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A CURRICULUM DESIGN  
BASED ON COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY  
FOR TEACHING NARRATIVE AND DRAMATIC LITERATURE  
IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

by

Richard J. Zbaracki

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Secondary Education

Under the Supervision of Professor Galen Saylor

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**TITLE**

A Curriculum Design Based on Cognitive Psychology

for Teaching Narrative and Dramatic Literature

in the Secondary School

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**SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE**

**GRADUATE COLLEGE**

**UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA**

TO ALL MY TEACHERS

Particularly

Sister M. Frederick O.P.  
Sister Ruth Larkin O.S.B.  
Professor Zera S. Fink

and

Most Especially

Professor Herbert Slusser  
and  
Professor Galen Saylor

## PREFACE

This curriculum design was first conceived as a synthesis of subject-centered and student-centered elements. It grew in both directions during the study and returned, happily, to its original conception. Having been examined in these many lights, I hope that it is now ready for its test in the schools, under fire by the students with their teachers. Only then will it have fulfilled its real purpose--helping students grow through literature.

It is impossible for me to begin to thank all my professors, friends, and colleagues who have helped me in so many ways through the period of this study. For fear of forgetting even one, should I begin to name any, I shall single out my adviser, Dr. Galen Saylor, who has been professor and friend throughout the whole effort. Dr. Saylor has been a real mentor to me.

I should like also to thank my children--Paul, Mark, Sara, Peter, and Andrew--who have been quieter than children ought to be for so long a time. They have taught their father patience in the way that they have learned it.

But most of all, I should like to thank my wife, Jacqueline, my "sine qua non," without whom, nothing.

R.J.Z.

Ames, Iowa

August, 1969

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

No area in English education has caused as much concern for teachers as the teaching of literature. Even a cursory examination of publications dealing with the language arts will reveal this continuing concern. Though language and composition have begun to vie with literature for attention, as indeed they should, articles continue to reflect teacher interest in literature. The reason for such emphasis is easily understood, for literature has long been the mainstay of the English curriculum and the most important component for English teachers themselves. Historically teachers have had more education in literature than in any other component of the language arts. In the majors of most English teachers literary study will take a conservative two-thirds of their time. It is no wonder that the English curriculum in secondary schools finds literature to take the greatest share of time, slightly over fifty percent of it, according to a recent study by the National Council of Teachers of English. Because of this concern, there exists almost a plethora of publications about literary study. But we do not wish to denigrate this interest in literature, for it rightfully holds an important place in the curriculum and in the studies of the secondary school student. Indeed, this dissertation was motivated by the concern, how literature might be better organized and more effectively taught in the secondary

schools.

To give ourselves some perspective, we might examine briefly the basic approaches to and attitudes toward literary study that have been dominant over the years. Such approaches to both ends and means of literary study seem to emanate from the two ends that Horace saw long ago in literature, that literature be "dulce et utile," pleasurable and useful. How the terms are understood will vary from reader to reader, and to set up ends of this kind is probably to oversimplify the attitudes; however, to use the terms as a means to direct our thought will be of some help to us.

Literature viewed as pleasurable can be approached in a number of ways. From the view of those who "settle down with a good book," pleasurable is understood as escape from worldly problems; to such, literature is a kind of opiate, the view many have toward television, drama, and films. As escape, students and adults easily find what they seek in literature, a means to relaxation. But literature can be viewed as pleasure in another sense, almost completely opposite to the first, in an aesthetic sense, particularly as that term is understood to reflect one's interest in beauty and form. This view of literature is often that of the overly zealous aesthetician, who, knowing and enjoying literary art, finds pleasure in the study of detail, neglecting other, equally important aspects. The extreme of either position in the secondary schools can do damage to literary study for the student. The first position of literature as



escape, when carried to the extreme, cares too much for the enjoyment alone and not enough for other ends equally important to the student. Such an extreme concentrates on keeping the student happy in the belief that eventually he will pursue other interests in literature. While this view is somewhat superficial in its approach, the view of the aesthetician is narrowly deep, concerned with aspects of form, technique, and artistry for their sake. Placing impossible demands on the student who has had limited experience in the complexities of literary art, the teacher frustrates the student, causing him to view the whole of art as meaningless in its concern for beauty, and too often beauty in the abstract.

Both kinds of approaches exist in our schools today as do many variations of the two. Under the first category there exist free reading programs which show no concern for student growth in literary study. While it can be argued that we must begin where the students are, we must also be responsible for where they are going; too often free reading becomes casual and meaningless to the student; it is a program which too often provides freedom from teacher responsibility as well. The second attitude is often that of the fledgling teacher who comes armed with copious notes from college classes to disarm the student with great knowledge in literature; every literary work studied is analyzed in close and often meaningless detail until the student has no real understanding of literary study.

But equally damaging can be approaches from the position

of literature as utility, though less damaging in the long run than the preceding. Again we need to remind ourselves that the term useful can be understood in any number of ways. From this position literature is often understood as a means to instruction, to moral perfection. While literature is sometimes hortative in its purpose, literary study should not be; that is, though literature may seek improvement of man, the study of it should assist the student in seeing that purpose without becoming that purpose itself. Literature, when too narrowly conceived as moralistic, tends to direct the student to searching out morals in the work, too intent upon the search for meaning and less concerned for the means to that meaning.

When literature was designed as preparation for college work, it was seen as a means to cultural study; it was felt the student needed background in historical approaches to literature and firm grounding in classical literature. Literary study was useful as a means to a college education and as an ornament for the educated man. What happened to the man because of the literary experiences was often disregarded.

Such viewpoints reflect many curricula designs in literary study today. Concerned with the continuing interest in college education, many curricula continue to speak to what has traditionally been viewed as "necessary" for college entrance--strong background in historical coverage of American and English literatures, with now an interest in world literature. In High School English Today we are told:

Few new sequential patterns for organizing literary study were uncovered. The patterns familiar to most American teachers were common in these schools--thematic or typological study in grades nine and ten, American literature in grade eleven, English literature or world literature in grade twelve. Variations on this pattern saw some schools moving world literature to grade ten, or perhaps American to that level followed by a year of British and finally of world literature, but such tamperings with familiar categories and sequences had not resulted in demonstrably more effective programs. The study of American literature seems likely to continue almost everywhere at the junior level, albeit with somewhat more emphasis on twentieth-century writers.<sup>1</sup>

With good instruction in individual classrooms students can rise above such restrictions within their programs, but by and large the pattern tends to direct the study and binds the student to such ends. While college-bound students might overcome the restrictions, other students may not; for them great sources of knowledge will become inaccessible because they have been turned away by the concerns of educated adults.

The faults of such curricula seem to grow from the failure of their designers to consider first the end of literary study which rests on the very uses of literature itself.

René Wellek and Austin Warren have pointed out that

the use of poetry follows from its nature; every object or class of objects is most efficiently and rationally used for what it is, or is centrally. It acquires a secondary use only when its prime function has lapsed: the old spinning wheel becomes an ornament, or a specimen in a museum; the square piano, no longer capable of music, is made into a useful desk. Similarly, the nature of an

<sup>1</sup>James R. Squire and Roger K. Applebee, High School English Instruction Today (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), p. 96.

object follows from its use; it is what it does.<sup>2</sup>

If literature is experience, both pleasurable and useful, it of course brings both kinds of experience to the student. But the kinds of experience as well as the kinds of pleasure and use will vary with the intellectual and social maturity of the student. What the adult deems pleasurable and useful in literature may not be what the child finds pleasurable and useful. Indeed, it may be that the child sees no use in literature at all but finds it extremely pleasurable; however, as he grows socially, he may find great use in it as well as a new kind of pleasure. Wellek and Warren suggest that direction to us when they point out that the two ends of literature unite:

When a work of literature functions successfully, the two 'notes' of pleasure and utility should not merely coexist but coalesce. The pleasure of literature . . . is not one preference among a long list of possible pleasures but is a 'higher pleasure' because pleasure in a higher kind of activity, i.e., non-acquisitive contemplation. And the utility--the seriousness, the instructiveness--of literature is a pleasurable seriousness, i.e., not the seriousness of a duty which must be done or of a lesson to be learned but an aesthetic seriousness, a seriousness of perception.<sup>3</sup>

If we examine statements about the end of literary study, we find similar kinds of statements about the outcomes. Dora Smith tells us, for example, "Literature is for delight. It is for the enrichment of personal living and the deepening of

<sup>2</sup>René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

insight into human nature and human experience."<sup>4</sup> Again pleasure and usefulness unite. Dwight Burton comments that literature is a function of general education: ". . . literature makes a unique contribution to general education which aims at the development of an informed and adjusted citizen."<sup>5</sup> Here we see the emphasis on the usefulness of literary study. In 1908 William Macpherson said it particularly well:

Viewed from the standpoint of its subject-matter, the essential function of literature is to enlarge the scope of our ideas and sympathies, to enrich and develop our human nature, to teach us to see and appreciate rightly 'the varied spectacle and drama of life'; and it is this function that gives to the study of literature universal validity, a firm standing at all stages of the curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

This same concern was shown in the study groups at the Dartmouth Seminar as reported by Herbert Muller in Uses of English.

Again and again the end of literary study is expressed as a means to awareness of human experience, an understanding of the human condition. Man finds himself a microcosm in the universe. Through literature he can extend and enrich his knowledge of both; he can gain an awareness of self alone and self in relationship to society. As literature reveals

<sup>4</sup>Dora V. Smith, "How Literature is Taught," NEA Journal, XL (April, 1951), p. 287.

<sup>5</sup>Dwight L. Burton, "Literature for Social Development," English Journal, XLIII (May, 1954), p. 231.

<sup>6</sup>William Macpherson, Principles and Method in the Study of English Literature (Cambridge, England: Macmillan, 1908), p. 8.

values, ethical systems, the reader can grow, not in moral goodness, perhaps, but in an awareness of the values others hold and the ethical systems they follow. Personalities and social roles will be shown to him, not for adoption necessarily, but for extension of his own experience with people in their many roles. A limited view of self becomes a wider view; a simple view of values, a complex one; a slight view of human character, a more thorough one. Literature develops with the student as he grows to this "seriousness of perception."

But such is the end of literary study, not the beginning of it, nor even the middle of it. Our problem in the past, as in the present, has been in determining means to that end, how we can best design a pattern for literary education that will lead us to the uses of literature that we have outlined.

Though our attention has always been on these goals in one way or another, we have never had sufficient knowledge of our students and their patterns of intellectual and social growth. True, we have known their interests at certain ages, their emotional tendencies, their intellectual concerns, even their literary likes and dislikes. But we have had only limited knowledge of their thinking strategies, the acquisition and processing of information; and certainly we have had no knowledge of these factors in relationship to social development. Yet how the student thinks--how he approaches a work of literature, functions intellectually and emotionally within it or with it, deduces meaning from these processes--

is important to how we pattern his study of literature, how we assist him in reaching the ends we have commonly recognized over the years. If a pattern of growth does take place in such processing, certainly that pattern will affect how we present literary experiences to him. If that pattern of intellectual development parallels and contributes to a similar pattern of social development, then we will want to present literary experiences in light of that development as well. As we select such experiences we would want to keep in mind the ends of literary education that we have designated.

Such has been the purpose of this study. In the past few years a growing body of knowledge has developed around the work of Jean Piaget and his associates. Similar work to his in intellectual and social growth has been done with applications to education. The purpose of this study was to take that knowledge of intellectual and social growth as a base for a curriculum design in the study of narrative and dramatic literature only; thus, the design is not complete for the study of all literature. It was felt that the basic pattern would be sufficient, however, since other aspects of literary study could be included as others working from the design saw fit. Thus, as Wilbur Hatfield said in 1935 of An Experience Curriculum in English:

This is intended to be a pattern curriculum. A pattern is not itself to be worn; it is merely an instrument to assist in the cutting--often with allowances for the individual peculiarities of the wearer--of the cloth to make a dress or suit. So this outline of work in English . . . is to be regarded as illustrative, an exposition of important

curriculum principles through their systematic application. The reader is urged to keep constantly in mind this illustrative character of the details, and to center his attention upon the principles behind them.<sup>7</sup>

The study begins first with background in the psychological and social growth, developing rather carefully the patterns of growth from infancy through adolescence, including a rationale for the curriculum pattern. From there the curriculum is designed through seven stages, each stage including a description of the basic literary elements to be used and the ways they might be used in relationship to the patterns of development at that stage. A summary completes the study.

<sup>7</sup>W. Wilbur Hatfield, chairman, An Experience Curriculum in English (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1935), p. v.



## CHAPTER II

## Psychological Backgrounds

Christopher Alexander says, ". . . every design problem begins with an effort to achieve fitness between two entities; the form in question and its context. The form is the solution to the problem; the context defines the problem. . . . when we speak of design, the real object of discussion is not the form alone, but the ensemble comprising the form and its context."<sup>1</sup> While curriculum is apparently only subject matter, in fact the context is considerably larger and elements other than subject matter are an essential part of the context. Form must be seen then as more than simply structure or organization; it is understood here as the material that comprises the form. As in writing, the audience of curriculum influences the choice of organization as well as the material, and, of course, material influences the organizational pattern that the writer and curriculum planner will use. Form solves the problem, but context determines what selections will be made when form is designed.

Since education is a social concern, the implicit elements of context create a complex problem. Society obtrudes on education in numerous ways, and each factor that influences must be considered, no matter how great or small its final effect. Like the legislator, the curriculum planner must be

<sup>1</sup>Christopher Alexander, Notes on the Synthesis of Form (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 15-16.

sensitive to the many elements within his "constituency" if he is to design a curriculum which meets the needs of the learner, for the curriculum is for him as legislation is for the citizen. While no element can be dismissed, some elements can be considered primary and part of immediate context while others, still important, can be considered as less immediate and the concern of those who implement curriculum rather than the concern of those who design it. Cultural differences, for example, demand that learning experiences vary, for some experiences will motivate learning in some groups but not in others. Yet the basic design of the curriculum can remain the same. Background knowledge can be assumed for one group but not for others; therefore, variations will exist in approaches while basic design will remain the same. Such factors, however, cannot always be anticipated generally nor need they be if basic design is the basis from which the teacher works. While such factors do indeed affect the curriculum, they need not always be the primary concern of the curriculum designer; therefore levels of curriculum design can be established.

However, one might then ask what factors of context can be considered as essential to curriculum design. What factors become the primary concern of the designer of curriculum? It is obvious that curriculum is designed for learning. Thus, primary context can be narrowed to central elements involved in the learning process. These elements can be identified as the learner, the act of learning, and what is being learned.

Each is an essential part of the context which determines the form of any curriculum design. When learning is planned, an interaction of these three components needs to be planned, for learning is an activity of the learner and is determined not only by him but by the experience provided for him. When he learns subject matter, for example, he also learns the operations, that is, the intellectual actions or actions of thought peculiar to that subject matter. He learns to think about the subject matter and in it. Moreover, both the knowledge and the operations that he learns affect later learning about subject matter, for the knowledge and the operations determine his capabilities for later learning. Curricula are often designed around subject matter, but knowledge about subject matter is really only one effect of learning. The activity or operation within the subject is equally important. Subject matter determines both the operations and the field for experience in the operations. The learner learns the operations as he "experiences" the subject; therefore, he learns both the concepts of the subject and the processes through which the concepts are formed.

Subject matter determines operations, though operations themselves may cross over from one subject to another. One learns to classify in chemistry and in language; what it is that is classified in chemistry varies from that in language. He learns relations in biology and art; what he relates varies. From the various operations that the child learns, he can, of course, develop and organize a body of knowledge

about the subject, for he learns concepts as well. While he works with the elements in chemistry, he learns the operations involving them and thus he can begin to build a body of knowledge based on these operations and observations; from this, further knowledge can be developed. The concepts of art provide both a vocabulary within the subject and an understanding of operations used in the subject, but one must learn to think with the operations in the subject to develop further knowledge. When concepts are learned by rote, one does not learn the operations; only the vocabulary is learned. Thus one is virtually incapable of working with what he has learned. In one sense, he hasn't learned at all, for he has not learned how to think in the subject. The very small child learns the operations of language without ever having "stepped inside" a grammar class. He has learned the elements of the subject and their operations and has organized them into a system through which he learns more. Though he may not be able to name the elements, describe the operations, or design a language system, he has learned the operations of that language sufficiently to build on it. With a study of the operations, he could, however, begin to develop a body of knowledge about the subject. The relationship of operations to knowledge of the subject is important, then, to the act of learning and thus important to the designer of curriculum.

The context of curriculum design is narrowed then by these two elements--the act of learning and what is learned. But the curriculum designer must consider as well the nature

of the learner, when he considers particularly the act of learning. He must understand what operations the learner can handle and what affects him as he learns the operations. What are his capabilities at certain levels of growth? What influences these capabilities as he grows? The degree to which the student is interested in ideas as ideas and in what others think about his ideas will affect the way he approaches learning and his thoughts about what is being learned when he reaches adolescence. His development in attitude toward ideas as something of himself and of society is a factor to be reckoned with in curriculum design.

Interaction of these three elements--what is being learned, the act of learning, and the learner--is a primary concern of the context of curriculum design, for the very nature of learning involves these three elements intricately; therefore, before one can begin to consider curriculum design, he needs to consider some basic aspects of each. To consider one without the other is to miss the point of learning. What one might do, then, is consider the nature of intellectual operations which affect learning and some of the basic influences on the development of these operations. If one has a basic knowledge of such operations, he can consider how such processes apply to the study of a particular subject matter. Having done so, he then can design a form which contains a synthesis of operations and subject matter elements so that the development in the study of the subject matter is based upon the development of intellectual operations and factors

which influence the growth of those operations. Such is the plan that will be followed in this dissertation.

### The Development of Intelligence

It should be pointed out that, although this curriculum design is intended for the secondary schools, it is helpful to consider early growth in development of intellectual activities, for these early operations influence the later ones. Through the play of environment on the child and the child's thoughts on the experiences in the environment, at any age learning takes place. However, the nature of the activities changes with the growth of cognitive ability; such changes depend upon the child's acquisition of certain operations. These operations, beginning as genuine actions and becoming internal as thought, are important, for they determine what the curriculum designer can expect from the child at certain points in the development of these activities. We must examine first how the learner "thinks" at early ages; then at later ages we will note how a pattern of growth becomes apparent, how one stage depends on the other and is similar to it in some ways. Learning depends on these operations and the changes in them, and it is this that we wish to observe in our examination of the processes of growth.

Adaptation is the essence of intelligence, according to Jean Piaget. From the time of birth on, the child adjusts to the many aspects of environment because of both the environment itself and the child's relations to the environment. He adjusts only as he acts within the environment. Physically

he attempts those things to which his body has become adapted, so cognitively he operates to the degree that cognitive operations have developed. In the process of this development, the child confronts experiences which affect both physical and cognitive actions and activities, one following the other. The developmental process which occurs suggests a kind of evolutionary process, one stage evolving from the other as the child copes with the complexities of environment, child and environment interacting in new ways as old ways become refined to assist him in his development of adaptation. Once the child has reached a stage in which the relationships between his actions and the environment are in a kind of balance, he can move on to a new stage of development; new interactions will then take place, demanding in turn new responses.

Basic to the child's development through all stages is the double aspect of adaptation, the subject-object interaction. The child does not work alone. Though he does not respond to every experience, aspects of the environment do affect him, particularly as the experiences relate to structures already a part of his thought processes, demanding coordination of new experiences. In other experiences the child will act on the environment himself so that what is experienced becomes incorporated into some existent pattern, thus modifying both the pattern and experience. Two functions are evident in such interaction; Piaget calls them assimilation and accommodation, each working with the other

until a balance is reached; he says:

. . . adaptation must be described as an equilibrium between the action of the organism on the environment and vice versa. Taking the term in its broadest sense, "assimilation" may be used to describe the action of the organism on surrounding objects, in so far as this action depends on previous behaviour involving the same or similar objects. In fact every relation between a living being and its environment has this particular characteristic; the former, instead of submitting passively to the latter, modifies it by imposing on it a certain structure of its own. It is in this way that, physiologically, the organism absorbs substances and changes them into something compatible with its own substance. Now, psychologically, the same is true, except that the modifications with which it is then concerned are no longer of a physico-chemical order, but entirely functional, and are determined by movement, perception or the interplay of real or potential actions (conceptual operations, etc.). Mental assimilation is thus the incorporation of objects into patterns of behaviours, these patterns being none other than the whole gamut of actions capable of active repetition.

Conversely, the environment acts on the organism and, following the practice of biologists, we can describe this converse action by the term "accommodation", it being understood that the individual never suffers the impact of surrounding stimuli as such, but they simply modify the assimilatory cycle by accommodating him to themselves. Psychologically, we again find the same process in the sense that the pressure of circumstances always leads, not to a passive submission to them, but to a simple modification of the action affecting them. This being so, we can then define adaptation as an equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation, which amounts to the same as an equilibrium of interaction between subject and object.<sup>2</sup>

Through adaptation growth takes place, a growth in structures, beginning with motor and perceptual structures and developing

<sup>2</sup>Jean Piaget, The Psychology of Intelligence, trans. Malcolm Piercy and D. E. Berlyne (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950), pp. 7-8.