

## Chapter 5

# The Didaktik/Curriculum Dialogue: What Did We Learn?

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**Abstract** In the late 1990s, scholars from the Anglo-American curriculum community began a conversation with scholars in the German didaktik tradition (see Westbury I, Hopmann S, Riquarts K, *Teaching as a reflective practice: the German Didaktik Tradition*. Erlbaum, Mahwah, 2000). One major difference between these traditions is the perspective on content. In the US tradition, content is often seen as (a) a given that does not need to be analyzed and (b) inert, i.e., unchanging as it passes from curricular documents through classrooms to pupils (and even to standardized tests). Within this frame, school leadership need not be centrally concerned with the content of curriculum. In didaktik, content is fundamental and regulation is ideally normative and intellectual, i.e., it provides tools for teachers to come to pedagogical terms with the contents they teach. What didaktik thinking potentially brought to life for US curriculum thought was a more fruitful understanding of content processes as (a) formation for community and society and (b) transformation to rich pedagogical potential. This chapter elaborates more fully the lines of similarity and difference between the didaktik and curriculum traditions and explores the reasons why didaktik has had only a modest impact on turning the Anglo-American curriculum tradition toward a more fully developed sense of content and content enactment.

In this chapter my task is to examine the nature and impact of the Didaktik and/or Curriculum project that took place in the late 1990s, the results of which are reflected in the volume on teaching as reflective practice edited by Westbury et al. (2000). At the core of the project, scholars from the Anglo-American curriculum community began a conversation with scholars in the German didaktik tradition. The US tradition of curriculum thought had its roots in the analyses of the graded school in the later half of the nineteenth century as a state system of universal education began to evolve. The perceived task was to decide which content should be covered when,

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where, and in what order so that documents could be created to synchronize and regulate the work of a largely female teaching force who were not trusted to have the capacity to decide or manage curriculum in their classrooms. The concern, in other words, was organizational and managerial. Although there were competing conceptions during this time of organizing principles for curriculum—what Kliebard (2004) called “ferment”—the traditional “subjects” of the academy were generally accepted as the organizing frame for curriculum. The German didaktik tradition traced its roots to Comenius’ *Didactica Magna*—The Great Didactic—published from 1633 to 1638. The central task of didaktik was the analysis of content from a social and a pedagogical frame. General didaktik focuses on *bildung*, i.e., the educative or formative potential of various contents within a social context. *Fachdidaktik*, or subject didaktik, associated with the gymnasium, concentrates on the elementarization and simplification of disciplinary content to create pedagogically functional representations.

The Didaktik and/or Curriculum project consisted of several activities:

1. Multiple conversations among a small group of scholars—Westbury, Gudem, Hopmann—on the likely points of similarity and difference between these traditions and on the difficulties of translating core terminology from the German didaktik corpus into English equivalents.
2. A major international conference at the IPN in Kiel attended by scholars from both traditions, including Lee Shulman, George Posner, Sigrun Gudmundsdottir, Tomas Englund, Michael Uljens, Peter Menck, David Hamilton, Ingrid Carlgren, and Wolfgang Klafki himself.
3. Articles in journals, including *Bildung und Erziehung* and the *Journal of Curriculum Studies*.
4. Translations, for the first time, of major Didaktik writings into English.
5. Important summative commentaries from Hopmann, Riquarts, Westbury, Gudem, and others on the connections between the traditions.

This project and its attempt to connect the two great curriculum traditions was clearly a major event in the history of curriculum scholarship. But the impact is difficult to assess. As a participant in both the origins and the work of the project, I have had a continuing awareness of the value of didaktik thinking in my own work. Moreover, I have worked closely for the past 4 years with Fred Janssen and Hanna Westbroek in the Netherlands, and for them didaktik is part of their everyday thinking. So I am perhaps not representative of most US scholars on this topic.

There have been isolated references in the US curriculum literature over the years, but mostly by Europeans—e.g., Hopmann. Two other members of this panel have written on the topic. Autio (2006), writing from a Finnish perspective, has produced a quite comprehensive analysis of the two traditions, seeing both as fundamentally complicit with neoliberalism and managerial instrumentality. Pinar (2011) has also authored a book that pays close attention to aspects of Didaktik. Finally, I would point to this session as a sign that the conversation opened in the 1990s is continuing, enlarged, of course, to include leadership studies.

Rather than attempt some type of empirical estimate of the impact of the didaktik vs. curriculum project, I decided it would be most useful to map how my understanding of curriculum work has been shaped by my contact with the Didaktik and/or Curriculum project. My contention is that this mapping can be useful in locating points at which the Didaktik tradition can potentially inform both Anglo-American curriculum thinking and leadership studies and practice.

## The Centrality of Content

Let me start by noting that most of my scholarly work has been directed to understanding the culturally and historically situated forms and practices associated with teaching in classrooms. Such work is, of course, at the nexus of curriculum and pedagogy, a topic that I wrote about in the Jackson Handbook (Doyle 1992) and am preoccupied with even today. In the US curriculum tradition, content is bypassed, i.e., usually seen as (a) a given that does not need to be analyzed and (b) inert, i.e., unchanging as it passes through curricular documents and pedagogical material into classrooms to pupils and into standardized tests. Within this frame, school leadership need not be centrally concerned with the content of curriculum but rather with delivery systems and so-called professional development exercises to achieve implementation fidelity.

I might also point out that familiar, everyday pedagogical forms and arrangements are quite often objects of derision or at least disappointment among education academics throughout the world. As such, they are not items to be studied and understood but targets for removal and replacement with reputedly effective processes flowing from the superior minds of pedagogical scholars—to make the world a better place. Despite the premature reports of the impending death of conventional practice, these forms and arrangements are remarkably enduring and crop up, with few exceptions, across the world wherever schooling activity occurs. So while we wait for the end of schooling as we know it, I thought it might be useful to understand what existing practice is all about.

My contact with didaktik came about as a part of my effort to understanding teaching in classrooms in ways that went far beyond the content-free process-product studies that grew out of the conventional educational psychology paradigm. As recounted in Westbury's origin story in the Preface to *Teaching as Reflective Practice* (2000), the Didaktik and/or Curriculum project began with an exchange Ian and I had around the Kirsch (1977) article on elementarization and simplification in mathematics teaching. But let me tell the rest of the story. For me it all began with an experience I had in a doctoral oral examination of one of our students who was majoring in what we called Teaching and Teacher Education and minoring in mathematics. The oral exam committee consisted of professors from the major and a minor professor from mathematics. After an hour or so of questions from the major committee, the mathematician began his turn with a comment that he found all the talk about teaching quite trivial. I, of course, bristled at this characterization of my

career work and, when the mathematics professor finished his questions, I asked the student to go to the board and talk through the teaching of some topic in mathematics. The student selected “induction” as the topic and began to explain how he would teach it. The mathematician interrupted rather soon to question whether the student was actually teaching about induction. After a brief conversation, they agreed that induction was, in fact, the topic on the floor. Then as the student explained what he would do first, second, etc., the mathematician noted that the approach being taken would possibly result in confusion when the students reached a related topic, etc. This type of conversation when on for about 15 min and struck me as something I had never heard before—continuous talk about teaching that utilized content rather than psychological categories. When I relayed this experience to Westbury, he sent me the Kirsch article. Again, I had never seen such an analysis and asked him what this was. When he reported back that it was just an ordinary piece of *facdidaktik*, we began our quest to find out what this *didaktik* stuff was all about.

So in *didaktik* I saw a fundamental emphasis on content and on analysis and interpretation of content as essential to both curriculum work and teaching activity. From this perspective, my focus shifted from delivery and implementation fidelity to providing tools for teachers to come to pedagogical terms with the contents they teach.

Within this frame, curriculum is the process through which content is gathered from the world, brought into schools, transformed into pedagogical material, and enacted as classroom event. In other words, curriculum work is a process of interpreting content to connect the world to the classroom.

I see three major domains of content interpretation (i.e., curriculum discourse) in schooling. Although connected, the tasks and language differ, often substantially, across these domains.

## Levels of Curriculum Discourse

### *Societal Level Curriculum Discourse*

The first level of curriculum discourse is that which occurs at the juncture between society and the institution of schooling. It is usually quite difficult to locate where this discourse takes place and who the participants are, but this multi-voiced and multi-located conversation connects what Westbury (2000) called the “idea of curriculum” situated within the “the pervasive web of beliefs and understandings about what schooling is that is to be found embedded in any society or culture” (p. 106) and the institutional documents and arrangements that constitute the instantiation of that idea in schools. It is the discourse through which content in the world is curricularized—endowed with socially significant educative potential. Any particular curriculum, thus, is first a set of claims about the educative effects of certain contents (i.e., what outcomes can be expected of particular experiences) and the social significance of these effects (i.e., why such outcomes are important for children and youth to acquire).

Let me quickly illustrate this process with one of my favorite quotations from Margaret Atwood's (2000) novel, *The Blind Assassin*:

Father had decided, correctly enough, that our education had been neglected. He wanted us taught French, but also Mathematics and Latin—brisk mental exercises that would act as a corrective for our excessive dreaminess. Geography too would be bracing.... He wanted the lacy, frilly, somewhat murky edges trimmed off us as if we were lettuces, leaving a plain, sound core (p. 161).

What we see here are working, and perhaps naive, theories of the educative potential of various contents as justification for their inclusion in a curriculum. Such theories of content are quite ubiquitous and easy to write. Their essence is twofold: (1) an interpretation of what experiences with the content achieve, and (2) an understanding of the fundamental educational consequences or importance of these experiences. What's more difficult to understand, of course, is how particular theories of content become hegemonic—why, for example, we generally accept that mathematics, history, literature, and science should be the backbone of curriculum. If curriculum is a complex conversation—and certainly it is, especially in very heterogeneous societies—where does that conversation take place and who listens to and accepts the claims of educative potential?

In contemporary curriculum theorizing, considerable discourse is directed to the connection between society and schooling—to what I am calling the curricularization of content. At a minimum, such discourse integrates theories of society, theories of the person, theories of knowledge, and theories of institutions. No wonder the curriculum conversation is complicated. Didaktik has certainly been seen as a resource for curriculum discourse about the connection between society and schooling and, thus, the fundamental role and purposes of education in a society (e.g., Autio 2006). This theme runs through the papers in this session and the argument is put forward that educational leaders can exercise influence in helping define how this connection should be interpreted, especially in light of the host of at best mis-educative standardizations and assessment practices being employed globally to manage schooling efficiencies while conveniently ignoring issues of race, poverty, gender, exploitation, and cultural funds of knowledge. Educational leaders, in other words, are being cast as the first, or perhaps the last, line of defense against neoliberal managerialism.

### *Institutional Curriculum Discourse*

The second level of curriculum discourse occurs within the institutionalized enterprise of schooling and is focused on the transformation of content into pedagogical material. This transformation has several dimensions:

1. The writing of district curriculum documents that attempt to “resolve” issues of inclusion, scope, and sequence—a process that is currently being swamped by the Common Core Standards.

2. The creation of textbooks and related materials (including assessments) by a variety of industries, nonprofits, and special interest groups.
3. The design and testing of curriculum approaches and materials by university professors, often with government sponsorship.

Whether consciously or not, these activities involve didaktik processes of elementarization, simplification, and representation. Moreover, they involve a theorizing of the content itself—what counts as mathematics, reading, science, history, geography, play, self-realization, etc. Arguments around these issues are especially inflamed in the fields of reading and mathematics. I would note that much of this kind of work is being done within disciplines, particularly mathematics education or science education rather than in traditional curriculum studies (e.g., Clements 2007). However, science and math educators in the US tend to view their work as pedagogical rather than curricular, which masks a bit the extent to which they are actually creating theories of content.

Didaktik has helped me identify and conceptualize these processes of content theorization and transformation that occur as content moves toward pedagogical material and classroom use. I would also see this as a rich arena for leadership studies. Educational administrators spend considerable resources to acquire and distribute pedagogical material, so enhancing their capacity to support, facilitate, and critically inform this process would seem to be essential.

### *Classroom Enactment*

The third level of curriculum discourse occurs among teachers and especially within teachers (ultimately this is a private deliberation) as they engage in the practical task of enacting curriculum in classroom group settings. It is often true, of course, that curriculum designers often reach toward enactment by producing model lessons that illustrate how a program can be implemented in classrooms. Schoenfeld (2014), for example, in his TRU MATH project has given quite detailed and extensively tested lessons that exemplify his principles of teaching mathematics for rigorous understanding. Such model lessons are intended to serve as clarifications of what the basic principles of the approach are and as practical tools for teachers to learn how to implement the program in their own classrooms. But such lesson models, and the frameworks they represent, are intended necessarily for all classrooms and thus specific details of context and setting are stripped away. Teachers, however, deal with the particular so to do the practical work of teaching they must transform whatever curriculum they encounter into forms and practices they can use with specific students at a specific time and place.

I have written at length in other contexts about the myriad demands of the classroom setting and the complex tasks these demands pose for the practical work of teaching (Doyle 2006). For present purposes, I would like to underscore two major points. First, to enact a curriculum in a classroom, a teacher must design, bring to

life, and sustain events that afford participation by as many students in the class group as possible. In other words, subtraction, poetry, or self-realization must become events to get on the floor in classrooms. At a minimum, such events (a) must not jeopardize student cooperation in future events—classes have a long history—and (b) must contain tasks that students accomplish with respect to the curriculum. Indeed, such tasks are, essentially, the curriculum on the floor in classrooms.

Second, practical designs, in teaching as elsewhere, must be procedural, suitable, and efficient. That is, to do practical work teachers face issues of:

1. Instrumentality—what procedures can be used to bring events to life and sustain them in a classroom
2. Congruence—how do these procedures fit existing circumstances in a classroom
3. Cost—how much of one’s limited time and resources are required to bring the event to life in a classroom (Doyle and Ponder 1977; Janssen et al. 2013).

In contrast to what is often assumed in the Anglo-American curriculum tradition, curriculum processes do not stop at the classroom door as teaching begins. Rather, the interpretative processes—which I take to be the essence of curriculum—continue to occur as teachers engage in designing events, bringing them to life with groups of students, monitoring their progress, and judging student products. It is impossible, in other words, to obviate the teacher’s perspective and essential theoretical commitments from the actual curriculum on the floor in classrooms. What teachers uniquely bring to the table is situated event knowledge of curriculum, which shapes in profound ways what occurs as curriculum in the real world.

School leaders and pedagogical reformers typically ignore the practicality demands of teachers’ work and, in turn set teachers up to be seen as failures. Most professional development experiences either attempt to train teachers rather quickly in new pedagogies or place teachers in professional learning communities to deliberate about their practices. Since in most cases teachers are being asked to achieve goals they do not have with methods they do not know how to use, such efforts typically fail. However, since the pedagogies and/or learning community procedures are endowed with inherent “quality,” leaders are off the hook. They have done all they can do, so it’s the teachers who are to blame.

An emphasis on practicality leads to a quite different approach, one of seeking bridging tools that connect a world of possibility to a world of practicality, i.e., the general to the particular, and in this sense mirrors the very design processes of practicality that teachers face every day. I have had the privilege recently of working closely with Fred Janssen and Hanna Westbroek in the Netherlands (Janssen et al. 2015) and with Kristin Gunckel, Marcy Wood, and Erin Turner at Arizona (Doyle et al. 2013) on the design and use of such bridging tools. I do not have time here to go into this work in detail, but these tools have shown considerable promise in making innovations practical. In turn, I think this work in practicality studies can be the foundation for a reconstruction of how teachers are supported in accomplishing the design tasks they face in making the general particular.

To return to the didaktik theme, I would underscore that an emphasis on the interpretation of content that exists at the core of curriculum processes in classrooms is an essential component of practical change in teaching. Reform is often seen largely as a matter of pedagogical practice. But different practices usually reflect fundamentally different conceptions of the content. If I think reading is primarily about pronouncing words correctly, then my reading pedagogy will differ markedly from someone who thinks reading is about updating personal knowledge. Or if I think mathematics is primarily about putting correct numerals into arithmetical sentences, then my math teaching will differ from that of someone who thinks mathematics is about finding quantitative dimensions of real-world problems. In practicality terms, there is a problem of congruence. Asking me to change practices without exploring the congruence of my theory of the content with the intended pedagogy is quite likely to be unproductive.

## Summary

To summarize, I think one of the major contributions of Didaktik to the Anglo-American Curriculum tradition has been to make content process rather than managerial control central to the schooling enterprise. These basically interpretive processes include:

1. The curricularization of content, i.e., how content is endowed with educative significance
2. The transformation of content into pedagogical material
3. The enactment of content in the complex practical world of the classroom.

I want to emphasize that these processes do not disappear if one were to change the fundamental purposes of schooling. Whether schools seek reproduction, emancipation, or self-realization, there would still be the tasks of curricularizing specific contents, transforming them into pedagogical materials, and enacting them with group of children. An understanding of these processes empowers teachers and curriculum leaders to tackle the central educative issues of schooling. It also underscores the urgent need to the design sensible resources and support systems to sustain this practical conversation.

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