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Agriculture and works of art

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Dear guests. My presentation has three parts. The first one is about curriculum theory, the second one about root vegetables and the third about a work of art, namely the medieval Icelandic saga of Grettir the Strong.

1. Curriculum theory

Since the middle of last century school curricula have increasingly been defined in terms of predetermined knowledge, skills, and competences to be attained by the students. The demand for such definitions of school curricula was first clearly stated by John Franklin Bobbitt in his book *The Curriculum*, originally published in 1918. It became the core tenet of mainstream curriculum theory with the publication of Ralph Tyler's 1949 book entitled *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. What Tyler said about prespecified aims as the organizing principles of school curricula was embraced both by those who spoke for traditional schooling in academic subjects and their critics who saw themselves as serving the needs of children and society rather than the muses.

Now more than 70 years after Tyler's book was published most curricula are written as lists of aims students shall attain. Teaching materials and methods of instruction are to be determined afterwards and supposedly it can be found out by testing if the schools have succeeded in bringing about the sought improvements of their students' performances.

Here in Iceland the national curriculum for ten years of compulsory education is published as a book with long lists of items of knowledge, skills, and competences all children are expected to have attained at the end of fourth, seventh and tenth grade. We of course all know that most of the children do not attain but a fraction of these competences. What they really learn is different and no two children gain the exact same abilities through their primary education. We also know that many of the aims are stated in very vague and general terms that denote abilities most people have to some extent, but no one fully attains. The idea that all the aims can be tested is also wildly implausible. The curriculum guide deals in abstractions and ideas that are far removed from real life. But it has the force of law. Although we are doomed to fail it is mandatory to attempt.

Secondary schools and universities in this country make their own curricula. Political authorities do not tell them what to teach but they insist that the curricula be written as lists of items of knowledge,

skills, and competences to be attained by students. So secondary schools and universities can do whatever they like provided they specify the learning outcomes in advance as abilities that students can demonstrate, and assessments can measure.

This way of thinking about schooling is fitting for some of the things that people need to learn. Some tasks and assignments in schools are designed to hone or perfect abilities that can be stated as aims of education in the way Bobbitt and Tyler requested, that is as abilities to be attained by the students. Examples of such tasks are may. One might be to factor polynomials or swim across the pool. Such tasks are important. We often need drills to become good at say swimming, factoring polynomials, shortening fractions, spelling correctly, conjugating verbs in a foreign language, or using computer software. Some tasks are, however, different.

2. Root vegetables

Learning to grow vegetables is a good example of a task that does not easily fit the model of mainstream curriculum theory. A teacher can of course use a bed with carrots, potatoes, and turnips as an opportunity to say something very illuminating about nutrition and a healthy diet or how root vegetables store carbohydrates, lecture on the anatomy of plants, explain how they grow from seeds and so on and so forth.

But when we grow vegetables, unexpected things come up. We may need a better fence to keep the sheep away, do something if the draining of the field is not good enough or the pipes from a well need some mending. We also need to take measures if there is too little molybdenum in the soil, snails are eating the turnips, or we have frost during the nights before the potatoes are fully grown. There is no way to plan for all this. Plant diseases and other problems come up unexpectedly and to solve them the students need to acquire many skills that cannot be specified in advance because we cannot know in advance which of these problems come up.

Growing food has also personal and cultural dimensions. The students learn to appreciate fresh vegetables and if they prepare and serve what they grow then they may learn about culinary traditions and the art of cooking. Some may also need to deal with their own aversion to insects, worms and mollusks and touching the soil with their hands, even overcome some psychological barriers if they use livestock manure as a fertilizer.

We can use a bed with vegetables as a supplement to a textbook to illuminate some biological facts and skip all this. We can see the unexpected problems that come up as distractions and avoid spending our precious time with our students on anything other than working towards prespecified educational aims. We can even have specialized staff to take care of draining, plumbing, soil, fertilizers, and plant diseases and, also leave it to others to harvest the vegetables, store them and cook them. If we choose to do that then we use only a small part of the educational potentialities of the work and then our students are not really doing much farming. They are mostly doing drills. To reap all the benefits, we need to see the unexpected as opportunities rather than as something to be avoided, and the unexpected nurtures abilities that cannot be specified in advance. That is what “unexpected” means.

3. Grettir the strong

Works of art as teaching materials are more like potatoes to be grown than textbook polynomials to be factored. One never knows what abilities the students will acquire. I am not saying that works of art cannot be used to make drills. It is for instance possible to use a work of literature to teach vocabulary or facts from history. I do not think it is wrong to do that but if we only do that, then we only use a small part of the educational potentialities of the work.

Real engagement with art is open ended like agriculture. If students stage a play or make a sculpture all sorts of unexpected problems come up and they may need to use carpenters' tools, a sewing machine, and sophisticated social skills.

Although literature maybe lends itself more easily to the requirements of mainstream curriculum theory than drama and the visual arts a rich text affords different topics for conversation and exploration to different individuals.

In most Icelandic primary and secondary schools, students read some of the epic literature written in Icelandic about seven or even eight centuries ago, like for instance the Saga of Grettir the Strong. One of the things that make this saga so great is that everything people say about Grettir, the main character, is at best a half-truth. In some ways he was like a troubled child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, in some ways a savior. As an adult he had characteristics suggesting bipolar disorder and lack of self-control but also incredible physical and mental strength. He was both very human and outside the human world, fighting supernatural elements like ghosts and trolls. From early age he was an outcast. Rich men promised rewards for killing him, but he was also loved and adored and those who eventually killed him were hated and despised and not given any reward.

The story offers opportunities to discuss many pressing concerns like social stigma, exclusion, and disabilities. It also invites readers to think about the supernatural, the mythical, and the heroic. Grettir, the protagonist of the saga, was not only an unlucky troublemaker. He was also a poet, a master of irony and laconic replies. If the students are ready and willing to construct Grettir-saga-like sentences some of them may become poets themselves. It is even conceivable that getting to know Grettir will turn some troublemakers into artists.

To use the educational possibilities of this saga a teacher must be ready to discuss the questions the students find most interesting - and that will vary from one class or cohort to another. In other words the teacher must be ready to spend time on the unexpected, what comes up and was never planned and that is why works of art, as teaching materials, are more like agriculture than textbook drills.

In my view a part of the compulsory school curriculum, maybe even half of it, should be aims based in Tyler's sense. But a well-balanced curriculum is like a well-balanced diet. It contains all sorts of food for body, mind, and soul. It has ample room for open ended quests, conversations and problems than cannot be foreseen. It is not only calories to burn up on the labor marked. It is also taste, texture, smell, participation, and above all common meals that help us to create and maintain communities, live a live that is both natural and human.

Thanks for listening.