

A Case Study in Canadian Curriculum Materials Analysis

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Il y a deux ans les auteurs ont fait faire des évaluations d'une sélection du matériel du programme d'études sociales (histoire et géographie) rédigé par des éducateurs canadiens et ils ont publié les résultats de ces évaluations dans *The History and Social Science Teacher*. Dans cet article ils ébauchent les origines et le contenu du schéma d'évaluation dont se sont servis les apprécateurs, et ils réfléchissent sur quelques-uns des points controversés qui surgissaient pendant l'évaluation même. Pour faire ces évaluations on n'a pas employé uniquement un système où il ne fallait que pointer une liste — système très répandu aujourd'hui du reste — et qui produise des résultats dits objectifs avec lesquels tous les apprécateurs d'une part, et les lecteurs des évaluations d'autre part peuvent être d'accord. Ils ont plutôt dressé un schéma qui exigeait, du moins en partie, des interprétations humanistes ou artistes de la part des apprécateurs et une attitude de réflexion de la part des lecteurs de ces interprétations. Le texte de ce schéma est donné en entier et un sommaire final contient un commentaire sur les buts d'un modèle d'évaluation du matériel des études sociales canadiennes qui, loin d'être prédéterminé, invite la discussion.

INTRODUCTION

What social science curriculum materials have been developed by Canadian educators? How should these materials be evaluated? And what kind of information is most appropriate to present a fair picture of a given set of materials? More specifically, how should editors of a journal instruct evaluators, so that the readers receive the most helpful understanding of what a set of Canadian curriculum materials have to offer?

In the latter months of 1974, we were invited to select a sample from recent Canadian social studies project materials, arrange for their evaluation, and edit the written evaluations for publication in *The History and Social Science Teacher* (HSST). A special issue of the journal was occasioned not only by the recent appearance of a great number of Canadian materials, but also by the dearth of critical literature. The most interesting aspect of the editorial function was the development and

distribution of a “schema for evaluation” which was provided for the guidance of the evaluators invited to criticize particular sets of materials. The present article is designed to outline the origins and contents of this evaluative schema, and reflect upon curriculum evaluation issues that surfaced while the evaluations were being written and edited. The arguments are presented here in summary form.

DESIGN OF AN EVALUATIVE SCHEMA FOR SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM MATERIALS

Two issues affected the design of the evaluative schema: the selection of both materials and evaluators in the context of the needs of a professional journal on the one hand, and the types of evaluative comments that the schema was to promote on the other.

On the first matter, a great variety was found to exist in the theoretical justifications, educational objectives, grade placements, and design formats of social studies materials in Canada. For example, some were based on “critical issues” or “social problems,” and others were designed to impart bodies of information, or to teach selected concepts and skills at the elementary or secondary level. Some were multi-media kits, others were bound and published volumes, and a great number were informal publications such as typescript “units of study.” They had been devised by foundations, teachers’ unions, loosely co-ordinated teams of educators, and individual teachers. We decided at an early point in our deliberations that the schema should be flexible enough to apply to *all* types of materials, no matter how broad or limited their scope, or how varied or uniform their contents.

The evaluators, also, were a diverse group, drawn from all parts of the country, and from all types of educational institutions: elementary and secondary schools, faculties of education, boards of education, and government offices. Wherever possible, teams of reviewers were formed, broadly representative of the types of expertise, interest, or experience that might assist in the interpretation of the particular piece of material under review. The criteria for the selection of such teams were detailed in the evaluative schema (see below). The selection of materials and competent evaluators obviously affected the review procedure. We decided that the materials and the evaluators should be drawn from as many sections of English-speaking Canada as possible. But, of course, compromises had to be made. Some project directors were unwilling to release their materials for review at that time. The evaluators were chosen largely on the basis of our familiarity with their work for the journal.

We were concerned that the series of evaluations required for HSST ought to emphasize readability and the use of non-technical language, yet the evaluations should demonstrate professional understanding and practical relevance. For the purpose at hand, therefore, it was considered

inappropriate to ask evaluators to draw up standardized assessments such as those found in the November 1972 issue of *Social Education*, which reviewed 26 major curriculum projects (1). And it was considered inappropriate also to prepare evaluations along the lines of the *Social Studies Curriculum Materials Data Book* (2, Introduction, Sheet 2), which reviews curriculum projects, large and small, each on a two-page data sheet consisting of a series of standardized paragraphs: (a) overview, (b) materials and cost, (c) required or suggested time, (d) intended user characteristics, (e) rationale and general objectives, (f) content, (g) teaching procedures, (h) evaluative data, and (g) references. Such criteria, derived from well-known social studies evaluation checklists (3), are designed to help educators make informed judgments and practical decisions regarding the adoption of selected materials for practical use. A strict adherence to checklist criteria tends to produce evaluations that are increasingly depersonalized or “objective” in character. Instead, the evaluative schema that we constructed was to perform a different function, namely that of assisting evaluators to prepare readable and personal assessments for publication in a journal. The schema was not designed primarily for teachers assessing materials for their own use.

This leads us to the second issue, the types of evaluations that the schema was designed to promote. We decided at an early stage that a flexible schema was most appropriate. The purposes of such a device were on the one hand to provide a series of relevant alternatives for evaluators to consider in preparing their personal judgments, and on the other hand to encourage the evaluators to demonstrate their reflective awareness of the influence of their own guiding concepts in the interpretation of curriculum materials. To that end, each evaluator was asked to read two chapters from Eisner’s and Vallance’s recently published collection of essays entitled *Conflicting Conceptions of Curriculum* (4). Thus, the basic question facing us in the design for an original schema was the *nature* of the evaluations that the schema should attempt to promote.

We were aware of a number of different strands in the literature of materials evaluation and analysis, including the variety of models that have been published on curricular decision-making and on goal-attainment (internal evaluation) and goal-free assessment (external evaluation) (5). Some of these models were influential in our schema. For example, the final version encouraged the evaluator to carefully examine the expressed goals of the material’s designers in order to judge the degree to which these goals were realized in the materials and in their potential for use. On the other hand, another section of the schema invited the evaluator to locate the materials within the general area of social science education. As noted above, the authors decided not to use the largely “check-list” format of the most widely used existing schema — the “curriculum materials analysis system” devised by Morrissett and his colleagues in the

Social Science Education Consortium (3). The merit of such a schema is that it generates “shareable” or “objective” meanings in the empirical sense, aiming to produce “unbiased” interpretations by removing the “personal” element from the interpretive procedures. This framework we attempted to broaden to include the types of criticisms generally considered interpretive, literary, or humanistic. Thus the schema was designed, at least in part, to elicit private understandings and personal insights on the part of the evaluator as he went about his task, and to make these interpretations available to the reader. The schema thus attempted to bridge what is often regarded as a gap between the “pre-determined” and the “open-minded” review, or between the “social scientific” and the “humanistic-interpretive” assessment pattern.

TEXT OF THE SCHEMA

As the materials were collected from various sources across the country, the pile became so large that it threatened to swamp the space limitations of the journal. Four projects, of relatively great breadth, were given generous space allocations, and three others were given much more limited space. The teams assessing the four major projects were sent the following schema. (The other three reviewers were given a shorter version of the same schema.)

1. *Schema for reviews*

(a) The *framework* for reviews is as follows:

Criticism based on *internal* evidence

A.1. — descriptive comments

A.2. — comments on the process of constructing the curriculum

A.3. — assessment of success in implementing the project's *own* objectives

Criticism based on relating the particular project to broader educational issues.

B.1. — assessment of the project from *external* evidence

B.2. — personal conclusions and reflections of the reviewer

In *sections (b) and (c) below* this framework is discussed in greater detail.

(b) *Criticism based on internal evidence* (A.1, A.2 and A.3)

In this section the reviewer will be expected to confine himself to the *details* of the project under review. The following questions may serve as a guide for the descriptive section (A.1.).

Very briefly, what is the history of the project?

What are the descriptive characteristics of the project? (types of media, time required, style, money cost, availability)

What are the guiding concepts? (society, learner, discipline, learning-teaching process)

What are the general and specific objectives? (cognitive, affective, psychomotor)

How is the project structured? (selecting and organizing of contents, attitudes, and values reflected by the selection and organizing process)

What instructional strategies and learning activities are characteristic of the project?

What guidance does the project afford the potential teacher users?

What provisions are made for evaluating student and/or teacher success?

What use might teachers make of all or parts of the project?

Some of these questions may, of course, be more appropriate to a particular project than others. The reviewer is encouraged to devise additional alternative questions to meet the demands of his own task. In the next section of the review (A.2.) the reviewer is asked to comment, if possible, on the *process* by which the curriculum was constructed. How was the curriculum group organized? Was there input by experts? What kept the group moving? Were any community or non-educational groups involved? Is there any evidence of personal growth by the participants? (It should be noted, however, that the evidence for these sorts of questions may not be available for some projects.) In the third section of the review (A.3.), the reviewer is requested to assess whether the materials have adequately met the demands of the project's objectives. Are the aims established for the project satisfactorily implemented? Are the various components adequately selected and structured? Are the parts of the project related to one another? Does the project meet the needs of the audience for whom it was intended? Does the project satisfactorily maintain commonly accepted stylistic and presentational standards? In short, the reviewer is asked to reflect on whether the project makes sense *in its own terms*. Reviewers are asked to tread cautiously in this section of the review. The production of materials, for example, may not be the prime purpose of a project. On occasion the materials may not reflect the major thrust of a curriculum endeavour. Please give explicit reasons for the statements you make and indicate clearly any opinions that depend upon your suppositions.

(c) *Criticism based on external evidence* (B.1 and B.2)

In this section a reviewer is asked to reflect upon the place occupied by this project in the general schema of history and social science projects. This is both a *locational* and *evaluative* task. From a *locational* point of view, we acknowledge the existence of a wide variety of social science curricula, each one structured on different principles, reaching for different objectives and serving different needs. No single project, as yet, has covered the entire range of alternatives. A reviewer, therefore, is asked to relate the project under study to this broader range of curriculum alternatives. For this purpose we are asking all reviewers to read two articles from a recent collection by Elliot W. Eisner and Elizabeth Vallance entitled *Conflicting Conceptions of Curriculum*. The first, entitled "Five Conceptions of Curriculum: Their Roots and Implications for Curriculum Planning," contains a sorting of alternatives based on such concepts as form, emphasis of the curriculum and aims of the school. The second, entitled "Applying the Five Curricular Orientations to *Man: A Course of Study*," is an attempt to judge the extent to which one well-known project meets the demands of each of the five curricular conceptions. *Note*: It is not intended that reviewers will apply the Eisner technique in the second article to the project under study. Such a procedure would be highly mechanistic for purposes of our readers. We thought that a reviewer might prefer to have what we consider to be a satisfactory curriculum perspective at hand for purposes of his own work. The basic question in this section is: how does the project

fit general comments on the nature of curriculum? Lastly, a reviewer will be asked to make general *evaluative* statements. We have already asked that the project be valued in its own terms, and that it be set against a broad curriculum picture. At this stage we request that a reviewer reflect upon the *worth* of the project. What is new? What attracts interest? What is creative? What is imaginative? How useful is the project? How does it contribute to historical or social science curriculum theory? To what extent does it satisfy a need? Are there unique features of materials, or learning activities, or evaluative techniques? Does the project help teachers to grow professionally? Will it attract student interest? Does it show new ways of developing concepts or generalizations? Does it represent an implementation of an original idea, or an original theory? Are there undesirable incidental learning outcomes embedded in the approach? How do these undesirable outcomes affect the “balance” of the project materials? What are your personal impressions? These are just a *few* of the questions (and there are many others) that might provide a basis for an overall evaluative comment. We ask reviewers to pull no punches, but to be fair (and when the decisions are difficult to make, to be generous).

2. *Form of the review*

Reviews are asked to follow the normal canons of *essay* writing. While we recommend that the structure (or a version of it) given above be followed by reviewers, we request that you do not clutter the flow of prose with headings or numbered sections. We have in mind both the readability and pleasing appearance in print of the complete appraisals. The amount of weight and the number of paragraphs to be attached to each section of a review will depend upon the demands of the project being considered and the preferences or wishes of the reviewers, after consultation with the editors. We would ask reviewers to avoid technical (or jargon) language in articles for the journal. Reviewers are asked to note that our readers are not likely to be familiar with some educational concepts and theories favoured by curriculum specialists and researchers. Please exercise care in any attempts to refer *implicitly* to the Eisner and Vallance article which has not yet been read widely in the school community.

3. *Reviewers' qualifications*

The following qualifications have been established:

- (a) One of the reviewers for each project *must* be a practising teacher at the elementary or secondary level.
- (b) No member of the team shall have been involved in any major capacity with developmental tasks associated with the project.
- (c) One of the team shall have a broad background in curriculum theory.
- (d) One member shall have involvement with curriculum development work that is recognized to be of superior quality.
- (e) One member shall have proven evidence of writing ability.

Only in the most unusual circumstances will a single person meet all five criteria; more commonly a team of two or (more rarely) three persons will be needed to meet these requirements. In cases where there are two or more reviewers the editors will first approach the person who will be chairman of the group, and will invite the chairman to participate in the selection of other members of the team.

5. *Length of review*

The length will be established by the editors after consultation with the chairman. The demands on the journal's pages are such that word limits cannot be exceeded under any circumstances.

The submissions of the evaluators appear in the Summer 1975 issue of *The History and Social Science Teacher* (6).

REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCHEMA

The contents of the evaluative essays written with the guidance of the above schema were both diverse and revealing. Some of the reasons for the diversity may be sought in the variety of the social studies curriculum materials that were being assessed. But the diversity of the constructed evaluations is also a reminder that the process of evaluation is a highly interpretive enterprise. The evaluator is of necessity involved in a dialogue with the materials being assessed. Recently it has been argued (7, 8) that curriculum evaluation is much like the task of criticism in the humanities. The evaluator, like a movie or book critic, applies to the material he is examining a set of interpretive devices and procedures, some of which belong to the canons of aesthetics (9). But even though two critics may agree on the standards of a "good" screen play, they will not necessarily arrive at identical descriptions and recommendations. In curriculum evaluation too the final product of each assessment is an exercise in interpretation which by its very nature cannot be "objective" or "unbiased." However, not all evaluations are of equal merit. As with a review of a movie, play or book where the interpretation may clash with our own, one interpretation may be more perceptive, more sensitive and more illuminating. The reader of the journal is engaged in a dialogue with the evaluator and brings a set of understandings and experiences to the task of reading the latter's judgments. For him there is a double task: interpreting the meanings, intentions, and judgments of the evaluator, and also probing — through the evaluator's comments — the orientations, intentions, meanings, and products of the materials' designer. It is the reader's task to determine whether the critic's evaluation has worth — that is, personal relevance.

While we do not claim that the evaluative essays composed for the purpose of HSST are without shortcomings, in a very real sense each assessment is an independent contribution to curriculum thought, in addition to being a comment upon the original set of materials. Acknowledgement of this role for criticism removes the need to "account for" (in the empirical sense) the differences in the written assessments. That does not mean that each assessment necessarily is a major contribution to the literature, but it does imply that each evaluation should be judged by the reader as a network of meanings separate from the original materials, although stimulated by them. What we have attempted to do is to provide the evaluators (as well as the readers) of selected Canadian social studies materials with an interpretive schema that moves beyond a form of evaluation that is objective, technical, and unbiased in an empirical-analytic sense. We recognize that there are features of a set of materials which are factual. In a more important sense, however, we have assumed that curriculum is not a mechanical

input-output, production type of process. Therefore curriculum materials cannot be evaluated in the way an engineer evaluates the parts of production machinery.

This case study in materials evaluation may suggest a reassessment of the role and purpose of curriculum evaluation. In the past, Canadian educators may have assumed that such analysis is a technical task, in which teachers are to examine given data in the light of pre-formed and carefully identified goals, established, say, by a province or by a local board. Such a task is assumed to generate only "shareable" or "common" meanings, often within a fairly controlled setting. Our experience suggests that an alternative conceptualization of the evaluative task, one that sees the end-in-view as the revelation of insights about the curricular process, may be more productive. In other words, traditional simplistic schemata for evaluation, based on narrow epistemological assumptions, may be replaced by forms that acknowledge the dialogical relationship of critic and object-to-be-assessed. No claim is made that the current schema is a flawless model of such a process, but it may serve a useful curricular purpose if it points in this direction.

Such a new direction may be needed in Canada at the present time. Curricular criticism has not been a highly developed art in this country; indeed, the present article is based on one of the few examples of social studies materials analysis that currently exist in Canada. Given the variety of materials available at the present time and the more relaxed attitude towards materials selection, the introduction of alternative schemata may be helpful in the pre-service and in-service education of social studies teachers.

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