

Getting Results with Curriculum Mapping

Edited by Heidi Hayes Jacobs



Chapter 3. Development of a Consensus Map: Wrestling with Curriculum Consistency and Flexibility

by Heidi Hayes Jacobs

Once the workshop begins and participants engage in learning about the nature of curriculum mapping, participants inevitably raise questions: "Shouldn't we eventually make a consensus map? Isn't that the point of mapping?" In other words, "Shouldn't all 3rd grade teachers be doing the same thing at the same time?" I would ask these questions instead: "What is in Johnny's best interest? When is consensus critical for Johnny's progress, and when is flexibility equally important?"

The 3rd grade teachers want to get together and make their consensus map *before* they have looked at any other grade levels. The high school social studies department wants to make decisions *before* examining not only the middle school social studies curriculum, but also any other subject area. Curriculum mapping provides a powerful opportunity to consider more subtle and nuanced considerations for learners as teachers wrestle with consensus.

A consensus curriculum map reflects the policy agreed on by a professional staff that targets those specific areas in each discipline that are to be addressed with consistency and flexibility in a school or a district. The result of this deliberation is an *essential* map.

The Latin for consensus is *consentiere*, meaning "to feel with; to feel the same." It is noteworthy that the Latin root does not mean to act the same way. It is important that teachers reach some professional agreements to ensure a meaningful journey for the learner. Their agreements can and should fulfill a range of approaches that do not encroach on classroom creativity, yet at the same time promise as smooth a journey as can be designed for the learner. This chapter probes the problems caused by hurried curriculum decision making and suggests policy guidelines for moving to an essential curriculum through the mapping process. The contention is that the tension between consistency and flexibility is a vital and dynamic basis for determining policies throughout each curriculum area. What should crystallize is the vision of a school in which communication and decisions are made directly in the children's best interest and are not based on old committee meeting habits.

Consensus Map Guidelines

It seems that curriculum decisions often are made too quickly. If we revisit the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter ("What is in Johnny's best interest? When is consensus critical for Johnny's progress, and when is flexibility equally important?"), it is clear that the key is thoughtful reflection.

A curious observation is the uniform way that committees review curriculum for each field of study. Too often authorities have a knee-jerk impulse to declare that "all curriculum areas will be the same." In fact, real and significant differences exist between fields of study. When discussing curriculum, we often use geopolitical metaphors, such as fields, worlds, areas, units, and boundaries. This usage is, in part, because there are rich and fascinating links between education and geopolitics (Jacobs, 1989). These differences highlight the perspectives that science, social studies, art, or math bring to the problems and topics under scrutiny. At the same time, when linked effectively, the curriculum areas can provide rich interdisciplinary experiences. When it comes to curriculum mapping, each discipline has its own unique characteristics. Therefore, the review of each discipline should take those characteristics into account. When planning interdisciplinary curriculum, multiple considerations come into play. As Rebecca Burns (2002, p. 64) points out:

Many administrators and faculties fail to realize that implementing interdisciplinary teamed instruction affects all key components of schooling: organization and management, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and culture.

We must return to the child in the chair who is watching us work at the table or at the computer and must ask if our decisions will ultimately be in that child's best interest. Wrestling with a consensus map requires sophisticated thinking and debate among faculty members.

Mapping can help teachers in a number of ways as they provide the targeted consistency and yet still provide the flexibility that can prove equally as critical. Often, a department or group of grade-level teachers might agree to share the same essential question, or a set of essential questions, to focus their work. Schools in a district might vary methods, materials, and approaches to the same standards. To help provide a perspective for the district, for parents, and for individual teachers, schools can design common benchmark assessment tasks that reflect a specific standard (see Chapter 9). This approach allows each school to provide an integrated approach tailored to its own learners and, at the same time, to give a consistent focus to useful assessment tasks across the district.

Value of the Mixed-Group Review in Mapping

One of the most revealing and engaging steps in the mapping process is the mixed-group review, in which members of the faculty who do not regularly work together have the opportunity to do so. This interfacing creates a series of "jigsaw" review groups comprising faculty members who rarely get a chance to step out of the box and view the experience of students from new perspectives. For example, in an elementary school, kindergarten, 2nd grade, 4th grade, 5th grade, music, and special education teachers might form one group. Likewise, freshman social studies, senior English, business education, math, and studio art

teachers might form a high school group. The purpose is to share observations targeted around a specific review task. Perhaps teachers are asked to review for repetitions or for gaps in either a specific subject or across a grade level. Individually, teachers examine the maps and make their notations. The mixed-group review culls these observations and analyzes them.

Often in high school groups, participants question whether someone who does not teach a particular subject is qualified to read the map for another subject. Although a teacher may not have majored in or specialized in that area, he or she often brings a new perspective from an "outside" point of view. An analogy to book publishing might prove helpful here.

When an author submits a book to a publishing house, the editor often sends it out to two sources for feedback: one, a reader who is familiar with the subject and might find holes in the content; two, an excellent reader who is not an expert in the subject. The latter reader sees things that the former reader might miss. When someone is conversant on a topic, he or she may be too close to the material, read between the lines, and miss critical gaps.

The same holds true in the curriculum review process. Sometimes a science teacher reviewing math curriculum might see something that the math teacher might miss in terms of an opportunity or a need. Sometimes the 5th grade teacher will pick up on something the 1st grade teacher misses. Sometimes the physical education teacher might see a gap in the 7th grade health curriculum. We owe it to Johnny (in the chair) to share our viewpoints and to review the curriculum from many angles.

It is precisely after the mixed-group review that the discussion of a potential consensus map makes sense. Now the faculty members have a new and fresh perspective about their work. The various views from the jigsaw nature of the mixed group allow for more informed curriculum decisions. A genuine potential for a rewarding professional openness can follow from these discussions. When teachers and administrators examine the truth of their work with "warts and all," camaraderie emerges. Mapping does not purport to create an idealistic vision where all teachers agree, love one another, and gather around a campfire and sing "Curriculum Kumbaya." What it can develop is a sense of place, of respect, and of new grounds for discussion, disputes, and direction. Therefore, looking at the consensus question is best toward the end of the first year of mapping or when collected mapping data have been sufficiently examined both vertically and horizontally.

Dangers of Premature Consensus

There is an understandable tendency to put faculty members together in their usual patterns after collecting mapping data. This tendency, however, can cause potential problems for the learner. One might even say that this is why the learner often runs into trouble. The very gaps we wish to avoid are created when we do not look at the big picture.

For example, a high school social studies department might collectively make a decision about the format for research-oriented papers without looking at the format used in English or science. As a result, students might get mixed signals and become confused when working on a full range of academic subjects. Consider the decision made by 2nd grade teachers when they decided to teach a major unit with a theme on folk tales and fairy tales. The group not

only failed to examine what occurred the previous year in 1st grade, but also never stepped back to look at the choices in language arts genre from a K–4 perspective. As it turned out, variations on folk tales and fairy tales were evident each year. Certainly some will argue that such stories have special meaning for young children, but when one thinks about the wide range of genre available and the fact that the choice was made in a grade-level vacuum, the decision is difficult to justify. Perhaps the children could use some nonfiction to build their reading skills as well.

If we return to the initial question raised in this chapter about consensus, we find choices about when to wrestle with consensus and flexibility and how to resolve such issues. The curriculum mapping process can provide solutions to those problems.

Process of Reaching a Curriculum Consensus Policy

As teachers and administrators examine the findings of a curriculum review, they have an opportunity to sort observations into two categories:

1. The level of difficulty and complexity in seeking a solution
 - a. Those that can be solved with relative ease in an immediate way
 - b. Those that require long-term research and development to create solutions
2. The tasks central to the mapping process (Jacobs, 1997a)
 - a. Filling in the gaps
 - b. Eliminating repetitions
 - c. Seeking potential areas for integration
 - d. Validating and integrating standards
 - e. Updating antiquated programs with timely curriculum

These two categories lead reviewers to focus on questions concerning consensus. In the course of resolving issues of repetition or gaps, sometimes we find that the question of consensus naturally emerges, thus alleviating the initial anxiety about whether "I am going to have to give up something I teach." When it is glaringly apparent that students will suffer because of a dearth of seamless curriculum planning, the discussion moves rapidly. In short, the maps are evidence that all reviewers see at the same time.

Tour of the Disciplines

One can find fascinating problems by touring the disciplines and considering the ways flexibility, or range, and consistency might vary in the review of specific subjects. At the time of this writing, schools in the United States are directly confronting standards that have, in fact, been organized into disciplines with few exceptions. Basic epistemology teaches us that each discipline has unique characteristics—in a sense, each has its own architecture. As Klein (1996, p. 38) points out, some disciplines are more permeable than others."

When a school is struggling with the issue of consensus, it is important to respect the

distinctions and unique properties of each subject. It is not just a question of when to be consistent or flexible, but of how the subject will play out in the classroom. To set this point in concrete, consider the following perspectives when looking at the tension between consistency and flexibility. Questions toward building consensus developed before reviewing the map should reflect a sincere attempt to determine what is unique about the discipline to be examined. As you tour the landscape that follows about each discipline, clear and distinctive components in each are in **bold**. This "tour" aims to set a discussion into motion, rather than to suggest that the reader will agree with the policy points raised.

Math

Math is the most abstract discipline. It is based on numeric and conceptual relationships through nonverbal symbols. To assist learners in engaging with the language of mathematics, teachers are advised to be consistent with the **sequence** of math instruction over time. Teachers might be ill advised to teach fractions before students know how to divide or to teach measurement when students lack basic counting skills. It is not in the best interest of students for a teacher to randomly eliminate teaching multiplication and division for the sake of variety.

However, range in **pace** is equally critical for students in mathematics. The building blocks of mathematical thinking are requisite for more advanced conceptualization. If a student is not ready to move on, then the teacher must take time to assist that learner. As one teacher put it, "We cannot put the kids on the train for multiplication until they have the addition tickets."

A **flexible range of methods** for assisting learners does not alter the sequence. Students do not acquire mathematical understanding at the same pace. Therefore, a school might elect to have a consensus map that relies on a careful K–12 sequence over the years, but that maintains flexibility as to the rapidity of the pace and the range of assignments, methods, strategies, and experiences that children can be exposed to as they go from class to class.

Language Arts, World Language Instruction, and Literature

This area is strikingly different from mathematics. The question of consistency and range can be applied to (1) choice of **genre** studied, (2) specific **works** of literature, (3) specific **editing and revision** skills when applying grammar, and (4) **theme**. In other words, five 4th grade teachers might agree with their colleagues when looking at the K–12 panorama that their 4th grade is a good time to introduce the genre of historical fiction. Consensus on the genre choice is accepted. The same team, however, could agree that there can be flexibility on the choice of specific literary works; not all teachers use the same textbook.

Yet, this flexibility proves problematic in other components of the language arts curriculum. It is difficult to argue that widely varying standards for editing their writing are helpful to learners. Here is a place where there is a need for great consistency. We do not want Johnny to get the message from one teacher that he needs to work on editing complete sentences in all his formal work, and then have him go to his second period class and find that the teacher does not care about the grammar "as long as the ideas are there."

Over the years, teachers may truly believe that they are introducing a *new* editing or revision

skill. An examination of the maps, however, shows that the students have been introduced to the same skills five years in a row. We need to work diligently at spiraling language arts skills vertically as students advance in grade level. We also need to work at supporting those same skills and following through in all subject areas when students reach middle and high school.

The choice of literary works has powerful implications vertically. Sometimes a student will have studied a novel in an English class, only to find the same novel presented again two years later. When the student protests, the response is often a variation on "Yes, I know you studied the book in 6th grade, but you haven't had it with me. It will be a different book in 8th grade. You will learn so much more." Most students are not going to major in English. They are teenagers, and they resent the lack of variety. As a freshman boy put it in an interview, "Hey, if they can't take the time to do something different, why should I?"

English teachers frequently wrap the study of literary works around **themes**. Conceptual notions, such as **conflict, rites of passage, or survival**, serve students well in English classes as a perspective on learning. Yet themes too can become redundant. Maps allow teachers to share with one another the themes and corresponding works they present in a thoughtful review over time. Consensus in this case points to vertical articulation to avoid redundant themes.

World language teachers are often very clear and consistent over the years in the curriculum. They tend to have a spiraling approach to working with grammar, situational applications of vocabulary, and a range of assessments.

Social Studies

Social studies is often the most controversial, permeable, and fluid of disciplines. Decisions that are made often have social consequences and reflect social values. Whose history are we going to leave out? What cultural perspective should we take? Even in what appears to be a highly contained area like geography, the actual choice of map type reflects values. Mercator maps, which are perhaps the most widely used maps in U.S. classrooms, were developed in 1569 by a German named Gerardus Mercator to help sailors navigate. Not surprisingly, Germany is placed in the physical center of the map, causing remarkable distortions in proportion to other countries (for example, Greenland is larger than Africa, South America, or India). A Peters projection map gives an accurate representation of land size, but is startling to students when they see how different the "value" message is compared to the 16th century Mercator map that is still the touchstone for most students (and adults). In short, controversy trails social studies.

Questions for curriculum reviews during the mapping process often focus around questions specific to the various subdisciplines in social studies: geography, history, political science, and anthropology:

- **Geography.** Geography involves consensus on consistent timing as to when to introduce concepts and terms across the grade levels, a relatively straightforward task. Range, or flexibility, becomes a legitimate concern in terms of what types of assessment truly reflect understanding of geography concepts.

- **History.** History clearly requires a thorough consideration of the sequence and the selection of critical events, periods, people, and themes. It is advisable that a K–12 perspective be considered as students build a historical view while they move through school. There certainly might be a range of methods and approaches to history, but it is simply unfair to students if teachers leave out critical eras of history during students' thirteen-year journey through K–12 social studies. Because certain parts of the world get more attention than others in our history courses, curriculum mappers must stay alert to build the most seamless social studies program they can, given the difficult task of eliminating key periods because of time constraints. Common historical skills, such as analyzing primary source documents, sorting fact from fiction, and debating multiple sides of an issue, should also be clearly identified in maps. Range, or flexibility, makes sense in terms of providing students with opportunities to fully investigate areas of interest and issues that emerge naturally from the study of history.
- **Political Science.** Political science provides an opportunity for students to compare characteristics and features of various governments. The bias of parents and teachers on political issues is obvious to most children. What should be consistent in the United States is the opportunity to express our views in an active democracy (Glickman, 2003a). Although consistency on advocating a particular position is antithetical to good political science instruction, precise agreement is critical about what issues in the content will be examined.
- **Anthropology.** There can be a particularly interesting range of experiences in anthropology as children examine cultures. Artifact analysis, interviewing, and online exchanges with students around the world are now possible, given our advanced technologies. Clearly, anthropology selections are often some of the most sensitive in the school curriculum. Should the same cultures be examined at each grade level? Which ones should be left out? All anthropologists have worldviews shaped by their personal backgrounds. Thus, it becomes a more fluid and difficult field to achieve consensus in all areas, except for the identification of specific cultures. Learners can become modern anthropologists. The social sciences lend themselves to great excitement, argument, and investigation. They require careful analysis concerning consistency and flexibility.

Science

Science curriculum is based on a solid set of procedures found in the **scientific method**. This approach to inquiry is to be developed methodically and consistently over the school years. Many times confusion exists between introducing those methods and using them in a developmental fashion. In truth, I have seen maps beginning in 4th grade with entries indicating that the teacher is introducing the scientific method, plus other maps that continue to say that those skills are being introduced throughout high school. The map needs to show definite expansion and sophistication. High school students have already been introduced to the scientific method; they need to be challenged with more elaborate opportunities to use the method.

A key content issue in science is to agree on which **concepts** and bodies of information should

be targeted—and at which grade levels. Sometimes the question of having a range of assessments proves problematic in the review process, although ultimately this question sparks a worthwhile debate. For example, one biology teacher in a middle school might use a multiple-choice test to ascertain student knowledge, whereas the neighboring biology teacher might use a class **lab**. Lab formats should be consistent year to year, even as the nature of the problems becomes more challenging. If we want to see "world class" science emerge, then we must encourage flexibility in science investigations by independent students, as in New York State's Science Research Program. Science departments that work with mapping tend to consider a set of more elaborate assessments to build consistent scientific competencies.

Performing and Fine Arts

Instruction in performing and fine arts reflects a dynamic range of approaches, creations, and student performances. By the same token, there is a striking consistency in the precise and incremental way that students move through the years in developing their personal expertise. Perhaps this consistency is because the outcomes of student work are public and visible. The performance nature of the arts points to the richness of variety in students' voices, yet also to the consistency of skill building that frequently occurs in our arts departments.

On the elementary level, the nature of art departments is such that one teacher might serve the entire population of K–5 learners over six years of elementary school. This arrangement provides an internal mechanism for monitoring the progress or regress of each learner. In high school, electives and graduation requirements dictate the possibilities for studio work, music performing groups, and choreography.

Physical Education

Physical education has always been a model for spiraling curriculum. Skills are clearly stated for the learner. The teaching goal is to improve individual student performance using the phrase "**personal best**," which points to the obvious range of students in any physical education class. Demonstrations of student work are constant, as are the standards for excellence. The role of the teacher is to enable learners to "revise" their performances without teacher interference. Physical education classes thrive on the interaction between individuals improving their skills and groups learning to work together. Unquestionably, there are gymnasiums where fierce competition and humiliation are forces to be reckoned with for students and for their teachers. Yet, in terms of the curriculum, the arts and athletics are often areas that wrestle effectively with the consistency and flexibility issues in the design of the curriculum map.

Teachers should develop the questions before reviewing the map that is building toward consensus. Those questions should reflect a sincere attempt to determine what is unique about each discipline. A school faculty can reflect on those features of each subject area that point to the need for consistency and those features that require attention to flexibility.

Interdisciplinary Curriculum

Interdisciplinary curriculum certainly emerges in the same spirit of review. The questions might

be, "Which interdisciplinary units or courses should be requisite experiences for the students in our school? Which should be optional?" Perhaps an elementary teacher might wish to use an interdisciplinary **theme** to present an array of concepts from the targeted standards, whereas another teacher might deal with the standards discipline by discipline. Does it matter whether teachers address certain content topics differently? Does it matter to the learners whether certain standards are effectively taught through an approach that is straight disciplinary or interdisciplinary? Answers to such questions are best found in the quality of student work. Assessing student progress and evidence of the skills provides insight into whether range or consistency is critical.

There is, however, one area of interdisciplinary concern that should definitely be consistent: the area of literacy. **Cross-disciplinary literacy** is requisite for students to perform in all classroom situations. Here, interdisciplinary review should be viewed in terms of consistent standards of writing, strategies for reading, opportunities for speaking, and a focus on targeted listening through active note-taking. A consistent focus on building (1) specific study skills, (2) interactive text reading strategies, and (3) editing and revising proficiencies should be a goal for a consensus map. A case cannot be made that erratic attention to language capacity-building is helpful to our learners. Mapping provides a remarkable opportunity to elevate literacy strategies in every classroom. In short, each math teacher is a writing teacher; each science teacher is a speech teacher; each art teacher is a reading teacher. We are all language teachers and enablers.

Conclusion

The focal point of this chapter has been to make a case for more intricate care in working toward curriculum consensus. Because the questions before educators are those dealing with making strong collective decisions, taking the time to examine each field and the sequences that make sense for learners is critical. The issue is not simply arriving at consensus. The premise developed here is that two variables—consistency and flexibility—are necessary. These two variables need to be examined according to the special characteristics of the curriculum for each discipline.

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