.

4. **Derive specific learning outcomes** from the enduring understanding: knowledge and skills

5. **Determine acceptable evidence** for expected learning outcomes and desired understandings: assessments
   a. Inform teaching and improve learning: assess regularly throughout the unit or course of study
   b. Use multiple sources of information
   c. Provide valid, reliable, and fair measurements

6. **Plan learning experiences and instruction**
a. What enabling knowledge (facts, concepts, and principles) and skills
(procedures) will students need to perform effectively and achieve desired
results?
b. What activities will equip students with the needed knowledge and skills?
c. What will need to be taught and coached, and how should it best be taught,
in light of performance goals?
d. What materials and resources are best suited to accomplish these goals?

   a. Ask scholars in a field related to the topic comment primarily on the
      content
   b. Curriculum experts and educators review both content and the pedagogical
      foundation of the lessons.
   c. Following their comments, the lessons are edited.
   d. Then, classroom field-tested in diverse settings with comments from
      written forms and interview
   e. Final editing based on feedback from educator and students

8. Dissemination (Mukai, 2000)

Basically, our curriculum design followed the above procedures. Due to time constraint,
we did not follow Mukai’s evaluation procedures to evaluate our curriculum except some
feedback from the teacher. The followings are some highlights during my design journey:

♦ **Still Not Sure**: the enduring understanding

♦ **Most Difficult:**
How to integrate all the elements of the approach we employed into the design.

How to align each part so they are consistent.

How to design rubric

♦ **Want to Know More:** what should be done if the instructional activities failed to produce expected learning outcomes. Do we need to suggest a rescuing plan in the curriculum? Or is it not curriculum designers’ responsibility?

**Reference:**


