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Author's Note

My favorite definition of *curriculum* is "path:" the planned, charted-out, and workable path toward worthy and reachable learning objectives.

Abstract

Description of an approach to evaluation in relation to a definition of curriculum planning process. An unpublished paper, The Maclellan Foundation, 2000

If you don't know where you are going, it will be difficult to know when you get there. A silly saying, for sure, but the common sense it suggests is worth thinking about. If you can't describe your purpose, it will be very difficult to determine the value of your outcomes. Effective evaluation depends on well-formed objectives and a way to keep track of your progress. Almost any journey calls for a map. Without such a map it is hard to arrive at your intended destination.

It helps to reflect on what a useful map needs to tell us as we make routing decisions. Three pieces of information are needed, each dealing with something that we bring to the map and something the map shows us about the information we need.

1. Where are we now and how is that location shown on the map?
2. Where are we intending to arrive and how is that shown on the map?
3. What routes and landmarks connect where we are with where we want to be?

All analogies break down sooner or later. Especially for matters in which learning is a major issue, the breakdown tends to occur early. Evaluating learning outcomes is far more complex than evaluating movement on the flat plane of a map. Even in its simplest form, assessment of memorized information, learning is concerned with high-worth outcomes.

Curriculum is far more than a list of courses or learning objectives. One of the basic definitions of curriculum is a helpful guide for planning the teaching-learning process. Curriculum is the concern for four questions (the first and second are co-existent) about *what* should be taught *why*, to *whom*, and *under what conditions*? This definition is deliberately in the form of a question. The most vital questions for curriculum planning are imbedded in this list. All these questions are deeply interrelated and can be useful as a guide for planning.

1. & 2. What should be taught why? (*The purpose of connecting what and why, with not even a comma between, is to emphasize the importance of planning in such a way that **what is to be taught** is always considered in the context of **why it should be taught.***)
3. To whom should it be taught?

4. Under what conditions should it be taught?

Discussion of teaching and learning commonly divides into two vantage points, the teacher's and the learner's. Both are surely important and valid. Educational planning often defaults to a focus on the teacher. The teacher is easier to control, to select, to train, to impose commands upon, to manage, and to expect to behave in more predictable ways. Learners and the learning process are more likely to be seen as unpredictable outcome variables. Teachers will be taught to do certain things in order to produce certain changes in the learners. But the gap between intentions and results is sometimes frustrating. Thus it is easier and more comfortable to talk about our plans for teaching than our plans for learning! So the list above can be transformed if we are willing to deal with these matters in more detail.

- 1a. What should be taught?
- 1b. Of what value will this be to the learners?

- 2a. Why should this be taught?
- 2b. What is the justification for spending time and effort on this material?

- 3a. To whom should it be taught?
- 3b. In what ways will *these* learners benefit? What will substantially help them?
- 3c. Will it be worthwhile for these learners? What will be accomplished at the conceptual level? Will we get beyond concrete facts?

- 4a. Under what conditions should it be taught?
- 4b. What learning circumstances and environment are needed for them to learn it effectively?

Educational assessment, especially when attempting to determine the worth of learning outcomes, proceeds most successfully within a concept of curriculum that connects the *what* and the *why*. The questions above will lead toward high-value information. They will be useful as the leader of the project. The following summation of the planning process will be useful as a guide for the evaluation plan itself.

What do we intend to teach?

Why do we want to teach this?

What is our intention and hope in this?

Why do we think that it will be worth the effort?

What qualities, characteristics, and backgrounds are needed in order that learners can be effective?

Why have we selected these learners? Are they the right ones?

What materials, at what reading levels and in what languages, will the learners be able to use? What learning situations will be used? Do these resources allow the right combination of didactic and experiential learning opportunities?

Why have these *materials* been chosen? **Why** have these *experiences* been planned?

Thoughtful reflection on these questions can keep the learning experience on track toward worthwhile outcomes.