A Solution to the Negative Influences of High-Stakes Testing on Curriculum

Erich DeChant

EDAS 611: The Curriculum

Bowling Green State University

Dr. Savilla Banister
Abstract
The curriculum in all kindergarten through twelfth grade public education in the United States has been adversely affected ever since high-stakes testing became the way to evaluate learning. This newfound “teaching-to-the-test” curriculum and the tests themselves have been spoken out against by, and are issues of supreme importance to, many educators across the country. Columnist Judith Semas, from the educational magazine *Curriculum Administrator*, asks: “Will today’s focus on a single high-stakes assessment tool provide the ‘irrefutable and invaluable information on student progress’ that (U.S. Secretary of Education, Rod) Paige, President Bush and other statewide testing advocates anticipate?” (Semas, 2001, p. 44). Teachers have been stripped of their lesson planning individuality and authority; and thus are being reduced to test preparation experts while teaching this test-based curriculum. While it is a fact that high-stakes standardized tests do have a place in education as a means of assessment; they should not be the sole means of evaluation for American children. To solve this problem the education community must come together and look into applying a variety of curriculum principles and assessment strategies so that the students and teachers of today will not be short-changed come tomorrow.
INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, the curriculum for modern-day elementary, intermediate, middle, and high school students has been altered significantly in order to prepare them for high-stakes standardized tests, which are defined as “those tests that ‘carry serious consequences for students or educators’” (Grant, 2004, p. 4). My personal problem with this new-age curriculum is that since it has been designed to prime kids for standardized testing, it has hamstringed teachers of their individuality and creativity and reduced learning to little more than rote memorization. Gregory J. Marchant agrees with this sentiment when he claims that “….They (teachers) tend to narrow the scope of their curriculum to that which is tested, and they tend to abandon more innovative teaching strategies, such as cooperative learning and creative projects, in favor of more traditional lecture and recitation” (2004, p. 3). Another problem is that it discourages teacher experimentation in lesson plan development and pedagogy, as educational administrators across the land have made it clear that the numerous high-stakes tests are to be first priority when it comes to lesson planning and curriculum preparation. This singular style of assessing student learning has changed curriculum for the worse. After all, if educators are to expect their students to emerge from their schools as well-rounded, critical thinking individuals, then they should provide for them a comprehensive and all-embracing curriculum that consists of a multitude of assessment means.
WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

The current trend in United States education is to “assess” and “evaluate” darn-near everything. Education advocate Finbarr Sloane relates with this fact when saying: “from the time children are in kindergarten until the time that they graduate high school (that is, if they pass their graduation test), boys and girls across America are being examined on a regular basis” (2003, p.13). The true problem in this is that the assessments and evaluations are almost always via high-stakes multiple-choice and short essay tests. The fact that this is true goes against everything that has been taught within the realm of “well-roundedness.” Thus it is clear that if the curriculum is to be altered, then the standard form for assessing it must change first. Essentially, it means that instead of evaluating students by way of standardized tests only, students should be given a variety of performance-based assessments, including, but not solely consisting of, multiple-choice and short essay standardized tests.

THE SOLUTION: A WELL-PLANNED AND HOLISTIC METHOD

In order for the national education community to solve this curriculum problem, they must first change the predominant theory on learning assessment: i.e., the high-stakes standardized test as the whole means for evaluation. But how exactly is this change going to take place? It can and will only through a systematic, research-based method that allows for multiple assessments to be used.

Students in Dr. Banister’s EDTL 611 class have learned from the class textbook, *Curriculum: Foundations, Principles, and Issues*, that there are various parts that make
up the principles of curriculum. These parts include curriculum development; curriculum design; curriculum aims, goals, and objectives; curriculum implementation; and curriculum evaluation. It is within each of these various parts of the curriculum principles that the solution to the dilemma of modern-day curriculum is found – and a new, thoroughly comprehensive curriculum is born.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

At the beginning of the entire principles of curriculum spectrum is curriculum development. As *Curriculum: Foundations, Principles, and Issues* assesses, “it is essential that great care be given to the creation of curricula” (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004, p.194). With this, any person or group attempting to solve the high-stakes testing curriculum problem must begin here. Within this aspect of curriculum principles are three main models in which to classify the process of development. These are Technical - Scientific, Non-technical - Nonscientific, and Holistic. In order for a true change in curriculum to take place, the Non-technical – Nonscientific approach must be taken.

The Non technical – Nonscientific approach should be taken when developing a new curriculum that is not wholly devoted to preparing students for testing because its fundamentals are rooted in the belief that the process of curriculum has a strong degree of universality, logic, and objectivity (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004). This varies from the approach taken by most curriculum developers today. More often than not, current developers follow the Technical – Scientific approach because it is based upon increasing students’ objective output – which essentially means raising their standardized test
scores. The Non technical – Nonscientific method emphasizes the “subjective, personal, aesthetic, heuristic, and transitional” (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004, p. 207). This means that instead of stressing the “outputs of production,” the focus of this curriculum will be on the learner him or herself; and thus, the curriculum must not be planned with such precision, but rather with the understanding that learning is a process. This belief is important, comments Judith Semas, a contributing editor of the magazine Curriculum Administrator, because the learner is why we (in education) are all here (2001).

CURRICULUM DESIGN

Now that a strong development for the curriculum is in place, the next action is to choose a different design. First, the fact that most curriculum advisors and specialists at the state and local level are basing their approach around objectives and evaluation needs to change. The new curriculum design will be characteristic of a philosophy that encourages learning experiences and activities above standardized assessments and output goals. However, before this can be accomplished, the new curriculum should clearly explain the four components of its design.

The four parts of curriculum design include “1) aims, goals, and objectives; 2) subject matter; 3) learning experiences; and 4) evaluation approaches (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004). Furthermore, a curriculum design has five standard sources that help create it: Science as a source, Society as a source, Eternal and Divine sources, Knowledge as a source, and the Learner as a source (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004).
The following needs to take place within the four parts of curriculum design in order to make it holistic and less test-based. First, the aims, goals, and objectives of the curriculum need to be based upon student learning and comprehension, rather than simple cut and dry test scores. The Headmaster of the Boston Arts Academy, Linda Nathan, agrees, claiming that the goals of education administrators are too often based on test performance (2002). Yet if the goals are to be based less on test scores, then evaluation approaches much be altered to reflect the change in philosophy on curriculum as a whole. Thus the evaluation(s) will not be singularly left to standardized tests, but to performance-based assessments and other creative projects as well as multiple-choice tests. The subject matter to be learned will essentially stay the same, as the stressing of science, math, English, and History learning is the main key to an education; however, foreign languages and various arts subjects should also be considered (Nathan, 2002).

Finally, learning experiences will not be held to ONLY those that can take place within a classroom; but will include field trips and other necessary experiences that take place outside the regular classroom.

Of the five standard sources of curriculum that exist, the Learner as a source philosophy should be dominant. After all, what is education really all about? Is it about outcomes or about what students (learners) can actually gain knowledge of? One educational expert opines that students acquiring knowledge is the true goal of education (Shaw, 2002). This exemplifies that stressing the learner is absolutely essential when designing a curriculum because the learner is exactly the reason why the curriculum even
exists! As another career education activist assesses, the curriculum that is prematurely set is too often placed above the learner him or herself (Goertz, 2003).

AIMS, GOALS, AND OBJECTIVES

The new curriculum should also clearly state its aims, goals, and objectives. In light of this, this new curriculum that will solve the great influence of testing will have the following aim: The aim of this whole and complete curriculum is to prepare indicators of learning and subject-matter that will enable students to gain knowledge of what is necessary to function as contributing members in a changing society. The goal of this curriculum is for students to become literate, highly critical thinking individuals who have the tools to make educated decisions on their own, demonstrate citizenship, and to achieve their career goals. Finally, the objectives of the curriculum are for students to understand the information that has been taught and to be able to process that information into goals of their own so that they may become responsible for furthering their education as responsible and independent decision makers.

CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

At this juncture in the process, it is essential to get the new curriculum implemented into effect. As the EDTL 611 textbook makes clear, implementing the new curriculum may seem to be simple, but is in fact a fairly involved process. In order to implement something new, personal habits, methods of behavior, and existing curricula must be adjusted (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004). Also, leadership must be summoned
inside of the schools for this new curriculum to successfully be put into practice. This means that there have to be people within each of the school buildings where this new curriculum is to be employed, who will lead others into actually making sure it is applied.

Furthermore, in order for this new curriculum to fairly have a chance at succeeding within each school, all persons involved with its implementation need to acquire a degree of patience. As Allan Ornstein and Francis Hunkins explain, there have been situations where innovations have not been implemented because educators have been impatient, wanting quick fixes so as to please both legislators and a demanding public who hastily want results (2004, p. 299). With this information being known, implementing the new curriculum will take a well-researched planning process.

First and foremost, to be a success when employing this new curriculum, those doing so need to plan strategically beforehand. *Curriculum: Foundations, Principles, and Issues* explains that careful planning with attention to detail will make clear what needs to be addressed in order to carry out the new curriculum and the philosophies that come with it (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004). In addition, it is helpful if the faculty and staff members of the institution where the new curriculum will be implemented are kept abreast of why there is a new philosophy of instruction. This is imperative because communicating with teachers is vital in making any policy or practice changes (Shaw, 2000). Teachers and staff need the opportunity to voice their opinions on how to best make the necessary changes so that the transition goes smoothly. Extra importance needs to be placed on this because too often, “teachers develop a psychological loneliness that
results in hostility to administrators and outside change agents who seem insensitive to the teachers’ plight” (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004, p. 301).

Secondly, there will be a strong level of support for the faculty members who will be counted on greatly to make this curriculum change possible. In order to help the faculty with this transformation, there will be in-service programs and later on, staff development time, allotted so that all questions can be answered and model examples can be given in terms of what is expected so that this can work. This is essential so that the faculty can work in good faith with the curriculum developers and administrative staff.

CURRICULUM EVALUATION

The final principle of curriculum comes in the form of evaluation. From square one, the argument has been that high-stakes testing should not be the most fundamental and regularly used form of evaluation. Therefore, if this new curriculum is to be successful, then the method for evaluating it will not depend so heavily on standardized testing.

The EDTL 611 class textbook and other educational research articles detail information on various evaluation models. Included in these sources is information on qualitative and quantitative measurements. Finbarr Sloane explains that qualitative and quantitative forms of assessment differ in that “a quantitative measurement uses values from an instrument based on a standardized system that limits data assembly to a selected or predetermined set of possible responses, while a qualitative measurement deals with detailed descriptions of performances, and thus can be a little subjective but can also be
more valuable (2003, p. 15) A few of the performance-based assessments include projects such as essays, performances such as oral presentations, and portfolio compilations. Linda Nathan explains that the value of such assessments are “similar to standardized achievement tests in that some performance-based assessments also have norms, but the approach and philosophy are much different than traditional standardized tests (2002, p. 598). The underlying concept is that students will produce evidence of mastering curriculum goals by creating performance-based projects and such, rather than by their performance on high-stakes tests.

In light of this, the newfound philosophy for the appraisal of curriculum will be based on a half-and-half method. The curriculum will be designed in a manner which necessitates that nearly half of the content standards be assessed with qualitative measures and the other half with traditional quantitative assessments. Therefore, there will finally be a fair and well-rounded curriculum – and just as importantly, a holistic and rational way of assessing it as well.

COUNTERARGUMENTS

Everything suggested above will probably raise the costs of education because a more intricate method of grading must be used for the performance-based assessments. However, the savings from not spending so much on test-preparation learning packets and the tests themselves should help to pay for a significant portion of these changes in the curriculum. Some may feel that this new curriculum and the methods which will be used to evaluate it are preposterously unrealistic. To those who feel this way I reply: Is not the practice of employing standardized tests as the *sole* method of evaluating
curriculum idealistic and impractical then, too? The underlying and fundamental essence of this argument is not that the curriculum HAS to change to be exactly everything that is detailed within this paper; but rather it is that the current curriculum and the means of assessing whether it has been learned DO need to change to be something like it!
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