

# Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment: Amiable Allies or Phony Friends?

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*Specialists in curriculum, instruction, and assessment typically work with colleagues in their own field. It is argued that such isolationism is educationally harmful, especially during today's era of heightened accountability for educators. To diminish excessive specialization by curriculum, instruction, and assessment personnel, amelioration proposals are made regarding both the university and state departments of education.*

“The stultifying effects of hyperspecialization.” This phrase is almost never encountered during human discourse. That’s surely understandable. But I can tell you, with complete certainty, when I heard this five-word phrase for the first and, so far, only time.

The year was 1950, and I was a freshman in a small Oregon college. I had just signed up to be a cub reporter on the school’s student newspaper. As my first assignment, the paper’s editor told me to interview a visiting professor who, the editor claimed, “was famous.” Because mine was a really small college, not many worldly accomplishments were actually required for a visiting professor to be considered “famous.”

I was, as might be expected, definitely anxious about my very first “newspaper” assignment. Accordingly, I carefully crafted a lengthy set of interview questions that I could suavely reel off during the course of the interview. Having made an appointment with the visiting professor, I then met him in his office. After a few preliminary pleasantries, with notebook firmly in hand, I launched into my set of deftly formulated queries.

To be honest, I cannot recall the precise phrasing of my initial question. But I’m pretty sure it was something such as this: “Professor, what do you regard as today’s most significant threat to our society?” I can, even today, repeat the professor’s response verbatim. He paused for a moment, apparently pondering the profound implications of my cleverly constructed question. Then, looking at me directly and, with more than a little gravity, he replied, “The stultifying effects of hyperspecialization.” There it was, a succinct response to the first question out of my carefully crafted box. As

would be true for any earnest cub reporter, I immediately wrote down his five-word reply, verbatim, in my notebook. My problem, however, was that I had no idea what two of the five words in his response actually meant. That's forty percent! Based on letter count, because the three words that I knew were all short ones, I was mystified by more than seventy percent of my interviewee's initial response.

It is uncommonly difficult, of course, for an interviewer to generate a sensible follow-up question to an interviewee if the interviewer fails to comprehend the interviewee's reply. Astutely, I moved on to Question Number 2. I may have been green, but I was not completely dimwitted.

Well, at the end of the interview, I dashed back to the paper's office where I described to the editor, with suitable self-effacement, how my very first interview had turned out. "Rather well," said I, while avoiding any mention of the professor's cryptic response to Question Number 1. Then, as soon as I would do so covertly, I consulted the office dictionary to find out what on earth my famed visitor had been talking about.

I learned that when people are *stultified*, they lose their enthusiasm and initiative. I also discovered that, although *specialization* refers to a distinctive line of work or study, when preceded by the prefix *hyper*, the resulting polysyllabic word means "the excessive particularizing of one's work or study."

Based on my clandestine dictionary work, I figured out that the visiting professor thought our most significant societal threat was that we were currently heading toward too much specialization. After thinking about what he had meant for the next few hours, I found myself sort of agreeing with him. That is, in my write-up of the interview, I registered as much agreement as is appropriate for a novice, yet nonpartisan journalist. I also recall *not* using the words *stultifying* or *hyperspecialization* in my written account of the interview, which to my chagrin, appeared only on page seven of the school newspaper—rather than on page one.

### A PROFESSION OF SPECIALISTS

And why, you might ask, have I taken you on this lengthy reminiscence ride? After all, I am certainly not the only college freshman ever to have been baffled by big words. Such a question is reasonable. I hope my answer will also be.

In the following problem-solution analysis, I intend to focus on the three major playing fields that most of us work in as we take part in the game called education. Putting it less metaphorically, I want to deal with the three specializations that, in the main, occupy the attention of most educational professionals. I will, therefore, be considering curriculum, instruction, and

assessment. It will be my contention that the educators who work in one of those three specializations are not only unknowledgeable about what goes on in the other two specializations, but they are also blissfully complacent about their ignorance. In short, I shall argue that, with respect to the education profession's blessed trinity of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, we have become far too specialized.

Having attempted to make that case, I then hope to demonstrate that, because of our nation's current preoccupation with educational accountability, the substantial isolation resulting from excessive educational specialization is having a stultifying impact on our nation's students. Finally, I proffer a two-part solution strategy that might possibly engender a meaningful rapprochement among the educators who work in one of these three key specializations.

## DEFINITIONS AND BONA FIDES

### DEFINITION TIME

Because in our field there are often different definitions lurking behind identical labels, I'd like to make sure you know what I'm referring to when I employ the terms curriculum, instruction, or assessment.

*Curriculum*, to me, consists of our educational aims, that is, the knowledge, skills, or affective changes in students we hope our educational efforts will produce. Curriculum, in short, consists of the ends that our educational system is intended to achieve for the students that we teach. When I entered the education profession eons ago, we described our curricular aims as "goals" or "objectives." These days, such aims are usually referred to as "content standards."

*Instruction*, on the other hand, consists of the means that educators employ in an attempt to achieve their curricular ends. Put more simply, instruction describes the things teachers do to help students learn what those students are supposed to learn. Instruction and teaching, to me, are synonymous.

Finally, *assessment* describes the measurement activities in which educators attempt to derive valid inferences about students' unseen knowledge, skills, or affect. For a variety of reasons, both curricular and instructional, educators need to assess students to determine what sorts of knowledge, skills, and affect those students actually possess. Such measurement endeavors are important, for example, when deciding (1) what curricular aims ought to be pursued, (2) how best to fashion instruction that will mesh with a student's current capabilities, and (3) whether an instructional sequence has been successful. When I first began teaching, we referred to

assessment as “testing.” But these days it seems that educators interchangeably use the labels *assessment*, *testing*, or *measurement*.

#### ALL TOO SEASONED

Now, just to get my qualifications on the table, I have personally worked in all three of these specializations, namely, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. I’ve written books about all three specializations. I’ve also taught graduate university courses in all three specializations. And I’ve directed many dissertations and supervised numerous research projects and development projects centered on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Many of those projects took place in the real world—as opposed to the university. In short, I am no stranger to any of these specialties. To be completely accurate, although during my own graduate studies I emphasized curriculum and instruction, I’ve picked up what I know about assessment on my own—well after graduate school was a faint memory.

Throughout my career in education, now having hit the half-century mark, I have encountered heaps of first-rate professionals in each of these three specializations. And, although during the most recent past I have been primarily plucking and squashing grapes in the measurement vineyard, I still count as close friends a number of folks who specialize in either curriculum or instruction.

At different times in my career, then, I have spent substantial time in each of the three fields I’ll be dealing with later in this analysis. I hope, therefore, that I will not be regarded as a measurement guy who’s tossing stones at the curriculum and instruction crowd. Such, surely, is not my purpose.

#### ACCOUNTABILITY IN CONTROL

Okay, so much for foreplay. Let’s get into the substance of this treatise. The genesis of my concern stems directly from the relentless escalation of accountability pressures under which our nation’s educators have been operating for at least the past two decades. At the center of this accountability pressure is a pervasive demand for credible evidence that the nation’s tax-supported educators have been doing a good job of operating our public schools. And this credible evidence almost always seems to take the form of students’ test scores. In other words, assessment evidence is now being employed by both educators and noneducators to determine whether curriculum and instruction are effective. As never before, the testing tail has definitely been wagging the curriculum/instruction canine.

Educators, then, and even more so since the arrival of the No Child Left Behind Act, are being appraised on the basis of their ability to get students to sparkle on high-stakes achievement tests. If students' test scores fail to rise, then it is thought that teachers have definitely stumbled. If test scores do rise, however, teachers are not only applauded but, as was seen in California and a few other states, "successful" teachers receive some serious financial rewards. Test scores, it seems, trump everything that's available to be trumped.

Yet, even though assessment professionals appear to be holding most of the cards these days, we still see many instances in which the activities carried out by curriculum or instruction professionals can have a major impact—either positive or negative—on the work of assessment professionals. Indeed, specialists in any one of the three fields can make a difference in the activities carried out in either of the other two specializations. Let me illustrate with several real-world examples of these sorts of interrelationships:

- If a state-approved curriculum contains too many content standards, then the state's teachers will be unable to promote students' mastery of those content standards in the instructional time that's available.
- Similarly, if a state-approved curriculum contains too many content standards, then assessment personnel will be unable to accurately test students' mastery of those standards in the assessment time that's available.
- If an important assessment device focuses on only a modest number of important curricular targets, however, then teacher's instruction can be crafted to address those curriculum/assessment targets satisfactorily.
- If an important test has been deliberately developed, from its inception, so that what's measured can be effectively taught, teachers' instructional efforts will typically be more successful than if the test had been developed without attention to instruction.
- Instructionally insensitive high-stakes assessments will typically tend to make teachers reduce their curricular aspirations or degrade their classroom instructional practices or both.

All right, any sensible person who surveys American education these days will conclude that the fields of curriculum, instruction, and assessment are vitally interrelated. Why is it, then, that most professionals who function in those three fields seem oblivious of this powerful, implication-laden truth? But it's even worse than that. The bulk of today's curriculum specialists appear to be self-righteously content in their own content realms. Members of each of the three specializations not only display a form of

other-field agnosticism, but they also seem to revel in that self-sired ignorance.

Earlier in my career, for a decade or so, I headed a group that developed high-stakes achievement tests for about a dozen states. In that role, I often found myself interacting with a given state department's curriculum, instruction, and assessment personnel. Typically, I encountered individuals who not only were totally happy to be working in their own special enclave but also were also quick to disparage the individuals in "those other fields." To be truthful, curriculum folks sometimes got along fairly well with instruction folks. But assessment personnel were, almost always, either feared or disdained by their curriculum or instruction colleagues. Assessment folks often regarded their curriculum or instruction counterparts as "soft heads." Curriculum or instruction personnel sometimes opined that their state department's assessment specialists must have been "cognitively damaged due to the computation of too many reliability coefficients." Interdisciplinary respect was rarely seen in those state departments of education.

Time and again, I would see a state's curriculum specialists, all by themselves, decide what their state's content standards ought to be. Time and again, I would see a state's assessment specialists, often abetted by their test-contractor lackeys, decide on the specifics of a high-stakes test's items all by themselves. Time and again, after the state's curriculum had been decided and after the state's test has been built, I would see the state department's instruction specialists, all by themselves, try to come up with staff development activities intended to help the state's teachers do a better instructional job of promoting high test scores. Other than the occasional tokenistic inclusion of a few folks from one of the other two specialties, the state department of education specialists that I encountered functioned in almost total isolation.

This isolationism, of course, is all too understandable. Most of today's masters-level and doctoral-level professionals were trained by professors who were, themselves, specialists. And those specialist-professors invariably operate in an academic reward structure that fosters specialization. Curriculum professors, especially those who want to advance academically, send their manuscripts to curriculum journals. Instruction professors fire off their manuscripts to instruction journals. And assessment professors send their manuscripts to assessment journals, or, if a given manuscript contains enough numbers and a few Greek letters, they send it to one of the higher brow psychometric journals.

Similar specialization-focused activities are also seen when professors become active in their state and national professional associations. The widespread specialization currently seen in education's three chief content fields is far from surprising. It makes sense. But, today, it is flat-out folly. But, today, this sort of unrelenting specialization is harming our nation's students.

## HYPERSPECIALIZATION'S HYPERHARM

### A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

What I see going on all over the country is that, if the wrong kinds of high-stakes tests are adopted, classroom instruction suffers. My own children are no longer in school, but my grandchildren are. All four of my children experienced their entire education in public schools. Let me tell you honestly that, were my children in public schools today, I would be genuinely frightened about the caliber of schooling they'd most likely be receiving. I wouldn't be worried about too much accountability. No, I'd realize that our nation's current need for accountability evidence isn't going to be satisfied for quite some time. Moreover, I really don't think that educational accountability is an inherently evil thing. What I'd be chiefly worried about is the absence of any sort of constructive colloquy among the chief participants in the education profession, namely, the curriculum specialists, the instruction specialists, and the assessment specialists. I'd be concerned that the preoccupation of these professionals with their own specialties would, in an easily discernable fashion, erode the quality of education that my children would be likely to receive.

The reason almost all of us decided to go into the field of education is that we wanted children to be better educated. I know that there might have been other motives for some, but I believe the bulk of us who work in this field are dominantly concerned about what's best for children.

### BIG-TIME BAD STUFF

Well, just look around at many of today's classrooms and you'll see blatant instances of curricular reductionism, excessive test preparation, and modeled dishonesty. First, *curricular reductionism* takes place when teachers give little or no classroom attention to topics they believe aren't going to be assessed on a high-stakes test. Children are being curricularly short-changed today as a consequence of their teachers' attention only to content the teachers think will be tested. Second, *excessive test preparation* arises when teachers, unable to determine what's going to be assessed on a high-stakes test, conclude that the only way they can realistically raise their students' scores is to drill those students relentlessly on testlike exercises. The cost of such excessive test preparation is that it jettisons the joy children ought to be experiencing in school. Finally, *modeled dishonesty* occurs when accountability-pressured teachers use unethical ploys to raise their students' test scores. For example, such teachers supply students, in advance of a high-stakes test, with copies of the actual items from that test—along with the correct answer key for those items. Later, during the administration of the

high-stakes test itself, students realize that their teacher has been cheating just to raise test scores. What a terrible message to send students.

All these bad things happen because the wrong sorts of accountability tests have been employed. Those improper tests have often been installed, in my experience, chiefly because curriculum, instruction, and assessment specialists have functioned independently, not collaboratively. Grandiose, albeit unteachable and untestable curricular aims have been fashioned by curriculum specialists—in isolation. Instructionally insensitive high-stakes tests have been installed—in isolation—by assessment specialists. Instructional specialists—in isolation—attempt to help teachers address too many curricular targets and design classroom instructional sequences to improve students' scores on instructionally insensitive tests.

I wouldn't really care all that much about this professional isolationism—if it didn't harm kids. But especially now, given the potential impact of the No Child Left Behind Act's significant accountability provisions, the potential for kid-harm is enormous. Professionals ought to be left to their own pursuits—as long as those pursuits are not damaging to the very individuals that those professionals are supposed to serve. And that's the sort of damage to children we see today. It occurs, in large part, because of our field's acceptance of excessive specialization. Such acceptance needs to be revoked.

#### WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

To remedy this situation, truly Herculean efforts are going to be required. That's because, to counter a specialist's proclivities to be special, a modification treatment must be provided that is every bit as robust as the one that produced the specialist's proclivities in the first place. Adolescent gangs arise for a reason, and they don't disappear merely because adults want them to go away. The same thing is true for professional specializations. However, given the educational mischief arising from today's excessive specialization in education, we clearly need to try something to remedy the situation. And, just as clearly, desperate measures are surely warranted. I wish to propose, therefore, both a short-term and a long-term solution strategy that might make at least a dent in education's isolationist armor-plate.

#### SHORT TERM: A STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION FOCUS

Because we need to address the shortcomings of excessive specialization immediately, I believe that something can be done at the state level, the level at which many of the most influential decisions about children's education are being made these days. More specifically, I think that each of



our chief state school officers can play a leadership role in significantly reducing the needless specialization so common throughout our nation's state departments of education.

There are, of course, exceptions to the too-specialized scenario that I have been ascribing to most state departments of education. If I had to guess, however, I'd bet there aren't more than a dozen states in which meaningful collaboration takes place among the state's curriculum, instruction, and assessment personnel. In such states, of course, little needs to be done.

However, in a typical state department, that is, one whose curriculum, instruction, and assessment workers function in sublime segregation, then that state's chief ought to exert some powerful influence to get things changed. For example, a department policy could be promulgated calling for meaningful interaction among personnel from the department's curricular, instructional, and assessment camps. The chief could give subordinate leaders (e.g., the department's deputy commissioners or assistant superintendents) not only the responsibility to nurture such collaborative efforts on an ongoing basis but also a requirement to stringently monitor the degree to which such collaboration-engendering activities appear to be taking place. We need genuine collaboration among specialists, not pretend collaboration.

To support such interspecialist collaboration, special departmental seminars and colloquies could be set up specifically for key departmental representatives of the three groups. During any activities such as these, the rationale for interdepartmental collaboration could be cited along with a reiteration of the chief's commitment to the collaborative solving of curriculum-related, instruction-related, and assessment-related problems.

Another potentially useful procedure would be to encourage individuals from one specialization to actually learn something about the content of the other two specializations. For instance, each specialty group could be asked, collectively, to identify one book or one journal article that would be particularly informative to their coworkers in the other two specializations. Such readings could then be assigned. After a reasonable amount of time had been given to allow busy people to do their assigned reading, a group discussion of each of the chosen books/articles could take place. Clearly, the thrust of these sorts of activities would be to bolster the kind of genuine collaboration that, in the end, will turn out to benefit children.

Collaborative interspecialization activities, however, ought to deal with serious issues, not be carried out merely for the dubious dividends derivative from interdisciplinary collaboration per se. Thus, topics for potential collaboration should be selected by the chiefs and their subordinates with care. These days, of course, a state's approach to the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act would surely yield a set of

issues ideally addressable by the collaborative efforts of a state department's curriculum, instruction, and assessment personnel.

None of this would happen, of course, unless a state's chief state school officer believes in the value of having state department personnel from curriculum, instruction, and assessment work together. The chief's preferences in this situation will, and surely should, prevail. The chief's preferences, therefore, are pivotal.

If a chief state school officer really wants an increased level of departmental collaboration, one straightforward approach would be to appoint a small committee of staff members representing all three of the specializations under consideration here. Then the chief can simply charge the committee to come up with one or more sensible plans whereby the department's curriculum, instruction, and assessment personnel are obliged to work together more productively. The most promising of these committee-identified plans can then be implemented.

#### LONG TERM: A SCHOOL OF EDUCATION FOCUS

Over the long haul, however, we need to start much earlier with curriculum, instruction, and assessment personnel to foster the ability, and the inclination, for them to work together. I think we must start in graduate school. At the masters' and, especially, at the doctoral level, I believe we need to provide graduate programs that are deliberately designed to create cadres of educators who can work reasonably well in any of these three arenas, that is, in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Most graduate students enrolled in such collaboratively focused programs, of course, will end up emphasizing one of those three fields more than the other two. But I'm hoping that, in the future, we'll be able to produce a supply of master's and doctoral recipients who are truly comfortable when crossing curricular, instructional, and assessment boundaries.

How would such programs work? Well, because I've spent the majority of my life as a university faculty member, I know what a thoroughly intractable crowd any group of professors can be. However, I also know that professors are smart enough to put together an effective interspecialization program of the type I'm talking about if they want to do so. They'll also be more inclined to install such a program if a dean of education creates a set of reward contingencies so that it is in the personal best interest of a professor to participate in such an interdisciplinary program. Just as a chief state school officer's leadership is pivotal in state department settings, in higher education settings an education dean's support of the kind of collaborative effort I have been proposing is almost a *sine qua non* for any such program's success. These sorts of collaborative training programs might possibly occur even without deanly support, but they would be rare.

I have in mind a collaboratively staffed program in which there was a clear intention on the part of participating faculty to produce graduate students who could function effectively, and collaboratively, in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. To do so, a set of core courses in all three specializations would need to be identified, collaboratively—one would hope, by relevant faculty members. And collaboratively supervised theses and dissertations ought to deal with at least two of the three areas of specialization (and, preferably, with all three).

Moreover, because the promotion of students' dispositions to collaborate is every bit as important as students' actual mastery of the content in these three areas, there also should be ongoing collaboration-fostering activities, for instance, collaboratively staffed seminars, colloquies, and lectures provided for those students who aim to become more potent players in a tripartite educational-improvement game. Faculty should, insofar as their sometimes thin skins will allow, both endorse and, if possible, model the kind of interspecialization affective dispositions that the program ought to be promoting.

It should be apparent that I am not advocating the sort of sometimes mindless interdisciplinary proposals I have seen in the past, often presented by professors in search of fashionability. Some forms of interdisciplinary graduate education make sense. Many don't. What I am advocating here is a particular type of interdisciplinary graduate program, the need for which has been generated by today's increasing accountability pressures on educators. That interdisciplinary program must be unabashedly committed to the blending of students' studies in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

One delightful dividend of such a three-pronged preparation program is that its graduates will have no trouble finding employment. Do you realize what a dearth now exists of educational professionals who can swim comfortably in our often choppy curricular, instructional, and assessment seas?

As indicated, however, an influential dean's endorsement is pivotal. I believe astute deans of education will recognize that their graduate programs could be producing students who, because of the acquisition of interspecialization expertise in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, can become big-time players in today's education arena. Such collaboratively prepared professionals can make a genuine difference in schooling. Moreover, I believe that if those deans are truly shrewd, they will see merit in my suggestions regarding how such a collaboration-focused graduate program might function. And be assured that if a key dean moves in the interdisciplinary direction I have suggested, it will follow—as night follows day or tenure follows refereed publication—that some faculty will surely wish to move in a similar direction.

As was true with state departments of education, one straightforward method of getting underway at the university level in the creation of graduate programs for multifield professionals is to rely on the time-honored appoint-a-committee ploy. A dean can ask a small group of seasoned professors (ideally those who have at least a nodding acquaintance with curriculum, instruction, and/or assessment) to come up with one or more proposals for a new interdisciplinary degree program aimed at producing multifield, make-a-difference professional educators. Having reviewed the committee's recommendations, the dean can then relay any meritorious proposals to the full faculty. As noted earlier, a dean's support of any such programs is imperative.

#### REASON FOR OPTIMISM?

Will my two-part strategy work? Well, given my lengthy and dismal track-record of having influenced either chief state school officers or deans of education, I am far from optimistic. However, given the seriousness of the potential harm that our field's current isolationism is apt to cause, even long-shots must be pursued. You see, in the field of education, we must lash out with vigor against the stultifying effects of hyperspecialization.

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