

A Whole in the Curriculum Network? Constrictions emanating from secondary school curricula

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'Network' has many meanings. As educators we can use 'network' to mean communication between teachers, parents, principals and administrators. As Pacific Islanders, so dependent on the sea, when we think of network, we might first think of our fishing nets - the familiar threads that bind our catch rather than abstract strings of communication. It is in this sense of a net that curriculum has come to bind us professionally, particularly in secondary schools. Like fish caught in a net, we can no longer choose to swim up or down, left or right, forwards or backwards. The binding threads of the curriculum net that work together to hold us in place are the Content, the Teaching Methods and the Assessment (Bastick 1995).

No matter how hard we try, it is not possible to loosen any one of these single threads on its own, because the other two threads hold it firm and secure. A school committee, for example, can not introduce locally relevant and meaningful content to replace the abstract examinable book work because it cannot loosen the binding thread of external assessment that tests that book work. Neither can the innovative teacher take time to teach for understanding, meaning and self-expression. He or she can not loosen the thread of teaching method, but must effectively 'drum-it-in' for the next exam. Experienced Pacific teachers can predict, almost exactly, what will be in the next exam. They train their students to this rote-precision because their teaching skills are judged by the students' assessment. Hence, it is also not possible to loosen the thread of assessment - to ask something different in a different way - for it is held firmly in place by threads of fixed content and efficient rote learning. If the examiners were to require less detailed content, with the intention of allowing more teaching time for deeper understanding, then teachers would simply use that extra time, not for more understanding but for more rote training of the reduced content, in order to increase their students' exam marks.

However, although we can not loosen the individual threads of the curriculum network we can, and do, tighten the curriculum net. Examiners' objective type questions require us to cover the content in greater time-consuming detail (Rees 1992:16). Teaching methods are constricted by these tight time and test constraints (Muralidhar 1992:13). The tests themselves become more 'objective' - mere meaninglessly atomising memory for marks. Whereas "...examinations need to be designed in a way which (*sic*) targets desired higher-level educational objectives and not just those matters of recall that might encourage rote learning" (Goundar 1992:21). The curriculum net is continually tightened by socio-cultural forces that seem to be beyond the power of any individual to influence. An example is the need to chase certificates that offer, for most students, only broken promises of work.

In higher education, at Pacific Colleges and Universities, the situation is not as constrained as it is in the secondary schools. In higher education, the curriculum offers degrees of intellectual freedom. Students are expected to choose what to study instead of being told what, or how, to study. Students are expected to make personal evaluations of critical ideas and to contribute their own ideas to a wider world of learning. But fish kept in a tight net lose their ability to swim.

As professionals we can not loosen, one-by-one, the individual curriculum threads of Content, Teaching methods and Assessment. As individuals, it also seems impossible to influence the greater socio-cultural forces that continually tighten the curriculum net. But there is a solution. There is a way out. There is a hole in the net. At the moment it is a small hole that has not been sufficiently noticed. The hole in the curriculum net is the Whole Language Approach (WLA) being used to develop literacy and language skills. In the Whole Language Approach students can choose their own book. Among other things, they are asked what they think of it and what they like about it. Students can also create their own stories (Moore, 1993).

The WLA is potentially a more successful programme for further education and for life.

The hole in the net has not been sufficiently noticed because of where it is. It doesn't seem to be in an important place, a place that immediately determines students' work prospects, a place that would warrant instant mending. The WLA is used in some Pacific primary schools and does not involve external examinations. If this approach were to be used in Pacific secondary schools then it is very likely that certain socio-cultural forces would immediately notice the hole and quickly move to mend it. As the curriculum net tightens at secondary level, it can constrict the preparation of primary students and thus cast a shadow over later success in further education.

All good fishermen know that when the net is tightened, the holes tend to widen and tear. As a solution to the tightening curriculum net in secondary schools, we can, as good educators, work to widen Whole Language Education to Whole Mathematics Education, to Whole Science Education, to Whole Education for the whole education system. As primary teachers we can work from below, feeding creative students into the secondary schools. As tertiary teachers we can work from above, creating expectations of success for the secondary schools. As educators we can all work to change secondary schools from a constricting curriculum network of rote learning and meaningless atomistic assessment of irrelevant facts towards, at the very least, a useful experience that each and every student deserves.

References

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