

Curriculum Without Fear

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Curriculum is ever-changing, a seemingly endlessly moving target. We can never seem to agree on what it should be or how it should be taught. Schools have state standards, district standards, sometimes county standards, and now national standards. The current push toward a national curriculum represents a major effort to move to some level of agreement about curriculum, making this a particularly critical time to stop and examine what constitutes a strong curriculum. Sir Ken Robinson, an international authority on creativity and education, in his most recent book, *The Element*, brings a different perspective to the curriculum question:

The future for education is not in standardizing but in customizing; not in promoting group-think and “deindividuation” but in cultivating the real depth and dynamism of human abilities of every sort.

His belief that risk-taking (and failure) are integral to a good education has much to offer us as we consider our options for creating the most powerful curriculum possible.

We all know that we can’t educate for tomorrow, in the sense that we don’t have a clue about the actual information that will be needed in the next 100 years, or even the next twenty. To truly educate, we must cultivate human potential, the need for each of us to find the “thing” that excites us and feeds our deepest hunger. It is at that point that creativity blooms. This is the very same creativity that is touted as essential in 21st Century Learning Skills. Despite this goal, the driving forces that are really behind what is taught in schools and the fears just beneath the surface are producing the opposite results.

It is interesting that we have assumed that the best way to provide workers for our economy is to have



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schools “look” like factories or corporations. We have divided curriculum up in the same way that we divide labor on the factory floor or departmental functions in a corporation. We even provide a quality control station (benchmarks), or customer satisfaction component to examine our creations (the students) to see if they have met design expectations. We are afraid to divert from this path, because we are concerned that our end-product will be missing something essential.

It is important to note that while this idea of the student as product, and curriculum as an essential body of knowledge is heavily represented in many of the politically driven mandates for education, it is not fully accepted either in the U.S. educational community (past or present) or in the world at large. In *Culture Counts: Changing Power Relations in Education*, Bishop and Glynn remind us that even our most basic approach to curriculum design may differ radically within cultural contexts. They tell of an occasion in the 1980s when the indigenous people of New Zealand, the Maori, were included in discussions with the Curriculum Division of the New Zealand Department of Education about the fundamentals of curriculum. The Maori began their planning with a listing of the principles that guide people’s lives, principles such as tapu (the sacred), mana (authority or power), and mauri (the life principle). This stood in stark contrast to the Pakeha (New Zealanders of British descent), who began their process of deliberation by asking what sort of knowledge needed to be included, listing events such as the Industrial Revolution.

Our approach, grounded in Western European history and processes, largely reflects the Pakeha approach; still, there is a real possibility that we can make curriculum more reflective of what really matters to us, rather than restricting it to facts and skills. Educators are coming to understand that processes are the key to real learning, but they often feel throttled by the mandates and assessments that have developed out of our fear that if there is no structure in place to monitor what goes on in schools, teachers won’t teach, and students won’t learn. Could it be that our primary goal should be greater than merely creating a productive workforce? Maybe we should simply cultivate potential in whatever form it may take, consistent with the principles that reflect our best selves.

By emphasizing individual and societal potential, we could more firmly meet the 21st Century Skills call for collaboration, creativity and critical thinking, and better equip students to flexibly respond to the unknowable demands of the future.

When Jim Kelly opened a new school in the Chatham, New Jersey, school district in 1995, he had to pull together a new school community that was coming from four different schools in the district. After many meetings with PTO groups, the Board of Education, and the new staff, Jim could see that they all shared one major common theme: they all cared deeply about kids. To convey this central principle, a banner was created for the school’s entry: “Whenever you enter this building, you are loved first and taught second.” Jim knew that the deepest principles that guide our lives could provide grounding and substance to more traditional curricular goals. He chose to lead his faculty, students, and the school community based on that premise. Jim remained in a leadership role at the school for twelve years and in 2007 was awarded the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association Principal of the Year Award for Visionary Leadership.

Finding the Right Formula

We have been looking for the magic educational bullet for a long time and veteran educators are often cynical about the latest reform initiatives that come down the pike. They are cynical because their experience has been that the reform initiative will soon pass and be followed by another and yet another. Many of these movements and strategies are meant to standardize teaching and are based on a conviction that bad teachers must be identified and jettisoned from the system. With this fear underlying so much of teacher professional development, it is no wonder that teachers are reluctant to invest their energies in the reform strategies or expose perceived gaps in their own understanding. But these gaps do not make a bad teacher; indeed, the teacher who actively takes risks, fails, assesses, and improves is our best hope for a meaningful classroom experience for our children.

If we are to look at this contextually, then, how *do* we motivate students to learn, and educators to be invested and engaged? Daniel Pink, in his recent

book *Drive*, looks closely at what motivates us and finds that research tells us that for routine tasks or the execution of mechanical skills that don't require much creativity, rewards can bolster performance. But for tasks requiring innovation, they can actually be harmful. Pink further notes that there are three essential elements to motivate people to do their best creative work: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. He describes autonomy as "the desire to direct our own lives," mastery as "the urge to get better at something that matters," and purpose as "our yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves." In today's environment teachers feel far from autonomous. As for mastery, teachers don't trust their peers and administrators to help them navigate their own growth, while their jobs are often held hostage to test scores.

Finally, there is real anger from many teachers about their purpose, as defined by Pink. They didn't enter teaching to get rich. They entered the profession to make a difference, and they feel their capacity to do so is being short-circuited every day by the testing culture in which they find themselves. It is critical that teachers and students find autonomy, mastery, and purpose in their school lives to flourish and do their best work.

This perspective offers clear guidance for curriculum development, and once again asks us to think of curriculum as the Maori might, by beginning with the principles that guide our lives, rather than a list of necessary knowledge. What we teach is critically important, because it must reflect the personal needs and interests of our students. How can our curriculum be designed to outline the necessary processes and skills needed for students to be successful over time and still leave teachers free to engage fully in learning with their students? In this model, collaboration, another 21st century learning skill, is essential. When teachers are collaborators with other teachers, and mentoring and coaching are part of their way of life, teachers have a chance to develop to their fullest. This culture of collaboration could then model for students how they can contribute to something that matters, bringing their own unique vision to bear on their personal work and the quality of the school experience. Standards and assessments do matter, but only when autonomy, mastery, and purpose are present. Standards and assess-

ments should serve our larger goal of developing school communities that lead the way for students to become the kind of engaged citizenry that our country needs. They should never lead us down the path of diminishing individuality and squashing the vast pool of our human potential. That is, after all, our best hope for a solid economic system in a society that reflects a culture of innovation, strength, and caring. It is also the foundation of our democratic way of life.

Students in Durham, NC, who transition from their elementary school into middle school are involved in an integrated study called *E Pluribus Unum* (From Many, One). Each year these new fifth graders begin with a syllabus and a notebook that outlines their path through the project, a study highlighting the experience of the people who immigrated to the U.S. between the 1890s and 1950s. The students engage in multiple projects designed to draw on their own lives, including interviews with relatives and research on their own cultural heritages. The experiences include social studies, lots of reading and writing, art and music. A central piece of the work is the Ellis Island simulation, for which students are given a character, and a "secret" list of facts about their character. They write from the point of view of the character, pack a box or case that reflects their character's journey, and create music that expresses the journey from different countries to Ellis Island.

The exercise culminates with the students, dressed as their characters and carrying their one suitcase with items they have brought from "home," come to the desk at Ellis Island and make their case for entry into the country. Students carefully choose what they might share with the official that might support their chances of entry. Some are admitted, others not. It is an experience that is more than personal. It engages the students in many independent activities, as well as a number of collaborative projects.

Students repeatedly reflect on their experiences, in their writing and conversations, assessing their own work and that of their peers. They write letters "home" from America, read novels describing the experiences of young people of the time, and create newspapers that might have circulated at Angel Island Immigration Station. They create presentations, papers, and poems for themselves and their peers. They make their own transition into a new stage of

their own lives through the lenses of the many Americans who also faced the changes and uncertainties of a new home. This experience is centered in the lives of the students, offers enormous autonomy in its many tasks, and provides a sense of mastery and purpose. And it is personal. The kids really care about their characters and they are encouraged to contemplate deeply the many social justice issues involved in immigration. Autonomy, mastery, and purpose all work together in a school experience that more than meets rigorous academic content.

It will take great courage for us to throw off the fear-based curriculum and move to our guiding principles for living as the foundation of the curriculum in our schools. We do have guiding lights to follow, and a host of educators who have, in the face of difficult resistance, refused to do otherwise. There are many educators who intellectually support such innovations, and many more who simply thirst for this re-orientation of our most basic values in schools. A culture that, as Sir Ken Robinson has said, cultivates “the real depth and dynamism of human abilities of every sort” represents a move toward a process that will allow students to develop a capacity for undertaking whatever challenges lie before them. How can we possibly do less?

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