

Educational Leaders as Stewards: Selecting A National Curriculum Guided by the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning*

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ABSTRACT

All educators should want to provide students with the best possible education, and this is done through curriculum selection. *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* by Dr. William A. Kritsonis (2007) presents a detailed plan for schools to development and implement modern curriculum that is perennial. Following Dr. Kritsonis's fundamental patterns of meaning allows schools to easily connect curriculum across subject areas. Educational leaders have the duty, and expectation, to supply students with the best education possible. Dr. Kritsonis has made the knowledge and capability of selecting curriculum accessible in his book, *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning*.

Dr. William Allan Kritsonis's book *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* acts as a funnel for educators to use in selecting curriculum, the end result of this process is to provide students the opportunity for an in-depth learning experience. Educational leaders are

expected to know what subjects students need to learn, how it is determined the subjects are learned, how subject knowledge is gained, and how subjects can be interconnected. Making the subject relevant to each individual student, rather than emphasizing a particular group of students, is the ultimate goal of education.

The purpose of this article is to explain how the structure of subjects enables curriculum to be arranged by application and breadth. “The analyses to follow are intended to give some sense of the relative precedence of organizing ideas within each discipline” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 103). There are six realms of fundamental patterns of meaning that enable educators to choose the best curriculum for students: symbolics, empirics, esthetics, synnoetics, ethics, and synoptics.

The First Realm: Symbolics

Ordinary language, which is common speech and writing, is the first subdivision of symbolics. Students are able to maneuver through society when they are able to effectively communicate through verbal and written means. Using ordinary language, a student must be able to organize words in the correct way to convey meaning. Therefore, it is imperative that students understand the language and what words mean; they must increase their vocabulary as they go through school. Improving language is done through practice; hence the need for classroom discussions. “It is important to provide the language student with opportunities to participate actively in the life of groups who use only the language he seeks to learn” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 116).

Mathematics falls into the symbolic realm because like language, it uses a collection of symbols. However, unlike language, mathematics is not used as a social unifier. Mathematics is “...a purely intellectual discipline, the forms of which are not determined by the urgencies of adjustments to nature and society” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 133). To really know mathematics, students must completely understand the subject. Understanding the subject means that students can express reasons behind operations. “The sovereign principle of all mathematical reasoning is logical consistency” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 136).

Nondiscursive symbolic forms are subjective in meaning. “The nondiscursive symbolic forms are used in all the arts and for the expression of feelings, values, commitments, and insights in the domains of personal knowledge, metaphysics, and religion” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 153). This realm encourages creativity by inviting students to express themselves through means other than ordinary language. “The nondiscursive symbolisms are chiefly used to express meanings in the realms of esthetic experience, personal knowledge, and synoptic insight” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 154).

The symbolics realm is made up of three subdivisions that are forms of expression all created by human beings. “The emphasis in learning any symbolism is not on the content of the meanings expressed, but on the conventional expressive forms used to objectify and communicate meanings” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 170-171). Teaching this realm to students allows students to organize symbols to communicate more effectively in the everyday world that they will soon be exposed.

The Second Realm: Empirics

Empirics are about measurement; this realm is crucial for physical science, biology, psychology, and social science. “Science, or systematic empirical inquiry, is concerned with matters of fact, not with symbolic conventions” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 179). Learning general descriptions of factual matters is the main aspect of science. Discovering truths that are empirical define the field of science, and is what students are taught.

“Physical science provides descriptions of the world as experienced through the activity of physical measurement” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 180). This means evaluating objects with an agreed upon standard of measurement encompassing length, weight, distance, etc. In short, students are learning the basics of the environment around them and how to recognize and measure patterns.

Taxonomy is the method of cataloging in biology, which is the study of living things. The foundational unit in this science is species and it refers to organisms that interbreed. Species that are similar are combined to create a genus, which are clumped into families, then into orders, into classes, into phyla, and finally into kingdoms. “While the student of modern biology also must know the kinds of living things and the names assigned to them, this ordering of types is now considered only the beginning of the science” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 208). In biology, students learn the theoretical understanding of living things occupying the earth.

Psychology is the study of the minds of living things. Unlike the other sciences, psychology is difficult to define because the mind is a subjective topic. “It is then argued that any attempt to analyze mind after the manner of the natural sciences can yield no knowledge of mind as it is in itself, but only of certain nonmental correlates of mind” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 224). Therefore, when teaching psychology to students, behavior should be the foundation of study. Psychologists understand the chemical make up of the brain, but are still unsure why particular behaviors are produced from imbalances. Empirics become difficult in this field due to the uncertainty of why behavior occurs.

“The social sciences, chief among which are social psychology, sociology, anthropology economics, and political science, are clearly in the domain of the sciences of man” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 249). Social science is concerned with how people define their lives, and what they make of themselves through society and culture. In Dr. Kritsonis’s (2007) book, sociology and economics are the two disciplines of social science. Sociology involves social behavior and why the behavior occurs. Allowing students to study sociology gives insight to the intellect and emotions of others. “The subject matter studied comprises every kind of social interaction, and the basic method of inquiry is the construction of conceptual schemes revealing the structures of social groups and the functions these structures subserve” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 261). Economics is dealing with the unlimited wants and limited resources of people. Limits, means, and desires are what dictate supply. Defining products, customers, resources, methods to distribute are issues of economics and what students study. Devising an economic structure that works efficiently and effectively is the goal of every society.

Many different economic arrangements are possible, and the decision as to what system of production and distribution is used depends upon many considerations, including historical precedents, cultural patterns, geography and natural resources, population, intellectual, scientific, and technical development, religious beliefs, and political factors. (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 262)

The Third Realm: Esthetics

Esthetics is beauty and this realm involves the areas of music, visual arts, the arts of movement, and literature. Students make meaning of these expressions based on their personal perceptions, which are derived from personal experiences and knowledge. “Esthetic meanings are herein treated in connection with a study of the arts because it is through the arts that esthetic understanding is most directly and deliberately cultivated” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 281). The fine arts are made up of: music, poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, dance, and drama. The fine arts are the foundation in education when learning about esthetics.

Music benefits the listening audience. The musician is able to use imagination and creativity to capture others. Students of music explore personal style and taste. Teachers give students the opportunity to express themselves through patterns of sound. Elements of music include patterns of rhythm, melody, harmony, and tone. Listening to nontraditional music allows teaches appreciation of other forms. “Each work of music should be invited to speak its own message and to stand on its own merits alone, for in music, it is in the perception of the singular work of art, and not in the conceptual classed to which the abstractive intellect may assign it, that its esthetic meaning consists” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 295).

“The term “visual arts” will be used here to designate the fields of painting, drawing, graphic arts, sculpture, and architecture, in which the artist shapes tangible materials into objects of esthetic importance” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 303). Working with tangible material, color, and design are some of the characteristics that separate the visual arts from music. Teaching organization of spatial patterns is essential for curriculum. Capturing the visual attention of the audience is how an artist expresses imagination and creativity. Art is subjective and individual decisions are made as to what is considered art. Teachers must keep an open mind since students will have different tastes and styles. Individuality should be allowed and encouraged. Esthetics differs from person to person and what is beautiful to one may not be beautiful to another, this difference should never be labeled as incorrect. “Mastery in the arts grows out of prolonged imaginative experimentation with material media in order to exploit most fully the expressive possibilities of the substances used” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 310). Whether it is paint, ink, pencil, clay, or photography, the education of the material used needs to emphasize esthetic sensibility. There are endless possibilities when creating art, and throughout the centuries artist have depicted life. Students need to be taught “...that artists and their works need to be understood in the light of their specific aims and not in terms of any universal and permanent standards of validity” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 325).

The arts of movement refer to physical education. Human beings are meant to be in motion; bodies were created to move. “The term “arts of movement” is intended to include all intentional activities, undertaken for esthetic purposes, in which the desired expressive effects are communicated by the movement of the human body” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 335-336). Development of wholeness is the primary goal. This goal promotes a healthy lifestyle through the encouragement of movement and balance that includes emotional stability. “This unity of thought, feeling, sense, and act is the particular aim of the arts of movement and of the fields of health, recreation, and physical education” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 337). Imagination and creativity are expressed by using the body as the medium, the outlet. Dance is most commonly associated with esthetics, therefore dominating the topic of the arts of movement. Physical education is often centered on individual and team sports and athletics, with dance being one of many options. Dance has also been used throughout centuries as a canvas of expression, as its esthetics is as individual as painting. Personal wholeness (physical, mental, and emotional balance) is the goal of physical education, and the curriculum needs to encompass this objective. “The arts of movement, physical education, and health and recreation activities are all closely interrelated resources for the enrichment of esthetic meaning, both in individual persons and in the life of society” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 355).

Literature uses words for expression. Language is an agreed upon communication in cultures, and therefore makes literature an easier medium. However, the way language is used can make literature a complicated area of study for students. When language is used for esthetics, for example poetry, interpretation becomes more abstract. “In literature, language is deliberately exploited for its expressive effect rather than to indicate, denote, or describe things for practical purposes” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 364). Whereas everyday language is intended for communication, literary language is used to inspire intellectual curiosity. Curriculum in literature is meant to stimulate the mental images of students. Literature should take the reader on a journey of new experiences and arouse imagination. Literary pieces are unique in their own right whether it is a poem, novel, play, or essay. “Each work is deliberately designed for certain esthetic effects and never merely to recapitulate the haphazard, contingent quality of concrete actuality” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 365). Teachers are encouraged to provide insights to guide students to have provoking thoughts on pieces of work.

The Fourth Realm: Synnoetics

Personal knowledge is the meaning for synnoetics, and the implication is that students learn information without trying. Synnoetics is unfamiliar to most and is not defined by specific academic subjects, as are the first three realms. “It is not customary to offer courses in relational insight, personal knowledge, or existential awareness, nor are there standard scholarly associations devoted to the pursuit of such knowledge” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 385). Personal meanings are concrete existential intersubjectivity and require students to be engaged in learning about themselves and others. Personal knowledge occurs from human contact and experience with family, friends, community members, co-workers, as well as contact with individuals from other cultures. “It is important to remember that in personal insight the simplest and most

untutored people can be as competent as, or even more competent than, people who have devoted much time and thought to the perfecting of this aspect of life” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 406). Utilizing phenomenology, Existentialism, theology, and literature to build curriculum, educators can teach students the foundation of synnoetics.

The Fifth Realm: Ethics

Teaching right and wrong to students is an ethical charge that all educators need to take. Having moral knowledge gives students the tools to make decisions that are in the best interest of mankind. Unfortunately there is not a common curriculum used in schools to teach ethics as a subject by itself. “The essence of ethical meanings, or of moral knowledge, is right deliberate action, that is, what a person ought voluntarily to do” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 443). Determining what is considered right and what is considered wrong is difficult. This confusion makes creating curriculum a complex task. The universally agreed upon principle of right and wrong is the basis of this realm.

There are five main components of moral concern: human rights; sex and family relations; class, ethnic, racial, religious, and vocational groups; economic life; and political life. “Beliefs about what is right and wrong are the very foundation of culture and civilization” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 454). Human rights are the condition of life that all are privileged. The U.S. Constitution gives every citizen the right to have a trial by jury and the freedom of religion and speech, to name a few. Maintaining freedom, integrity, and dignity are what Americans have come to expect. Sex and family relations is also an area of ethical concern because this is the environment in which children are raised. Preserving innocence has established moral codes in these matters. Relationships that involve class, ethnic, racial, religious, and vocational groups are also subject of ethics. “Every culture has its distinctive expectations and regulations about what is right and wrong in these relationships” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 456). Economic and political life encompasses property rights, distribution of goods and services, and use of just power.

Believing that human nature is good and that people want to do the right thing is what drives life. Assessing behavior establishes the foundation for moral decisions. “On this foundation a defensible and productive theory of morals can be established—a theory according to which the entire educative endeavor is seen as a moral enterprise aimed at the consummation of human life through the increase in meaning in all its realms” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 472).

The Sixth Realm: Synoptics

History, religion, and philosophy are the major disciplines of synoptics. “This term comprises meanings having an integrative function, uniting meanings from all the realms into a unified perspective, that is, providing a “single vision” or “synopsis” of meanings” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 483).

History imaginatively recreates the past. What happened in the past and human events are the essence of history and time depicts the material for study. Teaching the order and interpretation of events are the duty of the educator. "The ultimate goal of history is to tell the whole story about what happened" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 485). Teaching the understanding of the decisions that people made in the past helps students create a synoptic meaning. Choosing curriculum that recreates past events through participation helps students to grasp learning of history in the present. Students are able to recognize that some past events have influenced the future.

Religion is the disclosure of ultimate meanings. "The term "ultimacy" is a general designation for such ideas as infinitude, absoluteness, the unlimited, transcendence, perfection, completeness, all-inclusive, the supreme, and many others" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 507). Religion is looking at things from an ultimate perspective. Prayer, mediation, active commitment, and ritual practices are how students gain a religious understanding. Though there are several religious beliefs, students understanding and accepting these beliefs, allows the acknowledgment and inquiry of the diversity of the religious forms. Understanding begins to build the bridge of acceptance of individual differences.

Philosophy is the critical interpretation of expressed meanings and the most inclusive of the synoptic realm. "Philosophy has its distinctive ways and ends that mark it as a recognizable field of inquiry" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 529). Knowledge from other fields is the underpinning of philosophy. Interpreting meanings from meanings by asking questions, suggesting answers, and then developing implications from the answers is the quest of the student, and to do this process continuously. There are not any absolute or obvious answers. Thinking, and encouraging others to think, is the goal of philosophic curriculum. Questioning society, the way it operates, and why it is accepted is an aspect of the fundamental patterns in philosophy. "Philosophy comprises within itself fields in which the nature and structure of each of the possible realms of meaning is analyzed, and fields that effect a critical synopsis of the entire spectrum of meanings" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 548).

Understanding the six realms of meaning creates the framework for selecting general education curriculum. Maximizing meanings is done through five principles and is the directive of curriculum. In order to maximize meanings fulfillment of life must include mastery, belonging to a community, many-sidedness, integrity, and quality. "The meaningful life is that in which the person finds one thing to do and learns to do it very well" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 560). To apply this to curriculum, it must be narrow and each teacher should be highly trained in the subject, and the depth of knowledge and skill are the goal. Belonging to a community enhances one's life endeavors. "The significance of each person's life results from participation in the meaning of the social whole" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 560). Contributing to the whole, society, requires cultivating meanings. Specialized curriculum is required that fosters understanding of society as a whole. Many-sidedness also creates fulfillment. "The desirable goal is well-roundedness and variety of interests, and the curriculum should be correspondingly broad and diverse" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 561). This principle promotes understanding of different fields and that students should become competent in different types of activity. Fulfillment of meaning also consists of the integrity of a person. "The main objective is to secure a coordination of whatever meanings are acquired into a coherent whole" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 561). Understanding self and feeling there is a purpose for life allows a person to become independent. This viewpoint guides curriculum into the studies of interrelated forms to create a whole. Students should be able to assimilate the

information into personal meaning. Fulfillment also consists of increasing the quality of understanding. “The ideal of life has to do with quality rather than with depth, participation, extensiveness, or coherence” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 562). The extent of curriculum will be what is deemed essential.

Curriculum should provide learning in all six realms because “the basic realms are such that all of them are required if a person is to achieve the highest excellence in anything at all” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 564). Though the six realms are broad, curriculum for general education is also determined by the character, traditions, and history of the school, community and students. “A general philosophy for the curriculum can only indicate the large design of the curriculum and certain principles for making decisions about the sequence of studies and the selection and organization of materials for instruction” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 579).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the structure of subjects enables curriculum to be arranged by application and breadth. Using the six realms of meaning as posited by Dr. William Allan Kritsonis supplies an outline for selecting curriculum. All educators should want to provide students with material that not only maximizes learning, but also in creating a more complete self of each student. Curriculum is meant to enhance individuality, not exclude students from groups. Beginning with the questions: What should students know? How can curriculum be used to get the most out of meanings? This starts the search for curriculum that capitalizes on learning. If students are going to be subject to education for so many years, it is important for them to get the most out of themselves.

References

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