

Toward a Time Line for American Curriculum History: A Preliminary Plan of Work

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Abstract:

In this exploratory piece, the authors recount the need for a curriculum history time line and suggest items for inclusion and possible ways of representing and categorizing the items. Difficulties in defining the bounds of the field are also presented.

For almost forty years, the curriculum field in the United States has suffered charges of being both ahistorical (e.g., Kliebard, 1986) and moribund (Schwab, 1970) as well as overly technical (e.g., Pinar, 1975) and expressive of social control (e.g., Apple, 1982). During the past quarter-century, however, the field appears to have prospered even if has been criticized. Moreover, it enjoys conspicuously increased contemporary attention from scholars, practicing educators, and, even, some politicians. One of its reasonably claimed strengths, indeed, is its continuing discovery of its robust history.

This serious and sustained attention to the history of the American school curriculum reasonably may be marked bibliographically by the 1976 yearbook of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Davis, 1976). Within a few years, research in the new area of curriculum history flowered. Scholars published major books (e.g., Kliebard, 1986; Tanner and Tanner, 1990) and wrote articles that were published in an increasing number of journals. Especially important in this growth was the founding of the Society for the Study of Curriculum History, its growth, and its publication of papers from its annual meeting (Kridel, 1989; Field and Burbaw, in press). Furthermore, papers on curriculum history topics began to appear regularly on AERA programs and those of other education and history societies. This scholarly attention certainly contributed to the reversal or lessening of the earlier charge of the curriculum field's ahistoricity.

Nevertheless, this rapidly increasing scholarship elevated to recognition of an unanticipated problem. Especially graduate students just beginning their study of curriculum history routinely expressed their need of a means by which they might grasp an overview and sequences in the history of the American school curriculum. Typical responses by some professors and class or seminar groups were their development of rudimentary curriculum history time lines. None of these aids seemed sufficient even as students attested their usefulness and none of these time lines apparently has been published.

Each of us understood the usefulness of a good time line. We are all active scholars of curriculum history. For various periods during the past three decades, we have offered seminars and courses in the field. Recently, we

began seriously to review our earlier decisions not to construct or even contribute to a time line in American curriculum history. Perhaps the most influential explanation of our avoidance of this possibility (or opportunity? or challenge?) was our considered belief that a time line that we developed might have at least two untoward consequences. First, we believed and continue to assert that a time line constructed by us or anyone else responsibly cannot be authoritative. We recognize that other scholars properly should contest the significance of our identifications, placement, and order of individuals, events, and publications. Noted differently, no time line can be complete enough – at any specific point in time nor, certainly, as scholarship proceeds. Second, we wanted to foster continuing research in curriculum history, not to stall or frustrate it. As a consequence, we thought that a proposed time line might work against our basic sentiments. Our review of our earlier position concluded with the recognition that our hesitance was not unreasonable. We also decided to launch an effort to develop as good a time line as we could.

This report shares the plan of our work, presently underway. To be sure, we hope that the plan yields a useful time line for American curriculum history. The plan features three major concerns: 1) the complex and nested contexts of curriculum in American life and culture, 2) organization of the time line, and 3) selection of items to be included on the time line.

How Should the Time Line Be Organized?

Our own and our students' early efforts to construct curriculum history time lines sought a minimalist simplicity and this criterion led to simplism. Simply, we arrayed all manner of events – events, individuals, major publications, even contexts - on a single line. A solution, itself too simplistic, became arrays of major publications, for example. We decided that any appropriate curriculum history time line must honor the complexity of history. Furthermore, we recognized years ago (Davis, 1977) that curriculum history is embedded as only a part in the history of education that is nested within the history of American life and culture. Our time line, consequently, would have to portray some of the necessary complexities, but should be simple enough that users could recognize or intuit relationships that were not always explicit. For our initial work, we have chosen five categories within which events will be noted and ordered:

- American Life and Culture
- Education in the United States
- Curriculum Events
- Significant Individuals in Curriculum
- Significant Publications in Curriculum

Although these five categories could define five different time lines, we reason that they should be recognized as major elements of a one, although general, conception to be carried across years (See Figure 1 on page 15). Indeed, this organizational scheme may be too complex to have practical use. That is, it may attempt to include so many elements that individual "events" may be obscured and relationships may be unrecognized. On the other hand, this complexity, we insist, cannot be avoided. Moreover, this organization has appeared to work "well enough" in our first trials to continue its use.

For convenience only, we arbitrarily decided to begin our work with the last decade of the 19th century and to continue through the present. Moreover, we currently are focusing our efforts to suggest details within each of the categories for specific decades (e.g., 1900-1909).

Organizationally, we also set several other arbitrary restrictions. We decided to focus attention primarily on the public school (K-12) curriculum. To be sure, we recognize that this arbitrary demarcation must be breached on occasion (e.g., Eight-Year Study). Further, we chose not to consider the curricula of higher education. We are also restricting our present exploration to include only publications in English.

What Should Be Included on the Time Line?

Selections of items for inclusion on the time line, in our experience, are both easy and tortured. Individuals like Franklin Bobbitt and Henry Harap and Hollis L. Caswell are easy to identify and to position within the curriculum field. On the other hand, persons like Madeline Hunter and Jerome Bruner and David Snedden, even as they surely are prominent in the "Education in the U. S." category, may appear problematic for selection to a curriculum category. Our guide to such decisions is simple: because none should be excluded, their initial placement is less important than their inclusion. As the time line is used and better understood, the appropriateness of their "place" likely will become clearer.

Also, having available two supra-curriculum categories [American Life and Culture, Education in the U.S.] seems fruitful in helping to distinguish between curriculum- and non-curriculum elements. Still, most decisions remain difficult when considering what events and publications and which individuals appropriately belong "in" and "out" of the three curriculum categories.

These decisions, to a major extent, should assist scholars and students to understand borders, even if contested, of the curriculum field.

These notions about selection obviously eschew explicit definitional concerns, i.e., What is curriculum? On the other hand, the choices themselves constitute the ground of increased understanding about the field. The selection process, nevertheless, remains to a great extent personal and idiosyncratic. As we continue to work on selection and classification, we recognize that we have chosen elements about which we know more than those about which we only have casual awareness. As our own knowledge and that of the field expands, we will have more from which to select. We further recognize that our knowledge is constrained by the American context and its European roots and relationships. For most periods of the American school curriculum, this feature seems unlikely to change impressively.

Judgments of significance lie at the heart of every decision about elements to include on the time line. Indeed, because only a few people, ideas, publications, and events can be included, these judgments can only reveal the values of those constructing the time line. Still, such judgments should not be merely capricious. We have used our responses to several questions to guide early decisions. These questions include, Did the event, individual, publication have a reasonably long-term impact on the school curriculum? Was it only a transitory phenomenon? What role does its popularity or notoriety have on the judgment to include or exclude it? To what extent must an individual have written a noteworthy publication to be included? How can we assure that individuals who made their major contributions in schools not be excluded? How long must a curricular idea or organization continue before it is included? Although all of these questions seem important, none of them appears to be singly sufficient to serve as a criterion on which to rule items "in" or "out". At this time, we believe that the creation of a curriculum history time line should be viewed as a process by which categories, inclusions and exclusions, and relationships are reviewed and reconsidered. Under this rule, the time line itself will change as it is used.

How Might the Time Line Be Portrayed?

How should the events identified be arranged to best show the relationship, temporally and conceptually? Several possibilities exist, some made possible by advances in computer technology, some which limit the portability of the time line, thereby, while increasing the robustness of the presentation, make it difficult to be widely disseminated. Some of the possibilities we have explored are presented here; other presentations may be proposed as the task unfolds.

Events in the Decade of _____

	--00	--01	--02	--03	--04	--05	--06	--07	--08	--09
Significant Individuals										
Significant Publications										
Curriculum Events										
Education in the US										
American Life and Culture										

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Traditional linear time line: One possibility, certainly the most obvious, is to list the events in chronological order, beginning with the oldest and proceeding to the most recent. Dangerously close to the model of "one damn thing after another," this seems to have little explanatory power although it does provide a simple listing where events can be sorted into decades and may be of use in finding a particular event if one knows the general time period.

Thematic linear time line: A second possibility is to organize the events thematically, according to the five categories of items. This could be accomplished using parallel time lines (similar to the organizing matrix) or by color coding the events around themes or those associated with individuals and documents.

Radial representation: Events could be displayed in a radial manner where themes served as the spokes of a circle and events were placed appropriately distant from the center to show time. Thematic connections could be designated by lines drawn between the events on the spokes.

Computer-based representations: With the use of a computer, the events could be linked through hyperlinks and color coded connections. This could allow users to explore the connections in their own manner and discover their own connections, thereby drawing on the power of a currently popular learning theory, constructivism

Three dimensional representations: To this point, two dimensional representations have been suggested. Three dimensional representations might be more effective in showing the relationships between items. For example, the events could be shown on the outside of a cylinder or hollow stela and links to other events could be shown by strings or wires which could transmit low voltage electricity to light up a light at connecting/related events. This would, on some small manner, allow the multiplicity of connections to be shown. However, this model would be very cumbersome and not at all portable.

An Invitation

To this point, we have shared our idea about a curriculum history time line that seeks continued formulation. For our part, we will proceed according to our present plans and, likely, we will modify these notions as we continue. We also invite others to join this enterprise. Certainly, we welcome contributions from others about contexts, ideas, events, and books that should be considered for inclusion in the time line. We also invite colleagues to try out these ideas and procedures for themselves and with their students. How well do they work? In what ways are they unhelpful? We hope that other scholars will share their work with us as we make available our work to the field. Our work is a continuing invitation to increased understanding of the history of the American school curriculum.

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