CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS, AUTONOMY AND EMANCIPATION

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This paper examines the nature and characteristics of a curriculum framework in terms of people, context and knowledge. It thus goes some way towards an exploration of the range and diversity of such frameworks. Two theoretical views of the dynamic interrelationships that exist among the dominant curriculum framework and alternative curriculum perspectives that exist at any one time are considered. Emphasis is placed on conditions under which curriculum frameworks might foster curriculum autonomy and the emancipation of the learner.

What is a curriculum framework? The term is relatively new to me. I have come across National profiles and National curriculum statements. At the school level the term curriculum framework is apparently well known and used in some Australian states and virtually ignored and unknown in others. As school education is a state responsibility, different states have responded differently to national agendas. This is not so at university and TAFE levels.

Is a curriculum framework a form of conceptual framework? I wonder how those who chose the theme for this conference define curriculum framework? One thing that is clear to me from the outset is that it implies some form of structure exists or will exist, that this structure is probably called a curriculum, or maybe the curriculum. Further the framework must be something that defines or determines the shape of the curriculum and precedes the completion of the curriculum. Somehow it also seems to imply that curriculum is viewed as a thing rather than an experience. The term curriculum framework also suggests that those who know what learners need are in charge of determining the framework.

Essentially the term curriculum framework suggests something is being built. Indeed practice suggests that the framework is built by those who (claim to) know what people need to learn. Then others in turn add to the structure according to their level and type of expertise. What is absent from most curriculum debate is that the final arbiter of the curriculum, of what is actually learned, are the learners themselves. It is the learners who provide the capstone for the building.

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Paper presented at the Australian Curriculum Studies Association Conference, Perth, Australia. 29 September- 2 October 1999
This building or construction metaphor is not new in the area of curriculum. We have considered curriculum design (Pratt, 1980), curriculum engineering (Zais, 1976), curriculum planning (Hass & Parkay, 1993), curriculum models (Langenbach, 1993), curriculum foundations (Zais, 1976), curriculum underpinnings, curriculum construction (Brady & Kennedy, 1999), curriculum reconstruction and now curriculum frameworks, as appropriate terms to use in relation to curriculum activity.

The attraction of the building metaphor is that it is not organic. It is perceived as value free and objective. Yet the values are carefully embedded in the whole curriculum building process. They are most evident when the foundations supporting the curriculum framework are carefully analysed. Indeed the building metaphor is squarely placed within a technological rationale or orientation. Eisner and Vallence included a discussion of the technological in their 1974 edited collection Conflicting conceptions of curriculum. Here the technological conception was firmly placed in an economic framework with competency based approaches to the learning endeavour. Kliebard (1975) speaks of the production model of curriculum that in school curriculum we associate with Franklin Bobbit (1918) and later with Ralph Tyler (1950) and at industry training level we associate with Taylorism (1911) and neo-Fordism, as being fundamentally grounded in a technological rationale. Schubert (1985) has referred to the technological curriculum approach encapsulated in the Tyler rationale as the perennial paradigm of curriculum, clearly emphasising an empirical/analytical approach and linked to the technical and to work. This dominant curriculum approach is thus essentially technical in its design and construction.

With technological approaches to curriculum there has been one apparent flaw. This is akin to building a house. Once the house is complete and it is handed over to those who are going to live in it, to use it, then it is possible that the inhabitants will begin to use it in ways the designers and builders did not intend and often did not even envisage. It is teachers and learners who get to play in the new house. Sometimes they wreak havoc, while at other times they value and respect the new house and make it a real home of which they are so proud that they maintain fidelity with what the designers and builders intended.

But what to do with the unruly, those who do other than what was intended? Central authorities, our leaders, find it difficult to involve teachers in key curriculum decisions, let alone consulting learners (Barham, 1996; Carlgren, 1999). Instead teachers and learners are controlled by assessment and testing. Outcomes and profiles have forced changes in teachers’ assessment practices (Griffin, 1998). Let us forget about the process of learning and the notion of objectives. Rather let us focus on the outcomes, what a person can do no matter how it was learned. Let the curriculum be defined by standards to be reached, by competency levels to be mastered. Define the curriculum in terms of national skills testing at levels where
there is no existing state examination such as the Higher School certificate in NSW. At the vocational level, which is increasingly creeping down the levels of schooling and up into undergraduate levels, let us have a national qualifications framework defined by competencies which in turn define the vocational education and training curriculum. Indeed we now have a National Training Framework (NTF) which encompasses all vocational education for studies below degree level (Brady 1999).

It is my contention that in Australia there exists a dominant curriculum framework or set of principles that is paralleling movements in business and industry and which has its focus firmly on the development of skills and competencies. Essentially I view it as controlling and prescriptive and couched in the language of a technological rationale. There may have been a shift away from a focus on process to one on outcome, or product, but the reality is still that we are confronted with the traditional production curriculum model, rationale or paradigm, relabelled as a framework.

The Australian curriculum framework reaches all levels of education and training. Essentially, the curriculum is just one part of the greatest example of peacetime social engineering the world has seen. Overarching everything in this process is an economic framework. Australia is one huge pilot study in free and open market economics. Australian industry has been restructured with the stated aim of making Australia competitive economically in the global market place. At the same time Australia is reducing its trade tariff barriers to a level far below any other country, thus crippling many Australian industries and putting their workforce on the unemployment queues. The Australian government has already sold off, privatised, more of its infrastructure than any other country.

In support of this quest for economic competitiveness the whole of education and training has been restructured to enable it to provide the personpower needed in the restructured industries and to take advantage of any areas where the country might be perceived to have a competitive edge. Essentially businesses and industries have been downsized and thousands of people rendered unemployed in the name of economic rationalism. The education and training industry has not escaped this rationalisation.

- Universities have been brought to their knees for refusing to join wholeheartedly into the national scheme of things with competency-based training and the treatment of higher education as a commodity.

- The TAFE sector has likewise been decimated by free market economics with the emphasis on competition with private providers and the replacement of industry focused technical education with task specific training and recognition of prior learning. This has also resulted in the artificial upgrading of on the job and workplace training to the status of TAFE technical education.

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• Schools have had their role increasingly redefined from that of providing general education in preparing the young of Australia for life and providing key skills necessary for lifelong learning towards that of vocational preparation and preparation for work-life long learning. Indeed vocational education is now considered as general education (Lewis, 1998).

The open training market and the overall economic rationalist and New Right (neoFordist) forces governing these changes are clear examples of public choice theory at work. These forces are supported by a human capital approach reflected in the OECD view that

only a well trained and highly adaptable labour force can provide the capacity to adjust to structural change and seize new employment opportunities created by technological progress. Achieving this will in many cases entail a re-examination, in perhaps radical ways, of the economic treatment of human resources and education (Levin, 1997,p.54).

We in Australia already have clear experiential evidence of this. As the youth of the nineties might say: technology rules. As the politicians of the nineties say: economics rules. They are essentially saying the same thing when it comes to approaches to curriculum, to the definition of curriculum framework. You will have noticed that I have avoided any explicit definition of curriculum framework so far, preferring instead to define by implication and example. Now to bite the bullet.

To this point I have discussed what might be termed the dominant curriculum framework, a framework that is technological in nature. I have paid virtually no heed to the needs of learners, as defined by learners themselves. Nor indeed have I said much about the role of the teacher other than to recognise teachers who implement the curriculum with fidelity, the conformists maybe, and those who are wayward and do their own thing. For in the current climate of technological thinking, control is the key to success. Thus there is no need to really consider the learners and the teachers. Their role is to follow and do. At this point I am tempted to draw a comparison with the raison d’etre of Paolo Friere. However that will come later. If what has been covered so far reflects a technological curriculum framework, is it possible to conceive of any other type of framework?

In a recent paper on the training of skilled workers in urban Australia. Paul Brady (1999) uses the term curriculum framework as encompassing:

the idea of clearly defining the broad components associated with the planning and implementing of vocational education programs. The draft curriculum framework consists of six parameters and their associated components. The parameters are goals, objectives, training strategy-general education, training strategy- occupation specific skills, structure of institution based training and student evaluation and issues of qualification.
Brady has produced a framework for vocational education that is still technological in nature, in that it broadly prescribes the curriculum parameters and components. In his paper however he addresses the limitations of the current competency based focus of vocational education and training in Australia and presents a position which does not require major restructuring of the thinking of those who have shaped the existing paradigm. As can be seen from the quotation above he attempts to inject back into the equation dimensions lost in the last decade. Notably general education lost to occupation specific skills, goals and objectives lost to outcomes, student evaluation lost to assessment of competencies.

While Brady’s shift may appear to be a small one it is one that recognises the importance of thinking, decision making, problem solving, creativity and flexibility; aspects largely leached from current approaches to vocational training. His work reflects increasing dissatisfaction with the national curriculum framework for training of skilled workers with its CBT and national qualifications framework. It represents the beginnings of a search for a curriculum framework that will support approaches to training more likely to achieve the goal of vocational education in Australia for a highly skilled and adaptable workforce (Employment and Skills Formation Council, 1992). However curriculum frameworks with different emphases are possible and plausible.

Kliebard (1975B) provides some insight into these possibilities. He describes a range of curriculum metaphors: the factory or production model of the Fordists; the banking model as described by Paolo Friere; the growth metaphor; and, the travel metaphor. We could all possibly name other metaphors such as the medical or injection metaphor. Among these metaphors there are just two where the learner figures in any meaningful way, these are the growth and the travel metaphors. In the others the focus is on doing for the learners what is deemed good or essential by others.

The growth metaphor is not unlike that of the story of the corn cast upon the ground in the Christian bible. If it falls on good ground it prospers, if on bad ground it withers. With the tree, the seed, if correctly tended, will sprout and grow. It will continue its healthy development while ever it is appropriately nurtured for its current stage of development. As long as the property developers or loggers don’t come through, it is likely to continue to prosper till a ripe age, being nourished and developing all the time. Such a wonderful way to begin a discussion of lifelong learning.

The pathway metaphor is much like the yellow brick road. Curriculum is viewed as a series of experiences that lead to fresh directions and to yet another intersection where a choice of path to be followed must be made. It is always possible to stay on the one path but ever so more exciting to take the challenge of new directions. Key to this metaphor is the John Dewey notion of objectives as beginning points or stepping stones. Where setting out in one direction leads to discovery of other

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options and paths to follow, rather than objectives being considered ends in themselves.

Underpinning what has come to this point are implicit notions that form the essence of curriculum theorizing. James Macdonald (1975) has categorised all statements about curriculum as about knowledge, about curriculum realities and about valued activity. Statements about knowledge and curriculum abound. Indeed to many people a curriculum is simply a statement of content. An excellent example of the organisation of knowledge and its resultant impact on a curriculum is provided for nursing initial preparation by Sohn (1991). Sohn explains how nursing curriculum has moved from an organisation around five medical specialties, medical, surgical, paediatric, obstetric, and psychiatric to a curriculum based on a nursing framework. Such frameworks may be organised on a set of nursing and/or borrowed concepts, or a nursing model or a combination of both. “These frameworks, often called ‘conceptual frameworks’, give unity and integrity to the new curricula.” In fact, suggests Sohn, they define nursing knowledge, the nursing framework, the nursing profession.

However it is too simplistic to equate curriculum content with knowledge. If content is defined as specified things to learn, then content free curricula actually exist. In any learning environment it is what is done with content that shapes what is learned. In any community it is the accepted source of knowledge that shapes the nature of the learning environment. Where knowledge is perceived as coming from on high from some higher being or source it is knowledge to be learned and mastered, not questioned, it is as absolute knowledge. Where knowledge is perceived as discovered by scientific effort for example, it can also be perceived as absolute. In some views knowledge can be perceived as tentative, at least for a time. When one is certain it is the truth, when it becomes absolute. Yet others view knowledge as something constructed out of experience. Indeed it may be that each of us has a different set of understandings about things and thus have different definitions constructed out of our own experience. An excellent example of this would be our respective definitions of curriculum and indeed of curriculum frameworks.

I find no such relativities in national curriculum statements whether they be frameworks or not. Our leaders present curriculum statements as absolute. Indeed the language in which curriculum is couched is such that one does not even have consciousness of the possibility of anything else, any alternative even existing. So much debate is about ways of arranging or organising knowledge for presentation for learners rather than about the truth, tentativeness or otherwise of that knowledge. Among these attempts are for example: the work of Joseph Schwab (1964) on the structure of the disciplines; the professions’ attempts to define their own unique knowledge base such as in Education where knowledge that is uniquely that of education is defined by some as forming a new discipline called Educology; notions of integrated curriculum (Kysilka, 1998); of transdisciplinary

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curriculum (White, 1998); the Paideia Proposal and the Great Books approach reflect a liberal education approach (Langenbach, 1993); and, in Australia, we have organised school knowledge into Key Learning Areas (KLAs). In my own work on teacher education curriculum I attempted to organise knowledge around dimensions of the learner. I viewed the curriculum framework as determined by what was required to assist the prospective teacher to become an effective person, an effective communicator, an effective learner and in interaction with these dimensions to add what were the specific aspects to development as a teacher (Koop, 1980). Each of these approaches reflects a different set of values. Different values also underpin the context in which curriculum frameworks exist.

The contextual issues in curriculum are many. In a sense the fact that we are discussing curriculum frameworks in a time in history where the global economy and the associated global market, global education, global communication and so on are at the forefront of our consciousness, frames, even shrouds, much of our view of curriculum. As a Western capitalist democracy still struggling for its own identity, Australia has embraced the economic rationalist rhetoric and approach. These broad issues are no less important in our considerations of curriculum realities than are debates about where education and training should take place.

There has for a long time been an assumption that learning must take place in classrooms. In the last ten years or so this imperative, this structural framework has been demolished. It has been replaced by emphases on the use of information technology and workplace learning. Universities are being pushed to use the world wide web to deliver education and training. This is designed to enable universities to reach a world market, to become increasingly self funding and possibly to replace academics with low paid technicians in the delivery of courses. At the TAFE level we have seen an increasing push for on the job and workplace training (Marsick & Watkin, 1990) and the accreditation of private organisations as delivers of that training. At the school level, the internet is now an everyday classroom tool. It will not be long before every home has a room dedicated as a learning and communication centre for its occupants. Much of this relocation of the place of learning has tended to shift the emphasis towards the learner. Terms such as experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), field experience, practicum, problem based learning (Heliker, 1994) may reflect a concern for linking theory and practice. It also reflects a concern for learning to be meaningful to the learner along with quality learning outcomes.

The learner is so often the person who has so little place in curriculum decision making and possibly no place in a curriculum framework. Yet the learner is the person who ultimately decides what is learned. This realisation came to industry nearly twenty years ago when it was realised that the people who actually built the car was the ultimate determiner of its quality, and that the store assistant determines the quality of customer service. In this era of increasing litigation in Australia the learner, the customer, is gradually getting better service. Maybe soon the learner

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will genuinely be the target for a customer focus program within the education and training industry.

Notions of lifelong learning and self directed learning reflect values that recognise the potential of learners to shape and control their own learning. The danger of course is that they will gain too much control and understanding and even begin to question the way government is acting on behalf of its people. They may become empowered. Of course this is where the experiences of Paolo Friere in South America, and later across the world, provide many message that we in Australia are not anxious to recognise apply here as much as they do in any country. We Might however envision a curriculum framework that is designed to foster transformations of the type described by Jack Mezirow (1991) or even frameworks that foster transcendence as described by Philip Phenix (1975). Just what the character of such curriculum frameworks might be is a challenge. I have grave doubts about the chance of a technological approach being appropriate. I do not think a structural or building metaphor would adequately serve the purpose. What might be a starting point is the notion of loose-tight used in management. Loose-tight is like having broad guidelines about what types of things are acceptable in terms of behaviour or in ways about doing things. Then the staff or the players are free to explore and tryout things and to be creative and imaginative as long as they stay within the broad guidelines. It is much like saying play in the park without putting any restrictions on what constitutes play. All is OK so long as it happens in the park. It is also akin to having a large open bowl of a range of fruits. The fruit can be rearranged in many ways and still be contained by the bowl. The adventurous might even try draping fruit over the edge of the bowl. The rules are broken once any fruit is not contained or held in place by the bowl. Thus the notion of loose inside tight on the outside. Should we have time at the end of this session I would like us to explore the notions of curriculum frameworks that might foster greater curriculum autonomy for both teachers and learners. This might further assist us to understand approaches that may emancipate them from the current and increasing centralist control of curriculum through curriculum frameworks.

References


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