Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment: same or different?

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Abstract

Contemporary educational theory and discourse typically separate curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as distinct elements in educational design. This is fundamentally unhelpful, and oversimplification arising from a passive rejection or ignorance of a more integrative and overlayed perspective. This paper problematises the relationships between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to more effectively support future research into the conditions for productive and relevant systems for learning design. We propose a model to describe the influence of inseparable and complex interrelationships and perspectives on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The paper will then demonstrate the application of the model for learning design in creative and performing arts, specifically senior music. This discussion has relevance for all levels of leadership in the educational sector, none more so than for classroom-based leading of learning.

Key terms: curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, learning design, music

Introduction

This paper examines the interrelationships between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, provides a new prismatic model to represent perspectives on the united message systems and demonstrates its manifestation as exemplified by creative and performing arts educational design. Our starting point is to unpack current conceptions.

In theoretical discussions on topics ranging from teacher education and democratic education to cultural studies in education, there is often a focus on the benefits of "alignment" (e.g., Hayes, 2003; Moura, et al, 2021) and "connection" (e.g., Menter, 2016) for curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Popular debates revolve around how these elements can be understood and sequenced to create effective applied educational designs for learners. Examples of recent work in the field include McPhail's (2021) proposal of the Curriculum Design Coherence Model and Fan et al.'s (2021) Cognitive Learning Model. Research teams like McPhail et al. and Fa et al write extensively about alignment between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and propose explanatory

models for reciprocal influences between the three elements. However, as seems typical, they do not go beyond a linear conceptualisation of relationships or critically examine or identify any potentially destabilising interrelationships.

As embraced by many researchers (e.g., Chan et al., 2011; Christie and Lingard, 2020; Penney et al., 2009), curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are the essential message systems of education. This implies a certain level of clarity, distinction, and continuity between these constructs as discrete elements and as fundamental and identifiable components of an educational system. Taking each message system in turn common threads of discourse are:

- Curriculum: these theorists discuss the relationships between factors influencing the validity of content selection for educational design (e.g., Meo, 2008).
- Pedagogy: writers and researchers of pedagogy consider learning patterns and links to teaching/teacher action and agency (e.g., Shah and Campus, 2021); and,
- Assessment: these researchers discuss the authenticity and validity of assessment approaches for demonstrating and evaluating learning.

These debates often attempt to isolate each message system from the others. For example, in the work of Heil and Ifenthaler (2023), assessment is discussed and decontextualised from curriculum and pedagogy. Other researchers recognise complexity across the message systems but, in our view, do not go far enough in the depth of analysis for their arguments (e.g., Choppin et al, 2022).

Challenging the status quo

This article challenges the basic assumptions underlying curriculum, pedagogy and assessment research and reporting in this field. Using working and contemporary definitions of each component of the message systems, we will argue that curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are inseparable and largely indistinguishable. We will propose a new model to assist in understanding the dynamics influencing learning design and to illustrate how this fundamental change in base assumptions works. This will then be applied to an example discipline, creative and performing arts, specifically music studies.

Curriculum undefined

At its simplest, the curriculum can be described as a set of endorsed ideas and understandings that students should learn. The guidelines are decided and communicated through syllabuses, directives, and policy frameworks and are enforced through training systems and an array of administrative obligations for teachers.

The curriculum is designed to set and control the dimension of *what* is to be learned. However, people learn despite a prescribed curriculum, and they learn unintended

things. Their learning is shaped by local contexts, world events, technological advancements, cultural exposure, globalisation, pandemics, and international tensions. Learners build their personal and shared understandings through immersive experiences with fluctuations in living costs and alterations in family structures. Children also learn from each other. Therefore, learner understandings of the set curriculum emerge as influenced by their immediate social and political contexts.

Curriculum as pedagogy as curriculum

But if we stick with the notion, for a moment, that we *can* describe an intended curriculum with clarity and validity, what then is the role of pedagogy? Pedagogy, the way or *how* something is learned, is often used to describe the intentional actions of teachers in their endeavours to lead learners to their learning. Pedagogy is an applied concept. It exists at the intersection between the intended curriculum and teacher/learner action. It is decisive, individual, and powerfully influential. It is reciprocal; that is, as the teacher teaches, they learn alongside their students as shaped by the contexts they provide and are provided for their actions. As active participants, their students reciprocally influence the impact and direction of the pedagogy, implicating them as active pedagogical agents.

Pedagogy is planned and adjusted in response to feedback loops between teachers and students. It is guided by the values and beliefs of all those involved in the shared learning events, becoming enmeshed with the intentions expressed in the "curriculum." So, a new curriculum emerges, a performative one located temporally and communally. Therefore, we propose that this pedagogy *is* a curriculum. That is, the way of learning iteratively directs what is to be learned.

Assessment

The third in the triumvirate is assessment. Assessment is intimately connected to the purposes of learning. It describes how knowledge is to be demonstrated with future application in mind. The demonstration of knowledge is an expression of the values ascribed to the learning contract outlined by the "curriculum." The contemporary body of literature considers such notions as assessment for learning, assessment of learning, and assessment *as* learning, effectively tearing apart a holistic assessment approach:

"Assessment *for* learning" [AoL] (Wiliam, 2011) is where the act of attending to and completing a task provides the circumstances for engaging with new knowledge and a built-in opportunity for demonstrating and developing knowledge and understanding. In this instance, assessment *is* pedagogy, and given the typically discovery-based framing of the tasks, it is also the curriculum.

"Assessment *of* learning" [AoL] (e.g., Hume and Coll. 2009) is a more traditional approach to evaluating learner understanding. In this approach, student achievement is measured as the outcome of a learning sequence. There is a separation between pedagogy and assessment in this instance. Still, there is often criticism that this approach to assessment doesn't allow for an authentic demonstration of knowledge and understanding under realistic circumstances.

"Assessment *as* learning" [AaL] (Dann, 2012) links together both assessment for, and of, learning. In this instance, learning is developed through completing a task that is presented after completion as a demonstration of achievement: here assessment is framed by pedagogy,

We propose that assessment is often indistinguishable from pedagogy, and the nature of an assessment task and its method of completion can distort an intended curriculum so that the task also becomes the curriculum.

Toward modelling CPA perspectives

Curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment exist in a complex array of overlapping relationships. Figure 1 is an attempt at depicting and mapping the basic interplay of the domains.

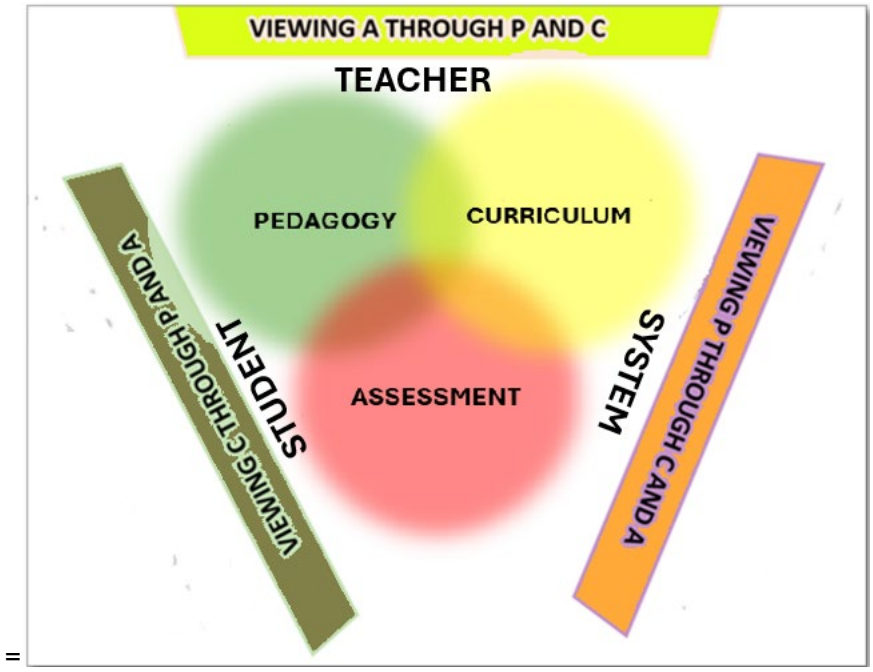

Figure 1 Map of the CPA elements

Three perspectives of the system of domains are shown in the Figure: the teacher, the student, and the system. Other perspectives, such as parents, researchers, and the profession, could also be mapped, but the main three are included for the moment. The

Venn diagram at the centre shows the interlocking between curriculum, assessment and pedagogy as potentially two-way or three-way overlaps where curriculum = assessment, assessment = pedagogy, curriculum = pedagogy, and curriculum = pedagogy = assessment. The three perspectives are shown with teachers described as viewing assessment through contact with pedagogy and curriculum; the student perspective of the curriculum through contact points with pedagogy and assessment; and the system (in this case, the educational system, for example, Catholic Education Office) view of pedagogy through curriculum and assessment. The domains for each of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment have blurred boundaries that overlay at the extremes. This represents the fields where they are indistinguishable from each other. Figure 1, therefore, maps the relationships and begins to depict how the perspectives might work. To explain, we take each perspective in turn.

Teacher perspective

The teacher has a great deal of informal agency in their interpretation of curriculum through their choices for pedagogy and assessment often rendering the elements synonymous through decisive action. Their aspect for the prism is through connection with the formal curriculum and their pedagogical choices. Of lesser influence is the design of assessment. For example, let's imagine Susan, a classroom music teacher, is preparing for classes in composition with her senior students. She has several decisions to make, starting with her pedagogical approach. She will next need to select and sequence the relevant content, concepts and skills to be learned. Her final decision is how the knowledge can be demonstrated. At this point she might reflect on her pedagogical options again. Therefore, we propose that her perspective for the CPA map starts with Curriculum and Pedagogy which both overlay assessment.

For this example let's say Susan is designing two introductory lessons for "Unit 3: Innovations" of the Music General Senior Syllabus (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2019). The unit requirements are described in the syllabus: "In this unit, students must study two innovations pre-1950 and two innovations post-1950". Susan has decided to start the learning design by introducing students to 12 bar blues performance exercises to familiarise them with Jazz composition. She will employ a formative AaL approach where the students use 12 bar blues form to compose and improvise in small group performances.

In this example, Unit 3 of the syllabus is assessed externally. Susan will lead pedagogy to prepare students for the final assessment by carefully considering the curriculum requirements. Susan has prepared the students for the curriculum requirements for summative assessment, which for this unit is an external AoL exam.

Student perspective

The student's perspective of the CPA map is via Pedagogy and Assessment. These are the points of direct engagement for them and could be experienced together inseparably depending on the learning design they face. The curriculum then becomes a destiny element for the students as they come to understand what they have learned. For example, let's consider Allan who's a student in Susan's music class. He will directly engage with the learning activities designed to scaffold his understanding and skills in composition. He will join with classmates to prepare a 12 bar blues in-class performance. Feedback on his improvisation across the basic chord progression will be in the form of peer assessment and ongoing feedback from Susan. He will demonstrate his knowledge of compositional devises such as syncopation and call and response.

So it is shown that Allan has engaged with the pedagogy and assessment as his first touch point, and this will frame his experience with the curriculum.

System perspective

Finally, the systemic perspective, for example, Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority [QCAA}, typically acts in a formal way to detail what concepts and skills will be learned and how achievement should be demonstrated and evaluated. Their focus is on the curriculum and assessment, and their view of pedagogy is shaped by their expectations for the other elements. Our example with Susan and Allan, is straight from the Music General Senior Syllabus (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2019).

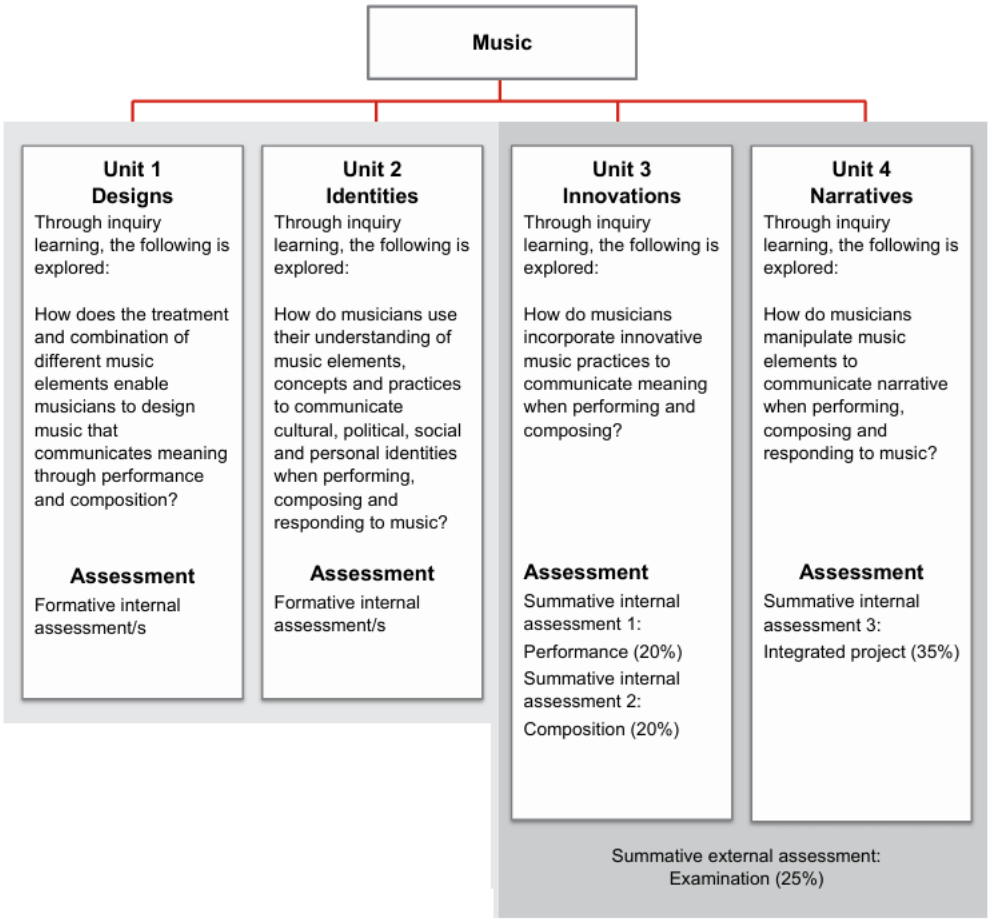

Figure 2: Assessment framework for Senior Music (QCAA, 2019, pg. 4)

This syllabus outlines the subject matter and assessment regime. Our discussion for Susan's teaching is for Unit 3: Innovations. Detailed descriptions of the subject matter to be learned is available for Susan online (https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au).

The assessment framework for senior studies in music is provided as Figure 2. AS shown, the overall achievement for the subject, Music, includes results for both Units 3 and 4. Susan's Jazz lessons are for Unit 3. The syllabus outlines the assessment, which for Allan, in his experience of Unit 3, comprises a summative internal assessment of performance (20% of final grade), a summative internal assessment of composition (20% of final grade), and a summative external assessment (25% of final grade). This is added to by a 35% integrated project for the next Unit. Therefore, the system, in this case, QCAA's perspective for the map, is via curriculum and assessment through which there are some basic guidelines for pedagogy, which for this Unit was limited to the repertoire.

We propose that the three domains exist as a type of prism that distorts the validity and influence of each against the others depending on the perspective.

CPA Prism

The way the perspectives of the CPA map are shown in Figure 1, there is a sense that the teacher, student and system have a clear view through two of the elements to the third. However, we propose that the perspectives tend to be blind to a third domain. Figure 3 shows how this might work by showing the CPA map as a prism.

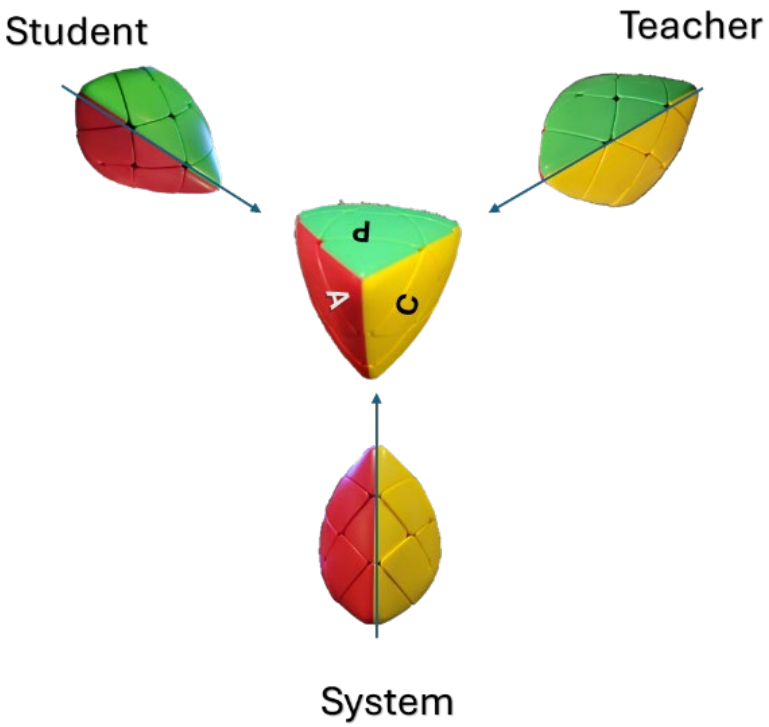

Figure 3 CPA Prism

The prismatic depiction shows how the perspective orientations connect with two of the elements while hiding a third. At the centre of Figure 3 is a triangular prism with three visible sides looking from above. Each side represents one of the three domains, Curriculum, Pedagogy or Assessment. The three perspectives of the current example are shown with, for example, the student (Allan) seeing Pedagogy and Assessment and without direct connection with the curriculum detail.

We have demonstrated a partial invisibility effect in Figure 3, as well as the unclear and overlapping boundaries between domains shown in Figure 1. We have also argued that sometimes the domains are completely indistinguishable from each other. These effects work together and explain the constant destabilization and re-stabilization of influences in overall educational design when considering CPA. It is understandable that there is constant instability for educational design and disagreement between stakeholders of the schooling system. However, we propose that there are even two more forces are at work: the forces of disciplinarity and purposes for learning. Figure 4 depicts the balance of forces at play for CPA.

Figure 4 Balance forces impacting overall educational design

This figure illustrates the layers of influence. The first layer comprises domain definition and domain boundary overlap. The second layer introduces stakeholder interpretation, including agency, perspective, and domain blindness. The third and final layer, which is likely the most impactful, involves discipline effect and considerations about the role for purposes of learning.

Disciplinarity and learning design

The learning plan is shaped by the specific discipline, which in our case is creative and performing arts, focusing on music. Each discipline is distinct in terms of the mental models it presents to students and the ways it frames knowing and communicating.

The sciences have unique methods for developing and communicating understanding and building knowledge. For want of a better name, they are scientific. This scientific and disciplinary way of learning and knowing is quite different from creative and performing arts disciplines. These two disciplines differ in the way misconceptions are discovered and addressed. They differ in how understanding is communicated, the nature of meaning, learning, and knowledge creation. These differences play a fundamental role in defining the disciplines themselves and this shapes the affordances for curriculum. pedagogy and assessment.

The disciplinary differences impact the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment and extent to which they overlap or become integrated. For example, in the context of Jazz composition music, the disciplinary approach allows pedagogy and assessment to coexist indistinguishably due to an AaL approach. In contrast, traditional sciences tend to follow AoL, which separates pedagogy and assessment more distinctly.

For both the sciences and creative and performing arts disciplines, though, there may be educational designs that rely upon productive conversations. That is, there are some cross-disciplinary pedagogies and even curriculums (e.g., the General Capabilities outlined by QCAA). Therefore, for each program of study, there is a state of flux between the overlap that may exist between the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment domains.

But above all other considerations, the most potent influence is conceptions for the purposes of education.

Purposes of education

Conceptions for the purpose of education shape the relative influence of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in any educational context. Such purposes could include any or all of the following at the same time:

- Career building: providing prerequisite skills and attitudes for career paths,
- Social preparation: providing the context and experiences for responsible social engagement,
- Functional basics: providing literacy, numeracy, and general capabilities such as 21st-century skills for all students,
- Ranking and sorting; providing gatekeeper services for tertiary education and work options,

- Knowledge appreciation: providing understanding and insight into the nature of knowledge and expertise across disciplines.

These purposes have overarching control of the entire educative venture. They direct the nature and interrelationships between the domains of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Figure 1). They shape and influence the perspectives of the stakeholders (Figure 3), and they are impacted by relevant disciplinary norms (Figure 4), Two examples of they way this could work:

1. If the goal of an education program is to rank and sort individuals for work or higher education opportunities, then the main emphasis would naturally be on the assessment system closely connected to the curriculum. The pedagogies could be viewed as less important and could even be presented as self-paced educational materials. In this situation, the system perspective is most important.
2. If the goal is to build and develop career skills, then the focus should naturally be on selecting the right pedagogy connected with formative assessment. In this instance, the curriculum should be more personalized and flexible to match each student's development. This type of purpose matches the student perspective depicted on our CPA map.

And so, the purposes of education warp and twist the shape and perspective of the CPA prism, ruining the likelihood of any strict and regular construction of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

Conclusion

It is not at all clear that the terms and concepts of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are useful for productive educational design. We have demonstrated there are many disintegrating forces at play that undermine the validity of a strict separation of terms. We have shown that stakeholder perspectives are blind to domains that are intended to inform the educational design. This undermines their capacity to engage with each other for impactful and united decision-making. We have shown that disciplinary differences and intended purposes for educational design work to de-stabilise the relative impact of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Throughout this discussion, though, it has always been apparent that agency sits with the teacher. The teacher holds formal and informal power over the educational experience that they direct. Our responsibility as a sector, then, is to ensure that our teachers are well-prepared, compassionate and critical thinkers with the needs of their students as their focus.

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