

# Curriculum or Common Sense? An Exploration in the Classroom Production of Useful Knowledge

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## *Introduction*

The relation among instrumental knowledge, practical understanding, and critical insight has been examined in a wide variety of contexts, including workers' study institutes of 19th century England (Johnson, 1979), the public school in post-World War I middle America (Lynd and Lynd, 1929), and third-world literacy programs (Freire, 1973). A recurrent theme is the tendency of instrumental or technicist concepts of education to suppress those interests and concerns of students which might lead to their developing critical insights into their situation. In other words, certain attempts to make education more practical or useful may, ironically, make students less able to form autonomous judgements about their social situation and more dependent on official definitions of it. This paper explores some problems associated with attempts to implement a curriculum geared to imparting useful knowledge. In particular, it focuses on the relation of practical understanding and critical insight to the instrumental tendencies associated with a recent curriculum innovation, life skills education, which has found wide application in educational and training contexts in Canada. In the pages which follow, I consider some main features of the life skills approach and raise issues connected with the social dimensions of school curricula of this kind. I then turn to a case of teaching skills for everyday living in the setting of a secondary school classroom.

Life skills education, which emerged in the 1960's, was described by its originator as having roots in John Dewey's concept of progressive education. Like progressive education, the point was "to make the problems of living an integral part of the school curriculum" (Adkins, 1974:507). Life skills education was originally addressed to "disadvantaged clients," to unemployed black youths, native peoples, welfare recipients, to those coming out of total institutions, and to other marginalized groups. The point was to make a more or less immediate practical difference in the lives of individuals belonging to such groups. The life skills curriculum was to provide an alternative to academic curricula which seemed to have little to do

with the everyday problems of disadvantaged persons. A key feature of the life skills approach has been an emphasis on behavioral change, as evidenced in this widely accepted definition of life skills:

Life skills are defined as "problem solving behaviors appropriately and responsibly used in management of personal affairs. As *problem solving behaviors*, life skills liberate in a way, since they include a relatively small class of behaviors usable in many life situations. *Appropriate* use requires an individual to adapt the behaviors to times and place. *Responsible* use requires maturity, or accountability.

And as behaviors used in the *management of personal affairs*, the life skills apply to five areas of life responsibility identified as self, family, leisure, community and job." (Himsl, 1971:17).

The focus on appropriate and responsible behavior in personal affairs is broadly characteristic of the various forms of life skills training I have examined; the concern is with the personal problems of the disadvantaged individual, and not with the social causes of the disadvantages.

In the life skills approach, the situation which produces "lack of skills" is typically taken as given; the social situation which demands such skills is presented as a set of tendencies and forces unfolding on their own accord, whereas the thing which can and must be changed is individual, personal behavior. Unlike Dewey's progressive education, there is little concern with grounding the curricular concept of "the problems of living" in an active understanding of the society, how it works, and how it might be made to work better (Dewey, 1916; 1946).

An echo of Dewey's more critical attitude towards problems of living is evident in Robert and Helen Lynd's remarks on the growing popularity of practically-oriented curricula in middle America during the first quarter of this century. They saw the dramatic increase in optional high school courses such as home economics, stenography, and mechanical drafting as evidence of a growing demand that education address practical concerns: "the pressure and accidents of local life are prompting Middletown to lay hands upon its schools at certain points . . . and to use them instrumentally to foster patriotism, teach hand skills, and serve its needs in other ways" (Lynd and Lynd, 1929:222). But they observed that the push towards practical concerns was associated with a "stifling of self-appraisal and self criticism" in favor of boosting civic (particularly business) interests:

The result of this is the muzzling of self-criticism by hurling the term "knocker" at the head of a critic and the drowning of incipient social problems under a public mood of everything being "fine and dandy." Thus, while education slowly pushes its tents closer to the practical concerns of the local life, the latter are forever striking camp and removing deeper into the forest. (Lynd and Lynd, 1929:222)

In this passage, the Lynds evoked an image of the potentially repressive demands which practicality, in its instrumental aspects, might make of education. The schools' shift towards a more practical curriculum would be self-defeating so long as those practical concerns continued to be defined in a way which resisted more broadly educative forms of questioning and examination.

Recent critical discussions of life skills-oriented programs suggests that such initiatives center on a compromised form of practicality similar to that noted by the Lynds, at least at the level of curriculum policy. Whether the defects of the instrumental, individualist approach extend to the level of classroom lessons is another question. Inasmuch as practical understanding, in a full sense, involves appraising action contexts in the light of common sense and personal experience, the viability of life skills as an educational aim depends rather crucially on what can be done in the classroom. It is one thing to point out the conceptual defects of life skills as a conception of practical knowledge, quite another to see what troubles might arise in attempts to teach life skills.

### *The Classroom Production of Useful Knowledge*

In this section, I examine data which called attention to the interactional features of teaching life skills in an inner city, basic level high school in a large Ontario city. These lessons formed part of a course entitled "Skills for Everyday Living," which were taught grade levels 9, 10, 11 and 12 as part of the family studies curriculum. The data discussed here are drawn from observations of lessons at the Grade 11-12 level.

Data collection and analysis undertaken followed the general aim of developing accounts of instruction which are based not on idealized models of the teaching process, but rather on the everyday world of classroom instruction. From a sociological perspective, the practical contingencies of instruction are, to a massive extent, organizational contingencies. The study of how instruction is accomplished practically thus requires examining the local organization of classroom activities. The issue here is how the structuring of lessons works from moment to moment, regardless of how participants might reconstruct them afterwards. This examination was accomplished by analyzing public, recognizable features of classroom practice. The present study focuses on communicative practices displayed in oral exchanges between teacher and students. Following the general approach of conversation analysis (Heritage, 1984:232-92), a sequence of lessons was audiotaped and reviewed, and detailed transcripts of selected portions were prepared.

A key assumption underlying the present study is that in classroom instruction, teacher and students are jointly involved in the active construction of the day's lessons on a moment-by-moment basis. Drawing on the work of James Heap and his colleagues, I will view this interaction as involving, quite crucially and centrally, the joint production of a "lesson-corpus of knowledge" (Heap, 1985), that is, a specific body of knowledge which is produced through the coordinated actions of teacher and students, is developed through lesson activities, and has the status of being the official collection of "things known" which teacher and student are entitled to invoke as established matters in the ongoing lesson interaction. In analyzing the lessons observed, I do not suppose that the contents of relevant policy documents, curriculum guidelines or lesson plans are literally and unproblematically being implemented or realized in the day's lesson. Nor do I dwell on the possible discrepancies between policy and practice. Instead, I

proceed on the maxim that whatever is to count, interactionally, as “Skills For Everyday Living” is being produced as a practical matter for participants in the course of the day’s lesson. In the classroom setting observed, the practical relevance of “skills for everyday living” was established not only through the topics chosen, but also through the use of lesson strategies designed to engage students’ present concerns. The latter included soliciting topics from students and probing their assumptions about topics introduced by the teacher. In both cases, the teacher’s efforts to manage the process of corpus building involved efforts to keep students interests focussed on questions of skill.

A component of one day’s lesson involved working through questions which had been submitted in writing by the students. In their content and manner of formulation, these questions clearly reflected the students’ preoccupations and assumptions concerning food purchases. For example, one question focussed on fast food outlets:

A: What about my first question?

T: Your first question. WHICH FAST FOOD PLACE SELLS THE BEST FOOD/

A: /Nutritious/

T: /In terms of a company or in terms of a type of food?

A: I mean nutritious food, like uh McDonalds, or

T: Well when you’re thinking about nutrition, what should you always stick to?

A: The four food groups.

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Key: A = 1st student speaker

T = teacher

/ = normal pause between turns missing (latched turn)

CAPITALIZED WORDS = reading from written text

The student has framed his question in a brand-name rating format, and when asked for clarification, gives McDonald’s as an example. But as the exchange unfolds, the student’s question furnishes an occasion for recalling a previously established element of the lesson corpus. The teacher’s question, “What should you always stick to?” and the response, “the four food groups,” shift the focus away from ratings and back to exercising the relevant skill: choosing meals which have a balanced composition of ingredients drawn from the four food groups described in the *Canada Food Guide*. Note that keeping the focus on the relevant skill involves ongoing reformulation of student responses. As the sequence progresses, students are asked to apply the four foods maxim to kinds of fast foods:

B: /you got everything there. Burger King stuff, McDonald’s stuff is all uh garbage.

T: Well I don't think you can really compare companies like

?: [Burger King ( )

T: [that, but you've got you've got meat — something from meat — something from the meat and alternates group, you've got something from the breads group, right, so you've got your burger and your bun

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Key: B = 2nd student speaker

[ ? = speaker identity not known  
= simultaneous speech begins  
( ) = indecipherable passage

Again, keeping the lesson on track involves shifting the discussion away from students' inclination to compare brand-name products. In these instances, then, the students' expressed concerns undergo a pedagogical transformation before being admitted as valid elements of the lesson corpus. The concrete interest in brand-name ratings is reconstructed as an issue of skill in dealing with generic properties of foods.

The teacher's exercise over topic control extends to disqualifying competing versions of practical knowledge about the matter under consideration. An instance of this occurs earlier in the same sequence:

T: OK, uh::: . . . here's OK WHY DO THEY SELL FOOD THAT IS DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH? — what kinds of food did you mean there, A?

A: Like bacon and all that.

T: Well at's not dangerous, ya see nothing is dangerous, nothing is dangerous, it wouldn't be on the market if it was dangerous.

Here, a student's question about hazardous or questionable foods is disqualified with "it wouldn't be on the market if it was dangerous." The latter assertion is interesting, inasmuch as many educated adults would probably reject it at face value. However, I propose that the force of this assertion should be grasped with respect to the ongoing work of managing the skills-oriented framework of the lesson. Here, the assertion "it wouldn't be on the market if it was dangerous" can be seen as an instance of "the good lie," that is, a deception which is justifiable insofar as it makes possible the attainment of an otherwise unfeasible instructional objective. If accepted by students, this fiction would restore the lesson premise that there are everyday problems which are best mastered through the acquisition of skills. In order to get on with skill development, students should accept as a matter of fact that there is no antagonistic "they," that the market is a safe place. However, this premise — which would free the process of skill development from moral or political considerations, or the need for a critical attitude — was subject to recurrent questioning from students.

During the next day's lesson, which focussed on recognizing the names and functions of food additives, the issue of dangerous foods resurfaced, championed in this case by a different student:

- T: /Weh you might assume there was something wrong, even though that's how the peas started off naturally, so what manufacturers do is, they often add coloring, natural coloring, to foods, so that every time you buy the same brand . . . it looks the same.
- C: [Yeah but that's dangerous Miss.
- T: Why?/
- D: /Miss, so/
- T: /Why is that dangerous?
- C: /Because . chemicals are, are dangerous.
- T: Well/
- C: /They are. Been proven.

In this case, the student refuses to relinquish the notion that the use of food additives is a dangerous practice. This refusal prompts the teacher to attempt a refutation:

- T: Certain kinds of chemicals are dangerous, C, and/
- ?: /Uh huh.
- T: But your body is made up of chemicals. Are you [dangerous?
- C: [Yeah, what happened to the fresh stuff and everything in the world, now everything is going chemical, chemical, all this, can that
- T: Well/
- C: /'n boxes
- T: OK. I I can I understand your concern, except that what I'm what this is all about today is I'm trying to demonstrate to you that that there are some good chemicals . that are necessary so that A, you don't get poisoned, uh B that there's enough food for all of us, and uh it's important to know which ones you want to avoid and which ones are necessary. There are some necessary things, like I said, like this began at the beginning, the vitamin A — if you didn't a eh add that that BHA then y the vitamin A would go out of the milk and so you'd be drinking it with nothing, you may as well drink water.
- C: I think half these chemicals today is killing half the people, this food
- T: Oh well [I think it's it's feeding a lot more people and
- C?: [(it is)
- T: making them a little healthier, in some respects. .OK.

With these moves, she has set aside the attempt to reconstruct C's common sense knowledge in favor of a more direct rejection. The premise of a safe domain for skill development is reasserted without C's cooperation. This problematic exchange

highlights the risks involved in making active use of students' practical understandings. They are often richer and more provocative than what is allowed for in the lesson design. To fully take up C's concerns would involve going beyond the skills framework.

### *Discussion*

This teacher-student interaction reveals that in the life skills lesson, the production of useful knowledge is sequentially organized in a manner which permits the teacher to retain control over what counts as useful. The students' present interests and understandings are used as resources for constructing the lesson, but they are not permitted to displace the concerns being promoted by the teacher. In two of the fragments examined, the teacher uses a strategy whereby student questions (submitted in written form) are incorporated into sequences which she initiates. Grammatically, these questions have the character of elicitation in search of a response. But in the lesson context, it is the teacher rather than the question's author who executes the elicitation. In this way, the teacher retains her characteristic position in instructional interactions as the speaker with the sole right to elicit responses from students and provide them with feedback. The questions are used as devices to draw out student notions, which are then shown to require reformulation. Within this format, the students' common sense knowledge can appear only as material for reconstruction. It is not allowed to stand, either as a fully autonomous elicitation, or as a response requiring no feedback. Further, feedback remains the sole prerogative of the teacher. Student-initiated feedback — such as "that's dangerous" — is disallowed.

The basic instructional format used has been described elsewhere as the elicitation-response-feedback (or ERF) sequence (Heap, 1985). The use of this type of sequence as the building block of larger lesson structures is not a special characteristic of skill-based instruction but rather a generic communication format widely applied in classroom teaching (Heap, 1982; McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979). In the context of the life skills lesson, the ERF format serves as the basis for managing the skills frame, which operates as a form of topic organization. A key feature of the skills lesson is the ongoing work of defining and making appear real a neutral space for exercising skills. The skills frame requires students to reorganize their understandings with respect to the premise of a neutral set of arrangements in which skill mastery makes important differences. Much of the teachers' effort is turned towards the ongoing construction of a picture of the world in which skill acquisition is a sensible aim and a legitimate demand. However, the premise of a neutral space for exercising skill is supported neither by social research (Lynd, and Lynd 1929; Foucault, 1979; Apple, 1985) nor by common sense (as evidenced by students' recurrent resistance to the teacher's skill-oriented formulations). The ongoing construction of such a picture of the world amounts to the not always successful promotion of a fiction necessitated by the skill model of useful knowledge.

Here we may recall Lynd's observation that curriculum innovations geared to dominant conceptions of useful knowledge often amounted to the inculcation of new forms of social illiteracy. In the case of "Skills for everyday Living," as with life skills education more generally, it is assumed that students suffer from a skills deficit. As a corollary to this, it is assumed that the more skills students acquire, the better. The positive aim of instruction is thus to increase the individual's accumulation of skills and knowledge. The overall tendency is to disregard the possibility that the situation requiring such skills is itself questionable. From Lynd's perspective, the new forms of illiteracy associated with changed social conditions were the sign of a deeper failure, a failure not at the individual level but at the cultural level. He argued against strategies which would place the increased burden of coping on the individual's shoulders. The point was not to create a "dull, methodical culture" in which individuals would be transformed into rational calculators robbed of spontaneity (Lynd, 1939:235). Instead of placing an unreasonable pressure to know on individuals, Lynd argued for a fundamental transformation of the social conditions which had created damaging new forms of knowledge deficits.

As we have seen, life skills instruction does not simply add to existing knowledge: it competes with common sense knowledge and requires a reorganization of students' practical understandings. If instruction geared to implanting a neutralized, individualized form of coping knowledge amounts to a kind of invasion of common sense, how should resistance to such implantation be characterized? A useful account of the underlying conflict between neutralized and critical versions of useful knowledge is to be found in a case examined by Johnson (1979). He recounts a struggle around practical knowledge which emerged in connection with workers' study institutes in early 19th century Britain. During this period, workers began to undertake their own autonomous efforts to educate themselves collectively. As these groups began to develop a political consciousness of their situation, they were challenged by paternalist groups like the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. The Society attempted to coopt workers' institutes and to replace them with depoliticized seminars on topics such as the latest developments in steamboilers. In their struggle to oppose this move, radical workers coined a new expression, "really useful knowledge," which re-emphasized the practical, political character of their concerns. As Johnson and his colleagues put it, "Really useful knowledge" was a knowledge of everyday circumstances, including a knowledge of why you were poor, why you were politically oppressed, and why, through the force of social circumstances, you were the kind of person you were . . ." (Education Group, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1981:37). In Johnson's formulation, "useful" — really useful — is not limited to a notion of being "technically effective," but rather connotes a genuine understanding of one's identity, interests, and collective situation. For these radical workers, really useful knowledge was not primarily a knowledge of how to be a better worker, technically, but rather a knowledge of what it was, socially, morally, politically, to be a worker in that situation. The crucial point is

this: resistance took the form of reasserting the practical, moral-political dimensions of useful knowledge which had been excised from the version of useful knowledge promoted by industrialists.

Similarly, the practical dimensions of problems of living which get masked off by the skills frame need to be revived and made central. Educational programs which aim to do anything more than reproduce the culture of disadvantage cannot afford to ignore the social conditions associated with disadvantage. There is considerable evidence that, far from having abated, these conditions have worsened. Lynd would have been disgusted that so little progress has been made in dealing with the social inequalities which he and contemporaries such as John Dewey had deplored sixty years ago. He likely would have seen the life skills approach to compensatory education as a newfangled version of those approaches to practical education which promoted "social illiteracy." The alternative would be to connect curricular approaches to practical knowledge with an honest, critical assessment of the very social conditions which have created the demand for compensatory or adjustive skills in the first place. Instead of short-circuiting students' current practical understandings, which already connect coping problems and social conditions, instruction might build on those understandings and get underway towards the production of genuinely useful knowledge.

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