

# *On the Importance of the Eccentric Curriculum*

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When education forsakes the middle for the ends or the beginnings it is deadly.

– Madeleine Grumet (1995, p. 17)

In her response to the question of what is basic to education, Madeleine Grumet (1995) argues that learning that matters to people is rooted in history, context, and practice. The basics of education emerge neither from the learner nor the curriculum, but, as Jerome Bruner (1990) has explained, from the subjunctive spaces of lived experience.

But what might this ‘middle’ be that Grumet suggests is the place of our existence? In schools, one might imagine that the ‘middle’ could be construed as the ‘core curriculum’—currently defined in terms of those knowledge domains associated with literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies. The core curriculum is considered to be foundational (and central) to the development of the educated citizen. Where knowledge of the core curriculum is not seen as immediately applicable to daily life, it is understood either in terms of preparation for some future existence or, more indirectly, as supportive of ‘thinking’ abilities that will eventually prove useful. Even when ‘learning processes’ are given primacy, knowledge is still conceptualized as an attainable object that floats between learners and context. Further, ‘core’ suggests that the important knowledge is not only static but that

it is generalized and generalizable ... to all populations, to all contexts.

Notions of 'basics' and learning goals can be traced back to the early days of the modern, Western school, but it was the mid-20th-century psychological theory of behaviorism that provided the theoretical impetus for the current emphases on fundamentals and pre-specified instructional objectives. Even though it might be imagined that student-centered and/or constructivist views of learning enable educators to critique and circumvent now-scorned behaviorist beliefs/practices, it is important to note that both behaviorist and constructivist theories of learning are founded on a shared assumption: the individual subject is the locus of all learning. As such, within both frames, the characters of schools and other institutions have tended to be examined in terms of aggregates of the individuals who compose them. (Conversely, there has also been a tendency to understand individuals as the products of the institutions they comprise.) The very question, "What are the basics, and are we teaching them?"—that might be argued to inhabit most educational debates, as well as curriculum document and policy development—only makes sense in light of such radical binaries as mind-versus-body and individual-versus-collective. Occupying a privileged place in between (or we could say in the center) of these binaries is the core curriculum, the canon, 'the basics.'

However, if an examination of the technological developments in Western society over the last hundred years shows that they did not emerge from the foundations of knowledge or even necessarily from persons considered to be authorities. Many critical events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were triggered by the eccentricities of individuals who strayed from beaten paths, pursuing personal obsessions that only a few could imagine would prove so influential. In other words, the collective intelligence of any society is rooted in the eccentricities of its (eccentric) citizens. In stark contrast, it seems that the modern school is organized around the unquestioned assumption that the collective good is best served by attending to a core curriculum that draws on and perpetuates notions of basics and centralized control.

What is basic to education, then, is not so much the 'core' or 'central' curriculum, but, instead, what we might call the 'eccentric curriculum'—a formulation that might at first seem oxymoronic. How might the most crucial aspect formal schooling be ex-centered? This question is underscored by contrasting some of the synonyms of central/core and eccentric: The former include *common, normal, sensible, familiar, and regular*. The latter include *idiosyncratic, abnormal, foolish, queer, and irregular*. While there are always attempts to regulate and authorize certain knowledge to be central (universal) to human existence, that, in fact, all knowledge is both simultaneously personal and collective, eccentric and, as Grumet argues, "in the middle."



The essays in this issue of JCACS, in different ways, make arguments for the importance of de-centered knowledge and, together, make the case for an eccentric curriculum. Our lead article by Luc Prud'homme, André Dolbec, Monique Brodeur, Annie Presseau, and Stéphane Martineau examines the issue of student diversity and pedagogical differentiation. The authors justify the necessity to establish an *îlot de rationalité* to create a coherent representation of the diverse elements to consider when the concept of pedagogical differentiation is at stake. Based on a dynamical conceptualization of diversity, they offer an explication of the concept of pedagogical differentiation that they link to an inclusive approach, which enables opportunities to notice and respect the presence of the various elements and actors of educational experiences.

What could be more eccentric than beside? 'Beside' is an orientation that values non-socialized selves as a wellspring of creative potentialities. Mary Aswell Doll suggests that getting "beside ourselves" is a natural way to experience our bodies (our embodiment) outside the boundaries of conformity. While most institutions have effectively ruled out 'beside' behaviors, Aswell Doll argues that reclaiming these perspectives may indeed restore the 'naturalness' of humanity; that is, evoke those "human imaginary powers expressed through the body." Drawing on literary examples like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," and the novels of Toni Morrison, Doll concludes that the image of womanhood in contemporary media is but merely 'thinly' crafted around socially constructed ideals that suppress this conception of natural embodiment as the origin of creativity and transformation.

Arguing for the importance of ghost stories, Robert Nellis offers the phrase "transformational spectral narratives" to describe those tales told about "persistent but elusive characteristics of the world with a view to facilitating progressive change." The power of ghost stories is in their ability to evoke response without being visible in the conventional sense. To explore this theoretical intertwining of revelation and concealment Nellis asks: "What is it that lurks in the dark corners, in the interstices of a text?" Drawing primarily on the work of Derrida, Nellis is well aware of the relativistic stigma attached to his theories. What he shares with Derrida, primarily, is a desire to undermine the binaries inherent in Western metaphysics. As Nellis warns: "Ghosts may haunt, but I believe they harm mostly when not recognized." In his view, writing/telling ghost stories is one way to address that which is oft-unnoticed in order to promote transformative change.

In her essay, Alison Pryer critically reviews educational experiences through the lens of silencing (normative) pedagogies. In the attempt to break

her own silence, she recounts a personal example of “curricular silencing,” as evidence of an enduring normative curricular structure that tends to mute difference, particularly the voices of abused children. Pryer envisions the classroom, and the curriculum, as a space to resist normative discourses and promote social justice. However, most school programs are designed to respond to self-disclosure, even though fear and coercion likely prevent most children from reporting their abusers. Currently, teacher education programs do little to prepare neophyte teachers for the devastating and pervasive nature of childhood abuse. Trained to be “bystanders” and trusting that the language and practice of curriculum are “fair, neutral and transparent,” beginning teachers are likely to perpetuate existing normative structures. Secrets and silences, the defining feature of childhood sexual abuse, are “maintained and reinforced by routine experiences with the everyday school curriculum.” Pryer concludes by outlining a “pedagogy of peace” that refuses to reproduce the discourses of silence.

Drawing on her educational experiences in dance, Gail Matthews announces the *arabesque* design as a metaphor for subjectivity. In the form of a narrative self-inquiry she considers reflective practices in terms of two main questions: What is curriculum? What is teacher development? Matthews sees her “personal stories of lived experiences” as rich sites for examining the ways in which teacher development and curriculum inform one another in arts-based inquiry. Matthews weaves her storied reflections around Schwab’s four commonplaces of curriculum: teacher, learner, subject matter, and milieu. The underlying narrative assumption is that stories create possibilities for further questions; they are part of an ongoing conversation among learners, teachers, and researchers.

The notion of “transplanting sensibilities” organizes James Nahachewsky and David Slomp’s critique of the Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts (CCFELA) as envisioned by the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCP) together. Reflecting on the British history of Cannington Manor, Saskatchewan, Nahachewsky and Slomp suggest that its short life was due to the rigid expectations of its settlers who were unwilling to relinquish certain “Victorian institutions” without regard for the particularities of the land and the economics of the country. In terms of curriculum design, such misplaced intentions often are those that do not reflect the demands of a rapidly changing cultural environment. They argue that a predominantly modernist educational mindset limits the creative dynamics inherent in multi-literacy practices. This critique considers the desired relationship between individuals, culture and curriculum by drawing attention to the (spoken and unspoken) language and philosophy of the Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts (CCFELA).

Drawing on contemporary theory in cartography, Stephanie Springgay develops an understanding of mapping as a dynamic process of un/folding that links space with qualities of corporeality and subjectivity. In this view, space is not an “empty vessel,” but rather created in the process of mapping and therefore is always “situated, contingent, differentiated.” From an a/r/tographical research framework, Springgay critically reflects on student videos produced during a six-month curriculum project developed to investigate how secondary high school students “understand, explore, and negotiate the lived meanings of their bodies through touch.” Specifically, she explores her understanding of students’ attempts to use video to address subjectivity, representation, and meaning-making relative to “bodied space.” Exploring notions such as un/folding, un/writing, and erasure, Springgay evokes the image of the palimpsest, where as she puts it, “in the instance of erasure something else is created.” Her conclusions reassert a conception of space as “embodied, relational, and intertwined” and argue the need to approach curriculum studies “through touch”; that is, offering ways of knowing and understanding that are more than merely cognitive, but relational and intercorporeal.

In the “Curriculum Pedagogies” section, Teresa Dobson describes and analyzes her experiences of developing and delivering the curriculum for “Text technologies: The changing nature of reading and writing,” a course designed to broaden perceptions around literacy and technology within the context of a Master of Educational Technology program at the University of British Columbia. In addition to establishing a critical and historical understanding of ‘technology,’ she surveys recent tools for writing in light of their historical predecessors, arguing that hypermedia presents some interesting challenges in terms of the ways in which it “both promotes and confounds” certain assumptions about writing. Philosophically, the context and content of the course prompts students to consider themselves both “agents and subjects of change,” recognizing that as new technologies continue to modify human experiences, human ways of knowing are also shaping the form of the technology. Hypertext (or hypermedia) is considered in terms of its implications for the future of literature, literacy, and teaching methodologies.

In the “Reviews” section, Marla Morris offers a critical reading of Deborah Britzman’s (2003) *After-education: Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and psychoanalytic histories of learning*. In Britzman’s own words, “After-education refers us back to an original flaw made from education: something within its very nature has led it to fail” (p. 4). Britzman seems to be suggesting that there is something harmful about education; something inherent in education that necessitates an afterward. According to Morris, “the afterward to which Britzman refers is the poison of being mis-educated.” In her view, one must endeavor to repair the damage caused by the toxins of school-

ing. As Morris concludes: “An after-education burns with both *eros* and *thanatos*, always already moving deeper within in order to do the work of reparation and social justice”. We might also say that an after-education is profoundly eccentric, suggesting that the learning that matters most to learners occurs outside the edges, the afterthoughts, of education.

### **References**

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- Grumet, Madeleine. (1995). The curriculum: What are the basics and are we teaching them? In Joe Kincheloe & Shirley Steinberg (Eds.), *Thirteen questions: reframing education's conversation*. New York: Peter Lang.