The Curriculum as a Work of Art:

Conceptualizing Change in the Context of Social Transformation[1]

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Abstract

Social transformation changed the curriculum regarded the art education. Artists to create a work of art offers significant insights into the creative process required to undertake curriculum transformation focusing on particular social and cultural context that constitutes their life-world. Curriculum transformation in this paper focusing on six key elements of curriculum; content, participants, rationale, resources, implementation, and outcomes. The virtue of a curriculum is a decisions made about each of the elements. But the most important one is to connect elements and the overall vision produced by the sum of all those decisions in the current social and educational context.

Key words: Curriculum, art education, Curriculum transformation, Social context, Educational context.

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During periods of social transformation the need for curriculum change increases. The theme of this conference *Transformations in Art Education* suggest that a need exists in Turkey, and likely most other places in the world, to reconsider present art teaching practice in light of changing social and cultural circumstances. The intention of curriculum revision is to manifest a new form for education that embodies reconsidered values arising from changing social circumstances, and expresses aspirations for the achievement of new potentialities for learners. As such, the act of imagining the future expressed in the form of curriculum, is a creative endeavor. My argument here is that the kind of thinking employed by artists to create a work of art offers significant insights into the creative process required to undertake curriculum transformation.
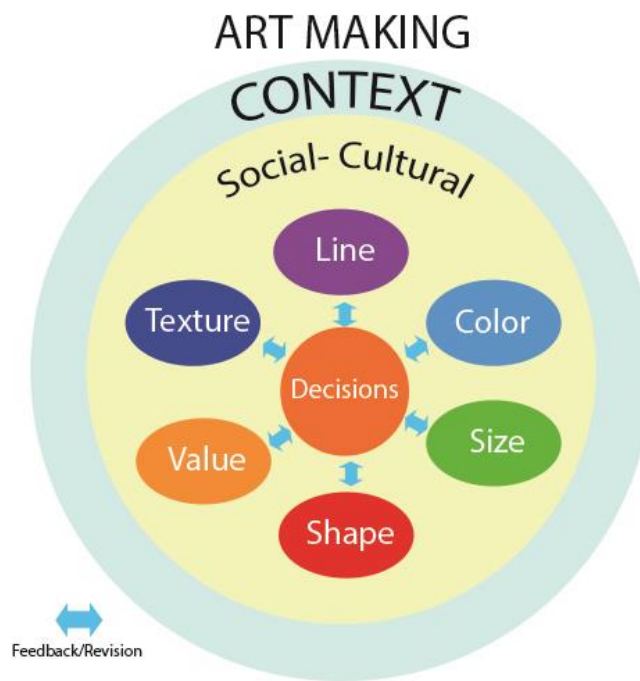

Figure 1. Artist Decision Model

First let us consider what an artist does in the art making process (See Figure 1). In simple terms the central cerebral activity undertaken in the artistic process is decision-making. Decisions are driven by intention arising from extant conditions experienced by the artist in the particular social and cultural context that constitutes their life-world. The energy of the artist is directed towards

the expression of an idea in visual public form and the means employed to do this is to manipulate visual qualities, we know as the elements of design. In two dimensional work these elements typically include line, color, size, shape, value, and texture. The choice and application of each of these in the work is driven by a creative decision-making process. The effect of each decision has an impact on all of the previous decisions requiring reflection and contemplation about the effectiveness of each choice to achieve the expressive intention of the work. As the number of decisions increases the complexity of the piece also increases.

Judgments made by the artist regarding the use of elements are governed by knowledge of the principles of design such as unity, contrast, balance, and rhythm. These organizational rules also contribute to the power of the piece and facilitate the effectiveness of its expression. Throughout the work each decision requires a judgment to be made about previous decisions that may be affected by the most recent one. For example, a change in color might affect value. A change in shape may affect size relationships, and a change in line quality may affect texture. Together all of these changes affect objects, space, relationships, and meaning. And, of course, all of these will have an impact on the effectiveness with which the work achieves its intention.

So far I have told you nothing new and you may be wondering why I am bothering to explain something that is perfectly obvious to anyone who has ever worked in the visual arts. My point is to illustrate the similarity between making art and creating curriculum. Both are artistic processes. Let me move now to an examination of the decision making process that is central to curriculum transformation.
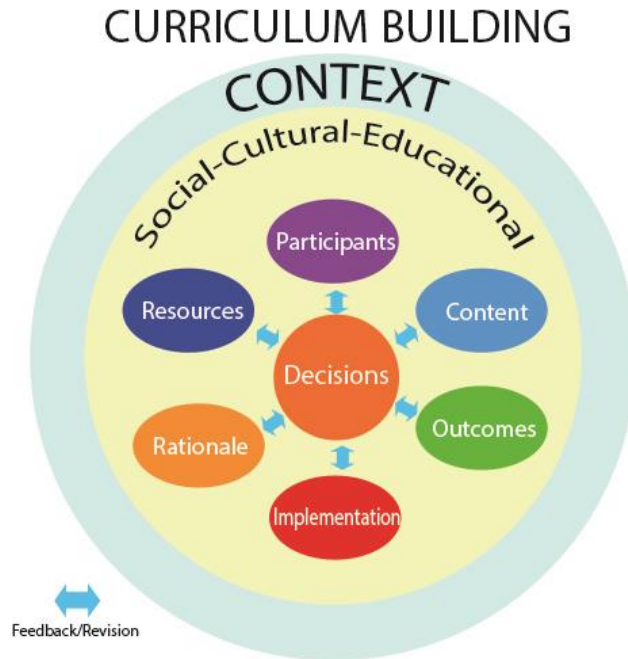
Figure 2. Curriculum Decision Model

Context

First we need to consider the context which gives rise to the need for curriculum change. No matter where we live in the world today the forces of change appear to be remarkably similar. Here are some of them:

Economic recession experienced in many countries has placed pressure on educational systems to narrow focus and prepare students primarily for future employment. Education practice is measured in terms of its vocational effectiveness. Instead of preparing students to think critically about themselves and the conditions of the world in which they find themselves, the more important priority is to develop basic skills of literacy and numeracy sufficient to prepare them for the workforce.

Visual images are pervasive in today's world playing a central role in, communicating, teaching, and persuading. Advertising impinges upon the ordinary routines of life in ways they could never have been imagined even fifty years ago. Advertising is designed to change people's behavior, their choices of consumer items, and their preference for political leaders. Some of the world's most creative artists work together with gifted market researchers to achieve these objectives. Enormous resources are provided by multinational companies for research to investigate the behavior and preferences of potential clients, paying particular attention to school age students.

New technologies have changed business, entertainment, communication, education, and the arts in amazing ways. Art making has seen a virtual explosion of different combinations of old media with the new and even more exploration of old media used together in new ways. Modern sculpture makes innovative use of unlikely combinations of materials. For example the performance artist Matthew Barney uses his body as a sculptural foundation changing his form with clothing, paint, and modelling materials to create unusual illusions resembling mythological creatures that take part in his performance pieces.

Dale Chihuly, a glass artist is an interesting transitional sculptor who has closed the gap between fine and popular art with his glass sculptures that have been exhibited in places like the New Orleans Marriott's Renaissance Arts Hotel and the foyer of the Bellagio Casino in Las Vegas. Water has been used in a wide range of fascinating ways to create sculptural forms, sometimes by itself and sometimes juxtaposed against other materials. Traditional materials have been displayed differently using lighting effects to emphasize or change its apparent form and surface. Water and light have been utilized together to create water sculptures of infinite variability.

Autodidactic learning. Recent research, conducted by an international group of researchers led by Kerry Freedman, has shown us that young people in multiple countries are teaching art to each other in energetic and carefully structured auto-didactic learning communities outside of school. The content of their learning embraces a range of art contemporary forms that they cannot learn in school. This suggests that the current art curriculums in their (five different) countries do not address these students' needs and may be anchored in outdated conceptions of art and education.

While much has changed some things remain the same. In the old world the arts still provide links to historical roots anchoring communities to their respective heritages. Cultural sustenance, comfort, and security is gained from the familiar images of traditional great works. In the new world and developing countries, on the other hand, a kind of cultural schizophrenia has arisen reflecting the dual desire to recover cultural roots from the ancient past, while at the same time embracing new ideals and artistic forms from trade partners. All of this interest, of course, is lubricated by the power of advertising through contemporary technologies (Boughton, 1999).

The world has changed rapidly and art programs in public schools typically have not kept pace with the change. The challenge for curriculum development in the current world is not only to reconsider the past, but to imagine a constructive future for the young people in schools today.

Curriculum Elements

Next we need to consider the elements of curriculum and the decisions that are made about them. Some years ago I conducted a systematic observation of a curriculum development project in the Province of Alberta in Canada (Boughton, 1976). The task was to revise the art education curriculum in the Edmonton Public School District. My research involved recording and classifying every one of the hundreds of decisions that led to the creation of a new art program.

From this work I was able to identify six clear categories of decisions that I called Curriculum Elements. These were Content, Outcomes, Implementation, Resources, Rationale, and Participants.

The decision making process was undertaken by a committee of selected teachers and curriculum staff from the school district over a period of several months. I had expected a systematic approach to the discussions but the approach was not linear at all. Decisions about content, resources, rationale, and teaching methods (Implementation) were undertaken in what seemed to be random order, but each was connected to the other. One might expect that the rationale that underpinned the process should be the first order of business, but interestingly while "rationale" was embedded in discussion about everything else it was the last to be formally decided.

In this instance the curriculum was developed by a committee. Those of us familiar with the democratic process understand that committee discussions are dynamic and proceed in an organic fashion, so it is not surprising that conversations about content become entangled with discussions about resources, Implementation methods, and teacher capabilities among other things. In fact, to ensure unity in the final curriculum product each of the elements need to be considered together to understand the whole. Just like a work of art. A linear approach to curriculum building does not work! Let me illustrate each of the elements using the example of a transition from one form of art education curriculum to another that has taken place in some parts of the United States.

Content

The content of curriculum is simply the substance of what is taught and is generally expressed as aims, goals and objectives. In recent years many university art education programs undertook a transformation from Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) to a Visual Culture approach. The content of DBAE was very much focused upon museum fine art, whereas the content of a visual

culture curriculum is much broader embracing all forms of imagery. Films, computer games, television programs, web sites, advertisements, toys, clothing, and architecture have all been included, in addition to the fine arts, as appropriate curriculum content because of their cultural significance and impact upon the life experience of children.

The selection of the broad range of content for study is traditionally undertaken by teachers or administrators in charge of curriculum. In the case of the DBAE program content was defined by study of the work of studio artists, historians, aestheticians, and critics. Content was systematically organized and students moved together through the same learning pathways defined by the teacher in order to arrive at pre-determined and measurable levels of content mastery related to each of the four content areas.

The curriculum content decisions made by those who have transitioned to a visual culture approach place more responsibility upon students for the selection of content. Teaching children to make art requires a gradual process of handing over decision-making power from teacher to students. Students in a visual culture program make an ever increasing number of their own decisions about artistic production and interpretation as they learn about visual culture. Different students and different classes accept responsibility at different rates, but helping students to become accustomed to take responsibility for their learning at all ages is an important content indicator of a good visual culture program.

The visual culture curriculum is interdisciplinary, reflexive, and draws content stimulus from sources in the environment ranging from fine art film, graphic design, fashion design, architecture, digital animation, comics (book and strip), video games, toys, advertising and other popular image sources. It takes advantage of spontaneous events, student discussions, museum excursions, and news reports.

The visual culture curriculum is also linked to the content students learn in other subject areas. A good curriculum is interdisciplinary in its structure. A thematic approach emphasizing content and meaning rather than one based on elements and principles of design builds upon the assumptions underpinning a visual culture approach.

Using themes to frame lessons opens pathways to connections between art and other school subjects. Substantive integration is consistent with current arguments for making art education consistent with the contemporary visual arts (Marshall, 2005).

The choices of art content has expanded in this age of infinite possibilities, partly as a consequence of changes in the professional field (Wilson, 2003) and partly resulting from the benefits of computer technology, which offers enhanced information retrieval and hypertext capabilities (Carpenter & Taylor, 2003).

Content decisions in a visual culture approach become more complicated for teachers as students accept more responsibility for their own learning. The kinds of decisions that are made in undertaking a project include these. What is an appropriate topic that is culturally relevant? What cultural sources should be used for research? Which formal qualities should be emphasized in this project? What media is best to use? What is the intended function of this work? What kind of research strategy should be employed for the project? What style of representation will best express the idea?; What techniques and process will be most appropriate?

Participants

Curriculum is a dynamic enterprise comprising an ever changing relationship between people objects and events. Often the needs and capabilities of people are overlooked by curriculum developers who are much more interested in content than who the content is for.

When change is underway important questions need to be asked about the people affected by curriculum transformation. The most important question is "Who are the learners?" "What is the nature of the population of young people who will experience learning in the arts and what are their needs … both present and future?" Young people today are very different from those of our generation and their futures will be vastly different from ours.

To continue my example of the transition from DBAE to a Visual Culture approach to art education the vision for learners that underpinned the DBAE model of art educators was to educate a community of future of museum attendees. Graduates from the school systems would be people who understood the work of artists, were capable of critique, had a good grasp of the great (Western) works of art from the past, and were capable of experiencing an aesthetic response to well-constructed form. In short, they would know the discipline of art, and would also know they could find the best examples of it in museums.

While these are commendable accomplishments, and there was nothing intrinsically wrong with this approach for students living in the last century, it does not meet the needs and interests of contemporary students. The visual experience of children today is vastly different from the childhood visual experiences of everyone in this room. Students today have far more variety of visual experience, largely transmitted in digital form and far more opportunity to make visual images than ever before. Good curriculum decisions will recognize the nature and interests of learners conterminously with decisions about content.

In the curriculum equation there are other stakeholders to consider in addition to the learners. These include, teachers, parents, and community stakeholders such as those involved in arts communities and arts professions. Teachers in particular need to be considered in terms of their backgrounds and capacity to embrace change. Any curriculum decisions will need to take account of the backgrounds needs and interests of all the stakeholders.

Rationale

The rationale is an important justification for the content of the curriculum. Without good reasons for change it is unlikely that a program would be funded or enacted. For more than a decade now there has been much discussion about the reasons for new approaches to the teaching of art appropriate to the lives of young people living in contemporary cultural conditions. As with any set of new ideas there are many views about the most appropriate guiding principles to direct new practice. These principles do not occur in a vacuum, they are affected, among other things, by the history of the field and the concerns of art education professionals who hold views about the future that often appear to be conflicting. For the practitioner in classrooms around the world the absence of a sound rationale makes the choice of methodology and content very confusing in a time of major change, such as that we are currently experiencing. There are no absolute answers and no quick fix solutions to assist with classroom practice, but a sound rationale can provide a focus point for day to day classroom decision making.

My example of the transition from DBAE to a visual culture approach illustrates a clear difference of rationale between these two approaches to curriculum. The DBAE rationale demands that art education curriculum should be based upon the work of art professionals ie the artist, the critic, the art historian, and the aesthetician. Visual culture rationale is based upon the life experience of

learners in which visual encounter embraces multiple art forms including popular arts, design arts, indigenous arts, folk arts, and fine arts. And this is because it is more relevant to their life experience. Simply put the rationale underpinning DBAE values the discipline and its structures, whereas the rationale for a visual culture approach values students' visual culture experience and interests. The difference is a matter of emphasis but the outcome results in very different teaching methods.

Resources

Resources include all the spaces, equipment, materials, personnel, and finances required to offer an educational program. No matter how engaging or robust a proposed curriculum may be without appropriate resources very little can happen. At the moment curriculum transformation is proposed there will be new demands upon resources, both human and material. Teachers may need to learn new content and strategies through in-service, and different classroom equipment and supplies may be necessary to facilitate implementation of the curriculum. New assessment strategies may require different funding.

For example in the DBAE model students typically proceeded with the same materials towards achievement of the same teacher defined learning goals at the same time. In a visual culture approach students at the senior levels could explore multiple media moving towards independent (and different) negotiated learning goals at the same time requiring a wider range of materials be available to them. It is likely a visual culture curriculum would be more electronically based, placing higher demand on computing resources. Therefore any proposal for content and instructional change will have immediate resource implications.

Implementation

There are two kinds of implementation associated with curriculum reform. The first has to do with the question of introducing the new program to teachers and parents. Simply writing a new document will not bring about change. In-service workshops for teachers, the production of teaching modules and instructional aids may need to be considered. These of course require additional resources to bring them into effect.

The second meaning of the term implementation has to do with pedagogy. How the program will be taught. Differences in content are intimately linked with teaching methods. Inappropriate methods can destroy content. For example a good teacher in a visual culture program will encourage students to bring ideas and objects they value into the class from outside of school. Students are usually excited by the opportunity to do this. Teachers inform themselves about their students' interests and help them to develop art knowledge based on their lived experiences. Students' everyday experiences with visual culture help them to understand why people make art and the significance of its impact in social and personal contexts. Teachers in a DBAE program, on the other hand are more likely to control the choices of art works viewed by the students and the subject matter and form of their studio expression.

Outcomes

The element "Outcomes" has to do with student learning that results from curriculum experience. On the one hand expected outcomes are stated as part of curriculum documentation, while, on the other hand, the actual learning is determined through judgment or measurement using assessment instruments. Traditional DBAE assessment practices connect learning objectives to outcomes in a very tight relationship in which opportunities for "thinking outside the box" is almost always

constrained. In this context, students strive to meet pre-stated objectives and do not define their own learning pathways.

Learning outcomes in a DBAE program are defined in advance by the teacher and students are tested to determine if those objectives have been achieved. Teachers, in a visual culture program negotiate learning outcomes with their students as they reach their senior years. Expectations for students are left open and assessment takes into account the possibility of unanticipated and idiosyncratic outcomes that have personal and social value. There is, as a consequence, a different kind of relationship between intended outcomes and achieved outcomes. Because the curriculum is individualized and curriculum content reflects student interests traditional testing practices are simply inappropriate.

Authentic assessment is an alternative to testing that sets real life tasks for students, often over a long term, to discover if they possess knowledge and skill in a field. In short, the teacher who wants to discover if their students can create a sculpture in clay will not ask them multiple choice questions about clay or sculpture. Instead the students will be asked to make a clay sculpture!

Portfolios are one of the most effective assessment strategies employed in a visual culture program. There are three important features of good portfolios that work well for effective assessment of learning in a visual culture program. The first is that the portfolio contains work that was initiated from classroom art activities but also contains spontaneous work done by students outside of the art class. Students follow their own ideas that may begin in the classroom content, but develop independently outside of school. Art learning does not begin and end in the art class.

Another feature of good portfolios is that they contain artwork selected by the students. Students are independent thinkers who learn to be responsible for choosing at least some of the entries in

their portfolio. Without student choice there is no indication of the student's capacity to make informed decisions.

A third feature of good portfolios is that they contain students' critical reflections. These reflections comment upon such things as the quality of the work, the way it was made, the reasons for choices, influences on the work, difficulties encountered, new ideas to explore and so on.

Conclusion

I have argued that curriculum transformation may be regarded as an art form. It is a creative process requiring decisions to be made about six key elements of curriculum. These are Content, Participants, Rationale, Resources, Implementation, and Outcomes. I used an example of the curriculum transition from DBAE to Visual Culture that is taking place in the United States to illustrate the kinds of decisions that need to be considered in such a process of curriculum development.

Just as there is good art and bad art, there can be good curriculums and bad curriculums. The virtue of a curriculum needs to be judged not only in terms of the "rightness" of decisions made about each of the elements, but more importantly about the connections between the elements and the overall vision produced by the sum of all those decisions in the current social and educational *context*.

All too often the problem of curriculum reform is tackled by simply revising the content, and perhaps the rationale. Other questions related to elements such as *resources*, *participants* (the changing nature and needs of learners and teachers), and strategies for *implementation* are forgotten.

In the end an effective curriculum transformation will achieve a gestalt that has a strong internal logic and consistency between each of the curriculum elements. It will contribute appropriately to the local cultural context and provide learners with the skills and knowledge to address the future. The most potent curriculum should not reflect the past so much as it should envision a vibrant and relevant future for its community of learners. A well-crafted curriculum can be a beautiful thing!

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