Christian Views of the Curriculum

Dr. S. Holtrop

Nov. 2015 / Jan. 2016 / June 2016 / Oct. 2016

The curriculum is ostensibly what students go to school to learn. Teachers and administrators try to choose the curriculum materials wisely. We “map” the curriculum to our internal and external learning objectives and assessments. In recent decades, state and national governments have increased testing programs to determine whether our students have actually learned the curriculum (and we wonder if they’ve learned something else maybe). We often talk of “covering” the curriculum. We also talk about the hidden curriculum—those values and nuggets of wisdom we like to impart to students that aren’t necessarily in the course objectives or on the state tests. We have undergraduate and graduate courses in curriculum development. We talk about it both as if it comes ready packaged from textbook publishers or legislatures and as if each teacher creates it anew every day. Every curriculum publisher has hundreds of curriculum consultants. And most teachers spend hundreds of hours each year revising curriculum materials in the form of lesson plans and instructional units.

Secular View #1 (curriculum-centered)

For thousands of years, people have learned things. The things they learned, the content matter, the concepts and facts – those have often been the focus of the whole educational process. So it’s safe to say that for thousands of years much talk about learning has been curriculum-centered. That is, we focus on *what* is being learned. If young people need to be able to hunt, cook, sew, or fight in the Army, we set up a training program focused on teaching the skills and knowledge they need. So a very common starting point both in religious education and secular education has been focused on what should be learned and when. This means the curriculum is often at the heart of the discussion about the purpose of education (as I mentioned in my article on the views of the purpose of education). If colleges want a more common set of skills and readings among first-year college students, they tell the high schools what to teach (this was a big issue in the early 1900s even though only a tiny fraction of the population went to college). If Army recruits aren’t physically fit, invent a PE curriculum (1920s). If society needs more scientists, increase the STEM curriculum (1960s, 2010s). If teens are getting pregnant or getting STDs, create or increase the sex ed. curriculum (1970s). If a part of the population is getting AIDS, create an AIDS curriculum (1990s). If hate crimes are on the rise in society, create a diversity curriculum (2000s). These are all true historical reactions to social issues – making or changing curriculum to address the societal problem, even if it’s not an immediate issue for school-aged kids.

And this approach didn’t just gradually fade into non-existence (as progressivism and humanism grew in prominence). At one point (1980s) there was a backlash against the more student-centered, seemingly permissive and fluffy approach described in Secular View #2 (below), which to many people seemed overblown at that point. This backlash led to a resurgence of emphasis on a common curriculum (e.g., Common Core) and getting people to focus on a *body of knowledge* that all of society could rally around (e.g., E.D. Hirsch).

Essentialism and perennialism are the philosophical examples of this “back to basics” view of curriculum. Assessment in this view of curriculum is simply testing student knowledge of the presented curriculum using traditional testing formats such as multiple choice. This view of curriculum, according to Wiggins and McTigh (2005), can lead to overemphasis on *coverage*, one the twin sins of curriculum design mentioned in their famous book *Understanding by Design.*

Secular View #2 (student-centered)

As progressive education and attitudes toward child development started changing in the last hundred years, curriculum materials started being viewed more as tools to be used in helping the *student* learn life skills and appreciations (not treating the student as just a piece of the puzzle to address societal issues or satisfy college or state expectations). So instead of having everyone read the same books, educators put more emphasis on student choice, developmentally appropriate learning materials, and different materials and learning activities for different learning styles and preferences. Some educators put a lot of emphasis on making learning *fun* instead of just covering a body of material chosen by the colleges, the state, or a textbook publisher. There was also more emphasis on reading popular novels and other trade books instead of on just reading the classics. Emphasis on accessibility and relevance meant seeking out interesting, practical, and real-world learning materials instead of just relying on textbooks in every subject area. Terms like interest-initiated and self-actualization became more important than learning “the basics” or *covering* an important *body of knowledge*. So it wasn’t about teaching *the curriculum* as much as it was about teaching *the student*. (E.g., *I teach ninth grade,* not *I teach English*.)

A few examples of the philosophies associated with this more student-centered view would be progressivism, constructivism, and humanism. Assessment in this view focuses more on useful and ongoing skills that a student can use for life. More creative ways of assessing student learning led to concepts like authentic assessment, project-based learning, mastery learning, and portfolios instead of paper and pencil tests. However, this view of curriculum, according to Wiggins and McTigh (2005), can lead to overemphasis on *fun*, the other one of the twin sins of curriculum design mentioned in their book *Understanding by Design.*

Christian Views of Curriculum

So what exactly would a Christian curriculum be? Does it have to come from a Christian publisher? Or can a Christian teacher make *any* curriculum Christian? There are lots of political maneuverings about values-free curriculum materials in the public schools and the age-old debate about how to address human and earth origins in biology textbooks. In Texas for a while, an older couple took it upon themselves to vet all potential curriculum materials for acceptability to evangelical Christians. Since Texas adopts textbooks statewide and cared about what this couple (the Gablers) concluded, this one evangelical Christian couple ended up deciding books for the whole state. And since the state is so big, publishers sometimes didn’t bother to make a non-Texas version for other school districts around the country, giving the Gablers a kind of evangelical veto power over which textbooks would be available nationwide.

Christians don’t all agree on what makes curriculum Christian or what the ideal Christian curriculum would be. Some homeschooling families and independent Christian schools have found the curriculum materials from publishers like Bob Jones and A Beka to be helpful in creating a specifically Christian learning environment for their students.

As I have done in my other articles, I would like to draw on Neibuhr’s idea that there are various ways Christians see the relationship between Christ and culture. I’d like to outline three biblically-informed ways Christians have tended to view the curriculum in both Christian and public schools as well as in alternative learning environments such as homeschooling.

Christian View #1 (Christianity against culture)

First, there’s the *Christianity-against-Culture* framework. Like the emphasis on sin that this framework has in its view of the student and the teacher, this framework may focus on holding history, literature, and science at a skeptical arm’s length and applying a biblical litmus test to the typical kinds of claims that the secular textbooks would make in these areas. For example, are typical history textbooks too wishy-washy and “revisionist”? Is literature too focused on glorifying sinful passions? Is science too arrogantly anti-God and too enamored with human discoveries (and too keen on human responsibility for climate change)?

Philosophies of education such as perennialism and essentialism often appeal to Christians in this framework, since these –isms align with the idea that there are “Great Books” and universal ideas and universal truths that all generations should pass on to the next. Christians in this framework often see this emphasis as very compatible with the concept of ageless biblical truths and biblical injunctions like “train up a child in the way s/he should go” and “teach these things to your children.” Further, some Christians in this framework would like to find specific Bible verses to align with each lesson in the curriculum. So it just feels right to go “back to the basics” in this Christian perspective. Assessment in this perspective tends to emphasize memorizing things like Bible verses and math facts but also carefully rehearsing the arguments against material considered to be secular teachings.

Christian View #2 (Christianity embracing culture)

On the other side of the spectrum is a kind of *Christianity-Embracing-Culture* framework. This perspective may focus on more of the humanistic and progressivistic trends associated with more modern ideas about education. Christians in this framework may even embrace some of the curricular emphases associated with reconstructionism, existentialism, or postmodernism in education. The idea is that science and human thought have significantly developed these more modern ideas about how society works, how the human mind works, how politics infuses all of modern life, or how the individual relates to society, to the past, and to the present. These may be deep thoughts, not all originating from specifically Christian thinkers, but Christian teachers in this biblical framework see these developments in knowledge as given to us by God and necessary to study through a Christian lens.

Another branch of this *Christianity-Embracing-Culture* framework sees the student as naturally exploratory, creative, and choosing what to get interested in and excited about. This part of the framework can include emphases on inclusive education, multicultural education, thematic instruction, integrated curriculum, problem-based learning, and a number of other newer approaches to organizing the curriculum or the school day. This greater emphasis on the *learner* necessitates a view of the *curriculum* that is also more open and flexible. After all, it’s hard to hold to the idea that all students should read Shakespeare in middle school while also holding to the idea that students should explore and choose their *own* reading materials. So assessment in this perspective tends to emphasize more real-world and creative ways for the student to demonstrate learned knowledge and skills.

Christian View #3 (Christ transforming culture)

Finally, a third framework can be generated from a *Christ-Transforming-Culture* perspective. This framework may acknowledge both the value of professionally selecting developmentally appropriate curriculum materials and the value of letting the student choose some reading or other learning materials based on his/her own areas of interest. It acknowledges both the needs of society for certain material to be taught and the needs of the student for flexibility, choice, and suitability of the materials. This approach focuses on a biblically ordained duty on the part of the school and a biblically ordained professional calling on the part of the teacher to select high quality, true, engaging, and relevant curriculum materials for each grade level and each content area. AND this approach focuses on the fact that students are unique, with different learning styles and needs, different cultural backgrounds, different divine callings in their lives, and different educational goals and futures. So the teacher is expected to professionally match appropriate learning materials and assessment strategies to the different types of learners and different learner needs in the classroom. Since the over-arching question in a Christ-Transforming-Culture framework is *how can this contribute to kingdom building*, the teacher in this framework selects curriculum materials and assessment strategies that will not only meet state requirements and not only address learner differences but also best further God’s kingdom work.

Conclusion

It’s daunting to try to teach the right stuff to each individual student. But that’s what being a professional is all about. (Most of the other professions in our society deal more one-on-one to address specific problems of the clients/patients/customers, so they automatically gravitate toward a more individualized approach and less toward one-size-fits-all.) Choosing the curriculum is a huge part of the professional role of a teacher. But so is what we do with it—that’s what makes for *biblically-infused* teaching, not the actual curriculum itself. This calling should not be taken lightly – there are multiple biblical warnings about not taking teaching lightly and not leading children astray. So it’s not just about trusting the older materials that seem to have stood the test of time. And it’s not just about finding proof texts to somehow Christianize human knowledge in every discipline. And it’s not just about “anything goes” because God made each child unique. It’s more about finding the way to teach both the material and the student in ways that respect the students’ needs and callings as well as respecting the families’ and community’s and wider culture’s needs too.

As I mention in some of the other “view of” articles, the students are being prepared to be agents of change in God’s plan to build his kingdom and transform culture for good. So teachers are there to provide the *coaching* that the students need to become strong *team players* in God’s plan. The curriculum is the primary tool used to coach the students in these preparations. A well-developed curriculum can help us teach students how to develop personal and social responsibility, how to work toward Shalom (peace) both near and far, and how to be free in Christ to be the creative and responsive beings we were created to be. A well-chosen curriculum helps us do what Jamie Smith (2009) urges teachers to do – help *form* the students instead of just *informing* them. (I’m thinking, for example, of the Through-Lines curriculum adopted by some Christian schools recently and the Teaching for Transformation workshops used in others.) So we’re not so much “covering” the curriculum as using it – every day, in bits and pieces, as tools – to get the students prepared for what they’re called to do.

So, back to the values issue—which is a big part of helping students prepare for their callings. I think we often think of values as an afterthought. We make sure we’re covering the textbooks, covering the state standards, covering what the kids will need at their next level of education, covering what employers want high school and college graduates to have learned. While we believe every teacher has a worldview that gets infused into the teaching of all this stuff that has to be covered, we often shy from identifying the essential components of the worldview that we desire. In the public schools, we say values education may be good for society and even for healthier school functioning, but we get bogged with “whose values?” In Christian schools, we proclaim that it’s biblical values, but again, whose biblical values? Those of the Christ-against-culture perspective, the Christianity-embracing-culture perspective, or the Christ-transforming-culture perspective? This is a tough one. But as Wiggins and McTighe (2005) point out in *Understanding by Design*, we should identify first and foremost what our educational priorities are and how we’ll know if students have learned them. They’re talking about critical thinking and essential questions over memorization of facts. But it’s no big stretch to see that learning about stewardship, responsibility, and love are even more urgent than cool essential questions about DNA molecules, Manifest Destiny, or haiku poetry. So how do we get *what* we most care about for these kids *whom* we so care about to the front of the line when it comes to writing learning objectives and designing authentic assessments of these most essential curricular goals? And how do make sure that our assessments reinforce our worldview formation, big ideas, and essential questions instead of sending a message that in the end what we care about most is memorization of facts from a textbook?

Some brief case studies in curriculum:

1. One-to-one computing can throw teachers into a real tizzy since not only do they have to figure out the technology (e.g., learning how to use an iPad, its apps, and any school-based learning management system, like Canvas), but they also have to adapt to having no textbooks. In fact, one way schools pay for iPads for everyone is to stop buying textbooks for everyone. Old textbooks may hang around the classroom for many years, but the idea is to go electronic, cloud-based, etc. Teachers can feel like their “curriculum” was taken away leaving them with a bunch of Game-Boys to try to control instead. Some teachers adapt to the new challenges and find hundreds of ways to access interesting, up-to-date content online and create virtual learning communities that continue almost round the clock. Others ask students to put their iPads under their desks and attend more traditionally to the teacher-made curriculum materials that replace the textbooks (e.g., handouts or PowerPoints).
2. Potentially objectionable material in the school’s curriculum materials is an age-old issue. Christian teachers may disagree with statements in the textbook concerning the origins and age of the earth and the origins of the human race. Or they may disagree with perspectives and assumptions embedded in history and literature textbooks. Or a small-town public school may object to how explicit the 4th-grade AIDS workbook is that the state supplies (and mandates). I saw a stack of these once with a bunch of pages neatly cut out of each booklet by the teacher. The community school board didn’t want to tell 4th-graders how people *get* AIDS. So what was left was a bizarre, and I’m sure confusing, couple of pages on how you *don’t* get AIDS. E.g., not from toilet seats or kissing. I guess that met the state mandate. Of course, removing material doesn’t guarantee that a teacher doesn’t go ahead and tell the students behind his/her closed door what was cut out of the AIDS booklet or what was left out of the sanitized version of a Shakespeare or Chaucer play. And just because something’s in the curriculum materials doesn’t mean the teacher can’t have students address whether or not that’s a good thing (e.g., a playwright including curse words). But yet, most teachers would agree that we should have some limits – which is making it very challenging this round for government teachers to teach about the presidential election process!
3. Faith integration is a giant buzzword at Christian colleges and Christian P-12 schools. And there are many interpretations of what this means. Or whether we should have a better term for what we want here. I saw one presentation that actually advocated finding a proof text from the Bible for every lesson in every course. The husband-wife team said it took them a long time (years), but their students appreciate seeing something from the Bible defending every lesson in the P.E. and home-ec. courses these presenters teach. On the other end of the spectrum is the assumption that if we have morning devotions, lunch prayer, and chapel we’re probably pretty faith integrated. Student evaluations of teachers who start class with prayer rate the teacher higher in faith integration for that class than for classes that don’t start with prayer. Some Christian students appreciate having the prayer time to get settled and focused. Teachers say it helps quiet the class down and helps set classroom management off to a good start when they start with prayer. But is this what prayer is for? And is this “integration” of faith? The *Through-Lines* and *Teaching for Transformation* programs are trying to integrate faith into the actual learning objectives and standards for every class. And some in the Dordt and Calvin communities are calling for a new word to replace integration, since to them integration implies something “other” (life faith) moving into the neighborhood (secular curriculum). These voices suggest new language like faith *infusion* or *social imaginary*.
4. How we assess speaks volumes about what we really value and prioritize. So we may say that we value creativity and content in student writing more than grammar, spelling, and punctuation, but how we assess student writing will send a more accurate message about what we really care about. The same can be said if we tell social studies or science students that we care most about their getting the overall concepts but then we test them on the facts. Even Bible class can become just another memorize and spit back the facts kind of class if that’s what our assessments emphasize. So how do we try to make our assessments more authentic and better aligned with the big ideas and essential questions we’ve identified for these content areas? Please see my PPT presentation from a teachers’ annual fall conference in Lynden, WA (October 2016): “Alternative Assessment.”

For Oct. 25, write 1.5 – 3.0 pages on your view of the curriculum

**View of curriculum and instruction (20 points)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Developing  5 | Competent  15 | Exemplary  20 |
| The paper shows limited awareness of the issues relevant to curriculum and instruction, including their nature, themes, and connections to educational purpose and the view of the student, teacher, and work. | The paper shows an emerging understanding of the nature of curriculum and instruction, their major themes, and their connections to assessment, educational purpose and the view of the student, teacher, and work. | The paper provides a flexible but coherent understanding of curriculum and instruction and their connections to assessment, educational purpose and the view of the student, teacher, and work. |
| The best papers—drawing on the course textbooks and different philosophies studied—address the major issues in curriculum choice (such as state standards, parental concerns, and integration of worldview issues), addressing some of the tensions inherent in curriculum decisions and how learning is assessed. Further, excellent papers provide specific examples of practical applications of responsible curriculum and instruction decisions and address briefly how curriculum and instruction relate to other components of a philosophy of education, such as standardized testing. | | |