A Note on Curriculum and Teaching Methods

The concept Curriculum is a complex notion. Various meanings have been attached to it. [1] A careful analysis of Curriculum shows that the notions "plan", "content", "objectives" and "method" are intimately connected to Curriculum which should not be completely identified with any one of these concepts. In this short paper I propose to discuss two questions: (a) Is the teaching method distinct from the Curriculum? and, (b) Can we decide prior to experience which methods ought to be applied in the educational process? Answers to these questions are meant to help clarify the relationship between the Curriculum and teaching method.

Before dealing with these questions it is important to indicate the meanings usually given "teaching method", and to indicate some relevant distinctions between these meanings. By teaching methods, we generally mean "the discussions or lecture techniques used, the experiments done, the surveys conducted, the demonstrations given, the acting pupils do, and so on."[2] According to Dewey, "Method means that arrangement of subject matter which makes it most effective in use."[3] In brief, teaching method refers to the ways in which a certain content is imparted to the student. Method, then, is distinct both from objectives and content. This does not mean that content and method are not closely related: content may depend on method or vice-versa although a change in content does not necessarily call for a change in method.

In *Democracy and Education,* and other of his works, Dewey insists that equal weight must be accorded to method and subject matter. Some educationists, inspired by Dewey's remarks on the importance of the student in the educational process, have fallen into what Eisner calls "the fallacy of formalism".[4] Their mistake results from an over-emphasis on method. Such curriculum theorists and educationists as Carl Bereiter, Carl Rogers, Richard W. Burns and Gary D. Brooks believe that the planning of an eductional process ought to focus on how children learn rather than on what they learn.[5] They argue that the rapid changes in actual knowledge requires that the goal of education be to help the child in learning how to learn. They conclude that the Curriculum is primarily concerned with questions of method. This results in an imbalance between the method and the content of the Curriculum. Content tends to be neglected to the extent that it becomes almost non-existent. Eisner rightly comments: "To argue that the form of eduction is the most important aspect of schooling is to disregard the very concepts and criteria that make inquiry [i.e., inquiry into the educational process] possible in the first place."[6]

This is a mistake often commited by those who identify the development of cognitive processes as the main function of the Curriculum. Their main concern is with "the refinement of intellectual operations." They aim at developing content-independent cognitive skills applicable to all learning situations, and at understanding the process by which learning occurs, believing that when cognitive skills applicable to all learning situations are developed and employed, the student will have "a sort of intellectual autonomy that will enable him to make his own selections and to interprete the situations encountered beyond the context of schooling."[7]

The emphasis in this approach is solely on method, to the extent that the fact that learning must be of something is forgotten. In understanding certain processes by which learning occurs and/or in developing certain cognitive skills, content must be taken into account if coherent results are to be produced. The problem with this view is that it stresses the learning process per se. By nature, "method" does not allow for this.

Let us turn to the first question: Is the teaching method distinct from the Curriculum? I have argued elsewhere that the Curriculum implies a certain notion of a plan, and that it involves a subject matter and objectives. [8] Given this view it is also the case that the Curriculum involves some (i.e., teaching) method which although closely related to the Curriculum is distinct from it. If the Curriculum involves an educational plan to be carried out, and a content to be taught, this plan has to be actualized in a certain way and the content has to be transmitted in a certain way. And just as the <u>way</u> one runs is not identical to the running itself, or the course one is running, or the finish-line one wants to reach, so the teaching method is formally distinct form content, objectives, and plan implied by the Curriculum, as well as from the Curriculum itself.

Let us now consider the second question: Can we decide prior to experience which methods to apply? Are there any methods that ought to be applied universally and necessarily? In other words, is there an ideal teaching method? I will discuss this issue with reference to the work of Dewey and William Hare.

In the chapter "The Natue of Method" in *Democracy and Education,* Dewey's contention is that method and subject matter should not be isolated from one another although in principle (or formally) the two notions can be distinguished. This view about the relations of method and subject matter is tied to Dewey's continuous opposition to dualism.[9]

When he writes about "some evils" in education that arise from a dualistic position on method and subject matter, Dewey makes remarks pertinent to the issue discussed here:

> There can be no discovery of a method without cases to be studied. The method is derived from *observation of what actually happens,* with a view to seeing that it happens better next time.[10] (My emphasis)

Criticizing the dualistic position in education he points out:

> Methods have then to be authoritatively recommended to teachers, instead of being an expression of their own intelligent observations. Under such circumstances, they have a *mechanical* uniformity, assumed to be alike for all minds.[11] (My emphasis)

And in the same section he states:

> Instead of being encouraged to attack their topics directly, experimenting with methods that seem promising and learning to discriminate by the consequences that accrue,

> *it is assumed that there is one fixed method* to be followed.[12] (My emphasis)

Finally, in his section "Method as General and as Individual" he stresses that:

> Imposing *an alleged uniform general method upon everybody* breeds mediocrity in all but the very exceptional.[13] (My emphasis)

Dewey's position can be summarized thus:
1. methods do depend on observation and experience,
2. one cannot assume one general, universal fixed method, nor can one assume methods applicable in all cases,
3. the selection of a method(s) depend(s) on particular situation(s) (or "experience").

William Hare, in *Open-Mindedness and Education*, does not directly address the second question raised in this paper. He asks: "Are some methods in principle at odds, or in accord, with open-mindedness?" This eventually leads to our question, for according to Hare, open-mindedness is the primary aim of an educational process. Hare defends the view that methods of formal instruction such as lecturing or listening do not necessarily exclude open-mindedness. Formal instruction is not incompatible per se with open-mindedness. He defends this position by analyzing the notion of formal instruction and the range of methods usually considered to fall under formal instruction. He also contends that:

> One cannot tell *in advance of experience* whether or not a particular teaching technique or method will be successful, i.e., will eventuate in the student learning.[14] (My emphasis)

Both Dewey and Hare address themselves to the issue of whether or not it is possible, prior to experience, to decide which method(s) ought to be used. The question I want to pose at this stage is this: Is it possible, prior to experience, to decide whether or not a certain method(s) ought *NOT* to be used? Are there any methods that ought always to be excluded from an educational process for reasons which can be provided prior to investigation of the situation itself? The answer seems to be 'Yes'. The reasons that can be provided are moral ones. Given certain moral principles, certain methods can be determined prior to experience to be morally objectionable. If a method is morally objectionable it ought to be excluded.

This point has been implied at various points in R.S. Peters' work, particularly in discussion or analysis of task and achievement aspects of 'education'.[15] Unfortunately it is overshadowed by other issues more central to his analysis.

Peters' general argument is that the words "educating people" imply the use of "morally legitimate procedures". Given "minimal moral demands, which are connected with respect for persons," we must exclude certain procedures.[16] He believes methods such as classical conditioning, brainwashing, some forms of drill, perhaps, giving children orders, and discouragement of individual choice ought to be excluded on moral grounds.

Let us return to Dewey and Hare, both of whom agree on at least two points: (1) The methods we use ought to be morally legititmate, and (2) We cannot decide prior to experience which methods we ought to use. In other words, we cannot determine what methods ought to be universally applied.

I believe that (2) does not exclude the view that we can decide prior to experience that certain methods ought *NOT* to be used because they are morally objectionable. I do not believe that this applies to the entire range of teaching methods. In certain cases, such as training, it is difficult to decide prior to experience whether methods are morally objectionable. But there are cases, such as classical conditioning, which are more straightforward. If certain minimal moral demands are decided upon and accepted prior to experience or application of a particular teaching method, it follows that these demands should be taken into account in deciding whether or not to use a certain method. In some instances this decision can be made prior to experience whatever the situation. Given a moral code which rests on the respect of human beings for example, there is no situation which calls for classical conditioning and at the same time does not go against certain minimal moral demands.

In this short paper I attempted to point out (a) that it is a mistake to identify Curriculum with teaching methods, and (b) that although one might not want to propose universal teaching methods prior to experience, one can, prior to experience, say some crucial things, that apply universally, about what one ought to exclude from a teaching method.

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FOOTNOTES

1 See, Ian Austin Christopher Rule, *A Philisophical Inquiry into the Meaning(s) of "Curriculum"* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, New York University, 1973). Rule lists 119 different definitions of the term 'curriculum'. Today, one could add a score of new definitions to the list. See also, John P. Portelli, *Philosophical Approaches to the Justification of the Curriculum* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, McGill University, 1984), especially Chapters 2 and 3. The major definition of Curriculum can be classified under three broad categories: Curriculum defined in terms of 'content', Curriculum defined in terms of 'experience' ('activities'), Curriculum defined in terms of 'plan'.

2 Paul H. Hirst, "The Contribution of Philosophy to the Study of Curriculum," in *Changing the Curriculum*, (London: London University Press, 1968), ed., J.F. Kerr, p.41.

3 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 164.

4 Elliot Eisner and Elizabeth Vallence, eds., *Conflicting Conceptions of Curriculum*, (Berkely, California: McCutchen Publ. Co., 1974), p. 14.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 6.

8 See, *Philosophical Approaches to the Justification of the Curriculum*, Chapter 3.

[9] "The idea that mind and the world of things and persons are two separate independent realms -- a theory which philosophically is known as dualism -- carries with it the conclusion that method and subject matter of instruction are separate affairs." *(Democracy and Education, p. 164).*

[10] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education,* p. 168.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., pp. 169-170.

[13] Ibid., p. 173.

[14] William Hare, *Open-Mindedness and Education,* (Montreal: McGill Queen's Press, 1979), p. 102.

[15] See, "Education as Initiation," in *Philosophical Analysis and Education,* ed., R.G. Archambault, (New York: Humanities Press, 1972). p. 88: *Ethics and Education,* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 41: and "What is an Educational Process," in *The Concept of Education,* ed., R.S. Peters, (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1967), pp.3-4.

[16] R.S. Peters, "What is an Educational Process," p. 3.