REVIEW OF BEST PRACTICES IN CURRICULUM DELIVERY: DIMENSIONS AND PARAMETERS IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

BY

BIODUN OGUNYEMI

1.   INTRODUCTION

Schools, colleges, universities and all other forms of educational institutions are challenged to reinvent themselves whenever their activities are no longer meeting the expectations of the society they serve.   The most concrete framework of undertaking this self-reinvention or re-engineering process is curriculum.   Thus, best practices in curriculum delivery can be provided by answers to the following questions:

- How is the curriculum conceived and implemented?
- What does it promote or fail to promote?
- Are curricular goals of educational institutions always in tandem with the yearnings, aspirations and expressed concerens of the society which they claim to serve?
- To what extent do academic activities and programmes of educational institutions qualify as "best" that can be afforded?

2.   DEFINING BEST PRACTICES

(i)   Fedler (2001:7) defines "best practice" with reference to a programme as an entity as follows:

"A best practice can be defined as a programme or practice that has been clearly defined, refined through repeated delivery, and supported by a substantial body of research".

(ii)   Whalley, Langley, Villareal and College (1977) focus more specifically on quality indicators as follows:

"Good statements identify, in general terms, the standard aspired to in an area of practice.   For any given area,

specific practices serve as quality indicators to determine if the standards identified in the broader goal statement are being achieved. These quality indicators are called best pracitces".

In either of the two instances, however, best practices could be understood both as organisation specific or among organisations of similar attributes, say, university education. Whether it is internally driven or externally induced, best practices as a concept connotes a continuous search for what works better than the familiar.

These two angles to best practices are discussed below:

(a) Organisation specific best practices (internally-driven)

This involves the situation in which an organisation sets out to compare notes among its constituent units to ascertain which of them best exemplify the vision driving it. Thus, the approach relies on internal mechanism, as it is usually initiated from within the organisation. For instance, among the terms of reference given to Ellard and Krysto (2000) by the University of Calgary are:

1. Inform the University and broader community about particular innovative, interesting, or cost effective curriculum features or learning activities.
2. Recognise the programmes that have been achieved, unusual levels of success in any aspect of curriculum transformation.
3. Provide exemplars of particular notable curriculum design features that might be adapted for use in other programmes.
4. Renew or enhance the momentum of the curriculum transformation effort as it enters the critical implementation stage.
5. Assist in an evaluation (partly summative and partly formative) of what we have achieved, institutionally, as our effort to redesign our curricula.

(b) Best practices among organisations of similar attributes (externally driven)

"Best practices" could also commence at the instance of an external agency. For instance, the National Universities Commission (NUC) develops some uniform criteria which it uses to accredit programmes across universities in Nigeria. Data from such exercises go a long way in re-formulating new goals and suggesting innovations into curricula and other activities of Nigerian Universities. Such is the nature of agenda setting in almost centralised educational system in Nigeria, West Africa, Africa and global levels. For instance, the Association of African Universities (AAU) once reported that the fall in the quality of training in some African Universities was worsened by:

- the drop in the level of training of graduates of secondary schools;
- the lack of scientific documentation available for students; and
- the lack, or the inefficiency, of training programmes in university pedagogy and in-service academic staff development programmes.

3. DEFINING CURRICULUM AND CURRICULUM DELIVERY

Due to divergence in thinking about the subject, various definitions of curriculum exist. This depends on whether emphasis is on:

- the place of the learner;
- the nature of what is to be learnt;
- the society from where both the learner and the subject matter are drawn.

Some of the popular schools of thought in this regard are discussed below:

(i) The Progressivists/Pragmatists (focus on learner)

They argue that nothing is worth learning exept what actively engages the learners. To them,

"aims are not to be thought of as being set up before hand, but are merely the results of the problem-solving situations which arise during activities of life". (Wheeler, 1967:77).

In other words, what we call "curriculum" should not be formulated before hand and we should just be guided by the experiences of learners for whom it is meant. This is what they called <u>child-centred curriculum</u>.

(ii)   <u>The Essentialists (focus on what is learnt)</u>

They call for a curriculum that focuses on the development of intellectual power. To the essentialists, education is about the individual's adaptation to a knowledge which is absolute and which exists independently of the learner. Thus, education aims are dependent on preconceived values which the learner should be made to discover and share. The essentialists, therefore, advocates a fixed curriculum which should consist of "minimum essentials" (particularly literature, mathematics, history). The organisation of the curriculum, according to the essentialists, should be in terms of subject-matter fields.

(iii)   <u>The Existentialists (focus on society/environment)</u>

They more adequately capture the challenges associated with rapid industrialisation and advancement in science and technology in the curriculum considerations. Existentialism focuses on opportunities for individuals to make choices and take full responsibilities for their actions (Akinpelu, 1981). Hence like the pragmatists, the most important source of knowledge to the existentialists is experience; but more specifically such experiences that promote choices and decision-making.

It should be noted that none of these three schools, or others like the perennialists, the realists, and the reconstructionists, adequately capture the configuration of curriculum whether at the school or

university level. While the ideas they put forward help us to reflect deeply on curriculum activities, there is no educational institution that can, in the strict sense of it, fall into any of the rigid compartments they represent.

Curriculum: Definition

Curriculum is about learners, about what is to be learnt and the society whose purpose the school serves.

The definitions of curriculum are examined below:

(a)   Wheeler (1967) says that curiculum means:

"the planned experienced offered to the learner under the guidance of the school".

(b)   Farrant (1980) underscores the importance of society in the conception and delivery of the curriculum as he defines curriculum as:

"the distilled thinking of society on what it wants to achieve through education. It tends to mirro society itself, reflecting its aims, values and priorities. It spells out clearly the knowledge the society considers important and useful. It identifies those physical and mental skills the society prices; and adopts those methods which it approves".

(c)   Olarinoye (2001) illustrates a narrow viewpoint of curriculum by defining it as:
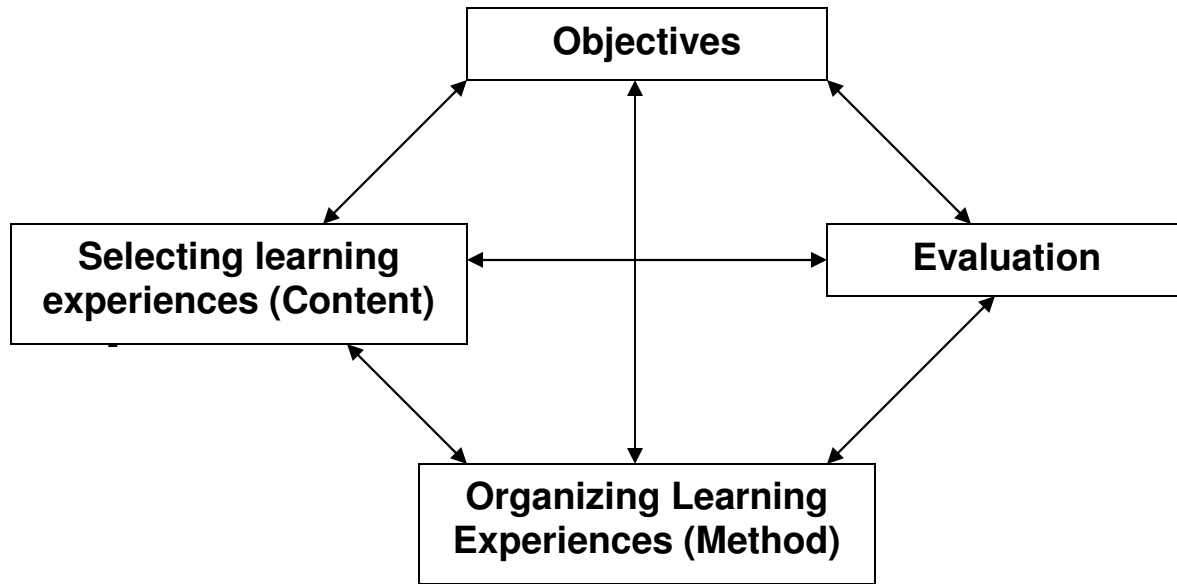
"a blueprint consisting of subject themes, topics, performance or behavioural activities, content or subject matter and students' activities".

Whether from the broad or narrow perspective, it is evident from the foregoing that a curriculum material has four interrelated parts. These are:

-       Objectives

- Learning experiences/content
- Organisation/method, and
- Evaluation.

The patterns of interaction among these elements of the curriculum are illustrated in Figure 1.

```
                          ┌─────────────────┐
                          │   Objectives    │
                          └─────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────┐                          ┌─────────────────┐
│  Selecting learning │◄────────────────────────►│   Evaluation    │
│ experiences (Content)│                          └─────────────────┘
└─────────────────────┘

                  ┌─────────────────────────┐
                  │   Organizing Learning   │
                  │  Experiences (Method)   │
                  └─────────────────────────┘
```

These elements of curriculum are discussed below:

(i)   Curriculum Objectives

This refers to the ends-in-view or anticipated outcomes after taking the students through the curriculum material. These are usually generated through three major sources:

- research studies on the society;
- analysis of learners' needs, and
- views expressed by experts in the discipline or subject fields.

However, there are instances when those to implement the curriculum have little or no say in its preparation. This is usually the case with pre-packaged National Secondary School curricula series.

(ii)   <u>Learning Experiences (Content)</u>

The term covers a broad spectrum of opportunities designed to facilitate the attainment curriculum aims, goals and objectives. Such experiences could emerge from:

- Direct interactions with the human teacher, fellow learners and other significant individuals and groups around the teaching-learning environment;
- Indirect influence or vicarious experience from these and other sources, such as reading books, listening to stories, participating in drama and watching episodes from film, video and the Internet.

(iii)   <u>Organizing Learning Experiences (Method)</u>

Methods provide the platform for interactions and mutually beneficial exchanges between the principal characters in the teaching-learning process – the teacher and the learners. By applying one method or the other, teachers act as facilitators of learning in order to translate curriculum objectives into observable events and activities that the society can see and measure. Fox (1993) identifies four broad orientations / approaches about methods of teaching. These are:

- Imparting knowledge" into the learners or transferring knowledge from someone that knows to others who do not know.
- To "mould or shape" the learners into some predetermined models of humans; as we find in training or drilling.
- A "process of exploration" by both teachers and learners or activity-based learning that requires mutual exchange of ideas and information.

Finally, to the developmentalist teachers, teaching goes beyond impartation of knowledge, beyond moulding and beyond exploration; it involves activities aimed at providing opportunities for the learner's all-round development.

(iv)   Evaluation

This involves feedback on activities related to the development and implementation of curriculum. It entails data collection on the unfolding curriculum material, or an already operational programme, in order to take decision on its efficacy or otherwise. This suggests that evaluation could be:

-    Formative: Done periodically as the curriculum activities are in progress; with a view to effecting needed coorection or addressing some observed anomalies;
-    Summative: Comes up at the end of the programme development (trial-run) or implementation.

Whether formative or summative, information from evaluation should guide curriculum review, in the following areas:

-    the objective set;
-    the learning experiences/content selected;
-    the methods of delivery.

In some instances, an area of learning may be jettisoned altogether especially where feedback from the larger society seem not to favour the existing curriculum orientations.

4.   **NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES AND BEST PRACTICES**

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004), National Policy on Education states that Nigerian Universities are expected to, among other things, contribute to national development through:

-    High level relevant human/mapower training;
-    Develop students' intellectual capability to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
-    Facilitate the acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills, which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society; and
-    Promote and encourage scholarship and community service.

Pai Obanya (1999:12, 16) puts higher institutions, particularly universities, at the forefront of the search for an "emergent Nigeria", with the following features:

- It will make a completely new demands on our institutions of higher learning;
- The society will be challenging higher institutions to contribute to the development of the "fundamentals" (political, economic, human capital, social services, infrastructural and National image) by their tripple mission of research, teaching and public service;
- Within each institution, and across institutions, through an improved networking arrangement, there is the need to strengthen the capacity of strategic thinking;

Obviously, best practices are at the heart of Obayan's call for strategic thinking, with reforms in the following direction:

- It is in the realm of teaching that a complete change of attitude, and practices is called for.
- An emergent Nigeria will require an educated (i.e. well rounded, workforce, i.e. a workforce that will require (a) a sound and broad general knowledge, and (b) the learning-to-learn (or adaptability) skills.

Writing within the same context, Adalemo (2001:27) observes that the purpose of higher education clearly go beyond the trinity of teaching, research and service taken at their face value. They involve:

- the education of the individual;
- advancing human capacity in the society at large;
- supporting intellectual and cultural artistic creativity; and
- evaluating society critically for self-renewal through individual thought and persuasion.

5. PARAMETERS OF BEST PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

From the earliest times, scholars have always collaborated and exchanged ideas on how to advance teaching, research and service

to the community. This is possible with the offer of an <u>emerging global knowledge economy</u>. Knowledge is increasingly viewed as having the capacity to augment productivity and regarded as the foundation of a country's competitive advantage. However, Ebergbe (2006) recently lamented that Nigeria's higher institutions are yet to compete with the rest of the developing countries in responding to the challenges of research and development.

Drawing from the experiences and success stories in Africa and elsewhere around the globe, the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) and allied agencies of government through the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) document has introduced the following reforms:

- The registration and licensing of more privately owned and funded universities.
- The setting up of the Nigerian University System Merit Award (NUSAMA).
- The assessment of locally published journals which serve as publication outlets for Nigerian academics.
- Organising the Nigerian Universities Research and Development Fair (NURESDEF).
- Establishment of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN).
- The introduction of a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph. D) as the minimum qualifications for all university lecturers with 2009 as the compliance deadline.
- The setting up of the Nigerian Universities Network (NUNet) e – project.
- The setting up of the National Virtual (Digital) Library.
- Plans to establish a national database of all projects, theses and dissertations to serve as a source for checking plagiarised academic works.
- The introduction of the post-UME Screening to check the quality of entrants.
- The introduction of the Nigerian Experts and Academics in the Diaspora Scheme (NEADS).

6. __CONCLUDING REMARKS__

Curriculum developers and teachers in Nigerian Universities would do well to be watchful for elements of the "Quackery Approach" in their quest for best practices in both the broad and narrow senses of it. The curriculum must be systematically conceived, well planned and contains elements capable of addressing the problems of society, as well as being a blueprint for specific subject matters.

At NOUN we have a very beautiful and rewarding experience in Curriculum Development. Ours is that of continuous training and staff development, with the numerous seminars and cross-departmental interactions all year round.