DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 804 CS 202 665

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TITLE Articulating the Language Arts Curriculum or Meadowlarks and a Bird Dog Named Gus.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference on Language Arts in the Elementary School (8th, Atlanta, Georgia, March 5-7, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Planning; *Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Curriculum; English Programs; *Language Arts; Program Development

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses articulating the language arts curriculum. Articulating the language arts curriculum is talking about it to and with peers, with students, and with oneself. It is argued that this dialogue and internal searching for a directional sense for the language arts curriculum is actually the basis for the curriculum itself. Language arts curriculum articulation should focus upon the search for reasonable assumptive bases for the program, a thorough explication of the program, and the design of a conceptual framework for teaching language arts. Articulation is also questioning all aspects of the language arts curriculum, including ideas, teaching approaches, and curriculum development. (TS)

ARTICULATING THE LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULUM
OR
MEADOWLARKS AND A BIRD DOG NAMED GUS

BY

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Aldo Leopold, noted conservationist and author of A Sand County Almanac, tells in his Round River Essays of a bird dog named Gus who once lived with him. Gus, it seems, was an excellent pheasant hunter, and Leopold lived in an area heavily populated with pheasants. Weekend hunting trips were common and productive.

It came to pass that Leopold moved to a different part of the country where the pheasant population was quite sparse, but Gus worked at it for awhile. With professional obligations taking up more of his time, Leopold had less time available for hunting, so turned Gus loose to roam the fields on his own.

Gus soon discovered that though there weren't many pheasants around, there was a proliferation of meadowlarks. As a matter of fact, after awhile, it seemed as much fun to hunt the meadowlarks. They were obviously easier to find, seemed to exhibit the same general properties as pheasants, and really didn't seem to mind as much as the pheasants had since they never ran the risk of being bagged.

And as for Gus, a bird in the bush was worth two in a bag.

* * * * * *

Effective curriculum articulation has never been an easy matter. In the language arts the situation has been even more difficult if anything, for the problem of defining "articulation" is confounded considerably by the further problem of conceptualizing what "language arts" is or does.

Perhaps such is a reason for what often appears to be our continued delusions in language arts curriculum. This is no place to retrace the recent history of language arts curriculum development aside from mentioning that more of us than not would probably concur that meadowlarks have taken up more of our time than pheasants.

Consider, for instance, Thursday, February 26, about 2:15 p.m.

I was one of several evaluators of special project proposals in reading curriculum our state education agency was reviewing for possible funding. Impressive looking evaluation forms utilizing specific criteria with assigned point values were being used to rank order the proposals.

And it happened.

A proposal whose individual components were rated high, placing it well up in the group. Yet it didn't hang together at all. In fact, it had all the class of a worn out Cadillac after a trip through a trash compactor! The truly astonishing part, however, came later when otherwise reasonably well-educated and normally intelligent adults couldn't decide how to "objectively" pitch it without doing severe disservice to the evaluation system; the system which called for the important components of a needs assessment, a rationale, goals and objectives, evaluation, dissemination, and program maintenance.

However, nowhere did it call for a description and/or explanation of what was to take place in the span of time between the needs assessment and the program evaluation.

The matter is disturbing for several reasons, but a couple that are especially fundamental.

First, it clearly demonstrates the ease with which we can get caught up in the procedural and administrative aspects of articulation, whether curriculum or other; a principle holding in a number of areas of endeavor. Jacque Ellul, French sociologist, in fact documents how technique has a way of becoming an end in itself. The acts of designing a curriculum; administering, evaluating and implementing a reading program; categorizing and writing up a scope and sequence of language arts skills and objectives all constitute technique as an entity in some senses. These acts are no longer means or intermediary but, instead, ends.

How many reading proposals are funded annually because they have addressed assigned criteria but still don't hang together conceptually?

How many language arts curriculum guides have a solid logical appeal in print, but which bear little relation to what goes on in the classroom?

This author recently observed a language arts staff inservice nearly disintegrate over a shoe box! A curriculum writing team had worked the summer writing up language arts skills and objectives, one per note card, one shoe box full of note cards per grade. Unfortunately, they ran out of shoe boxes by the fifth grade; hence, no fifth and sixth grade curriculum!

Other districts continue to devote time, energy and, therefore, also considerable money to the development of lists of skills and objectives for the language arts program. The result is more often than not lists only slightly less well-written than those readily available from nearly any commercial publisher.

Implicit in such acts can be seen a second problem with the "technique-as-end-syndrome." That is that our energies are being diverted away from more fundamental matters in language arts curriculum articulation. We get caught up in the dominant operational model for curriculum development and articulation; its intricacies and details; its demands which seem to call for convergence rather than divergence, cooperation and concurrence. Yet, perhaps divergence avoidance is not necessarily a desirable thing in curriculum articulation.

Thomas Kuhn, writing in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, points out how scientific advancement is not a gradual accumulation of new knowledge "piled" on top of old knowledge as was traditionally assumed. But, instead, significant new developments have resulted when scientists have violated a currently espoused paradigm; they have, in effect, functioned as revolutionaries in a sense. The Galileos and Einsteins and Watsons have refused to be constrained

by the perceptions of reality espoused by given scientific models at given points in time; models which were supposed to provide the new directions for a field of endeavor.

The key to breakthroughs in curriculum might not be unlike the key to new developments in science, that is in questioning.

However, the Einsteins and Watsons are few in history, for peer pressure, social demand, perhaps innate character of man, militate against question-raising outside the purview of the currently accepted models of reality, and searches for alternatives are few in number. In some senses, when one is so busy searching for answers there is little time left to search for new questions.

Of course, a correlative factor is that the extent to which a currently espoused curriculum model responds to questions is to some degree a determiner of the number and quality of questions raised. It would seem that any language arts curriculum model being adhered to in a given situation is premised upon certain underlying assumptive bases. These are the bases which must be turned to when answering any questions an interloper might raise.

And responsiveness to such questions should be an essential of any curriculum model. Unfortunately, such responsiveness appears not to be an attribute of curriculum in any area. J. Schwab, in fact, asserts this weakness as a key factor in curriculum's current moribund state. (Schwab, 1970) We have tended to grab at panaceas without subjecting them to the scrutiny of questions of applicability, reliability and psychological validity. An approach to curriculum must be prepared to respond.

For example, what are the assumptive bases of initial reading instruction programs? If a given program has a heavy decoding emphasis, i.e. aspects of phonology-morphology, their components and features, grapheme-phoneme correspondences, etc., well delineated and stranded through the grades in a scope and

sequence; what is being assumed about the mental operations taking place during the reading act?

If the program has a language-experience base, what assumptions hold regarding the mental energy expenditures of the reading act?

A recent survey of language arts teachers (Hutchinson, 1975) suggested that spelling, capitalization, punctuation and other similar language arts skills receive top priority from practicing teachers. If so, what are the perceived roles of such skills? It would seem deluding to assume that they bear in any significant way on the writing act. For the most part, they are presentational amenities which come after-the-fact in order to make the final product more presentable.

In short, critical examination must not be avoided for the sake of efficiency and/or ease of administration. Technique generates ease. Its handles can be quickly latched on to, its course made more amenable to logical design.

For the sake of maintaining an ongoing battle with the implicit forces of technique in language arts curriculum articulation, I would like to propose a few selected, occasionally radical, notions.

+ Articulation is Discoursing

  Articulating the language arts curriculum is talking it; talking to and with peers, with students and, perhaps most importantly, with self. Time spent designing a scope and sequence of language producing and language consuming skills and detailed curriculum guides is largely time inefficiently spent. Such has probably been done both more efficiently and more profesionally by others who have the financial resources to do so.

  People with experience in curriculum development say that such is largely a vicarious experience. When a small team of teachers works on

language arts curriculum in summer workshops, for instance, and then has some difficulty getting it "implemented" in the total school program, it is easy to forget that the problem lies less in the what of the produced curriculum guide than in the how of its production. The dialogue, the give and take, the internal searching for a directional sense for the language arts curriculum IS the curriculum. It is only our phrenological desires to parse reality into categories that has demanded that curriculum, instruction, and administration are three separate aspects of the schooling act. And it is an additional perverting of reality that suggests curriculum itself is further sub-divided into a curriculum guide, textbooks, and other noninternalized physical phenomena or materials.

+ Articulation is Conceptualizing

Language arts curriculum articulation should focus upon the search for reasonable assumptive bases for the program, a thorough explication of same and the design of a conceptual framework which moves on teaching from them.

Why are you teaching this poem? Why are you teaching any poem? Where does such stand in relation to the other classroom activities you are engaging in? How does it relate to what others are doing in the language arts program?

Experience suggests that activites such as small group interaction, creative dramatics, grammar study, etc., are more often viewed as neat entities, valuable in and for their own sakes, than we would like to prefer.

It would seem that if a teacher is using a "Moffett" approach, for instance, he or she must be prepared to "articulate" or if you would "discourse" on the assumptive bases of each teaching act called for in that approach.

In a composition program, if the teacher is not marking or critiquing student writing, where is that course of action or "non-action" going? If the teacher is critiquing, where is that action going? What is the relationship of the "discursive" to the "non-discursive" in writing?

In short, what are the assumptive bases of our actions as language arts teachers?

+ Articulation is Questioning

There is a fine line between advocacy and ideology. Advocates largely argue for. Ideologists broach no questions against. In some senses, certitude is the sure mark of beginning death throes for an idea, a teaching approach, a curriculum development or articulation model. The "Kuhnian" idea of scientific revolution and his substantive documentation of same leaves little doubt that the Einsteins, Watsons, and others "revolt" at what seems to be the height of popularity of some other operational model; a time when "there is an answer for everything."

Perhaps the surest sign of healthy development and productivity in curriculum approaches are in their tolerance, nay, their encouragement of questions; their receptivity to the interloper who wants to probe out assumptions, beliefs, weaknesses and strengths.

There is a point, of course, where a disrupter can find fault for the sheer sake of finding fault. But it would seem that such is but a small risk when one considers the stakes.

After all, a bird dog named Gus notwithstanding, meadowlarks are not pheasants.

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