The Ecology of Curriculum Enactment: Frame and Task Narratives

Walter Doyle and Dennis Rosemartin
University of Arizona
The issue

• “The truth is that I don’t keep to the curriculum or the teachers’ guide. I feel quite free to do what I want. I am not interested in what the curriculum writers expect from me.... I never consider what they intend.... They provide guidelines for what they believe children should know. I teach what seems relevant to me without any connection to the curriculum and without any sense of obligation to it.”

Mariam, teacher of 8th grade Bible Studies, a mandated subject (and textbook) in the Israeli compulsory curriculum.
Structure

- Dewey essay, The child and the curriculum (1902)
- The oppositions (either/or):
  - The curriculum
  - or the child
- Reconstruction:
  - The child and the curriculum connected through experience.
The Curriculum or the Teacher

- On the side of the curriculum:
  - Match the teacher to the curriculum – implementation, fidelity, design of materials, professional development, surveillance.

- On the side of the teacher:
  - Teacher as source of curriculum – adaptation, autonomy, creativity. “Principled resistance.” The highest form of professional practice is to create one’s own curriculum.
Metaphors to bridge the gap

- Music score – musician
  - Jazz – improvisation
  - Concert pianist - You don’t have to write the Mozart sonata to perform it, but it should sound like Mozart

- Tool (artifact) - designer
Curriculum as Interpretation

- To write curriculum is to posit an association between an experience with a particular content and an educative outcome.
- Curriculum, then, is an interpretation or theory of content with respect to a purpose, an argument about the educative potential of a content.
Curriculum as interpretation

“Father had decided, correctly enough, that our education had been neglected. He wanted us taught French, but also Mathematics and Latin—brisk mental exercises that would act as a corrective for our excessive dreaminess. Geography too would be bracing. . . . He wanted the lacy, frilly, somewhat murky edges trimmed off us as if we were lettuces, leaving a plain, sound core. He didn’t understand why we liked what we liked. He wanted us turned into the semblances of boys, one way or another. Well, what do you expect? He’d never had sisters.” Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*
Curriculum Enactment

- Inherently ambiguous idea. What does it mean to “enact” a curriculum?
- Teachers must establish, orchestrate, and sustain jointly constituted events that elicit student cooperation over long periods of time in a particular place.
- Embedded in these events are tasks that specify student products and accountability.
Curriculum Enactment

- The curriculum on the floor—what students actually do with the content—is embodied in the tasks they accomplish.
- The ability and willingness of students to engage in these tasks affects the flow of activity that holds order in place in classrooms.
- Task systems are known to be fragile.
Curriculum Enactment

- Enacting a curriculum means translating a document into locally sustainable events.
- Curriculum materials, as tools or artifacts, represent only a part of this process.
- At the core or curriculum enactment are the tasks a teacher establishes, and these tasks are a product of a teacher’s theory or interpretation of the content.
- A failure of a teacher to adequately account for context means not only a loss of order but a loss of curriculum.
Interpersonal Relationships

- The rich tradition of theory and research on interpersonal relationships in education is especially valuable in understanding curriculum use in classrooms.
- For example, the work of such investigators as Brekelmans, Van Tartwijk, and Wubbles on influence and proximity as dimensions of the teacher-student relationship captures important aspects of the process of sustaining classroom events.
Interpretation as the Thread

- The common thread connecting curriculum and teaching is **interpretation**.
- A curriculum is a product of a theory or interpretation of content.
- The curriculum on the floor in a classroom is contained in the tasks a teacher establishes.
- These tasks are products of the teacher’s interpretation or theory of the content.
Interpretation as the Thread

- One important implication of this perspective is that curriculum work, i.e., the interpretation of content, does not stop at the classroom door. Teachers continue to do curriculum work as they interpret content to design and maintain tasks. Similarly, pedagogical framing begins as curriculum is being written because a theory of the content has implications for how the content is to be experienced by novices.
Frame and Task Narratives

- Adaptation of Shkedi’s (2009) ideas of **frame narrative** and **task narrative** as analytically separate dimensions of a curriculum.
- Frame narrative is a theory of the content as educative potential (bildung) and as pedagogical representation: Here is what counts, educationally, as mathematics, history, literature, etc. A frame narrative activates a belief (faith) that elicits pedagogical investment.
Task Narrative

- Task narrative is a description of classroom forms, discourse practices, activities, and exercises or assignments that seem most consistent with the frame narrative.
The work of teaching

- Teachers are embedded in a local world of activity designing and orchestrating events that sustain student engagement (i.e., have holding power) and enacting tasks (demand specifications for cognitive engagement with content) to produce products that become part of the accountability system of a class.

- We know from classroom studies that this is a complex endeavor of inventing local, situated, and jointly constituted performances.
Conclusion: From document to event

- The continuum is interpretation. So discourse about interpretation is essential.
- Frame narratives are often neglected in curriculum documents in favor of task narratives. And it takes a long time to understand them.
- Most task narratives are incomplete and naïve and thus fail to address the complexity of situated enactment. And it takes a long time to learn them.
- Invent tools to make teachers’ curricula in motion public and objects of analysis and discourse.
References


