Hilda Taba – Curriculum Pioneer and Architect

By Susan Smith

In only my second semester (and second class) of my doctoral work, I have often felt intimidated. Spending 60 hours per week, sometimes more, as an assistant principal at a high school, I decided I needed a new challenge, and I was thrilled to be accepted into an educational leadership doctoral program at Miami University, where I had studied as an undergraduate student. When I registered for Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Diversity, I had no idea what to expect. When I learned we would be writing a book chapter, I again experienced feeling intimidated. As I looked around the room, and as I got to know the students in the class who all come from different backgrounds, and who spend time each day working differently than I do, my feeling did not subside.

When it came time to select the books we would study, I was unfamiliar with ninety per cent of the authors from which we could choose. I watched as others in this class began to talk to each other about an author they already knew and about whom they would want to write. When Dr. Poetter explained he had read almost all of the books we would use for this project, I was impressed, and again, intimidated. He described each book and author that would be part of the project and passed them around the room to all of the students. Some were passed quickly to the next recipient while some were pored over and discussed quietly among the students. I wrote notes feverishly about each one because I had little background knowledge and knew we would have to soon decide our fate with this project. Then, he passed out an index card to each of us, and asked us to write our top three choices. When I looked back through my notes, I had written only one word next to Hilda Taba's name and book title – woman. I put down my first two choices, and decided, being the feminist that I am, that I should also include Taba in my choices.
The following week, when the books were assigned, and Dr. Poetter emailed me that he wanted me to tackle Taba, I had no idea what I had done. The book was given to me, and even the cover of the book and its title seemed bland compared to the ones the other students know held in their hands. And, as I looked at the faces of my colleagues, it appeared, they looked back at me with sympathy. Even Dr. Poetter wished me luck as I would embark on the adventure of getting through this thick, intense and seemingly inaccessible text.

I started as any student would – at the beginning. I used Post-It notes, and got through about a third of the book before I stopped myself. I thought back to the word I had written in my notes – woman; I realized I should not have started by diving into this massive pool of text, but instead with learning about Hilda Taba as a woman. Finding out about her as a person propelled me through the final two hundred pages of her book; her life was interesting, and the obstacles she faced and overcame were inspiring to me. Though I can't compare my short four-hour trek from my home town in Michigan to Oxford, Ohio, to the pioneer Taba was, my journey eventually would lead me to study a very interesting woman, and to remind me to not judge a book by its cover. And, to not be intimidated.

Many curriculum specialists have been labeled as pioneers in the field, but most often do not travel across the sea seeking curriculum work. Hilda Taba left her home in Estonia after graduating from the University of Tartu in 1926 with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation; her country had recently gained independence from Russia. Seeking independence herself, she left her homeland and came to America where she earned a Master's degree from Bryn Mawr College in 1927, and a Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1932. Taba was influenced heavily in her work after reading Boyd Bode's *Fundamentals of Education*, and she grew interested in the child-centered approach and the flexibility of the progressive movement in education (Krull,
2003). With these feelings toward progressivism, it is not surprising that Taba was most affected by John Dewey. She attended his lectures, studied his work, and eventually, William H. Kilpatrick, one of Dewey’s colleagues, became the principle advisor of her doctoral work. Kilpatrick found Taba to be very capable, and knew her dissertation would influence educators and scholars for years to come (Krull, 2003). Living in the afterglow of a completed doctorate and the success of her studies, she wanted to return to Estonia to implement her new-found knowledge at the university from which she had graduated. A professorship position was open at the University of Tartu, and Taba wanted to bring progressive thoughts to her alma mater. However, she wasn't chosen for the position, and experienced extreme disappointment (Hergesheimer, 2004). It is believed that she was not awarded the position because she was a woman, and this only fueled her anger (Crocco, 2003). But, she was not intimidated by the chauvinism.

Taba accepted a position at a college of economics in Estonia, but her heart wasn't in it, and the curriculum pioneer once again returned to the United States to fill the void she was experiencing by not being able to apply the knowledge she had obtained through her studies in her homeland. But, with this journey, she had less optimism; upon her arrival, she wasn't able to find employment that met her qualifications. Taba instead had to accept jobs coaching and tutoring wealthy American families, and ever-present was the threat that she would be deported because she had not yet acquired citizenship (Krull, 2003). Taba fought against sexism and for democracy in her personal and professional lives, and she forged ahead with her aspirations as a pioneer.

Taba finally landed a position with which she was satisfied as a German teacher and later, the Curriculum Director, at the Dalton School; she became involved in educational research by
chance, as she was hired as the Eight-Year Study was beginning. The Dalton School was heavily involved in this now well-known study, and this was the beginning of her professional relationship with Ralph Tyler. Tyler was impressed by Taba's dedication to the field of scientific research and her deep understanding of the processes in education (Krull, 2003), so he hired her to join the evaluation team at the Ohio State University as the social studies curriculum coordinator. The staff was then moved to the University of Chicago, and Taba was named the director of the Curriculum Laboratory, which she headed until 1945.

Ironically, after her return to the United States, the intellectual leadership of Estonia was “eliminated” after the Soviet takeover of Estonia in 1940 (Hergesheimer, 2004). Had she stayed, she would not have been able to utilize her talents in the field of curriculum theory. Some say that her ability to take risks and persevere as a pioneer of democracy saved her life (Hergesheimer, 2004). Elizabeth Brady, who was one of Taba's colleagues from 1945-1951, wrote, “Taba was very energetic, enthusiastic, active, seemingly tireless; she led life at a tempo which sometimes led to misunderstandings and often wore out friends and staff. She was small in stature, perky in manners and in dress … There was that sense that she was always intent on the next destination…” (Brady, 1992, p.60). Luckily, her final destination was our country; her work contributed a great deal to the curriculum foundations built in America in the 1960s. And, as I read through this maybe somewhat downplayed work of art, I picture this curriculum pioneer looking through the window of the boat she most likely traveled in to her new land of personal and professional democracy.

Taba as Curriculum Architect

In education, many practitioners view the curriculum as a “blueprint” of what is to be studied. When I learned that Taba was described as an architect and as I read Curriculum
Development Theory and Practice (Taba, 1962), that made sense. I could imagine Taba writing her book methodically – planning each word carefully as she composed this very dense text. Architects work diligently to plan their projects; they begin with dimensions and ideas, and they transform these to blueprints for those in construction to follow. I see Taba anticipating her book would be the blueprint that theorists and practitioners could reference and use when creating curriculum. And, in each building, each architectural creation, there has to be windows. There must be a way for those within the building to look out, and for those outside to look within what the architect has created. When Taba wrote this later well-known text, she was writing through the lens of her work with Ralph Tyler and the Tyler Rationale; she saw curriculum development through a window of seven steps. The original sequence of these steps was developed by Tyler, but she used these as the blueprint for her own work. Both believed that curricula are designed so that students may learn; to develop curricula differently is a disservice to the field (Taba, 1962). As I describe the seven steps Taba elucidates in her book, I will explain that what Taba built has windows through which we can view curriculum and practice today as well.

**Step 1: Diagnosis of Needs**

The diagnosis involved in curriculum development, according to Taba, would center on the thought that there is a need to accommodate different types of learners, to introduce new content, and to emphasis different aspects through learning (Taba, 1962, p. 231). Taba explains that we can not determine students' needs nor what content we should teach without “diagnostic checks.” These checks determine a diagnosis of achievement, and without these checks we would be overreaching on the curriculum or underestimating and re-teaching what students already know. Taba likens this to closing the gap of what students know and what we need to
teach them. This is quite similar to what is asked of teachers and instructional specialists when developing curriculum and determining what to teach.

Much recent research and focus of practitioners is on the concept of formative assessments and formative instructional practices. As teachers, they are asked to determine where their students are through assessments and then close the gap to what students should learn and be able to do. New teacher evaluation models are focusing on this notion as well; in some states, 50% of a teacher's evaluation will be on value added or student growth measured by standardized test scores. The measurements that will be used are assessments normed by states and the nation. Teachers will be held accountable for “closing the gap” for their students.

Second, Taba wrote that educators should diagnose where students are as learners in addition to achievement. For Taba, this included understanding students' backgrounds, cultures, motivational patterns, how they learn socially, and what cultural capital they bring from home to the classroom. Taba actually writes, when considering learning to read, “the choice of content and the approach to learning depend on whether the students are largely slum dwellers or from the middle class” (p. 234). It is at points similar to this in the book that the reader remembers that Taba is writing from the lens of the 1960s; the effect of the history of that period is evident in statements like this throughout her text. However, again, there is strong evidence of Taba creating a window to today's society. Much has not changed in terms of a socioeconomic gap that exists among students from low-income backgrounds and those of the middle-class students. Though we would be hesitant to use a term “slum dweller,” we have not, in 50 years, determined how to bridge this gap between the “have's” and the “have nots.” Taba also felt that it is essential for us to consider interpersonal relationships, the classroom climate, and group values when we diagnose curriculum needs. Today, as well, these three aspects of teaching continue to be
important and studied.

Finally, Taba expects that a diagnosis of curriculum problems must occur as the final part of this first step of curriculum development. She explains that in order for educators to determine what should be taught, we must formulate hypotheses, assemble data, and interpret them; she feels, too, that teachers should be involved in all parts of this process (p. 238). I will not digress into the debate that exists between scholars and researchers in terms of their involvement in research and curriculum; however, I will applaud Taba for recognizing that teachers should be researchers for their own classrooms and of their own students.

Step 2: Formulation of Objectives

Taba found that the function of objectives was twofold – one the one hand, school-wide outcomes and on the other hand, more specific objectives that describe behaviors to be obtained in a certain unit, subject area, course or program (p. 196). The primary function of the latter type of objective would be what would guide decisions on what to “cover” or to “emphasize” in a curriculum. Objectives, according to Taba, also serve to provide a common, consistent focus for the activities included in a curriculum as well as a guide for the evaluation of achievement (as discussed in Step 1). Taba stated that objectives should describe the kind of behavior expected, and the content to which the behavior applies if one is attempting to create clear objectives. She elaborated by stating, “objectives are developmental, representing the roads to travel rather than terminal points” (p. 203). Teachers, in her opinion, would use the objectives as a blueprint of sorts, then, as a guide to what they are building with their students.

And, again, this building would have a window – through which one could see today's use of objectives. What objectives meant to the theorists of the 1960s is similar to how today's
educators view creating objectives. I feel as if teachers use objectives, often dictated by their district and their state departments of education, as guidelines for what they will teach and what they hope students will learn. Teachers, though, cannot map out what some pedagogues term “teachable” or “Aha!” moments; these opportunities for learning occur throughout the course of a well-planned lesson with excellent delivery. Either way, I am sure few would argue that the absence of objectives or standards would be intelligent in educational curriculum.

**Step 3: Selection of Content**

Another example of the historical context of Taba's book is evident in her discussion of the selection of content. In this section, she mentions “new requirements for what constitutes literacy have also emerged” (p. 263) and that a recent “explosion of knowledge has made the classical simplicity of school subjects impossible.” She also explains that students need more knowledge of geography, and that “Since Sputnik, priorities are being established by assigning more time to science, foreign languages, and mathematics … to develop more scientists and technicians” (p. 265); these new requirements, in my mind, reveal what was occurring nationally and the need to “keep up” with other countries academically. This feeling of competition among the nations fueled much of the curriculum writing at this time.

A caution that we should heed is that simply “covering” material does not mean learning will occur; she stresses depth over breadth. A mistake Taba exposes in this section of her book is that schools at this time were filling students' minds with trivial and meaningless facts (p. 272).

Both of these ideas ring true in education today; new sets of standards being adopted have fewer objectives, and the research states that a meaningful curriculum incorporates more in-
depth learning on fewer topics or content areas. The pressure to contend with the academics and achievement of other countries is also still present. Society is bombarded with articles about America's failing education system, and how we have dropped to near the bottom of reports on the intelligence of our students. Would Taba have seen this state of our education when she looked through her window?

Another point worth mentioning that Taba makes in describing how to select content is that the students need to be involved; they must be able to make the content their own (p. 283). In other words, the learners need to be able to connect to the curriculum. If they are unable to do so, the content is meaningless in their world. The students must employ their own experiences and background knowledge to build upon when learning new material. This connects well with the philosophy of most educators today; finding ways to connect the content to the lives of students is essential in modern classrooms. Taba appears to be forward-thinking when making these statements in regard to content selection, because we work toward this goal when selecting content today as well.

**Step Four: Organization of Content**

The role of teachers and curriculum specialists are mentioned throughout Taba's book. In this step, and the previous step, Taba states that teachers should not work alone. That teachers need an outside perspective when selecting and organizing content is her caution. And, in determining how to organize content, she criticizes what curriculum books at the time suggested. She states that using interests, experiences, life problems or content topics are ineffective. Instead, she encourages organizing content based on focus, and writes, that focusing the unit on core notions means student are the recipients of a more enriching scope of content development.
The term “depth not breadth” could be applied to her ideas on content development; she writes that trying to cover all elements of a content topic results in a reduction in learning. Rather, teaching fewer topics but teaching these topics at a deeper level should be a teacher's approach to developing content. Recently, the state of Ohio took the same approach with redesigning core content standards, and there are fewer topics, but more information included under each topic than in the previous set of standards. Taba would appreciate this redesign, though it has many teachers concerned about the changes.

Additionally, Taba's thoughts on organizing the content involve making certain that teachers understand that not all students learn the same way, and that it is our responsibility to provide a variety of instructional methods to our students (p. 307). The ideal approach, in her opinion, would be to have a balance of experiences and activities when organizing content. Some of the organization of content should consider the social aspects of the classroom as well. Learning activities should include reading, analyzing, researching, observing, writing, experimenting, manipulating, and finally (not surprising for a curriculum architect), constructing (p. 308). Further, Taba feels as if students also need time to absorb new material, and that teachers should account for time for students to reflect on new learning.

In the windows that are built, we often see ourselves. Taba creates this window not for others to look in, but for students to look within themselves, and to reflect on their learning. This is an important aspect of instruction today as well. Research shows that when students are involved and engaged in their own learning, growth occurs. When anyone learns a new skill, she needs time to absorb and to reflect on what areas she needs work; this is true of students when responding to new content material. Taba knew that this must be considered when developing curriculum.
Step Five: Selection of Learning Experiences

Taba states that selection has always been a problem in curriculum development, and that there is never enough class time for all of the things students must learn (p. 263); and therein lies the dilemma. What to choose? Taba feels that educators “seem to be confused about the criteria” and that there has been an explosion of new knowledge that should be incorporated into curricula; equally troublesome is the fact that during the lesson, teachers must incorporate the improved technology of the 1960s (p. 263-264). The issue of what should be selected for students to learn created many issues among the leading curriculum specialists at this time, and Taba challenges Gardner for stating that reading is more important than mathematics (p. 265). Again, she mentions Sputnik and “that competition with Russia requires that we develop more scientists and technicians” (p. 265). It appears as if the events of this decade dictated students' learning experiences.

Taba also stresses in this section of her book that curriculum consists of two different things: content and learning experiences or in other words, how students retain new content. To summarize, Taba writes, “If curriculum is a plan for learning, and if objectives determine what learning is important, then it follows that that adequate curriculum planning involves selecting and organizing both content and learning experiences” (p. 266). Important to note as well, Taba includes a side note to this sentence asking the reader to refer to the work of her colleague Ralph Tyler.

Looking toward the “unpredictable future” is another piece of advice Taba provided for readers, and she also gave a caveat that we should be prepared for what could lie ahead; she felt as if the curriculum at the time focused too much on “lessons of history” (p. 275); we need our students to be prepared for problem-solving, adapting to new situations for critical thinking, and
utilizing inquiry skills. As I read her book, I felt as if I was looking through a window of the 1960s to today; so much educational literature and media involve preparing students for 21st century learning skills. These skills are not far from what Taba wanted 1960s educators to expect from students.

Another criticism Taba includes in this section is her feeling that the curriculum during the 1960s was ethnocentric and based on Western culture, and she cautions that we need to have a knowledge of other cultures outside of our own – a “cosmopolitan orientation” (p. 273). This critique may be rooted in her ethnicity, and being an immigrant, or her work in the area of social studies. From wherever these thoughts originate, we have not come that far in the past 50 years. Much of the curriculum today focuses little on worldly cultures and a sense of global awareness or unification.

**Step Six: Organization of Learning Experiences**

Once learning experiences are selected, they must be organized before instruction can occur. Taba's statement regarding this organization process is interesting; she again feels as if there is a dualism that exists in this part of the process. One must organize the content and the learning experiences, and she writes that a typical curriculum lists the subject, topics, and the sequence teachers should use for these topics. She takes issue with the fact that usually “only an unorganized list of learning activities at most is offered” (p. 291) from which teachers choose when lesson planning.

Most notable in this section of her writing is Taba's forward-thinking stating that students' needs are important when we organize what they will learn. She provides a window to what is today termed differentiated instruction. A balanced variety of learning techniques makes
flexibility possible when working with heterogeneous groups, and teaching to the most able students leaves others behind, while teaching to the “less able” provides no challenge for the more able students. Taba's proposal is that we “design methods of learning according to differences in needs, level of comprehension, or ability” (p. 309). This approach is used today in classrooms nationwide; teachers strive to meet students where they are, and to help them grow academically.

**Step Seven: Determining of what to evaluate and of the ways and means of doing it**

In the final step of curriculum development, Taba finally mentions the role of parents in education. She begins by stating that teachers use evaluations to assess progress toward the objectives while students should “make judgements” about what they have learned. Then, parents should evaluate their children and whether or not they feel their students have learned the material (p. 311). Evaluations, to Taba, were not just pencil-and-paper-write-in-a-blue-book types of tests; she takes a broader approach in her definition of evaluation. She feels that clarifying the objectives to describe student behaviors, developing a variety of ways to evaluate students, summarizing the evaluations or evidence, and using the information gained from these assessments are all in the evaluation process (p. 313). These steps, she believed, were essential to curriculum developing. Evaluation, in fact, was the blueprint. Without analyzing where students start, and what they achieve throughout a certain period of time, and then adjusting their instruction based on what is learned is teaching blindly in her mind.

Taba also writes that there are three types of tests: standardized tests, non-standardized tests, and informal devices. And, that overuse of one of these three will result in poor student data (p. 329). Were Taba to look through the window of today's talk on assessments, she would
see many similarities. Today, teachers are expected to utilize a variety of assessments – both formal and informal. They are to “assess for learning” if they are keeping up with that trend. They are to “use student data to inform instruction” and they are to focus on a new educational acronym (as if another is needed) FIP (Formative Instructional Practices).

So much research and so much emphasis is placed on the assessment of students; it is a billion dollar industry. If Taba were alive to see countless companies vie for school funding that doesn't exist with the false hope that their product will improve scores or close achievement gaps, she would laugh. She wrote about the same concepts with less flashy terms 50 years ago.

When Taba traveled across seas to America and forged her way through the world of curriculum development and theory, she helped to build a foundation of progressivism through the creation of a blueprint. In her preface, she proclaims that the book was twenty years in the making. But, she didn't know that what she wrote would transcend seventy years. She didn't know how many would look through the window she built to shape their own research and to transform education. And, Willard B. Spaulding, who wrote the foreword, stated that Dr. Taba felt that “curriculum development is sterile if it does not encompass change in classroom practices” (p. viii). But, how much has changed in schools from when this pioneer, and the hundreds of others with whom she studied, blazed the trail for us?

Considering the blueprint Taba constructed through her research, and the foundation her and her colleagues built nearly 70 years ago, they would be shamed that we have not yet opened the “curriculum window” as they would have wanted. We are standing in front of the window Taba included in her blueprint, but we refuse to open it. We continue to create curriculum that does not challenge our students beyond what is included in textbooks, and then we pressure them to perform on high-stakes tests of the pencil-and-paper variety. No critical thinking or problem-
solving skills are assessed on these tests, and there is no opportunity for students to think
globally. Students have surpassed teachers when it comes to utilizing technology for learning,
and with a lack of educational funding, this will only worsen. All that Taba felt was important to
curriculum and learning is essential to today's students as well, but we are staring through a
closed window unsure how to open it.

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