The Subjective Nature of Curriculum Evaluation

"In the latter months of 1974," R. J. Clark and his colleagues report, "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)," the "most interesting aspect" of which 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," an undertaking the "origins and contents" of which Clark and colleagues will present "here in summary form."[1]

"Two issues affected the design of the evaluative schema," they continue, "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."[2] Concerning the first, Clark and his co-authors note that a "great variety was found to exist in the theoretical justifications, educational objectives, grade placements, and design formats of social studies materials in Canada," as some were organized according to "critical issues" or "social problems" while "others were designed to impart bodies of information, or to teach selected concepts and skills at the elementary or secondary level."[3] They note that "some were multi-media kits, others were bound and published volumes, and a great number were informal publications such as typescript 'units of study,' issued "by foundations, teachers' unions, loosely co-ordinated teams of educators, and individual teachers."[4] Clark and his colleagues resolved that their evaluation "schema should be flexible enough to apply to *all* types materials, of no matter how broad or limited their scope, or how varied or uniform their contents."[5] Evaluators came 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."[6] They worked not individually but in "teams … broadly representative of the types of expertise, interest, or experience that might assist in the interpretation of the particular piece of material under review."[7]

Instead of preparing a "check-list" of "criteria" – resulting in "depersonalized" or "objective" evaluations, Clark and his colleagues constructed schema to assist "evaluators to prepare readable and personal assessments for publication in a journal," not necessarily "for teachers assessing materials for their own use."[8] That meant that a "flexible schema was most appropriate," presenting 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."[9] Each

evaluator was assigned two chapters from Eisner's and Vallance's recently published collection of essays entitled *Conflicting Conceptions of Curriculum*.[10] Again: the "basic question" Clark and colleagues considered was "the nature of the evaluations that the schema should attempt to promote."[11] They answered by emphasizing the subjective side of evaluation, setting aside the "check-list" concept in favour of "criticisms generally considered interpretive, literary, or humanistic," a schema "designed, at least in part, to elicit private understandings and personal insights on the part of the evaluator," making these interpretations available to the reader," thereby bridging the "gap" between the "pre-determined" and the "open-minded" review, or between the "social scientific" and the "humanistic-interpretive" assessment schemes.[12]

The evaluative essays composed under the guidance of their schema[13] were "both diverse and revealing," the former attributable (Clark and his colleagues suggest) to the "variety of the social studies curriculum materials that were being assessed," but also attributable to the fact "that the process of evaluation is a highly interpretive enterprise."[14] As is the teacher participating in the complicated conversation that is curriculum, the "evaluator is of necessity involved in a dialogue with the materials being assessed."[15] Clark and colleagues think not of teachers but of movie or book critics who "will not necessarily arrive at identical descriptions and recommendations."[16] They conclude: "In curriculum evaluation to the final product of each assessment is an exercise in interpretation which by its very nature cannot be 'objective' or 'unbiased,'" a fact that does not imply that "all evaluations are of equal merit."[17] They emphasize that "one interpretation may be more perceptive, more sensitive and more illuminating."[18] Again (if inadvertently) referencing the conversation character of curriculum, Clark and colleagues point out that 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," so that for the reader

> [t]here 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."[19]

I would not conflate "worth" with "personal relevance," as the former is a more expansive and at times impersonal concept. Latin has worth even when not personally relevant.[20]

Despite disavowing relativism (that each evaluative essay was of equal worth), Clark and colleagues do insist that "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."[21] That qualified praise exempts them from "the need to 'account for' (in the empirical sense) the differences in the written assessments" while

acknowledging "that each assessment [is not] 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,"[22] a self-evident insight that side-steps the inevitability of disagreement, even conflict, that can accompany dissonant interpretations.

"What we have attempted to do," Clark and colleagues conclude, "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," no minor achievement, as it acknowledges that curriculum is no "mechanical input-output, production type of process. Therefore curriculum materials cannot be evaluated in the way an engineer evaluates the parts of production machinery."[23] They suggest that educators – including curriculum evaluation specialists – may have assumed "in the past" that "curriculum evaluation 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."[24] (With PISA and other "global" standardized assessments, such "technical" evaluation is now entirely entrenched.) Such a conception of evaluation, Clark and colleagues continue, lead to the manufacture of "only 'shareable' or 'common' meanings, often within a fairly controlled setting."[25] Clark and colleagues have proposed "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."[26] From "alternative" – an option at the evaluation cafeteria – they up the ante, writing that "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."[27] Someday.

COMMENTARY

The very able research assistant – Dr. Anton Birioukov-Brant - who provided these paragraphs from the original – notes that "this article pushes the boundaries of curricular evaluation," a statement I think doesn't go quite far enough. I suggest that it replaces not supplements criterion-referenced assessment. I do concur with Anton's summary: The authors present an overview of an innovative evaluative schema, one that embraces the interpretive lenses that are imbued with the design and evaluation of a curricular project. Moreover, the authors also point to the reader's interpretation of the evaluation itself, thereby highlighting the subjective nature of curricular design and evaluation. This may also reflect the qualitative movement gaining momentum around this period." Underline "this period," as these intellectual breakthroughs (see Axelrod

1979 for an explication of the concept) were dismissed by policymakers enthralled by the quantification of education experience. I accent the "subjective nature of curricular design and evaluation" but also of the curriculum itself. Reactivating the past permits us to see past the present.

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

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[1] Clark et al. 1977, 65-66.

[2] Clark et al. 1977, 66. The latter reminds me of questions students are asked when they evaluate the courses I teach at UBC. One asks if course objectives were clearly stated. My courses have no objectives.

[3] Clark et al. 1977, 66. To teach "critical issues" or "social problems" surely "information" is required, the study of which could stimulate "skills," here presumably grade-based. Grades have always seemed to me more a bureaucratic than cognitive concept.

[4] Clark et al. 1977, 66.

[5] Clark et al. 1977, 66.

[6] Clark et al. 1977, 66.

[7] Clark et al. 1977, 66.

[8] Clark et al. 1977, 67.

[9] Clark et al. 1977, 67.

[10] 1974. Eisner would later develop his conception of "connoisseurship" to characterize the subjective nature of evaluation. See Pinar et al. (1995, 581-583) for a discussion – including criticism – of the concept. Contemporaneous efforts to conceive of evaluation as "criticism" were published in Willis 1978.

[11] Clark et al. 1977, 67.

[12] Clark et al. 1977, 67-68.

[13] The authors provide the schema on pages 68-71. It is quite detailed and lengthy, which is why it is not included here, as I struggle to keep these research briefs "brief."

[14] Clark et al. 1977, 71.

[15] Clark et al. 1977, 71.

[16] Clark et al. 1977, 71.

[17] Clark et al. 1977, 71.

[18] Clark et al. 1977, 71.

[19] Clark et al. 1977, 71.

[20] "When we study Latin," Gardini (2019, 5) "explains, we must study it for one fundamental reason: because it is the language of civilization; because the Western world was created on its back. Because inscribed in Latin are the secrets of our deepest cultural memory, secrets that demand to be read," adding (with a mix of worth and personal relevance): "Latin is *beautiful*. This fact undergirds all that I will be saying in these pages. Beauty is the face of freedom."

[21] Clark et al. 1977, 71.

[22] Clark et al. 1977, 71.

[23] Clark et al. 1977, 71-72.

[24] Clark et al. 1977, 72.

[25] Clark et al. 1977, 72. Those "common meanings" are now numerals, e.g. test scores.

[26] Clark et al. 1977, 72. "Productive" equivocates and thereby invites economistic considerations, deemphasizing ethical or political imperatives.

[27] Clark et al. 1977, 72.