



DORDT COLLEGE

Digital Collections @ Dordt

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

2-25-2020

Hidden Curriculum: Stumbling Along the Trail Towards Faith Formation

David J. Mulder

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

Hidden Curriculum: Stumbling Along the Trail Towards Faith Formation

Abstract

"I believe it's important to recognize that faith formation is not actually a human endeavor."

Posting about ideas, assumption, and attitudes conveyed in classrooms from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/hidden-curriculum-stumbling-along-the-trail-towards-faith-formation/>

Keywords

In All Things, curriculum, faith, Christian life, words

Disciplines

Christianity | Education

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

in things

February 25, 2020

Hidden Curriculum: Stumbling Along the Trail towards Faith Formation

Dave Mulder

Imagine walking along a path through a field or forest as part of a group of travelers, following a guide. In this mental picture, as we walk along the path we'll get to notice many things that are right along our pathway, because the course we are walking is designed to take us to particular points of interest. A good guide will be sure to help us take notice of things on our path, calling our attention to the landmarks. Along our way, we might also get glimpses of other interesting things off in the distance. These aren't really on the path we are traveling, but they might be part of the same field or forest and so our guide might just refer to these, but not emphasize them since they aren't on our path. There might also be particular areas of the landscape we avoid, that are excluded from our journey. These might be dull, or dangerous, or require special preparation to traverse, and a good guide is aware of these demands—ensuring that the travelers are safe and cared for well.

At a literal level, this image of a path is a good way to understand what we mean by "curriculum." The word "curriculum" comes from a Latin root, *currere*, which means "path" or "course." A curriculum is quite literally the "path to follow" in a formal learning situation.

Most curricula are planned carefully and intentionally to ensure learning, assuming you follow that well-defined path. If you are serving as a teacher, mentor, or youth leader for children, teens, or young adults, you will likely understand the benefits of a well-designed curriculum. As you serve as a guide for them along the curriculum path, good

resources help you point out not-to-be-missed vistas as well as troublesome patches to be traveled with care.

But, this planned curriculum is not the only thing that gets conveyed to the young people in our care. If you are planning to teach, mentor, or minister to children, teens, or young adults, I encourage you to begin by checking your assumptions. The words we use are one thing. The ideas—and especially the unspoken ideas—that lie behind these words are another.

A friend once shared a story with me about her son and an eye-opening experience he had as a middle schooler. Let's call him Jake, though that's not his real name. Jake came home from the Christian school he attended one day, and when Mom asked about his day, Jake responded, "Pretty good, but today I realized that I am not part of the 'we.'"

"What do you mean?" Mom inquired.

"Well," Jake replied, "Teachers are always saying things like, 'We go to church twice on Sunday,' or 'We vote Republican,' or 'We believe the Earth is 6,000 years old.'"

Mom's eyebrows went up. "And...?"

"I just realized that when they say, 'we,' teachers are implying that all Christians think the same about these things. And even though I am a Christian, I'm pretty sure I don't think the same as my classmates and teachers about all of these things. I'm not part of the 'we.'"

My friend and her family are definitely Christians, but I would say that they are more moderate or even left-leaning politically. Compared to many of their neighbors and friends from church and the local Christian school, they are more progressive on social issues, and perhaps even theological issues. So, it's probably no wonder Jake might start to realize that some of his family's values are different than the values held by many of his teachers and classmates.

Jake astutely perceived that he is not part of the "we" that was being assumed by his teachers. Behind that collective *what we think* is a set of assumptions that often goes unstated and unexamined. Each of us has these kinds of assumptions, after all. Jake's teachers—in good faith, I believe—expressed their assumptions in a way that was intended to foster togetherness, believing that everyone in the community shared that same set of assumptions. This was, in fact, not the case. The assumption made by the teacher led to some cognitive dissonance for Jake. The collective "we" that was likely

meant to be community-building instead prompted Jake to feel isolated and disenfranchised.

I would suggest that in the story I shared, Jake's teachers could have paid more attention to the "hidden curriculum" of their instruction. Most teachers and youth workers pay close attention to the explicit curriculum of their courses and programs. The explicit curriculum is the plan for what they will teach and how they will teach it. It's made up of the teaching resources, texts, and experiences designed to help students learn and develop. The explicit curriculum is usually pretty easy to spot, because it is, well, explicit. Anyone even glancing into the classroom will be able to get a sense for the explicit curriculum, because it's all right out there in the open.

In contrast, the hidden curriculum is not so obvious. The hidden curriculum is made up of all of those unstated, implicit assumptions that are present in the room. The hidden curriculum is also all of the things we deliberately leave *out* of the curriculum, the things we intentionally *do not* teach. The hidden curriculum may not be intentionally, explicitly *taught*. But the ideas, assumptions, and attitudes that make up the hidden curriculum are certainly *caught*.

Faith formation often seems to happen that way, after all. Kids catch our meaning, and sometimes even the things we don't realize we are conveying to them. I think that an awareness of our own beliefs and attitudes and how they shape our view of the world is something everyone who works with young people should be cultivating.

At the same time, I believe it's important to recognize that faith formation is not actually a human endeavor. Remember that it's the Holy Spirit at work in all of us that fans the flames of our faith. That said, I believe that the Spirit uses our small steps, the faith building blocks we pass along to the kids, to do the work of faith formation. He can and will use us, even in our imperfections and missteps.

So, this is our challenge: how open are we to letting the Spirit work? Those of us called to serve kids as teachers, mentors, youth workers and the like have the responsibility and opportunity to both model a life of faith as well as explicitly teach the way of the Lord to the next generation. Be ready! Use the resources at your disposal to guide the young people "on the trail with you" well. Check your assumptions, and express them with care. The bottom line for all of us—our kids, and for those of us who are more "grown up"—is the same: as Paul teaches in Philippians 1:6, we can be "confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."