

In Search of the Perfect Curriculum

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In Search of the Perfect Curriculum by Diana Waring

As an experienced homeschool mom, speaker and curriculum writer, I've noticed that many believe this and seek earnestly for the genie, or the wand, or the catalog. And, lest you think I'm loftily looking down my nose, let me add that I was one of them. In the early days of homeschooling, I was convinced that there truly existed a perfect curriculum, and spent years on a quest, like those in search of the Holy Grail, to find it.

Premise

If the right curriculum can be found, it will perform the magic – the abra-cadabra– to transform a student from ignorant to educated all by itself.

Most of us who invested way too much time and money on this zealous mission have found by now that there is no fantastic carpet ride — only increasing disappointment, discouragement, and often the end of homeschooling altogether. We wonder why all of our attempts end in defeat, in our children showing distaste and disgust at the results of our valiant effort to find the perfect curriculum. Convinced that it's the curriculum that accomplishes the difficult feat of teaching, we continue to crawl toward the increasingly remote goal of enthusiastic, passionate, well-educated children. We end up calling the goal a fantasy when the mirage is too elusive.



What's wrong with this picture? Maybe an answer will emerge from the following story.

Many years ago, my daughter, Melody, began violin lessons with a retired college professor. His first comment, as she unpacked her violin, was, "Melody, I can't teach you to play violin." As he said this, I startled in shock, since he had already auditioned and accepted Melody into his studio, and was charging a very significant fee. However, he quickly followed up this comment with, "But I can help you learn."

I startled again, this time as my educational world leaped suddenly into focus. In that moment the perspective swung from the teacher and the books to the participation of the student. A good teacher is important, just like a good curriculum. However, the real magic of learning – the true abra-cadabra – is only revealed as the student engages the material: practices it, plays with it, dissects it, considers it, creatively reconfigures it, questions it, teaches it, and makes it his or her own.

Perhaps, we can alter the original premise and find a true, attainable quest: A good curriculum will offer opportunities for students to dive into oceans of learning, will allow students to find interesting issues to pursue, will encourage their growth and understanding, and cause students to do the work of learning.

If this makes sense, then let us consider some ways in which we can evaluate our curriculum choices, realizing that though it will not "educate" our students for us, it is, nevertheless, a good assistant in this process.

Consideration #1) Does this curriculum encourage students to think about what is being said, to consider and ask their own questions, or does it simply require that students memorize and regurgitate answers in the mind-numbing mold of "Polly wants a cracker"?

I remember my high school experience as a second-year algebra student. Though I excelled in the class, successfully memorizing all of the theorems for the frequent math tests, yet they never gave me a clue that algebra is something people can

and actually do use in real life. We were never taught to ask, “How does this work beyond the pages of my textbook?” Actually, we were never taught any more than to do the pages in sequence, take the tests and get the grade. It wasn’t until I was thirty-eight years old that I discovered algebra had a reason for existing beyond the confines of a textbook. And, to tell you the truth, I was both chagrined and surprised that no one had bothered to explain that during any of those months of algebra.

And language arts: name the noun; name the verb; write the sentence. No! Why not BE the noun; DO the verb; go outside and collect nouns and make them do stuff; cause them to obey whatever the prepositions demand of them. Keep going until the questions start — “What about this?” “Is this right?” “Can we say it this way?”



Consideration #2) Does this curriculum offer students the freedom to make individual choices, based on their interests, or does it demand that everyone march in lock-step through each page?

I can concede that math would mostly be sequential, but as a historian, I have often pondered the arrogance of requiring all students to know the importance of the Napoleonic wars, for example, while dismissing the comparative importance of learning about Beethoven, Robert Fulton or Louis Braille. These men all lived during this same era, and each significantly impacted the world. Who decided that it is more important to know geo-political history than musical, scientific, or blind-education history, to the point of excluding them from the history books? Why should we require students to know the impact of the battle of Waterloo, while restricting from them the significance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Fulton’s affect on transportation and commerce, or the earth-shaking technology that opened the written word to those who could not see?

Rather than a forced march with a whip-cracking overseer through selected facts, why not give a basic understanding of an era of history, introduce students to the many fascinating people of the time, then set them free to dig more deeply into those people and events most compelling to them?

Consideration #3) Does this curriculum encourage active, hands-on, creative participation on the part of the student, or does it allow them to sit passively through the lessons as long as they can answer a certain percentage of the test questions correctly?

How would you define the difference between being a player on the field and a spectator in the stands? That is exactly the difference between being actively engaged in the world of learning and passively sitting by. When you are a player, you exert energy, get sweaty from the effort, and feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment when the game is over. When you are merely a spectator, however, you expend the minimum amount of energy, try to avoid discomfort, and find satisfaction mainly through the game’s entertainment value. When it comes to a student’s education, if they move beyond the spectator position to becoming actively involved on the field of learning, they will find an entirely different, thorough-going and enjoyable experience.

How on earth can a curriculum help draw a student into this kind of active participation? Great question. . . Though there are probably as many answers as there are unique and individual students, there are certain characteristics in curriculum that will either assist or hinder reaching this goal of engagement.

- Foundational to this is the “Wow! factor” – that elusive element that makes the student sit up and take notice. It may be the subject area (ex. some students relish science, while others gobble up literature), it may be the approach (ex. telling weird and unusual facts about bacteria in a biology book), or it may be something as simple as the fact that their best friend LOVES this curriculum.
- Secondly, look for what opportunities are offered to interact with the material in creative, hands-on ways. (You can always add this in to an otherwise passable curriculum, though it takes more time and effort.) For instance, see if there are possibilities for: creating a board game out of what is being learned; building a Lego replica of the architecture of a particular geographic site; making a Play-dough display of a particular chemical element; doing a theatrical presentation of a piece of literature; and so on. Though, admittedly, it does take more time to be a player than a spectator, learn to recognize the overlapping learning experiences and note the lessons that will not need to be repeated. For instance, when a history search becomes a literature or writing project; when a science presentation becomes an art project; when art becomes history; when chores become mentoring; and when a math test becomes a pryer time.

So, rather than seek fruitlessly for the perfect curriculum, focus your search for a curriculum that will warmly invite your students into their own learning experience. Unlike the quest for the Holy Grail, this pursuit has a high level of rewards and daily value!

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