**Emergent Curriculum**

Curriculum is generally defined as a set of learning outcomes and the processes, materials, and activities that teachers and students use to cause the students to achieve those outcomes. It may refer to the course of study in all subjects for a school, district, or country, or it may refer to a specific subject like mathematics, or to a specific course such as algebra. The word "curriculum" derives from the Latin "curre" meaning to run, as in a race. Curriculum is focused on a goal. There are specific learnings to be achieved, and often explicit ways of getting there.

Emergent curriculum takes a different approach. The curriculum designer creates an environment that supports learning. The environment includes the teachers and students, materials and resources, activities and projects, and procedures to guide the way people work in the environment. It also includes the larger cultural and social contexts since those influence what happens locally.

Main Street and Troll Village

An example of emergent curriculum is a project called Main Street, which I developed as a fifth/sixth grade teacher. You can read more about **Main Street here**. It was part of an interdisciplinary project on the urban environment.

Main Street was a model of a city street, above and below ground. I started by building the structure and laying out the street and marking the building lots. Beyond that, it was a blank slate.
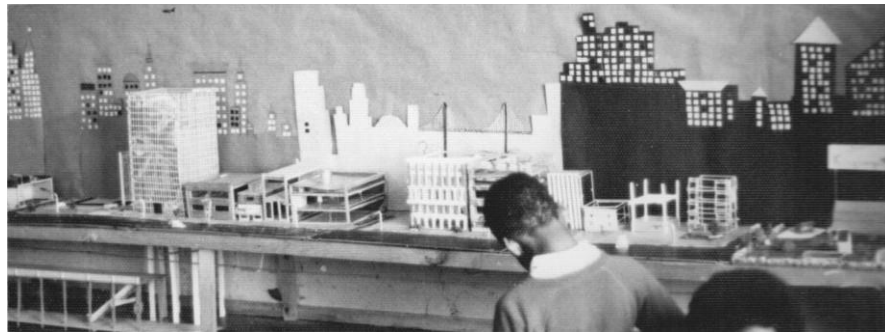
The students decided what to build. The results were not predetermined, but they did emerge within a structure and were guided by various constraints, including the structure of the street model that I provided at the beginning of the project. There was also an elected Planning Board of five students who wrote a building code and managed its implementation. The urban environment that the students lived in provided implicit guidance for what was built. There was no requirement that buildings on the street be multi-story, but almost all of them were. This was what was familiar in the neighborhood (zip code 10025) and the kind of building the students lived in. They build a subway. Had this project been done in Houston, that probably would not have happened. The electrical distribution system, which powered streetlights and the buildings was underground. Had we been somewhere else, it would more likely have been strung on utility poles.

What emerges in a project like Main Street is determined by a combination of explicit structure designed by the teacher and the relevant physical, cultural, and social context in which the project develops. Although specific outcomes not known ahead of time, are some possibilities are more likely than others. This allows for to planning for resources and support to be manageable.

Troll Village was a project that emerged in my fifth-grade class several years before Main Street. Michelle Hughes, who was a student in that class, has written about **Troll Village here**. Unlike Main Street, I did

not initiate Troll Village. In fact, I had very little to do with it. The most important role I played was to let it happen. I allowed the time and space for the students to work together and create. I also provided craft materials as needed, when requested by the students.

Several decades later, Michelle, as a Head of School, supported Po Po Village, a project in which students built a village on the school grounds. You can read more about **Po-Po village here**.

Evaluation

How can the results of an emergent curriculum project be evaluated? The question has two aspects: How do we know what individual students have learned and achieved? From the teacher and curriculum developer perspective we want to know how valuable the learning experiences are, how they relate to the larger educational goals of the school, and how manageable the project is on a practical level.

Student outcomes in an emergent project cannot be determined by standardized test. Such tests assume a predetermined set of outcomes to be achieved. In an emergent project, the outcomes emerge as the project develops. We start with a set of possible outcomes and modify them on an ongoing basis and add outcomes that were not anticipated ahead of time. And the outcomes will be different for different students, so a standardized test is not an appropriate evaluation tool.

Portfolio and performance-based assessment are more suitable measures of an emergent curriculum. In the case of Main Street, the street itself was the portfolio. There were also "class books" – large scrapbooks that contained documentation, photos, and diagrams of the process and products that went into building the street. Students were frequently explaining their work to other students and to the many visitors who came to the class to see Main Street. Explaining one's work, and answering questions about it, is a major part of performance-based assessment.