
Preface to the Third Edition

In the few short years since I wrote the first edition of this book the world has changed at an unpredicted and dizzying rate. In spite of the continuing crises of war and economic fluctuations, the call for educational improvement has not diminished. The passions and human differences that engage the population of this country as it confronts the consequences of long-term conflict in far-away places, as well as the new reality of its homeland effects, are similarly manifested as it confronts the as yet unproven benefits of government mandated changes in its educational systems. Given war or peace, education is, after all, an important investment in the future.

Good investments should provide us with profitable returns. Up-to-date knowledge of the human learning process in its contemporary setting of a varied, changing population and ever-evolving content demand is required. Money, energy, and time are the currencies of investments in the effective delivery of education, investments whose purpose is to protect and improve the future of society.

The third edition of *The Curriculum Bridge* responds to the changes in our recent history with additions and corrections that provide an up-to-date picture of the education subculture in the context of its interactions with the greater cultures in which we reside. This edition also adds new representative samples of the rapidly expanding body of findings of research in the areas of curriculum and learning, assessment, and education-related neuroscience. In order to present the original and new ideas in a logical manner, we have reorganized and redrawn some of the prior presentations.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

This book is for those of us who want to make an investment of time that may help us understand how to make better decisions about what students should and can learn and how we can help them learn. It explains why there is growing

mistrust of the return on the investment in education in this country; why there is a cry for higher standards and accountability. It will prepare us to make a knowing and credible response to those who lack faith in what we do. The time spent should give us greater confidence in our ability to identify the problems and find the solutions for whatever others have found deficient or convince them to judge us otherwise. My own investment of time in preparation for this book was made because I am a teacher and know that learning and writing about what I need to do will help me become a better one.

Profitable returns on investments require more than superficial suggestions. Although a basic philosophy about what is right in curriculum is embedded in this book, it is not a philosophical treatise. It is more of an informed “how to do it.” Unlike other curriculum books, it deals mostly with the present and with current needs. It does not address the specific content of different subject areas; instead it provides an overall view that can help educators and other educational decision makers as they respond to the needs of their students and the demands of policymakers for higher standards. Although there is a strong emphasis on the research knowledge that should guide us in building curriculum, the book is not a comprehensive review of the literature. It does try to synthesize and represent the thoughts of many current researchers in a manner that can easily be understood and applied to classroom practice. Therefore, those who practice and those who lead others in their practice may benefit from the chapters ahead.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

This book is about curriculum and the skeleton that gives it a frame and support: the standards or levels of the bar that represent what we value, what we know, and what our children need to know. A shared understanding of the meaning of curriculum and classroom practice is a good way to begin. A variety of people and institutions make educational decisions at times, but for professional educators, it is their major endeavor and responsibility. They make long-term decisions that affect many students and small decisions that are momentary, aimed at one particular student in a specific instance. The set of all school-based decisions about what and how children should learn is the curriculum.

Regardless of whether curriculum decisions are made by an individual teacher, a consensus of teachers, or imposed as a policy by those in authority, if they are planned and documented, they constitute the written curriculum. Not everything is written down, and not everything written is accomplished. The planned and unplanned decisions made and the actions taken by teachers in classrooms (with the written curriculum and other things

in mind) are referred to as the enacted curriculum, which is, in essence, classroom practice. The unwritten curriculum is sometimes referred to as the “hidden curriculum,” but it is not hidden from classroom practice.

Embedded in the chapters ahead is a real story of three teachers as they confront the current issues that concern schools and discover what is now known about learning. Based on this new knowledge, they work together to pursue some specific strategies that will help them use the standards skeleton to build the curriculum bridge to classroom practice. And then they will look at the future. Their task will not be easy.

When educators are given the authority to enact curriculum, they have power—more than they probably realize. However, when parents and the public-at-large entrust teachers with this power over their children, they retain some rights to monitor and control what teachers do. Teachers, then, juggle constantly. In one hand are the balls that represent what they believe is best for that child and themselves, at this time, in this place. These beliefs are based on their standards, their values, their interests, their knowledge of the content of the curriculum, their knowledge of their own skills, and their knowledge of their students. In the other hand is their obligation to respect the beliefs of others who have a stake in students’ futures: parents, supervisors, elected officials, and the public-at-large.

The juggling act is tricky. It demands concentration and practice. Teachers must know where each ball is at all times. Because they must respond to different students at different moments in time, they need to reflectively monitor their own beliefs. They need to listen carefully to the voices of others who can influence what they are doing, and be alert to a lack of fit. Sometimes adjustments will be necessary, but at other times their beliefs should be held firm. The rhythm, balance, and consistency are important. Skill with old moves increases with experience, but new ones make their performance better and more interesting.

In Chapter 1 readers will discover or be reminded of some of the past history of curriculum, with a focus on the last two decades. This period brought us to the current crescendo of public interest in education and the trend of a common core of high standards and accountability for students and their teachers. The present is viewed through the comments of the public, respected educational leaders, and politicians in regard to the implementation of this agenda. They are worthy of the attention because it is important to understand the influences and controls that affect our values, effectiveness, and choices.

Chapter 2 explores these influences. Influences may not have clearly definable consequences when you do not pay attention to them. But if we are teachers, their power is related to our own needs. Our strongest imperative is to reach our students—and we struggle to do the best we can. Controls, such

as high-stakes tests based on imposed standards, can have clearly definable consequences for our students and for our country. The cogent strategy is to make the influences and controls of a variety of stakeholders work for our purposes rather than against them.

Chapter 2 helps us gain an understanding of the underlying struggle in this country for control of public education. Beginning with the politically charged debate between federal and state governments over who should determine standards, it considers the roles of the press and big business in framing the dimensions of the discourse. It then moves to the role of local school boards and their relationship with the internal power system of supervision by school administrators and the unpredictable power of parents. Included among the other influences addressed are the subtle pressures of peers and professional peer groups, college professors, professional writers, and, because education is a major enterprise, the powerful lure of an abundance of commercial materials and new technologies.

Chapter 3 brings us to the foundation of the enacted curriculum with a discussion of what we now know about how learning happens. It takes us from the microlevel of current research on how parts of the brain vary and operate in information processing to the macrolevel of its role in classroom interactions. The briefing on the scientific knowledge base is intended to provide us with a rationale or decision-making template for the curriculum content and instructional strategies that we classroom teachers may choose. It will help us predict more cogently what will work and understand why some things do not work. It is in this knowledge that our true power lies. The best use of that power includes a reflective process that is progenerative, leading us continuously to self-correction and renewal. This chapter ends with a summary analysis that applies current knowledge of how learning takes place to specific suggestions for curriculum, instructional practice, and its technological applications.

Chapter 4 takes us to the creative design step: constructing our own curriculum. Once all of the influences, controls, and existing sources have been considered, the teacher is ready to identify what standards students must meet and which additional outcomes are desired (the desired outcomes may exceed the standards). This chapter provides clarification of the new terminology and compares it to the existing terms and habits of practice so that we may all speak the same new language. It offers a template to guide us as we design down from more general prescribed national or state standards to the specific outcomes we aim for with an individual classroom experience.

It is a challenge to match these desired outcomes with appropriate learning experiences for students, experiences in settings that reflect the many new understandings that we now have about how learning happens and about what keeps it from happening. Before writing this book, for example, I

thought about the outcomes I wished to achieve, but knowing how learning takes place humbled my expectations for accomplishing them with just a reading activity. However, that same knowledge about learning has made me rethink the way in which this reading activity is organized. Using a metaphor of the theater, Chapter 5 takes us through the elements of the setting: grouping students and using time, space, and material props. It addresses the role of student goals in motivating and managing learning and then explores the use of critical themes and classroom discourse. In any form of theater we must pay attention to the variations in our audience. Not all students have the same prior knowledge, motivation, or stimulus preference. In the struggle for the achievement of common goals, we must deal with these differences. The structure of the theater itself may affect the performance. Not all schools and systems have the same resources available. Equity in performance may depend on equity in the resources applied.

Unfortunately, a missing element in this educational reading activity is my ability to assess its effect on my readers. Assessments produce the signals for our educational transport system, the system that takes our students from the place of not knowing to knowing. We teacher-engineers need to know where we are going, how well and how fast we are progressing, where the switches are, and, if the track is obstructed, what are the alternative routes. We also need to stop at a station from time to time to refuel, revise, and take on new passengers and new systems. Assessments guide our station breaks.

Chapter 6 compares what we term *proximal assessment*, the in-process actions of the teacher, with the application of high-stakes accountability measures produced far away or “distal” to those assessed. Performance assessments of constructed feedback will be explored as an alternative or addition to short tests of recall of finite and unrevealing facts, measured by percentages of correct responses for predetermined answers. These measure a wider scope of newly constructed knowledge and use open-ended problems that allow for divergent solutions. This chapter looks at rubrics that identify more clearly what has or hasn’t been accomplished and does it in a way that can provide better direction for new learning activities.

Well-done assessments can be designed to discover previously unrevealed positive outcomes and undiscovered needs. They can also be used to enforce curriculum policy mandates. When assessments are high stake or bear appreciable consequences for students, educators, and systems, special care must be taken in their design and implementation. We provide some suggestions for this care.

Chapter 7 looks at ways to increase the potential return on our investments. Ensuring a good return requires learning new skills and sharing our skills with others in a meaningful way. Engaging teachers in a more formal process of action research can help give their craft a more scientific framework—and

perhaps lead to greater success. Participation in research requires professional development. This chapter examines the possible reasons for the failure of our present systems of professional development for teachers. Teacher networks and teacher leaders are suggested as one possible way to meet the challenge of instructional improvement. Finally, it suggests how technology can assist in the research and teacher learning process and in our communication with the public. A better approach to curriculum writing and enactment can ensure a better future for our profession, our students, and our society. When others have confidence in our ability to ensure the return on their investments, it will bring each of us the personal satisfaction of knowing we did it well!