

# Theoretical Possibility and Critical Review of the Bruner's Narrative Curriculum

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## **Abstract**

*This article reviews Bruner's narrative curriculum theory that contrasts with the early stance, the structure of knowledge, and criticizes the limits of new theory. There are many possibilities of narrative approach to curriculum development. With the critical stance, Bruner's narrative theory has significant advantage and meaningful strategy for curriculum change. I will argue that Bruner's narrative theory plays an important role in changing school culture and curriculum development. In practical context of schooling, narrative theory gives new conception about teaching and subject matter construction to teachers. Also this narrative has weakness with regard to concrete teaching and reliable evaluation. Through this balanced review about Bruner's narrative theory, we should reflect carefully pros and cons about narrative strategy of curriculum development. In the future, school curriculum can be developed by positivistic and constructive strategy.*

**Keywords:** *Curriculum development, Narrative theory, Bruner, Structure of knowledge*

## **1. Introduction**

There are many characteristics about Bruner's curriculum theory. Since 1960, Bruner have suggested many curricular ideas about schooling and curriculum development. According to Korea national curriculum guideline, the third national curriculum revision has considered as discipline-based curriculum focusing on the structure of knowledge. The term of discipline-based curriculum and structure of knowledge is a key language in Bruner's curriculum theory. In discipline-based curriculum development, the process of education should be re-conceptualized as the structure of knowledge. In this reason, Bruner's curriculum theory has criticized as hard structuralism and paradigmatic thinking.

In fact, during the more than thirty years old (1960-1990), we have recognized Bruner's educational theory as the theory of structure of knowledge. The tenets built in the structure of knowledge are paradigmatic view, positivistic stance, and objectivism about knowledge. Most curriculum researchers in Korea often criticize the biased tendency of school curriculum, which tends to develop experiential and objective knowledge in classroom setting. In these traditional perspectives of knowledge, the nature of learner and content is treated as passive position toward receiving object. In the terrain of curriculum theory, Bruner's conception of the structure of knowledge has been positioned to modern and positivistic stance that underlines objective school knowledge.

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### **Article history:**

Received (September 12, 2016), Review Result (November 22, 2016), Accepted (December 29, 2016)

Since 1980, turning point from the structure of knowledge to narrative may mark a change in Bruner's curriculum theory. The advent of the language of narrative eventually brought about qualitative changes of Bruner's viewpoint. The change was caused by the conception of educational objectives, curricular content, teaching-learning method, and educational evaluation based on the restructuring by narrative.

This study intends to suggest the possibilities and limits Bruner's narrative curriculum theory. I will review the traditional significance of the structure of knowledge and examine the weakness of Bruner's educational theory, Furthermore I will also propose the new possibility of narrative curriculum based on Bruner's stance.

I will argue that there are significant changes in Bruner's views. The aspect of curriculum that inclines to the term of the existing stance is called paradigmatic and rationalistic curriculum system. I think Bruner's theory in some degree have interest in this system, but move toward more than positivistic system. In vein of this system, the tasks of this study are as follows: First, How is the significant change of Bruner's theory. Second, what is narrative and narrative curriculum in Bruner's stance. Third, what is the possibilities and limits Bruner's narrative curriculum theory.

## **2. Meaning and significance of narrative in curriculum**

The term of narrative in Korea mainly has been used in literature and rhetorics. Recently the narrative term came into a various genre and knowledge domain. Literally speaking, narrative is a story or account of event in the sequence and flow of time. Narrative is composed of a series of events and is sequenced by affiliation. Thus, narrative is featured by both the affiliation of events and the story that those series of events produce. One notable thing is that stories could be interpreted in numeral ways unless they are explained. Unlike verified scientific theory or argumentation, stories are proved to be appropriate by 'likelihood'.

Bruner premises two sets of thought mode while preaching on narrative mode of thought; paradigmatic mode of thought and narrative mode of thought [1][2][3]. The mode of thought is not only cognitive function, but a thinking method to construct human experiences or phenomenon. The former, structured as logical statements, is scientific knowledge with a causal relationship. But, the latter, namely structured as story is intentional and illogical. Humans have differently developed their experiences with their context and surroundings within different cultural bases. That is, it deals with the world of existence and cause and effect. On the other hand, the latter aims to understand differently perceived human world and reflects the requests of living. The former mode aims for explanation. The latter pursues interpretation, which requires understanding. Explanation premises causal existence and can physically be verified. As for the narrative mode of thought, however, seemingly existing meanings are judged by circumstantial relevance or probability [4].

According to recent Bruner's literature, let us have a brief look at two Bruner's narrative theories [5][6]. First, there are what might be called endogenous theories of narrative. Their central claim, typically, is that narrative is inherent either in the nature of the human mind, in the nature of language, or in those supposed programs alleged to run our nervous systems. Simply to claim that storytelling is doing - what - comes naturally is hardly to explain it; but even so, endogenous theories entail certain presuppositions that are not altogether trivial-like the implicit claim that narrative is a human universal, within reach of everybody regardless of culture, language, intelligence, or condition of life. For not all anthropologists buy into claims about human universal (Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000: 115-116)

Second, the plight-modeling approaches which is a kind of narrative theory that involves culture and human interaction much more directly. It needs a word of background. About two decades ago the literary critic and linguist Roland Barthes proposed that narrative form provides the solution to the problem of translating knowing into telling. He suggested that the two somehow grow alike or grow together whether by experience coming to fit the confines of language or language coming to fit the forms of experience, or both. For Barthes, the confluence of the two was like Henry James's remark that "adventures happen only to people who can tell adventure stories. Way-of-knowing and way-of-telling somehow fuse [7] Narrative is a basic structure through which we make meaning of our lives. The facts of our existence-actions, events, episodes-constitute the raw material of life. But a human life is more than a list of happenings. Without some process of understanding what they mean, the facts are merely a data set. Meaning has to do with values and beliefs-what do we want to happen, what do we hope will be the next event in our lives? Meaning has to do with context-what is the importance of certain facts or happenings in relation to others, and when considered as a part of a larger whole? Meaning has to do with interpretation- how do we bring our own store of knowledge to bear on our understanding and put our own spin on the actualities of life? Valuation, contextuality and interpretability are qualities of narrative. To make meaning narratively means that we understand the raw material of our existence in a story - like form.

### **3. Theory of narrative curriculum: Applicative possibilities and limits**

#### **3.1. Relation of narrative to curriculum**

In his thinking about culture, mind and education he set out four principles or tenets that guided his psycho-cultural approach to education. These are[2]:

First, the perspective tenet. In essence, this says that making meaning involves taking on board the perspective or the frame of reference in which the meaning was constructed, and it suggests that nothing can be culture-free. Everything that learners encounter is set within a cultural context and learners themselves, although coming from a culture, may not be a mirror of that culture. This tenet highlights the importance of individuals making for themselves and being able to not only understand but also to create.

Second, the constraints tenet. Bruner believes that any form of making meaning is constrained in to ways. The first of these relates to the ways in which we have evolved as a species and our ways of thinking have evoked with us. The way in which we think now depends on and is constrained by what we thought previously. The second constraint is that our cultural tools -the symbolic systems we have developed within cultures -may not always be as useful to us as we need. The implication for education is the need for learners to be equipped with the symbolic systems that will best serve their learning.

Third, the constructivist tenet. For Bruner this means that reality is not found but made. We construct meaning and, in sharing with others, may have to reconstruct it. Education must be about equipping learners to use the tools for making meaning and building understanding and to help in the process of change in order to be able to adapt to changing conditions or circumstances.

Fourth, the interactional tenet. For Bruner, the passing on of knowledge and skill involves what he calls a 'sub-community' in interaction. Learners learn alongside others with whom they interact.

The orientation and strategic method of constructing curriculum based on narrative are as follows [8]: First, story or narrative required to achieve instructional objectives is used by narrative as subject matter of instruction. In this case, narrative as pedagogical knowledge moves toward teacher's compiling and plotting stories. It makes intuitive sense that experienced teachers should know their subject matter differently than those who are not engaged in teaching.

Second, narrative is used by means of transmitting instructional contents. In this case, narrative as delivery tool is extended in vein of choosing a number of existing stories. Values and narratives are inexorably intertwined. Together they have one fundamental principle in common, a principle that is basic to the narrative nature of pedagogical content knowledge. This basic principle is that narrative help us interpret the world. Values and narratives are interpretative tools that constitute a practical, but also highly selective, perspective with which look at the world around us

Third, narrative as instructional contents is emphasized by teacher's teaching contents. In this case, narrative as pedagogical knowledge influences the possibility of reaching instructional objectives. Teachers live in stories. They use them in order to tell their students about some of the things they know.

Fourth, narrative is used with the conception of thinking tools. According to this approach, instruction plan is designed by logic of narrative knowing. In this case, teacher's teaching is plot of story line and narrative structure.

In view of narrative stance, we can suggest the concrete method of relational curriculum with narrative. First, There is an educational objectives in curriculum setting. Narrative thinking is a main educational objectives in stating objectives. There are some useful contents; narrativising, narrative heuristics, and narrative competency [2]. Second, there is selection and organization of educational content. There is narrative mode of thought as educational content; attribute dimension and referential dimension. Besides the nature of narrative, story form functions as subject matter [9]. Third, there is teaching-learning method and educational activities in classroom. teaching concerns with meaning making. Teaching as storytelling correspond to interpret a story [10]. Finally, there is educational evaluation and assessment in instruction. We should evaluate and assess something beyond information given. The language of 'less is more' plays a key role in transmitting and assessing knowledge.

### **3.2. Applicative possibilities and limits of narrative curriculum**

We may discuss the applicative possibilities and limits of narrative curriculum with the lens of commonplaces.

First, there is an aspect of establishment of educational objectives. We should consider the possibility of establishing and stating educational objectives in mode of various narratives. In this case, we may emphasize the Eisner's expressive objective and problem solving objectives with recognition of the limits of the behavioral objectives. There are many meaningful objectives in narrative curriculum; self-identity, story-making skill, and narrative competency.

Second, there in an aspect of selection and organization of educational contents. We should emphasize two-fold strong point of structure of knowledge; objective entity and constructive flow of knowledge. In this case, we may consider two aspect of the nature of knowledge; discovery and construction of knowledge. There are many meaningful selection and organization of educational contents in narrative curriculum; narrative thinking skill,

hermeneutic recursion of spiral organization, and story-telling [2]. Especially, thematic unit through narrative learning and story structure are key tool for learner's deep learning. Therefore, lesson and unit are should be constructed by learning episode, irony, interpretive reconstruction, and humane relevant time.

Third, there is an aspect of construction of subject matter and unit. To solve these problems, we can approach and use the various methods Bruner suggested [2]: micro aspect of culture, meaning making, constructivism, interaction, and self identity. Four these mechanisms provide important clues for teaching and organization of subject matter. Especially, in context of classroom, we should focus on inter-subjectivity within learning community. From this learning culture, the development of cultural homogeneity and self identity are crucial to schooling. But we should also pay attention to cultural standardization through objective knowledge and subject matter.

Fourth, there is an aspect of teaching and learning. Two mode; teaching by story and story-based teaching may implement narrative-based instruction. Teaching as storytelling is very powerful strategy for instructional setting. We may consider the various aspects for activating narrative in instruction; narrative as instructional subject matter, narrative as vehicle for content delivery, narrative as instructional content, and narrative as viewpoint of instruction. In this respect, we may discover the nature of narrative, transforming story and events into instructional content; transformative instrument. According to Gudmundsdottir, stories teacher know is transformed into pedagogical content knowledge through narrative [11]. Egan suggests story form framework and romantic model in developing a curriculum [9].

Fourth, there is an aspect of educational evaluation. At an early time, Bruner [12] criticize the school culture, which emphasize tendentiously analytic mode of thinking in classroom. Teachers often use multiple-choice item because of easy test making. Due to paradigmatic system of curriculum, school learning brought out underestimating learner's intuitive thinking skill. I think this mode of school culture restricts imaginative thought and divergent competency. The system of reward and punishment, assessment and evaluation should be reshaped into autonomous skill and flexible cognitive skill.

In addition to the possibilities of narrative curriculum, we should explore the limits of Bruner's narrative curriculum. First, ambiguity and vagueness of narrative meaning Second, approve of emergent construction Third, teacher education and support Fourth, reliability and validity of educational evaluation..

#### **4. Conclusions**

This study intends to explore the possibilities and limits of Bruner's narrative curriculum. There is an obvious contrast between the theory of Bruner's narrative, the focus of this article, and the structure of knowledge. In this paper, I will review strong point and weakness of the Bruner's curriculum theory through literature review. In view of critical stance, there is an continuity between early Bruner theory (1960-1980) and later theory (1980-2010) Furthermore this continuity shed light on the school curriculum development. Narrative theory provides many possibilities of curriculum development with cognitive diversity and constructive knowledge. We can find the important point of curriculum development through narrative when making a school curriculum and subject matter within the educational objectives, selection and organization of educational content, teaching method, and educational evaluation. These four aspects of curriculum development suggest new paradigm of schooling based on the continuity between the two.

But there are many critical problems of the ontological and epistemological nature of narrative. These views raise problems about the abstract and complex application to classroom. Because there are two perspectives about teacher's attitude and professionalism, we should suggest concrete strategy of curriculum development differentiated with existing method. New strategies of narrative curriculum development have many possibilities and limits of curricular task when comparing with storytelling, story making, narrative structure, and discursive method. Therefore, we should suggest distinguishing tactics of curriculum making beyond logical and linear approach. In the future, many curriculum researchers should pay attention to concrete approach to teaching and curriculum reconstruction.

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