The curriculum of the plague

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Abstract The Covid-19 pandemic can be read as an eruption of the Real: a traumatic event that overwhelms our capacity for symbolization and exposes the fragility of the imaginary. Albert Camus addresses this traumatic dimension in his 1947 novel *The Plague*, in which he reserves a rather puzzling statement for the closing paragraph: A plague never disappears, he wrote, but can lie dormant only to reappear once again “for the education of men”. What lessons can be learned from the pandemic we are experiencing right now? While Covid-19 is often discussed from a biological perspective, the magnitude of the tragedy raises questions far beyond the confines of the natural/medical sciences, questions about humanity, our limits and possibilities, and the transcendent. This article explores the potential educational aspect of the pandemic by framing the discussion in an exegetical reading of Camus’ novel. Through this reading, it claims that even within the tragic reality of its effects, the present pandemic might bring to the fore the notion of an existential kind of learning—one that is deeply personal, that cannot be programmed or learned from direct teaching, and that connects us in relevant ways to the lives of others. At the same time, this reading is not oblivious to the practical needs around decision-making on the part of educational policymakers, administrators, and teachers. As the novel shows, tragic events create a demand for quick action, so a few practical principles for curriculum decision-making are also offered.

Keywords Coronavirus · Curriculum · Education · Existentialism · Pandemic · Plague

Albert Camus’ novel *The Plague* (*La Peste*) describes the extraordinary events that take place during a sudden pandemic that locks down a rather ordinary town, the city of Oran in French Algeria. The novel, organized into five parts, recounts the experiences of townsfolk

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from the perspective of a young doctor, Bernard Rieux. Explaining that the life of a city can best be experienced by paying attention to “how the people in it work, how they love, and how they die”, Camus (1948) describes the succession of stages the unsuspecting citizens experience as isolated and at first seemingly unimportant events start to disrupt everyday life—rats spitting blood and dying in the streets, the rapid appearance and spread of the plague across the city, a declared state of pandemic, and the tragedy that ensues as a complete lockdown brings normal life to a halt. In describing the fear, denial, loss of dear ones, boredom, shock, puzzlement, longing, and anger, but also hope and love, Camus paints a vivid landscape of life under the attack of something invisible and unexpected.

There are clear parallels between the situation depicted in the novel and what we are experiencing now around the world. At the time of this writing, over 323,000 people have died due to coronavirus in the United States alone; the death toll is at 190,000 in Brazil, 121,000 in Mexico, and 70,000 in the United Kingdom. Across all continents, no one can remain indifferent to the tragedy of human lives lost. No country is completely safe.

While the Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented in terms of its speed and global reach, the events Camus describes nevertheless address and accurately reflect how the current pandemic is being handled by the authorities, and perhaps most importantly, thought about, felt, and experienced by individuals.

Since its publication, readers have viewed the novel through the lens of their time. At one point, it was regarded as an account of the Nazi invasion of France, and then it was heralded as a literary symbol of the Resistance. Today, amid nationwide quarantines, *The Plague* is being widely discussed in the media, and a new English translation of the novel is currently underway. What is it about art—and literature, in particular—that resonates so strongly in us, providing a reflection of our existential situation?

In reflecting on this return to a classic of literature during a time of distress, this article takes the view that by studying and paying close attention to lessons from the past, we can gain insights into our present condition, make more sensible decisions, and project a possible future.

A recurring phenomenon yet always anew

Certainly, plagues have been a recurring fact throughout human history. We have the historical records of the pestilences that swept across Europe, the diseases the English brought to indigenous North American tribes, and in more ancient times, the plagues described in the Bible. Pandemics are nothing new. In part one of the novel, right after Camus uses the word *plague* for the first time, he writes that “there have been as many plagues as wars in history”, and yet they always “take people equally by surprise” (Camus 1948, p. 34). Within a few months of the outbreak of Covid-19, countries all over the world closed their borders, put social distancing measures in place, locked down cities, called off public events, canceled flights, closed schools and university campuses, and switched teaching and learning to online platforms. We are surprised all right!

Camus has so far described the predicament primarily from the perspective of the town’s doctors and their technical preoccupations: What was the proper diagnosis, did the statistics mean anything? Did they reveal a trend? Did doctors have enough serum and supplies to treat large numbers of patients when the time came? What were the political implications of declaring a pandemic? But then Camus makes a sudden existential shift, illuminating the situation from the perspective of the lived experience of the townsfolk, including

the main character, Dr. Rieux. “A pestilence isn’t a thing made to man’s measure”, Camus writes, “therefore we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn’t always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away” (Camus 1948, p. 35).

A phenomenon surpassing human beings and their imagination cannot be dealt with from the safe distance of scientific discourse and statistical models: Death becomes real—it becomes the greatest certainty. No longer are we talking about numbers but about parents, friends, children, a lover, a neighbor. The plague personalizes our relationship to self and others. As Camus shows, for those who do not pass away but survive, a pandemic calls into question the very idea of freedom. In the words of the novel’s narrator, before this reality was acknowledged, the people “went on doing business, arranged for journeys, and formed views. How should they have given a thought to anything like plague, which rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the exchange of views” (Camus 1948, p. 35). In a scenario that looks much like what we are experiencing today, Camus then casts a foreboding sentence: “They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences” (p. 35). An invisible, microscopic entity has proven to be greater than us. Freedom, a notion so very often invoked in political and ideological discourse to oblige the will of others in the public sphere, is suddenly met with a reversal in the private sphere of our own lives. The tragedy of the pandemic forcefully places us directly in front of the certainty and facticity of our limits, showing us that we are fragile, temporal beings subsisting on divine breath. Could it be that the sometimes compulsive resort to activity and to the political, with its imagined freedom, is an escape from the less comfortable truths we encounter in the silence and quietness of a *vita contemplativa* that a quarantine forces on us?

Aside from its biological facticity, the pandemic gains its tragic dimension as an eruption of the Real, bringing forth death as the most certain possibility of existence, and, with it, anxiety, fear, desires, and dreams. These are then translated or expressed in the imaginary, taking the form of objects, intentionalities, and perceptions of the ego. Because of the traumatic effect of this sudden and, in many cases, painful encounter with reality, the treatment must include approaching the issue from the realm of the symbolic, allowing the chain of signification to flow. In very general terms, this means paying attention to what is happening, how it is being experienced in our inner life, and using words to describe it just as it is. This is how we make “sense” of things, recognizing the direction of our innermost intentions and desires and the role they play in how we experience reality. It is why, in developing a more honest approach to psychotherapy (what would later be called psychoanalysis), Freud decided to give up assumptions and explanations from the natural sciences, drop his experiments with hypnosis, and return to the teachings of Franz Brentano—relying on a phenomenological description of whatever situation was producing suffering just as it was being experienced in order to bring about understanding (*Verstehen*). The therapeutic process of self-understanding is, at bottom, a process of education of the self.

The value of autobiography

Illuminating the existential dimension of the pandemic, as Camus does in *The Plague*, bringing back the flesh and bone person in his circumstance, inevitably involves paying attention to autobiography. In the field of curriculum studies, it is Pinar (2004) who has

most notably drawn attention to the educational value of a careful study of one's own biographic situation.

Besides the known talent that Camus displays across his work for vivid and detailed description, this novel is particularly drenched in his autobiographic experience. Oran, the setting of the story, is his hometown (a place he also uses as the backdrop in his essays "Summer" and "Weddings"). He wrote *The Plague* during World War II and the Nazi occupation of France. And he was no stranger to disease, since he was also suffering from severe tuberculosis, which at one point forced him to be isolated and painfully separated from his wife. Across his *oeuvre*, and in *The Plague* in particular, Camus deals with his own condition poetically—not from an optimism detached from sorrow but from a sense of profound love of life and for the other. His work is a phenomenological description steeped in Eros.

Faced with a pandemic we experience as something new, that takes us by surprise, it could be said we are now living in an *epoché* of sorts and are being invited to learn to live through it in a state of suspension, in openness, in wonder, to attend to the ways in which the phenomenon appears to us and what it might be showing, concealing, offering. This is also what we see happening in Camus' novel. Once the plague hit and the city was locked down and cut off from the outside world, Oran was overcome with a mood of fear. But at the same time, "with fear, serious reflection began" (Camus 1948, p. 22). With the opportunity to reflect, the pandemic offered a necessary condition for a personalizing education.

An excursus into method and theory

Before I continue exploring this kind of education with an exegetical reading of the novel, a brief note on method and theory is in order. Method is conceived here not as directions or recipes for action but in the original Greek sense of *methodos*, i.e., a path one takes, whose destination one cannot always know in advance but can surely recognize and describe in retrospect. In this original sense (not in terms of newness but of genesis), the method used here also resonates with the Latin root of curriculum, *currere*, the course one travels, a journey. I sometimes hear people express that the work some of us are doing in the curriculum field, such as literary study (Pinar 2006), intellectual biography (Pinar 2019), philosophical research and phenomenology in education (Rocha 2015), theology and politics (Rocha 2017a), psychoanalytic and phenomenological research (Murillo 2018, 2019), and intellectual history (Murillo and Pinar 2019), to name a few, is something new or experimental compared to traditional qualitative research methods in education. But the opposite is true. As Rocha notes, social science is the newcomer and the experiment: "Poetry, verse, song, story: these are traditional in the sense of being old and ancient" (Huddleston and Rocha 2020). In this sense, literary study as a form of educational research in the field of curriculum can be said to be pre-qualitative in essence (Rocha 2017b). But its significance for an understanding of our present existential predicament under Covid-19 is grounded not only in its temporal precedence but in its capacity to access the universal aspects of the essence of the phenomenon as it is perceived and lived through.

For Franz Brentano (teacher of both Freud and Husserl), self-understanding was considered the fundamental and necessary ground of knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) and requires inner perception, an attentiveness to the movements of the inner life, that the external aspects of experience (what social scientists gather from observations and interviews), simply does not permit. In the present case, of a global pandemic that has caused distress and

disruption at all levels of social life, the biomedical or natural sciences can certainly help to explain the mutations of the virus, and they have even found a vaccine for it, but they cannot say anything about this experience as lived from a perspective of self-understanding by the subjectively existing individual.

Since the natural and social sciences disregarded the study of phenomena as they appear to consciousness, the possibility and capacity for a compassionate and attuned understanding were handed over “to laymen, poets, natural philosophers and mystics” (Freud 1957, as cited in Wertz and Olbert 2016, p. 255). For the same reason, the field of curriculum experienced a turning point toward reconceptualization by rejecting the “imperialism of the social sciences and other forms of pseudo-empiricism” (Murillo and Pinar 2019, p. 160) in education. Instead, by returning to the study of the humanities (history, literature, philosophy, and theology), the field brought the focus of attention “back to the subjectively existing individual at the center of educational experience”, opening up the way for “a more careful and dedicated consideration of the problem of subjective reconstruction” (Murillo and Pinar 2019, p. 160). The German philosopher and educator Friedrich Schleiermacher also highlighted the relevance of a hermeneutical reading for the reconstruction of the subject. In his account, “where there is no such internal ground [of life of the spirit and intellect], there is no change in the subject, or only change of a mechanistic nature” (Friesen and Kenklies 2021). By focusing on that internal ground, the literary analysis offered here aims to reconstruct the existential lessons to be learned from a novel set in times of crisis such as our own.

After the lockdown was declared without any warning and the reality of the measures of distance and isolation started to sink in, the people in Oran began to think about all they had left undone, of what could have been but was not (one last kiss, a visit to a parent, a declaration of love, a beer with friends). With this, the mood of the people descended into an attitude of feeling “hostile to the past, impatient of the present, and cheated of the future” (Camus 1948, p. 67). A mood that for us may be easy to recognize.

A preliminary lesson to be learned from Camus’s narration is that in order to understand our present and project a possible future, we need to study the past. This is precisely what literary study incentivizes—not only because it gives us access to the way others, in times past, dealt with problems, discoveries, questions, and ways of approaching life but because, as an aesthetic experience, it provides far more than cognitive information from the decoding of the text: it stimulates our inner sensitivity and resonates in the realm of affect, providing a sense of identification and recognition and the sometimes surprising discovery of traces of our own emotional landscape put into words.

In an article in *The New York Times*, Laura Marris (2020), who is currently working on a new English translation of *La Peste*, said it best when she noted that “while Camus was writing for the moment, he was also writing for the future”, and adds, “I still hope that books from the past can be a kind of serum for the future, as Camus intended his novel to be”. While he could never have predicted that the pandemic of the novel would have the global reach of the pandemic of 2020, the depth of his observations and descriptions of the existential landscape of the situation is surely a serum for our capacity to make sense of our present plague and to imagine our future reconstruction.

The work of the German educationalist Bollnow (1987) represents an important contribution to understanding and describing the existential essence of education. His application of a philosophical-anthropological perspective to pedagogical questions is a hallmark of the educational theory and practice of the tradition known as human-science pedagogy (*Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*), to which he contributed, inspired by figures like Wilhelm Dilthey and his teacher, Hermann Nohl.

Two characteristics distinguish Bollnow's existentialism: the importance attributed to the intersubjective nature of the relationships humans establish with others and with their surroundings (engagement) and the recognition of not only angst but also hope and trust as a primordial human mood (Friesen and Koerrenz 2017). This focus on questions related to what it means to be human and the lived experience of educational reality makes the human-science approach an indispensable intellectual source for the reconceptualized field of curriculum today.

A fundamental aspect of Bollnow's (1987) work—and the exegetical key for this reading of *The Plague* from an existential perspective—is the notion of subjective development. The development of the subject is not linear and progressive, as it is in classic educational literature (such as the accounts of *Bildung* in Humboldt). On the contrary, Bollnow emphasizes discontinuity, reversals, and having to start over again as not only unavoidable but necessary aspects of our process of becoming who we are. Hence the need for the work of subjective reconstruction, the *raison d'être* of curricular work.

The ubiquity of discontinuity and reversals in our process of becoming is felt in a uniquely human experience: that of crises. But instead of approaching the phenomenon of crisis from a purely catastrophic or destructive perspective, Bollnow's existential approach restores the description of the productive and regenerating effects that crises can have on us, reminding us of the meaning of the word crisis in its Greek origin (*krinen*): to purify. In Bollnow's words, "The overcoming of the crisis signifies not only the averting of danger—although this stands more prominently in the foreground, along with the feeling of relief—but rather at the same time, viewed more deeply, also a purification, an elimination of long-active conflicts" (Bollnow 1987, p. 2). As such, he qualifies a crisis as something that "belongs to this life essentially and [is] in accordance with its nature and has to fulfill a meaningful and necessary function within it" (p. 3). Crisis, then, has a formative power. However, in order to accomplish this, simply experiencing a crisis is not enough. It requires thoughtful engagement, an analysis of what the situation may be revealing about oneself and one's involvement and investment in the experience. This is why Bollnow's phenomenologically inclined analysis focuses on crises "within the biographically comprehensible life of the individual human being" (p. 3), producing an attentive description of the experience as it appears to consciousness, making it available for critique.

Existential learning

In the present context of disruption of life as usual, governments and civil organizations are desperately looking for a rationale to make decisions and take action. News reports have dedicated significant time and space to comparative analyses of measures adopted by different regions and countries, trying to determine the tradeoffs between degrees of effectiveness in maintaining or lowering rates of infection and death on the one hand and easing social distancing measures to keep businesses operating and the economy going on the other. Education has become a particular area of concern for those in decision-making positions, given complications related to school closures and uncertainties about when it will be safe for schools to reopen. From an academic perspective, there are concerns about gaps in student learning that the interruption is causing; at the same time, there are financial as well as domestic complications, such as parents having to work while the children are at home.

There are no pre-made recipes or proven protocols for action in a situation like this. In locked-down Oran, the situation Camus described was as desperate as ours today. "The

public lacked, in short, standards of comparison” to assess the situation, Camus tells us. “It was only as time passed and the steady rise in the death-rate could not be ignored that public opinion became alive to the truth” (Camus 1948, p. 72). This last word, truth, is interesting here. The people already knew about the unusual events that were taking place: rats dying by the hundreds in the streets and people dying from symptoms similar to those seen in the rats. But other truths needed to be reckoned with, besides the obvious one of a deadly, invisible infection.

At this stage, the main character, Dr. Rieux, sensing they were facing a reality surpassing man’s capacity to cope with it, pleaded with the city authorities: What they needed now was rapid action. However, actions and solutions depend on the understanding one has of the true depth and nature of a problem. It is in this sense that astringent policies using rhetoric like “We are all in the same boat” do not appeal to all individuals. The anxious compulsion to be practical and take rapid action, motivated by unacknowledged fear, is pierced through with the reply Dr. Rieux received from Rambert, a young foreign journalist—a young man trapped in the city on lockdown and in love with someone far away: “You can’t understand”, Rambert said. “You’re using the language of reason, not of the heart; you live in a world of abstractions” (Camus 1948, p. 79). We see here a shift to interiority.

When officials deploy policies for health and education in a state of emergency, like Covid-19, their decisions are said to be for the welfare of the public. The young journalist, however, is pointing out that “the public” is composed of individuals like you and me, while reminding us of Pascal’s famous adage, “The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of... We know the truth not only by the reason, but by the heart”. As such, we experience phenomena differently and at registers that are not purely rational.

From a phenomenological perspective, understanding consciousness and experience is paramount. This is why people like Husserl and Dilthey brought attention to a rather important distinction to be made when discussing experience. In the German language, experience can be denoted by either *Erfahrung* or *Erlebnis*. The former refers to the usual way of referring to experience, as a dealing with the external world. The latter pertains to experience *as lived*, containing the full range of affects, cogitations, and meanings that derive from it, allowing an experience to be experienced (and remembered) in a particular way. *Erlebnis* describes the aesthetic dimension of experience, the necessary conditions that lead to a tear watering your eyes when listening to a particular song, reading a certain passage, contemplating a sculpture or painting. No wonder Husserl referred to this sense of experience as the highest genus, since it is the primary material—the thing itself—we can go back to. In this sense, experience is “only mine”, as Heidegger would make sure to point out, a pure exercise of subjectivity.

In Oran, after hearing a priest’s sermon on the plague, Dr. Rieux engages in an honest conversation with the more philosophically inclined character Jean Tarrou. A visibly affected Dr. Rieux comments, “What’s true of all the evils in the world is true of the plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves” (Camus 1948, p. 115). The doctor’s surprising anthropological observation was perhaps inspired by the previous conversation he had with Rambert and the turn to interiority (Rieux confesses that Rambert’s words stuck with him long after the encounter). This rising above oneself that Rieux talks about has clear educational connotations, strongly reminiscent of the German notion of education as *Bildung*, the cultivation of oneself, the rise from natural determinations to the realm of culture. Used in contradistinction to instruction or didactics, *Bildung* refers to a spiritually enhancing practice, sustained in academic study but aimed at the perfection of character, the extension of inner powers, and the establishment of mutually transformative relations with the world and others.

While today parents, teachers, and decision-makers have expressed their concern about student learning, let us not forget that this present pandemic is bringing to the fore the possibility of an existential kind of learning—a rising above oneself—that is deeply personal, that cannot be programmed or learned from direct teaching, and that has the potential to connect us in relevant ways to the lives of others.

Three practical principles for curriculum decision-making

As mentioned earlier, difficult times evoke a natural response of wanting to do something about them. Sometimes, taking action is an ethical responsibility. Education, and its manifestation in curriculum, are by definition a realm of decision-making. Decisions in the realm of education are, for the most part, ethical in essence, as they define an idea of what should happen and how it should happen.

In the last few months, I have been approached by journalists and people in the general public expressing a deep and honest concern with what will happen with student learning and what schools can do in this situation. The first thing I tell them is that we must understand “learning” in a broad sense. Concern for only the percentage of coverage of the mandated curriculum (the list of contents and skills to be learned at a provincial or national level) is a tragic and reductionistic understanding of learning. In the broader sense, learning consists of a process of self-cultivation mediated by academic study, a self-actualizing practice directed at elevating the sense of humanity in oneself, and the concretization of the vocation to be more as a singular person. This, of course, includes the development of a series of skills for life and care of oneself. As such, it corresponds to the notion of *Bildung* we mentioned earlier and is something that does not take place only in schools.

When it comes to the school system, however, it is important to approach curricular decisions in education from a systemic perspective. This means recognizing that our efforts should be organized and distributed across different levels of decision-making, each with specific attributions and responsibilities. Typically, we recognize three levels of curricular decision-making: a macro level (the level of government and public policy), an intermediate level (the level of school communities), and a micro level (the level of classroom practice).

Decisions on all three levels can benefit from a unifying narrative that provides a sense of higher purpose and direction, beyond the task at hand. An understanding of education and learning in the sense highlighted in *Bildung* can be an inspiring general principle, one public policy can use to frame actions on the other levels. In order to make meaningful decisions, there needs to be a meaningful narrative that brings personal responsibility and agency to the forefront of educational endeavors.

While curriculum studies are devoted to the understanding of educational experience, curriculum scholars take part in practical decision-making, not only in their own teaching but also in various levels of policy and program design, development, implementation, adjustment, and evaluation. Perhaps those coming from a reconceptualized tradition may better understand that decisions in education are always intentional but open-ended, since they are grounded in and sustained by desires, hopes, dreams, and fears rather than only on managerial rationales and their related fantasies of control and predefined outcomes. Since today, just as at the beginning of the pandemic in the novel, we are facing a similar demand for strategies for actions, it is only fitting that we mention, at least briefly, a few basic general principles for decision-making in curricular matters. These principles are flexibility, prioritization, and integration.

The first general principle is flexibility. Closing schools and switching all academic activities to online environments entails a significant transformation in the methods of instruction, interaction, and timing, and with it, a reduction in the range of educational possibilities that in-person settings allow. When it comes to imagining, designing, and developing strategies for these necessary adjustments and transformations, it is important at all three levels of decision-making to remember that prescribed curricula (at national, provincial, or district levels) are intended more as guidelines that define the contours of the broader educational purposes for the nation and as a reference for teacher's decisions. They are not hard and fast lists of content and skills to be "covered" in a checklist fashion or rigid prescriptions of predefined strategies and methods to teach.

Educational communities and their actors should therefore be encouraged to make use of their professional judgment and autonomy to reprogram educational content in terms of its scope, sequence, progression, continuity, and approaches to teaching and evaluating it. Even in highly regulated institutional environments, what teachers actually do with their students is the locus of professional freedom and creativity par excellence. Flexibility, then, should be a guiding principle to deal with changes that may be needed all across the board; this includes the expectations of institutions regarding teachers' tasks and deadlines and the changes teachers may need to make to adjust their lesson plans and evaluations in the understanding that not all students may be in a position to access the internet in a synchronic way. Ultimately, flexibility is also the use of tact, based on knowing that both teachers and students are going through a trying time. Guiding questions for flexible decision-making are those inspired by Bollnow's view of crises: In what ways might this experience provide an opportunity for self-reflection? In what ways might this academic content enable learning of subjective significance?

The second principle is prioritization. Online classes can never be comparable to real, on-site, in-person education. Formal, on-campus classes will most likely continue to be interrupted for an undetermined period of time, causing loss of sessions and delays in programs, as we see in European countries experiencing ongoing or second-wave contagions. Considering this plausible scenario, prescribed curricula should be adjusted to prioritize the most important cores of contents and skills to present to students at their present level and in the little time we have available.

Teachers are already making decisions of this kind, though perhaps without realizing it. Every time they decide to spend more time on a specific subject and breeze through others, or when they select certain pages to be studied from the textbook while leaving others aside, they are in fact responding to what in the field we refer to as the canonical question of curriculum: What knowledge is of most worth? It is humanly impossible to teach or learn absolutely everything there is to be learned, so we need to make selections. And selecting some things means excluding others. We give some things priority over others because they are considered to be qualitatively better, more important, more useful.

Prioritizing does not mean shrinking the possibilities of educability. It means concentrating attention on the essential and getting rid of the redundant. Using this principle, governments can provide school systems with a pre-made selection of the most important and core elements of the curriculum, considering its entire trajectory along the different levels (and making sure that the selected contents prepare students to access those in the next level). Educational communities can then decide how they are going to prioritize elements of that selection, in accord with their institutional identity and the traits they consider important. Teachers, in turn, can guide their prioritization by criteria such as relevance, pertinence, integration, and feasibility. This means prioritizing learning objectives that are

more essential for understanding the discipline; those that are the most meaningful ones for life; those that are more generative in terms of their possible connection with other disciplines; and those that are actually possible to implement, develop, and evaluate in a context of distance education.

Along with the two principles of flexibility and prioritization, a third element to pay attention to is integration. After deciding what contents are going to be given priority for the period of emergency, we need to ensure that each is treated with integrality in relation to itself (the dignity of content on its own) and in relation to a network of other related content. This is the usual sense of the principle of integration.

However, and most importantly, besides issues of selecting generative topics and the possible interdisciplinary approach to them (learning math through art, for example), this principle brings up the issue of integrity. “What does it mean to treat one’s topic of study with integrity? How might school classroom and university teachers alike teach in a way that respects the character and integrity of the lives and experiences of children and the work undertaken with them?” (Jardine et al. 2004, p. 324). Such questions are even more ethically important for a curriculum of emergency.

Taken together, these three principles can serve as practical orientations for the creation of curricular environments that support a kind of learning related to our capacity to make sense of ourselves and the world we are experiencing, learning that enables subjective reconstruction through the development of the power of judgment, critique, and thoughtful engagement with academic content.

“The most pressing task for our time”, states Bollnow (1987, p. 26), is “the education of human beings for the power of judgment which must naturally be applied first of all to ourselves as self-education”. He continues: “This power of judgment is not a purely intellectual faculty: rather, it depends closely on the moral substance of the human being”. Bollnow was pointing to a curriculum that does not wish crises away but embraces and uses them productively for the perfection and elevation of human substance.

A curriculum on humanity and human relations

While Covid-19 is biologically determined, what we make of this situation opens the educational possibility for self-understanding and reconstruction. This, I claim, is the invitation behind the seemingly enigmatic idea with which Camus closes the novel, that plagues come “for the education of men”. Here is the entire closing paragraph in the upcoming translation by Laura Marris:

Indeed, as he heard the cries of delight rising from the city, Rieux remembered that this delight was always threatened. For he knew that this joyous crowd did not, and what you can read in books—that the germ of the plague never dies or disappears, that it can lie dormant for decades in furniture and linens, that it waits patiently in rooms, in basements, in trunks, among handkerchiefs and paperwork, and that perhaps the day would come when, for the sorrow and education of men, the plague would revive its rats and dispatch them to die in a happy city.

By framing the phenomenon of our vital education within a larger process that entails joys but also sorrows and, certainly, death, this passage shows us, among other things, that the curriculum of the plague may be teaching us to recalibrate our sense of what is truly important and to separate and do away with the clutter of what is not. In the face of a real global crisis, the existential and deeply personalizing kind of learning that the

novel invites us to surpasses the now trending ideological preoccupations with inequalities and identity politics. The ultimate equalizer is death. The plague of Covid-19 has revealed once again our shared human condition. It has come down as a cleansing fire to clear away the superfluous and the unnecessary and reminded us to return to the truly timeless and important questions, those of humanity, freedom, responsibility, and relatedly, education.

Instead of focusing on group identities, the novel bears witness to the autobiographical and to personal responsibility as keys to the assertion of the subject. As Marris (2020) notes in her article, “Camus’s Inoculation Against Hate”, the novel also focuses more on subjective reconstruction than on activism of resistance. Pinar makes a different but related point (Murillo and Pinar 2019) when laying out the tenets of a reconceptualized curriculum field—that only the individual self can aspire to change, and only from there can one aspire to think about the transformation of society.

Becoming attuned to this now urgent task of subjective reconstruction highlights the importance of returning to the study of texts from the past. As Camus tells us in the last paragraph of the novel, the townsfolk ignored what they could have learned about plagues in books. As Pinar, too, reminds us, our future is not in front but in our past.

Understanding our plague as an existential lived curriculum in this historically attuned way invites us not to place hope in the future of technological developments but to draw wisdom from those who have lived before and longer than us and to gather from them existential insights for the future. In our search for *Verstehen*, educational experience, the study of the humanities (literature, philosophy, history, and theology) becomes fundamental.

It is from such perspectives, not from the political and the social sciences, that it becomes possible to develop an understanding fueled and sustained by love, something that, as Marris titled her column, might inoculate us against hate.

Rambert, confronting Dr. Rieux, tells him, “I’ve seen enough people who die for an idea...What interests me is living and dying for what one loves” (Camus 1948, p. 149). This distinction the young journalist makes mediates the answer to the ongoing canonical question of curriculum: “What knowledge is of most worth?”

The question and its answer are always relational, as they are situated within a particular socio-cultural network of associations between self and other. For the same reason, they are always a product of a certain intentionality. Education, after all, is also mediated by the question (posed by Schleiermacher): What does the older generation actually want with the younger? The pandemic is reminding us of these fundamental questions of value and intentionality for education. Tarrou, in a long and serious conversation with Dr. Rieux, puts it in the following way: “What’s natural is the microbe. All the rest—health, integrity, purity (if you like)—is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter” (Camus 1948, p. 229). These things are up to us to cultivate.

Conceiving of curriculum in these terms in the face of a global pandemic brings with it certain demands. One of them is to “continue to do our work” (Camus 1948, p. 38) and to do it with honesty, hope, and courage. One cannot be a complete fatalist in all honesty, for no one can live without at least a tiny glimmer of hope. We must then roll up our sleeves and roll up the stone of our duty, just as Camus imagines Sisyphus rolling his stone up the mountain: with a happy heart.

I close this piece with one final invitation that Camus offers us in *The Plague*: “If there is one thing one can always yearn for and sometimes attain, it is human love” (Camus 1948, p. 271).

May we be found living, educating, and being educated during this time of plague in a relation of love for self and other.

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