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Curriculum Development Is Dead —Or Is It?



by Harro Van Brummelen

Three curriculum episodes

In May 1996 many North American curriculum scholars, including myself, attended a conference at the University of British Columbia. The theme of the conference was *Curriculum as Narrative/Narrative as Curriculum*. The seminars ranged from topics such as “Bathroom stories: Local narratives of the grand type” to “Using our (personal) stories to investigate the social

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construction of power relations.” In a session titled, “For here too gods are present: Making the fantastic familiar,” the presenter held that “in classrooms are gods, spirits, demons, magicians, initiates, occult knowledge, and profound myths in need of imaginative evocation” In another session, an acquaintance of mine reinterpreted the story of Jacob wrestling in the night. What it really means, he said, is that Jacob struggled with himself, that he came face-to-face with his inner being—and thus was blessed and renewed through an inner transformation. Our students, he continued, need a similar “wrestling” with themselves, to discover their essence. Curriculum, therefore, is about wrestling with our inmost self in order to be blessed through self-revelation. That is why throughout the conference I heard many personal “narratives.” I also hear how Greek myths as well as Buddhist insights could enlighten my personal curriculum journey. The conference, for many, was a religious experience.

A second curriculum situation. A curriculum textbook I use describes how a teacher met the needs of her seventh grade class (McNeil 1995:8-9). She asked the class, “What is your greatest concern for the world?” and “What is your greatest fear?” Student answers ranged from “failing at school,” “dying of AIDS,” to “going to Hell.” Most responses revolved around their own death. Since she believed that at the center of curriculum should be “a desire to hear students’ voices,” she had the students construct a topical framework for a unit on death and dying—“stating what they were going to study,

how they would approach it, what materials they would use, and what their responsibilities would be." The students chose novels that different groups would use and decided on group and individual activities. Journal writing began with answering the question, "What do you expect to learn in the next six weeks?" Students' own questions guided the development of the unit. (E.g., How has my past affected my future? Is there a heaven and a hell? Why do people choose to die?) The resulting projects were diverse both in design and execution.

A third curriculum event. Between 1988 and 1993, the British Columbia government launched major curriculum reforms. Its innovative *Year 2000* program emphasized process rather than specific content. It allowed students to progress at their own rates as they "constructed" knowledge through thematic investigations. Teacher-facilitators were to stimulate interactive and self-directed learning activities in cross-grade settings. Teachers were to choose their own content and develop their own units. Their student evaluation would report only what students "can do," not areas of weakness nor comparisons with their peers.

In a two-week period in 1993, however, the government undid five years of curriculum reform. It had been stung by a barrage of unceasing media and parent criticism about the "crisis" in the schools. Soon, an avalanche of inch-thick, much more prescriptive subject-based curriculum guidelines arrived in the schools. Their long lists of prescribed learning outcomes reminded many teachers of the behavioral objectives that at one time they had to write for unit and lesson planning. The emphasis on student evaluation (1/4 of the material in each guide) was a semi-veiled attempt at making schools more accountable. Most of the curriculum guides, however, at least at the elementary level, have been notable mainly for filling up shelf space in staff rooms, as teachers continue to do, by and large, what they have done for years. Yet there are two significant consequences of the new guidelines. First media criticism of the schools has virtually disappeared. Second curriculum development at the local level has also become almost non-existent.

Is curriculum development dead?

These three real-life curriculum episodes appear to have little in common. First the conference asked how personal narratives of students and teachers can lead to a transformative classroom curriculum. The postmodern quest for curriculum meaning has become intensely personal and even religious, while generally opposing any worldview with definite claims of truth, including orthodox Christianity. Discussion of curriculum development outside the classroom, at the same time, is not very helpful for the postmodernist. Second the

In the end, constructionism undermines any sense of a common ethical responsibility and accountability.

unit on death and dying illustrates how a constructivist teacher allowed students to take charge of their learning. Students chose both content and learning strategies. They arrived at their own conclusions in independent and self-directed ways. There was little overt teacher input, but the underlying structure assumed knowledge and value relativism. Finally, recent developments in British Columbia reiterate once more that centrally-constructed system curriculum guides tend to be political rather than educational documents, although they may put a virtual stop to local curriculum initiatives.

What conclusions we can draw from these disparate episodes? First, you will note the chasms that exist among those interested in curriculum. At the UBC conference I asked myself, "What does this have to do with the everyday life of classroom teachers?" I felt I was among Plato's philosopher-kings. The luxury of abstruse debate may have some long-term implications, but it had little direct relevance for day-to-day life in the classroom. Government and textbook officials, for instance, were notable for their absence. The unit on death and dying, while motivating students, will no doubt be opposed by those demanding "basics," structure, and accountability,

and by those who argue that values related to these topics should be taught in the home, not in the school. As for the new curriculum guides, teachers more often use either their textbooks to frame their classroom activities, or develop constructivist-type approaches where student questions and interests guide curriculum quests.

It seems to me that today three divergent curriculum tracks far too often go side by side without affecting each other. First, academics have developed new theoretical approaches to curriculum over the last fifteen years. There is a kaleidoscope of “discourses” about curriculum rooted in neo-Marxist-related critical theory, in feminism, phenomenology, postmodernism, biographic narrative, and, lately, even in theology or religious experience (Pinar 1995). These discussions, however, have been stronger in analyzing weaknesses and in suggesting broad ideals than in developing curriculum alternatives for the classroom.

Second, curriculum construction today is seldom done at the local level. Rather, multinational textbook conglomerates, state departments of education, and, to a lesser extent, persons jumping on bandwagons such as “multiple intelligences” develop curriculum. But their impact appears to depend on whether resulting materials reflect what teachers are already doing. Teachers have become suspicious about the reams of curriculum documents and “innovative” approaches that promise utopia. They think, if not say, “We’ve seen it all before and it made little difference. Just leave us alone.”

Third, there is the “lived space” of individual classrooms. There teachers find ways to survive among competing demands. They face difficult classroom dynamics resulting from unstable family backgrounds and an individualistic, authority-shirking society. They cope with increasing, oft-clashing parental expectations. They must use state-mandated modes of accountability for which they “teach to the test” even when they believe this is second best for their students. They hear that they should implement outcome-based education, whole language and individualized reading programs, writers’ workshops, integrated units, cooperative and collaborative learning, activities to suit not only different learning styles but also multiple intelligences (and don’t confuse the two!),

computer- and Internet-based learning, career and personal planning activities, multicultural education—and not to forget using constructivist approaches throughout. I get tired just *listing* them all. No wonder that many teachers just try to be positive role models and provide a sound classroom atmosphere, basing their planning, other than working from a yearly overview, on the day-to-day realities of classroom life. For them, central curriculum development has become irrelevant or inappropriate. Local curriculum construction has died without a formal funeral: “I’m coping the best I can. Don’t load more work onto me. The more curriculum changes, the more things stay the same.”

But, to accept that curriculum development is dead or might as well be dead is a wrong reaction. Dead wrong—especially for Christian educators. Christians find themselves in a rapidly changing society whose cultural biases oppose what their Church stands for. There is growing ambiguity in North America about the role of religion and ethics, of technology and industry, and even of government and education. There no longer is an Archimedean point, a solid base, from which we see and interpret reality. The ability to affirm objective knowledge of truth has been replaced by the belief that each person is entitled to personally-determined perspectives.

Our students—let’s not kid ourselves—are profoundly affected by this ideology of relativistic individualism. I read some time ago that 81 percent of Generation X in North America believe that there is no universal truth. Young Christians today often argue that while they have chosen “universal” Biblical norms for themselves, those are not absolutes that apply to others: “It is up to each individual to devise their own value system. Truth is an individual concept that persons decide for themselves.”

In this societal context, Christian schools have to be instrumental in converting the basic assumptions and values of our youth and reshaping their worldviews (Toews 1995). If schools fail to be centers of responsive discipleship where biblical faith and its implications transform young people to know what it means to “work out their salvation with fear and trembling,” we will lose the next generation. We need new approaches in curriculum.

We need to re-enliven both curriculum development and implementation. But to remain sane among the many competing demands on our time, our aim and focus must be clear. We need to avoid becoming overwhelmed, for instance, by interesting but peripheral or even incompatible curriculum approaches in the educational marketplace. Before I give an example and some pointers, I will take a detour, however. Because of its influence, I first want to consider the currently most popular curriculum bandwagon: constructivism.

Can constructivism enliven curriculum?

The ideology of constructivism is probably the most influential movement in curriculum today. When I accessed ERIC, I immediately had 2800 “hits” for constructivism and related terms, most within the last few years. Elliott Eisner has made the point that an ideology is seldom directly infused into school programs, but, when talked about often enough, becomes like the air we breathe. We do not even notice that its values and metaphors are influencing the way we think about education. We often implicitly begin to accept its related practices without critical analysis. This, I believe, is what is happening with constructivism. Many of its pedagogical strategies are attractive. I use them in my own classroom. But are we swallowing the relativistic worldview of constructivism as we adopt its learning approaches?

It is politically incorrect today to oppose constructivism. Constructivism is what I call a “yummy” word. It sounds good. It unites, at least temporarily, all those opposed to passive learning, thoughtless regurgitation, and rigid classroom structures. Who would not want to facilitate active learning that takes into account students’ previous experiences, their interests and needs, and meaningful personal response? A large proportion of articles in educational journals therefore refer to and use constructivist ideas.

Constructivism views traditional learning, not surprisingly, as inadequate. It attends to different types of learners and learning. It sees classrooms as communities of learning engaged in activity, reflection and creative experiences. Teachers no longer supply information, but facilitate

auto-nomous learning. They just coordinate and critique student constructions. Challenging, open-ended investigations, especially of contradictions, lead learners to dialogue and explore and generate many possibilities (Fosnot 1996:20). Note that many constructivist strategies are ones that teachers have previously successfully used under the rubric of active student participation in the learning process.

Few teachers, however, realize the theoretical basis of constructivism even when they openly use constructivist strategies. Constructivism is a theory about how learners come to know. It is not

Our students are profoundly affected by an ideology of relativistic individualism.

a prescription for instruction, even though it is often used that way. The theory breaks radically with the Western—and Christian—tradition that knowledge can be gained through the senses and leads to a picture of the real world. Constructivism holds that humans do not discover knowledge or “read the book of nature.” Rather, it claims that humans construct all knowledge either individually or through social interaction. Knowledge does not discover or reflect a world that exists “out there.” Instead, humans make knowledge to help us cope with our experiences. Order in reality is arbitrary, imposed on the world by humanly constructed handles in order to create *personal meaning and significance*. No ultimate, true, objective knowledge exists. Knowledge is strictly subjective. That is why constructivists assert that “others have realities that are independent of ours . . . we can never take any of these realities as fixed” (Paul Ernest in Steffe and Gale 1995:485).

In the classroom, therefore, learning begins with children’s own ideas, hypotheses, and explorations, as it did in the unit on death and dying. Students do not discover knowledge but create their own understandings and meaning by reflecting on their physical, social, and mental activity. Teachers pose problems and encourage students to set personal goals. Learners play an

active role in selecting and defining curriculum activities, with teachers being willing to follow children's pursuits even when those seem naïve or immature (Gould in Fosnot 1996:93). Teachers seek and value learners' constructions, viewpoints, and solutions. They ask whether their work is coherent and useful, and help them open their windows further. They support learning, not control it. Meaningful activity is valued over right answers. Indeed, there are no single right answers. There are only discrepancies that students may analyze and resolve in a variety of ways (Ackermann in Steffe & Gale 1995:342): "Right answers are not possible in a constructivist textbook. It goes against the philosophy" (Baker & Piburn 1997:xv). Even mathematical laws and procedures are viewed as social conventions that, like the rules of chess, could be changed (Ernest in Steffe & Gale 1995:477).

Moreover, there cannot be an all-encompassing curriculum model because both teachers and students create and transform knowledge and meaning as learning takes place. Course outlines and unit plans are therefore loose and indeterminate. After all, there is no one truth, no one right way to view phenomena and situations. When we read literature, for instance, everyone's interpretation is equally valid. Its study becomes important not so much because it helps us understand important issues in life, but because it helps us develop the tools of meaning making and effective writing. Thus we can create our own reality, our own answers, and our own values. Language, as leading radical constructivist Ernst von Glasersfeld put it, is an important tool, "but it does not transport meanings or concepts" (Fosnot 1996:7).

A curriculum unit based on such principles and used in some of my local public schools is *Greenprints for changing schools* (Greig, Pike & Selby 1989). One of its themes is that change is a personal process through which individuals discover personal meaning. Change is facilitated, not directed. Teachers are released from being "tour guides." Instead, they involve students in negotiating the learning process in an open and participatory setting. This is done so that students "realize that one creates one's own reality" (24). Students are told, "You are the centre of the world. You are a free, immensely powerful source of life and

goodness. Affirm it. Spread it. Radiate it. Think day and night about it. And you will see a miracle happen: the greatness of your own life," leading to a new form of happiness (26). The curriculum highlights the shortcomings of a mechanistic worldview. At the same time, it naively assumes that a "holistic sense of spirituality" and "organic organizations" will bring about honest and caring schooling, with "natural" and "emergent" processes (27-32).

While this curriculum can be lauded for stressing responsible ecological stewardship, one wonders whether and how, with students creating their own reality, there can be any common perception of "the great, simple and so effective concepts of love, peace, compassion, truth, purity, goodness, humility, faith, divinity, the heart, the soul, resurrection, infinity and eternity" (32). If these are to be "luminous pillars of human civilization," then more is needed than a rejection of Cartesian thought and a personal choice from a smorgasbord of Hindu and humanist conceptions. This curriculum assumes that utopia can be brought about through open-ended, personal meaning-making about these key concepts. We need only to look inward, into ourselves, for meaning.

The basic problem with constructivism is that since people construct their own knowledge and meanings, many viable realities exist. Ultimately, then, we no longer share important commonalities. We no longer have to recognize common human bonds and values. The most we can say is that for individuals, or groups some constructions may be more viable than others at a particular time and in a particular context. All personal choices become legitimate. In the end, one model of reality and one set of values is as good as any other. If personal meaning justifies constructions of knowledge and meaning, then rampant and self-centered relativism results (Airasian & Walsh 1997:448). Personal voice supplants authority and community. Many constructivists duck this issue by claiming that some constructions are obviously better than others. But as soon as teachers apply certain standards to show that some are superior, they compromise the basic tenet of constructivism. They no longer give students full freedom to construct meaning for themselves. This, it seems to me, is the inevitable Achilles' heel of constructivism.

Constructivism can be seen as a manifestation of postmodernism. If there is one postmodern notion that has become as pervasive in our culture as the air we breathe it is that there are no universal standards that exist independently of human choice. Therefore values, including moral ones, are constructions that vary from culture to culture and change over time. In the classroom, therefore, children must have a completely open mind on value matters as they construct their own defensible value framework. However, to allow students to choose their values freely means that we may have to sanction lack of respect or cruelty or dishonesty. In the end, constructivism undermines any sense of common ethical responsibility and accountability. It is doubtful that its narrow focus on individual construction of meaning can nurture students to become responsible and responsive contributors to a compassionate and just society (Hyttén 1994).

Note that for the radical constructivist there is little point in developing curricula at all since students should be the main determiners of learning activities. That is why books and articles on constructivism generally limit themselves to examples of how teachers have implemented constructivist strategies in the classroom, or to discussing topics such as “Science and affect,” “Styles and students,” or “Time, talk and teachers” (Baker & Piburn 1997). The curriculum, in other words, consists mainly of processes, not content. In fact, a student-initiated constructivist curriculum may be rich in topics such as death and dying and ecology—but will severely truncate the present scope of the curriculum. The latter also results from the immense amount of classroom time required. Imagine initiating activities without giving explicit directions, stimulating new constructions about knowledge, and then responding to all the different and complex student constructions in open-minded and enriching ways (Airasian & Walsh 1997). Just think of students trying to construct their own long division algorithms or effective forms of government in this way.

Let me sum up where our three curriculum episodes have brought us. On the one hand, postmodernists and constructivists are right. The personal narratives of our students and of ourselves are important as we consider and plan

curriculum. To impose one centrally planned curriculum on all schools, as state and provincial departments as well as publishers would do, does not work. Our planning needs to take into account where we, students, teachers, parents, communities, and culture, are. Moreover, curriculum encompasses pedagogical strategies as much as it does content. Learning, to be meaningful, does require students to be actively involved and take responsibility.

But, on the other hand, postmodernists and constructivists are wrong. There is a created reality governed by God-given absolute

Constructivism temporarily unites many who oppose passive learning, thoughtless regurgitation, and rigid classroom structures. But beware!

laws. There *are* interpretations and “constructions” that are more right than others—and some that are wrong. And students do not always have to form their own “constructions” to be active learners. That would be too complex and too time-consuming. Constructivism also implicitly rejects the value of our cultural and our Christian heritage. It fosters individualism where we need to forge community. It undermines the certainty and relevance of a common faith and ethic. Constructivists are wrong. Students do not just need *construction*. Rather, they also need *instruction* about basic concepts, skills and, especially, God-given universal values—even as we use the strategies of active learning that constructivists have tried to co-opt for themselves. Ultimately the constructivist agenda leads to death, not life.

Can Christian teachers enliven curriculum?

Contrary to the basic tenets of constructivism, the Bible tells us that we live in a well-ordered reality. That order does not result from human

construction. Rather, it is God's created gift that God faithfully sustains. God calls humans to be stewards of that creation, not to exploit it. In the process, we see through a glass darkly and develop personal interpretations of our experiences. Those interpretations, however, are better or worse renderings and readings of a reality that exists. Some are more valid than others because they are closer to God's laws and intentions for His creation, whether those be the laws of nature or the precepts He has established for human life. No doubt some of us see more clearly than others as we interpret God's Word in nature and in Scripture. All our knowledge is provisional and open to redirection. However, we are not sovereigns in our own private constructivist kingdoms, but God's ambassadors called to promote mercy, healing, and justice as we unfold God's creation.

In schools, that means that as teachers you are much more than facilitators of personal constructions. You are *guides* who share insights as you help students develop and use their insights and gifts in responsible and responsive ways. You enable your students to function as competent, principled, and compassionate persons. Especially in a cultural context of ethical relativism to which constructivism contributes, you want your students to embrace a religious, moral, and social framework grounded in a defensible Biblical worldview. You want your students to hear what God's Spirit says to them about their calling in our cultural context. Your teaching needs to be *enlivening*, *transforming*, and *transcending*. I will say something about each of these adjectives.

First, how can our teaching be *enlivening*? We are not concerned with content and skills only. Neither, however, do we just want students to construct meaning without a well-grounded framework of beliefs and values. Our teaching enlivens—our teaching is vital or life-affirming—because it recognizes that God speaks to us in and through our physical and social worlds. God created a wonderful world, even if it is today marred by sin. God also gave us basic norms that guide our living (Psalm 19). We encourage and enable our students to respond with their unique gifts. Let's not implicitly accept relativistic post-

modernism on the one hand or rigid traditionalism on the other. Let's help our students explore what the Bible says about creation, compassion, justice, peace, and spirituality. This is especially important because these terms are regularly used by postmodernists today but with meanings very different from a Biblical perspective. Let's help students analyze how Biblical norms can be applied to issues like sexual morality, family living, war, racism, poverty, ecological stewardship, genetic engineering, and so on. Let's help students become excited about serving our Lord Jesus Christ by learning and using such learning in God-glorifying ways. Let's make our classrooms enlivening experiences for our students.

How can our teaching be *transformative*? As Christians we embrace the only way of life that is redemptive. While we recognize the power of sin, we also know that there is hope in Jesus Christ. Let's help students become sensitive to what God's creational intent of love, peace, and justice means for them and their communities. Let's help them experience compassion and justice. Let's incorporate strategies that rely on teamwork in posing, analyzing and solving problems so that students will learn how to solve or address personal and societal problems—from conflicts with fellow students to dealing with racism and other forms of injustice. Our programs must be based on a Biblical, transforming vision. No program can transform in and by itself, of course. It also requires the students' commitment, reflection, discernment and hard work, and, above all, the transforming power of God's Spirit. That is why we need to regularly call students to a personal commitment that is reflected in how they live—the weakness of the Reformed community in this respect has been disheartening and has grave consequences.

Finally, how can our programs be *transcendent*? Our programs should encourage learners to respond in and through their learning in their own unique ways, by trying out new possibilities, by enriching their personal lives and their environments, by committing themselves to certain values and courses of action. Let's stimulate them to use their discernment and creativity in developing new perspectives of seeing and responding to God's world, deepening and

extending their understanding of the concepts and principles. At all levels from kindergarten to grade 12, let's animate them to take initiatives and risks, to develop ideas on their own, craft their own response, using their own gifts to best advantage.

The adjective *transcendent* also has a religious meaning. And that applies here, too. Can our programs help our students "work out their salvation with fear and trembling" so that they may "shine like stars in the universe as [they] hold out the word of life" to those around them (Phil. 2)? Can they help our students transcend ethical relativism, self-centered individualism, and instant gratification, not just in word but in deed? Of course, no matter what our curriculum, we won't succeed with all. But—and now I come back to my original point—if we passively accept that curriculum development is dead or may as well be dead, then we fail to be instruments of the Spirit in bringing about vitality, transformation, and transcendence in the lives of our students. So let me conclude with an example of the type of curriculum development that, I believe, can foster discipleship.

An example of meaningful, realistic curriculum development

Several of British Columbia's Christian schools have been working on a grade eight humanities curriculum. Humanities is an integrated study of past and present human relationships and actions. Students learn to see the connections between themselves and the world around them by exploring and examining their relationship with God, each other, the past, their own and other cultures, and creation. The content comprises themes and issues from Biblical studies, English, and social studies. Three units are *Community and Culture*, *Kingdom Building*, and *Taking a Stand* (Society of Christian Schools 1996). The content of the units as well as the way they were developed and implemented is instructive.

Let's take a look at the unit *Taking a Stand*. Teachers from three schools that had developed a humanities curriculum got together in the summer of 1995 and pooled their ideas. They agreed to pilot their initial draft in order to refine

the unit. They defined the unit's thematic statement, learning outcomes, and focus questions as follows:

In each generation and culture the Spirit of God moves people to take a stand in pursuit of truth. Taking a stand involves personal commitment and a willingness to question those traditions which distort the discovery of truth. A personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the foundation of all truth: His world illumines all human understanding.

The unit is intended to help students:

- understand the Gospel's message of salvation by faith alone as expressed in Paul's letters.

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constructionist textbook.
It goes against the
philosophy.”*

- understand that the pursuit of truth, which drives many individuals to observe, question, challenge, experiment and defend their convictions, often involves personal suffering.
- see the sovereignty and love of God as He continually calls His Church to repent and to proclaim His message through a walk of faith.

Focus questions:

- How do people's beliefs influence their lives?
- What are the characteristics of individuals who make a difference?
- What kind of stand does Christ call us to take?

The unit consists of four main parts:

- Paul's life, how he took a stand, and, specifically, his letter to the Galatians. The study of Galatians does not only provide the link between Paul's writings and Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses, but also confronts students with questions about their own life: How did Paul take a stand? What is the depth of Paul's message for you, and us, today? Which of the following beliefs and practices do you think are necessary to being a Christian (e.g., praying to God, baptizing believers, marrying a Christian)? One student assignment is to create a brochure promoting the Christian faith using the theological themes of the letter of *Galatians*.

- *The Renaissance and Reformation*, focusing on why individuals such as Wycliffe and Luther took certain stands. Students write a research paper and a biography. They also write a report on how an historical or current religious leader has made a difference in people's lives, and how a religiously-based group such as World Vision has improved the lives of others in our world.
- the novel, *Cue for Treason*, and
- the television play, *Twelve Angry Men*, with students learning about television as a medium and focusing on the statement of one juror, "It takes a great deal of courage to stand alone."

A concluding activity is entitled, *How should we then live?*:

We seek to discover the patterns, themes, and trends. We would like to learn from the victories and the mistakes of others. Begin by thinking about the things that interested you most about the areas that we studied. Then search for an underlying theme, for example: loyalty, cowardliness, courage, perseverance, compassion, integrity, creativity, godliness, etc. The theme you choose will be used for both your position paper and your speech. The examples you use come from the cultures we have studied. The application should be specific to what you feel is important for us to remember in the way we live our lives today. Choose a topic that is important to you. Your speech and position paper will be more powerful if you believe your topic is important.

Topic ideas range from "It is more fun to live in 1997 than at any other time in history . . ." to "I believe our society has lost the faith that Christ, Paul, and the Reformers died for . . ." to "We need to follow the example of our Christian forefathers and make a difference in our world . . .".

Without going into details, note how the unit takes a very different view of knowledge and values than does constructivism, and yet allows for a great deal of student response. God's Word is held central as the authoritative truth for our lives. History is looked at in terms of human response to God's creation mandate and His Great Commandment. While human interpretation and bias are not denied, the unit recognizes the importance of actual historical happenings and cultural development: history is more than arbitrary human constructions. Students grapple with their personal

beliefs and values within the context of the existence of certain absolutes which they can follow or rebuff in their lives. Yet the learning goes much beyond passive memorization or simple interpretation. The unit includes a wide variety of learning activities and continually calls for personal response and action. In that sense it is soundly rooted in a biblical understanding of knowledge.

The development and use of this humanities program is also instructive. First, teachers in each school worked on school-based programs, with several principals giving pairs of teachers some joint planning time a couple of times a week. Once teachers had tried various approaches, they then saw the benefit of getting together for a couple of weeks and pooling insights and experiences, and drew up a joint program with the help of the district curriculum coordinator. The joint program, I believe, was superior to any of the three original parts. But note that the three schools, while working together, still maintain their individuality. For instance, one school substitutes a study of *Romans* and *Corinthians* for *Galatians*. Another puts more emphasis on the importance of the Great Commission in the lives of heroes of the faith, and has an extensive service project as an integral part of the unit.

To announce the death of curriculum development at the local level is premature if this project is any indication. No doubt it takes more time than "teaching the text." But if several teachers and schools learn to cooperate, and principals make sure that no teacher is overwhelmed with work, and districts perhaps pay small stipends for summer work by groups of teachers that would benefit all schools, then we can continue to develop approaches to curriculum that distance our schools from the oft-narrow formalism of state-developed course outlines on the one hand and from a constructivism that undermines a Biblical approach to knowledge and truth.

We have no choice. If we intend our programs to enliven and transform our students so that they can transcend the prevailing secularism and relativism of our age, then we have no choice but to continue to develop curricula that reflect Biblical views of knowledge and the person, and that challenge students to take up their calling before the face of our God.

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