

IS THERE A CURRICULUM IN THIS HOUSE?

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Abstract

Unschoolers are sometimes regarded as using "no curriculum." This article proposes that curriculum is a path of thought inherent to everyone who thinks. Curriculum is determined not by external sources but by the interaction between the flow of external sources and the actively mediating consciousness of the living learner. This is true whether one is schooling, homeschooling, unschooling or other, because the inner curriculum constantly flows and overcomes obstacles, just as a river finds its way around dam.

Keywords: curriculum, continuum learning, Stanley Fish, Jonathan Kozol, natural learning

1. Day in the Life

Kanti wakes up and starts telling the story of her dream to her mother, Shanti. The story involves some balls rolling down some hills or steps or slides – she can't really tell and in the dream they sort of morphed into one another. She closes her eyes again for some time. Then she jumps up to find some balls and starts rolling them down the steps and then creates a slanted surface with some pillows and rolls the balls at various angles. She folds her sheets, lays them over the pillows and rolls balls down that too. Over breakfast their conversation goes to bicycles, gauging the slope of a road by riding your bike (more easily than you can by walking), how to gain momentum to continue riding uphill without pedalling, and how long that will last. She also tells her father, Ganti, what her friend told her the other day when they rode bicycles together. The conversation reminds her of another friend and she goes to skype with that friend. On skype they play a guessing game for a while and then log in to Khan Academy together to show each other their programs.

At lunch she has *pulusu* and rice in a steel plate and when she spins the plate she observes the *pulusu* liquid spin to the edge of the plate while the rice and vegetable pieces remain in the middle. She then spins faster and sees the motion of the vegetable pieces and rice as well. She puts the rice and vegetables in different parts of the plate and observes the motion when she spins the plate.

She reads a book and later enacts some of the scenes of the book using some beads (pretending they are the characters). Afterwards she makes some things out of clay and pretends that she is running a shop. She makes some clay money as well. She keeps accounts, tracks expenses and profits as well. Some objects cost more because they use a lot of clay, some because they require more skill. Some are made of clay plus other things like toothpicks or cardboard pieces.

In the bathroom she watches the water dripping from the tap into a mug and overflowing into a bucket and observes the ripples as they fall. Because the mug is tilted the ripples are not circular but in an oval shape. She recognizes the focal points. She observes the periodic nature of the overflow from the mug to the bucket.

“Kanti!” her friends calling at the window shake her from her thoughts. “Coming!” she shouts back in reply. She quickly finishes her bath and gets ready to go out to play. Outside she and her friends decide what game(s) to play using an elaborate decision making process. They then play the various games until every one has to go home.

Ganti asks her if she wants to go to the store. She says, “can we take the long cut?” “Okay,” he says as they go out. Rather than walk on the main road, she walks across the open lot behind their neighbourhood, around some drainage pipes that she can climb, and through a cluster of houses that have come up near a construction site. She plays with some dogs along the way. On the way back it starts raining and she knows where on the open lot the puddles would start to form and goes there to splash and also to look for earthworms. She can not find any worms and so plans to come back the next day.

When she gets back home her shoes and clothes are thoroughly muddy and she stops first at the bathroom to change and dry off. She asks her dad not to scrape the mud from her shoes but to leave them to dry like that so that she can walk with heavy shoes and then chisel the dried mud off with a rock, as she had done once before.

She and her mom start making rolls. She plays with the dough for a long time, which is useful because it needs to be kneaded. Otherwise it will not rise. “Why?” she asks. Shanti explains that kneading the dough combines different proteins to make gluten which makes the dough stretchy. They place the dough in a bowl, cover with a damp cloth and leave it to rise. After dinner they punch down the dough and form it into rolls. These will now rise again for an hour and then bake for half an hour. But now they are so tired that no one wants to stay up and bake them after an hour much less eat them when they are done. They decide to make them the next morning, and to prevent premature rising, they put the entire tray of rolls in the fridge.

Her dad tells her a story of Akbar and Birbal. She interrupts frequently, leading to a number of tangential conversations, but always coming back to the story, until they fall asleep.

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In the course of the day a variety of questions have come up – about fluid flow, physical forces, economics, properties of materials, biochemical reactions, emperors, worms, and so on. These

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questions will remain and help to sort out other experiences and data that Kanti comes across, and in turn she will have further questions. To prepare for the next time she and Kanti will talk about gluten, Shanti has looked up some information about how it gets activated in the kneading process and is ready to show its molecular structure using paper clips. Is this conversation about gluten child-led? Adult-led? Led by the desire for bread? Kanti plans to go back to the ground the next day to search for earthworms. Had she not gone the previous day with Ganti, she might not have made this plan. If she lived in a house where getting muddy was frowned upon, it would be less likely to happen. Or more likely – depending on how risk-averse (or frown-averse) Kanti was.

This path, wondering, pondering, meandering as it may be, comes from within. Suggestions, expectations, requirements and other stimuli come from the outside world but the way one receives and responds to them comes from within. Though the specific things Kanti says and does cannot be predicted in advance, they are influenced by whatever she and those around her have said and done before. Underlying it all is an intricate fabric.

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2. Is there a curriculum in this house?

I ask this question with an echo. An echo that, like every echo, echoes another.

Here I echo Stanley Fish: “Is there a text in this class?”

“Is there a text in this class?” is a question posed by a student to a teacher who then reported this question to Stanley Fish, who in turn shared the story in the opening paragraph of his essay titled, “Is there a Text in this Class?” It is published in a book of essays, under the same title.

Here is how Stanley Fish encountered and in turn posed this question:

On the first day of the new semester a colleague at Johns Hopkins University was approached by a student who, as it turned out, had just taken a course from me. She put to him what I think you would agree is a perfectly straightforward question: “Is there a text in this class?” Responding with a confidence so perfect that he was unaware of it (although in telling the story, he refers to this moment as “walking into the trap”), my colleague said, “Yes; it’s the *Norton Anthology of Literature*,” whereupon the trap (set not by the student but by the infinite capacity of language for being appropriated) was sprung: “No, no,” she said, “I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?”

- Stanley Fish, “Is There a Text in This Class?” in *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1980), p. 305.

The question “is it just us?” refers to the idea that the reader is part of the text, and that the

meaning of the text comes from the experience of reading, and is not a fixed and finished product of writing.

But is there such a thing as “just us?” Are we not in turn formed by our interactions with everything around us, including the text before us? Rather than conclude that a text has no meaning, Fish proposes that we find that meaning in the interplay between reader and text.

“Meaning is an event, something that happens, not on the page, where we are accustomed to look for it, but in the interaction between the flow of print (or sound) and the actively mediating consciousness of a reader-hearer.”

- Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. x.

And so it is for curriculum.

Curriculum is determined not by the external sources (where we are accustomed to look for it) but by the interaction between the flow of external sources and the actively mediating consciousness of the living learner.

Curriculum is not just that thing that schools and traditional homeschoolers use. Curriculum is a path of thought inherent to everyone who thinks. Like a river charts a course by flowing, and explorers blaze trails by walking, we pursue ideas by thinking, in communication with the sea of ideas that surrounds us.

Nor is free thinking and self-directed learning only (or necessarily) practiced by those who are not in school or not “following a curriculum.” Even those using a rigidly prescribed curriculum must actively mediate in order to draw meaning from it, within the social context in which it is embedded.

3. What curriculum are you using?

Among homeschoolers who are exploring unschooling and life-learning, the question of curriculum often gives rise to unnecessary confusion, perhaps because those who are called upon to answer the question, rarely have a direct answer. We hear, “We are a little Waldorfy” or “We mix and match,” or “Life is our curriculum” or “Why put knowledge into boxes and give your kids worksheets when you can give them the world?” This leaves a beatific smile on the face of the one who answered, but a blank and almost apologetic look on the one who asked the (apparently silly) question.

A prevailing misconception among homeschoolers is that there are those who follow curriculum and those who don't. And those who sometimes kind of do. And that these two directions towards and away from curriculum, worksheets and structured educational activity define a linear spectrum of those on the one hand who follow curriculum and conventional educational goals, called “homeschoolers,” and “unschoolers” on the other, who dismiss these in the name of free thinking.

This distinction, though widespread, is not meaningful. Learning without textbooks and

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planned lessons does not automatically constitute unschooling. Nor does use of a worksheet or textbook in itself impede free thinking, any more than use of a basket impedes free throwing or use of a road impedes free wheeling. What one does with a given book or map or road or basket follows from one's inner curriculum, ever flowing, spreading and gathering. Like a roaring ocean currents it may engulf whatever passes by, letting nothing escape. In quieter times, in the way of whispering currents formed by raindrops, it may seek out other drops and seep deep into the ground where roots of ideas await.

In school or out, people follow their own curriculum. When the standard school curriculum does not recognize the role of the individual in creatively interpreting the content, the student can be labeled a failure, as happens to so many students. What if we understood instead that the student so labelled is following his or her own curriculum? Education advocate Jonathan Kozol writes about the channels of thought that livened the mind of one such student whom he met in New York:

He often misses what most others think to be the “main point” of an essay he has read or lecture he has heard, which may be one reason why the comprehension questions on a standardized exam sometimes befuddled him. Instead, he often tends to fasten on a piece of what he’s read or heard that corresponds to something he already cares about and finds his own unusual back-channel to the essence of the work or to the meaning of the man, which leaves him with a sense of intimate association.

Jonathan Kozol, “The Road to Rome,” in *Shame of the Nation* (New York: Crown, 2005), p. 130.

Those channels, taking the student from one idea to another, are the student’s own curriculum. They may lead him to people, places, books, even textbooks, but it is his own inner curriculum that is leading him. The books may also open up further channels, provoking further paths of inquiry.

Of this approach to learning, that I am calling the inner curriculum, Jonathan Kozol writes,

One result of this, I think, is that his memories of these encounters with a person, or a passage of prose writing, or a poem, linger in his mind ...

ibid.

This inner curriculum is so strong that even if one must go through a program dictated by others, it will still find ways to express itself, just as a river finds its way around a dam or grass still grows through paved roads, and the memories of meaningful encounters linger. This is the curriculum that everyone is already using, and will always use. If one is at the same time following a Standardized Curriculum from a Board of Education, one's inner guide will help one latch on to what nourishes him or her. It will also help one to forget what is useless and keep the mind free to learn, discover and rediscover.

4. What would it be not to follow a curriculum?

To follow whim?

What is whim? Does it come from nothing? What is nothing? Is there (ever) nothing? The American Transcendentalist philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

Is there such a thing as “no path?”

Was Kanti walking where there was no path when she rejected the main road in favour of the open lot and through the neighbourhood? Let us look at the factors that influenced her decision:

- open lot route was interesting – pipes to climb, puddles to splash, pitfalls to dodge
- road was same old route, hence boring

These are just facts about the two routes. These alone might not determine her preference each time. What influenced her decision that particular day?

- had time to take the “long cut”
- had taken it before and hence knew about it
- wanted to feel the mud on her shoes
- dogs
- vehicle traffic on the main road
- position of sun, which way the wind blew
- other factors we don’t know

Her path was as much influenced by the existence of the main road, which she found unattractive, perhaps because it was neat, orderly, paved and fixed, as by any particular feature of the open lot and winding alley paths.



Though the path may not be there on the ground, the path is there in the mind, and that directs one’s footsteps on the ground. Every time we take a step, there is something behind our step, leading us to

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take this step and not some other step. And one step leads to another.

Aravinda Pillalamarri studied literature and worked as a librarian for many years before turning to grassroots community development work with the Association for India's Development. She hopes to support the freedom and dignity of every person to follow their inner curriculum and to support the social institutions that facilitate holistic learning for all. She lives with her family in Mumbai and writes about peace, justice and sustainability on the home front in her blog Ask Amma (askamma.wordpress.com).

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Note: Kanti, Shanti and Ganti are imaginary characters. Their story is included for illustrative purposes.