

## SHANKER BLOG

### Marie Kondo The Curriculum

by Jal Mehta , and Shanna Peeples -- June 25, 2020

*This post is part of our series entitled Teaching and Learning During a Pandemic, in which we invite guest authors to reflect on the challenges of the Coronavirus pandemic for teaching and learning. Our guests today are Jal Mehta and Shanna Peeples. Mehta is Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and the author, most recently, with Sarah Fine, of In Search of Deeper Learning: The Quest to Remake the American High School. Peeples is the 2015 National Teacher of the Year and the author of Think Like Socrates: Using Questions to Invite Wonder & Empathy Into the Classroom. Other posts in the series are compiled here.*

As we turn our eye towards next year, there is increasing concern about “catching students up,” particularly those students who are presumed to have done the least learning during quarantine. This might mean summer school, double blocks of reading and math, and high doses of remediation.

We have a different suggestion. Marie Kondo the curriculum.

As everyone now knows, Marie Kondo is the Japanese cleaning expert who showed you how to declutter your home by keeping only the items that bring joy.

The curriculum is as overstuffed as most American houses. Curriculums are often decided by committees, who have different views of what is important, and they compromise by giving every faction some of what they want. The result is a curriculum with too many topics and too little depth. When Jal and Sarah Fine wrote their book on deeper learning, teachers said that district pacing guides are one of the top three factors that limited their ability to engage in deep learning (teacher evaluations and state tests are the others). Conversely, students said that almost every memorable or powerful learning experience came when they had the time and space to go deeper. Thus there are sound educational reasons to thin the curriculum, and some leading jurisdictions around the world, like British Columbia, are already moving in that direction.

It also makes much more sense as an approach to next year. There are at least three problems with the “catch up and remediation” strategy. First, given the current projections about Covid, there is going to be limited in-person time in schools. We couldn’t do the double dose strategy even if we wanted to. Second, that in-person time should be treated as gold. It will likely be limited under the best of circumstances, and might be wiped out entirely if Covid returns. Students will have been away from their friends, teachers, and school for at least six months, and will be desperately seeking community and relationships. We should use that precious in-person time to build strong relationships and classroom communities—for it is these kinds of communities that will sustain motivation when students are working at home. Third, we worry that the double dose strategy will turn off students from learning, which is bad under any circumstances, but is particularly so when we know that we will need to engage students learning at home.

Conversely, to Marie Kondo would mean that we identify key topics that “spark joy,” particularly topics that can enable teachers to hit upon multiple learning goals at once. Shanna found that questions can identify these

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possibilities in a way that feels both personal and authentic for teachers and students. For example, spending time with these two questions works as a kind of Swiss Army knife for cutting to the essential heart of the learning experiences we want for our students:

*What do you want your students to love?*

*How can your students use what you're teaching them to understand the world and respond to its problems?*

In Shanna's practice, she's worked with students from kindergarten to college seniors, in multiple states and internationally. They welcomed the opportunity to co-construct their learning through the invitation to answer a simple, yet profound question: *What would you ask the smartest person in the world?* The resulting questions often intersect with what adults would see as important.

If teachers were to Marie Kondo the curriculum, much as you might Marie Kondo your closet, we'd suggest that they identify five buckets.

The first is topics that *spiral*. These are topics that repeat, in slightly different form, over the years. How to write an essay, with a thesis statement, evidence, and supporting detail, is a topic that repeats roughly from third grade to high school graduation. There isn't any need to "catch up" students on this.

Second, there are topics that are *nice to have*s. The curriculum is filled with these. Lots of topics, across disciplines, that some committee of adults thought that students should be exposed to. We can let many of these go.

Third, there are topics that are *sequential*—where you really do need to learn one thing before you learn the next. Math is the discipline that teachers perceive to be the most sequential. Here, some things do need to be "made up," but even here we would urge teachers to be judicious and limit themselves to teaching what is needed to teach what is next. You might think of this as what Yong Zhao calls "just in time" learning—teach the lesson on how to use the compass at the moment the explorer is lost in the woods, as opposed to "just in case" learning, where you spend so much time preparing for the exploration that you never actually make it to the woods.

Fourth, there are topics that really are *essential*. These are the heart of your wardrobe, the paintings you want to display in the living room. Shakespeare. DuBois. Darwin. Keep.

Fifth and finally, there are *skills*, like reading and writing, that benefit from practice and repeated exposure. It is important that kids practice these things, but there is no reason why they need to become decontextualized from the reasons why you might want to do them. If you start with questions, like the teachers in Shanna's book *Think Like Socrates* did, there are opportunities for deep investigations, research, and writing. She describes math teachers investigating racial disparities in policing, humanities teachers mapping power relations within their own high school, and music teachers exploring how music can cultivate emotions as well as skills. Thus, the need to "catch up" students does not need to interfere with the desire to engage in critical thinking, develop relevant lessons, and in other ways embody good teaching practices.

We also should think about the implicit messages we are sending. If, when students return to school in the fall, our primary message is that they are behind and need to do double doses of eat-your-broccoli type schooling, then they will rightly intuit that we don't care much about them in the present and see them only as vessels into which we deposit knowledge that we think is important. If, instead, we welcome them back as whole human beings, as people who have had a life-defining experience and survived it with resilience and verve, and invite them to inquire with us about topics of mutual interest, we are much more likely to sustain their energy and attention.

Students, teachers, and administrators have handled an unprecedented professional pivot and it is natural to feel a sense of "coulda, shoulda, woulda" that looks for a do-over. However, we would suggest that everyone did the best they could under incredibly difficult circumstances.

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It's true that students have likely learned less traditional academic content than they would have were they in school. But they also likely have learned more non-school content than they would have were they in school. When students do return, let's embrace their strengths as opposed to focusing solely on their deficits. And let's build the best learning experience we can for next year, rather than seeking to stuff what was lost from this year onto next year's already full plate.

To put it another way, everything in our curriculum has a purpose—or had a purpose when it was first introduced—but not everything in our curriculum needs to stay. Much like yesterday's wardrobe or old souvenirs, things that were once important are now obstacles to living our best life. We can let these go with gratitude for their marking of how we have grown in our practice, while creating space on our educational shelves for what we need today.

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Comments

Thank you so much for this post; it is by far the single best one I have seen in all of the pandemic coverage and commentary. We are in such grave danger of reinforcing the deficit paradigm, when we could productively use this moment in history to understand anew what truly constitutes learning.

*Submitted by Jane Feinberg on June 29, 2020*

[reply](#)

I would like to know more about how to implement these strategies as a teacher

*Submitted by Peggy on June 29, 2020*

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I am reclaiming my whole house! Decluttering everything!

*Submitted by Ana Paula on July 11, 2020*

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