

The Hidden Curriculum

By some definitions, the curriculum is the sum total of all learning experiences students have in a given college or program. In this consultation, we have used a more limited definition, since our aim is to give primary attention to the courses we offer in TEE.

However, it is critically important to realise that students are learning from all the experiences they have in any college, school, or TEE program. The context and the structures of our program convey their own para-messages. (Para = alongside) We always have both an explicit and an implicit curriculum. The question is whether we are aware of our implicit, or 'hidden' curriculum, and whether this supports or undermines our explicit curriculum.

Quotes from Perry Shaw of ABTS

What is the "hidden" curriculum? Most of us think of curriculum as the course descriptions included in our college catalogs, or a list of SEAN courses. But this is only one form of curriculum - the "explicit" curriculum: those publicly known, stated and planned educational events that are commonly understood by all those who are participating.

"The impact of the hidden curriculum found in most forms of seminary education is profoundly negative. The prevalent methods and structures used in most theological education—including missiological education—subtly undermine the content and intent of our schools, producing graduates who are often ill-equipped for their subsequent roles in church and society."

Education experts tell us **the hidden curriculum always overrides the explicit curriculum.** This means that theological education can only be effective when the hidden curriculum is intentionally designed rather than unintentionally accepted.

We devote many hours to planning our explicit curriculum and to writing or translating courses. But we are often unaware of the power of the 'hidden curriculum – values and attitudes that are caught rather than taught.

Para messages in TEE are carried in such matters as:

- the way group leaders dress; their sense of humour, if any;
- the relationship of group leaders with students and with others;
- the venue and timing of group meetings;
- the courses offered and not offered;
- the attention given to some topics and the omission or skimpy treatment of others;
- the style, type and appearance of home study materials;
- acknowledgement of TEE graduates and whether they are given ministry opportunities in the church;
- the program rules;
- the culture of the learning community;
- the structure of our programs; how they are managed, who can attend;
- the expectations that are communicated to our students.

Some of the things students may learn from the hidden curriculum

- the ethos and beliefs of the sponsoring denomination/s or mission/s;

- the values actually espoused in the program and by our sponsors. (These may not always be the same as the values we teach or which our publicity materials claim we uphold);
- the importance – or otherwise – of contextualisation to local needs and culture;
- hermeneutical assumptions about how to interpret and use the Bible;
- theological presuppositions and assumptions;
- understandings about how to lead a group;
- beliefs about what is most important in Christian life;
- ideas about how people learn, and thus ideas about how to teach others.

We can best understand the concept of the hidden curriculum with some examples from various educational settings I am familiar with. (Names and details have obviously been changed!)

What do you think is the implicit message in each of the following situations?

1. The Calathumpian Bible School students are required to attend church and the church youth group regularly. Both services are very long and not very inspirational. There is a problem with the acoustics in the church building and there is no sound system. The pastor has a very soft voice, so it is always difficult to hear the sermons. On Youth Nights every week the procedure is the same. Several young people stand up in turn and give inaudible testimonies. They are shy and speak softly. When each has finished, everyone claps, without knowing what the speaker has just said.

PARA MESSAGE – Church is boring. It doesn't really make any difference whether you can hear people speaking or not. God expects us to sit through boring meetings and gives us Brownie points for sitting it out.

2. The Bible school in Bongoland has several nice homes for the missionary staff. The local staff have smaller houses with fewer facilities, and the students are crowded into dormitories.

PARA MESSAGE – There is a hierarchy here. Missionaries are at the top, then local teachers, and students are at the bottom of the pyramid. After all, it is a big sacrifice for the missionaries to come out here to Bongoland, and to keep them, we have to give them some of the comforts to which they are accustomed.

3. Most students at the Onward and Upward Bible College are adults. There are very few young school leavers. The college enforces strict dress rules – much stricter than the local community. Students may not leave the campus without permission, except to go to church or to their part-time jobs. Students are only allowed to have 3 things on their dressing tables. Their day is ruled by bells. The Senior Student checks everyone's study record each week to ensure they are doing their homework.

PARA MESSAGE – Christian adults cannot be trusted to organise their own lives or to act independently. Christian leaders constantly check on their people. The Bible School leaders are role models for Christian leaders and pastors. Pastors should ensure their churches have lots of rules to guide the behaviour of a potentially errant congregation.

4. The Bullamakanka TEE group meets every Wednesday night. Pastor Joe is the centre leader and every session is the same. Pastor Joe goes through every question in last week's programmed lesson and tells the students the correct answers – even though the answers are already in the books, or can be easily worked out. The students mark their answers. Some questions are thought questions and students often have different opinions, but Pastor Joe always

gives his view, and this is treated as the correct answer. By the time all this has been done, there is little time left for discussion or any other learning activities.

PARA MESSAGES: Pastors are wiser and more prestigious than other Christians. Pastor Joe is always right and his views are definitive, and better than anyone else's. TEE is rather boring. The most important thing is to get the answers right.

5. The Woop Woop TEE discussion group has a good mix of women and men, younger and older students. The students sit in rows with the group leader at the front.

PARA MESSAGE: Men and women, young and old, can all study God's Word. The group leader is a teacher rather than a facilitator. The seating suggests the session will be centred on the leader, and that s/he will do most of the talking.

6. The Pre-Tribulation Foot Washing Church has a TEE program in a remote Bongo tribal area. The students are taking a Church History Overview course. There is a brief treatment of the Early Church. The course then skips the Middle Ages and jumps to the Reformation. The Modern Church topics are almost all about the PTFW Church, its importance, and its spread around the world.

PARA MESSAGES: The Middle Ages are not important at all. Probably all 'Dark Ages'. The PTFW Church is very important today – probably the biggest and most influential Church in the world. Certainly the most biblical Church. These Bongo tribespeople are deceived by distortion and omission of facts they are unable to verify for themselves.. They should rightly learn the history of their own denomination, but it would be honest to tell them theirs is quite a small denomination; there are much larger, much more influential Churches.

7. David was a promising theological student. He scored lots of High Distinctions in his courses and particularly loved Systematic Theology. When he was ordained and began ministry in a local congregation, he decided to start a TEE program for his church members. He believed they could handle quite high-level courses so he purchased some challenging TEE materials. He announced the new course and put up posters around the church. On the first night only 3 people came. He spent much of the evening lecturing. The next week attendance was down to two, and they hadn't done their home study. David was very discouraged at this lack of interest in Theology. After a year he resigned from the ministry and began a PhD in Theology at a local university.

PARA MESSAGES: Theology is primarily an academic study. Church people should be academically oriented. If people don't want to put in the hard work of studying they are probably just lazy.

REFERENCE: Perry Shaw, "The Hidden Curriculum", in *Journal of Asian Mission* 8:1-2 (2006).

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION AND LEARNING TASKS

1. Try to identify some aspects of the hidden curriculum in your TEE programs. How far do these agree with the beliefs and values you are teaching in your explicit curriculum?
2. If you find any important differences between your explicit and implicit curricula, what could you do to bring the two together to ensure students learn what you want them to learn?
3. Suggest some ways you could deliberately develop an implicit curriculum for your TEE program.