

## Curriculum Mapping - the road ahead, or more bumpy terrain?

Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be incomplete without its buzz words and latest trendy catch-phrases: lifelong learners, personalised learning, education for sustainability, key competencies, and of course, curriculum mapping. What I would like to do here is to clarify this particular route before going on the journey. The travel metaphor is no accident - although we would not like one of those along the way! The term *curriculum mapping* suggests a metaphor that I would like to expand on here as I set out some of the features of this particular term I suspect we will hear about increasingly in the coming years. Besides providing some explanation, it will be important not to get so taken by the view that we forget to note some of the harder realities of this particular journey, although that will be balanced with some thoughts about what we could get out of being part of the tour.

Curriculum mapping at its simplest is a technique to analyse and assess your school's current curriculum offerings in relation to competencies or standards of performance. Curriculum mappers will consider this explanation too simple, so I should add that your school will also consider resources and assessment used to support teaching, not merely at a content level, but more importantly at a skill level. Units of work (or samples of units) are assessed individually to decide what kinds of competencies are being fostered, either by direct teaching or by modelling. Another kind of curriculum map would reflect the competencies and attributes that *ought* to be present, and then you would assess current offerings against the ideal or desired state of affairs. A further variation of the curriculum map is a *diary* that journals or documents what is actually taking place in the

classroom against what is planned, and will record this in the form of description of content and competencies taught or standards being aimed at.

A curriculum map may take the form of a grid block that will reflect competencies or standards along one axis and the unit topics or curriculum content of specific areas (eg social studies) along the other axis. Where intersections occur, the degree of the fit between the two points is noted either simply by ticking or by written description. This type of map will help in the analysis of the present situation. A journal or diary map will have timeframes along one axis (eg months) and competencies, content, standards, resources and assessments along the other axis, with the intersecting blocks being entered and completed with the relevant information.

Producing a curriculum map will require careful thought and planning prior to commencing the process, beginning with the Principal and Senior Management Team, then engaging key teachers on the staff, such as syndicate leaders or heads of department. Ultimately, especially when using diary mapping, all teachers will be required to be involved in the process.

The importance of curriculum mapping lies in its ability to clarify for a school staff where it is now so that it can move forward with confidence to ensure that students are learning what they ought to be learning. Curriculum mapping can therefore be a vital tool in the management and enhancement of student learning, apart from the positive planning and decision making benefits that flow from effective organisation.

The resources required are the time and expertise of the curriculum leaders and senior managers who will have to plan this process and then sustain it as becomes ingrained in school life. There are web based resources although pen and paper systems can be just as effective. Whole staff or smaller group professional development sessions that seek to understand and produce curriculum maps may actually work better with pen and paper, as this provides a graphic reminder for a few days as posters can be left on staffroom walls. Subsequently, these maps can be stored electronically.

I would like now to do what I promised earlier, that is to extend the mapping metaphor. In this way, some of the strengths, weaknesses, limitations and opportunities of curriculum mapping may better present themselves.

Those who have taught Geography will be familiar with the FACKTS approach suggested by Jane Evans and Cheryl Osborne to teaching mapping, and I would like to adapt that mnemonic for use here. A good map has a Frame. In this respect, curriculum mapping has some positive possibilities for schools, because it helps schools to bring their curriculum offerings under control. In this sense, a frame is really like a snapshot or a detailed view of a specific curriculum area, applying a specific lens (such as competencies or standards). On the other hand, if there is something in the frame, there must be something *out of frame*. The question is: who will decide what is included and what is excluded, and whose interests are being promoted or protected by this process? Framing can also be understood as a verb - curriculum mapping enables schools *to frame* their curriculum offerings around the competencies or values they think are important for them, their communities and most importantly, their students.

Geographers are interested in orientation and hence a map should have an Arrow pointing north. This indicates that there is a correct way of looking at a map and that a map looks at reality from a particular perspective. This awareness helps us to realise that a curriculum map is created from the point of view of the school community that designs it, and more importantly, the constant North point should be the students in that school. If the curriculum map fails to take adequate account of students it becomes a dangerous redundancy. Designing a curriculum for a school goes beyond competencies, content and standards - it can now be an expression of each school's unique value position - and this too helps orient a school's curriculum mapping activities.

Colour is crucial to a map, and each one represents unique features - blue for water features, various designs of green that represent woodland, native bush and orchards are some examples. A curriculum can and should have some colour in it - and this is an opportunity that now presents itself to schools. In the process of curriculum mapping, schools can be aware, if they so choose, of where their current offerings are colourless, dull and bland, and then perhaps seek ways to reincorporate some much needed colour into their particular curriculum.

A Key helps a map reader to understand some of the many features represented on a map. It also forces the map writer to have an audience in mind. The emphasis is therefore on clarity of communication. A curriculum map that gets bogged down in woolly adjectives or vague descriptions, that lacks clear, direct and specific language and punchy verbs, has no place in our already busy lives. Readers of, and participants in, curriculum maps, require useful documents that show connections across curriculum areas and within curriculum areas and that communicate clearly whether a school is on track as a place of learning.

It may seem trite to suggest that a curriculum map, like any other map, has a Title, yet remembering a title is part of the communication just mentioned, and is also a reminder to be thinking clearly about what this map is, what it is doing, who it is about and for, which community it serves and the time frames it is intended to cover. Although a title may seem to be a finishing touch, the considerations just outlined tell us that we begin to think about our title long before we attempt to write the curriculum map, hence the importance of a period of thorough pre-planning.

Finally, a map is drawn to Scale, and herein lie some of the controversial aspects of a curriculum map. A map is always only a *representation* of reality - it is not reality itself. There cannot be a 1 - 1 map, otherwise it would be reality itself. Schools participating in curriculum mapping will produce crude, blunt or bloated instruments if they fail to acknowledge this point. In essence, a map is a summary or synopsis of what exists on the ground. A typical exercise for student geographers is to compare and contrast maps of the same location but drawn at different times. The map shows, in summary, some of the important changes occurring on the ground. Curriculum maps help to provide an overview (think of a satellite picture here) of what is taking place in the classrooms of a school, but at best only summarise or bring out in high relief the key features of classroom curricular practice. Like the map of the same place but drawn a decade or two apart, so a school curriculum map is not static, because it attempts to summarise a changing reality.

Actual terrain may be dotted with areas of quicksand, perilous ravines and jagged peaks. The intrepid explorer setting out to map this terrain must travel prepared and must have planned out the journey well in advance. After the initial phase of

preparation and exploration, the explorer discovers that not all the support party are that keen on the journey, and drop out, as they do not perceive the travails of the journey to balance the potential outcome of the journey. This signals a key weakness and danger of curriculum mapping - if Principals do not have their staff take ownership of this process, they will discover that their mapping efforts will struggle each step of the way, and that staff resistance may be greater than any obstacles presented by the journey itself. Once again, therefore, the importance of pre-planning and selling a vision is vital to success. Principals are required to carefully strategise to ensure they are able to balance workloads against the perceived benefits of participating in a process that requires significant commitment from staff.

At another level, curriculum mapping can be a technicised, engineered mode of analysis. It treats the vitality and spontaneity of daily human interactions in a cold, tick box fashion that may tell us little about those human interactions. On the other hand, it is an instrument that can help to organise our thoughts and better systematise our future actions. It is also an instrument that supports accountability by providing valid analysis of the current situation and validates practice or points the way to amended practice. The process of establishing curriculum mapping in a school has the potential to open up cross-curricular, cross-syndicate and cross-departmental dialogue. This can be vitally enriching to a school, and helps teachers to become leaders of learning. So as Principals begin to think about those Key Competencies, Values and Principles of the New Zealand Curriculum, they may consider curriculum mapping as a tool to fashion the response of their school to this new demand.

## References:

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