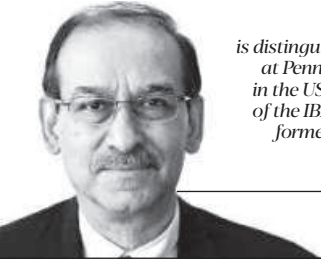


# What is a great curriculum?

**In this era of technological revolution, how should a school curriculum be designed to equip today’s students to become the torchbearers of tomorrow’s nation-building? Two academic veterans examine the dos and don’ts of modern-day curricula in the fifth part of a series that focuses on some of the most fundamental issues of higher education in Bangladesh. The Daily Star welcomes and encourages any and all thoughts, ideas, and recommendations on these issues from our respected readers.**



Dr Syed Saad Andaleeb is distinguished professor emeritus at Pennsylvania State University in the US, former faculty member of the IBA, Dhaka University, and former vice-chancellor of Brac University.

**SYED SAAD ANDALEEB**

A great curriculum is intended to shape human capacities by delivering quality education in sync with the times. It contributes significantly to an academic institution’s identity and reputation, bringing to life the institution’s essence and purpose. In combination with good students, great teachers, sufficient resources, creative governance, stakeholder involvement, and far-sighted leadership, the curriculum influences what, where, and how students learn. In its larger ambit, from the institution to the nation, its role in nation-building is undisputed.

A well-designed curriculum involves a complex web of considerations: national policy guidelines; community needs (including employers); mission and vision of the institution(s); learning styles (adult learning can be subject-based, process-based or problem-based); nature of the subject matter; institutional resources (budgets, state-of-the-art facilities, technology, opportunities for upskilling, etc); and support services (e.g. links to industry for internships, guidance and counselling programmes, etc). The complex connections among these elements must be aptly harmonised for a curriculum to be effective for students, institution(s), and community.

A good curriculum must be examined relentlessly on its design, seeking to constantly improve on five dimensions: Goals are the expectations concerning learning and teaching and must at least:

- \* Specify the end goal, with clear learning objectives across the programme.
- \* Support learners’ ability to learn with the right balance of rigour.
- \* Prepare learners for life with unique skills, interest, attitudes, and values.
- \* Build learning experience in a pyramid fashion, each level building on previous levels.

\* Be flexible and enable monitoring and evaluation by administration.

\* Consider the theories of learning relevant to each field of study and the range of learning styles. *Methods* concern the instructional approaches and procedures to reach and engage students inside and outside the classroom to facilitate learning. The right blend of methods – i.e. pedagogy or andragogy – can run the gamut: from lectures, peer instruction, flipped classrooms, minute papers, developing concept maps, case studies, hands on research projects, team-based learning to problem-solving and much more. Today’s lecture-based classrooms, dreary and uninspiring to the core, represent an antiquated era.

*Materials* are the tools combined with methods to achieve the goals of the curriculum. Books, journal articles, laboratories, cases, media reports, web sources, and a plethora of materials are available to enrich the curriculum. If computer labs are ill-equipped or a geography teacher lacks multimedia to take students to the various corners of the world, learning is diminished. Budgets in our academic institutions often fail to provide the right materials and constrain the inquisitive mind.

*Innovative linkages* within a programme (architecture students converting rooftops into gardens or water reservoirs) or between programmes (using art to treat mental health or the creation of biomedical engineering) must be constantly explored, seeking synergy and to vivify the curriculum.

*Assessment* is an ongoing process to determine what the student knows, understands, and can do with their knowledge and skills. Information from assessment is used to adjust instructional approaches, teaching materials, and academic support programmes. Some programmes are considering eliminating summative assessment without clearly understanding its ramifications.

It needs emphasis that if the curriculum is ill-designed, purposeless, disjointed, and repetitive, it will encumber one’s education. I recall seeing a university offering three levels of an introductory course, adding credit hours (seemingly) to earn revenues! No student or parent complained, nor did any regulatory body intervene to look into this anomaly. A poor curriculum is “a recipe for academic disaster.” It is particularly dire when institutions download programmes of study from institutions

abroad without considering their fit with and the needs of various stakeholders (students, teachers, employers, planners, etc), whether resources are available to match the demands of the curriculum, whether it can be competently delivered, and whether the quality of the student intake will be capable of absorbing the material.

A vibrant curriculum feeds into more detailed activities: sequencing the subject matter for best possible alignment, training teachers to deliver the curriculum, preparing an effective syllabus for each course, developing clear learning outcomes for effective assessment (both formative and summative), developing rubrics, and providing effective feedback to students. With online/hybrid learning and emerging educational technology playing an increasing role in higher education, attention to the curriculum is a *sine qua non*.

A curriculum should be reviewed regularly to meet the needs of learners as well as society. In fact, a good curriculum should be developed democratically, although it can pose challenges – e.g. whether Darwin should be taught in class at all. Times change, circumstances change, curricula should, too.

Importantly, academic institutions must demonstrate courage by introducing new thinking into the curriculum. For example, engineering students should be able to design and build a prototype in their field at the end of their academic career, instead of just passing exams. Sociology students may design social change programmes. Harmonising cross-disciplinary programmes of study such as engineering and sociology for poverty reduction can go a long way in transforming academia to becoming more innovative and relevant.

Curriculums across the world are being reassessed today. A colleague at Oxford worries, “Universities have lost their original purposes – to give a broad education and make useful citizens of its students as well as providing research into life concerns.” Unfortunately, many institutions have turned into job training and specialist trade schools while teaching little else. It’s time we refocus on what, where, and how students learn, and their competencies, attitudes, behaviours, and worldview we need to develop, consistent with a fulfilling, tolerant, industrious, and kind society. With stakeholder participation, a vibrant curriculum can be truly transformative.



Dr Halimur R Khan is a university professor and can be reached at [halimurkhan@post.harvard.edu](mailto:halimurkhan@post.harvard.edu).

**HALIMUR R KHAN**

Despite being almost ubiquitous in discussions on education, the term “curriculum” is quite often used, even by educators, incorrectly and is not infrequently referred to just as a “routine” or a “schedule” of activities for students. Curriculum, however, is a much broader concept, and aside from considering all the relevant components of learning and skill-developing activities, it must and generally does help learners develop the idea of nation-building and to help promote an educated citizenry, particularly at the primary and secondary levels.

In his piece here, Prof Syed Saad Andaleeb explores the overall contour of the curriculum – i.e. the major dimensions it should be based upon, whether it is for the primary schools or for a private university. However, while he provides a clear roadmap, the component of nation-building and developing an educated citizenry at the school levels need a separate discussion and particular attention.

Aside from a formal set of activities to develop a desired set of skills, the school curriculum must also embed educational texts within the material approved, especially in the areas of general education, that represent the values of a nation and its culture, and appreciate, promote and aspire to establish them among its citizens.

The first component of a curriculum, then, is a set of planned educational activities, experiences and materials designed to achieve specific learning goals or outcomes. It outlines what students should learn, the order in which they should learn it, and the assessment strategies used to evaluate student learning.

The second component is the kind of texts and material that are chosen to impart the values and morals that can help create a healthy, equitable and prosperous society. This is more easily done with the material, as mentioned earlier, from the courses in general education – disciplines from the arts and the humanities.

The commonly agreed upon foundational values among most nations generally are honesty, integrity, truthfulness, accountability, dignity, kindness and respect for others, commitment, responsibility, dependability, and hard-work. There can be others which a society might value more. However, a GREAT curriculum that intends to prepare children for the future must promote these values that, in turn, lead to a nation’s economic growth, national prosperity, and the establishment of a healthy society. The correct values and morals matter; they determine the success and failures of a society.

A great curriculum can instil proper values in the children from the lessons they learn from reading stories, looking at images and pictures, interpreting the meaning of historical events, and so on. With an appropriate story conveying a particular value, the teacher can adopt a strategy to make the lesson memorable to the children. For example, in order to teach honesty, the instructor can start with a discussion on the topic to prepare the children’s minds to receive the lesson. During this discussion, perhaps after the story is read, the instructor could ask open-ended questions probing into what the children might think about the characters in the story that may have done something “dishonest,” ask what the children might have done in the situation; the instructor can add some visuals (something for the children to reinforce the lesson), encourage role-playing, ask the students if they have faced a situation like this, etc. And the teacher might also assign a follow-up activity, such as writing a journal entry or drawing a picture on the topic. The impact of a similar lesson based on an appropriate text can – and usually does – last a lifetime and influences the learner to become a more honest citizen. Imagine if this was done in Bangladesh: a nation of mostly honest individuals! It would eliminate perhaps more than half of this nation’s problems immediately.

A great curriculum enables a society to pursue its needs and aspirations. The school curriculum should thus be closely tied to the pressing problems of society. In today’s Bangladesh, there’s a serious need to include – NOT provide lip services to – the 10 values mentioned above.

Crime, corruption, moral degradation, ineptitude, illegalities, illicitacies, etc now appears absurdly out of control in Bangladesh. This clearly suggests that either society does not want to or cannot eliminate these problems, or that it’s not creating enough honest and moral citizens to replace the undesirables from society. It’s perhaps time to pay attention to what we teach (or not teach) and how we teach it in our schools, to help build a moral and smarter society.



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

## 10 Things I Hate About Dhaka



**BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND**

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University, and former pro-vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

**SHAMSAD MORTUZA**

10 Things I Hate About You is a popular Hollywood teen romance. In a pivotal scene, a young girl named Kat reads out a poem in front of her class as she is heartbroken about her classmate Pat. Dhaka is notorious for breaking our hearts. Here’s my take on Dhaka guided by the poem.

“I hate the way you talk to me,” Dhaka! You are loud and obnoxious. You get jittery easily. You love to show your might depending on the size of your wheels, the flag stands that you bear or the hooters that you blow. You are rude when you wear a helmet. Your head accessory makes you part of a notorious gang that can throng and throw tantrums. You shout and scream. You get physical when you talk. I hate the way you talk and talk,

and do not change at all. I hate it when those who are not supposed to talk, say it all. And those who are supposed to talk, do not have anything to say. And most of all, I hate the way you mastered the art to gag us all.

“I hate the way you cut your” roads, Dhaka! I know it hurts as different agencies take different times to rip you open. They insert cables to rejuvenate your nerves to make sure that things flow all right. The colossal concrete columns look over you like surgeons watching you being cut open on an operation table. “Are you numb, Dhaka? Has the toxic air put you to sleep? Do you feel any pain?” The columns of surgeons seem to ask.

“I hate the way you drive your car,” Dhaka! You come from all different

directions. You are colour blind. Green means stop, even eternally so. Red means the colour of a police sergeant’s eyes that pry all over you. Yellow, my dear, is the sick, jaundiced state we are all in.

“I hate it when you stare.” There is little care for privacy. Everything is everyone’s business here in Dhaka. You stare at an inferno in its full blaze.

**“I hate the way you talk to me,” Dhaka! You are loud and obnoxious. You get jittery easily. You love to show your might depending on the size of your wheels, the flag stands that you bear or the hooters that you blow.**

Your stare is more important than those who have come to douse it. You stare at bodies, encouraging others to

get under the sartorial wrap.

“I hate the big” mess that you dump here and there. A city filled with filth that reads my mind. Has there been any study to show the connection between the waste outside and the waste within? Dhaka, you should own up to the meaning of your name and keep your filth all covered. Or do you prefer the ritual drum root of your name to make all dirty laundry public? How can you allow all your dirt to be washed away by the river that is near? Little do you care that the water can wash back and come to our doors when the monsoon is here.

“I hate the way you’re always right.” I hate that you do not give us our rights. Life is taxing here, as our bills would say. But there is no way to prove you wrong as you would always have the final say.

“I hate it when you lie,” Dhaka. You keep on making promises. Then once you realise that I do not exercise my franchise, you always have it your way. You can stop all road dividers at your whim and not find it foul. You do not care how much longer the other passengers will be on the road with the avoidable increase in traffic volume.

“I hate it when you make me laugh.”

Even worse when you make me cry. I laugh when you bring the circus to the town. Singers and players come to entertain us. Firecrackers lit up the sky. You give the sign of allience as if to prove that money in the city actually flies. I laugh when people buy gold-plated *jalebi* only to think their excrement runs through the same sewage of those whose lives are as complicated as that *jalebi*. The rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. You do not care if there are rich man’s sports creating a gulf, separating the East from the West. You do not care if the river gets narrowed for recreational clubs. You do not care if you can stop the traffic from entering sticker-only zones. Whose city is it anyway, Dhaka? I cry.

“I hate the way you’re not around.” I hate the way an ambulance cannot find a way to carry patients to hospitals. I hate the way when there are hardly any decent services around. Have you ever wondered, Dhaka, why there is an equal number of pharmacy shops and eateries? That’s my guesstimate, but if I am right, then all we do here is just eat

and fall sick. There are hardly enough healthy spots. The traffic jam sucks the life juice out of us. We eat, sleep, and die. Yet, there is no slot for us to have our last respite when we die. You will simply churn our bones away when our body has deposited the last drop of nitrogen to enrich the soil of your burial ground.

“I hate the way I don’t hate you, not even close, not even a little bit, not even at all.” Indeed, I should hate you more for being the least liveable city. Yet, Dhaka, I am in love with you. I know your nooks and crannies. You are the first of many of my firsts. You are the crowd where I am never alone. You are the faces that I never get tired of facing. My first day at school, my first movie in the cinema hall, my first truancy from school, my first Eid prayer with Dad, my first visit to a puja mandap, and my first escape into a park. To detach from you is to detach from my sole self. I have been around. I have seen cities that are great and small. Life in Dhaka beats it all. And my heart beats with the beat of Dhakeswari *dhaak*, Dhaka. I hate to see you lose your charm.