Prompt: What are the implications of experiential education on curriculum design?

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It is probably not unreasonable to assume that the term “curriculum” evokes in most listeners images of schooling, textbooks and lessons arranged in a sequence that are then imparted to learners in a classroom. In this white paper I will challenge that image and make an argument for a more expansive understanding of the term “curriculum”, one that has value in the world of experiential education. Underlying this argument is a core assumption based on a “both/and” stance in which all education, no matter the setting, should include both high quality content-rich experiential and didactic elements. For the discussion below, I have culled from the thinking a broad range of educational theorists. I am not claiming that the understanding of curriculum I have outlined is the only one. Rather, I am suggesting that we have not given the concept of curriculum the credit it is due nor have we fully explored its multiple iterations. What follows is my understanding of what our work in Jewish experiential education might draw on in order to produce deep, high quality and meaningful learning.

Some background on the development of the notion of curriculum may be useful in creating context. The field is relatively new, beginning in earnest in 1893 when the Committee of Ten, appointed by the National Education Association, made its recommendations for a uniform curriculum to serve as a basis for high school education preparing students for college. The first textbook on the topic of curriculum theory written by Franklin Bobbit was published in 1918. In the ensuing century, curriculum has been studied (more intensively at some times than at others), designed and implemented, argued over and, as a discipline, despaired of due to its complexity and lack of agreement around what constitutes curriculum. Indeed, I would like to suggest that the term “curriculum” as it has developed in the past century, might be seen as falling into social theorist and philosopher W.B. Gallie’s (1965) category of “essentially contested concepts”. An essentially contested concept, according to Gallie, is appraisive and internally complex lending itself to multiple interpretations, open in character and malleable in how it is defined and used.

The term “curriculum” is from the classical Latin term referring to "a running, course, career" (also "a fast chariot, racing car" conjuring an image of travel). The precise make-up of the course or trip is not clear. Instead, one gets a sense of movement over time, not one of a static and unyielding document as the term later came to be used. Kilpatrick’s (1918) and
Dewey’s (1902) writings align more with this early etymology. Dewey describes the relationship between the child and the curriculum as a map to be traversed in directions to be determined by the interests and developmental stage of the child. The learning experiences, guided by an adult (the teacher), becomes the route taken in the context of the larger map. Curriculum, as I understand Dewey, is more constructivist, a continual moving back and forth between the subject matter and the child, each informing the other, mediated by the teacher. This notion of curriculum is a dynamic one expressed as an emergent journey shaped by the teacher in conjunction with the learner’s emerging interests and experiences. To be fair, Dewey (1938) rails against the “progressive” educators of his time some of whom he saw as misinterpreting him in suggesting that the learning process be completely child-centered, fluid and unplanned. Therefore, even though curriculum is dynamic and emergent, it is, according to Dewey, somewhat paradoxically carefully considered and designed to reflect the authenticity of the subject matter and the current needs and state of the learner.

Sizer (1984, 2004) reinforces Dewey in his warning that what appears as a neatly ordered curriculum is neither neatly ordered, nor a curriculum. He suggests we not think of curriculum as something to be delivered but, rather, as an ongoing enterprise, one that ultimately seeks to uncover ideas and build intellectual skills using an integrated and evolving body of knowledge. Macdonald (1986) unpacks Dewey’s (1902) image of the curricular into three units of discourse: situations, events and acts. *Situations*, he writes, have boundaries such as organization of time and space, materials, resources and instructional patterns, add character to events and acts and are expressed in the planned environment in which events and *acts* are embedded. *Events* are patterns of interactions with beginnings and ends and *acts* are the transactions within events that are either observable or inferred. Macdonald is emphatic that his conception of curriculum is not about a curriculum plan, nor does it include objectives and clearly measurable evaluation. Rather it is, at its core, relational as expressed in the transactions between the parties.

Before concluding, I want to address the issue of subject matter and suggest that we not dismiss its systematic articulation as unimportant. For sure, Jewish education is, at one level, about knowledge acquisition. However, this knowledge acquisition is valuable only if it is in service of students living a Jewish life and developing a strong Jewish identity (Woocher, 2012, Aron, 1996 and others). This is distinct from perceptions of curriculum such as that of The Committee of Ten where the ultimate goal was to prepare students for additional study in the university setting. Jewish educators often cite “lifelong learning” as a core goal but, again, only as it leads to a deepening of Jewish living and commitment. Hence, any decision-making around which subject matter to include in a given educational experience or framework, should be informed by these larger goals.
In sum, I would like to suggest the following understanding of the term “curriculum” that can inform both experiential and more formalized education frameworks:

Curriculum is an emergent process that is best understood in hindsight, not a final product on paper. At the heart of curriculum is the quality of relationships between its constituent elements which are continually informing one another in an iterative manner. Curriculum is a planned environment (Macdonald’s “situation”) in which a series of events occur in which learners and teachers are the actors. Curriculum seeks to uncover ideas and build intellectual skills. Subject matter is a tool of curriculum, not the core learning unit. Curriculum is a journey towards the betterment of society and self that uses the tools of learning: teacher, environment, relationships, time, space and more.

From the above discussion, we can conclude that curriculum is more than subject matter and teaching and learning materials. It is, in a Deweyian way, a journey towards the betterment of society and self. Congregational education frameworks (both complementary schools and experiential youth programming) might be enriched by this more expansive view of curricular thinking. Too often in considering curriculum we think about the subject matter and books we will use. Concern about students’ preparation for Bar and Bat Mitzvah animates curricular decision making along with a concern that the children won’t “know” enough, that we will not have “covered” enough material. We might as well state it up front: We will never be able to do all that we would like in terms of conveying subject matter. And that is okay. Instead, as Dewey and Sizer suggest, let us spend more time thinking about our learners, the relationships we want them to build with each other and with us, and the Jewish and life journeys we want to enable them to travel. Subject matter is determined in dialogue with the realities of our students’ current and future worlds. Thinking about curriculum in this way might require us to re-visit our core assumptions about all aspects of learning in our congregations.

The following are some questions that can guide us as we embrace a broader understanding of “curriculum”:

• What is the optimal setting that will allow children to explore and engage deeply with subject matter?
• What is the most effective unit of time for learning?
• What setting and context will be most conducive to building relationships?
• What will be the role of the purveyors of knowledge (I hesitate to use the term ‘teachers’) and how will these individuals’ voices be included in curricular decision-making?
• How do we hear the learners’ voices in our decision-making about what to teach?
• What subject matter will enrich children’s lives today and enable them to traverse, as Dewey might say, their life learning maps of tomorrow?
• How do we balance the need to articulate a course of learning with the need of the learner to emerge into his or her Jewish identity with us as their guides?

Answering any one of these questions alone does not constitute curricular decision-making. Rather, when we simultaneously explore a number of them, pushing our thinking and challenging our assumptions, a more robust and meaningful curricular experience might emerge.

Bibliography


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