

PAPER DETAILS

TITLE: CURRICULUM METAPHORS

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PAGES: 385-390

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/334274>

The Eurasia Proceedings of Educational & Social Sciences (EPESS), 2016

Volume 4, Pages 385-390

ICEMST 2016: International Conference on Education in Mathematics, Science & Technology

CURRICULUM METAPHORS

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ABSTRACT: One Of The Most Common Learning Tools In The Subject Domain Of Education Is Metaphors. It Has Been Said That Learning Is Not Possible Without Metaphors, Let Alone The Usage Of Metaphors In Our Daily Routine Without Even Noticing. A Lot Of Our Common Speech Is Full With Metaphors That Became A Part Of Our Normal Dialogue, To The Extent That We Do Not Consider The “Figure Of Speech” A Metaphor Any Longer.

More importantly, using metaphors to describe curriculum has been a method adopted by scholars trying to “practicalise” curriculum and give it a living-like sense. Eventually, curriculum metaphors took a steep turn (in some cases) when it started navigating educational policies to undesirable areas of application.

From that perspective, this paper will analyse the favourable/unfavourable effects of curriculum metaphors in general, with addition to an in-depth investigation of the appropriateness, the reliability and validity of notions of *Production*, *Growth*, and *Journey* as curriculum metaphors; explored in a short (but highly influential) article by Herbert Kliebard in 1972, and since, literature has been deliberating and confronting these three metaphors (among others like *Medicine* or *Natural Resources*) for their ability in characterizing curriculum.

Key Words: Education, curriculum, curriculum metaphors, metaphors.

INTRODUCTION

If any educational institution answered the questions of what, when, how to teach, and what are the result of teaching, then they have designed their curriculum (Print, 1993). Curriculum is a familiar term in the education milieu between educators and scholars. Albeit, the understanding of the concept is quite problematic, still, all agrees that curriculum is related to laying out a plan in order to facilitate knowledge and experience transferred from an educator to a learner, through a set of learning tools, to meet a final objective.

One of the most common learning tools in the subject domain of education is metaphors. It has been said that learning is not possible without metaphors, let alone the usage of metaphors in our daily routine without even noticing. A lot of our common speech is full with metaphors that became a part of our normal dialogue, to the extent that we do not consider the “figure of speech” a metaphor any longer.

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Curriculum

Most people outside the education milieu think of curriculum as the course of study in a classroom (Wiles & Bondi, 1998). This was the common definition in the beginning of this era. The definition itself had evolved over the years from simple explanation to highly sophisticated philosophical concept.

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- Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the conference

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In searching for definition of curriculum, one was amazed by the number of definitions for a single term; Zais (1976) was right when he said “a search for the correct definition of the term is not a very productive enterprise”. Finding a sole definition of curriculum had proven to be a problematic task. What was noticed is that most of the definitions being used in the literature were sentences reflecting personal perception and interpretation of the concept. The most practical method I found was followed by Glatthorn (2012), resolving this dilemma by dividing curriculum definitions into prescriptive and descriptive.

Prescriptive definitions of curriculum are statements that describe curriculum with what should take place in the normal path of a study, or what should happen when following a plan in teaching a subject i.e. “how things ought to be” (Glatthorn, 2012). Definitions can be as simple as Tyler’s (1957) “all the learning experiences planned and directed by the school to attain its educational goals”, or Popham & Baker’s (1970) “all planned learning outcomes for which the school is responsible. Or it can be more in-depth, like the one presented by Print (1993) “all the planned learning opportunities offered by the organization to learners and the experiences learners encounter when the curriculum is implemented”.

Descriptive definitions on the other hand, reflects what really happens in the classroom i.e., experience or curriculum in action. Again, definitions vary from being short and simple like Shepherd & Ragan’s (1982) “all experiences of the child for whom the school accepts responsibility” or Caswell & Campbell’s (1935) “all the experiences children have under the guidance of teachers”. Passing by strongly factual definitions like Tanner & Tanner (1995) “curriculum is concerned not with what students will do in the learning situation, but with what they will learn as a consequence of what they do. Curriculum is concerned with results”. To philosophical definitions like the one argued by Wiles & Bondi (1998) “We see the curriculum as a desired goal or set of values, which can be activated through a development process culminating in experiences for students”.

It is important to mention that curriculum is not an instruction book, it is not necessary that what goes in the classroom is fully compatible with what was planned for the curriculum; it all comes back to the interpretation of the teacher (Fisher & Muirhead, 2005). In fact, scholars like Goodlad (1979), Glatthorn (1987, 2000) and Van Den Akker (1998), divided curriculum into several types/phases, with key distinctions. On its importance, but it is not in-line with the interests of this paper.

Metaphor

Kliebard (1982) defines metaphor as “Figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a similarity”. The key point here that the learner should be familiar with the object of similarity; otherwise it would not serve the purpose, which is why efficient metaphors allow students to find a personal perspectival meaning of concepts from their own life experiences and re-characterize it in familiar terms or mind images. It is the human nature to break complex concepts into more familiar experiences (Yero, 2002).

Metaphors are used widely in the education process to enhance the means of understanding the topic, using self-imagination instead of textual enunciation. This process helps the learner to visualize new ideologies, free from philosophical and disciplinary boundaries. Baptist (2002) realised this when she said that using metaphors by scholars allows examining of new perspectives, by merging concepts that seems fairly distant.

Curriculum Metaphors

Curriculum metaphors have been used everlasting. Interestingly, the Latin word *curriculum* means run the course (Wiles & Bondi, 1998), Yero (2002) considers this itself a metaphor. Beauchamp (1975) states that, “metaphor is a useful tool for scholars to communicate curriculum concepts and for students to analyze various aspects and value positions”. Metaphors are another way to express how an educator define curriculum and visions its applications, and to what extent he can exploit curriculum to a satisfactory limit. Simply, curriculum metaphors are a reflection of the educator perception and understanding of curriculum. Alternatively, the term *characterization of curriculum* can be used instead of curriculum metaphor, which may have broader applications related to its implementation.

In fact, curriculum metaphor is powerful to the extent that it could determine the educational philosophy of an institute. Perkins (2013) visions the role of curriculum metaphor on two levels; firstly, the educator defines the teaching philosophy according to the metaphor. Secondly, the educator must realize how the metaphor molds the student understanding of his position.

This brings us to the question, why do we need curriculum metaphors? Lakoff and Johnson (2003) answers by saying that using metaphors create social reality guiding the implementers throughout the process, doing actions that fit the metaphor which will reasonably strengthen the power of the metaphor in return, they conclude “In

this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies”. In other words, the metaphor one adopts influence the way one acts.

Unfortunately, a risky fact about curriculum metaphors, that it conceptualizes and influences the perception of the concept (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). If a metaphor represents students in a passive way, they will act accordingly, and vice-versa. Also this conceptualization affects the hidden curriculum strongly through the day-to-day teacher / student interaction. Therefore, the metaphor adopted in schools, districts or ministries should be chosen carefully, being consciously aware of the messages sent to all parties concerned. Moreover, choosing a metaphor can be influenced by the surrounding culture / nature of the country or the region. For example, an agriculture society would feel more accustomed with *Growth* metaphor, were an industrial society would adopt *Production* metaphor, and so forth.

Production

Kliebard (1972) said “The curriculum is the means of production” where raw material undertakes several manufacturing processes under a proficient skilled craftsman, to produce a flourished product. The interpretation of this metaphor is clear, raw material is the student, the manufacturing process is the teaching process and its tools, the skilled craftsman is the educator, and the flourished product is the students after successfully passing the subject.

Subsequently, he states “The outcome of the production process is carefully plotted in advance according to rigorous design specifications” referring to an essential point in production and similarly in curriculum, which is the aims and objectives, and here appears the beauty of metaphor, at first, one cannot see the connection between production and curriculum, but when examining in depth, the similarity is obvious. He adds “when certain means of production prove to be wasteful, they are discarded in favour of more efficient ones”, this is the self-evaluating process of curriculum, which is considered a necessity in any production operation for self-improvement and development (The Scottish Government, 2008), (Lewis, 1954). Finally, he says that in order to make the most out of raw materials, we need to guide any particular quality found within to “proper production systems” avoiding wasting any potentially useful characteristics.

While some scholars idealized this metaphor like Cook-Sather (2003) saying “The root metaphor of education as *Production* and the multiple branches that spring from it, create a version of reality that is scarcely more humane than the construct of the Matrix”. Yet, it had been criticised for the influence it leaves over curriculum as being a template that fits all, neglecting the variance found between students. Brummelen (1993) records that *Production* metaphor was dominant at the start of the industrial era in the 1900s, because of that, it implies that educators will control students in a way that at the end of the teaching period students will be assessed according to “predetermined performance objectives”, which he claims it only focuses on bits and pieces of knowledge they need to acquire. Eventually, educators will be degraded to be managers using step-by-step instruction book rather than pedagogues, not in charge, and avoiding creativity and deviating from curriculum to the interest of the student. The students as well, will be templates ready to be molded and tested, before being tossed to the next production line. Perkins (2013) drastically insists that “the meaningfulness of learning is lost when education is viewed as a means for production”

Compared to other metaphors examined in this paper, from my point of view, *production* is the least metaphor reflecting curriculum in light of new educational theories. Mainly because of what was discussed earlier about how metaphor conceptualizes your actions, and the negative effect that it leaves on educators and students for that matter.

Growth

“The metaphor of *Growth* is at least as ancient as civilisation itself.....it was the basis of the educational classic *Emile*, of Jean-Jacques Rousseau” Kridel (2010). *Growth* is another metaphor interpreted by Kliebard in his article. He states “The curriculum is the greenhouse where students will grow and develop to their fullest potential under the care of a wise and patient gardener”. The role the educator plays in raising of the “*plant*” student is highly pressed upon. This metaphor is related to what Mead (1936) used in describing the educational ambience as a place where the student is engaged in self-discovery and inventional process while insulated from external environment. *Growth* was even chosen to be the official metaphor for New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Kliebard presses that every plant is different than the other having its own nature, although in the same greenhouse; therefore, each plant should be treated individually and “according to its needs”, and how hard the gardener tried to alter this nature to meet his desires, it will not be diverted, conversely, I believe that if the gardener tried too hard to manipulate the plant’s nature, the outcome may be a deformed hybrid with more flaws

than merits. This metaphor emphasizes that curriculum cannot create optimum conditions for everybody to grow in, where diversity is always present and should always be accounted for. Generally, all plants in the greenhouse should be rationed the basic nutrients with reference to the curriculum outlines, with addition to any special treatment that may be required to a particular plant.

Both curriculum and greenhouse are semi-controlled environments, with a mixture of natural and artificial components. In a greenhouse, one cannot entirely demolish external factors (Temperature, light....etc); likewise, classroom environment is opened to external effects and influences. A good gardener like a good teacher should benefit from and utilize all components of the environment, natural, artificial, internal, or external. Indeed some cannot be stopped, but surly can be guided to the interest of the student.

Babstist (2002) expanded *Growth* metaphor into the *Garden* metaphor, she explored into the sociological depth of the concept discussing aspects like faith, power and order. In my opinion, the *greenhouse* term is more suitable than the *Garden*, when describing curriculum, because a greenhouse is more or less a simulated semi-controlled environment, rather than the garden which is open to external factors and limited input control.

Like curriculum, gardens require long carful actions for plants to flower, including personal attendance with full solicitude. Considering that, this metaphor throws on the educator's shoulders the bargain to explore his / her students; it identifies how a teacher can affect positively (or negatively) the development of his / her students. An educator shall use proper nutrients available to help seedlings grow and nourish with knowledge and experiences, considering that every "plant" student needs a certain amount of directing and guidance to flower.

Moreover, it also reflects that students grow from within, focusing into their inner capacities for support and pushing them to interact with the inputs to do so (Kridel, 2010). "Nurturing and fostering life are at the heart of this metaphor. It recognizes how students require the proper support and care in order to become enriched with knowledge and develop" (Perkins, 2013).

Journey

Thirdly, curriculum as *Journey*, or (as addressed in some writings) *Travel*. Kliebard wrote "The curriculum is a route over which students will travel under the leadership of an experienced guide and companion". The first thing you realize in this metaphor is the sense of intimacy that normally grows amid travellers, and among travellers and their leaders. Notice that Kliebard chose to place "guide" before "companion" to highlight the authoritarian position of the educator, which can be useful if handled with caution. And to recognize that the educator has been on the same journey before and he/she is superior in knowledge and experience. On the other hand, his/her role as a companion may be more sufficient in other situations, although the curriculum does not pinpoint these situations and normally left to the educator's sapience.

"Each traveller will be affected differently by the journey" says Kliebard, a group of students in a classroom learning the same subject will have different levels of accepting, absorbing and accommodating information, similar to the group of travellers, some are interested in sightseeing, some in observing the nature, some in learning new experiences. The foresight of the educator is important to discover individual abilities, and use it to guide them along the path predetermined in the curriculum. Taking into consideration that this variability could not (and should not) be resisted or combated, it should be appreciated and utilized in achieving the educational objectives.

In a journey, obstacles cannot be anticipated; the schedule should be always consented for deviation from the original plan, depending on the situation or the circumstances. Student accompanied and lead by the teacher, travels along a semi-defined route, which allows diversion from the main road to different paths and returning to the main road once again (Yero, 2002). Similarly, the educator in a classroom can re-assess items in the curriculum, like learning activities or course outlay, according to his own judgment, putting in mind the curriculum's outcome. In other words, *Journey* resembles the curriculum flexibility for modification.

Clark (2000) sees an illuminating aspect of *Journey*, which is putting people in a condition where they are forced to collaborate and act in conjunction in an alien environment. This helps transforming students into "less self-enclosed" persons looking forward to taking part in group work. Besides, the fact that Traveling is mostly connected to fun and enjoyment, and in most cases volitional; reduces pressure on students and giving them the feeling that they do something they enjoy contributing to its events in their own pace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, using metaphors to describe curriculum had proven to be fruitful in most cases. Yet, wrongly chosen metaphors that does not suit the institution policy, nature or cultural environment, may result in

undesirable consequences, especially when combined with improper interpretations from the people responsible of its implementation.

The article discussed three common metaphors; *Production*, *Growth*, and *Journey*. Elucidating the pros and cons of each, and their effect over both educators and learners, explaining how *Production* metaphor provides a scenario of the student being the raw material in the hands of a skilful craftsman, who shapes and turn the raw material into a flourished product. While *Growth* metaphor describes the educator as a careful gardener, obliged to uncover the unique characteristics of each plant / student and ration them accordingly until they flower. And in the *Journey* metaphor, a teacher is a guide and companion who has been on the same journey before, while on the path he tour-guides the students around the roads of knowledge and experiences, knowing that not all travellers has the same input capabilities.

In addition, we discussed how curriculum metaphors conceptualize the understanding of curriculum to the extent that it affects the educational philosophy of the institution and all the parties involved, and how critical this may be, and pressed upon that choosing a metaphor to describe curriculum is a serious matter, because each metaphor may have applications that does not really reflect one's understanding of curriculum. For example, we saw *Growth* as a process where the individual self-expands sitting in an enclosed space, while *Journey* is a process where the individual is opened onto new horizons, jumping from one place to another.

Finally, it is the responsibility of the organization to adopt a metaphor that suits her best, because, at the end, metaphors are personal perceptions and characterization of your own vision.

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