

Language Arts and the Inner Curriculum

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“Science and education, being too exclusively abstract, verbal, and bookish, don’t have enough place for raw, concrete, esthetic experience, especially of the subjective happening inside oneself” (Maslow, 1968, P. 229).

When our educational systems become preoccupied with measurement, test-taking, and a positivistic orientation, we risk ignoring students’ inner dimensions. This article defines the inner curriculum and demonstrates how it can be used within an language arts context to address affective elements.

Defining the Inner Curriculum

The inner curriculum is a school’s plan for addressing the inner life of students. This includes their emotions, imagination, intuition, ideals, values, and sense of spirituality. The inner curriculum can be inserted any curriculum that is currently in place and is comprised of four elements:

1. Intrapersonal. The intrapersonal element involves one’s emotions, intuition, and spirituality. In dealing with emotions, students must identify feelings, then connect them to external events or situations. Intuition teaches students how to use their general impressions or sense of knowing apart from logic and emotion. Spirituality here is defined apart from any religious context. It is simply honoring the inner. Here one looks for symbols, images, and impressions and then assigns meaning. Meditation, guided imagery, power writing, and mythology are techniques that are often used with this intrapersonal element.

2. Expressing the Intrapersonal. With this element students give expression to what is discovered in the intrapersonal element above. The arts are often used for this. Music, dance, visual art, drama, poetry, and creative writing can all be used as separate curricular elements or used across the curriculum. Also, personal metaphors, journal writing, and small group discussions where students are engaged in honest dialogue can also be used to express intrapersonal elements.

3. Interpersonal. This element involves understanding one’s self in the context of a group, culture, or social setting. Activities here include cooperative group activities, values clarification, moral dilemmas, and an aesthetic response to literature.

4. The Human Condition. With this element students seek to know themselves in the context of humanity. The goal here is to begin to understand what it is to be human and to find similarities over time and across cultures. Comparisons using mythology, literature, and history as well as newspapers and current events can be used to this end.

Importance of the Inner Curriculum

The activities in the inner curriculum are designed to lead to a better understanding of oneself, which in turn makes it less likely that the conscious mind will be ruled by unconscious forces (Bettleheim, 1984). By bringing unconscious images, wants, and feelings to consciousness one is then free to act upon them. Also, neglecting the inner, subjective world of the psyche increases the likelihood that students will experience meaninglessness, psychic fragmentation, or some form of affect disorder (Jung, 1933; Smith, 1990; Sylwester, 2000). Educating the whole person means restoring balance between inner and outer lives, what John Miller (2000) calls soulful learning.

Positivism and the Inner Curriculum

One of the things that prevent implementation of the inner curriculum is an overemphasis on a positivist orientation toward learning. Positivism has its roots in the scientific tradition and is usually associated with behaviorism. This view states that knowledge exists outside the self and that truth can only be derived through objective observations which are proven through reliable tests and predictions (Alkove & McCarty, 1992). That is, only by collecting empirical data, isolating variables, testing, and retesting can we arrive at truth or say that a thing is so. In this view learning happens from the outside in, by receiving knowledge from an external source and then demonstrating that knowledge outwardly with a behavior or a performance. Here, learning does not occur unless and until there is a behavior to indicate such. In discussing an extremist view of positivism, Maslow (1970) states,

Indeed, the pure positivist rejects any inner experiences of any kind as being "unscientific," as not in the realm of human knowledge, as not susceptible of students by a scientific method, because such data are not objective, that is to say, public and shared (p.6)

Currently, this one-sided view of education manifests itself in three ways: First, the overemphasis on testing as a way of assigning worth or value to an educational experience. Second, the lesser status given to the arts when compared to the sciences and other curricular areas. As stated above, the arts give form and expression to our inner experiences and thus, are an integral component of the inner curriculum. And third, intelligence is largely determined and described only in terms of numbers (Richert, 1997). That is, intelligence is thought to exist only *if* it can be quantified and compared to a normative scale.

Constructivism and the Inner Curriculum

Constructivism is an alternative to a positivistic orientation that is more amenable to the inner curriculum. Here knowledge is seen as residing within the self and is constructed by each individual as he or she interacts with the information and the environment (Alkove & McCarty, 1992). This view of learning is usually associated with

cognitive psychology. To the constructivist, determining what is true requires a value judgement and thus, truth is seen as something that cannot be objective or removed from the person. Here, each person constructs his or her own reality as incoming data interacts with information stored in long term memory. Thus, real learning happens inside the head of individuals as they add bits of data to the cognitive webs in long term memory and as such, it cannot easily be quantified.

Activities in the Inner Curriculum

One of the unique things about the inner curriculum is that it need not replace a curriculum already in place. Like a small glove inside a larger one, it can augment and enhance those things a teacher is already doing. Activities in the inner curriculum may involve creative dramatics, poetry, creative writing, art, music, dance, moral reasoning, problem solving, community service, books and literature, or simply silence. It is beyond the scope of this article to specific activities in each of these, however, activities associated with inner curriculum should have some or all of the following eight characteristics:

1. *They are open ended.* If the activity is truly part of the inner curriculum, students are not expected to come to a predetermined conclusion or create a standardized product. Like life, there is no set answer. Students are allowed and even encouraged to come to their own conclusions. In creating or respond, they can take the idea as far as they want or, in turn, respond as minimally as they feel necessary. For example, in an activity from the inner curriculum, you would not find a teacher saying to a student, “This story is very short. Why don’t you go back and add some more description?”

2. *They are meaningful.* Assignments and activities are not created to keep students busy, to have them demonstrate their knowing, or to get a nice, dispersion of scores. Rather, activities are designed to increase understanding or to move students forward. Students are able to connect with the activity on a personal level. Homework is seen here, not as a measuring device, but as practice of things that have already been learned in class (Brophy, 1986). After reading a chapter in a social studies text, the regular curriculum might have students do some sort of worksheet to reinforce ideas or to gage their comprehension. In the inner curriculum the teacher would say, “Find an idea that you find interesting. Describe it using words, pictures, or some other form, then tell us how it might touch your life.”

3. *They connect with students’ lives.* These activities try to make connection with students inner or outer life. For example, after reading a story, students might be asked to describe similar feelings, events, characters, or situations from their own lives. In a science lesson students might be directed to see how a concept touches their lives or to take an imaginary trip somewhere and describe what they see, feel, and hear.

4. *They promote a greater understanding of self.* One of the goals of the inner curriculum is to examine those parts of ourselves that have been ignored. This is done in order to begin to recognize why we think and feel as we do. In this way we can eventually free ourselves unconscious forces.

5. *They promote a greater understanding of others.* When students are able to look beyond surface differences they are able to see the great commonality in the human experience, one that transcends time, geography, race, ethnicity, society, status, and religions. This deeper look helps them to connect with others in a more meaningful way with others. They ask not why, but why.

6. *They allow students share their ideas with others.* Here students thinking, creating, and doing not just for the teacher, but for a variety of audiences. Dramas are created and performed in other classrooms. Writing projects are shared and eventually turned into class books. Students are asked to respond to the ideas of others. You see cooperative learning and students talking with other students. Students are encouraged to turn to a neighbor to get help or to share an idea.

7. *They recognize multiple ways to demonstrate knowing.* In traditional curriculums, knowledge is demonstrated by taking a test or writing a report. Activities in the spiritual curriculum realize that people are able to express their knowledge and understand in a variety of ways. For example, students may create dramas demonstrating important concepts, use art, photography, give a speech, use dance or creative movement, use music, dress up as a character and recreate important events, or create a video. Imagine in a science class, important concepts represented using sculpture or visual in art, set to music, and presented to other students in a video or slide presentation. (For those pragmatists, I do not recommend doing these kinds of things all the time.)

8. *They recognize and attend to the spiritual element in each child.* Spirituality here is something completely apart from organized religion. It can be viewed two ways: First, it can be seen in a purely secular sense as an accumulation of one's ideals, values, and lofty aspiration. It is that higher part of self, super ego, or what I call super consciousness that is accessed through one's intuitive sense. Second, spirituality can be seen in the sacred sense as the part of oneself connected to something beyond self which is of numinous origin. Regardless of the view, one's spirituality opens that person up to experiences beyond the experience.

Self-Actualization

The inner curriculum can become a vehicle for students' self-actualization. Self-actualization is the state where one is able to accept and express of one's inner core or self and begin to actualize those capacities and potentialities found there (Maslow, 1968). There are four tasks specifically related to this:

1. *Discover and understand oneself.* This reflects the intrapersonal element described above that occurs through various self-reflective experiences. Understanding oneself makes it less likely that the conscious will be ruled by unconscious forces (Bettleheim, 1984). Part of self-actualizing then is the integration of the conscious and unconscious parts of one's personality (Russel-Chapin, Rybak, & Copilevitz, 1996; Smith, 1990). Only by bringing unconscious images, wants, and feelings to consciousness is one free to act upon them. Also, understanding and accepting oneself makes it more

likely that these qualities will be applied others. This reflects the interpersonal element described above.

2. *Express one's inner core.* This is the expression of the intrapersonal element described above. Once images and ideas from the inner, subjective realm have been identified, the next step is to express them. This expression serves two functions: First, it creates a more dynamic and more richly defined interaction between the ego and the self or the conscious and unconscious mind (Sylwester, 2000). And second, it allows these images and ideas to interact with other humans.

3. *Find one's passion and act on it.* This is a matter of discovering what one is interested in and indulging in it. This is what mythologist Joseph Campbell (1968) calls finding your bliss. Part of a teacher's role then is to expose students to a wide variety of topics and activities and create the structure whereby they can indulge their passions.

4. *Discover one's strengths or particular talents and learn how to use them to solve problems.* As Robert Sternberg (1996) describes in his book, *Successful Intelligence*, highly successful people are not necessarily those who have a great many strengths and few weaknesses; rather, they are those who learn how to use their strengths to compensate for a weakness in order to solve problems or create products. Thus, part of any educational experience should be devoted to helping students develop their preferred ways of thinking and knowing.

Language Arts Activities

As stated above, the inner curriculum need not replace curricula already in place. Like a small glove inside a larger one, it can augment and enhance those things schools and teachers are already doing. The language arts are particularly well suited for the inner curriculum as assignments and activities here can easily be designed to encourage students to look inward. Described here are inner curriculum activities in a language arts context or across the curriculum. Some of these activities will be familiar to educators with a whole language or holistic learning philosophy, however, knowledge of the inner curriculum allows these familiar activities to be used with new intent.

1. *Include and embrace silence.* Some of the recent brain research describes the need for breaks after instructional input in order to fully process new information (Jensen, 2000). Silence can be used in this way as lesson closure to help students identify what they learned. Here a teacher would ask students, "What is at least one thing that you found interesting or important? How might it connect to your life?" After a moment of silence, the teacher would then say, "Turn to a neighbor and share your ideas." These silence moments need last only 30 seconds to a minute.

Silence is also needed to fully process life's instructional input or to understand one's emotions and unconscious prompts (Miller, 2000). Here silence is used to bring stillness to the mind in order to enhance self-reflection. The Buddhist mystic, Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) says a stilled mind is like the smooth surface of a pond in that it reflects the wealth of images that surround it.

Finally, silence can also be used as a pre-writing activity by asking, “What are you thinking about today? Take a few minutes, breath deeply and try to focus on what you thoughts are running through your head.” These moments of silence can be made more powerful by having students record their thoughts in a journal, power write, or share with a neighbor (each of these are described below).

2. *Inner curriculum writing prompts.* All students are more motivated to write and take greater pride and ownership in the final product if the writing topics comes from within. Thus, if writing prompts are used, they should be asked to described their experiences, feelings, ideas, or perceptions. The inner curriculum writing prompts in Figure 1 can be used to this end. These are prompts that focus on both interpersonal and intrapersonal elements.

Figure 1. Inner curriculum writing prompts

1. Make a list of heroes or people you look up to. What are some traits that they have?
2. Describe a safe place. Describe a place that doesn't feel safe.
3. Describe a safe time. Describe a time that didn't feel safe.
4. Make a list of people who have hurt you. Why do you think they acted as they did?
5. Make a list of people who think *you* may have hurt them in some way. Are they right?
6. When have you asked for help?
7. When have you helped?
8. List ten events in your life. Put them in order from (a) most to least important, (b) sad to happy, (c) exciting to boring, (d) safe to risky.
9. You are leaving something in your life (place, stage, period). What is it? What will next?
10. You are/will be starting something new in your life. What is it?
11. What is your secret power?
12. What special talents do you have?
13. When or where do you feel alone.
14. When or where do you feel apart from others.
15. Make a list of things you would like to do. What does this list tell you about you?
16. What are some things you've outgrown?
17. What are some activities that used to be fun, but aren't any more?
18. Describe a goal for you life. What are some things you will need to do to achieve your goal? What are some things you can do right now? What things might get in the way of accomplishing this goal?
19. Describe the most beautiful thing you have every seen. If you can't, describe a very beautiful thing you have encountered. Use words or pictures.
20. Describe or list three objects that are important to you. What do these say about who you are?
21. Shadow side. What feelings or parts of your personality do you try to keep hidden? Draw a picture or create a character that has some of the traits of this hidden side.
22. Doing and being. In the middle of a circle or shape, write something you did today or yesterday. On the outside of the circle, list dreams, feelings, ideals related to that thing. (Free association. Don't think too much.)
23. Describe villains you know of in real life, history, movies, books, or TV. What are their characteristics. Pick one characteristic that you see in yourself sometimes.

Informally, these writing prompts can be used with journal writing activities (described below). They can also be used with the five-step process writing approach described by Donald Graves (1983). These steps are: (a) pre-writing, where ideas are generated, (b) drafting, where the first attempt is made to capture ideas on paper, (c) revising, the heart of the writing process, where a piece is re-visioned and reshaped many

times, (d) editing, the last writing stage where grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors are corrected, and (e) publishing, where the writing is shared with an audience. Most of the writing activities in a classroom should involve only pre-writing and drafting. Graves recommends that students be given a choice as to which of these drafts they want to take to the revision step. Generally, students find only about one in five drafts worthy of investing the mental and emotional energy necessary to revise and create a finished product. The rest of the drafts can be kept in a file folder as a junkyard for other writing ideas or included in a portfolio to document students' journey.

3. Journal writing. Journal writing is a natural follow up to a moment of silence described above. The goal of the journal is to provide a place for students to record their thoughts, observations, or interesting ideas. It is to be a written version of their thinking space and thus should not be graded for spelling, mechanics, or content. Sometimes a teacher might give a specific journal prompt such as, "What kind of things make you happy?" Or, "Describe a time when you were very angry." The best kinds of journal prompts are more general and allow for students to write about what is important in their lives. "What do you want to say today?" Or, "What's going on in your life?" Or, "What are you thinking about?" Or, "What are you feeling? Why are you feeling this way?" The goal is to get to a place where students no longer need teacher prompts for writing.

Having others respond to a journal makes it become a more dynamic entity and greatly increases student interest and the quality of writing. Students should always be given a choice as to which entries they want to share with others. Paper clips can be used here to denote entries to be responded to. Students will also need to be taught how to respond aesthetically to journal entries. An aesthetic response is when readers describe the effect the writing has on their imagination, emotions, or associations. The aesthetic response questions in Figure 2 can be displayed in poster form some place in the room and used to teach students how to respond to the writing of others.

Figure 2. Questions that elicit an aesthetic response.

1. What did it make you think about?
2. What is something it reminded you of?
3. What book, movie, TV show, or historical event is this like?
4. What images were painted in your head as you read?
5. What did you want to know more about?
6. What is one idea that you liked?
7. What were you feeling as you read this?
8. What experience in your own life has trigger similar feelings or situations?
9. What events in your life are similar to those described?
10. What do you want to say to the writer/author?

4. Sharing. Sharing one's writing with others helps students see a certain universality or commonality of experience and understand each other at a deeper level. Sharing also has a certain cathartic effect in that it allows students to identify things that may have been harboring in their unconscious, record them, and then share them with others.

Described here are five ways that sharing can be done: First, as described above, students can trade journals or have others respond to specified journal entries by writing on the journal page. Second, students might read or describe a journal entry to a partner

and let that partner respond orally. Third, students can read or describe a journal entry in small group. As members of the group respond orally with aesthetic response kinds of questions (Figure 2), these entries become natural vehicles for small group discussions. Fourth, teachers might create a magic circle (described below). And fifth, two or three volunteers can sign up to share an idea or journal entry with the class. Teachers should never do more than three of these whole-class kinds of sharing in a given class period as students naturally get distracted after a few minutes of listening passively.

5. *Power write.* A power write is where students try to catch as many ideas they can in a three-minute period of time (two minutes for younger students). This is different than a free write where students write what ever they want in an extended period of time. The goal in the power write is to get students to bypass the logical mind by free associating quickly, catching the first thought that pops into their mind. In this sense, it is much like the Buddhist koan which uses a riddle or a question to bypass the logical mind. A stop watch should be used here so that students know they are writing for a specific amount of time. They are to keep their pencils moving, writing down the first thing that comes to their mind. Often students start out with, “I don’t know what to write about. I can’t think of anything...” but this always leads to something else.

Students’ writing should be very disjointed here. It helps if teachers model this sense of disjointedness by showing and reading a copy of a power write they have done. Encourage students to use scribbles, scratch marks, arrows, diagrams, single words, incomplete sentences, and quick impressions. If done correctly, the power write will help the writer to discover a wealth of images and impressions residing in the unconscious.

6. *Magic Circle.* The first step in Magic Circle is give the class a writing/thinking prompt to respond to. There are three kinds of prompts that can be used here: (a) a question, (b) a memory prompt, and (c) priming-the-pump. The question should ask students to reflect upon some aspect of their lives or experience, such as, “What do you like to do best a sunny, summer day?” The memory prompt asks students to tell about a time or event in their lives. For example, “Tell me about a time when you were angry,” or “Describe a time when you were very proud.” Priming-the-pump is where teachers share a piece of writing to get ideas flowing. This could be a piece of poetry or a short segment from a story or newspaper. However, the most effective kind of prime is when teachers share something they have written.

The second step of Magic Circle is for students to describe on paper what is going through their heads or what the prompt made them think about. Students and teachers then write for three to five minutes. This can be extended if students are still writing with great energy. Near the end of the writing time students should be given a verbal mile marker such as, “There’s about a minute left. Try to finish up the idea that you are working on.” This allows for some sort of closure and helps writers to create a sensible last thought.

The third step of Magic Circle is to collect students’ writing. They should not put their names on the their papers. This is an important point, as all writing needs to be anonymous for magic circle to be effective. The pile of papers are then shuffled and students desks are arranged in a circle. One paper is passed out to each student.

The fourth step of Magic Circle is to have students respond to each paper using some form of aesthetic response described in Figure 2 above. When a student has finished with a paper, that student stands up and moves to the center of the circle to look for a desk that somebody has vacated. The student then moves to the empty desk and responds to that piece of writing. For younger students, this provides the physical movement that they need to keep them engaged. This part of Magic Circle takes a fair amount of concentration on the part of students and can generally be maintained for only ten to twenty minutes. (A good beginning goal is to ask students to try to respond to at least three pieces of writing.) When students have responded to at least three papers or when they seem to be losing concentration, they should be asked to finish the paper in front of them and gradually find their own.

At the end of Magic Circle, each piece of writing should have the responses of three or four students on it. Again, this makes the paper become a dynamic entity and it also allows students to interact with the thoughts and emotions of others in a safe way.

7. Free verse poetry. Poetry uses words, sounds, and phrases to paint a picture. Free verse poetry paints this picture without the use of rhyme, meter, or other defined poetic devices. This form of poetry allows young poetics to concentrate on the sound of the poem and re-creating a feeling or event. Free verse is a good starting point for poetry writing as feelings and ideas are not sacrificed for form. Other poetry forms will naturally develop from here as students begin to experiment with different sounds and their effect. Poetry can also be used to bring another way of seeing to other subject areas. Figure 3 contains a free verse poem that was created for a middle school unit on the History of Music.

Figure 3. A free verse poem.

Music

A skin stretched over a hollow log.
The ancients, pounding.
Vibrations, traveling through the air.
Moving outward, invisible through space.
Sounds,
Coming one after another.
Repeating, pulsating.
People moving now,
Moving in time with sound.
Responding to sound.
Transforming by sound.

A chant,
A prayer, repeated over and over.
The sound becomes line.
The line takes shape, moving here and there, fluttering about,
A butterfly,
A dancing butterfly of sound.

The dancing line, now joined by another.
Line upon line, intertwining, one upon the other.
The other upon the one.

Many together to produce blend.
Chord.
Colors of sound, perfectly matched.
Harmonies knit,
A bridge from here to there.
between inner and outer.

Sound
The sound of the mothers heart within the womb.
The sound of life.
And the sound of silence.
A pounding silence then.

Final Word

So why should we care about the inner curriculum? The Gospel of St. Matthew, “What shall it profit a man if he should gain the whole world but lose his soul” (Matthew 16:26). Which is to say, what is the use of having high test scores if our children do not know who they are, what their passions are, where their strengths lie, or how to obtain happiness?

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