

## **Just in case or Just in time?**

*by Bambi Betts*

For administrators in international schools, an increasingly pressing question is "What is the 'right' curriculum to prepare our students for the world they will live in as adults?"

While our international schools are free from the constraints of state or national mandates, they are just as often distant from the latest research and effective strategies, clouding the answer to this question. Despite the complications, it is telling that the answer has remained pretty much the same over a number of decades. With the possible exception of some technology content, and the absence of home economics and 'shop', the core content of the curriculum in many of our schools closely resembles the curriculum of over fifty years ago.

Conscientious principals and school heads are asking, is this OK? Is it possible that 90% of what students of the fifties needed to be successful adults is what is still needed today? Could it be true that students today need to spend basically the same amount of time, in pretty much the same ways on content and skills designed to prepare them for a future now past? Or does their own future demand the same? While the resounding response from most schools is yes, at least in practice, let me suggest an alternative response.

Until quite recently, "schooling" has been rooted in the construct of information giving. The place called school was set up, in large part, to "teach" students information and skills they would have a difficult time getting any other way. Given this premise, it is logical that the curriculum development process was based on defining what information and skills might be important. The curriculum came to be driven by a "just in case" mentality. Content and skill objectives were written into the curriculum "just in case" students might need these things as adults.

And information was not expanding nearly as rapidly as it is today so we could just about keep up with incorporating whatever new information was emerging. Most of us are now still operating with some version of the "just-in-case curriculum." And, not surprisingly, this mentality has contributed to "curriculum overload." As ever increasing groups of stakeholders lobby for schools to teach even more, the "just-in-case curriculum" mushrooms. Even if we are working with standards, the driving premise continues to be that there is a core set of content and skills every learner must acquire in a particular sequence, and that these are essential to being a successful adult in "the future."

But what if we began to think of curriculum in the same way that we approach solving most real-life problems? As adults, living in the future for which we were prepared, when we need to make a decision, or solve a problem or even just find out about something we are interested in, we tend not to be driven by content. We don't really have the luxury of picking our problems or dilemmas based on content. We can't just decide that since I know a lot about economics, we'll conger up an economics problem for today. Rather we are driven by questions such as: Do I see a problem or issue brewing? What do I need to

know about this? How can I find out? How much time will it take? What are the likely implications of possible solutions?

In daily life whether personal or professional, rarely is the starting point set information; rather it is a central problem or question or need. Yet, how often do we offer students in our schools this as a starting point? How much practice do they actually get over 12 years in school to start with a typical, ill-structured, messy problem, the kind each of us faces daily?

It is this question of the starting point which leads me to suggest that perhaps, it is time to begin shifting the emphasis in curriculum from "just in case" to "just in time." Consider a problem such as "What economic policy might best serve the Venezuelan people over the next decade?" How do I go about solving it? Perhaps, I learned about the notion of economic policy somewhere in my schooling, and perhaps I learned about the long-term effects of such policies from my just-in-case curriculum, but not necessarily. The just-in-case curriculum, based in skill and content standards, is often driven by static or simulated data which we hope will be conjured up (and still relevant) in appropriate settings in the future. But this scheme often fails.

In real life what I will do is ask, "What information do I need to solve this problem?" "Where can I get it?" "What other smaller decisions will I need to make which will help me find a solution?" "How much time do I have and who needs to know the solution?" The context compels me to answer the questions about what specific information and skills will be needed to get the job done. This is the "just-in-time" curriculum. Its premises are real problems, real-time data, critical thinking and questioning, forging connections, real purpose.

Am I suggesting there is no place for the teaching of individual skills and bits and pieces of information? Clearly not. But, I believe the time is approaching to shift the emphasis from "just-in-case" to "just in time." In fact, such initiatives as inquiry-based and problem-based learning are already piloting this notion. "Just in case" is becoming a far too random way to prepare students for a future which is impossible to predict. "Just in time," as contradictory as it sounds, could help create learners who are about inventing the future, not just prepared for it.

Now, when we walk into a classroom we often hear "Today we will be learning about..." Over the next decade, we will hear more and more frequently, "What do we need to learn today?" And it will be the student asking himself. Let's hope international administrators will be among the pioneers in this journey.

(Note: Please contact bambibetts@eca.com.ve for further dialogue on this issue)