



The Case Against Teaching as Delivery of the Curriculum

Although many teachers see themselves as curriculum deliverers, this view dismisses the role of the individual learner and contributes to the continuation of social inequities.

By Youngjoo Kim

It was the first day of a graduate curriculum class. The room was packed with graduate students, most of whom were practicing teachers. The room was saturated with the curious anticipation that occurs when a class first meets. Students were glancing at me, the instructor. I finally broke the ice by asking these questions: “Who are teachers? What is teaching and what is curriculum? In what ways are teachers curriculum workers? How are you, in your role as teachers, involved in curriculum work?”

Students immediately became engaged in answering these questions, and one student with a cheerful voice was quick to reply, “Teachers deliver the curriculum.” Another student in the back volunteered, “We, teachers, are the ones who present the knowledge to students that they are expected to learn at each grade level. So, I think that teachers are the conduit between the curriculum and the students.” A few more students chimed in, one after another, agreeing with the idea of the teacher as deliverer of the curriculum. Soon, others extended the discussions to the importance of a teacher being equipped with good lesson planning skills and effective instructional strategies.

This conversation took place in a class that I teach called “Teachers and the Curriculum.” In this course, the students — most of whom are practicing teachers — critically examine the notion of teaching and explore salient curriculum issues. I often begin by asking students the question about the teacher-curriculum relationship, and the perspective of teacher as deliverer of the curriculum is a typical response.

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For me, a teacher's acceptance of the idea of teaching as primarily a delivery of a general curriculum is troublesome. This notion of education is closely associated with problematic practices such as suppressing student voices, narrowing the range of critical thought, and neglecting the serendipitous "teachable moments." Believing that teaching is curriculum delivery dismisses the individual learner and contributes to the continuation of social inequities.

SUPPRESSING STUDENTS' VOICES

Teaching as curriculum delivery evokes the image of a one-way transmission of knowledge: Prepackaged data is transmitted to passive students. In this delivery model of teaching, suppressing or excluding students' voices in the learning process is typical. A result of such methods is a disaffection between students and the material taught in the classroom. Information, thus presented to students, fails to engage the learner's experiences and existing knowledge base. That leaves students frustrated and confused. Problems posed for reflection and exploration in class are distanced from real issues students deal with in their daily lives. For many students, what they learn at school is irrelevant and unattached to their interests, leading them to develop apathetic attitudes and to lose motivation.

Imposing the curriculum on students, excluding their voices from the curriculum-making process, also disrupts the development of participatory democratic citizenship skills among students. An important function of school in a democratic society is to educate students so they can become active participants in their democratic society, engage in meaningful dialogue with others, and make thoughtful choices with an appreciation for the consequences. Students discover their democratic capabilities only when "the democratic values ... are essential ingredients of learning" (Garrison 2003: 525). The experience of exercising freedom responsibly and participating in the decision-making process teaches students how to be democratic citizens. Unfortunately, "teaching as delivery" doesn't offer students either the democratic experience of choosing their learning experiences or the chance to participate in developing their path to learning. The prescribed role of students as passive recipients of the curriculum and of someone else's choices only deters or suppresses a student's ability to make informed, thoughtful selections.

DEVELOPING THE UNCRITICAL MIND

"Where did we come from? Were we created by God or did we evolve?" "What's the legacy of Christopher Columbus? Was he an explorer-hero or was he a genocidal conqueror?" Asking such ques-

tions can easily trigger unsettling debates because they can be viewed from varied points and interpreted differently. By contrast, the delivery model of teaching and curriculum presents knowledge as absolute and irrefutable and demands that students believe and accept it without questioning. When transmitting knowledge from the top becomes a dominant teaching practice, students develop a habit of mind that submits and conforms to ideas of others, rather than constructing their own views and thoughts on a subject. As discussed by Freire (1970), promoting such an unthinking, uncritical, and sub-

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missive mind that is mainly interested in receiving and garnering static, unexamined information is a form of oppression rather than education in its truest sense. Teaching as delivery of the curriculum leaves little space for students to construct knowledge and claim it as their own, and the practice doesn't empower students to become free and conscious intellectuals.

MISSING TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Teaching as delivery also discourages teachers from seeking and using educational opportunities and teachable moments that aren't part of a prepackaged curriculum. As many teachers know, an extraordinary amount of learning can occur when a teacher seizes upon an unpredictable teachable moment. For instance, a pair of tortoises, the newly adopted and enthusiastically welcomed pets in a 4th-grade classroom, could set off substantial study projects on reptiles, their eating and living habits, pet cultures around the world, and other related topics. Students critically examining their collapsing school building in a poor urban school district may become a signal to action for a democratic citizenship project, as it was for Brian Schultz's 5th-grade classroom (2008). There, the students' efforts to communicate to the public the poor conditions and needs of their school building led to stories by the national media and action for change in the school. More important, the students' actions taught them that they had a voice, if only they would use it.

Social issues and contemporary events can also motivate inquiries and catalyze discussions that help students enhance their understanding of the subjects and better prepare them for social participation. These learning experiences are enhanced when a teacher recognizes and responds with imagination to

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teachable moments as they emerge.

When teachers understand that their duty is to disseminate prearranged curriculum content, there is less spontaneity in the classroom and less time for serendipitous, teachable moments. In a classroom where only the authorized curriculum is offered, teachers and students start to accept that topics not included in the official knowledge are not worth class time and that discussing them is digressing from the real teaching. These teachers are conditioned to feel guilty when they digress from the standard curriculum. They learn to resist the experience of education in the moment. Raising an issue or question, if it's not directly related to the prescribed lesson, is frowned upon. Distracting the class with invitations to open dialogue or flights of fancy is seen as a loss of core learning time. Learning opportunities that allow teachers to teach beyond the limits of their imagination are erroneously labeled as time wasters and counterproductive.

BEING "CLERK OF THE EMPIRE"

When teachers deliver the curriculum rather than teaching students to create their own curriculum, whether intended or not, whether aware of it or not, their role is more akin to a waiter than a cook, a mail carrier than a letter writer, or a grocer than a food producer. Teachers who focus on delivering someone else's prepackaged product deny their students a voice in their learning. The good intention of teaching an efficient, focused, scripted lesson has the unintended consequences of valuing conformity over independent thought, of discouraging critical investigation, and of alienating students from their own education. When teachers see themselves as cogs in the education structure and see their role as simply following a script, they're also denied a role in their students' education. They soon begin to understand that their primary duty is to deliver the curriculum, just as construction workers lay bricks to meet the original architectural design. Such attitudes make it difficult for educators to identify themselves as teachers of critical thinking or to even have a role in education reform and improvement.

Teaching as delivery makes teachers susceptible to the trap of becoming the "clerks of the empire" (Giroux 1994: 38). The academic and cultural lessons conveyed in the curriculum are not value neutral, and they often speak for the ideas of the powerful, justifying and maintaining social hierarchies and the continued unequal distribution of privileges among classes.

CONCLUSION

A teacher's perceptions of teaching and curriculum are important because they situate and guide

that teacher's practice. When educators conceive of teaching as the delivery of a prepackaged, decontextualized curriculum, they're less likely to see the importance of providing students with an educational experience steeped in perceptive associations to the world in which they learn and live. Learning that broadens students' perspectives, arms them with critical thinking tools, and deepens their grasp of the world invites them to tap into the unknown, embrace new challenges, experiment, make mistakes, pose alternatives, and try anew. Yet, when teaching is installing static facts, teachers are less likely to create learning environments that encourage students to learn through trial-and-error with an experimental spirit. To contribute to education that is personally meaningful and intellectually rigorous for students, teachers first have to perceive of the student as an individual.

Every child begins with a voracious thirst for knowledge and a hunger to understand. To meet these needs, learners communicate through their world to begin to situate the experiences, thoughts, and other miscellaneous bits of data they have collected into meaningful, useful knowledge. The learning schemas and calculi they employ to construct knowledge don't follow the hierarchical structure of most curriculum plans. Culture, class, race, religion, age, media, and students' peers influence their methods and means for collecting, analyzing, and assessing information. A universal, one-size-fits-all curriculum plan may often be a hindrance to learning. The impersonal nature of a general curriculum plan distances the student from the lesson, making the information garnered to be of questionable value. By keeping the learner from the curriculum process, we hobble the teacher and student by removing opportunities to connect and create lines of communication that are so vital to the learning process. By striving to achieve efficiency, we've traded effectiveness and diminished the communications and academic exchanges in the learning community. **K**

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