

National Educational Dilemma: What Does a Student Need to Know? Answer? Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this article seek to deconstruct traditional thinking about education while introducing a postmodern view of curriculum development. *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning*, an exhaustive work by Dr. William Kritsonis, distinguished writer, lecturer, and editor provides curriculum leaders an important tool by which they may shape a new way of looking at things to develop that reflects new and changing realities. Curriculum can be developed that will continue to be relevant and vital for each successive generation as definitions of quality, integrity, and language are continuously revisited. The bottom line is that the conceptual framework can be a useful paradigm for curriculum selection and development that will continue to be fresh and useful. The *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* provides a key to success in education because it gives a legitimate blueprint to “What does a person need to know?”

This purpose of this article is to show how the personal experiences of the authors can be viewed and reinterpreted through a conceptual framework *Realms of Meaning*, first introduced by Phenix (1986) and later revised and expanded upon by Kritsonis (2007) in *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning*. Dr. Kritsonis studied with Dr. Phenix when Kritsonis was a Visiting Scholar at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York. Implementing this framework as a process for selecting curriculum is a significant and important task for educators. Each educator is called upon to answer to one question: “What does a person need to know?” The answer to this question will be reexamined with each new generation.

What did early man need to know? Archaeologists tell us that primitive man needed to know how to survive. There were motivating factors that enabled early man to learn how to survive. Basic necessities such as shelter, food, water, light, and protection from the elements were central to his need to know. Learning to control his environment and share survival techniques with successive generations were the basics of man’s education. Each generation is faced with same perennial question, “What does a person need to know?”

Modern society has placed a mask on the things that man needs to know. *Ways of Knowing Through Realms of Meaning* provides a useful device for removing the masks of misunderstanding providing guidance to man. The educator needs to understand human nature. Man needs to understand people in their actualities, in their possibilities, and in their idealities. He must also know how to foster desirable changes in people. Survival alone no longer addresses modern man’s knowledge needs.

There are many different types of investigations interested in the exploration of human nature. No single genre of inquiry has a monopoly on knowledge about man. Each kind of investigator sees man from a particular perspective. Each is well equipped to explain certain aspects or dimensions of humanity. To solve many dilemmas that are required for greater understanding one naturally turns to the scientists and scholars who have made the study of human beings their concerns. Other scholarship comes from the philosophical arena. The *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* points out that biologists consider man as one species of animal, the most highly developed of all forms of living things within the evolutionary sequence. This is the basis for concrete support of the realms of meaning. Economists describe man as a producer and consumer of material goods and services, with wants that always outrun resources, and hence, with the need to invent social mechanisms for the allocation of the limited resources. Moralists portray man as a moral agent, with a consciousness of right and wrong. They see him as free and responsible, fashioning his own destiny through a continuing series of moral decisions.

After we have removed the mask of misunderstanding on what man needs to know, the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* provides the four dimensions of meaning. This is a clear path to setting the stage for selecting curriculum for the development of the complete person. The first dimension of meaning is “experience.” A meaning is an experience, in the sense that it pertains to human consciousness. In self-consciousness a person is both himself and yet stands outside himself as an observer. He is at once both subject and object; knower and known; agent and patient; observer and observed. This duality is what enables a person to know anything at all. The second

dimension of meaning is “rule, logic, or principle.” Many types of meaning are distinguished from one another by some difference in characteristic. Each type of meaning has its own rule that makes it one kind of meaning and not another. The third dimension of “meaning is selective elaboration.” There is no limit to the varieties of meaning. These are the kinds of meanings that have proven fruitful in the development of cultural heritage. It should not be assumed that the universe of meanings is exhausted by the particular collection of meanings that have been elaborated in any given civilization at any given stage in its history and that are represented by a corresponding collection of scholarly disciplines. The fourth dimension of meaning is expression. Meanings that have civilizing power are communicable. They are not private property.

The communication of meanings takes place through “symbols.” Symbols are objects that stand for meanings. The possibility of symbolization is dependent on the unique human power of self-transcendence. The dual quality of reflective awareness is required to understand a symbol. This duality lays the groundwork for selecting curriculum for the development of the complete person. Each kind of meaning has its distinctive expression. The proper aim of education is to promote the growth of meanings. To fulfill this aim, the educator needs to understand the kinds of meaning that have proven effective in the development of civilization and to construct a curriculum based on these meanings. To simplify curriculum planning it is necessary to divide the many scholarly disciplines into broad categories so that a balanced allocation of in depth studies may be made.

It is through symbols that we move into ordinary language. We can look at the first realm in the *Realms of Meaning*, “symbolics” and derive from it the nuts and bolts of ordinary language. This is critical for selecting curriculum for the development of the complete person. Ordinary human language is the most significant link between curriculum and development of the complete person. Anywhere on earth, man will learn to speak the language of his immediate environment. This enables him to use meaningful symbols for communication. This is critical to the development of the complete person.

In *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning*, Kritsonis (2007) explains what should be taught in order to maximize meanings. There are five principal components: mastery, belonging to a community, many-sidedness, integrity, and quality. Kritsonis (2007) argues that it is not necessary to choose only while rejecting the others. Since a study may extend over many years, sometimes for the greater part of a lifetime, it is possible to achieve fulfillment of meaning in more than one way. In the long run it is possible to achieve fulfillment in all the ways suggested by Phenix (1986) and Kritsonis (2007).

To restate the central question, “What should be taught?” The perennial question of each generation is “What does a person need to know?” The answers are imbedded in the conceptual framework provided by Phoenix (1986) and Kritsonis (2007). *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* is a process for selecting curriculum for the development of the complete person.

We will base our curriculum on integrity and quality. Quality is necessary. We recommend maintaining quality at the forefront of the curriculum. Quality is a moving target. A quality education in 1750 is not the same as quality in the 1890. The target had moved. In early 1930’s in America, education was provided by the narrowly defined elite

class much as it has been for centuries. The emerging elites of that era were the “known” educators and social scientists. Definitions of quality were provided by the best and the brightest minds.

In 1965, one of the authors (Clarence Johnson or affectionately known as **CJ**) started on his journey in education by teaching seventh grader mathematics. CJ had learned mathematics from gifted public school teachers and a highly qualified college professor. He knew quality when he encountered it. When quality is taught and embraced, everything else becomes unimportant. CJ taught minority students in an integrated school district located in a diverse community. Because he had been taught by quality people as a student he had acquired the same traits. Some of his students went on to become teachers and administrators. Quality was inserted into the minds of the next generation. Quality is a moving target. As expectations for success continue to rise, quality rises accordingly.

In 1975 the CJ’s students learning mathematics using paper, pencil, slide rule, abacus, chalk, chalkboard, quality, and integrity. Today’s students learn with pencil, chalk, chalkboard, calculator, computer, quality, and integrity. Primitive man utilized the primitive tools, quality, and integrity. We are convinced that quality remains the same even when the technology changes. Integrity is the same because a sense of rightness and wrongness tend to remain consistent throughout the existence of man.

In implementing the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* as a curriculum selection process the development of the complete person will likely result from the commitment to quality and integrity.

Quality is colorblind. Quality is not poor or rich. Quality does not discriminate. It is not gender biased. Quality is found in all communities and in all segments in our society. Integrity is the other mainstay in the ways of knowing through the realms of meaning. The *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* gives a blue print of “What does a person need to know?” Phenix (1986) and Kritsonis (2007) emphasize integrity as an integral part of the realms of meaning. Both emphasize that the main objective is to secure a coordination of whatever meanings are acquired into a coherent whole. The evil to be avoided is inner division and partiality.

Each person should possess a significant range of meanings in his own self without depending for the significance of his life upon his position in the social whole. That is, he should become relatively independent, with rich inner resources for meeting a variety of situation and exigencies. The materials of learning also need to be capable of assimilation by the particular person so that they may contribute to his integral selfhood. I taught my students that when integrity is lost, nothing matters. We must remain true to our convictions.

Clarence Johnson taught seventh grade mathematics to students. His students could add, subtract, multiply, divide fractions, decimals, and whole numbers after completing his instructional demands. CJ’s students learned mathematics for the right reason. Cheating in mathematics to earn a passing grade was an example of lack of integrity. His students were taught to solve the problems in mathematics independently and correctly or lose the integrity and quality of learning mathematics. Integrity is a cornerstone of “What a person needs to know?”

In conclusion, implementing the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* provides an infrastructure for selecting curriculum that will lead to development of the complete person. These are language, quality, and integrity. Educators can build a curriculum with these three cornerstones that will remain constant throughout generations. Higher education thrives today because campuses maintain a high degree of integrity. America is the home of many immigrants. When we use like symbols for an extended period time, people of different nationalities countries speak our language. As a nation we speak a language of love and cooperation long enough for immigrants to cope, become citizens, and later speak the common language. We maintain quality in public education and are producers of goods and services. Our industries are rich in technology because quality is a moving target and technologies both influence and are influenced by these changes. Our public schools were equipped with paper and mimeograph machines in the 1950's. Today classrooms are filled with chemistry labs and computers.

We keep our sights on quality as it continues to shift and change. The authors are convinced that in the year of 2250 curriculum will contain language, quality, and integrity. Quality is shaped by the values of a generation. During the industrial revolution manufacturing skills were highly valued. During the space age quality in science, mathematics, and engineering were sought. At the turn of the twenty-first century, integrity was a major platform for U.S. presidential candidates. Many public schools in the U.S. have changed the curriculum to teach character and integrity. Finally, integrity, language, and quality imbedded in the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* are what a person needs to know.

References

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