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## ABSTRACT

The concept of lifelong learning has become important in recent years as adults increasingly need to adapt and innovate, become more flexible workers, and take more active roles in the education of their children. Most of the discussion of lifelong learning, however, is couched in terms of formal educational institutions. But informal learning may require a different vocabulary. A study using videotape clips from a range of British television and Open University programs has been used to illustrate how the concept of "curriculum" changes and functions in learning situations outside those to be found in formal institutional contexts. In more informal learning, "curriculum" can be taken to mean learning opportunities, which are organized in a particular learning situation. This definition contrasts to formal educational institution curriculums, which promulgate what things powerful groups in a particular society think students should learn and focus on subjects rather than processes. Although learning by adults outside workplace contexts or educational institutions is informal, it still can have a curriculum--a way of organizing knowledge--if a broad definition is used. Further research and reflection on issues associated with transferring the language of institutionalized learning into the lifelong learning context are needed. (Contains 20 references.) (KC)

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# Issues in the study of curriculum in the context of lifelong learning

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The concept of lifelong learning has become particularly important in recent years in terms of national policy, personal aspiration and research and scholarship. While there is an increasing requirement for adults to be able to adapt and innovate, becoming more flexible workers and learners, parents are also being encouraged to take a more active part in the education of their children. However, in many discussions lifelong learning seems to be seen as encompassing only the school and employment years and as taking place only in formal educational and training arenas. This is partially caused by and at the same time reflected in the language we use to talk about lifelong learning, which is all borrowed from the discourses of formal education and training, and carried over uncritically from one context to another. In this paper I am going to look at one of the concepts implicated in this, curriculum, and see how it changes and functions in learning situations outside those to be found in formal institutional contexts. As part of this investigation I am going to consider a series of video clips concerned with a variety of learning situations. These clips come from a range of BBC and Open University programmes and have been selected and brought together as part of a new undergraduate course, *Learning Matters: challenges of the information age*, due to start in 2001. It is important to be aware that my use of these clips is illustrative; they do not constitute research data. I was not present when any of them was filmed, nor was I involved in the initial cutting; the clips were taken from completed programmes. Thus they have the status of quotations from other authors rather than of empirical data.

I am going to start with a basic definition of curriculum that is broad enough to have at least some chance of functioning across learning situations outside the educational institution:

‘Curriculum’ is taken to mean: the learning opportunities which are organised in a particular learning situation

It is important to note that in defining my key term in this way I am differentiating between curriculum and learning. I do not at this stage want to imply that all learning is part of a curriculum; although my definition is deliberately broad, I do not want it to become so all-inclusive that it embraces all incidental, accidental learning. For example, I have learned over the years that papers with ‘design and technology’ in the title do not attract large audiences at BERA conference, but I would have to subscribe to a pretty serious conspiracy theory about the relationship between myself and the rest of the academic community to see this as being part of a curriculum even of my learning to operate as an academic. Curriculum implies organisation, a programme of learning, though the organisation involved may (as we shall see) turn out to be neither overt nor intentional. Note also that my definition does not specify who or what it is that is doing the organising. Although in an educational institution this is often (at one level at least) the teacher, I would like to leave open the possibility that other persons or forces might take this role.

## **OVERT AND FORMAL CURRICULA**

Before going on to the main focus of this paper, the applicability of the term ‘curriculum’ to situations outside of educational institutions, I am going briefly to look at how it operates within them. The most obvious and common use of the term

refers to the formal curriculum, encapsulated in the UK in curriculum documentation which emanates from government departments and other large institutions. Statements of this curriculum mainly take the form of lists of learning goals and (in some cases) processes through which students are expected to achieve them. Goodson (1988) notes that:

Conflict over the written curriculum has both 'symbolic significance' and also practical significance - by publicly signifying which aspirations and intentions are to be enshrined in written curriculum criteria are established for the evaluation and public estimation of schooling (page 12)

Statements about what should be in the curriculum exemplify what things powerful groups in a particular society think students should learn, and encapsulate value judgements about what sorts of knowledge are considered important, and what attitudes students are expected to emerge with (Bowe et al., 1992, Connell et al., 1982, Goodson, 1992, Goodson et al., 1997, Paechter, forthcoming, 2000, Popkewitz, 1997). As such they are statements of intent; in many cases it is clear that there is a considerable gap between what is intended by those constructing the curriculum or carrying out its precepts and what is actually learned by those to whom it is applied.

The structure of the National Curriculum reflects many taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature and purpose of schooling in England and Wales. It is assumed, for example, that what is most important is the learning of subjects (as opposed to processes or more nebulous attributes such as independence) and that each subject has knowledge, skills and procedures that are special to it. Some subjects are also given priority over others; for example, all children have their attainment in

English, mathematics and science tested by national assessments at regular intervals. Another assumption, which, though contested, underlies the National Curriculum for England and Wales (in contrast to the situation elsewhere) is that the compulsory curriculum should be structured to allow for increasing specialism in the last few years of schooling. This curriculum is also presented as the 'expert' view of what should be taught. This hides a background of at times acrimonious debate between policy makers, educational experts, teachers and politicians; what results is at best a compromise and at worst driven entirely by political considerations (Evans and Penney, 1995, Layton, 1995, Shepherd and Vulliamy, 1994).

The formal written curriculum also encapsulates a view of learning in which it is straightforwardly assumed that what is learned is equivalent to what is to be tested. Thus one can often find 'curricula' which might more accurately be described as 'syllabuses' in that they focus exclusively on the knowledge content which is to be examined during or at the end of the course. Some of the earlier versions of the National Curriculum for England and Wales looked like this. Such an approach ignores the need to structure the learning experiences, taking into account the positions of the learners, as well as the knowledge and skills that we want them to learn.

Finally, the formal curriculum of the educational institution assumes the presence of a teacher. It is implied that the curriculum content is already understood by the teacher and that the purpose of the learning experiences is to convey that understanding to the learners (Stenhouse, 1975). The latter are not expected to structure their own curriculum; this is done by the teacher, who is seen as the expert responsible for getting the knowledge over to the learner through the way they

organise the learning. Even where teachers and educational institutions are attempting to give students greater control over their own learning, the teacher is still responsible for providing the conditions in which the learning can take place and for setting the boundaries of student control. The learning opportunities are not just 'organised', as in the definition I gave above; they are 'organised for the learner by others'.

## **HIDDEN CURRICULA**

In contrast to the formal curriculum, which can be seen as a statement of intent, the hidden curriculum is at least partially unintended and may indeed run counter to the overt purposes of the educational institution concerned. Skelton (1997) defines the hidden curriculum as:

That set of implicit messages relating to knowledge, values, norms of behaviour and attitudes that learners experience in and through educational processes. These messages may be contradictory, non-linear and punctual and each learner mediates the message in her/his own way. (page 188)

I would argue that there are at least two types of hidden curriculum; the intended and the unintended. The intended hidden curriculum comprises those things that are not part of the formal curriculum but which teachers actively and consciously pursue as learning goals for their students. What these are may vary, but their presence is common to all educational institutions. For example, teachers in schools often try to take steps to ensure that the curriculum fosters the development of certain values and discourages others. They may encourage students to compete or collaborate, to refrain from bullying, to value order, formal knowledge or common sense. The content of the

intended hidden curriculum is determined by the values of those working in a particular institution and the structures that they are able to put in place. It is hidden in so far as it is not spelt out to student, but it is at least partially articulated by the teachers and may well be made explicit to parents and other adults with interests in the school, for example through policy documents about bullying, racism and so forth.

At the same time, there is a further hidden curriculum which is not consciously intended by teachers and lecturers, and indeed may run counter to either or both of the intended overt and hidden curricula. Walkerdine (1990) notes, for example, that while there is an overt message conveyed in primary classrooms that it is important to work hard and concentrate, at the same time teachers value achievement that results from this hard work less highly than that seen as the result of 'flair' or 'natural ability'. While there is an intended hidden curriculum that values hard work and doing one's best, at the same time this is undermined by a set of unintended messages which suggest that it would be better to succeed while not trying very hard at all. Walkerdine further suggests that boys and girls suffer differentially as a result of these contradictory stances, with hard-working girls seen as less able than boys achieving less but also working less hard.

Another example of how the unintended hidden curriculum can operate in the classroom can be seen in the following video clip:

*Play Weighing the Carrot here*

While this clip can be seen straightforwardly as an example of work on the formal mathematics curriculum, there is also clear evidence of an unintended and hidden curriculum operating. The boy in the clip carries out the weighing activity more or less alone, discussing it with the teacher and recording the results; all the girl gets to



do is hold the carrot for him. If she learns anything at all from the activity, it is that boys do mathematics, while girls stand and watch; she is learning to be an assistant to an active, powerful, male. There is considerable evidence that this sort of experience is quite common for girls in schools (Delamont, 1990, Paechter, 1998, Walkerdine and The Girls and Mathematics Unit, 1989). Although the teacher in this clip made no attempt to change this situation, and in fact contributed to it by addressing all her 'teaching' remarks to the boy, it would not be fair to say that she intended the children to learn these things about their gender roles. However, examples such as this suggest that the unintended hidden curriculum is very pervasive and very powerful, at least in part because it is unintended. Teachers (and students) are at best only partially aware of what is going on and can often find it very difficult to resist.

Finally, if the term 'hidden curriculum' is taken to include such unintended curricula, then we have to accept that the term 'curriculum', while it implies organisation, does not necessarily require a person who does that organising. In this example it is (to put it simplistically) society that structures the children's learning opportunities.

### **FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING FOR CHILDREN IN THE HOME**

In contrast with the situation in educational institutions, learning in the home is largely perceived as being informal. Is it still possible to apply the term 'curriculum' to these learning situations? I am going to consider this question through the use of four examples.

The first involves the learning that takes place through children's involvement with cultural and/or religious ceremonies. In taking part in a religious or cultural

ceremony with her or his family, whether physically in the home or elsewhere, a child learns both about the religious and cultural traditions of her or his ethnic and/or religious group, and is enabled to develop a sense of who they are in relation to that group and to other groups. Sometimes this educational as well as ceremonial role is very explicit. For example, in the Passover service that takes place before the celebratory meal, or Seder, in Jewish households, the youngest member of the family asks four questions about the special rituals and foods of the Passover meal. In response, senior members of the family (the father, in Orthodox homes) read from the Hagadah, a religious book that tells the story of the Jews' suffering and Exodus from Egypt. In this way the Passover ceremony is structured to be in itself a formal curriculum for the learning of an important part of Jewish religious belief and cultural tradition. The ceremony of asking the four questions and hearing the replies in the Hagadah organises how the children of the family learn about the ceremony and why it is important.

It could also be argued that the presentation of 'milestones' for children's development in childcare manuals (including those published by the Government) is another example of a formal curriculum organising learning in the home environment. These 'milestone' lists vary in their detail and are ostensibly intended as a check for parents worried about their child's development, for example by giving an indication of when the parent should become concerned (for example if no tuneful babble is produced by one year) (Green, 1992). However, because they also indicate what 'normal' children can do at particular ages, they also function as an externally-structured curriculum for a conscientious or ambitious parent (who might try and achieve some of the goals much earlier than is 'normal' for example). Official

publications of this sort also function as ‘prompts’ for those parents unsure of what they should be doing with their baby at a particular age, by suggesting what they might be able to do with particular toys. For example, when talking about the regular ‘developmental checks’ made by health visitors and doctors on all children in their area, the Health Education Authority (1994), in a book given to all first-time mothers in England, state:

Each developmental check will include a general check of your child’s health, and developmental tests suited to your child’s age. (Speech and language checks are included.) So in later checks for example, your child may be asked to do things like building bricks, looking at and talking about pictures, and so on (page 28).

In contrast to these examples, where a more or less formal (and written) curriculum can be seen to be operating even for very young children and in a home environment, comes the related question whether the spontaneous developmental play of parent and baby can be described as a curriculum. The following clip gives one example of this:

*Play Baby Games clip (Baby Monthly 26:20/274-279)*

What appears to be happening in this clip is that three-month old Chloe, by her increased interest in her surroundings, forces her mother, if she is to hold Chloe’s attention, to change her own behaviour, being more exciting as a playmate by tickling and blowing raspberries. We might describe this as a curriculum both for Chloe’s further learning and for her mother’s development as a parent. If this is a curriculum, I don’t think we can say that it is structured consciously, either by the mother or by the baby. However, there is certainly some structure, and that structure organises learning

opportunities, which is all that my definition requires. We might want to say that the curriculum is structured by the needs of the baby's development, expressed in the baby's behaviour. Or maybe this is stretching the concept of curriculum too far; does my definition break down and become meaningless if I seek to apply it here?

In contrast again is another clip in which the parent explicitly structures what might be seen as an intended hidden curriculum of gender-role behaviour; she wants her daughter to be 'a pretty, dainty little girl that plays with her toys and isn't very naughty'. Probably the most important and pervasive processes of role-learning that we all go through early in our lives is learning gender-role behaviour, that is, learning to behave in a male or female way (Kessler and McKenna, 1978, Paechter, 1998). Most of the time this occurs subconsciously on the part of both learners and the others who participate in this learning process. However, as this clip suggests, it is also possible directly to intervene in this process.

*Play Viv buying Tiffany's hat here (Baby Monthly 37:48/412-420)*

The way that Viv dresses Tiffany is part of how she structures her daughter's curriculum of 'learning to be a little girl (of a certain kind)'. Tiffany's gender role development (Kessler and McKenna, 1978), something which is often seen as 'natural' by parents and those who advise them, is here seen clearly as taking place within the context of a curriculum, structured by her mother, which involves her in learning a particular form of femininity. It is notable that Viv has a fairly clear idea of what would constitute success and failure in terms of this curriculum, and would, if we spoke to her again a few years later, be able to say to what degree her curriculum had succeeded. This is not to say that other forces are not at work; most of our learning of gender roles takes place on a level that is subconscious for both the

learners and those involved in the transmission of such roles, such as parents (Smith and Lloyd, 1978). Again, it might well be stretching my definition to say that in all cases this transmission process is underpinned by a curriculum. However, in this case there is clearly organisation on the part of the parent that is intended to lead to a particular form of learning on the part of the child. This example suggests that it is possible to have an intended but hidden curriculum of role development that is enacted initially and from an early age in the home environment.

### **ROLE AND TASK-FOCUSED LEARNING IN ADULT LIFE**

Learning in adult life, outside of the educational institution, often also involves the learning of roles. The parents in the previous examples all had to learn a new role when their babies were born, and, as the example of the baby games shows, that role may partly be reciprocally structured by the learning of the child as he or she develops physically and intellectually. In the workplace, learning to take on a new role is likely to be structured by the demands of the work situation itself and may be bound up with the learning of procedures and processes as well as with ways of behaving. Because professional roles are considered to be so important, both by the professionals themselves and by their clients, there is often explicit teaching of professional behaviour as part of workplace learning (General Medical Council, 1993). The curriculum associated with this is structured by a number of factors, which include the expectations of the professional group that one is in the process of joining, and the expectations of the clients with whom one will be working. A trainee health visitor, for example, has to learn not only how to behave as a 'friendly professional' with

parents, but also to give advice that complies with Health Education Authority and Healthcare Trust guidelines, even if they conflict with her own views.

One of the roles that junior doctors have to take on is that of ‘professional expert’; this can be somewhat problematic, as can be seen from my next clip. This is from a BBC programme that follows two junior doctors through their first week on the wards. At this stage they are in a sort of limbo between their formal medical training and independent practice; they are fully qualified doctors but not registered to practice independently of the hospital setting.

*Play Junior Doctors here*

It is clear from the clip that learning to be a professional expert in this context is very difficult; most of the time the junior doctors barely know what is going on. They also have to learn to be superior authorities to the nurses, although it is clear that the latter, at least at first, know far more about the practicalities of the job than they do. How they learn the doctor role is unclear; it may be that the expectations of the patients and their colleagues gradually move them towards behaving in ‘appropriate’ ways. It is not clear whether this would count as a curriculum, except in so far as there are clearly recognisable implicit criteria for success and failure; we could all recognise a doctor who ‘didn’t behave like a proper doctor’. At the same time, earlier in these doctors’ training there are explicit curricula dealing with particular sorts of professional behaviour, such as professional ethics.

Much workplace learning is also structured by the tasks and procedures specific to the job. For example, the ward sister in the last clip has a clear idea of the sorts of things she will have to teach the doctors early on, simply so that they can do their jobs; in the clip we see her teaching one of them how to fill a syringe. Similarly,

a health visitor in training has to be taught how to fill in the weight and height charts on the child health record books that parents bring to the baby clinic.

Workplace curricula are structured by the needs of the job, but these may be mediated and interpreted by a more experienced colleague (such as the ward sister) or by someone with explicit training responsibilities (such as the community practice teacher who is in charge of the practical training of a health visitor). It seems that in the workplace, in contrast, for example, to the educational institution, curricula are largely structured by immediate considerations. Learning focused on longer-term goals (such as, in the case of health visitors, learning about child development) tends to be conducted outside the work situation, with the worker going into what is in effect or fact an educational institution which may happen to be physically located in the workplace. Workplace curricula may be formal, as in the training of health visitors, or totally informal; for example, a person new in a job may satisfy their immediate learning needs by asking a colleague, consulting a handbook or finding out by trial and error.

Learning by adults outside of workplace contexts or educational institutions is almost exclusively informal, yet I think that it is still possible to talk about a curriculum, if we retain our broad definition. Suppose, for example, that you want to build a set of shelves. You have some idea about how to go about this, but you are not clear what sort of wood to use and what would be the best way to fix the shelves to the wall. So you set about finding these things out. How you organise your learning would depend on a number of things, including how you prefer to learn and what resources you have access to. You might decide to ask an expert (the person in the wood shop, a more experienced friend) about the wood and read up about fixing

methods in a DIY book. These decisions constitute how you organise your curriculum for learning to build the shelves. Similarly, new parents making decisions about the best ways to start an infant eating solids might decide to consult one or more childcare manuals, a more experienced parent, their health visitor, one of the many parent support and discussion groups on the Internet, or all of these. Again, I would argue that getting a feel for who to consult and how is part of the parent's curriculum for learning how to make informed decisions about infant feeding.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to examine the concept of curriculum in a number of contexts quite different from those of its origin, the formal educational system. Starting with a broad definition, I tried to show that we can use the concept to describe learning situations throughout the whole lifespan and involving formal and informal contexts within the home and the workplace as well as in the educational institution. In most of these cases, the concept transfers across fairly well, as long as the broad definition is retained. In others, particularly in the example of early child development, its application is more open to debate. I would like to be able to use the term even to cover this case, but am concerned that if we apply it this broadly it will cease to have a useful meaning; I would welcome discussion on this issue.

The point of this paper has been to highlight some of the issues in transferring the language of institutionalised learning into the lifelong learning context. That we should take these issues seriously is illustrated by the questions that arise as we approach the borders of what may and may not count as curriculum in contexts other than the educational institution. If we do include these cases, then we may find that



our definition has become too broad to be useful; if we do not, then we may find that we are once again thinking of lifelong learning only in the context of educational institutions and, maybe, related workplace training. If we are truly to embrace the idea that learning is continuous throughout life and across contexts, we need to examine the assumptions that come along with the language of learning, and grapple with some of the uncertainties that comes with extending the use of this language.

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