

# CURRICULUM DESIGN

Diane Common starts her review of David Pratt's *Curriculum: Design and Development*, by reminding us that that curriculum design is sufficiently "complex" that it cannot be settled (quoting Pratt) by 'intuition, folklore, and conventional wisdom,' but instead (Common's paraphrasing of Pratt) by "curriculum principles supported by validated theory and evidence of practical effectiveness," determined by "professionals, or what Pratt calls applied scientists, via their understanding of [quoting Pratt] 'curriculum design as an applied science,' a view Common rejects:

Unfortunately, the problem of curriculum is not for applied science, design, logistics, and most of the other things about which Pratt writes. It would be nice if curriculum were as simple as Pratt's solution suggests, but it is not. It would be nice if Pratt's book embodied a new dream about curriculum, but it does not. Nothing new is tackled, no old ideas are challenged, fundamental issues are ignored, and the complexity that is curriculum is reduced to a technological simplicity of systems, flow-charts, and measurable things.<sup>1</sup>

That would seem to settle the matter, but Common continues by finding a point on which the two can concur: "I agree with Pratt: Actual curriculum-making should be thinking in action."<sup>2</sup> That lasts only a moment, as Common quickly adds: "This thinking must be worthwhile, and it can be improved by the amount of reflection and deliberation that accompanies and precedes it."<sup>3</sup> What she terms "curriculum-thinking should be characterized by logical thought," enabling "curriculum-makers ... to organize their curriculum planning according to rules, and, as a result, devise and adhere to plans that are complementary to their curriculum purposes."<sup>4</sup> This last assertion would seem to place Common alongside Ralph Tyler.

The "rules" Common has in mind, are not, however, "scientific ... because curriculum is not a technological enterprise but, rather, a moral one."<sup>5</sup> Suddenly she seems closer to Alan R. Tom, if publishing three years earlier.<sup>6</sup> "Curriculum development," Common asserts, "is a moral enterprise," one "that must be grounded in educational theory."<sup>7</sup> Admitting that this is an "assumption" – if a "fundamental" one – she chides Pratt for failing to appreciate it, noting that, moreover, he makes "no attempt to define education, and, in fact, does not distinguish among schooling, education, and training."<sup>8</sup> By educational theory Common appears to mean an "image of an educated person."<sup>9</sup> Shifting from morality to rationality (perhaps the two are intertwined for her), Common asserts that "curriculum design ... presupposes a particular image of an educated person, and takes its form and substance from that image and not from logistics, flow-charts, and other matters of scientific technology."<sup>10</sup>

Then Common invokes the canonical curriculum question - what knowledge is of most worth? – if in her own terms:

What shall be taught, when, to whom, and with what aims? Moral questions, which are necessary and primary curriculum questions, can have good or bad, right or wrong answers. Curriculum design involves making those kinds of choices and requires the articulation of reasons for those choices.<sup>11</sup>

Here rationality seems in service to morality.

With the curriculum question asked, Common turns her attention to “curriculum content,” namely “what should be included in the curriculum, or, more simply, what should be taught?”<sup>12</sup> She supplements that question with these: “What is the relationship between the culture and the content, between knowledge and the curriculum?”<sup>13</sup> She notes that Pratt addresses “none of these questions ... save very briefly in his chapter on ‘Curriculum Design: An Historical Perspective,’ and they are not considered as design questions, which they most assuredly are.”<sup>14</sup> Common concludes her scathing review lamenting that “Pratt, while quoting Spencer, did not heed his warning: ‘Before there can be a rational curriculum, we must settle which things it most concerns us to know... we must determine the relative values of knowledge,’” an assertion Common takes to be supportive of her position but which I doubt.

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## COMMENTARY

Common is quite critical of Pratt’s book, complaining that it does not break new ground, nor challenge old debates; instead, he reduces curriculum design to an applied science. The curriculum question – in Common’s phrasing “What should be taught?” - is left unasked, unanswered. Common characterizes curriculum design as a moral enterprise, one that must attend to culture.

## REFERENCES

Beauchamp, George. 1961. *Curriculum Theory: Meaning, Development and Use*. Wilmette, IL: The Kagg Press.

- Common, Dianne L. 1981. Reviewed work: *Curriculum: Design and Development* by David Pratt. *Canadian Journal of Education* (6) 4, 122-125.
- Pinar, William F, Reynolds, William, Slattery, Patrick, and Taubman, Peter. 1995. *Understanding Curriculum*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Pratt, David. 1980. *Curriculum: Design and Development*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Tom, Alan R. 1984. *Teaching as a Moral Craft*. New York: Longman.
- Tyler, Ralph W. 1949. *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Common 1981, 122-123. I am reminded of what I termed the conceptual-empiricists in the U.S. field (Pinar et al. 1995, 212-213, those who attempted to reconceptualize curriculum studies scientifically, the most comprehensive instance of which was Beauchamp's *Curriculum Theory*.
- <sup>2</sup> Common 1981, 123.
- <sup>3</sup> Common 1981, 123.
- <sup>4</sup> Common 1981, 123.
- <sup>5</sup> Common 1981, 123.
- <sup>6</sup> Tom 1984.
- <sup>7</sup> Common 1981, 123.
- <sup>8</sup> Common 1981, 123.
- <sup>9</sup> Common 1981, 123. While I share Common's affirmation of curriculum development as a moral undertaking – although I'd add it is also a political, racial, gendered one – I do part company over the “image of an educated person” idea, as (apart from its ocularcentrism) it risks reinscribing the “objectives” game, one that instrumentalizes curriculum development and standardizes the infinity of forms “an educated person” can take.
- <sup>10</sup> Common 1981, 123. In our era, the emphasis up science (plus technology, engineering, mathematics: STEM) has only amped up. But all these, it seems to many, are secondary to – in service to – economics.
- <sup>11</sup> Common 1981, 123.
- <sup>12</sup> Common 1981, 124.

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