CURRICULA IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Defining Curricula: Expanded Scope and Perspectives

The word curriculum typically calls to mind a set of lessons in a course or a set of courses in a program, but this definition is limited. Although a curriculum is typically composed of pre-determined instructional activities intended to deliver particular content (for example, knowledge, skills, or dispositions), curricula are more fruitfully conceptualized as sites of interaction among instructors, learners, and the content to be learned. It is this interaction of individuals and curricula that results in learning. Without interactions among content, learners, and instructors, a curriculum approximates a learning experience, but is not commensurate with it because a variety of contextual factors influence the outcome of any educational experience.

In defining curricula as sites for social interaction, we bring to the foreground the various factors and influences that animate courses and programs. Students are the most obvious, if not most salient, influence on an academic plan, bringing prior knowledge, goals, motivations, expectations, needs, skills, and capacities to the learning experience and thus shaping the outcomes of a curriculum. Institutional contexts are another influence on curricula; organizational, departmental, and program resources, assessment practices, reward systems, and so on, have an impact on what is planned and how it is delivered. Prevailing social and cultural forces further shape what happens in interactions among instructors, learners, and content. Norms for classroom behavior, beliefs about what can be accomplished and by whom, labor market trends, evolutions in fields and disciplines, changes in government policies, and a host of other factors also affect curricular plans.

Educators may argue that it is impossible to consider all this, particularly the diversity of students in their courses and programs, as they plan; they can only focus on content and create a learning experience geared to the average student. However, once learning outcomes become the criterion by which the quality of a curriculum is judged, it is no longer possible (and indeed, it is shortsighted) to ignore the impact of student characteristics and experiences on curricula. Moreover, in an era of mass higher education, a curriculum can no longer be designed for a homogeneous population.
Student diversity, mobility, and the press toward globalization compel us to change the way we think about curricula just as they challenge our assumptions about higher education structures.

If we acknowledge that curricula are sites for social interactions—in short, that the curriculum on paper may not be the curriculum that is experienced—then the discussion of any curriculum must consider its intended purposes, content, and methods of instruction (including choices about what, when, and how to assess learning), as well as what transpires when learners engage the curriculum. Moreover, because learning is affected by the multiple and overlapping contexts—institutional, professional, social, cultural, economic, political, and historical—in which it occurs, curricula, too, must be understood to be a product of these institutional and extra-institutional contexts. For this reason, explorations of curricula may be easiest to conduct at the level of individual or classroom interactions, where fairly distinct boundaries can be drawn around instructors, students, content, activities, and the influences that act most directly on learners and instructors. At the level of the program and the institution, the complexity of the task is multiplied. At the level of a national system, only the most general statements can be defended. The more distant the observer is from the learning experience, the more difficult it is to speak confidently about the nature of a curriculum and its effects on learning.

Discussions of curricula at the macro-level may seem bloodless because they reduce a curriculum to a set of structures and stated rationales, and obscure its dynamism by extracting it from its lived contexts. Such discussions, however imperfect, are necessary if we are to understand higher education curricula from its historical roots to the present. Thus, this chapter begins with a disclaimer: for the sake of analysis, the intersecting, mutually influential elements of curricula (purpose, content, instructional methods, assessment, etc.) will sometimes be treated as if they were truly separable. This approach facilitates comparisons across time and space, but it does not provide a view of a curriculum in practice. It therefore becomes the reader’s task to consider how the many different elements of a curriculum come together in local contexts, the nature of educational interactions in those contexts, and their implications for the success of a given learning experience.

Changes in educational purposes—an inevitable consequence of changing social, cultural, political, and economic needs—have influenced curricula throughout the history of higher education. Part I of this chapter, therefore, traces the development and evolution of different higher education models to reveal the connections among national conditions and choices regarding educational purposes, organizational structures, and curricula. This portrait of university life in different eras and regions provides necessary groundwork for a discussion (provided in Part II of this chapter) on contemporary curricular issues that transcend national boundaries. Simply put, the history of the higher education curriculum is, at heart, a history of the development of national systems,¹ their educational goals, and how they modified educational programs to serve those goals. This discussion also emphasizes the critical linkages between sociocultural contexts, educational purposes, organizational structures, and curricular content.