

## Minimalism and Its Implications in the Curriculum

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### ABSTRACT

Minimalism is a multifaceted concept whose definitions and applications vary depending on context. The aim of this study is to examine the theoretical implications of minimalism for designing curriculum components in higher education. This research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in the speculative essay methodology—a strategy that enables conceptual analysis and creative synthesis of theoretical foundations through critical reflection. Data were collected through the “documentary review” method, drawing upon sources in philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, and sociology related to minimalism. The extracted concepts were then analyzed in connection with curriculum elements. The results indicate that, from a minimalist perspective, educational objectives should be selected, purposeful, and meaningful rather than vague and conventional. Curriculum content requires restructuring and the elimination of redundant information to enhance the conceptual continuity of learning. Teaching methods should align with the design of activities that foster independent learning while avoiding extraneous cognitive load. Finally, assessment practices should shift from purely quantitative testing toward meaningful and qualitative evaluations such as portfolios, self-assessment, and learner narratives. Minimalism can serve as a critical and theoretical framework for improving quality, enhancing meaning, and increasing clarity in curriculum planning. However, its effective implementation within Iran’s higher education system requires confronting challenges such as institutional resistance, traditional evaluation structures, and dominant quantitative mindsets. This approach may help counteract the excessive expansion of content and unnecessary teaching practices, transforming the learning environment into a meaningful and learner-centered space.

**Keywords:** Minimalism, higher education, curriculum, conceptual design, meaningful assessment, speculative essay



## Introduction

The contemporary age—marked by information overload and rapid technological shifts—has led to structurally fragmented and meaning-deprived curricula in higher education (Khan & Law, 2015; Musiowsky-Borneman & Arnold, 2021). Programs often prioritize quantity over quality, undermining learner engagement and conceptual coherence. In response, minimalism is introduced as a design-philosophical approach that emphasizes purposeful simplicity, the elimination of excess, and clarity in learning (Gabriele, 2007; Baule et al., 2024). Studies such as Nguna (2020) confirm its benefits in reducing cognitive load and improving instructional coherence. However, theoretical analysis of minimalism's implications for curriculum elements remains underexplored. This study frames minimalism across four interpretive layers—philosophical, aesthetic, psychological, and sociological—drawing from Kantian purposiveness, Deweyan simplicity, Carroll's theory of self-directed learning, and Baudrillard's critique of consumerist education. Accordingly, the research investigates how minimalist principles may inform the rethinking of curriculum objectives, content, pedagogy, and assessment in higher education.

## Methodology

This research, grounded in theoretical analysis and the speculative essay methodology, is situated within curriculum studies following Edmund Short's (1991) classification—specifically the "speculative essay" genre. Relying on conceptual analysis, philosophical foundations, and critical reflection, the study explores the possibilities and implications of minimalism for higher education curriculum. Data was obtained through document analysis of interdisciplinary sources on minimalism, spanning art, philosophy, education, and sociology. Core minimalist concepts—simplicity, clarity, meaning, and anti-consumerism—were identified and examined in relation to Tyler's four curriculum elements: objectives, content, teaching methods, and evaluation. The study involves no fieldwork but emphasizes theoretical insight. Conceptual validity was ensured through reliance on foundational sources, while reflective credibility was achieved via multiple reviews of analyses against the theoretical framework. The originality of the research is supported through interdisciplinary synthesis. The overall aim is to extract the theoretical capacities of minimalism for rethinking curriculum components in higher education.

## Findings

Drawing upon conceptual analysis and Tyler's four-element framework, this study articulates the implications of minimalism for curriculum design in higher education. It emphasizes rethinking objectives toward clarity, meaningfulness, and learner self-regulation (Carroll, 1998; Biggs et al., 2022). In terms of content, minimalism advocates for the purposeful selection of foundational concepts and the elimination of thematic excess to reduce cognitive overload and enhance coherence (Sweller et al., 2011; Kant, 2000). Regarding teaching methods, minimalist pedagogy promotes structurally simple, experience-driven strategies that support active, exploratory, and autonomous learning (Dewey, 1934; Carroll, 1990). Finally, evaluation is reframed as a deep, reflective, and interpretive process, favoring tools such as portfolios, feedback cycles, and self-assessment over numerical testing (Musiowsky-Borneman & Arnold, 2021; Black & Wiliam, 2009). Together, these implications offer a pathway to reduce curricular clutter and reclaim authenticity and intentionality in education.

## Conclusion

This study reinterprets curriculum design in higher education through the lens of minimalism, not merely as an aesthetic preference but as a philosophical-design approach to address structural, cognitive, and semantic complexities in education. At the level of learning objectives, minimalism challenges conventional abstraction by emphasizing meaningfulness, self-regulation, and conceptual coherence—resonating with the logic of constructive alignment (Biggs et al., 2022; Kant, 2000). Content, accordingly, is no longer a compilation of fragmented information, but a refined, purposeful, and conceptually unified structure that facilitates deep learning (Dewey, 1934; Sasaki, 2021). This principle extends into pedagogy, where minimalist instructional design values simplicity, authenticity, and learner autonomy over elaborate or media-heavy delivery methods (Carroll, 1998; Pinar, 1995). Most critically, assessment is reimagined—not as a terminal evaluative instrument—but as a process embedded within the learning experience, anchored in reflection, dialogue, and learner agency (Musiowsky-Borneman

& Arnold, 2021; Ramazani Sadr et al., 2024). In doing so, minimalist evaluation shifts the focus from quantity to qualitative understanding and lived academic experience. In essence, minimalism offers a framework for recalibrating the higher education curriculum—streamlining structure, fostering meaning, and supporting learner-centered, coherent educational design that answers the growing pedagogical fragmentation of modern academia.

### Practical Suggestions

- Regarding the “objective” element: Revising educational objectives based on the minimalist principle of purposeful design — Curriculum goals should move away from vague generalities and instead aim for meaningful, achievable targets aligned with student self-regulation.
- Regarding the “content” element: Streamlining curriculum structure through the removal of superfluous components — By emphasizing conceptual coherence, selecting foundational content, and avoiding thematic overload, learning quality can be enhanced and students’ cognitive load reduced.
- Regarding the “teaching method” element: Employing simplified, experience-based teaching approaches — Educational activities should be designed with structural simplicity that still enables active, exploratory, and self-directed learning.
- Regarding the “evaluation” element: Revising the assessment system by emphasizing meaningful, interpretable evaluation — Replacing quantitative tests with alternatives like portfolios, feedback-based assessment, and self-evaluation can foster deeper understanding and learner motivation.

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