

Inspect and adapt as a guide to curriculum

Paul Magnuson
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I wish I knew a heck of a lot more about curriculum. However, I don't want to let the feeling that I want - and the reality, that *I need* - to know more about curriculum stop me from working with curriculum. So I recognize the need for more experience and take solace that I'll get more experience by continuing to work in the area of curriculum as if I *did* know enough!

And isn't that how we become experts in anything? By working a bit beyond our current knowledge? Taking some risks that expose what we don't know so we learn what we need to learn? And sharing with others to get help identifying those areas? That's what I'm doing here. So let me know if and when I go off track or even, perhaps, seem a little unhinged.

I'm going to start with a simple motto borrowed from a philosophy of how to work coming out of the software industry. It's called agile. The motto is *inspect and adapt*. I'd like that motto to guide the way we use curriculum: from its creation to its storage to its ongoing review and improvement.

Let me give a review of curriculum as I understand it so we can start from the same page.

Curriculum is in general all the stuff that a school wants students to do and know. In a boarding school like ours it could mean plenty beyond the classroom, but more often than not curriculum refers to what happens in classes. A distinction is made between the written curriculum (students will learn x, y, and z) and the hidden curriculum (the stuff getting taught, for example, by the way it is taught). A distinction is also made between the written curriculum (again, the students will learn x, y and z) and what is actually taught (the students learn v, w, and z). Teachers, you see, don't always follow the curriculum, for a number of reasons. They probably often have very good reasons not to follow the curriculum.

I think an inspect and adapt mindset can inform how we set up the written curriculum and how we work with the curriculum to inform teaching (and vice versa) so that it any of it even matters. We can say it matters if it improves student learning, though it can matter in other ways, too, like for example making teaching easier for teachers, even if student learning doesn't change much.

Inspect and adapt.

Here is my bias regarding how curriculum tends to work.



1. A number of subject areas are assumed as important based on tradition and inertia. You are probably able to name a number of subjects that you would expect to find in just about any school you walk into, anywhere in the world.
2. Within each subject area there are specific classes, quite likely based on more tradition and inertia, more than likely taught in an order based on tradition and inertia.
3. The school requires that there be a written description of the courses which are either determined by a company or organization which supplies the curriculum to the school or may be what the teachers have written themselves, probably based on documentation that existed before the teacher arrived at that particular school, though there are also processes for writing new curriculum as well as curriculum review processes that include individuals and teams re-writing or creating new curriculum.
4. Once written, the curriculum documents are made shareable to those who use them most - the teachers who are in charge of teaching the content specified in the curriculum - and probably also other teachers, administrators, and to a degree, the parents of the students if not also the students themselves.
5. Once instruction starts, the teacher takes liberty with what is written in the curriculum because of a variety of factors: the teacher's own areas of expertise and weaknesses, perceived and real mismatches between the amount of curriculum and the amount of time to teach, and if the students are lucky, the teacher's desire to match the written curriculum with the students' needs and interests. Big plans are made, after all, at the time during which the maker knows the least about the thing being planned, namely, at the very beginning.
6. Usually schools have some sort of process to record what was taught. Sometimes the record of what was actually taught becomes the future curriculum for the class, especially if new teachers are handed the record of what was taught as well as the curriculum (what the school has determined should be taught). Sometimes new teachers might only receive the record of what was taught, making it the de facto curriculum. After all, what was taught is updated annually through the process of teaching and by the teacher closest to the subject and the students. The curriculum document - what is supposed to be taught - is on average older, more static, and therefore further from reality.
7. Since the school administration assumes that the written curriculum is being taught, teachers who veer from the written curriculum may only talk about the changes they make (most likely to improve the curriculum) with other teachers, hiding the reality of the taught curriculum and its differences from the written curriculum. This difference is sometimes repaired by (6) above, where the taught curriculum becomes the written curriculum or simply allowing the written and taught curriculum to diverge, since it's not



hard to recognize that (5) above suggests different teachers, teaching different students, should have a fair amount of leeway for what is taught. One can imagine of course subjects in which too much leeway is risky (eg math, if there is a progression of skills that require earlier skills) or perhaps foreign language (if the method is overwhelmingly grammar based). Too much leeway can lead to similar or the same topics appearing multiple times, which students will resent unless the reappearance is motivated, which of course requires a planned curriculum.

8. The written, published curriculum therefore serves the need to demonstrate the big plan, while the taught curriculum reflects the reality of teaching and learning. The big plan is generally static, the teaching and learning dynamic - except that it could be that both the big plan and the teaching and learning simultaneously dampen each other, especially if there are unspoken agreements to avoid highlighting the differences, which leads to unclarity, which muddies the water, which in general makes reaching goals harder.
9. While all this is going on, it is possible that what the students are REALLY internalizing is how the curriculum is taught, how the teachers perceive the power relations between themselves and their students, what is allowed to go unaddressed, what values the teacher (and therefore school) seem to hold A whole slew of learning that is shaping how the students will think and act in the future but are much less represented in the curriculum documentation in the school, if represented even at all.

I doubt anyone agrees fully with the 9 points above. I doubt I have the right 9 points. But I bet many people will recognize their own school environments in part or whole in more than one of the points, despite limitations of the list. So what to do about that?

Well, we might adopt an inspect and adapt mindset and see where that leads us. Here's my first attempt:

When working with curriculum, we will hold in mind these four agile principles¹:

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
 - The interaction between all the members of the school is an important piece of the curriculum. It is hard to document, generally not assessed, and lives through the mutual agreement established through the patterns of our own interaction.
 - While we can't predict exact actions, we can design curriculum and the process of working with curriculum in a manner which encourages the types of interactions we'd like to see in teaching and learning.

¹ The four principles are modified from their original context in the world of software.



- Our curriculum is not dependent on a particular set of prescribed processes or tools, but rather an ongoing conversation about how we can best create opportunities for modeling teaching and learning within (ie student to student) and across (ie teacher to student) groups.
- Activities, classes, and units that work over comprehensive documentation
 - We are aiming for student learning over detailed plans about what students are supposed to learn. While it is tempting to create longer and more detailed plans, the plan may be used less and less the longer and more detailed it gets. Another way to say this might be: a smaller and small percentage of the plan might be read or used the longer the plan gets.
 - Detailed plans have to make an assumption that each detail is important, therefore it is included in the plan. Veering from the plan is seen as negative. However, one of our principal aims is to support innovation, which requires flexibility and adaptation, *so that we may veer from the plan.*
- Collaboration over command and control
 - We'd like to emphasize a curriculum which leads to collaboration, whether teacher to teacher, teacher to student, or student to student. While any teacher of any subject can argue that the subject's content is important, exactly what content is taught may be less important than the habits of mind, the habits of interaction, and the habits of learning that the curriculum reinforces. We would like the hidden curriculum to be teaching values prized in colleagues later in life: the ability to collaborate, to listen, to express an opinion, to compromise All of these traits are learned by how we interact with one another, and maybe just a bit by the content of any one of our subject areas.
- Responding to change over following a plan
 - We will start our curriculum development with the assumption that a written curriculum (and a class syllabus) will begin to be inaccurate from the minute it is first published. Therefore we will keep the curriculum plans short. Documentation of what is actually taught may in fact be much longer and can be used by future teachers to construct their classes.
 - A key part of our curriculum process includes regular iterative review of what have determined is the central curriculum in a specific class and what is actually taught. This is done through departmental meetings with all teachers reflecting, together, on the overlap of the written, taught, and hidden curriculums.



- Curriculum that creates choices and paths to pursue that may differ from year to year based on students, international events, teacher expertise and other factors are welcome. The individual decision making of the teacher and how that curriculum is shared with students are more important than the document stating what must be covered. This isn't to say that certain information must be covered, for example, to preserve the scaffolding across classes and years in some subjects and to meet the requirements of external programs (ie the IB).

Perhaps this explains a bit the curriculum process we are attempting to build and follow. I hope you can join in with your department and the rest of your colleagues to keep the planning light, but to review and reflect often, together.

Paul can be contacted at pmagnuson@las.ch.

