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## What is curriculum?

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### Introduction

The main question in the field of curriculum seems to be "What is curriculum?"

- Johnson-Mardones, 2015, p. 124

It is no coincidence that, separately, Pinar, Reynolds, Slaterry, and Taubman (1995, as cited in Pacheco, 2012, p.2) and Johnson-Mardones (2015, p.124) declared curriculum a "complicated conversation". 20 years of deliberation and study did not yield greater clarity in the field (or should it be fields) of curriculum theory, studies, design, and development; it appears that time does not clarify.

Should government/regulator or institution specify curriculum, and make decisions with regard to knowledge, skills, and pedagogy (Priestley, 2017)? Should regulation/policy govern the input (what is taught) or output (what outcomes have been achieved) of curriculum? In what ways would curriculum be globally and locally influenced in terms of vision and purpose? How are curriculum, teaching, and learning related?

This is a conversation that asks tough questions. Perhaps the answers have thus far been underwhelming.

### Sensing curriculum

... the assumptions of ... 'future thinking' tend to be that certain wider social changes are not only inevitable, but of positive benefit to humanity and that schooling in the future will have to follow them. This 'following' is invariably viewed as unproblematic.

- Young & Muller, 2010, p. 11

This following along with the alluded requirement to stay relevant have fractured specialised knowledge from schooling (Muller & Young, 2014). Consequently, there appears to be a deliberate conflation of higher education with vocational education, treating conceptual knowledge and practical knowledge as similar (if not the same), perhaps even emphasising generic skills (such as problem-solving)

over discipline-specialised knowledge (Muller & Young, 2014). This dislocation is deemed unproblematic because the relevance that higher education seeks is increasingly found in university graduates' employability. If generic skills will get the graduates employed, then surely the curriculum ought to follow. In Singapore, employability is further defined by starting salaries and employment rates. Such measures of educational quality are thought to be valid and demanded of both the autonomous universities and private education institutes with the results publicly compared in the national newspapers.

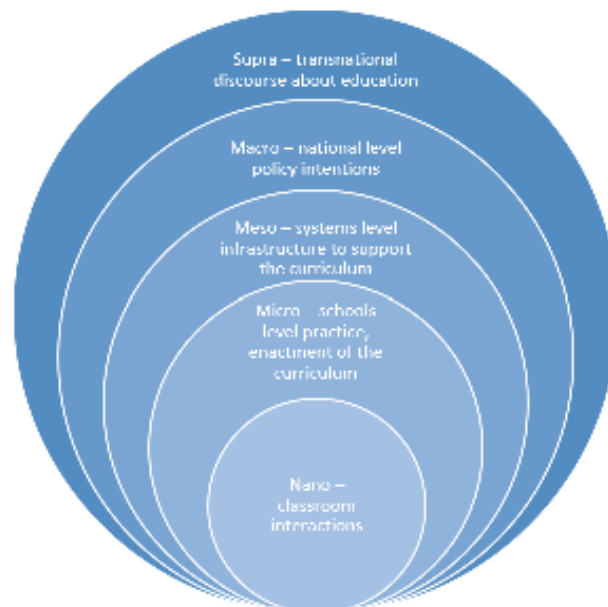
However, higher education's utility in the job market is not entirely straightforward. It is necessary to discern knowledge from opinions and experiences without devaluing either because specialised knowledge is significantly different from everyday knowledge. It is produced differently (not informally through everyday experiences), structured differently, and for different purposes (Young & Muller, 2013).

Such contentions of schooling's response (or lack of) to prevailing trends and the ensuing curricular debate lay bare the challenge of making decisions on the future of education. What are the possible futures when defining curriculum?

Traditionally, higher education and vocational education are respectively bounded and separated. These boundaries are taken for granted and the social construction of knowledge is ignored. However, the distribution of specialised knowledge heavily favours the elite few in higher education whilst the mass has to settle for simpler, procedural versions of the knowledge through the vocational track. Thus, this Future 1 has often been accused of causing "social divisiveness, inequality, unhappiness, and conflict" (Young & Muller, 2010, p. 17).

Future 2 is the emergent anti-thesis seeking to break the boundaries, de-differentiate and de-specialise both knowledge and institutions thereby leading to the conflation of higher education and vocational education. Young & Muller (2010, p.18) proffered various manifestations of this "over-socialised" knowledge:

- Integration of school subjects resulting in the weakening of the boundaries between school knowledge and everyday knowledge
- Stipulation of curricular content as generic skills thereby weakening disciplines
- Promotion of formative assessment over summative assessment leading to the weakening of boundaries between students
- Introduction of unified qualifications framework weakening the boundaries between academic and vocational qualifications
- Promotion of facilitative over directive teaching weakening the boundaries between experts and novice learners



Unfortunately, the apparent elevation of vocational education has a price.

The erosion of expertise and the loss of trust in specialist knowledge has been an inadvertent consequence of the relativism of boundary-less thinking. Trust in reliable knowledge and in the judgments of specialist knowers has been hollowed out by common sense scepticism... we deride specialised knowledge and knowers even as our lives are ever more dependent upon them.

- Young & Muller, 2010, p. 21

As a result of this ostensible dichotomy, the necessary Future 3 dialectic seeks to hold that the construction of knowledge is social and historical whilst situating the boundaries of disciplines within communities of practice. These boundaries are not a given (unlike Future 1) and are subjected to reordering (not eliminating as called for in Future 2) where new knowledge is socially constructed then stabilises. Are we there yet?

## Particularising curriculum

As alluded to in the preceding discussion, curricular considerations span a wide array of milieus and elements. Priestley (2017, p. 2-3) proffers that delineating curriculum requires conceiving it as a layered construct.

A parallel can be found in Johnson-Mardones' (2015) treatise on the "fractured" state of the field of curriculum studies (p. 124). He opted for a multi-dimensional concept of curriculum so as to accommodate its complexity, proffering an understanding of "curriculum as a phenomenon, as design and as field" (p. 125).

Curriculum as an academic field enables research into various discourses that are undergirded by disciplines spanning phenomenology, critical theory, postmodernism, psychology, and beyond. This, in turn, allows dialogue

Figure 1. Layered construct of curriculum

between the curriculum field and other educational fields.

Curriculum as design is often referenced against the Tylerian tradition of technical decision making about what is to be taught and how. This is often achieved through appropriating Bloom's taxonomy for the necessary verbs to formulate learning outcomes, ascertain suitable levels of understanding, and ensure measurability (Johnson-Mardones, 2015). Inevitably, a dialectical reaction against the perceived rigidity of the Tyler Rationale would emerge. The reconceptualists, chiefly William Pinar, claimed that "the curriculum field was in a period of stasis and that there was a need to move it into new ways of understanding" (Pacheco, 2012, p. 5). The curriculum discourse thus departed from the technical towards the political and personal; predominantly underpinned by critical theory.

Curriculum as phenomenon is manifested in the written and experienced. As a written document, curriculum "regulates the content of schooling, shapes the school experience, and controls teachers' work" (Johnson-Mardones, 2015, p. 125). This is a familiar aspect of curriculum. However, the curriculum experienced by students "through schedules, routines, and school rituals" may differ from the official prescription, giving rise to a "hidden curriculum" (Johnson-Mardones, 2015, p.126). Consequently, curriculum as a phenomenon is complex, layered, and multidimensional.

The various dimensions and their respective constituents are:

Intended	Unintended	Experienced or lived
Written	Hidden	From the point of view of the students
Supported	Null	
Taught		
Tested		

Table 1: Dimensions and constituents of curricula.

## Lecturer agency

Curriculum consideration is incomplete without including the state of lecturer agency. The enactment of curriculum is necessarily lecturer-mediated, between policy intentions and classroom realities, hence never lecturer-proof, and predisposed to implementation gaps and unintended consequences (Priestley et al., 2015). The temptation, therefore, is to remove all decision making from the lecturers so that fidelity of implementation is enshrined. However, counter-intuitively, the problem is exacerbated when lecturers are constantly tasked with implementing others' decisions without appropriate autonomy being accorded to them. Agency by necessity requires an "acting-out" by the lecturer, which is dependent on the agent's capacity to decide between myriad alternatives, resolving dilemmas, then acting on that decision. Lecturer agencies cannot be aided by efforts in dehumanising them. Instead, a bottom-up approach is needed, where improvements may be achieved through lecturer-driven initiatives.

Unfortunately, the prevalent regulations demand accountability and benchmarking – enforcement of top-down control when a bottom-up approach is desired.

Ethical and professional practices thus lose out to performative pressures, as survival strategies lead to tactical and even *cynical compliance*.

- Priestley et al., 2015, p. 4, emphasis not in original

The achievement of lecturer agency lies within the narrow space where the autonomy of a bottom-up initiative overlaps the conformity towards a top-down regulatory requirement. Apart from the capacity of the lecturer, the affordances accorded, and the limitations of the ecology influence the degree of agency (Priestley et al., 2015).

## A working construct of curriculum: A synthesis

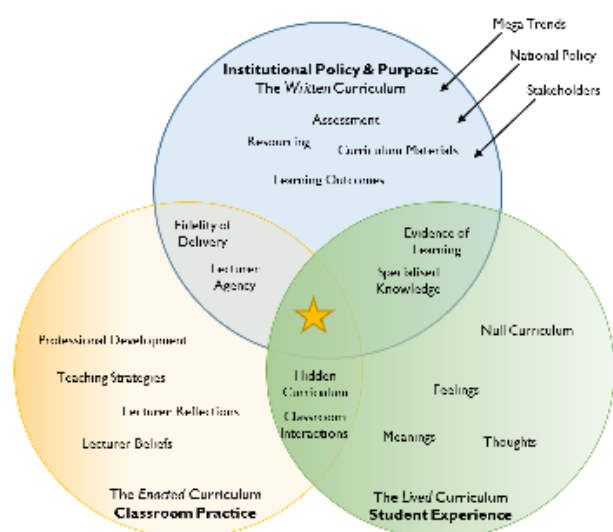


Figure 2. A working construct of curriculum: A synthesis

This diagram illustrates an attempted synthesis of the many facets of curriculum reported earlier. The realms of the written and enacted curricula have been discussed in the preceding sections. What remains glaringly missing is the consideration of student experience in the lived curriculum.

## The lived curriculum

... a peculiarity of academic learning is to focus, not on the world itself, but on others' views of that world. The idea that people can learn through listening to lectures most clearly expresses the fact that teaching is a rhetorical activity, seeking to persuade students of an alternative way of looking at the world *they already know through experience*. This way of learning presupposes that students must be able to interpret correctly a complex discourse of words, symbols, and diagrams, each bearing a specific meaning that must be interpreted correctly if the student is to learn what is intended. How do students deal with this?

- Laurillard, 2002, p. 43, emphasis not in original

Indeed, how much is going on in the classroom? How complex is learning? When learning takes place in the away from the real world, how many representations of that world are present? How might the myriad first-order experiences that students bring with them to class be reconciled with the second-order descriptions by the subject matter experts – namely the curriculum developer and lecturer? Indeed, students experience not just the subject matter but the teaching as well, how much of this dual-experience are we paying attention to? Would the representations from the written curriculum and the enacted curriculum converge or diverge? Would these representations accurately and sufficiently reflect reality? Or would these representations be mired in ludic and narrative fallacies? How do students then reconcile these in a representation of their own?

## The impossibility of education?

Formal learning that is situated away from actual practice predisposes a written curriculum, and the very act of codifying the curriculum causes the loss of authenticity. This is often criticised as the impracticality of theoretical knowledge. However, it is the second-ordered nature of curriculum, be it higher education or vocational, that is driving a "crisis of confidence in professional knowledge" (Schon, 1983, p. 3). The loss of faith in specialist knowledge, where experts do not solve problems without creating new ones, is not due to a ubiquitous theory-practice dichotomy. The chasm may instead lie in the loss of randomness inherent in real-life vis-à-vis a deliberately designed lesson plan that is anything but random; and the tacit knowledge that drives the expert's intuitive responses vis-à-vis a well-defined, best practice protocol. Such authenticity cannot be replicated in a well-structured curriculum in the classroom, particularly the Future 1 and 2 curricula.

Therefore, a causal education seems impossible since the very act of writing a curriculum negates the efficacy of the learner's problem-solving abilities in real-life. We are unable to conclude that the enacted curriculum has caused the successful development of the stipulated learning outcomes and that these outcomes adequately reflect success in real-life. Furthermore, would not academic success at best reproduce current realities (more likely inferior versions given the irreproducibility of intuition) and thus ineffectual in creating new realities that are apposite to these uncertain times? How then might a non-written curriculum be enacted? Would navigating through the elements in the above model afford mediation towards the co-construction of disciplinary boundaries by lecturers and learners in the form of a Future 3 curriculum, thus removing the need for a written curriculum?

If so, then the outcome of education is necessarily teleological. This is a conversation that asks tough questions.

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