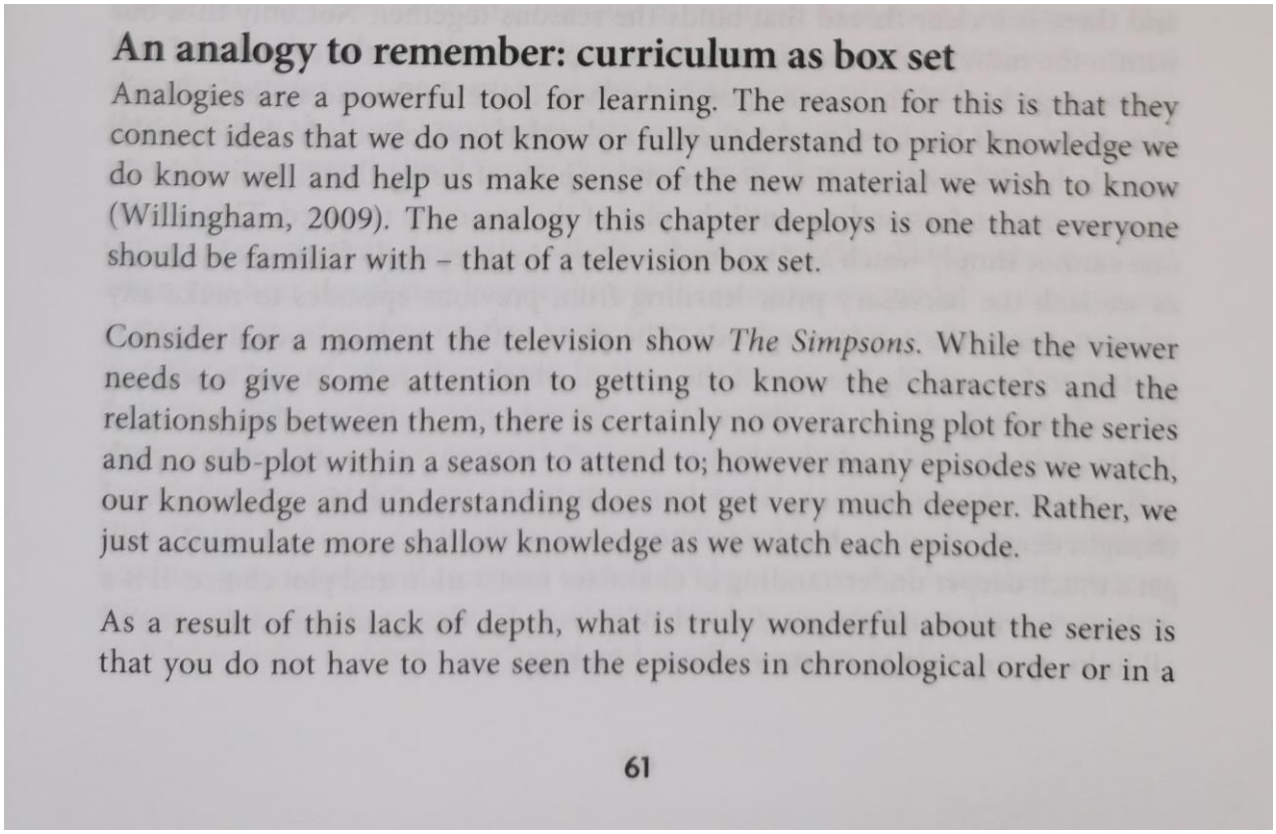
Curriculum as a box set

Neil Almond (2020)

This extract has been taken from Neil Almonds chapter ‘Curriculum Coherence: How best to do it?’ in **The researched guide to curriculum.**



An analogy to remember: curriculum as box set

Analogies are a powerful tool for learning. The reason for this is that they connect ideas that we do not know or fully understand to prior knowledge we do know well and help us make sense of the new material we wish to know (Willingham, 2009). The analogy this chapter deploys is one that everyone should be familiar with – that of a television box set.

Consider for a moment the television show *The Simpsons*. While the viewer needs to give some attention to getting to know the characters and the relationships between them, there is certainly no overarching plot for the series and no sub-plot within a season to attend to; however many episodes we watch, our knowledge and understanding does not get very much deeper. Rather, we just accumulate more shallow knowledge as we watch each episode.

As a result of this lack of depth, what is truly wonderful about the series is that you do not have to have seen the episodes in chronological order or in a

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particular sequence. The watcher is free to pick any episode off the shelf and can no doubt enjoy the episode but will not be required to think too deeply about it. As each episode does not build on what has come before it, having a depth of prior knowledge is not necessary. Figure 1 demonstrates what this looks like when the box set analogy is used to show lessons planned as a series of only loosely connected one-offs in similar fashion to *The Simpsons*.

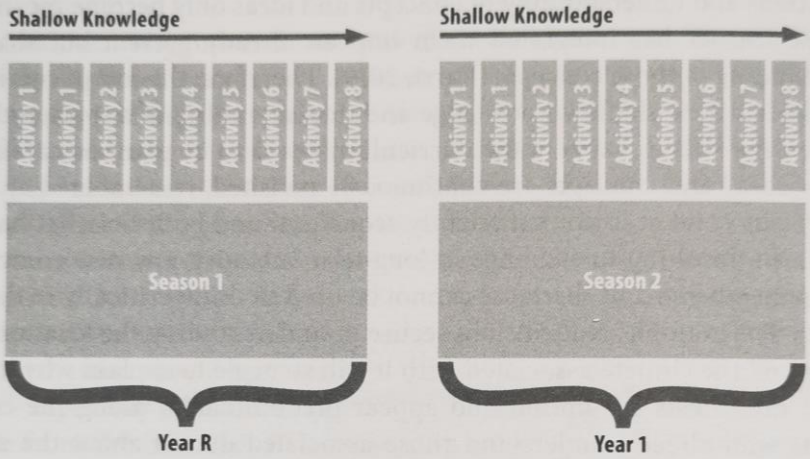


Figure 1: A curriculum designed out of shallow understanding where previous ideas and concepts are not revisited.

Now consider the television series *Game of Thrones* or *Line of Duty*. In contrast to *The Simpsons*, there is an overarching plot to the whole series; there is purpose and there is a clear thread that binds the seasons together. Not only this, but within the individual seasons, there are sub-plots which tie the episodes of that season together. Within each episode (or two, if the deliberate stylistic choice of a cliffhanger has been made), there is a plot that is resolved which means the episode has its own merit; a short-term purpose of being there. Each episode deepens our understanding until the plot of the season is resolved. This is why one cannot simply watch and understand any single episode from such a series as we lack the necessary prior learning from previous episodes to make any meaning from the random episode. The plots within each episode are a vital part of understanding the plot of the season, which in turn is crucial to solving the overarching plot of the series. Although a quick, initial summary – what is known in the TV trade as 'the previously' – may put us on the correct path and give us a bare minimum of understanding, viewers that have attended and thought deeply about each episode, the actions of the characters and events, will get a much deeper understanding of character motivation and plot choice. It is a delicate, intricate and purposeful web of knowledge that gradually deepens and all links up together to create a cohesive journey.

But what does this have to do with the intended curriculum?

Now imagine the 'episodes' as lessons; the whole series as a subject from the national curriculum and each season being a year of schooling. Working with these ideas, we can think of curriculum as a well-written television series, like *Game of Thrones* or *Line of Duty*. There is a grand and complicated story arch that covers the whole series – in a school context this would be the curriculum a child experiences from reception to year 6, or from year 7 to year 11, or even into year 13. In an ideal world, probably only possible in all-through schools or multi-academy trusts that span both phases, the curriculum builds cumulatively from the very start of reception to the very end of year 13. This curriculum is then broken down by year group – corresponding to a season using our box set analogy. Within each individual season lies its own narrative plot, which is worthy in its own right and is resolved by the end of the season – but can also set the scene for what is to come or play a part in the resolution of the overarching story arch. In an educational context, each season provides the core knowledge and understanding required in each year group in order to successfully progress and understand the subsequent seasons that will follow. In other words, it takes new ideas and learning and gradually increases the complexity of those ideas so that a child's knowledge goes from shallower to deeper over the course of their schooling. The higher up the school you teach, the more important it is to know the intricate details of what has been taught previously; when it comes to delivering your lessons, you can bring previous ideas that may have seemed irrelevant at the time back to the forefront. The lower down the school, the more you need to be aware of the final outcome of the whole series so you can weave the initial ideas and introduce the correct (but initially shallow) knowledge into your lessons which can then be picked up and subsequently built on by the teachers further up the school.

Coherent curriculum design is a whole-school enterprise. This is what is meant when you hear the phrase 'curriculum is the progression model' – students are remembering what they need to know from previous years and using it in order to make sense of what they learn in the coming years as their understanding deepens. With time, certain aspects are brought to mind effortlessly. The student may not even be aware that they are remembering them as such, as the knowledge has now become an automatic part of their thinking apparatus. This is the same as how, when watching a complicated box set early on, you might need to consciously call to mind who each character is and how they relate to others, or ask annoying questions of your viewing companions. By season two, such knowledge is deeply ingrained and recalled automatically.

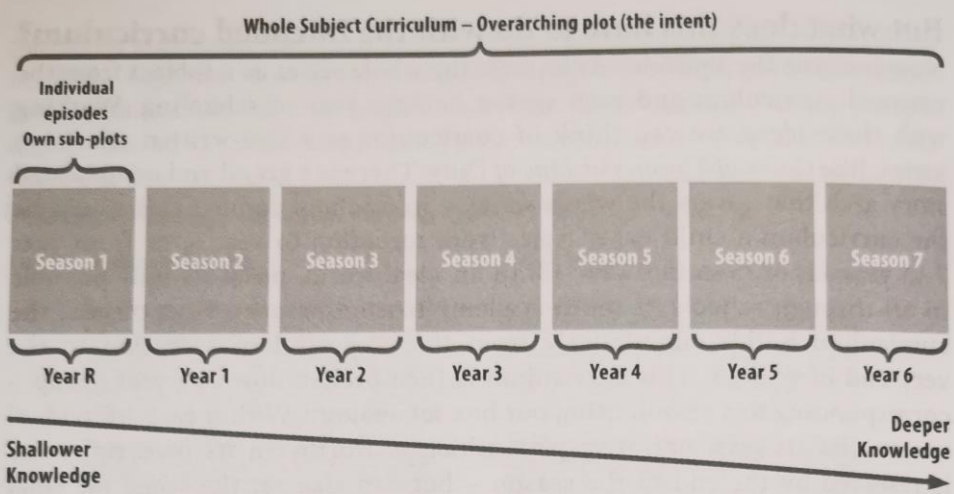


Figure 2: A model of curriculum that demonstrates how knowledge within a subject can go from shallow to deep in a coherent curriculum.

How best to create this cohesion?

Both the activity- and coverage-driven curriculum as described by Wiggins and McTighe (2005) are the result of making decisions about curriculum design starting at the beginning of the learning journey. When planning begins at the beginning, it is difficult to have a shared understanding – or indeed any understanding at all – of the shared final outcomes or how best to get there. The writers of complex box set series do not start writing episode one and then continue writing from the basis of that episode and see where it takes them, least of all because it may not be the same person writing each episode. There is rich discussion about the storyline and sub-plots, with key events and details meticulously planned so all writers know what is happening, when it is happening and why it is happening. A builder does not begin the foundations before consulting the blueprints for how the house will look when it's finished. Teachers must do the same when building and writing their curriculum – start at the end. To some teachers, this is a rather paradoxical idea; but it becomes obvious once you consider the previous analogies. However, simply getting teachers to select an area of study from the national curriculum and asking them to think backwards will still not deliver the coherence we are after.

It is good to think of curriculum design at a macro level and micro level. The macro level refers to the distribution of the attainment targets for the subjects from the national curriculum and sequencing these into a coherent order. For example, it makes little sense to teach the history of the Great Fire of London

at key stage 1 before children have a wider sense of where London is and its status within the United Kingdom in geography. Ensuring that the curriculum is sequenced in such a way is the first step to securing coherence across the curriculum. Victoria Morris, a teacher at St Matthias School in Tower Hamlets, East London has produced useful documents that can help schools plan the curriculum at this macro level for history and geography. These are available at www.bit.ly/2U2CoOF. For the other subjects, primary school subject leaders might need to research and tap into the expertise of secondary colleagues to help them sequence the attainment targets of the other national curriculum subjects. All teachers, regardless of phase taught, would also benefit from using their respective subject associations.

Once this is done, consider the concepts that will be revisited over again. These subject-based concepts must take students out of their normal lived experience and demonstrate to them the interrelatedness of ideas which can lead to intellectual development; it is these concepts that drive curriculum, though they must be connected to content (Young and Lambert, 2014). In the box set analogy, these concepts are the themes that are represented throughout the series.

For example, when mapping the concepts of 'democracy', it may look something like figure 3. Democracy may first be encountered in reception through the idea of rules that must be followed in the classroom. This could then be visited again in year 1 when studying the Great Fire of London and learning that it was the king who made all the rules. In year 2, children could look at the work of the suffragette Emily Davison and the sacrifices the movement made for women to have the vote. Before learning about the impact of the Romans in Britain, it would be worth giving some background information on Rome, detailing how it went from a republic, with a form of democratic representation, to an empire. This could be built on furthermore in year 4 when learning about the wonders of the Ancient Greeks, where democracy could be compared and contrasted between the city states of Athens and Sparta. To promote chronological understanding, in year 5 the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings could be studied, and we could bring to attention the fact that the territories under Anglo-Saxon control were ruled by kings. Viking culture, on the other hand, allowed for free men to participate in meetings called 'things' and to vote on important decisions. Finally, in year 6, students could look at the work of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement's struggle for equality and the right to vote. These units should not be seen in isolation. Because it has been carefully planned, each time democracy appears on the curriculum, teachers

can ask students what they remember about this concept from previous years (and offer meaningful prompts if they have forgotten) before deepening their understanding of the concept.

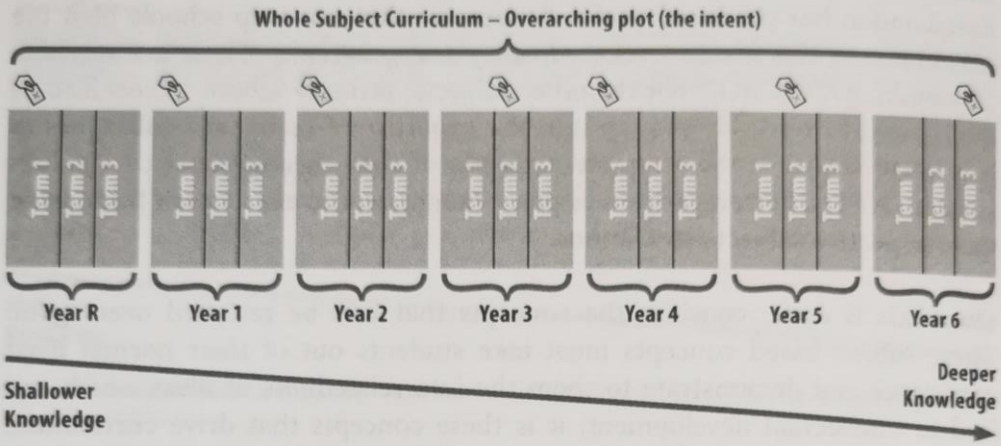


Figure 3: A model of how the concept of democracy may be mapped in a history curriculum at a macro level.