

Curriculum and Subject Matter

The English word 'curriculum' is derived from the Latin word *curriculum* meaning 'a course', 'a race' or 'a running'. This suggests a process, the idea of going through something which has a beginning, a development and an end. The secondary meaning of curriculum was 'career'. Both the primary and the secondary meanings of curriculum referred to temporal space and to non-temporal endeavours or intellectual pursuits. The expression 'curriculum vitae', then referred to both intellectual and non-intellectual pursuits. Today curriculum in the educational context refers primarily, if not solely, to intellectual pursuits. Actually curriculum is related to learning in a broad sense, incorporating more than the "cognitive" aspect (what one learns, how this is brought about, with what objectives, how it is planned, evaluated, etc.). This suggests that the concept curriculum is a complex notion. Various meanings have been attached to it. (1) A careful analysis of curriculum shows that the notions of "plan", "content or subject matter", "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 the following question: Is the notion of subject matter inherent in that of curriculum, or, does the notion curriculum make sense without that of subject matter? Answers to this question are meant to help clarify the relationship between the curriculum and subject matter.

It is worthwhile before attempting to answer this question to investigate briefly what the notion of subject matter means, and where it fits in the educational context. K. B. Henderson identifies three uses of the term 'subject matter': (a) as *concreta*, (b) as the content of the conventional subject taught, (c) as knowledge. (2)

According to the first of these, subject matter refers to something physical. A chemistry teacher could say "I am teaching the nitrates this week", or an English Literature teacher, "I am teaching the plays of Harold Pinter. Henderson argues that although it is meaningful to say these things, it would not make sense for the Chemistry teacher to say "I am teaching certain *concreta*". What these teachers mean to say is that they are teaching students something *about* the nitrates or the plays of Harold Pinter. Subject matter in such cases does not refer to *concreta*.

If subject matter is 'the content of conventional subjects taught', what is indicated is *what* should be *included* in subject matter. What should be included falls under "conventional subjects" or "traditional disciplines." (3) The underlying principle here is that we should teach only the disciplines. This, Jane R. Martin points out, "may be interpreted as a principle governing school subjects (Pr.S.) or as a principle governing school subject matter selection (Pr.S.M.)." (4) While according to Pr.S., every school subject falls under a discipline, according to Pr.S.M., a subject matter falls under a subject and there is therefore no need for a subject to fall under a corresponding discipline. The important point here is that 'discipline' covers a broader area than 'subject', and 'subject' a broader area than 'subject matter'.

The third and perhaps the most crucial usage of 'subject matter' is 'subject matter as knowledge'. Following Ryle, Henderson makes the distinction between knowing that and knowing how. The former he calls "cognitive or verbal" knowledge, the latter "performance" knowledge. Henderson defends the position that subject matter should properly refer to cognitive knowledge. His main argument against the inclusion of performative knowledge is that this type of knowledge is essentially constituted of "behaviours" which are a kind of *concreta*. According to Henderson, if one considers teaching as a triadic relation (X teaches Y to Z), the *only* substitute for Y is verbal knowledge. (5)

Such a narrow view of subject matter as this one creates problems of inclusion. What of the teaching of skills, or for that matter the teaching of developing dispositions, as part of the teaching process? The problem is that, just as we speak about X teaching Z that Malta is an island in the Mediterranean, we *also* speak about X teaching Z how to add, how to perform a certain experiment, or how to behave. In these cases Z is not acquiring a body of *facts*, but learning how to *do* certain activities, acquiring certain dispositions. Skills and dispositions may be included in subject matter. If they are not, it will not be possible to include such things as art appreciation, moral education or reading in a curriculum.

This relates to Dewey's remarks about the nature or a subject matter: "It consists of the facts observed, recalled, read, and talked about, and the ideas suggested, in course of a development of a situation having a purpose." (6) The "facts observed, recalled, read and talked about" refer to propositional knowledge, while "ideas suggested in course of a development of a situation having a purpose" refer to performative knowledge (since for Dewey "ideas" are always related to actions and dispositions).

Let us now consider where the notion of subject matter fits in the educational context. If one holds that education is a process of initiation into a form of life (7), and that this process consists among other things of the activities of teaching and learning, then subject matter will form the second term of the triadic relation implied in the activity of teaching: X teaches Y to Z (where Y is the subject matter; the "vehicle"). According to this view, teaching does not merely involve teaching students (Z) or teaching something (Y). It involves both Y and Z. X and Z could be the same person. Nor does this view deny that where X and Z are not identical, X does not learn anything from such an activity. That is, this vision does not conflict with Dewey's dictum that, "the learned man should also still be a learner . . ." (8) The teacher, Dewey insists, has to be a learned man. This vision of teaching does not assume that the role of teacher is essentially an active one, while that of the student is essentially a passive one, where the student merely receives and accepts what the teacher says. This is an important point. Louis Arnold Reid points out that the distinction of teacher from student where the former is active and the latter passive follows "if we are too much dominated by ordinary grammatical use." (9) Nothing in the grammatical analysis of teaching denies what Reid calls the "dialectical way" of looking at teaching! A corollary of this view of teaching is that when one teaches, one does so in a certain manner and with certain objectives in mind.

The upshot of this vision of teaching is that the slogans “we teach subjects” and “we teach children and not subjects” are misleading if taken on their own. If one adheres completely to the first, the centre of gravity shifts away from the learner; if one adheres to the second the centre of gravity shifts away from the subject. A careful examination of the process of teaching shows that both learner and subject are central. Take the example of eating. No one would maintain that the central notion in this process is either that of food or that of the eater. The two go together. With regard to the relationship of teaching, subject and learner, this middle of the road position is not new. Some forty years ago Sir John Adams remarked: “The New Teaching does not put John in front, but drives him and Latin side by side, and one of the characteristic feature of the intelligent New Teaching is that the true relations between the pupil and the subject can be clearly recognized.”(10)

One more point must be considered with regard to the second term of the triadic relation of teaching. Should the term ‘curriculum’ itself be used as a substitute for the term ‘subject matter’ in this triadic relation? Derr, in his article “Curriculum: A Concept Elucidation,”(11) attempts a brief analysis of curriculum by examining the implications of the term ‘curriculum’ as used in certain sentences. One sentence he considers is this: “All elementary schools should offer the new math curriculum.” According to Derr three things are implicit in such a statement: 1. teachers should offer the new math curriculum, 2. the schools should have qualified people to teach the new math curriculum, 3. when teachers offer it, then, they should teach it. The assumption here is that curriculum is considered as something which is *taught*. This seems odd to me. Teachers do not usually ask one another whether or not they have *taught* a certain curriculum. They say “I taught history,” or “I taught a certain subject matter,” not “I taught the history curriculum.” In ordinary usage, ‘the curriculum’ is not something which is taught, although it is undoubtedly related to and influences what goes on in the activity of teaching. The expressions ‘subject matter of the curriculum’ or ‘content of the curriculum’ are not identical with ‘the curriculum’.

Let us return to the initial question: Can there be a curriculum without a subject matter? Consider for a moment the example of someone running a race. Can one run a race without actually doing certain movements and covering a certain ground? Clearly the answer is, ‘No’. Running a race usually involves at least three things: that one does certain things in certain ways, that there be a place (a track, a course) where the running takes place, and that there be at least one other person competing. There are races where the competitors run a course alone. But someone is still competing with someone else. The times of runners are recorded and whoever runs a course in the shortest time will win. (Similarly, when one competes with oneself, trying to better one’s PR, the element of competing is still present. Here, the other person is oneself at some other point in time).

Curriculum theorists generally agree that the notion of subject matter or content is intrinsic to that of curriculum. Some identify the two completely(12): I believe this to be

a mistake(13). This does not mean that subject matter (or content) is independent of curriculum. To extend the image of a race, neither the track nor certain movements alone make the race. In the case of curriculum, subject matter (or content) is not equivalent to the curriculum. Although a curriculum must have some form of content.

It is important to distinguish between the remarks “the curriculum consists of content . . .” and “the curriculum *has* a content . . .”(14). According to John Wilson, the former expression of the relation between content or subject matter and curriculum lacks sense. The phrase “‘consists’ of introduces a material”(15), but the curriculum is not something physical(16). The phrase ‘consists in’ would not serve our purpose either, according to Wilson, for this is used “in a definition or statement of identity.”(17)

Three observations can be noted following this discussion of the concept subject matter as it relates to that of the curriculum:

1. The expression ‘content of the curriculum’ can refer to a particular subject matter as well as to a particular subject depending upon the level of reference. Thus, in a discussion of what subjects to include in a certain curriculum, the expression ‘content of the curriculum’ refers to the subjects chosen. In a discussion of what to teach from a certain subject *area*, where the area is chosen, content refers to subject matter.

2. The notion of subject matter or content is closely related to that of the curriculum, although it does not make sense to say that the curriculum consists of content among other things.

3. Given that we are clear about the uses of the terms ‘subject matter’ and ‘content’ with reference to the curriculum, the question which follows is: How do we justify the inclusion or exclusion of a certain content? This is an intrinsically *moral* question.(18)

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Notes

1. See Ian A.C. Rule, *A Philosophical 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 definitions 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. K.B. Henderson, "Uses of 'Subject Matter'" in *Language and Concepts in Education*, eds., B. O. Smith and R. H. Ennis (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1961), pp. 45-58.
3. This leads to the crucial issue of the justification of the content of the curriculum.
4. Jane R. Martin, "The Discipline and the Curriculum," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Education: A Study of Curriculum*, ed., J. R. Martin (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1970), p. 66.
5. For an analysis of teaching as a triadic relation, see I. Scheffler, *The Language of Education* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas Publ., 1974), pp. 60-75.
6. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 180.
7. See R. S. Peters, "Education as Initiation," in *Philosophical Analysis and Education*, ed., R. D. Archmbault (New York: Humanities Press, 1972), p. 87-112.
8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 184, fn. 1.
9. Louis Arnaud Reid, *Philosophy and Education*, (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 148.
10. Quoted by Harold Entwistle in his book *Child-Centered Education* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1970), p. 96.
11. Richard L. Derr, "Curriculum: A Concept Elucidation," in *Curriculum Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1977, pp. 145-155.
12. G. T. Buswell, for example, defines curriculum as "whatever content is used"; Morton Alpren defines it as the "content, subject matter or what is to be taught and learned"; William B. Ragan states that "traditionally, curriculum has meant the subjects taught in school, or the course of study." (Quoted by I.A.C. Rule, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Meaning(s) of 'Curriculum'*, p. 157).
13. It would go beyond the scope of this paper to argue for this position which I have defended elsewhere. See, *Philosophical Approaches to the Justification of the Curriculum*, pp. 39-41.
14. John Wilson, *Philosophy and Practical Education*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 63.
15. H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 2nd ed., revised by Sir Ernest Gowers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 107.
16. See LeRoi Daniels, and Jerrold Coombs, "The Concept of Curriculum," in *Philosophy of Education, Canadian Perspective*, eds., Donald B. Cochrane and Martin Schiralli (Don Mills, Ont.: Collier Macmillan Canada, Inc., 1982), p. 252.
17. John Wilson. *Philosophy and Practical Education*, p. 63.
18. See R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), pp. 144-166.