

CURRICULUM

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1. Core Definition and Scope

The term **curriculum** encompasses the totality of experiences, both planned and unplanned, that occur in the educational process. While often narrowly defined as the list of subjects or courses required for a degree or academic program--such as the group of necessary or recommended curricula spanning various topics which a pupil has to satisfy in effort to fulfill the requisites of a certain degree or academic program--its conceptual scope is significantly broader. Fundamentally, the curriculum outlines what knowledge, skills, and values are intended to be transmitted and acquired through schooling. It functions as the intellectual blueprint for an educational institution, determining the content, sequence, instructional methods, and assessment protocols used to achieve established educational goals.

In formal settings, particularly within institutions of higher education, the curriculum often refers to the overall blended unit of coursework stipulating a specialized large or small region of emphasis. This view emphasizes structure and prerequisite fulfillment, ensuring students master a defined body of knowledge necessary for professional accreditation or advanced study. This administrative perspective is vital for accreditation bodies and institutional planning, providing a measurable framework against which student progress and institutional quality are gauged. It addresses the logistics of academic progression, detailing specific credit hours, course sequencing, and graduation requirements necessary for the attainment of a diploma or certification.

However, modern educational theory extends the definition beyond mere documentation. The curriculum is not just the written plan (the syllabus or course catalogue); it is the entire learning environment. It includes the instructional strategies employed by teachers, the materials used, the physical and psychological atmosphere of the classroom, and the means by which student learning is evaluated. Therefore, the scope of curriculum theory must incorporate elements of philosophy (determining what is valuable to teach), sociology (analyzing the social context and impact of education), and psychology (understanding how learning occurs and how content should be organized for optimal retention and application).

A key distinction often drawn is between the intended curriculum and the enacted curriculum. The **intended curriculum** is the formal, written plan developed by curriculum experts, administrators, or policymakers. The **enacted curriculum**, by contrast, is what is actually taught and experienced in the classroom, reflecting the teacher's interpretation, adaptation, and delivery of the material. This divergence highlights the complexity inherent in educational execution, where bureaucratic mandates meet the dynamic realities of classroom instruction and student engagement.

2. Etymology and Historical Foundations

The term *curriculum* derives from the Latin word *currere*, meaning "to run" or "the course of a race." This etymological root suggests a path or a prescribed journey to be followed--an apt metaphor for the sequential nature of educational study. Early academic usage solidified in the 16th and 17th centuries, notably at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands and the University of Glasgow in Scotland, where it denoted the fixed, required course of study leading to a degree. Initially, these courses were highly structured around classical disciplines, reflecting the prevailing humanistic and theological concerns of the time.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly in Western educational systems, the curriculum remained largely defined by tradition, focusing on the Seven Liberal Arts (grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). This classical structure served the primary goal of educating the elite for leadership roles in government, church, and society. The content was standardized, fixed, and primarily aimed at mental discipline, assuming that rigorous study of difficult material automatically led to intellectual development, a principle known as "faculty psychology."

A pivotal shift occurred around the turn of the 20th century, coinciding with the rise of industrialization, mass schooling, and the professionalization of education in the United States. Educators such as John Dewey challenged the static, subject-centered approach, advocating instead for a curriculum centered on the child's experience and societal relevance (Progressivism). Dewey argued that education should prepare students for democratic life and problem-solving, moving the focus from mere content transmission to learning processes and application. This movement laid the groundwork for curriculum development to emerge as a specialized academic field.

The formalization of curriculum theory owes much to figures like Franklin Bobbitt and Ralph Tyler. Bobbitt's 1918 work, *The Curriculum*, sought to apply principles of scientific management (Taylorism) to education, viewing the curriculum as a mechanism for producing specific outcomes necessary for social efficiency. Later, Tyler's 1949 seminal work, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, provided the influential rationale model that dominated the field for decades, systematically framing curriculum design around objectives, learning experiences, organization, and evaluation.

3. Conceptual Models of Curriculum

Curriculum development is underpinned by various philosophical and organizational models, each dictating a different approach to content selection, instructional method, and assessment. The most dominant historical model is the **Objectives Model**, famously codified by Ralph Tyler. This model is characterized by its linear, rational approach: first, defining clear behavioral objectives

(what the student should be able to do); second, selecting appropriate learning experiences; third, organizing these experiences effectively; and finally, evaluating whether the objectives were met. This system is highly measurable and favored in contexts demanding high accountability and standardization.

Contrasting the objectives-driven approach is the **Process Model**, championed by theorists such as Lawrence Stenhouse. The process model critiques the Tyler rationale for being too rigid and failing to account for the unpredictable nature of genuine inquiry and discovery learning. Instead of beginning with fixed behavioral outcomes, the process model emphasizes teacher judgment, research methodology, and content mastery as central to the curriculum. The goal is not merely to achieve predetermined ends but to foster intellectual processes and critical thinking skills, allowing the curriculum to evolve dynamically based on classroom interaction.

Another significant framework is the **Reconceptualist Model**, which arose in the 1970s. Reconceptualists viewed the curriculum not as a neutral technical plan but as a profoundly political and deeply personal text. Scholars like William Pinar focused on the "currere" (the running, autobiographical experience of the learner), arguing that curriculum study must address questions of ideology, power, gender, race, and class. This model pushes beyond technical efficiency to examine how educational content shapes individual identity and reinforces or challenges societal structures, placing critical pedagogy at its heart.

Furthermore, ecological and systems models view the curriculum as a component within a complex, interconnected environment. The **Cyclical Model** (e.g., the Wheeler model) emphasizes continuous feedback, evaluation, and revision, treating curriculum development as an ongoing loop rather than a terminal product. These models recognize that external factors--such as economic shifts, technological advancements, and community needs--constantly influence the relevance and effectiveness of the educational plan, necessitating built-in mechanisms for regular adjustment and adaptation.

4. Curriculum Design and Development Process

The systematic creation of a curriculum is a multi-stage process that transitions from philosophical conceptualization to practical implementation. The process typically begins with a comprehensive **Needs Assessment**, which involves identifying the gaps between current student performance or knowledge and desired outcomes. This assessment draws data from various stakeholders, including employers, professional organizations, parents, and community members, alongside reviewing existing student performance data and societal demands, ensuring the eventual curriculum is relevant and responsive.

Following the assessment, **Goal and Objective Setting** is crucial. Goals define the broad aims of the program, while objectives specify the measurable, observable outcomes expected of the

students. These objectives dictate the subsequent selection of content. The principle of alignment--ensuring that learning activities, instructional materials, and assessments all directly relate to the stated objectives--is foundational to effective curriculum design. Content is selected based on criteria such as validity (accuracy and reliability), significance (importance within the discipline), learnability (appropriateness for the age/developmental level), and utility (applicability to real-world problems).

The phase of **Organization and Sequencing** determines how content is structured over time. Decisions must be made regarding vertical articulation (the logical progression from one grade level or course to the next) and horizontal integration (the coordination of content across different subjects at the same level). Sequencing can follow principles of complexity (moving from simple to complex), prerequisite knowledge (requiring foundational mastery before advanced topics), or spiral organization (returning to core concepts repeatedly with increasing depth, as advocated by Jerome Bruner).

The final stages involve **Implementation and Evaluation**. Implementation requires substantial professional development for educators to ensure they understand the curriculum's philosophy and are equipped with the necessary skills and resources to teach it effectively. Evaluation is a continuous process that monitors the curriculum's effectiveness both formatively (during the process) and summatively (at the end). Data gathered from assessments and feedback inform necessary revisions, ensuring the curriculum remains responsive, effective, and free from unintended negative consequences.

5. Types and Levels of Curriculum

Educational theorists distinguish between several types of curricula that operate simultaneously within any learning environment. The **Official Curriculum**, or manifest curriculum, is the formal, publicly stated document. This includes state standards, mandated textbooks, detailed program descriptions, and syllabi. It represents the explicit institutional commitment to knowledge transmission and is often the focus of legislative review, accountability measures, and parental scrutiny.

A powerful, yet less obvious, component is the **Hidden Curriculum** (or implicit curriculum). This refers to the non-academic lessons, values, attitudes, and beliefs that are transmitted unintentionally through the structure, routines, and culture of the school environment. Examples include lessons about authority (learned through hierarchical school administration), punctuality (enforced by bells and deadlines), competition (fostered by grading systems), and gender roles (reinforced by classroom dynamics or material choices). Scholars argue that the hidden curriculum often carries more weight in shaping a student's long-term behavior and worldview than the explicit content.

Furthermore, the concept of the **Null Curriculum**, introduced by Elliot Eisner, refers to the knowledge domains and intellectual processes that are explicitly excluded from the educational program. Eisner argued that what schools choose *not* to teach sends a profound message about what is deemed unimportant, marginal, or controversial. For instance, the systematic omission of certain cultural histories, critical thinking skills related to media literacy, or subjects like philosophy at early levels represents a powerful curricular decision that limits the scope of intellectual exploration available to students.

In addition to these functional categories, curriculum can be categorized by scope: the **Subject-Centered Curriculum** focuses on the logical structure and integrity of academic disciplines (e.g., mathematics, history). Conversely, the **Learner-Centered Curriculum** focuses on the needs, interests, and developmental stages of the student, often resulting in integrated or interdisciplinary units. Finally, the **Problem-Centered Curriculum** organizes learning around real-world issues or societal problems, requiring students to integrate knowledge from various fields to seek solutions, promoting higher-order thinking and practical application.

6. Significance in Educational Policy and Practice

The curriculum serves as the central mechanism for translating educational philosophy and political ideology into practical application. At the level of educational policy, standardized curricula--such as national standards or state frameworks--are essential tools for ensuring **equity** and **accountability**. By mandating a baseline of knowledge and skills, policymakers aim to reduce disparities in educational quality across different regions and socioeconomic groups, thereby promoting a shared civic literacy and ensuring a consistently skilled workforce.

In educational practice, the curriculum provides teachers with a necessary organizational structure. It ensures consistency in instruction, helps align teaching methods with measurable outcomes, and serves as the foundation for professional development initiatives. A well-articulated curriculum allows educators to build upon previous knowledge systematically and helps prevent redundant instruction or critical gaps in foundational understanding. It acts as a professional contract between the institution, the teacher, and the learner, clearly specifying expectations and obligations.

Societally, the curriculum is a crucial vehicle for cultural transmission and social reproduction. The selection of curricular content inherently reflects judgments about which cultural heritage is valuable, which historical narratives are prioritized, and which ethical values are promoted. Debates over curriculum content--such as the inclusion of evolution, critical race theory, or specific historical interpretations--are often proxy battles over national identity and social priorities, illustrating the powerful ideological function of educational planning.

Furthermore, curriculum planning directly impacts economic competitiveness. Nations increasingly rely on their educational systems to produce graduates capable of innovation and participation in

the global economy. Consequently, curriculum development frequently focuses on integrating **STEM** (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, promoting digital literacy, and fostering skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity, which are deemed essential for 21st-century success.

7. Criticisms and Contemporary Debates

Despite its systematic nature, the curriculum remains a subject of intense criticism and ongoing debate. A primary critique, often leveled by Reconceptualists and critical theorists, concerns the inherent **political nature** of content selection. Critics argue that curricula are rarely neutral; they tend to privilege the knowledge of dominant cultural groups, potentially marginalizing the histories, experiences, and epistemologies of minority populations. This critique raises fundamental questions about "whose knowledge is of most worth" and how educational institutions inadvertently perpetuate structural inequalities by defining acceptable academic content.

Another significant contemporary debate revolves around the tension between **standardization and flexibility**. The push for highly standardized curricula (often coupled with high-stakes testing) is intended to enhance accountability and comparability. However, critics argue that this approach leads to a "teaching to the test" mentality, stifles teacher creativity, and fails to address the unique needs, interests, and learning styles of diverse student populations. Excessive standardization can reduce the curriculum to a set of discrete, testable facts, undermining the development of complex conceptual understanding and critical inquiry.

The challenge of rapid technological change also poses a persistent problem for curriculum design. Traditional curriculum models struggle to keep pace with the exponential growth of information and the evolving skill sets required in a digital age. Educators face the difficult task of integrating media literacy, computational thinking, and ethical considerations regarding technology, all while ensuring students master foundational knowledge. This necessitates a move away from curricula focused solely on content coverage toward models that emphasize adaptability, information curation, and lifelong learning skills.

Finally, debates persist regarding the balance between content depth and breadth. Curricula often suffer from "coverage compulsion," attempting to cram too much material into limited time, resulting in superficial learning rather than deep understanding. Reform efforts frequently advocate for a "less is more" philosophy, encouraging educators to prioritize core concepts and allow students the time necessary to engage in meaningful exploration, application, and mastery, shifting the focus from quantity of topics covered to quality of learning achieved.

Further Reading

[Wikipedia: Curriculum](#)

The Journal of Curriculum Studies

Ralph Tyler's Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction

The Null Curriculum: What Isn't Taught (Elliot Eisner)

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