
[When teaching and learning the curriculum clash](#)

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Curriculum development

Teaching-learning strategies

Around the globe, the curriculum routinely stands as the most ferociously defended dimension of an education system. A curriculum embodies and transmits the heritage, core tenets, and ambitions of a nation or region, laying out the educational path for its future citizens and workforce. Across academic disciplines, experts strive to imbue curriculum with the intellectual foundations and most recent knowledge and discoveries of their respective fields. Together, the responsible experts seem often to create curriculum as a mostly additive process, introducing more new content than they eliminate or condense from the old. Furthermore, as curriculum developers tend to operate in subject silos, they can remain somewhat ignorant of the amount of content their fellow developers are amassing. Finally, sitting as the arbiter of the curriculum's ultimate attainment is the examinations bureau.

The common result is a curriculum that often overflows with content, codified in the respective textbooks as a combination of:

- core learning objectives—e.g., adding double-digit numbers, using adjectives, and practicing good hygiene and nutrition;
- thematic knowledge—e.g., people in the community, the environment, and the economy; and
- information, illustration and practice—usually a collection of substance and exercises drawn from one context (typically, metropolitan), representing a generic context or amalgamated from several contexts, and aiming to give concrete meaning to the core objectives and themes.

Faced with this abundance of content and the goal of successful test results at the end of the year or cycle, teachers can adopt a common and seemingly justifiable strategy. Basically, this is to put their heads down and 'sprint' through the textbook to cover all the material by the end of the year. This is what their head teachers and inspectors demand, it is what parents expect, and it is even what the learners anticipate. In characterizing the teaching of the curriculum in this way to colleagues from dozens of countries, I have yet to receive any protests.

When curriculum undermines learning

This approach to teaching the curriculum can undermine learning in at least two ways. First, when a teacher proceeds at pace through the textbooks, students may struggle to keep up or simply give up and become stranded along the way, panting in distress. The frequency of this outcome is evident in the high dropout rates that many education systems face. The fact that dropout rates are often most acute in the lower primary grades fits neatly with this conclusion. It is here that children are accumulating the building blocks of learning. If the teacher moves to the next lesson before most students have mastered the current lesson's content, understanding of all future lessons becomes more and more unlikely.

I shared this analysis recently with a group of inspectors and district education leaders in Uganda. They acknowledged the problem but suggested that there is really no option: the curriculum is official and must be taught completely. Pondering how to reply, I proposed a hypothetical calculation. "Say a teacher completes 100 percent of the curriculum but only 10% of the students get to the 'finish line' with her, can you say that there was only 10 percent total learning? Now, what if the teacher only covers 60 percent of the curriculum, taking time to be sure that more children learn? This doesn't mean stopping six-tenths of the way through the textbook but shedding 40 percent of each chapter or module. If just half succeed with the 60 percent, that means that 30 percent learning has occurred. This is a full three times the amount of total learning of the 10 percent scenario."

Admittedly, this is a simplistic way to characterize the learning challenge. Still, it hopefully raises a legitimate way to consider this complex situation. How much learning does a slavish adherence to the curriculum truly yield? What of the curriculum is vital to learn, contributing to real understanding, retention, and usefulness? Certainly, the core learning objectives and themes are essential, but can one say the same of the associated information, illustrations, and practice? These questions announce the second way that teaching the full curriculum can undermine students' learning it.

Curriculum for the 21st Century

In too many settings, a complete coverage of the curriculum aligns with rote learning of the content. Few from across the global education community will defend this as productive learning. Such an indictment is particularly salient as more and more systems embrace the goal of teaching for the 21st Century. As teachers feel pressure to cover all the content from a curriculum and its textbooks, the quality of learning suffers in at least three fundamental ways:

- One, there is little to no time for effective continuous formative assessment, meaning especially for feedback and remediation;
- Two, content remains generic and often abstract, so students learn in ways that are neither relevant nor practical to the local context, diminishing both their motivation to learn and their comprehension and retention;
- Three, the critical personal skills that nations and communities need their graduates to possess for life and livelihood remain neglected.

The obvious recommendation, then, is to strip the curriculum down to its core learning objectives and themes. This may be obvious, but it is rarely implemented. By providing teachers with a streamlined curriculum, they can enrich their lessons with information, illustrations, and practice from the students' home context. They can take the required time to provide feedback, remediation, and, for quicker learners, enhancement. And they can cultivate students' personal skills, readying them for

the challenges and opportunities of the 21st Century, regardless the social or economic role or geographic setting they will occupy as youth and adults.

When less becomes more

This may sound hard, and I am certain that many will say the skills required to teach in this way surpass the capacity of most teachers. Yet, the feasibility and the benefits of such an approach is shown convincingly in the experience of the [Speed School program](#) that Geneva Global operates on behalf of a group of private donors in Ethiopia and Uganda. This accelerated education program covers the first three years of primary schooling with children aged 8 to 14 in just one school year. This happens by stripping the three years of curriculum to the core learning objectives and themes, as described above. The content to enliven these essential elements comes from the surrounding context. Lessons combine academic, practical, and personal learning objectives which students learn in small groups. Instruction is delivered by young, often non-certified teachers from the local community who receive intensive training and support to use highly learner-centered, activity-based methods, and conduct truly continuous formative assessment. The result? The program has equipped children whom the system had previously abandoned to re-enter (or enter for the first time) primary school and to thrive there, both academically and socially, as leaders.

So, education leaders and your international partners, it's time to do the math. With curriculum, less (content) can absolutely become more (learning).

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MANTE 21/11/2019

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