

A Protocol for Developing Meaningful Curricula- Five Steps That Engage Teachers in Collaborative Program Vision Building

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The process of developing curricula has not been properly defined for educational leaders who aspire to collaboratively engage their teachers in a thoughtful and sincere codification of the programs they are expected to implement in their classrooms. In his seminal 1949 work, Ralph Tyler proposed a loose and theoretical prescription for curriculum development (i.e., development of goals, experiences, and assessments). Jerome Bruner (1960) helped educators define what should go into curricula. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005) have presented a framework within which curricular content can be organized so that it helps educators clearly recognize the goals they want children to achieve. Curriculum tools such as Heidi Hayes Jacobs' Curriculum Mapping instrument (Jacobs, 2004) give us research-proven strategies to improve existing curricula (mapping is a great mechanism whereby school leaders can help teachers bridge gaps between their planned lessons and the curricular goals they established before they started the school year). But none of these strategies help curriculum leaders sit teams of teachers down to develop user-friendly curricula that can be institutionally implemented in classrooms across a grade-level or content-area.

I propose a five-step model that, over the course of one to two years, engages teachers in a methodical, sincere, and meaningful series of professional activities that lead to the creation of curriculum documents to be institutionalized in every classroom throughout a school district. The process should be embedded in the school calendar so that teachers (the developers) have opportunities to write their programs collaboratively. Effectively and vertically constructed curricula will only come about with the help of K-12 teachers generating ideas together. Three to four days each year should be set aside to release teachers from their classes while they gather in small groups of curriculum committees to plot the course of the district's programs.

Some time must first be spent establishing a culture of ownership over the curriculum development process, so that the developers (teachers) understand their roles as the chief caretakers of district programs. Setting the tone that the process is to be an honest and open one will help teachers feel comfortable about doing their work. It helps to have an honest conversation about the myths of curriculum development. The first meeting with curriculum committees should open by generating a conversation around some common but often unspoken concerns, such as not knowing how to define curriculum or how to develop curriculum, or the purpose of curriculum documents. Icebreakers can be powerful opening tone-setters. One simple but powerful tool I've used is referred to as the "snowball fight." Each member of the curriculum development committee writes a question about curriculum development on a sheet of paper. Questions range

from “What is curriculum?” to “How will we write curriculum?” Next, everyone crumples the papers into balls and throws them at each other. Then each picks up one paper question from the floor, and everyone is encouraged to do his/her best to provide answers in round-robin format. The school leader should moderate and clarify the responses when necessary. Even before the committee begins its work, an effort should be made to point out that everyone has similar questions and concerns about the task on which the group is about to embark.

The first formal step in the curriculum development process has to be an agreement by the developers on what students should know upon completion of each grade. These learning expectations should include: 1) the expectations existing curricula have established for the children that successfully raised program standards (not everything has to be reinvented), 2) the state and Common Core Standards (if applicable), and 3) the curriculum development team’s own goals for its students that should in some way reflect local community’s goals for its children as well.

Developing Mastery Skills Lists is not an easy task, since the conversation around expectations can come down to a heated debate about what’s important for students to know and how much information they should have to understand and apply. The half- to full-day work on mastery skills is framed around unpacking standards and compromising about outcomes outside of the standards that teachers want to be included in the lists. It’s important to explain why Mastery Skills Lists need to be written. They do two things: 1) they frame the next part of the curriculum development process, creation of scope and sequence charts, and 2) they guide the adoption of textbook publishers’ materials. Mastery Skills Lists are more important than standards because they encompass all of the things that kids should know, not just the things assessed on standardized tests.

With Mastery Skills Lists in hand, teachers can make well-informed decisions about the textbook materials that have the potential to support their work. Textbook and materials selection is thus the second formal step in the curriculum development process. Textbooks should lay out skills that correlate to the blueprint of skills developed by the teachers. It’s easy to fall into the trap of letting textbook companies drive curriculum development. To turn the process around, teachers should question publisher representatives as to what their materials will do to help meet the expectations that were framed by the Mastery Skills Lists development process.

Having Mastery Skills and supportive materials to their avail, teacher curriculum writers can engage in the third step of the curriculum development process: creation of scope and sequence charts. This step helps teachers decide when along the school year the skills will be taught. Scope and sequence charts come in two “flavors.” Topic Scope and Sequence Charts plot the district wide implementation of skills. Topic charts show us where on the K-12 continuum

specific skills will be taught. Without them we would not know where the gaps and unnecessary redundancies lie. These charts provide teachers with an alternative way to look at the mastery skills as the developers plot the skills along the year into the charts.

Teachers will tell you they find the Topic Scope and Sequence Charts to be the most helpful component of the curriculum package. Considering that the charts frame exactly what teachers should teach, I would agree that these are integral to the success of a school year. But when to teach these skills between September and June must be determined by a second type of visual: a Program Scope and Sequence Chart. Program charts show us the week and span of time during which a specific unit will be implemented. Constructing these charts doesn't require a group effort. Setting aside a half-day for individual teachers to write year-long scope and sequence tables is usually sufficient.

Many of us are most familiar with the frameworks that indicate the standards aligned with the concepts and skills we plan to teach and provide additional information that allows us to see the program's "big picture." The construction of these tables is a natural next course in the curriculum development process because they provide another way of looking at the mastery skills and a program's scope and sequence. They provide a more efficient way of graphically looking at how standards are aligned with the units and show additional information such as the Enduring Understandings, Essential Questions, and Big Ideas that frame each unit. I don't expect to have to invest too much time building these tables since, by this point in the curriculum development process, teachers have already considered the global aspects of their program.

Many of the nuts and bolts of a curriculum are included in another component of the curriculum package: the Unit Plan. The fifth and last step in the curriculum development process means codifying the unit goals, sample activities, and formative/summative assessments that will illustrate student acquisition of the goals. Units of Study should be viewed through the lens of a new teacher, or a veteran teacher looking at the new curriculum for the first time. These are the user-friendly guides that bring the program "home" for the teacher and provide much-needed direction for daily lesson planning. I would much rather have a teacher rely on the Units of Study for lesson plan development than the textbook teacher's guide, since I strive to have the curriculum developers drive the program's vision instead of having the textbook publishers dictate what and how we teach our children.

Throughout this five-step process, teachers will engage in discussions that have them thinking in terms of depth over breadth. Visualizing mastery skills that are scoped out and sequenced longitudinally gives teachers that revelatory "aha" moment when they see unnecessary redundancies from grade to grade, and vital scaffolding that will be in place thanks to a carefully laid out plan solidified in the first two steps of the curriculum development process.

In light of the Common Core Standards' emphasis on depth of knowledge of fewer but more complex concepts, this identification and plotting of mastery skills is a healthy byproduct of the five-step curriculum development process. The reality we hear from teachers is that there is not enough time in the day to teach everything we would like to teach our students. Running like horses to an unrealistic skill mastery "finish line" has been futile. We've finally come to grips on a national level with the research-backed idea that learning mastery is a matter of thinking critically about the vital concepts we want our children to understand, and we've come to realize that this is a more effective approach to teaching and learning.

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