

Lawrence Stenhouse believed that ‘the central problem of curriculum study is the gap between our ideas and our aspirations and our attempts to institutionalise them’ (1977, p. 3). A believer in curriculum as process, he had a firm belief that teachers’ knowledge was important. He strongly advocated that teachers could and should research their own curriculum practices and therefore be change agents for their own curriculum reform through their professional learning. He has left a huge legacy in the curriculum field, particularly in the United Kingdom and Australia.

Others assert that the concept of curriculum can be traced back to early civilisations (e.g. Smith & Lovat, 2003; Schubert, 1986) because it is essentially concerned with community decision-making about what and whose knowledge is of most worth for whom and at what stage. Harold Benjamin’s (1939) parable about what constituted core knowledge for a stone-age tribe (e.g. should the new generation learn about catching fish with bare hands as a precursor to using an early fishing rod?) is very salient here. It is clear that curriculum is always a social construction and will therefore involve a compromise between what has been selected by one group of stakeholders in the interests of other stakeholders. In addition, as Clark, Milburn and Goodson (1989) emphasise, there will also be compromises between what has been thought most important or ‘core’ in the past and what new ideas and interests should now be understood.

The Latin origins of the word ‘curriculum’ are ‘curro’ (I run) or, as Pinar (1975) suggests, ‘currere’ (to be running). For the ancient Greeks, ‘curriculum’ meant a competitive running track. These usages suggest different perspectives: ‘curriculum’ emphasises the track on which the runner is running, while ‘currere’ and ‘curro’ focus on the individual’s running action or the existential experience of running in a particular race at a particular time in the runner’s own biography.

Pursuing the metaphor of a race, nonetheless, can be helpful in understanding the concept of curriculum and the experience of a particular curriculum by an individual learner. For example, what kind of race is the runner competing in—what kind of curriculum is the student experiencing? Perhaps a 100-metre sprint or a series of hurdles?

Perhaps a more extended cross-country or marathon race? Are the runners competing against themselves or is it about how well they do compared with the other competitors? Does it matter how long it takes to finish or is it a race against time? Is the racetrack flat or uphill? Do some of the competitors have handicaps or does everyone start the race together? Smith and Lovat (2003) provide a more detailed exploration of this analogy.



Reflection 1.3: Your curriculum story

Using the metaphor of different kinds of races and racetracks, think about your own curriculum history. What kind of racetracks have you run on? What kind of curriculum races did you run/are you running at preschool/primary/secondary school/university? Tell your curriculum story.

A comprehensive understanding of the curriculum race is much more than the content and skills—it incorporates *how* the knowledge, skills and values are learned as well as what assessment strategies are implemented.

Deciding that the concept of curriculum defies an easy definition, the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) in 1992 developed a set of principles about curriculum work. More than two decades on with some slight revision they continue to be a helpful beginning for those engaged in curriculum work.

Curriculum work should:

- be informed by political, social, economic and historical analysis;
- involve explicit identification and evaluation of the values and beliefs on which it is based;
- involve critical reflection;
- acknowledge that individuals will experience the same learning activity in different ways;

- strive to expose and eliminate inequality experienced by individuals or groups;
- promote quality at the individual, school, community, system, national and global level; and
- be a collaborative experience, resourced to ensure active participation by teachers, other education professionals, students and parents.

(www.acsa.edu.au/pages/page493.asp, accessed 29 January 2013)

To apply principles such as these, curriculum development is therefore very much concerned with decision-making (Smith & Lovat, 2003). Subsequent chapters will explore the different kinds of decisions that need to be made in selecting, planning, implementing and evaluating curricula.

Reflection 1.4: From principles to action

How do you think some of the above principles can be actioned in schools and systems? By teachers? By parents? By students?

Tests Formal, systematic procedures used to gather information under uniform conditions. They do not have to involve just pencil and paper, but can be through a performance, a try-out for a team, a watercolour, and so on.

Central principles of authentic assessment

‘Assessment’ also means different things in different contexts. In essence it should be most concerned with making judgments about student learning at one point to make decisions about future plans for learning. It has been said, therefore, that assessment is integral or at the ‘heart of the curriculum process’. It is also often claimed that assessment regimes actually overly determine the intended curriculum. And too often the term ‘assessment’ is conflated with **testing** regimes. Student performance on particular assessment tasks is often used as an indicator of how well one country is doing educationally in comparison with others.

Once again, the ACSA’s (1996) assessment principles, workshopped by four South Australian educators, Phil Cormack, Bruce Johnson, Judy Peters and David Williams, provide a valuable starting point in examining assessment storylines.

Assessment should:

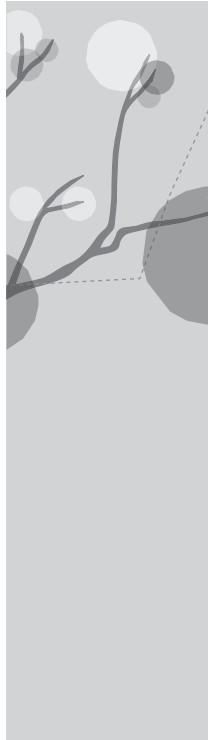
- connect to, broaden and problematise the curriculum;
- involve teacher, student and community judgment;
- connect to the world beyond school;
- involve complex thinking and problem solving;
- engage students in performing and reflecting;
- promote equity.

(www.acsa.edu.au/pages/page364.asp), accessed 29 January 2013)

CASE STUDY 1.1: APPLYING THEORY TO PRACTICE

Hani is both a primary teacher and the parent of two young children, one of whom has just started school. Early in her career, when still a pre-service teacher, she decided that in her classroom she would use a range of assessment strategies when making decisions about what children could and could not do. She wanted to make sure that she never judged a child's performance solely on one kind of task. She made this decision on the basis of her reading of relevant research and, while it was time consuming, especially at the beginning of each school year, it seemed to ensure that she planned effectively for her students as individuals. After her eldest daughter's first weeks at school Hani is disturbed to find her daughter's teacher has placed the daughter in the lowest ability group based on one analysis of her literacy skills and understandings. Hani understands that her daughter is shy and needs time to develop rapport with new people in her life but Hani knows her daughter is able to read quite well. Should she raise this with the teacher or forget about it?

Later chapters examine how these principles can translate to a range of assessment strategies and techniques. In addition the increasing emphasis on high stakes testing is discussed.



Reflection 1.5: Applying assessment principles

Think about your latest assessment experience. Did it conform to the ACSA principles espoused on page 13? Which principles in your experience are most difficult to put into practice?

Practical decisions: A teacher's dilemma

The final section of this chapter concludes with a simple example of a curriculum decision-making dilemma from a teacher's classroom experience. This example illustrates that in order to start to answer some of the difficult questions about curriculum, complex integration of the storylines that unfold in subsequent chapters is required. Developing an understanding of these storylines can also help teachers to make practical decisions about their curriculum and assessment practices.

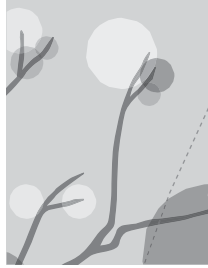
CASE STUDY 1.2: CREATIVITY IN SECONDARY ENGLISH CURRICULUM

Rohan is a secondary English teacher in a comprehensive inner city school close to the heart of Newcastle in New South Wales. He has been teaching for six years now and continues to enjoy a passion for English. It was this passion that first drew him into the teaching profession after a brief career in public relations. He believes that the emphasis on literacy in a general sense has led to a devaluing of the subject English and particularly a trend away from creative writing.

He's also concerned that only a few of his senior students are choosing to study literature at an advanced level. He tries to make sure that his students apply the understandings about Shakespearian plays and sonnets to their own lives and think about how the themes in such texts relate to them.

He's worried about the increasing trend to assess students using multiple choice and short answer tests and the concern that other kinds of assessment are too costly. He feels strongly that deep understandings about literary texts cannot be measured in this way.

How can he talk with his students and their parents about his concerns?



Summary

The curriculum and assessment storylines offered in this book provide a starting point for discussion, further exploration, even debate. There are no easy answers to some of the recurring curriculum and assessment questions and discussion will no doubt open up more questions and opportunities for **reflection**. These chapters are not intended to present final statements (or ultimate resolutions). In Mary Beattie's (1997, p. 9) words:

When curriculum is conceived as a story with a past, present and future which can be told from a number of perspectives, researchers and practitioners have the opportunity to deliberate on issues relating to authority, to who is the author of the story being told and whose stories are silenced, whose knowledge is of value, and to matters of power and control embedded in these issues ... When individuals share the stories of their own experiences they can both examine and interrogate the stories they tell in their practices, choose from among other available options, and imagine new possibilities.

It is my hope that such examination and sharing of stories will enable us as educators to work towards the imagining of new possibilities beyond recurring and out-dated storylines and themes. Only through such imagining will we be able to learn to live more creatively in our knowledge-building, post-industrial societies.

A number of key questions that are the basis for any curriculum and assessment work are beginning to emerge and will be important threads to think about in the unfolding storylines throughout the book.

Reflection

Deliberate and focused attempts to make greater meaning and understanding of our experience.

Discussion questions

- 1 Whose knowledge counts most? Whose doesn't? Why?
- 2 How can this knowledge be best organised, structured and sequenced for more effective learning to take place?
- 3 What resources and strategies are needed so this can happen?
- 4 How can we assess *for* learning as well as assess learning?
- 5 How do we know when learning has been effective?
- 6 Are there curriculum essentials that all students should be provided with?
- 7 Should we measure our learning outcomes against those in other cultures/countries?
- 8 How can learning be meaningfully reported to others?

Further reading

Apple, M (1990). *Ideology and Curriculum*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

This book demonstrates how critical it is for teachers to unpack their 'saturated consciousness' (what they take for granted) about schooling, how children learn and what education is all about if they are to understand the social construction of curriculum and assessment. Only through this kind of reflection can educators start to unpack the stereotypes implicit in curriculum and assessment practices.

Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) <www.acsa.edu.au>.

The ACSA was founded in 1983 to support meaningful, relevant and engaging curriculum work at all levels of education and across all sectors in Australia. It advocates for equity and social justice.

Bruner, J (1960). *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Provides an insight into Bruner's early thinking about curriculum as process and the rationale behind his famous curriculum resource *Man: A Course of Study*.

Cohen, D (1992). *Liberating Curriculum from Sacred Cows*. Sydney: Australian Education Network.

David Cohen critiques ten 'sacred cows' about curriculum and assessment (e.g. curriculum is a document; curriculum is a rational process). He proposes some more liberating concepts about the nature of curriculum and assessment.

Connelly, M & Clandinin, J (1990). Stories of Experience and Narrative Enquiry. *Educational Researcher* 19(5) 2–14.

A frequently cited and very useful article about the power of narrative to document teacher professional journeys.

Luke, A, Woods, A & Weir, K (eds) (2013). *Curriculum, Syllabus Design and Equity. A Primer and Model*. New York: Routledge.

Focuses on what is defined as the 'technical' form of curriculum rather than its content. Each author stresses the need for principled syllabus design that values specific community context and the professionalism of teachers in the quest for equity in educational outcomes.

Smith, D & Lovat, T (2003). *Curriculum: Action on Reflection*. 4th edn. Melbourne: Thomson.

Documents the influence of the so-called foundation disciplines on our understanding of curriculum studies. The authors also demonstrate the importance of understanding both the intention and actuality of curriculum. This text defines curriculum as a socially constructed decision-making process.

