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## Curriculum as Myth

In light of the failures of curriculum reform, it would seem quite easy to regard current curriculum designs as mythical, in the illusory sense of the word. Henchey's paper, however, goes further in exploring the way in which the notions of myth and curriculum might interact. He examines the possibility that modern curriculum might be viewed not only as illusory, but also in the myth's positive sense of being an exemplar - a symbolic form of social project.

He makes the case for regarding curriculum, not as something easily discerned through scientific enquiry, but as an intuition, a belief, a way of perceiving what the real needs of learner and society are, or should be, and how they might be satisfied. He sees approaches embedded in art, philosophy, anthropology, and ecology as being appropriate for this endeavour. Finally, Henchey claims that the study of curriculum presents us with a double myth: since it has failed to recognise the mythic (in the exemplary sense) nature of curriculum, it is a myth (in the illusory sense).

The chief purpose of ... myths has been to stabilize the established order, both in nature and in society, to confirm belief, to vouch for the efficacy of the cultus, and to maintain traditional behaviour and status by means of supernatural sanctions and precedents.

E.O. James, Myth and Ritual in the Ancient East (London, 1958) p.283.

Myth and curriculum are both terms that have been given various meanings. To associate them, therefore, is to invite not only a little wonder but also a good deal of confusion.

We use the word myth in two very different ways: first, to refer to an illusion, something fictitious, and second, to refer to an

exemplary model, "a symbolic approximate expression of truth". (Burrows, 1946, p.45; Eliade, 1963) In the first use we think of myths as unsupported beliefs and superstitions, in contrast to history, science and logic. This is the view of myth that developed with the rise of philosophy in ancient Greece, and it has continued to the present day, an interpretation congenial to the scientific worldview of Western society. It is, by far, the most popular and respectable meaning of the word.

The second meaning of myth, however, is both more ancient and more modern, predating the Greeks' preoccupation with logos and also finding respectful attention among contemporary scholars in anthropology, religious studies, and psychology. This view sees myth as a symbolic form of expression parallel to art, language, and science; myth is an intuition, a belief, a perception; it is an archetype, "reality perceived but not recognized," "not history but exemplar history, the meaning and value of which lie in its repetition." (Cassirer, quoted in McKenzie, 1963, p.183) In this sense, a myth is not intended to be untrue; on the contrary it claims to be a different form of expression of something that is believed to be true.

We also use the word curriculum in more than one way: in a narrow sense to refer to a subject learned, such as history, or to the syllabus of the subject; more broadly, we speak of a program to be followed, the "course to be run" in the Latin meaning of the term; more broadly still, we think of experiences of the learner, planned or intended effects of educational activity; in the broadest sense of all, we include an ensemble of apparently unrelated activities and assumptions that constitute what we call the "hidden" curriculum of timetables, rules, grading systems, registration, "extra-curricular" activities, and patterns of teacher-student interaction.

Since it is the bias of academics that everything should be studied, written about, and taught to others, there are many people who apply their minds to the study of myth and many others who apply their minds to the study of curriculum, though the latter group form a much younger and more insecure, though more ambitious and influential, profession than the former. This profession of the curriculum specialist considers such issues as the theories or foundation of curriculum, concepts of curriculum design, as well as processes of curriculum development, implementation, evaluation, and administration.

If we think of both myth and curriculum together, we may ask three questions: (1) Is there a sense in which curriculum as a modern educational phenomenon is a myth (either illusion or exemplar)? (2) Is there a sense in which the study of curriculum is itself a myth (illusion or exemplar) which studies a myth? (3) If there are answers to these two questions, do they have any importance? The purpose of this essay is to reflect on the following answers which may be suggested: (1) All curricula in our society function as exemplar-myths, (2) A good deal of curriculum study and development is illusion-myth in that it does not sufficiently acknowledge the mythic nature of what it studies, and (3) Our understanding of curriculum is less complete

than we like to think it is, and our approach to curriculum is more reductionist than we would like to believe.

### Curriculum as myth

There is a popular belief that any curriculum -- elementary, secondary, or post-secondary -- should bear some relationship to the real world, and people are prepared to praise or condemn a curriculum according to the degree to which it appears to have this relationship with reality. It is less clear what the "real world" is and what kind of relationship a curriculum should have with it. In practice, the real world is identified, if an effort is made at all, with two kinds of needs: the needs of the students who are invited or compelled to follow the curriculum, and the needs of the society that provides the expectations for the curriculum, the context within which it functions, and the social and economic system that will receive the graduates of the curriculum. In short, the real world of the curriculum is represented by the needs of the consumers and the needs of the investors. When these two sets of needs are relatively coherent, consistent, stable, and the subject of some common understanding, the curriculum-reality link is relatively clear; when these needs, though, are diverse, contradictory, changing, and confusing, the contact with reality is more problematic.

To complicate matters further, a curriculum bears three kinds of relationship with reality -- or realities: it is an idealization of the past, a reflection of the present, and an image of the future. The content of a curriculum is not reality itself but a selection and organization of realities -- of a sample of the past recreated and edited to fit the design of the present, of a sample of the present whose purpose is to reinforce the customs, assumptions, values, and ways of behaving that influential individuals and groups believe or pretend to believe essential for socializing the young, and a sample of the future that presents to society an image of continuity and progress and to the individual some confidence in the fairness of his destiny.

The content, then, of curriculum is not reality but an idealization of various realities. The important decisions about curriculum -- the selection of content, its organization into "subjects", the identification of the core or "basis", the rewarding through the granting of grades and credentials, the ceremonies of registration, examinations, and instructional timetables -- are less matters of true or false than matters of right and wrong. Curriculum is more an ethical and artistic enterprise than it is an intellectual one.

A number of illustrations can be offered. The goals of history, especially at the elementary and secondary levels, are primarily patriotism complemented by an unthreatening amount of international understanding, not the social criticism (and, indeed, cynicism) so typical of those who have received a rigorous training in historical methods. Language, especially reading in the mother tongue and in some places facility in second language, has been the primary measure

of academic status at the elementary level, the criterion by which pupils are classified, and the predictor of their future success. Latin used to be used as the criterion of selection for post-secondary education; it was ideal for this purpose because it was (a) difficult, (b) precise, (c) uninteresting, and (d) useless. It was the standard by which the central qualities of self-discipline, perseverance, and attention to detail were measured. When the study of Latin went into decline (no pun intended), the "new" mathematics had fortunately become sufficiently difficult, precise, uninteresting, and abstract, though not totally useless, to provide a suitable substitute. Indeed, the enormous emphasis given to the teaching of mathematics -- approximately 20% of the curriculum of elementary and secondary education in most countries -- is justified much more on ethical grounds than by the half-hearted arguments advanced in favour of an understanding of the scientific-technological society, consumer protection in discount stores, the rigours of income tax time, or a mode of thinking transferable to other situations. This issue is clear in the controversy over whether pupils should use pocket calculators; the argument is less over whether you can calculate a square root faster and more accurately (the academic point) than over the example of yet another rigorous, self-reliant, character-building skill fallen before the jelly roll of soft pedagogy (the moral point). The reform of science curricula during the 1960's and 1970's seems to have raised the level of scientific competence of bright students interested in science and at the same time it succeeded in intimidating the rest of the population through the rigours of its academic method and the wizardry of its laboratory demonstrations. The social objectives of the arts and vocational subjects, as consolation prizes for the academic also-rans and channels for the students who are creative but rebellious, have been fairly evident to guidance counsellors, parents, and students if not to educational theorists. In short, the basics of the curriculum are the five R's: reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic, respect, and responsibility, the first three being the means, and the last two the ends.

The point is not so much that there are unintended effects in every curriculum, or that academic content is unimportant, or that there is some conspiracy to use curriculum and schooling for nefarious ends, or that curriculum is in a chaotic state. The main points are the following: (1) Curriculum is a lot less than reality, reducing, simplifying, and ordering reality according to some explicit or implicit perception; (2) Curriculum is also a lot more than reality, introducing purpose and patterns not found in what the content of the curriculum claims to mirror; (3) Curriculum is not so much a construct of reality as a perception of mystery; (4) The purposes of certain studies and procedures are not necessarily those that are claimed for them; (5) There is a good deal of *ex post facto* rationalization of curriculum designs, processes, and requirements that should not be accepted too literally; (6) The process of building, changing, and implementing a curriculum is only partly a matter of logic, and less still a matter of technique; it is far more a matter of politics, practical ethics, art, and rhetoric.

In curriculum, as in communication, the medium IS the message, and the medium is myth. Curriculum is symbol, a form of social expression analogous to art, television, science, mathematics, and language. In its essential features, curriculum is not an abstraction, a discourse, a descriptive or analytic body of knowledge; it is not necessarily a deliberate or conscious construction of truth, any more than it is necessarily institutionalized lying to the young. Curriculum is an intuition, a belief, a way of perceiving the mystery of what the needs of learners and the needs of society are, what they should be, and how they may be satisfied. Curriculum is the exemplar of a society's self-concept, and this exemplary character of the whole permeates the parts, offering not social reality, not knowledge of social reality, but the exemplar of social reality, something called social studies. When we acknowledge that education is "what is left after we have forgotten everything we have learned," we may also say that when the content fades, the myth endures - the values and perceptions that, in the words of the opening quotation, "stabilize", "confirm", "vouch for", and "maintain" order through sanctions and precedents. If the myth is to maintain honesty, punctuality, the objective nature of physical and social reality, the fairness of competition, the importance of individualism, the progress of materialism, the utility of pragmatism, these provide the "realistic" boundaries of the curriculum and the "realistic" objectives of its content and structure. There are obviously differences between one subject and another, one teacher and another, and between an elementary school and a graduate school, but each has its mythic dimension. The reading list for a graduate seminar on the death of print is no less mythic than a nursery school excursion to watch trained seals; they are just different movements in a prolonged and complex rite de passage.

### Curriculum study as double-myth

If the Hopi Indians of Arizona, masters of esoteric ceremonies and custodians of an abstract cosmology, were to descend from their mesas and become curriculum specialists, they would probably be bewildered by much of the content of curriculum but they would have no difficulty recognizing the form of what they were studying. Myth, like ethnicity, is more readily recognized in the beliefs of others than in our own.

The most important element in any study is to acknowledge the nature of the subject being studied, to respect it, and not to apply methods of inquiry or generate theories that are inappropriate. Confusion about the nature of the subject leads to error in the selection of method and often absurdity in the interpretation of conclusions. If we are uncertain about whether a body is living or dead, we may perform an autopsy when we should do a biopsy; to confuse scientific and religious knowledge is to end up with angels on the head of a pin, a threat to both the comfort of the angels and the utility of the pin.

If there is some merit in the argument that curriculum is a form of myth, a form that our society uses to deal with certain complex and mysterious needs, then the study of curriculum must begin by recognizing its mythic character and respecting the complexity of that character. Not to do so is to become disillusioned about the goals of curriculum, simplistic about its design, confused about processes, pedantic about its study, and trivial in its evaluation. What requires high art should not be subjected to low techniques or even mainstream science.

Although the study of curriculum is relatively junior in the family of disciplines, there have, over the years, been four main orientations which have been more concurrent than sequential and which have tended to dominate the field of inquiry: moralistic, rationalistic, technological, and commercial. The roots of the moralistic approach have been in philosophy and social theory, and this school of thought ranges from John Dewey through most curriculum specialists in social studies and in religious education, and includes almost all advocacy groups that urge a particular content such as sex and drug education, automobile safety, dental hygiene, consumer protection, or mental health. This view holds that a curriculum should teach certain values that would improve both the individual and the society, and that these values can be taught more or less directly by including an appropriate subject or unit in a school timetable. A second approach is rationalistic, seeking theoretical models in the social sciences, especially psychology. Many of the great curriculum theorists of the recent past -- Tyler, Taba, Beauchamp and in many ways Bruner -- shared this view, and they elaborated variations of theoretical patterns of components (aims, content, strategies, evaluation) and processes (agents, steps, phases, procedures) which were recycled in hundreds of curriculum textbooks. A third and more recent approach to curriculum study has been technological, rooted in the use of media (computers, television, film, programmed instruction, visual aids) but more significantly in a mode of thinking that includes general systems theory, programming logic, precision, and quantification. The current popularity of mastery teaching, competency-based and performance-based programs, behavioral objectives, computer-assisted instruction, objective testing, and accountability illustrates the influence of this orientation. The fourth approach to the study of curriculum, and one not given a great deal of attention in the scholarly literature on the subject, is the commercial view found primarily, but not exclusively, among the manufacturers of curriculum hardware and software materials, the specialists who prepare these materials, and the professionals and consultants who market them and purchase them for school systems.

Each of these approaches has its merits and a defensible intellectual position. The good intentions of the moralists, the paradigms of the rationalists, the strategies of the technologists, and the pragmatism of the marketers all bring to the study of curriculum a perspective that is important. But to a greater or lesser extent they also all share an illusion: they underestimate the function and complexity of curriculum as myth, they are reductionist in their

appraisal of the influences that shape curriculum, they overestimate the rationality of curriculum design and development, and therefore they are overconfident about the efficacy of curriculum interventions to "fix" some individual or social problem, whether it is a four-minute attention span or an alarming increase of the educated unemployed.

The difficulty is that the study of curriculum has been essentially analytic. This implies parts, logic, rationality, science, and technique. But a curriculum is more properly seen as synthesis; wholes, rhetoric, mystery, art, and creation. To a degree curriculum studies acknowledge this in the enormous difficulty theorists have had in agreeing on a definition of the concept of curriculum and the distinctions between curriculum and related notions. There is a hint in this that the problem may lie less with the competence of the analysts than with the appropriateness of the process of analysis. If, though, we think of curriculum as synthesis - holistic, rhetorical, mysterious, artistic and creative - we recognize that it is shaped more by influences than by individual planners - by the society of which it is part, by the subject disciplines from which it draws its content, by the students' needs and expectations and reactions, and by the internal dynamics of the educational system within which most curricula are embedded. These influences are, in turn, rooted in the fundamental values and perceptions of the society, what Willis Harman calls the "social project" or what certain anthropologists might call the mythic structure. This argues that curriculum must be studied the same way culture must be studied, as a complex whole; it also suggests that developing a curriculum is only slightly less difficult than developing a culture. To reduce the complexity, underestimate the influences, overestimate the rationality of the enterprise and presume what the effects will be all run the danger of at best being ineffective and disillusioned - the common destiny of many curriculum reformers - or, worse, the cause of distorted and unintended effects.

The claim being made here is that many curriculum studies are in reality double myths, based on an illusion because they do not acknowledge the mythic quality of a curriculum. If we are to study curriculum as myth, we must look more to the approaches of the anthropologist who tries to comprehend culture as a whole, the ecologist whose highest function, in the words of the science-fiction writer Frank Herbert, is "an understanding of consequences", the artist who creates alternative realities, and the philosopher who looks for meaning. This enlarged view of the study of curriculum, one that acknowledges value assumptions, recognizes the importance of the context of curriculum, and looks to artistic models of development, is one that respects the mythic nature of curriculum. Being more ambitious in its study, it is more modest in its expectations.

There are a number of theorists who work in this more holistic-artistic mode of curriculum study, and three in particular deserve mention. Harold Shane has for many years been exploring the relation between curriculum and the larger issues arising from futures studies. One may think of him as a curriculum anthropologist-ecologist, studying the maps of tomorrow which futurists

such as Toffler, Kahn, Harman and various international organizations sketch about the issues of the eighties and nineties, and tracing connections between these maps and possible designs of curriculum today. If Shane tries to bridge the future and the present at a macro level, William Pinar bridges society and individual meaning at a more micro level, exploring human consciousness, social structures, and the role of curriculum in bringing meaning to the intersection of consciousness and structure. Pinar and many others in the group termed "reconceptualists" are essentially philosophers of curriculum, building on the earlier critiques of curriculum by such radical critics as Illich, Freire, and Kozol. The contribution of Elliot Eisner is essentially methodological, bringing to the conception of curriculum the discipline of the artist and the art educator, a challenge to the prevailing scientific, cybernetic and technological models.

These approaches to the study of curriculum may lead to new initiatives in the design and development of curricula and to a new form of curriculum discourse which approaches evaluation more in the manner of artistic criticism and cultural critique.

### **The implications of myth**

If we accept the idea that the function of curriculum is not to reflect reality, not to meet the needs of the individual and society, but rather to idealize reality and needs in terms of past, present, and future, then the study of curriculum, far from being the shallow description of the self-evident that some academic critics consider it, is rather a complex matter about which our understanding is very imperfect and incomplete and in which our approaches are very fragmentary.

Furthermore, curriculum is under considerable pressure at the present time and this pressure will likely continue and increase over this decade at least. On the one hand the knowledge explosion, the rate of change, and the increasing severity of social problems complicate the task of selection and organization of content at all levels and present a challenge of curriculum priorities to which curriculum studies have not yet provided adequate response; on the other hand, the rapid increase of information about brain function and learning and the spectacular developments that constitute the communications revolution sweep past traditional concepts of the limits of learning, teaching methods, and educational organization and administration. Curriculum is caught between the information explosion and the communications revolution and its challenge is to provide a structure for organizing, reducing, and transforming the message of the former for the medium of the latter.

It is here that a recognition of the mythic character of curriculum will focus our attention on questions of value, assumption, model, ideal, and image. What image of history is most helpful for a people living in a period of discontinuity? What is the best model of "liberal" education in a society in which people must be liberated



not from the ignorance of information scarcity but from the ignorance of information overload? What are the "basics" for living in a superindustrial future of leisure, abundance, and constant change? In a future of scarcity, competition, and authoritarian control? In a future of simplicity, community, and balance? What is "general education" in a pluralist society in which the two cultures have yielded to an aggregation of individual and group narcissism? How can we recognize "quality" curriculum in an environment shaped by the metaphors of the thirty-second TV spot, fast food, and disposable lighters?

The field of curriculum inquiry is still quite limited in its ability to deal with these questions or even to provide a conceptual framework within which they can be engaged. We must recognize these limits. We must explore how our values and meanings give form to our curriculum, and the consequences of this curriculum. We must also appreciate how other values and meanings lead to other forms with different consequences. We need studies of the myths of curriculum similar to what E.F. Schumacher did for the myths of economics.

We should have, then, a certain modesty in recognizing both the limits of what curriculum can do and the limits of what the study of curriculum can contribute to our understanding of education and learning. This implies that we should be skeptical about comprehensive curriculum plans, systems, and designs. In the present climate of financial uncertainty and wide-spectrum criticism of schools, content, teachers, and discipline, governments may be tempted to impose a curriculum stencil on an educational system, offering the solution of coherence, uniformity, centralization, detail, and accountability. In other words, instant myth masking as a rational system. Insofar as such a system underestimates the complexity of what is happening in society and education, and presumes on rationality as the model of "delivering" curriculum, it runs the risk of exacerbating the problems it wishes to solve. Government curriculum directors should be invited to read the classical Greek dramatists if they wish to foresee the fate of their designs.

A similar danger comes from evading the mystery of a curriculum by reducing it to the magic of quantification. It is possible to measure some of the effects of a particular program, but it is impossible to measure all of the effects of the program, however simple it may be, and it is a spectacular waste of time and money to generate quantitative data on broad curriculum designs. It is possible to measure the mathematical frequency of an individual note, but common sense has spared musicians and music lovers the absurdity of numerical measures for the quality of a symphony. It is a bit early to be sure that curriculum specialists will be so lucky.

It may be that our curriculum is doing far less than we believe in those areas in which we are making conscious efforts to intervene in the learning of students. It may also be that it is far more effective in achieving other more mysterious goals that we only

Norman Henchey

vaguely perceive. And it is possible that our curriculum can do far more than we dare to hope in preparing our students for the kind of world in which they will live.

We must begin by distinguishing between our ideals and our illusions. We will have to get our myths right.

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