Perspectives on Curriculum Making

Rico Peterson

National Technical Institute for the Deaf

Rochester Institute of Technology

ABSTRACT

We are in the early days of exploration into the teaching and learning of ASL and interpreting. Much of the last 40 years has been spent in establishing ASL and Deaf Culture as legitimate fields of study. Having gained this recognition, we can now afford the relative luxury of inquiry into competing points of view on what should be taught, how it ought to be taught, how we learn, and how we can best assess learning. Scant attention has been paid to individual differences in learners in this field. Even less attention has been given to the ways in which curriculum is wrought. This article offers a perspective on curriculum deliberation drawn from the works of Reid (1992) and Schwab (1978), and suggests questions and considerations in developing new avenues in the pursuit of our curriculum.

What ought the curriculum be?

In the space of 40-odd words Aristotle limns the major preoccupation of curricularists of all time.

> Mankind are by no means agreed about the things to be taught…
> Should the useful in life, should Virtue, or should the higher
> knowledge be the aim of our training; …Again, about the means
> there is no agreement… (<u>Politics</u>, Book VIII, Ch. 2, p. 542)

These seminal questions in curriculum making have been discussed for thousands of years. What is teaching? What is learning? Which things should students know? To what extent do they need to know those things? How shall these things be taught? How learned? How best to assess them? What is the role of the teacher in the learning process? The echo of these questions can be heard clearly in the words of Ralph Tyler, some 2,300 years later. Regarding curriculum and instruction, Tyler poses these four basic questions:

1. What educational purpose should the school seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
3. How can these educational experiences be organized?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained? (Tyler, 1949, p. 1)

Although addressed to education, these are in fact social questions. From the perspective of education as social engineering, another apposite question might be asked -- What is the role of school in society?

It has long been the aim of liberal education to prepare people for responsible citizenship. In Dewey's view the ideal society is one in which citizens engage in collective problem solving through informed discussion. The role of the school and the faculty, then, is to develop people capable of fomenting and participating in such discussion. Aristotle expresses the sentiment that the center of a worthwhile life is civic participation, and that this participation is sustained

by civic virtue. Interpreter education is a relative newcomer to institutes of higher education. Regarding civic participation and civic virtue, the tradeoffs in moving interpreter education from community to institution are not inconsiderable.

Institutions are created to take social actions. Curriculum is both a part of the institution of education and an institution unto itself. In its evolution curriculum has mirrored the shift from orality to literacy; it has evolved from oral text to textbook. Ong (1982) offers a fascinating take on the spread of literacy and its effect on thinking and communicating. In the transition from spoken/remembered to written/recorded, what was known was rendered into subjects, and subjects into sequences. Thus knowledge once preserved in illuminated texts with generations on generations of commentary added in the margins is a legacy of what is and has been thought, believed, and known.

In a sense, this is where we stand today regarding ASL and interpreting teaching and curriculum. What has been known about ASL has not been written down until very recently. What has been studied has only recently been shared through research reports. What is known about interpreting between ASL and English has not even reached this stage. Although many scholars are now focused on ASL, little directed research has informed our teaching. Even less has been transformed into a theory or curriculum of interpreting education. The theoretical base for the analysis of our work called for by Rust in 1984 has yet to materialize.

Texts on ASL are a recent phenomenon. Critical attention to issues of teaching and learning ASL/interpreting is more recent still. The nascent art and science of curriculum making in our field has been seen primarily through the twin lenses of linguistics and politics. While this work has wrought remarkable and laudable change in the field, it is suggested here that other perspectives must also be considered. For example, Joseph (1988) discusses language standards and standard languages, showing that attempts to standardize language are often political actions, and that the "approved" language which results is often more indicative of power and prestige than it is of standard usage. This line of inquiry could be very useful in the continuing discussion on curriculum development in ASL and interpreting.

Theoretical Frameworks

In describing the various theoretical frameworks for curriculum design, Reid (1992) asks these pertinent questions:

- Should we think and act in accordance with established theories and principles?

- Can social institutions be described as a framework for our social philosophy?

The ways we conceive of curriculum, the words we choose and the choices we make reflect our position on social questions. Our descriptions of the role of curriculum reflect our conceptions of social action.

In turn, our views of social action, of institutions, and of educational purpose bear directly on our curriculum. The history of ASL/interpreting

curriculum follows closely the patterns shown in the history of conceptions of curriculum. Reid (1992) outlines four general philosophies, or frameworks for ways of thinking about curriculum. Though not strictly chronological in order, each conception can be seen as a response to perceived shortcomings in those constructs that came before.

Structural - Curriculum as System

The first framework, and the one that best reflects current practice in our field, Reid describes as structural, or systematic. Here curriculum is seen as "plans or blueprints for activities". In this view curriculum is a prototype for learning. It is the job of the school and the teacher to process the student through a designated sequence.

> This style of approach to curriculum has its strengths…
> Curriculum is about designing learning within institutional
> contexts, which means that practicalities of organization involving
> large numbers of people and agencies have to be thought about.
> Well-meaning efforts to humanize curriculum have been known to
> degenerate into chaos and confusion. Definitional thinking also has
> its points. It leads to such ideas as objectives and criteria of
> evaluation, which have usefulness in thinking about forms of
> curriculum and why one might be preferred to another. (Reid, 1992,
> p. 18)

A drawback to this way of thinking is that classes and people are rarely as predictable or tractable as blueprints render them. Students come to the study of ASL/interpreting with markedly different purposes and motivations. A full-time student attending a university during the daytime and a part-time student attending community college at nighttime may conceivably have the same

teacher following the same curriculum, but most likely that is where the similarity in their learning experience ends. Students take our classes for a variety of reasons. For some it is compulsory, either as an elective or as an introduction to further study in ASL or Deaf culture. For others it is optional, a class taken for social reasons or to satisfy some curiosity. In current practice, these many disparate purposes are often treated by the same curriculum. By putting the focus squarely on a single process, then, it is possible to overlook weaknesses in the design.

How can one curriculum satisfy such a dissimilar audience? Teachers have long commented, for instance, on the difference between daytime and nighttime classes, especially at the community college level. These factors are rarely taken into account when designing curriculum.

Radical - Curriculum as Cultural Hegemony

Curriculum as institution is fundamental to this view as well, but from a diametrically opposite point of view. The radical view holds that institutions, curricular and otherwise, are primarily a means of subjugating and oppressing the population. Here curriculum is seen as cultural reproduction and institutions are held to be fundamentally flawed and working against the interests of the people. The chief weakness in this perspective lies in the difficulty it has in discussing problems in constructive terms. In this perspective the number of people that can be considered as "experts" is controlled by the demand for allegiance to an extreme ideology.

An example here is the current discussion about whether ASL teachers must be Deaf. This clearly reserves expert status to only those deemed politically acceptable. To wit, Jacobs (1996) makes a strong argument that only Deaf people can properly teach ASL. Although framed in socio-cognitive terms, the argument is essentially a political one. Jacobs cites Walton (1991) who writes

> …since non-native teachers will not intuitively provide authentic pragmatic responses, the student will not be properly prepared for authentic intercultural communication with native speakers. The instructional process simply loses validity if it is not geared to genuine intercultural communication. A great fear in the teaching of TFLs (Truly Foreign Languages) is that a learner will excel in the linguistic code, thus increasing native speaker expectations about the foreigner's control of the pragmatic system, but will fail in the pragmatic domain, thus creating more damage in intercultural situations than if the student were poor in both domains. (Walton, 1991, p. 167)

There are two problems with this argument vis a vis instruction in ASL and interpreting. The first is the presupposition that "authentic intercultural communication" happens in the classroom. In an ASL classroom the study of culture is crucial, but authenticity here does not necessarily derive from the Deaf/Hearing paradigm. The culture of the classroom includes well-rehearsed scripts for behavior and expectations on the part of students and teachers. In the classroom it is likely that the roles of Teacher and Student have primacy over the roles of Deaf (native speaker) and Hearing (non-native speaker). See Schank & Abelson (1977) for a very useful discussion on Script Theory and Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou's (1989) interesting work on Procedural Display in the classroom. A claim can be made that classroom culture is dominant in schools, and that

languacultures (Agar, 1994) are subordinate to it. Students do not necessarily talk

or listen to teachers, nor do teachers in classrooms listen or talk to students, in a

way that is generalizable to 'real world' experience. It deserves mention that an

ASL classroom is likely to be the only environment most students ever

experience wherein a deaf person is in a position of authority over a group of

hearing people. Sociolinguistic concerns of power and control and the roles of

Student and Teacher in the culture of the classroom therefore call to question the

issue of "authentic intercultural communication" in ASL instruction.

The other problem with this argument is the notion that ASL students can

"excel in the linguistic code, thus increasing native speaker expectations". ASL is

so profoundly different from English that students rarely "excel" in its linguistic

code, other than in a strictly academic sense. Native speakers easily identify

novices. Concerns about "expectations" and "damage" do not take into

consideration the tendency on the part of native ASL speakers to code-switch to

a form of Signed English when communicating with hearing people. In fact, this

code-switching is pragmatic; it is a way to align language expectations, thereby

controlling damage.

More to the point of the politics of the issue, Jacobs (1996) cites a Deaf

teacher who states that although a hearing person might be

technically/linguistically competent to teach ASL, "it is not politically correct,"

(p. 204). This argument is current in ASL instruction. Still, even in the happy (and

relatively rare) circumstance of real native fluency, it must be recognized that

knowing a thing and teaching that thing are quite different abilities. Certainly deafness, in and of itself, does not confer any special capability as a teacher.

More subtle, and potentially more of a hindrance to the growth of our field, is the belief that only hearing people can teach interpreting. This is reflected in the lack of deaf people among interpreting faculty. It is also seen in the comments of deaf people themselves, who wonder what value they bring to the teaching of interpreting when they can't "hear" the English. Solutions to providing access to Spoken English are problematic, but not impossible. In striving to find a way to incorporate deaf instructors in interpreting classrooms programs can model what most espouse -- the empowerment of deaf people. By practicing what we preach we offer students the chance to learn by experience. By witnessing their teachers struggling, and sometimes failing at the central problem of accessibility students have a profound opportunity to extend their learning beyond the scholastic to what Rogers (1969) refers to as the personal or significant. This is an instance where the pursuit has greater virtue than the result. What better way to prove the value of lifelong learning?

Existential - Curriculum as Personal Experience

Systematic and radical views of curriculum have one important similarity: they pay little attention to students as individuals. The existential approach to curriculum making addresses this concern directly. Here curriculum is viewed as personal experience. This perspective lacks the strategic development of the

systematic and radical views. The existentialist sees curriculum as something that one must experience in one's own way, for one's own benefit.

This perspective, unlike the others, includes the student's perspective in the educational process. However, by reducing everything to an individual basis, this view does not provide a foundation upon which other ideas can cohere. In its exaltation of the individual over the process, it does not permit schooling to be seen as a civic interest, something done in service of society.

This is not a philosophy anywhere in evidence in ASL curriculum and instruction. It might be said that the existential view is a luxury we have not yet earned. At the same time, this perspective has particular resonance with the early history of interpreter education. Scarcely 40 years ago the deaf community was our <u>only</u> curriculum– the existential perspective fully realized. Significant exposure to and experience with deaf people was a given. Interpreters were nominated from and certified by the community. The bargain we have made in transferring interpreter education from community to institution is nowhere more poignant; felt both by programs as they scramble to find opportunities for students to interact with deaf people, and by students who are often so insecure about their skills that they dread the interaction.

<u>Practical - Curriculum as Deliberation</u>

Reid (1992) suggests a fourth framework. It shares the recognition of systematic and radical views of curriculum as institution. In its deontological

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view of the perceptions of the student as crucial to the development of meaningful curriculum, it is also similar to the existential perspective.

Reid (1992) calls the deliberative philosophy of curriculum 'the method of the practical'. Here curriculum is seen as something that cannot be determined without the involvement of all concerned in the process of deliberation. Reid describes deliberation as "the bringing together of different sources of knowledge", and makes the claim that deliberation as social philosophy is more principled and more intellectually defensible than those philosophies that guide other approaches to curriculum.

A danger inherent to this approach is that it is possible, especially for those in control of the process, to adopt the form of deliberation without adopting its method. It is not uncommon for administrators to use the smokescreen of getting "a diversity of points of view" to support a decision that has already been made.

A fundamental difference between deliberation and other methods is that deliberation avoids, in fact prohibits *a priori* assumptions of the problem. The first step in the deliberative process is for all parties to define the question. Deliberation allows for the problem to be seen in each of its manifestations, from the perspectives of each of the interested parties. These "interested parties" are described by Schwab (1978) as the commonplaces of teacher, student, subject matter, milieu, and process.

This philosophy has not been seen in ASL or interpreting curriculum development. There are, however, great possibilities for it. Considering the array of venues, the modes of language choice, the differing philosophies of teaching, and the variety of motivations and purposes people bring to their study, deliberation offers intriguing possibilities for future work in curriculum development.

What Should Be Taught?

Covington (1984) offers this read on students' classroom behavior "…the need for achievement results from a conflict between striving for success, on the one hand, and a disposition to avoid failure on the other." (p. 6)

Covington's Self-Worth Theory suggests that achievement is activated by perceptions of ability; that a sense of worth depends largely on one's accomplishments. A person must be successful at some valued activity to achieve a sense of self-esteem. And not only must the person be successful, but that success must be seen as the result of one's own efforts. Signing in English instead of ASL; students using their voices in the classroom; the reluctance to ask for clarification; trepidation about interacting with Deaf people; all standard complaints of teachers in our field, might then be seen as student strategies (or needs) to succeed, or at the very least, to not fail at communicating.

Language and communication are intensely personal. The way we speak reflects our identities, our sense of self. Learning how to interpret and

communicate effectively between languages is significantly different than learning how to remove an appendix or predict the weather. A student in science or geography, for example, can struggle or succeed with the subject matter within the milieu of a comfortable, natural means of self-expression. Frustration, elation, confusion, clarity are all experienced in a familiar medium. Language learning, on the other hand, is fraught with personal risk. Intelligent people are reduced to linguistic infancy -- crawling from nouns, toddling toward verbs. Moreover, the "immersion" approach to language learning, common in many classrooms, is in some conflict with principles of effective andragogy. It compares to placing students in interpreting settings where they are forced to work beyond their capacity, whether in their native or target language or both, and cannot help but cause a tremendous sense of inadequacy and incompetence. Likewise, allowing students to do volunteer work where little or no real effort is involved can give students a false sense of ability.

This is one reason that many programs today forbid students to work unsupervised in the community while they are matriculating. This sensible precaution is another example of an opportunity for programs to do more than pay lip service to precepts of ethical conduct. How can we expect students to develop a sound ethos when their programs engage in the murky moral relativism of "…something, anything, is better than nothing."

Possible Questions for the Future

Students are individuals, with significantly different backgrounds, purposes, strategies, and abilities. The study of individual differences has been given much attention in the psychology of education, but very little in ASL and interpreting pedagogy. Whatever form our curriculum development takes in the future, it will benefit from attention to competing and conflicting perspectives on schooling and society.

Here again, Reid (1992) on curriculum development

> The commonplaces to which curriculum deliberation must attend are: teachers, students, disciplines, milieus, and curriculum making. That is to say, any deliberation on matters of what should be taught and learned are seriously incomplete unless they refer to those who will teach the curriculum, those who will follow it, the sources of knowledge from which the content will be selected, the context of schooling and society within which the curriculum is to operate, and the procedures appropriate to the making and communicating of curriculum decisions. This is not to say that other matters should not be addressed, but that any process of deliberation on curriculum that does not direct its attention to these essential commonplaces is deficient. (Reid, 1992, p.79)

Who represents these commonplaces? Traditionally teachers have had the most involvement; deaf people, the "sources of knowledge" have been represented to a lesser degree, and their views are recognized as essential. But who speaks for curriculum making? For the milieus, for the discipline? Indeed, addressing these questions is a crucial step in any meaningful implementation. Determining who can speak with authority for the institutions of higher education and curriculum, for instruction, for students, for the subject matter,

and for the process of curriculum making is no easy thing. Neither is it assured that schools, programs, teachers, and communities have the time and resources, not to mention the interest to invest in curriculum on this scale. Given the extraordinary resources (and re-thinking) that the deliberative perspective requires, it is fair to ask just how practical is this "method of the practical"?

If curriculum making in this style is attempted a clear danger exists in what Reid calls "the vice of specialization." It is a simple matter for any representative of any of the commonplaces to invoke "special" knowledge of aspects of the situation as a means to exert undue influence over the outcome. Certainly experienced teachers, administrators, students, and consumers have much to offer the process. But to reduce curriculum development to the special purview of any of the interested parties is to diminish the curriculum that results.

Deliberation is not easy, and it is not cheap. The resources for such an enterprise are considerable. Issues of scope also must be addressed. The idea of national standards has long been held desirable in our profession. It is, however, by no means certain that national standards can or should lead to a national curriculum. The milieus and contexts within which our teaching and learning take place are so disparate that it is hard to imagine a single curriculum that would be universally satisfactory.

ASL/interpreting instruction has taken much of the last quarter century to establish its bona fides among academic subjects. It would be a serious mistake

to allow the solidarity that won this recognition to preclude us from the

important work of studying heterodox points of view on teaching and learning.

Curriculum inquiry and in particular curriculum deliberation has to date been

conducted in a very narrow range in our field. As the profession continues to

grow and develop, these areas of study hold great promise.

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