

Some Thoughts On Emergent Curriculum

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Citation: Yu-le, Z. (2004). *Some thoughts on emergent curriculum*. Paper presented at the Forum for Integrated Education and Educational Reform sponsored by the Council for Global Integrative Education, Santa Cruz, CA, October 28-30. Retrieved [date], from <http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/CGIE/yule.pdf>.

The emergent curriculum which focuses on the dialogue and cooperation on the basis of emergentism represents the basic characteristics of the curriculum development and major direction in the future. It is the product of the critical reflection of the predefined curriculum, the objective demand of constructivist conceptions of knowledge and the basic content of curriculum returning back to the life-world. Emergent curriculum has the characteristics of “experiential” “creative” and “life”. The emergent curriculum can be implemented through the following conditions: to enhance the curriculum consciousness of teachers and students; to establish “I-you” orientated conceptions about the teachers and students and to form the subject-orientated conceptions about the curriculum evaluation.

While the curriculum theories of scientism represented by Tyler Rational greatly accelerated the scientific process of the curriculum development, it brought about the education crisis and human crisis to a certain extent. Hence during its birth to assuming the leading role, it was criticized for the predefined nature by many researchers. Emergent curriculum, as the outcome of the criticism and the transcendence of the predefined curriculum, came into being. This paper aims to analyze the basic conceptions of emergent curriculum and makes a comparison between the emergent curriculum and the predefined curriculum on the basis of emergentism.

What is emergent curriculum?

Emergent curriculum is based on the emergentism, which refers to the dynamic process of emergence and development of the entity or phenomena. As opposed to emergence, “being predefined” refers to being complete and finished. At present thoughts of emergentism are still weak in the philosophical construction, but it has caught the attention of the researchers all over the world. Emergentism, the thoughts about the emergent evolving process and rules of the entity or phenomena, claims that everything is emergent in nature. This is a dynamic wholeness viewpoint.

Emergent curriculum is a constructive curriculum in which the teachers, students, teaching materials and environment interact in the context of dialogue. It departs away from the idea “everything is predefined” and maintains that “everything is developing”. Curriculum activity, instead of pure cognitive activity, is the dynamic process in which teachers and students display and create the significance of the life. Emergent curriculum, as a specific curriculum mode, is widely adopted in the pre-school education in the United States and American scholars, Elizabeth Jones and John Nimmo, published their work *Emergent Curriculum*. We proposed that emergent curriculum should not only be regarded as a specific operating model, but also an idea of curriculum development, i.e., we should design the curriculum according to the conceptions of emergentism, trying to bring the curriculum returning back to the life world. The Open

Curriculum in Britain the curriculum theory of process model advocated by L. Stenhouse in Britain, and the Project Curriculum implemented in the town of Reggio Emilia in Italy display the inner essence of emergent curriculum to a certain extent. In addition American scholar W. Doll, Jr. thought that curriculum is emergent in the dialogue between the teacher and students and is no longer the carrier of certain knowledge system. Negotiation curriculum advocated by Australian scholar G. Boomer et. al. is also a kind of emergent curriculum in essence. The development and implementation of the curriculum is completed through the negation and cooperation by the teachers and students, meanwhile the value, meaning and spirit embedded in the curriculum come into being through the mutual understanding of teachers and students. The new curriculum reform in China reflects the essence of the emergent curriculum too. The inquiry-based curriculum is a kind of emergent curriculum.

The term “curriculum” in emergent curriculum assumes a totally new meaning. It is no longer known conclusive knowledge, but is a dynamic process in which teachers and students develop and explore knowledge through the dialogue. Though process is also mentioned in the predefined curriculum, the process is predefined; the quality of creation is lost. In emergent curriculum, teaching materials is not a static knowledge system, not the starting point nor the destination of the curriculum, but something to light “the torch of student’s thinking”. The emergent curriculum focuses on the “emergence”, in essence, focuses on the human. “Human development” is the core of emergent curriculum, with the basic purpose of promoting the full realization of individual’s whole life, hence it corresponds to the development trend of the times, the need of the student all-round development and represents basic characteristics and direction of curriculum development in the future.

What is the background of the appearance of emergent curriculum?

Emergent curriculum is the product of the critical reflection of the predefined curriculum

The predefined curriculum, as opposed to the emergent curriculum, is the product of essentialist thinking mode of the science-world outlook and supported by the positivism philosophy and behaviorist psychology. “It holds that the developmental process, channels, methods and outcomes are predefined and the nature of the process is prior to the process”

The predefined curriculum represented by Tyler Rational, is designed by the curriculum experts, and the teachers and students just need to follow the fixed course and arrived at the predefined destination. This curriculum, which has a fixed and specified goal, objective content, mechanic implementation procedures and closed evaluation, manifests a typical “input-output” linear process and the indefinite and unexpected factors are ignored. Professor John Nimmo has referred it as “canned curriculum”□ These “cans” are manufactured by the curriculum experts and the teacher has the duty to take out the curriculum content from the “cans” and the students are forced to swallow them, no matter whether they are delicious or not. Under the control of instrumental rationality, curriculum is a tool control by the society and students are modeled like tools whose subjectivity and individuality are mercilessly overlooked and deprived.

Since “emergentism” is a thinking model objecting to the dualism, the emergent curriculum is not simply a negation of the predefined curriculum, while it attempts to provide some critical reflections on the problems existing in the predefined curriculum, break the fixed

linear proceduralism, enrich and deepen our curriculum research and improve our curriculum practice to benefit the students.

Emergent curriculum is the objective demand of constructivist conceptions of knowledge

Conceptions about the curriculum and conceptions about the knowledge are interrelated. The conceptions about the curriculum changes with the conceptions about the knowledge and different conceptions about the knowledge have different conceptions about the curriculum. Objectivist conceptions about the knowledge, as opposed to constructivist conceptions about the knowledge, assume that knowledge is the reflections of objective entity on the human mind and is objective, absolute and applicable to all. Hence the predefined curriculum is regarded as the system used to distribute knowledge to the students and the teachers, the standard tests and specific learning objects are overstressed.

In the view of constructivism, knowledge is not “purely-objective” and “value-free”, but a kind of possible explanation of the outside world. Knowledge is neither objective nor subjective, “not a final answer to a certain question, but is an explanation and a kind of supposition, and this supposition will be replaced by the new ones with the advancement of human”ⁱ. Knowledge is not a mirror-reflection of objective entity upon the human, but is constructed through the interaction by the human and the environment in the rich and complicated context. The student is not a “block” or “polished mirror”, but the active participant in the meaning construction. So constructivist conceptions about the knowledge provide the premise and foundation for the emergent curriculum. The knowledge is no longer the fixed and absolute doctrine which has to be accepted by the students, but the students can construct his own knowledge based on his own experience and curriculum resources and changes this knowledge into his own educational experience. This is why we can see the sparkles of the ideas of Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky from the emergent curriculum .

Emergent curriculum is the basic content of curriculum returning back to the life-world

At present, the idea “school curriculum should return back to the life-world , which aims to dissolve a series of questions brought by the “science-world” and seek for the lost human spiritual garden, is an important consensus in the world curriculum development. “Curriculum returning back to the life-world” is not only the need of promoting the student development, but also the value orientation of the curriculum reform in China. Only by this, school curriculum can relive and carry the meaning of life.

Different world outlooks bear different thinking modes and the change of the thinking mode brings the fundamental changes in the nature, forms and representations of the curriculum. The predefined curriculum which is based on the science- world outlook that embodies a kind of essentialist thinking mode, processes the curriculum statically and establishes a classic curriculum paradigm. The emergent mode of thinking is a criticism and transcendence over the essentialism thinking mode, is embedded in the life-world outlook. The emergent mode of thinking bears the following characteristics: “focus on the process but essence, focus on the relation but substance, focus on the creativity but predisposition, focus on the individuality and difference but uniformity, and focus on the concrete but the abstract”ⁱⁱ. In effect, a certain kind of thinking mode has corresponding curriculum system. Essentialism

thinking mode matched the predefined curriculum, whereas the emergent mode of thinking is manifested in the emergent curriculum.

Hence, with the background of transformation of the human thinking mode, the curriculum reform in China should divorce with the thinking mode which is separated from the life-world and put enough emphasis on the emergent mode of thinking. Whether the participants of the curriculum have the emergent mode of thinking becomes the key of the development of emergent curriculum .

What are the characteristics of emergent curriculum?

Experiential

Experience, which is personal and tacit, is rooted in the spiritual world of the students. It is through experience that the meaning of the curriculum comes into being. If students are forced to memorize the conclusive knowledge without their exploration and experience, learning does not take place; the rich curriculum meaning faces the risk of being lost.

Emergent curriculum manifests the deep level understanding of the curriculum. The researchers have not come to the consensus of connotation of the curriculum due to its complexity. But they began to shift from focusing on the connotation to focusing on the experience and emergence, which shows that the curriculum value shift from “teaching” to “learning” and predicts that a deep-level reform will come in the curriculum theories and practice. Though the traditional ideas such as “curriculum is discipline” is still influential, current curriculum researcher pay more attention to the “emergence” and stimulation function of the curriculum. Hence the understanding of the curriculum has undergone a fundamental change—the curriculum is no longer understood as institutional curriculum, but an “experience curriculum”. Curriculum should be related to the students’ rich spiritual world and life experience and by so doing the curriculum meaning can be “created”. The students are not passive recipients, but active subjects of curriculum development, each student constructs his own curriculum based on the experience and interests and the individual’s liberation and freedom become the ultimate goal of the curriculum development.

Creative

The process of “emergence” is the process of creation. Emergent curriculum views the student as the unfulfilled life and open existence. “It is this kind of view that provides the opportunity for stimulating the student’s creativity”ⁱⁱⁱ. Emergent curriculum is not only to promote the students to acquire more knowledge, but also to bring the student’s creativity into full play and liberate the student’s creativity. On the contrary, the predefined curriculum is against the creativity because with the use of simple industrial manufacturing model, all the aspects of curriculum are predefined; curriculum activities became technical processes. Emergent curriculum believes in the great potential of every student and tries hard to explore their creativity. So the implementation is a process in which the creativity is awoken and stimulated. Liberation and exploration into the creativity depend on the internal power of students, instead of the outside controlling power. According to the German philosopher J. Habermas’ theory on interest, the predefined curriculum embodies the technical interest with the

control and efficiency as its value orientation, while emergent curriculum embodies the emancipatory interest, which aims to liberate the individual by stimulating the student's creativity. Hence emergent curriculum is the source of creativity development.

The multi-perspective curriculum advocated by S. Roegholts in Holland embodies the creativity of emergent curriculum. This curriculum is not viewed as a certain knowledge system, but provides a variety of ideas and explanation, promote the students to analyze the problem from different views, form a new explanation and develop their subjectivity and creativity in the participation and dialogue.

Life

Life is the soul of the emergent curriculum. Education faces the living complete life, with the aim of "cultivating the human", hence curriculum, as the core element of education, should value and treasure life. The curriculum not only provides the students with rich knowledge but also prepares for the remote future and more importantly, enhances the significance and value of life. The implementation of emergent curriculum is actually a process in which the students grow and display their life power and a process in which they acquire the knowledge and "grow" into human being.

First of all, emergent curriculum focuses on the uniqueness of life. Emergent curriculum focuses on the individuality and difference between students, and opposes the generality and uniformity. Individuality and difference is the basic feature of the "emergence process". As each life is unique, education should meet the differences of students. In effect, to promote the development of students' individuality is the internal need of quality education and new curriculum reform. The predefined curriculum ignores the uniqueness of student life because when the curriculum is predefined, a uniform standard for evaluating the student performance is predefined. On the contrary, emergent curriculum focuses on the student individuality and abandons the pursuit of standard products and tries to promote the individuality development to the fullest.

Secondly, emergent curriculum focuses on the wholeness of the student life. Emergent curriculum insists on the holistic thinking or relative thinking, views the student as a whole and refuses the artificial isolation of student life because students participate in the curriculum as a whole life instead of the incomplete parts and makes the students have an all-round development . Curriculum implementation is not only a cognition process in which students acquire the knowledge, but also a process in which students fully display their creativity and enrich their life; hence students can fully realize their value and develop their subjectivity.

How can we implement the emergent curriculum?

How can we implement the emergent curriculum into our education practice? Below goes the key condition to reform the predefined curriculum.

To enhance the curriculum consciousness of teachers and students

The implementation of curriculum is actually a dynamic, nonlinear and self-organized process in which the curriculum is being created and meaning is being constructed, so the

curriculum goal, content and teaching methods should vary with the specific context and different students. This process is beyond the limitation of the fixed rigid procedure and allows the “mistakes” and “unexpected events” happen and makes these indefinite factors as important curriculum resources. Curriculum implementation is no longer a definite and closed procedure, but a complex nonlinear activity full of variables. But the implementation of emergent curriculum puts a much higher demands to teachers and students, that is, to enhance their curriculum consciousness urgently.

The traditional role of the teacher cannot meet the need of the emergent curriculum. The teacher is not a passive knowledge transmitter, but an active curriculum researcher and creator. He not only needs to consider what to teach and how to teach, but also why to teach. The teacher begins the curriculum research and innovation rooted in the authentic educational settings, so the teacher turns into a researcher. While the teacher-proof strategy is adopted in the predefined curriculum, the teacher is excluded in the curriculum development and has no right to sound their voice, no right to alter the curriculum and no need to consider the issues related to the curriculum; what the teacher needs to do is just faithfully and effectively implementing the curriculum.

The student is also the subject, creator and constructor in the emergent curriculum, no longer the passive recipients of knowledge. Curriculum implementation is a dynamic process in which the students actively interact with the outside environment and their personal knowledge, life experience and direct experience become important curriculum resources and the student moves from the border of the curriculum to the center.

To establish “I-you” orientated conceptions about the teachers and students

Because dualism thinking mode is applied in the essentialism, so the relationship between teacher and student in the predefined curriculum represents the “I-it” model. This model exterminates the intersubjectivity in the life world, and causes the teacher-student relationship transform into a pure subject-object relation. The life is regarded as mere cognition agent and hence the wholeness is discrete. But the intersubjective dialogue is formed between the student and the teacher in the emergent curriculum. “I-you ” relation does not mean “double subjects”, because the teacher is the subject of teaching and the student is the subject of learning in the “double subjects” model and the teacher and the student remain objects to each other, in effect, the “double subjects” is another implicit subject-object model.

Intersubjectivity in “I-you” model is the negation of “I-it” model; it represents the relative thinking in the outlook of the life world and stresses the interactions and dialogue between the subjects. This intersubjectivity removes the cognition and control relation between students and teachers and replaces it by aesthetic relation and spiritual relation. So the teacher and the student changes from the abstract subjects into the subjects in the life-world and they emancipate themselves from the self-centered viewpoints. Under this circumstance, neither the teacher nor the student is the center, and neither of them can treat the counterpart as the object. Students is emancipated from the cage in which only the teacher has the discourse right and assumes the subjective position, hence provides the basic condition for the implementation of emergent curriculum.

Teachers have to listen attentively in emergent curriculum. Listening, as a communicative behavior, is the premise of dialogue, and which requires the teacher to listen to the student about their feeling, desire and ideas. It is through listening that the teacher perceives the student as whole and animate individuals and an “outlook of life-based teaching” can be established. Listening does not mean pure auditory response, but requires the teacher commits himself to it wholeheartedly and dives into the sea of student soul, to comprehend its beating and flopping. The teacher and the student think actively and express themselves freely through listening to each other and communicating at an equal status, finally, produce “brand-new fruits”.

Form the subject-orientated conceptions about the curriculum evaluation

The goal-orientated evaluation is employed in predefined curriculum. Though this kind of evaluation pushes the scientific process of curriculum evaluation, the subjectivity of the evaluatees is ignored owing to the dualism thinking mode, which treats the evaluators as the subjects and the evaluatees as the objects. The simple qualitative methods are used to evaluate the complex evaluatees and focus on the functions of making judgments, appraisal and selecting and ignore the functions of promoting and development. While these ignored functions are restored in emergent curriculum.

First of all, emergent curriculum evaluation is communicative. The community made up of the evaluators and the evaluatees make the evaluation through dialogue and negotiation in the curriculum implementation. The evaluation standards are set by the two participants according to the educational settings and the student differences. The evaluatees are the participants and the subjects too. The curriculum, instruction and evaluation are integrated into an organic whole, which corresponds to the development trends of current world curriculum evaluation. E. G. Guba and Y. S. Lincoln proposed that since 1970s the curriculum evaluation has entered into an era of “co-construction” in which the evaluation is to form “psycho-construction” through negotiation.

Secondly, the emergent curriculum evaluation is dynamic. The dynamic nature of emergent curriculum determines that the evaluation standards are not fixed. Before the evaluation, a flexible general standard is employed and the standards should make certain adaptations as the evaluation is being implemented. Only by this, the functions of curriculum evaluation can be brought into full play. The dynamic nature of the evaluation manifests the complexity of the curriculum evaluation, and indicates the evaluation of emergent curriculum is a long-term process in which the evaluators and the evaluatees need to participate together to get the authentic, rich and whole information of the evaluatees.

Last, the evaluation of emergent curriculum is integral. The goal-orientated evaluation of the predefined curriculum insists on “reductionism” and atom-like separation of the whole-person, while the aim of emergent curriculum is “the cultivation of a whole person”, and students take part in the curriculum activities as integral life, it is inadequate to evaluate the students according to the standardized reductionism conceptions. Evaluation is integral, including the evaluation of the development students made in cognitive aspects such as knowledge and abilities and development in innovative spirits and hands-on abilities.

ⁱ Chen Qi & Zhang Jianwei. (1998, 3). Constructivism and Teaching Reform. Educational Research and Experiment.

ⁱⁱ Li Wenge. (2002). Returning to the Realistic Life-world. Beijing: Chinese Social Science Press, P. 152~156.
Experiment.

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