POINT AND COUNTERPOINT

Curriculum and the rise of theory: learning to be a stranger in the world

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Changing debates

Teachers and academics sometimes feel like they are already familiar with the meaning of curriculum, and do not need to know more, or to engage in endless theoretical debate over the need for curriculum inquiry. Pinar (2019) refers to the "conceptual exhaustion" associated with the struggle to identify the nature of curriculum inquiry beyond the merry-go-round of reproduction theories. Freire's (1972) spin on teaching as banking education did seem to reflect what was going on at the time, though many began to wonder if it was just Freire who was feeling liberated. Meanwhile, Brennan (2018) recognises that there must be a need to know, and in recent years, there have been fewer and fewer people needing to know about curriculum, and indeed ignoring what is already known in the field. As a concept, curriculum initiates an endless set of metaphors. There is no end, just more questions, and so it can be frustrating, and perhaps the kind of theoretical work that most people fear because it lacks structure and direction in a field that is governed by routine and predictability. It is almost as if we lose our direction and reach out to curriculum theory to show us why we are in the game. But in our search for purpose, we are probably looking in the wrong place. Where do we look? Curriculum inquiry can show us.

The aim of this paper is to present a brief genealogy of the rise of curriculum theory, to identify how our conceptualisation of curriculum has changed over the centuries, and to map a picture of where we have arrived. Perhaps, nothing better identifies the nature of curriculum inquiry than the incessant drive to understand why we do what we do, and

what we do does to the student. But rather than continue with questions of 'why', I explore towards the end of the paper what the teacher can to do to take the brakes off student learning for long enough so that the student can learn what they themselves need.

Curriculum is conceptualised in this paper in three ways, *curriculum as enacted*, *curriculum as theory*, and *curriculum as history*. I should add that these three concepts are not developmental in a temporal sense, even though they are presented below in sequence.

Curriculum as enacted need

While curriculum inquiry has largely disappeared from our national thoughts in education, there is little doubt that it constitutes the foundational concept in the field (Pinar, 2019), a concept upon which all else in education depends. Curriculum was there long before the beginning of formal learning, and long before the rise of curriculum theory in education. I will suggest below that curriculum theory arose through the separation of Country and learning. Country always has been curriculum for most people throughout the world, including those not involved in formal education.

Prior to formal learning, learning was enacted through need, where people learnt from Country, through observation and imitation in real-life practice. As an enactment of Country, 'students' modelled rather than represented the culture through language. Learning and living the culture were done on the job, like practicum teaching in schools or nursing in the hospital. Learning was the everyday, as it is today in informal contexts. Life skills were observed and enacted rather than explained or interpreted. Learning was not a practice in preparation for life; it was an unconscious enactment of need where meaning was intrinsic to one's context. Country was the teacher (and still is for a few). The

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world is always present in an enacted curriculum. Continuity in one's life reigned over discontinuity.

However, learning from Country is just not possible in the era of mass schooling. Some universities though are trying to enforce it and thus creating the tension between student agency and enforced engagement (Hazou, 2015). Harold Rosen (1986), and before him, Illich, AS Neil and others, highlighted the need for the story of learning 'to be presented in a propitious context and to be retold in an equally propitious one' (p. 229). While the state and its teachers do tell students what is good for them, there must be an element of students being able to decide what they themselves need (to draw again on Brennan, 2018).

From curriculum as enactment to curriculum as theory (of how to be)

With the advent of formal schooling, learning moved inside buildings and books. Discontinuity became the norm. Students began to learn *about, rather than from life*. They began to learn from the teacher and from books. Learning became a practice for later life, with critical theorists arguing that self-consciousness could make a difference. The world, for students, became about things, and once students began to learn about things, learning became mediated by words. The rise of theory was accompanied by the appearance of difference.

Students now sit in classrooms talking about the world of objects outside (while others dream of modules that can package this world of experience for students). This flagged the beginning of the contemporary complication in education, or what Zembylas (2019) terms, the leading dilemma of education. While curriculum constitutes the foundational concept, representation is surely the cross to bear for all those involved in teaching and learning. Along with representation (and a theory of how), came the need to accommodate difference, which came into existence with the imposed separation of teaching and knowledge, and the learner and learning. But the attempts by many learners to know what could not be seen outside the school were accompanied by a whole range of anxieties. With the rise of theory, and the abstract representation of the world in schools, students and teachers also became strangers to themselves.

The work of representing the world outside the school — for students sitting in classrooms — flagged the beginning of curriculum as theory (a theory of how to be in the world). Even 4–5 year olds in today's classrooms learn through theory in the school. And since education moved into buildings, learning and teaching have been connected through an assumed conduit (between mind and the outside world). The teacher talks and the student receives the 'deposit'. I hasten to add that there is nothing inherently wrong with *banking education*; that is, how it must be in any society.

Transmission-based education still constitutes the mainstay of teacher work insofar as children are required to learn their culture.

Of course, some students are better positioned to learn the target culture than others. Some already perform the target culture and so learning a theory of how to live in the world makes a lot of sense to these students (there is less conscious learning involved) while for others not from the target culture, the theory (of how to live in the culture) is new and hence a more challenging learning task, with more anxieties about what cannot be seen. It is as if the learner is taken out of the world and put in a place where they need to learn about this world from the outside.

Learning has thus moved from imitating the culture of one's family to imitating the accepted theory of 'the' culture, or at least representing the knowledge of the culture, for example, through books and machines. Learning *how to go there* is seen to be better and more powerful than learning the knowledge itself. There is a double difference in education today. The learner is separated from the object of their inquiry, but so too has the learner become a stranger to themselves in the schooling environment. This entrenched double difference now reigns over reconciliation (Derrida, 2004). Curriculum inquiry shows us how the rise of theory and the separation of the learner (both from the object of inquiry and from themselves) undermine the very efforts of teachers and the state to teach reconciliation in Australia. We cannot teach (perform) continuity and discontinuity in the same breath. Students are just not going to believe their teachers, and they don't (Manning & Harrison, 2018).

We can see how some parents insist on their own imposed domain separation. Schooling is for western things, while the home is for performing one's own language and culture. The two are explicitly divided and so there is less ambiguity about the identity to be enacted in either context. They simply run with the division of the self between the home and school. Some families have clearly decided that school cannot accommodate two languages and two cultures side-by-side — on equal terms, and there is certainly no evidence to the contrary in Australia. Their experiences perhaps inform us about our so-far futile attempts to include other knowledges in the curriculum.

We can already see how difficult it is to grasp the concept of curriculum because it has moved from curriculum as an *ongoing enactment of need on Country*, to curriculum as 'a theory of how' (Anglo Australians talk about knowledge production). They are preparing for life in the future, and this takes a special kind of person who can wait patiently for the future (and its rewards) to arrive. Learning in Australia is driven by a temporal imperative, where a student must have faith in their future success, although for many not from the target culture, such future rewards never arrive. Here, students must learn to control their impulses, to 'inhibit, forbid,

and suppress, and this is abundantly seen in all periods of history' (Felman, 1987, p. 71). And as they are positioned in relation to the national narrative, they increasingly become strangers in their own family heritage.

From the moment that children enter formal learning, they are learning to represent things that cannot be seen. Some students have already 'seen' these objects, others not. Some see more, others see less. Learning is about being able to see and not see things in the world outside the school, and so distance (appearance and disappearance) mediates success in education. Students learn the teacher's method. They learn how to go there. They learn through language how to represent the world outside, and to create difference, where there was previously none. Methods of distance and difference help the student *to moderate* their own learning. This is the birth of the agentic and disciplined learner, the learner who is now able to moderate their own learning anxieties. The student has become the agentic learner, the critical learner, the independent learner, the inquiring learner, the reflexive learner, the visual learner, the verbal learner, the musical learner, the experiential learner, the transformative learner, and even the natural learner — there is a desperate need to position the student as a 'deep critical thinker', as someone able to understand.

The disciplined and self-moderating student is admired for their insights and for taking charge of their life — for their hard-fought agency. Ryan & Barton (2020) do note though that most teachers act in ways that 'accept "the way things are" rather than mobilising as corporate agents or social actors to enact change.' (p. 223). Perhaps, this is why critical theorists have just not been able to sell critical reflexivity (as a method) to students and teachers. Indeed, students are often highly suspicious of academics who want them to be critical thinkers and to see what they can see, with Britzman (2015) observing that 'feeling force-fed is one of the central anxieties reported by students in the university' (p. 9).

The impossibility of being taught to be critically reflexive has been widely reported (see Ellsworth, 1992; Paraskeva, 2019; Mbembe, 2016; Anwaruddin, 2016), with many calling into question an application of the teacher's methods to build the student's own knowledge. This is the power of method that prevails in the curriculum at all levels. The teacher and students are trained through the methodology to moderate their own 'mental practice' (Archer, 2012, p. 11). They not only become self-moderating and mediated; the method also shapes their understanding of self and who they think they are. If curriculum as enactment is learning to be in the world, curriculum as theory is about learning to be a stranger in the world.

But in learning to talk about those cultures outside school (and the successful student must learn these discourses), the student's gain (speech) becomes someone else's loss.

Learned stereotypes and generalisations are at the cost of those referred to. Other cultures are made strange, as students learn to successfully talk about the outside world. But can students learn to be in the world with others without misrepresenting them?

Learning and critical theory become close allies, knowing why we do what we do. Understanding the world has become a highly valued middle-class pursuit, engaged in vigorously defending what we know, and assimilating the world before them (Fink, 2014). The teacher wants the student to become highly self-conscious and to see what they can see, and indeed, systemic rewards are available to those who are willing to displace their own needs with those of the teacher.

Ellsworth (1992) first highlighted how both teachers and students must become more critical of the very methodology that makes them strangers to themselves. She argued that critical theorists need to reflect on their own intellectual privilege in a curriculum structure scaffolded through western, middle-class methods of being critically self-conscious (as if it is an inherently useful social practice). Critical reflexivity is perhaps only 'normal' (Archer, 2012) for those in a position to create normality.

While critical literacy aims to prepare teachers and students 'as text-critics' (Anwaruddin, 2016, p. 4), it also fails to apply its own critical literacy practices to its own methodology, including those outlined as befitting good teaching practice, including (1) why is the teacher wanting me to be a critical thinker? (2) What will this methodology do to (and for) me? (i.e. whose interests are at play?). And we can add a third point here: as a student, what do I need from my education (what might be the source of my satisfaction)? Unless critical theorists can explain to students the implications of learning their methods of learning, and what these methods bring to bear on (what they do to) the student's identity (and in whose interests), they will continue to have trouble persuading students to accept their theory of a better world. Students may well be dismissed as resistant to change, but Kristeva (2009) highlights how students may be more interested in paradise than they are in what teacher wants for them.

Perhaps, it was once true that learning is 'something you can do on your own' (Biesta, 2016, p. 126), but it is certainly not true today, in an era when students are not only scaffolded in what and how to think and learn, but also in how to be. The judging student has become the thoroughly self-measured and moderated human being through an array of regimes and technologies, where they are no longer able to 'learn on their own' or to decide what they themselves need. But with the position of a critical thinker, comes an intellectual superiority, and with it, the temptation to understand and judge the world ahead. Self-consciousness in education has become privileged, even arrogant. Bruce Fink (2014)

argues that understanding has become the problem. With understanding comes assimilation, exclusion and strangeness, with Butler (2015) underscoring the dilemma, can we ever hear other people's stories without assimilating them to our own (or do we merely make the strange familiar)?

Recapping

I now want to recap what has been said so far. An enacted curriculum gives us what we need without even having to think about it (why would we want more!). The rise of theory has given us the capacity to think about the world and to make it visible for students from a distance. Teachers construct and scaffold models of reality in the classroom, while students use the teacher's approach to reproduce these same models. The disciplined and self-moderating student is admired for their insights and for taking charge of their life, yet it is the life of another, a middle-class facsimile of self that is learnt and adopted. Students are now no longer able to 'learn on their own' (Biesta, 2016), or to see where to go, or to decide what is good for them. They have become strangers to themselves in a learning context that consistently positions them in relation to middle-class, self-consciousness.

But as Brennan reminds us, there has got to be something in it for the student. Students must have the freedom to explore knowledge that is not yet meaningful, significant or functional, and as teachers, we need to find it in ourselves to let the learner back in the world again (as if they were ever outside!). The student must be allowed to engage with what Rosen (1988) terms, the 'autobiographical impulse', where they are provided with the space to make their own lives more meaningful and to be able to see themselves in the context of their own heritage and history. I now turn to the third conceptualisation of curriculum as history.

Curriculum as history

When I first started teaching, a colleague said to me in passing as we were planning the learning activities for the next day, 'I would never try to teach the students'. As a student–teacher trained in liberation practice (and the need for change to justify one's own work), I was astounded by a remark that subsequently took me 30 years to decipher. What can the teacher do if we cannot teach the students?

On this question, Hattam (2020) endeavours to reclaim the benefits of critical pedagogy through the 'terrain of affect' (p. 89). He draws on Roger Simon's 'critical pedagogy of remembrance' (p. 86) to reposition critical pedagogy as being governed by affect as well as knowledge, outlining how stories from the past such as those from the Holocaust

can move students to act through affect. He underlines the argument that being touched by the stories of others is to be moved by affect or emotions, in order to take some form of action. In looking for an approach to learning (and change) that does not rely on an epistemological argument to change student consciousness, Hattam (2020) explores how affect can be felt beyond transference of knowledge and cognition, and even beyond what Sarah Ahmed (2004) describes as the politics of emotion. However, an ongoing conundrum remains for Hattam (2020) and many others (e.g. Butler, 2015; Green 2018; Zembylas, 2019; Biesta, 2016; Ahmed, 2004): how can students learn beyond their own beliefs and feelings (and beyond transference and the politics of emotion) to understand the lives and stories of others? The critical theorist would ask: how can learners be other than themselves so they can reflect upon themselves?

Garrett (2017) explains that we 'do not abandon beliefs called into question by factual information' (p. 69), rather we tend to defend our ignorance and privilege. Fink (2007) adds that we devote much of our time to defending our own sense of wholeness and unity in the face of imposed vulnerability. Farley (2009) further observes that 'what matters to us most — our ways of doing things — are at constant risk of coming undone and becoming our undoing' (p. 546). Teachers and academics are like their students in their need to protect their sense of wholeness. Psychoanalysts such as Fink (2014), Kristeva (2004, 2009), Britzman (2015) and Butler (2015) underscore the underlying issue here of teaching and transference; simply, the student (and teacher) cannot use their own knowledge to understand others. Our beliefs and emotions inevitably intervene to assimilate their stories to our own understanding, and our own sense of unity and emotional wellbeing.

If we cannot change the student's mind — or as my colleague explained — if we cannot teach the students because the risk for them of conflict is far too great, how then can we draw on affect? Hattam (2020) highlights the critical point that we all have a responsibility to history, and I suggest here that such a responsibility is not to the national narrative or indeed to the stories of others, nor to that of the teacher. The responsibility in curriculum inquiry consists of the teacher ensuring that they take the brakes off the student's own learning for long enough that they might be able to recognise something of themselves in their own heritage, thus providing the space (without the teacher's knowledge) to reconcile their life with that of others. We must be looking for ways in which we can reconcile with others beyond the realms of cognitive science and beyond arguments over whose knowledge is right or most reasonable.

There is evidence from a small number of studies (Harrison et al., 2020; Peck, 2018; Simon, 2011) to demonstrate

how reconciliation with both a strange self and others arrives not from the national narrative, nor from cognition, but through affective interactions with one's own family heritage and history, including peers and the bullies who came with them, with the places where we grew-up, our loves, our fears, our anxieties and anger, as well as with the violence and social breakdown in our family. Students need to be able to learn from their history, and teachers need to be able to recognise the impulse to do so. Of critical importance is the presentation of these histories in a propitious context if students are to ever get what they need and want from education — even a few small opportunities to make their own strange selves more familiar in the context of what the critical pedagogue believes is good for the student.

This inquiry has targeted a tiny window of opportunity for learning new things in a context where students and teachers work hard to defend themselves against knowledge that they do not want to know. We do prefer to stick with the old ways, and resistance to discovery is strong; I have suggested a way around this resistance to new knowledge through avenues of affect. Learning about family can be brutal. I have argued that the possibilities for creating affect must initially take place in relation to the student's family heritage. Of critical importance to the success of learning through affect (rather than cognition) is both the surrender of conscious control to the point where affect can creep through the student's filters and defences to illuminate the knowledge they have not wanted to know, along with the parallels that their life has with others. Curriculum inquiry is about explicating this shifting window of opportunity to learn new knowledge beyond the early work of Freire, Illich and Apple.

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