

Database:

Education Research Complete

RATING CURRICULUM DOCUMENTS

Abstract

Because secondary-school programs undergo frequent revisions, curriculum documents representing the most recent curricular-decisions sometimes fail to receive as much attention as they deserve. This is a mistake. These documents, though transitory in nature, are the written expression of districts' and schools' curricular attentions. Poorly constructed documents send negative messages about district and school commitment to educational excellence. This article introduces quality criteria that can be used to assess the quality of documents. A rating scale has been developed that includes an operational definition for four rating points for each criterion of excellence. This rating scale is useful both for professionals charged with developing new curriculum documents and for those interested in assessing the adequacy of those that have already been prepared.

Introduction

Curriculum documents are the written expression of the curriculum. They communicate decisions that have resulted from planning processes that, sometimes, extend over several years. Curriculum documents include materials as diverse as district-level philosophy statements, course of study descriptions for parents, grade-level program documents, course guides, and instructional unit plans.

The "half-life" of many curriculum documents is not great. Changing conditions require frequent reviews of curriculum decisions of all kinds. For example, few secondary schools today would countenance a biology curriculum from the middle 1950's that featured extensive coverage of the importance of the discovery of the "Piltdown Man" . . . an event more contemporary scholarship has revealed to be a fraud. The effort to keep the curriculum tied to today's economic, political, scientific, and social realities requires us to monitor programs carefully, to make periodic adjustments, and to update curriculum documents to reflect these changes.

The transitory nature of curriculum documents sometimes results in a lack of careful attention to their preparation. This is a mistake. While individual documents are in force, they represent the best official thinking regarding the topics they address. For people who were not personally involved in making decisions incorporated within the documents, they often represent the only source of information about these issues. Curriculum documents codify actions of a school district's curriculum decision-making apparatus. They transmit information related to these action to a wide audience. Hence, they fulfill both public relations and communications functions.

Characteristics of Good Curriculum Documents

What are the attributes of a "good" curriculum document? My colleague, Robert Shutes, and I first addressed this topic 15 years ago.(n1) I Subsequent work has reduced the original list of twelve curriculum-document-quality criteria to seven. These are:

Legitimacy of the Document

Credibility of the Developers

Specification of Intended Learners

Specification of Intended Users

Specification of Document Purpose/Coverage

Clarity and Usability of Format and Organization

Evidence of Professional Editing and Reproduction

Legitimacy of the Document. This criterion requires that there be evidence the document has behind it the full authority of policy makers and leading administrators in the school district or other educational agency where it was produced. Absent this kind of information, users may well wonder whether the document has the force of official policy behind it or whether it was something put together as an interesting project by individuals having no official standing or backing.

Credibility of the Developers. Curriculum documents seek to communicate with people who were not personally involved in the deliberations leading to the decisions reflected in these materials. These external audiences are more receptive to the information contained in curriculum documents when they know something about the people who were involved in developing the content they contain. It is particularly important for there to be something about the professional backgrounds and expertise of these people. For example, secondary teachers are likely to take seriously instructional unit documents prepared by people with strong backgrounds in secondary education. Similarly, they often reject out of hand suggestions from those with expertise in elementary education. A commitment to be specific about the backgrounds of the developers in curriculum documents may encourage curriculum development teams to involve individuals who have backgrounds that will seem important to potential users of described programs.

Specification of Intended Learners. A review of curriculum documents in such collections as the Kraus Curriculum Development Library reveals that surprising numbers of these material fail to make mention of the particular learners for whom described programs, policies, and procedures are intended. This is a regrettable omission. Without this information, some document users may seek to implement programs in classrooms serving learners for whom the described program was never intended.

Some years ago, an outstanding social studies program was developed for the "most talented one-fourth" of the high school population. Somewhere along the line, information about this intended group got left out of the descriptive materials. Later, someone with only a hazy memory of the initial intended audience, thought to put in language suggesting that the curriculum was for "average and above average" learners. This definition included a much larger pool of people than were included in the "top one-fourth." When some instructors tried to use the described program with average high school students, they encountered serious problems and concluded that the described program was "not good." A brief paragraph in the initial document that specified clearly the intended learners would have avoided this difficulty.

Specification of Intended Users. Individual curriculum documents are designed for different audiences. Some are directed at parents. Others serve the needs of central office and school-level administrators. Still others are primarily of interest to classroom instructors. Nothing assures a quicker trip to the back of a seldom-opened drawer than presenting someone a curriculum document intended for a different kind of an audience.

For example, a central office curriculum director has little need for the specific instructional suggestions and sources of resource materials in an instructional unit document. Similarly, a third grade teacher has little day-to-day need for a comprehensive general curriculum management document that, in highly abbreviated form, explains the structure of a district's entire K-12 program.

This is not to say that professionals at different levels do not have some interest in aspects of professional life that go beyond their own responsibilities. However, their need is much greater for materials that speak specifically to needs associated with the particular roles they are playing. Information in curriculum documents that makes clear who the primary users are helps professionals decide the degree of relevance the material has for them and has much to do with the degree of attention they will devote to this information.

Scope of Document Purpose/Coverage. This criterion is related both to the issue of intended learners and intended users. It refers to the specificity with which information in a curriculum document references its purpose and its intended breadth of coverage. Is the document intended as a source of guidance for the management of an entire K-12 program in a school district? Or is it designed to highlight some major unit topics, generalizations, concepts, suggestions for instruction, examples of possible evaluation procedures, and suggested sources of materials for social studies instruction in grade 3? Because the scope of any document isn't all-encompassing, there may be references to the existence of other, related documents containing information going beyond its own purpose/coverage limitations.

Clarity and Consistency of Format and Organization. Professionals in education are pressed for time. Well-designed curriculum documents respond to this situation by using a presentation format that is clear and that allows users to identify individual document sections quickly. A good format might include a table of contents, consistent heading structures, a notation scheme to tie together common elements of content, and consistent use of terminology throughout. In addition, the level of detail provided in one part of the document should not vary markedly from that provided in another part. In practice, the lack of consistency often is reflected by material in the final one-fourth of a document featuring much less attention to detail than that introduced in the first three-fourths. Often this results because of time pressures faced by a curriculum-development team that has been forced to rush the last part of their work to meet a deadline.

Evidence of Professional Editing and Reproduction. Why is it that money for curriculum development seems to run out just at the point documents are to be printed and distributed? This may not happen as frequently as one might suppose, but, still, the quality of many curriculum document clearly signals tight-budget conditions. A failure to commit funds to prepare decent-looking curriculum documents is a false economy. Documents have been reproduced from spirit-masters or that include large numbers of spelling and typographical errors might as well include covers reading "This is not important." Poor packaging engenders indifference. Even a well-planned (and expensive) curriculum development effort may have minimal impact if potential users encounter it for the first time in a package that screams "low priority." Even though curriculum documents may have an official standing of only a few years before

they are revised and replaced, they need to be produced in ways that will help establish their importance with potential users.

Procedures for Rating

The seven criteria noted above can be used in several ways. For example, they can be provided to team members charged with making and packaging curriculum decisions for the purpose of encouraging them to consider these quality indicators as they do their work. As drafts are prepared, they can be checked against the criteria. The criteria can also be used to conduct a quality inventory of existing documents. Results can be used to establish priority areas for attention when documents are revised.

Figure 1 introduces a rating scale form titled "Evaluating a Curriculum Document." It features a four-point rating scale, with "1" being the lowest rating and "4" being the highest.

Rating scales present us with a consistency-of-measurement problem. This is true because individual raters tend to define meanings of each rating point in idiosyncratic ways. In an effort to overcome this difficulty, a companion document has been prepared titled "Curriculum Documents' Quality Criteria: Meanings of Rating Points." (See Figure 2.) This material attempts to provide descriptors for each rating point with sufficient specificity that interpretative differences among raters will be minimized.

Definitions of these rating points should not be regarded as definitive. It may be useful for groups of individuals to discuss these definitions and modify them as they deem appropriate. This kind of activity can lead to more interrater reliability when the scheme is applied to individual curriculum documents to individual criteria. This kind of discussion can also be a valuable team building activity.

Rating curriculum documents draws attention to important quality. Results pinpoint areas in need of attention. They provide a rationale for curriculum leaders to use as they prepare guidelines related to document preparation for individuals who are involved in curriculum-development activities. Careful attention to quality criteria can lead the preparation of curriculum documents that more effectively carry their "messages" to the people whose needs they are supposed to serve.

(n1) Armstrong and R.E. Shutes (December 1981). Quality in curriculum Documents: Some Basic Criteria. Educational Leadership, 39(3), 200-202.

Figure 1. Evaluating a Curriculum Document

Name(s) of Evaluator(s)

Document Title:

Where and When Produced:

Directions: Assign a rating to the document form " 1 " to " 4 " on each of the criteria listed below. [For an explanation of meaning of rating points, see material titled "Curriculum Documents' Quality Criteria: Meanings of Rating Points."]

Criterion	Rating
Legitimacy of the Document	
Credibility of the Developers	
Specification of Intended Learners	

Specification of Intended Users
Specification of Document Purpose/Coverage
Evidence of Professional Editing and Reproduction

TOTAL RATING OF THE DOCUMENT (add scores)

Figure 2. Curriculum Documents' Quality Criteria: Meaning of Rating Points

A. Legitimacy of the Document

1. No indication anywhere that the document is connected to a specific school district or other educational agency.
2. Name of issuing school district or other educational agency appears, but there are no printed names of responsible officials.
3. Name of issuing school district or other educational agency appears along with a printed list of responsible officials.
4. Name of issuing school district or other educational agency appears along with a printed list of responsible officials and with a facsimile signature of at least one top administrative official.

B. Credibility of the Developers

1. Names of developers do not appear in the document
2. Names of developers appear, but there is no references to their training or expertise in areas related to the subject of the document.
3. Names of developers appear, but for fewer than one half of their total number there are references to their training or expertise in areas related to the subject of the document.
4. Names of developers appear and, for one half or more of these developers, there are references to their training or expertise in areas related to the subject of the document.

C. Specification of Intended Learners

1. There is no reference in the document to the specific population of learners for whom the described program is intended.
2. References to intended learners are very general in nature, describing only such broad groups as "adult learners," "school-aged learners," and "pre-school learners."
3. References to intended learners specify grade levels and/or age levels of people to be served by the described program.
4. References to intended learners identify specific grade levels and/or age levels and go beyond this information to point out presumed learning characteristics of this population (e.g. "gifted and talented," "auditorially handicapped," and so forth).

D. Specification of Intended Users

1. There are no references to categories of individuals who are expected to be primary users of the document.
2. Information regarding intended users is provided in only the most general of terms ("educators," "professional staff," and so forth).

3. Information regarding intended users is specific and makes particular references to categories of individuals for whom the document is intended (building principal, central office curriculum supervisor, classroom teacher, parent, and so forth).
4. Information regarding intended users is specific and makes particular references to categories of individuals for whom the document is intended and provides reasons why these named categories of individuals will find information in the document helpful.

E. Specification of Document Purpose/Coverage

1. There are no references regarding the purpose of the document (e.g. management of an overall district program, a broad statement of philosophy, instructional unit plan).
2. The document is explicitly labeled as to its purpose (scope and sequence document, grade-level program guide, course of study for a high school, and so forth).
3. The document is explicitly labeled as to its purpose, and there is descriptive material elaborating on this purpose within the document.
4. The document is explicitly labeled as to its purpose, there is descriptive material elaborating on this purpose within the document, and there is information related to other kinds of curriculum documents that might be of interest to other users.

F. Clarity and Consistency of Format and Organization

1. There is no description of a formatting plan provided, and there is no evidence that an undescribed format has been implemented consistently throughout the document.
2. A description of a formatting plan for the document is provided, but this format is implemented consistently in fewer than one-third of total document pages.
3. A description of a formatting plan for the document is provided, and this plan is implemented consistently on pages comprising between one-third and two-thirds of total document pages.
4. A description of a formatting plan for the document is provided, and this plan is implemented consistently on pages comprising more than two-thirds of the document total.

G. Evidence of Professional Editing and Reproduction

1. Document is printed from spirit-masters (ditto masters); or, there are spelling and mechanical usage errors on 25 percent or more of the total number of document pages.
2. There are spelling and mechanical usage errors on 10 to 24 percent of total document pages, or document is mimeographed.
3. Document is printed using electronic copying devices, an off-set press, or other commercial printing technology, and there are spelling and mechanical usage errors on fewer than 24 percent of total document pages.
4. (a) Document is printed using electronic copying devices, an off-set press, or other commercial printing technology, (b) there are spelling and mechanical usage errors on fewer than 10 percent of total document, and (c) if the document is 20 pages or more in length, there is a professional binding.

References

Armstrong, D.G., & Shutes, R.E. (1981). Quality in curriculum documents: some basic criteria. *Educational Leadership*, 39 (3), 200-202.

~~~~~

By David G. Armstrong, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

---

Copyright of High School Journal is the property of University of North Carolina Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

[Back](#)