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Curriculum Lost: a festival of errors

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ABSTRACT This article traces the career of one teacher through his involvement in a number of school based curriculum design innovations. The idea of 'depth' or distance is used to discuss a number of dimensions against which it is possible to judge the worth of a curriculum from a range of perspectives, most especially that of the student. The discussion also regrets the lack of a robust contemporary debate around the nature of curriculum and illuminates a lack of coherence and understanding of criteria for selecting curriculum content in our schools today.

Introduction

During the summer of 2010 a 'festival of errors' was held in Paris. It was a response to what many French scientists saw as a worrying consequence of the curriculum studied by school students, one that focused on producing the 'right answer' rather than provoking them to think. A report in *The Guardian* (Davies, 2010) claimed that there is growing concern in France that the school system is characterised by a culture of 'intellectual timorousness', which 'is leaving children bereft of creativity, flexibility of thought and – crucially – confidence in their own mental abilities.' What fascinates and frustrates me is that this concern is an almost direct echo of that raised by John Holt in his seminal book *How Children Fail* written nearly fifty years ago. He wrote:

> Practically everything we do in school tends to make children answer centered. In the first place, right answers pay off. Schools are a kind of temple of worship for 'right answers,' and the way to get ahead is to lay plenty of them on the altar. In the second place, the chances are good that teachers themselves are answer-centered, certainly in mathematics, but by no means only there. What they do, they do because this is what they were or are told to do, or what the book says to do, or what they have always done. In the third place, even those teachers who are not themselves answer centered will

> probably not see, as for many years I did not, the distinction between answer-centeredness and problem- centeredness, far less understand its importance. Thus their ways of teaching children, and, above all, the sheer volume of work they give them, will force the children into answer directed strategies, if only because there isn't time for anything else. I have noticed many times that when the workload of the class is light, kids are willing to do some thinking, to take time to figure things out; when the workload is heavy, the 'I-don't-get-it' begins to sound, the thinking stops, they expect us to show them everything. Thus one ironical consequence of the drive for so-called higher standards in schools is that the children are too busy to think. (Holt, 1969)

To return to the present day, one of the organisers of the 'festival of errors' suggested that the enduring problem of conformity and compliance is just a small part of a wider malaise which is leaving the national education system – which, in the case of France was born out of the revolutionary ideals of equality and fraternity – increasingly ill-equipped to help level out the injustices of modern society. While our genesis in the UK may have been different we, as the most recent poll from MORI (2007) suggests, are at much the same place. MORI gave students a list of different activities which are commonly practiced in the classroom and asked them to choose the three they did most often. The top mention was copying from a book or the board, with over half of students choosing this option (52%). The 11-16's in the poll also commonly listed 'listening to explanations in class' – a third saying they regularly listened to a teacher talking for a long time (33%) and a quarter that they took notes while their teacher talks (25%). I can almost hear John Holt turning in his grave.

As a relatively curious and restless soul, experiencing this and trying to make sense of my work through nearly forty years in schools has had moments of despair, but many more of exhilaration. But as I look back on my career I sense that much of what I was engaged in and shared with students was largely about seeking the 'right answers' to pass the tests, get the tickets so we could start the next journey and perpetuate the school system acting as some giant sieve, privileging some, denying others, rewarding conformity and perpetuating the idea that to recall and understand knowledge is much more potent as a sign of success in our culture than to create or make new knowledge and apply it.

In this article I attempt to trace my experience of curriculum as a teacher and locate it in a number of ideas generated to try to begin to understand where we might need to go in the next round of curriculum development. I suggest the idea of 'distance' as a way of judging the worth of a curriculum offer and tease out a number of dimensions that can be used to explore a curriculum from the perspective of its meaning and agency for the learner.

Curriculum as 'Distance'

In his novel Depths, Henning Mankell (2010) crafts a tale of dark intrigue around the life of Lars Tobiasson-Svartman, the central character. Tobiasson-Svartman is a naval engineer charged with making depth soundings for the Swedish navy. He is obsessed with distances and blessed with a special gift that enables him to accurately estimate the depth of the ocean at any point on a journey. His quest is to identify and map the best course for vessels to follow and help them navigate around potential obstacles. In that sense, his work is similar to that of a teacher, and while in his private life Tobiasson-Svartman might offer a poor role model, he is an expert at selecting and plotting the most appropriate courses. The idea of distance and its measurement is at the heart of Mankell's thriller as is the connect / disconnect between the inanimate world of taking depth soundings of the ocean with its technical accuracy and the idea of distance and morality as experienced in everyday life. This idea of 'distance' between chilling cerebral engagement and routine toil in matters outside of personal interest or in matters that have little connection with the life lived in community and are devoid of personal significance, generates some interesting questions when applied to the curriculum.

Definitions of 'curriculum' are fairly elusive and have become even more diffuse since the nationalisation of the English curriculum by the last Conservative government. The usefulness of the term 'curriculum' has come under challenge. Robin Alexander for instance argues that pedagogy is both 'the performance of teaching together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape it' (Alexander, 2001), which sounds very similar to John Kerr's definition of the curriculum as, 'All the learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside the school.' (Kerr, 1969).

In the intervening years between these two contributions, England moved from being a country with one of the least centralised and prescriptive curricular to one of the most controlled and centralised. The winter of the secret garden of curriculum development in England brought it in line with the mainstream of other European countries where 'the what' or 'the matter' of learning had a longer tradition of state intervention. As a teacher involved in a number of interschool conferences with partner schools in mainland Europe in the 1980's it was interesting that we talked of 'curriculum development' with our partners, while, bemused by the freedom that schools in England enjoyed, they talked of 'pedagogy' and ways of engaging students more centrally in their learning.

To Lawrence Stenhouse 'A curriculum is an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice'. He suggested that a curriculum is rather like a recipe in cookery.

> It can be criticized on nutritional or gastronomic grounds – does it nourish the students and does it taste good? – and it can be criticized on the grounds of practicality – we can't get hold of six

> dozen larks' tongues and the grocer can't find any ground unicorn horn! A curriculum, like the recipe for a dish, is first imagined as a possibility, then the subject of experiment. The recipe offered publicly is in a sense a report on the experiment. Similarly, a curriculum should be grounded in practice. It is an attempt to describe the work observed in classrooms that it is adequately communicated to teachers and others. Finally, within limits, a recipe can varied according to taste. So can a curriculum. (Stenhouse, 1975)

Please don't dismiss these contributions as an echo from an age long past…just feel and hear the voice of many teachers in another quotation from Stenhouse:

> I believe there is a tendency, recurrent enough to suggest that it may be endemic in the approach, for [inspectors of education] to use the objectives model as a stick with which to beat teachers. 'What are your objectives?' is more often asked in a tone of challenge than one of interested and helpful inquiry. The demand for [lesson] objectives is a demand for justification rather than a description of ends... It is not about curriculum design, but rather an expression of irritation in the problems of accountability in education. (Stenhouse, 1975)

So let me return to Tobiasson-Svartman, I want to suggest we make use of the idea of 'distance' as a way of raising a number of questions to judge the worth of a particular curriculum:

- How close are ways of knowing and making sense of their world as used by the learner inside the school and outside in the wider community? (awareness)
- How close are the issues that are being studied/explored to those that trouble and puzzle the learner? (personal resonance)
- How close are the tools, technologies and instruments that the learner uses inside the school to those they use to make sense of their world in the wider community? (technologies)
- How close is what students learn in the formal curriculum and the opportunities they have to explore and apply their learning? (relevance)
- How close is the need for the student to be the author of their own work/research and their experience of schooling? (authorship)
- How close are the contexts in which students are learning to those that are 'real' and 'authentic'? (authenticity)
- How close are the mores and culture of the community in which the learner lives and what they are learning? (meaning)
- How close are the perspectives and positions that lie at the heart of what is taught and the opportunity for the learner to develop their own personal positions? (significance)
- How close is the match between the needs of the learner to become more self reliant and resilient and their experience of the school curriculum (resilience)

The bracketed words at the end of each bullet point, such as (awareness) are intended as a short cut to a key idea. These ideas are used later in this article to try to understand the curriculum as seen from the perspective of the learner i.e. how distant or close they are to her. The choice of my nine items above will its self locate me in a perspective of person centred education (see Fielding, 2007, for a fuller and penetrating analysis of this). It is a very different view to that exposed by Chris Woodhead, one-time head of Ofsted. According to Woodhead:

> There are two fundamentally different views of education. On the one hand, there is the emphasis on the child. The insistence that everything must be relevant to the child's experience and to the perceived needs of society. The argument that the teacher should be a mentor or a coach who facilitates the growth of the child's understanding. The current obsession with personalisation. On the other, there is the belief that the school is an institution in which children are initiated by teachers, who are authorities in their subjects, into a body of knowledge which has no immediate connection to their lives or necessary relevance to the problems of society. (Woodhead, 2009)

Producing a framework such as that summarised in my nine bullet points above is pretty vacuous unless we can apply it and unless it illuminates our understanding and animates our future. The real test is for a school, with its community of students and parents, to thrash out its own framework of key purposes and then critically appraise their curriculum.

In this next section I aim to look at my own experience as a teacher and try to extrapolate the essence of the curriculum as experienced by students at several schools through my career. Most of my work has been in secondary schools, mainly in economically deprived and challenging communities, in urban, new town and rural locations. Most have been significantly rebuilt or set up as new schools, with an emphasis on supporting human scale practices in relation to curriculum design and development, pedagogy, the use of time and space, staff and student organisation and relationships. But this is not where I began.

Most of my comments here apply to what we now commonly term Key Stage 3/4 or Lower Secondary School as it might be termed across much of Europe.

Text Book Curriculum

I began teaching geography. A course organised around a set of text books that started with the British Isles and then toured their way around the continents. The books, *Groundwork Geography* (they still appear on e-bay from time to time) were full of maps and facts, capes and bays, capitals and commodities. They were content bound with exercises to test for comprehension, films from the

County Library were used to break the tedium. The course made little attempt to relate what was taught with the lives of the students and it assumed a virtuous symmetry with the needs of students, and between the intended curriculum and that received and interpreted by the students … by and large they complied and played the game of labelling maps, drawing graphs of data provided, copying detailed information and answering series after series of closed questions.

Essentially we played the game called 'schooling'. Externally derived and packaged knowledge, the transmission of uncontested information, tested by pencil and paper tests with some multiple choice papers.

If I apply the very simple set of questions I framed around the idea of 'distance', or closeness to the curriculum experienced by students, then it might be reasonable to suggest that in my early years the pattern was something like:

	poor	adequate	good	outstanding
Awareness	#			
Resonance	#			
Technologies	#			
Relevance	#			
Authorship	#			
Authenticity	#			
Meaning	#			
Significance	#			
Resilience	#			

Table I. Curriculum as delivering geography.

Ideas, Teams and Themes

I found all this pretty unsatisfying both for my students and myself. I was restless and moved on....For much of the 1970s I was Head of Humanities, this was a time of bourgeoning curriculum development in this country and abroad….much spurred on by the opportunities and challenges of RoSLA in 1972 Specifically, we were involved in:

- Man: a course of Study, [MACOS] a social science courses developed under the guidance of Jerome Bruner. It focused on key questions such as 'What makes man human?' and a constructivist pedagogy
- The Humanities Curriculum Project, [HCP] part of the rush of ideas to support the raising of the school leaving age…moved pedagogy into passionate debate about controversial contemporary issues and engagement through discussion not writing. Lawrence Stenhouse, leader of this project also set his stall very firmly against any curriculum that relied on the pre specification of 'behavioural objectives'. His work championed the ideas of 'teacher as researcher'; respecting the voice of the student; working to develop the curriculum through deliberation and principles of procedure

- Man in time, place and society, 8-13, with its emphasis on project based inquiry work across and within the social subjects ... another initiative of the then School Council, as were the following two projects.
- Geography for the Young School Leaver, [GYSL] a much more radical break with any previous definition of 'geography' and pedagogy. Similar to HCP, it was highly supportive of school based curriculum development, collaboration between networks and locally based community inquiry
- History 13-16, as with GYSL, another curriculum project developed under the umbrella of the School Council, with an eclectic view of how history had and could be conceived as an area of experience on the school curriculum.

Many of these projects were seen as highly innovative (for an account of some of this work see Tom Dalton, 1988). They involved a more holistic and less subject centred view of knowledge, a central role for school based curriculum development and cross disciplinary team planning. They supported problem based and enquiry learning but still persisted with outcomes that were written, mainly demanding a response to a pre set essay title related to the topic. Through these projects, however, we had moved beyond being banal purveyors of de-contextualised knowledge and were able to select contexts and contents that were appearing in national and local papers, television and issues that students were raising informally as we spoke with them during tutorial sessions. However the topics, the timing, the materials, the approaches were all selected and set by us as teachers, the idea of co-construction was not yet on the radar.

	poor	adequate	good	outstanding
Awareness		#		
Resonance		#		
Technologies	#			
Relevance		#		
Authorship	#			
Authenticity		#		
Meaning			#	
Significance			#	
Resilience		#		

Table II. Curriculum as engaging in integrated projects.

The History 13-16 project was different to the others. It used to frustrate me as I saw it as weak….I simply could not understand what it stood for or what it was trying to reform. Essentially I was inclined to dismiss it as a limp set of compromises, the. The irony is it that of all the above projects it is the one that has passed the test of time the best. It was based, not on any particular innovation or new ways of thinking, but rather it tried to capture the various ways that 'history' as a school subject had developed.

The project decided to list the needs of adolescents which a course in History could meet. These were:

- The need to understand the world in which they live.
- The need to find their personal identity by widening their experience through the study of people of a different time and place.
- The need to understand the process of change and continuity in human affairs.
- The need to begin to acquire leisure interests.
- The need to develop the ability to think critically, and to make judgements about human situations.

The five needs bulleted above were translated into a course made up of a study in development, a depth study, a modern world study and a study of the local historic environment. I now think that what initially distanced me from this project, its apparent fudge, might have been its strength. It managed to avoid alienating prevailing elites yet had enough drive to claim interest. It represented a smorgasbord or tartan, with different threads and ingredients making a rich offer that ran the risk of being dismissed as being eclectic but also had strength in its variety and appeal. It was neither imperial nor dogmatic in its view and allowed the teacher and student to be engaged in a variety of ways of knowing and understanding.

A cursory glance at Table II suggests that the move from teaching a text book defined geography course to planning and engaging in an integrated curriculum replete with research and inquiry based activities had seen an improvement in my perception of what I was doing and what might constitute a worthwhile curriculum...although the table also suggests that there was some way to go. However, the quest for a breakthrough remained, the frustration deepened. In a critique of the 2006 Education White Paper, and in language that still seems as fresh today, Jenni Russell, warns us that the dangers of....

> … The dead hand of control belongs not to local, but central, government. It lays down exactly what must be taught in the national curriculum; prescribes detailed lesson plans for every primary teacher in English and maths; sets national tests and examinations; and decides the limited criteria by which schools are judged …
> None of this is to be changed in the new agenda of choice. Ofsted will be asked to judge new institutions just as it does now. The government simply won't contemplate the idea that its own rigid approach to teaching and testing might be holding back any real improvements – despite compelling evidence …
> So many people would like their children to be taught in ways that gave them genuine skills, enthusiasm and the pleasure of discovery. The few schools that try to do so, at the fringes where the system permits it, see dramatic changes in children's abilities, confidence and behaviour. But schools dare not teach major subjects differently

> while the threat of being failed by Ofsted or falling down league tables looms. If the government and its critics really want to reduce failures in school and make this a more equitable, better-educated nation, this is where reforms have to begin. (Russell, 2006)

A Smorgasbord of Delights

Opening a new school at the beginning of the century gave me another opportunity to pick the baton of challenge that lies at the heart of Russell's comment i.e. how to conceive a curriculum that held the potential of engaging, challenging and including a greater range of talents, from a greater and diverse range of cultures than we had traditionally recognised and given credit to. So perhaps a guided fudge, a tartan of possibilities, a third way challenge, a rainbow alliance or some other wrapper to hide and embed what we wanted to achieve in a gentle and more subtle way, might succeed. The urgency to act was self evident and maybe the mix and match approach so successfully hatched by the creators of the Schools Council History project might give us scope. In such an approach we were ready to acknowledge the ambiguities, dilemmas and contradictions as well as the strengths of our work.

The curriculum we developed was animated by four key drivers:

- acknowledgment and working within the framework of the national curriculum, shown as 'Projects' on the diagram below
- opportunity to explore the potential of what the then QCA offered through its development of its personal, learning and thinking skills framework (PLTS), shown as 'Trans-curriculum' on the diagram below
- recognition of the importance of motivation and engagement
- internalisation of the maxim that 'I cannot teach a child well, whom I do not know well.'

Its development was both exhilarating and constraining. In this third section I outline how we were able to seize another opportunity to craft a comprehensive curriculum offer. This time in the context of setting up a new school …

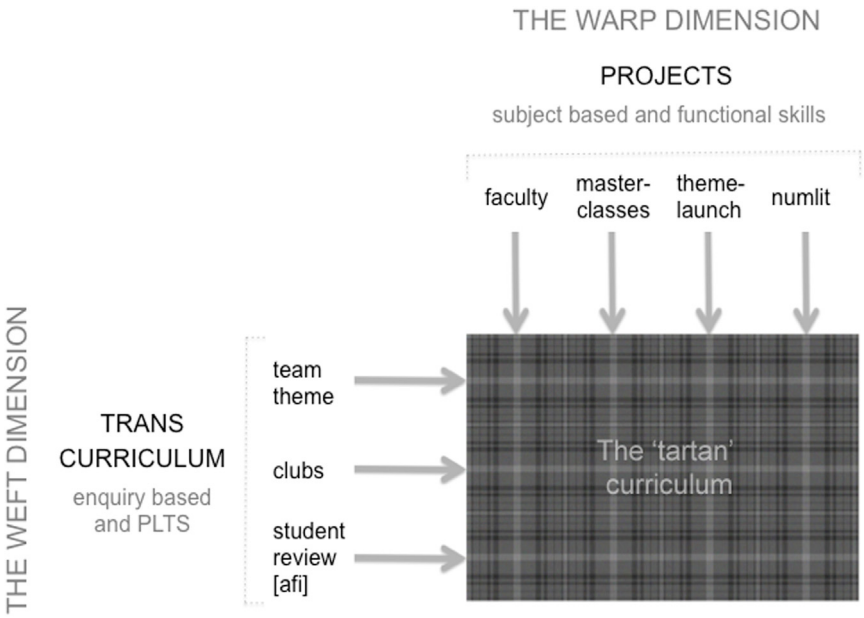

Figure 1 illustrates the main elements of our curriculum offer to students and their parents/carers:

Within the Warp

Themes with a Specific Subject Focus at Lunch or Throughout

About 75% of planned curriculum time was given to thematic work. Within Key Stage 3 themes were allocated to half terms. Staff agreed the breadth and balance of the themes across the three years and these became the common entitlement of all students. The elements of the themes were retrospectively mapped against the attainment targets of the national curriculum. However to avoid petrifaction and recipe approaches each teaching team was able to develop one new theme each academic year. Each theme was planned by a small group of teachers who worked across the ideas and skills with their own groups and there was often an element of team teaching. Most themes were cross-curricular but some deliberately gave more prominence to a subject element or were launched by a group of teachers who's background and expertise was in one particular subject field, such a group of scientists or a theme like 'global warming'.

Master Classes

Partly as a balance to the thematic work, to ensure exposure to subject knowledge and expertise, and to offer staff a generous allocation of time to work in depth on a passion of their training or subject interest, one day per week was normally designated a subject specialist day.

NumLit – Numeracy and Literacy

Apart from Masterclass days, each day had a 20 minute intensive session of either literacy or numeracy

Faculty – Three-day Faculty Projects

At the end of each half term, ie 6 times each school year teachers in teams of three, normally from a cognate area, such as Humanities or Expressive Arts, planed a three day event that usually culminated in a public exhibition or performance. The projects enabled staff with similar subject backgrounds to collaborate and produce engaging ways of working, largely unhindered by time constraints. These projects were organised in cross age groups.

Within the Weft

Themes

The themes had an emphasis on small teams of staff working with half year groups. This meant that no teacher taught more than 80/90 students each week and no student was taught by more than 6/7 teachers each week – with the exception of faculty projects and their own choice of clubs.

Weekly Clubs

Although not part of the compulsory curriculum, weekly clubs were regularly attended by over 60% of students on a Wednesday afternoon. The vast majority of support staff and technicians, as well as colleagues with expertise in a particular area from the wider community, offered a comprehensive programme of activates from sport to art, technology to personal wellbeing. Club time gave an additional CPD slot for teachers to share ideas and plan the future programmes/activities.

Small Group/Assessment for Learning [AfL] Tutorials

As part of the student entitlement small groups of 5/6 met each week for a 20 minute slot to review their week, exchange successes, gain courage. These gatherings were facilitated by their tutor who also held responsibility for co

working with the student to prepare an appreciative presentation to the parent/carer at end of each term.

Additional Opportunities/Visits/Residentials

The element of school experience that is most frequently offered when an adult is asked to recall something from their school days is a visit or especially, an extended residential. As part of our programme each year 7 student went to an adventure camp with their tutor within the first six weeks at the school and all had an entitlement to a three day visit to Paris within the first three years. Wherever possible we raised sufficient funds to pay for all students to enjoy these activities.

Given where I began with my sets of 'Groundwork Geography' this has been some journey. But even with the variety and verve of the elements on the smorgasbord described above, it was insufficient. It did not pass the tests of distance that I set out at the beginning of this article. Whether from a text book, an interactive theatre group, or a set of encounters carefully crafted by a teaching team, the common thread remains ..... a curriculum largely determined externally by others. It may be the state, the exam board or the teacher but for the student it is not his...and this is a profound error in our current curriculum provision, especially with the opportunities that daily unfold through new interactive and intercommunity technologies.

Given this lack of student voice and presence in a curriculum that was their feast, the smorgasbord is still insufficient in its responsiveness to students as co-constructors of their own learning and consequently the table below still shows much 'room for improvement'.

	poor	adequate	good	outstanding
Awareness			#	
Resonance			#	
Technologies		#		
Relevance		#		
Authorship	#			
Authenticity		#		
Meaning		#		
Significance			#	
Resilience			#	

Table III. Curriculum as weft and warp.

The mid 2000s were not a new era of curriculum development but with energy from the QCA there was much more activity. It was not easy, and following several rounds of discussions at the QCA, in both the 'Curriculum Future' group and the 'Teacher Assessment Exemplification Project', I felt a tension running

within me suggesting that we were in danger of re running a curriculum debate that I had been embroiled in for over thirty years and that despite all the political rhetoric to the opposite, we were widening the gap of engagement and achievement and inducing despair. The application of 'the market' to education, the fetish of 'choice', were making a reality of so many of the fears that Michael Barber characterised as 'the disappeared', 'the disaffected', and 'the disappointed' in his book the *The Learning Game.*

The state sponsored curriculum has lacked meaning and agency for many and led thousands of students into desperately unengaging and, for many empty tasks. It has been an instrument of social division. The meaningless daily rituals, the constant reference to the academic curriculum as the only model that has legitimacy and the reminders of failure, frequently based on spurious compilations of data, especially in schools that have ended up on the 'wrong side of the tracks', have served to remove the last vestiges of hope of a new common comprehensive curriculum for all. We have lost the strong local curriculum development and renewal that we enjoyed, and were world leaders of, thirty years ago. We are in retreat over our quest for a common comprehensive school curriculum fit for all, one based on a skills and qualities framework; student voice and negotiation; a pluralistic, rich and recursive pedagogy; located in side and way beyond the boundaries of a school and not just with those called teachers; embodying the principles of assessment for learning and holding the means for the public celebration of shared successes that go way beyond the pretence that we can sum the talents of a person by a number and capture the spirit and sum of our humanness through a series of pencil and paper tests. What a con we perpetuated and how the yoke of guilt tightened every day I did it.

Towards a Comprehensive Curriculum for a Comprehensive School

It may be that I needed to conceptualise the curriculum smorgasbord differently and see the various elements and opportunities from the perspective of 'Who might initiate the learning?' and 'Who might the learning be conducted in association with?' Maybe the breadth and balance of something like the ideas illustrated in Table IV have a greater chance of challenging and getting 'the best not for the few, but for the many'.

Individual	Small group	Whole class	Team
Student initiated research	Problem based learning	Class negotiated projects	Cross- curricular themes
Basic skills	Gifted and talented programmes	Masterclasses/ immersive learning	Team events/visits
Extended assignments	Learning tutorials	Community projects	Faculty projects

Table IV. Elements of a comprehensive curriculum offer.

Many of these suggestions are driven by the desire to redefine 'distance'. To move from seeing the curriculum as a set of re-planned activities as 'distant from' to a set of co-constructed activities that are 'near to'. To value students not as 'passive recipients' but as 'authors'. To offer, as suggested in the table above, opportunities and circumstances:

- for students to deepen their mastery of essential skills and competences;
- for individual students, or small groups, to pursue and deepen their own interests and concerns;
- for teachers and other adults to share and inspire others through and into their own interests;
- for small groups to be involved in problem-based-learning [PBL] set by the teacher;
- for whole class groups to negotiate and explore a theme of common interest or to work on a community commissioned project;
- for a team of teachers to work together to explore an issue, idea or theme from a number of perspectives.

As a conclusion I want to give some practical meaning to some of the ideas that permeate the above, practices that when added to the smorgasbord might at last move us to see the curriculum as having not two but three strong strands:

- subjects orientated enquiry
- thematic and skills based
- student initiated enquiry/ community commissioned
- With content selected on basis of:
- worthwhileness e.g. to enhance literacies, access common culture
- illuminating current controversies and issues, locally and globally
- resonating with the lives lived by students and held to have significance for them i.e matters that were intrinsically motivational

Taken together, these three strands might move us to a new curriculum deal for students and teachers and nudge us further to our goal:

	poor	adequate	good	outstanding
Awareness				#
Resonance				#
Technologies				#
Relevance				#
Authorship				#
Authenticity				#
Meaning				#
Significance				#
Resilience				#

Table V. A curriculum fit for all.

Collaboration and New Opportunities

It is that last element on my list 'student initiated enquiry/ community commissioned' work that is 'resonating with the lives lived by students and held to have significance for them – intrinsically motivational' that might be the most challenging to achieve. I'll end by offering an illustration of 'student as co constructor' from the work of Elaine Senechal in her school in Boston, Massachusetts (Seneschal, 2008). She offers an interesting example of curriculum change as a response to failure in her description of Greater Egleston Community High School, one of the alternative high schools in the Boston Public Schools System. The school was started by residents of a low income, minority community to meet the needs of their young people who were dropping out of the state system. From the beginning one of the goals of the school was to create community leaders. Seneschal describes how she developed a community based learning approach to teach effectively the skills and competences of a demanding science programme. She developed a curriculum that was deeply connected to the community through tapping into community concerns around issues of environment and health using local networks and multi agency workers co-located at the school.

The focus of the programme was on the environmental issues that were important to the neighbourhood surrounding the school. With the help of community organisations, the students became researchers in their community, gathering data, mapping areas of opportunity and concern. Subsequently they became community activists, leaders and role models in the environmental justice movement. Seneschal gives a fascinating account of how student concerns over high levels of asthma led to a co-constructed project (students, staff and community workers), looking at bus routes and vehicle emissions in the area, especially around the school, which had a significant political impact and contributed to the passing of anti-engine idling in Massachusetts. This success was just the beginning of a series of evidence based campaigns that students worked on with others in their community, one of the most deprived

in Boston, to improve the quality of life and experience for all in their neighbourhoods.

This work is a powerful illustration of a nexus of an authentic, context rich enquiry approach which is used to engage and enthral students in their learning while providing opportunities to enhance cultural and critical skills of learning eg the personal. learning and thinking skills framework developed by the QCA, and content worth understanding eg science (in this case by being mapped against State requirements). The outcomes of this community based approached were seen to be:

- Reduction of alienation and isolation by providing a culturally familiar setting for learning
- Increased engagement, motivation, and mastery of skills
- Enhancement of self concept
- Acquisition of strategies to effect social change (Seneschal, 2008)

This approach has much in common with that being pioneered by Learning Futures (Price 2010), with its emphasis on engagement and integration and the suggestion of a new basis of a curriculum applied and nuanced in issues that are important to the student but have wider applicability. Issues that authentically offer the learner opportunities practice the power of the specialist, whether it be as a scientist, an geographer or a environmentalist.

Paulo Freire encapsulates the trap which envelopes us and one that we have to become free of:

> We have a strong tendency to affirm that what is different from us is inferior. We start from the belief that our way of being is not only good but better than that of others who are different from us. This is intolerance. It is the irresistible preference to reject differences. The dominant class, then, because it has the power to distinguish itself from the dominated class, first, rejects the differences between them but, second, does not pretend to be equal to those who are different; third, it does not intend that those who are different shall be equal. What it wants is to maintain the differences and keep its distance and to recognize and emphasize in practice the inferiority of those who are dominated. (Freire, 2006).

As Senechal concludes 'We are teaching students in a schools system established and controlled by the dominant culture. In spite of their own and their families desire for education, and their own intelligence, skills and potential, they are often viewed negatively as learners.' It is this reality and the institutionalised injustice, prejudice and waste that the current curriculum and all that surrounds it by way of didactic pedagogy and the obsession with decontextualised pencil and paper summative testing that made me restless at the beginning of my career and sustained, and frustrated me through it. In his novel 'Among Schoolchildren', Tracy Kidder poignantly sums it:

> The problem is fundamental. Put twenty or more children of roughly the same age in a room, confine them to desks, make them wait in lines, make them behave. It is as if a secret committee, now lost to history, had made a study of children and, having figured out what the greatest number were least disposed to do, declared that all of them should do it. (Kidder, 1991)

Why are we so supine in ignoring the waste of talent that the current curriculum arrangements represent and the distorted privilege and inequality they help perpetuate? It doesn't have to be like this. Maybe as I reflect on my efforts at curriculum reform, they have been misplaced, my own unique 'festival of errors' and as Patricia Broadfoot suggests, of the holy trinity of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, it is the latter that really controls and hence determines what and who is valued:

> … because assessment procedures are so closely bound up with the legitimation of particular educational practices, because they are the overt means of communication from schools [and other institutions] to society and, to a greater or lesser extent in different societies, the covert means of that society's response in the form of control ... . Assessment procedures may well be the system that determines curriculum and pedagogy and, hence, social reproduction. (Broadfoot, 1996)

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