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Curriculum Diffusion: Some Concepts and their Consequences

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Work on curriculum diffusion has been characterised by the use of a number of important concepts. The purpose of this paper is to try to show how the use of these concepts has strong implications for action.

The notion of *adoption* has been the most pervasive idea in work on curriculum diffusion. Its use originated in work on the diffusion of agricultural techniques and products, and the word clearly implies an "all or nothing" acceptance of the product under discussion. Either one has adopted x, or one has not — the use of the word does not allow us inbetween stages. In terms of the original use, it is quite possible to talk about the adoption of a technique or a product; it makes little sense, however, to talk about the adoption of an attitude or a concept or an idea. It would not make sense to say that we either had or did not have a particular idea, since ideas (or attitudes or concepts) are not finite in that way. In a very real sense, the idea is inevitably modified in each person.

The consequence of widespread use of the concept of adoption in curriculum diffusion seems to me to have been the emphasis on the production of the tangible "package". The developers' success was to be measured in terms of diffusion; but the only diffusion which could be seen was the purchase or use of the package. However much curriculum developers wished to insist that their innovation was concerned with changing attitudes or with fundamental changes in the classroom behaviour of teachers, the pressure, particularly from the Schools Council but also from the publishers, has been on the reduction of concepts and attitudes to material objects — either books or kits; a great deal of curriculum development effort has gone into persuading teachers to buy them. This could well be called the "salesman" model of diffusion.

In recent years, considerable thought has been given, firstly by the Humanities Curriculum Project and later by the Schools Council, to a strategy which was designed to emphasise ideas rather than things. The underlying concept here is *communication*, expressed mainly through the use of the word "dissemination" to describe "any activity which is designed to communicate a project's ideas to a wider audience". (Schools Council, 1973, p.9)

The idea is well expressed by the project Geography for the Young School Leaver, when the team saw its task as "ensuring that the ideas and proposals of the team have been heard of by everyone, and – far more important and difficult – that they are fully understood". (GYSL 1973)

The practical implications of this view of diffusion are clear. The developer is concerned with finding ways of communicating the project's message to teachers in such a way that the teacher not only "fully understands" the message but also decides to accept it. There seems to me to be a strong implication in statements of this point of view that, if only teachers could come to understand what the project really means, they would welcome it with open arms. Perhaps this notion of diffusion could be termed the "missionary" model.

There are certain problems associated with this view, however. There is, I think, a confusion over what is to be communicated. The objective is understanding; but it does not make sense to talk, as the Schools Council Working Party on Dissemination did, of "communicating understanding" (Schools Council 1973 p.10). The American emphasis is on the "utilization on knowledge" (Havelock 1973; Short 1973). There is knowledge being produced about the curriculum which should be used by teachers; the problem is that the teachers do not have access to this knowledge; so some system of linking knowledge producers and users must be found. In other words, it is to be knowledge which is communicated.

In what sense, however, is the word "knowledge" being used? Are we talking about knowledge in the way it is used philosophically, to mean "that which is true", or are we using it to mean "information" - that is, knowledge about something, or knowledge that some statement has been made? In order to make sense of the idea of understanding being made possible by communication (which is at the root both of the "dissemination" and the "knowledge utilization" views), we must, I think, take it that knowledge in this context is something special - that it has the status of "scientific knowledge" and can be regarded as true. I am most doubtful, however, whether educational research in general, and curriculum research in particular, could in any sense be described as "scientific knowledge". Much curriculum research is necessarily descriptive (as, for instance, Rudduck's work on the dissemination of HCP in Schools Council Working Paper 56) or descriptive/speculative (as the major book from the project History, Geography and Social Science 8-13, Blyth et al 1976). This research is useful to teachers; but it is not predictively true in the sense we expect "scientific knowledge" to be.

I see this confusion between knowledge and information as important for the British view of diffusion (or dissemination) as communication. If what is to be communicated were scientific knowledge, then full communication would be enough to ensure maximum use. If, as I would wish to argue, what is communicated can only be described as information, then use of this depends not only on communication but on ability to interpret, evaluate and apply this information. In other words, communication is only part of the process.

A concept which has more recently become important in work in diffusion is that of *implementation*. Briefly, implementation is the stage after adoption – that is, the time when an innovation is actually put into practice. It becomes clear to workers not only that reported adoption of an innovation was no guarantee that anything had actually changed in the classroom, but also that, even where change had occurred, it was possible for people to use the same label (for instance, team teaching) for a number of different practices. This led to work which looked at what happened after the teachers were committed to change.

It must be noted that implementation in this sense is conceptualized within the adoption of diffusion. Clearly the notion of implementation implies that something exists which is to be implemented. It also implies that the recipient ought to be trying to put this pre-existing scheme into operation as fully as possible. This in turn implies that such schemes need to be of a kind which *can* be put into action — that they should be (more or less) blueprints. The most comprehensive consideration of implementation is that of Fullan & Pomfret (1975).

"Implementation, as we use it, refers to the actual use of innovation. Implementation has been conceptualized in two ways in the literature:

- a. the degree to which the innovation is implemented as planned, that is, the extent to which the various organizational, normative and behavioural components of a developed designed innovation are put into practice by the user group: thus *fidelity with* developers' or sponsors' conceptions of the innovation is the main criterion.
- b. The degree to which the innovation is a product of a *mutual adaptation* between developers' and users' conceptions during the planning, adoption and especially the implementation process". (pp.4-5)

I have considerable doubt as to whether this second view could be a reasonable use of the word implementation, unless such adaptation is a specified part of the curriculum plan. Indeed Fullan & Pomfret appear to support this. "Although we favour the second definition we have serious reservations concerning the efficacy of degree of implementation as a dependant variable for the study of educational change. Briefly, it tends to imply linear, centrally directed consensus assumption about how change should occur" (1975 p.5)

However, both Fullan & Pomfret and Leithwood & Russell (1973), though overtly writing about implementation, spend considerable time considering an alternative. As part of their definitions, Fullan & Pomfret (1975 p.6) say:

"In summary, we conceive of the implementation process as consisting of a series of interactions within the user group and between this group and the developer and adopter groups initiated with the express purpose of evolving new organizational, normative and behavioural forms (i.e. new role relationships). The process evolves in response to the environmental context, the innovation's characteristics, the planning and adoption process, status and power networks within and among groups, individual characteristics of group members and strategies used to adopt and implement the innovation".

This seems to me to have little to do with implementation, but much to do with a strategy of diffusion which has the user as its focus rather than the developer of the innovation. The concept of user-centred diffusion has not been much explored, but seems to have important implications. Other views are strictly within a centre -- periphery model of diffusion (Schon 1971); this view would allow an alternative - that is, what (following Schon) I have called (1973) a "movement" model, where there is no fixed centre or message, but a developing and changing pattern. (See also Blyth et al 1976, pp.162-163. Elliott 1976 has called this the "shifting centre model"; I believe this concentrates on only part of the possible shift.) The notion of user-centred diffusion also suggests that users - particularly teachers, but also parents and children - are able and willing to define their own situation accurately enough to enable them to use and develop appropriate curriculum information for their own needs. A number of people are sceptical about the current ability of teachers to perform this role. I do not share these doubts; but in any case they address the wrong question.

"The tendency is to view teachers as resistant, incapable, or unwilling to change and to ignore the possibility that teachers' inadequacies in knowledge, understanding and skills are partly a result of their not having had the opportunity and support to develop these competencies in the past and present social situations. The question, then, may not be whether teachers are currently capable of innovations and change but whether they can come to be capable if the situation is altered to support this development". (Fullan 1972 p.13)

A second major implication of user-centred diffusion is that there would be a considerable change in the role of the central curriculum development team. Instead of provider and organizer, a central team (if it were felt to be necessary at all) would become adviser and facilitator. There might still be room for a central team to produce ideas and materials; this would then become part of the evidence available to teachers and others when curriculum decisions are to be made.

A further implication would be that it would be recognized as impossible fully to trace the influence of a curriculum project or development. It is possible for ideas to have affected teachers or schools, but for the teachers not to know, or to forget, where the idea came from. This difficulty arises at the moment, of course. If a project (as History, Geography and Social Science 8-13 did) takes as a major aim the stimulation of thinking in its curriculum area, then it would be quite possible to claim that in a school which considers the project ideas, uses them as a starting point, but finishes by holding views diametrically opposed to those of the project, the project has had a major success! In practice, of course, this influence of ideas is usually invisible to research methods, but is none the less real.

If the user were to become the major focus of curriculum diffusion, instead of the project, it would seem likely that curriculum research and development would become more local, but where not local, more responsive to the users' concern. For central projects, the current concerns about dissemination and diffusion which amount to salesmanship or missionary work, could be replaced by a concern that teachers should be able to say "no" to innovation.

Conclusion

To establish the direct connection between language, thought and action is a hazardous, and pehaps an impossible, undertaking. What I have tried to do in this paper is to establish the practical implications of the use of a number of concepts connected with diffusion, and to show where possible that these implications correspond with action which curriculum developers have taken. My suggestion would be that those concerned with curriculum diffusion should try to be clear about their preferred model of diffusion before becoming committed to terms which, like all concepts, must necessarily limit and direct their thinking.

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