

Retrospective on “What is Curriculum?”

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It can be a tad sobering to re-read for the first time in over twenty years something written then in a hurry. I had been assigned to teach my first curriculum course at Simon Fraser University and thought it might be a good idea to find out what “curriculum” was. Many of the people I talked to in the field seemed to have rather divergent views, and some cheerfully admitted they had no idea. Some suggested I look at the kinds of books used by curriculum professors in their courses and infer what the field covered from that. And, of course, I studied the big Curriculum textbooks. None of this made things much clearer, oddly enough. I also wanted to start my class off with something that would clarify what curriculum was supposed to be about for the students. Not being able to find anything that seemed to me adequate at the time, I wrote “What is Curriculum?” for my students, and later sent it off to the editor of *Curriculum Inquiry*, who, I tend to think looking at it now, was unduly kind in printing it.

A number of issues come to mind on re-reading. First, a rather uncomfortable awareness of showing off with the Latin quotes. I had been then closer to my schooldays, when Father Paul had tried to persuade us that Latin was our mother tongue, and this English vulgate we slopped around in was no language in which to learn precision and clarity of thought. He wasn’t very successful, but as my Latin dribbles away with years of inaction, I’m beginning to wonder whether maybe he had a point: a point made well by A.E. Housman (1989) in his inaugural lecture as professor of Latin

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at London University in 1892—one of the more interesting essays about education written in the previous century or so. But also, as I look at those quotes, and the argument I make about the meaning of the word moving from the container to the contained, I am doubtful both about the movement and whether those quotes actually support the claim.

In general, I was looking at “curriculum” in a kind of Wittgensteinian way, seeking its meaning in its uses (1963). One part of my conclusion was that almost anything to do with education seemed to be encompassed in the notion of what it meant to “do” curriculum. This part won me a mention in the second edition of the massive *Curriculum Development* text, by Daniel and Laurel Tanner (1980, p. 32). This moment of glory, however, was a tad tarnished by my definition of curriculum being dismissed as being indistinguishable from the term “pedagogy.” I often wondered how writers of these enormous books managed to read all the items that are cited in their vast bibliographies. This experience gave me a clue.

The second part of my conclusion was that “curriculum” seemed to be the only area of genuine educational study not infected by people supposedly studying education through psychology or philosophy or sociology or whatever. That is, curriculum has the virtue, as it seemed to me then, of not trying to ape the methodology of some other academic inquiry and then apply it to education. This dividing up the field of education into many sub-fields, none of which apparently has much that is useful to say to any other, seems to me still to be the curse of the study of education. How much longer can we stagger on, producing mountains of “knowledge” that are supposed to improve education, while patently doing nothing of the sort—and in the process earning the contempt of the wider academic world. It seems to me impossible to show that the practice of education has been at all improved by a century of expert psychological and philosophical and sociological and whatever else study of its phenomena. Carrying on this way, in the teeth of the evidence, can be managed only by refusing to look at the world around us.

The piece is dated by its references to the then popular movement called “Open Education.” I do think the point about educational scholars, faced with the question of what we should teach, preferring to deal with procedural questions remains generally true. E.D. Hirsch (1987) has, to the distress of progressivists generally, recommended a specific curriculum. Unfortunately, it is just a reassertion of the old form of the liberal or traditional curriculum. One can only hope that curriculum study in the 21st century will escape from the dreary and fruitless arguments between progressivist and traditionalist forces that have dogged education through the previous century. One can hardly see any debate about education still without recognizing the lineaments of this division barely below the surface.

The question of how to educate people seems to have been given no new answer since Rousseau's day. We have always had the oldest notion around—that you shape children to the mould evident in the adult population, and its range of beliefs, skills, commitments, etc. Intruding into that oldest and long-lasting assumption came the astonishingly bold idea of that myth-maker, mystic, and jokester, Plato, who said that the well-socialized person drifts through life like an animal, never reflecting beyond the norms of the group she or he was born into. Instead, he suggested, we should shape the child's mind through years of careful discipline and learning, to inquire after the truth, regardless of conventions and what is taken for granted by the society at large. This has never been an idea that has attracted a lot of people. As A.E. Housman (1989) noted, the love of truth is the faintest of all human passions. Then, the last educational idea, Rousseau suggested that our minds are not just made up of the knowledge they learn, as Plato represented them, but rather they, like our bodies, go through their own regular stages of development. Education was the process of facilitating that spontaneous developmental process to its fullest realization.

It is dreary to be in a business whose practitioners work within the confines of these three ideas, seemingly assuming that the answer to education is somehow to get a right balance among them. It is clear that each of these old ideas is inadequate by itself, and that put together, they just lead to the kinds of sterile struggles of one over the other that we have seen now, with regard to the public schools of the Western nation-states, for a century and a half or more.

Having to teach a class on curriculum started me on a critique of education that has led, on the one hand, to a rather depressing conclusion, expressed in the title of my recent book *Getting it Wrong From the Beginning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). (On the other hand, it led to an articulation of an alternative view, in *The Educated Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). "What is curriculum?" led to a conclusion that no one seemed to have much of a clue. The cluelessness seemed to be tied to the cluelessness about education in general. Why is it a field subject to all kinds of fads and pendulum swings? Why do people have the bizarre belief that some research about, say, learning or development might expose something about the phenomenon that has evaded attention for thousands of years and allow us to educate better—as though education is a bit like astronomy, whose phenomena of interest require increasingly sophisticated methodologies and tools to bring them into view? The problems of education are stark and grossly evident. I do think much of educational research might be best characterized as an avoidance activity.

Let me try to indicate my general point about our cluelessness about education in a dramatic form. Imagine you are an Athenian among a group

of your fellow citizens about two and a half thousand years ago. Ahead of you, and slightly raised, is a stone altar, beside which wood burns and crackles in a shallow pit. Smoke is also rising from a hole in the altar at the end farthest from the pit. A meticulously groomed heifer is being led towards the altar by two men you know. It kicks and moos, startled by the fire and the silent crowd of men, but is firmly forced up the steps. The priestess raises her arms, praises the wisdom of the goddess Athena, and asks Her to accept this pure sacrifice and to enjoy the rich smell of its burning meat. The blade of a long knife flashes down into neck of the heifer. There is a momentary squeal, then silence as its legs give way. The animal is expertly butchered. Its entrails are scooped into long bowls and placed before the priestess on the altar while the carcass is tossed into the burning pit. The priestess pours a cup of wine onto the hissing sacrifice.

As the carcass continues to sizzle, you and your fellow-citizens stand silent, watching the priestess swiftly cut away the liver and tip the remaining entrails into the smoking hole in the side of the altar. They add pungently to the smell that most delights the gods. The priestess dissects the liver, and all eyes watch her intently. The leading citizens and the poorest are equally tense. After a few endless minutes, her bloodied hands hold up pieces of the liver. She shouts that it is unspotted, that the goddess Athena is pleased with the sacrifice, and that She guarantees success in battle against the Corinthians. A great shout goes up. The goddess has supported those who proposed war and rejection of the peace treaty some had favored.

Later, when the burned meat which Athena most savors is cut away, and after the priestess's portion is set aside, you and your companions will also receive a small share of the heifer's meat. If, as you enjoy eating it with a bowl of wine around a table with your friends, you suggest to them that cutting up an animal and examining its entrails is not a particularly good way for making major policy decisions, you would, of course, be considered crazy. If you persisted in saying that the ceremony you had just been through seemed an unlikely best procedure for running the state, people might think you were joking. If you persisted, making serious arguments that the condition of heifers' livers had nothing to do with the wisdom of going to war, you would be faced with the incredulity of your audience and then perhaps with their hostility. They would likely respond to you patronizingly with their own common-sense arguments.

How else, they would say, do you propose to discover what the will of the goddess is? The priestess is highly trained, with many years of skilled experience in discovering and interpreting the data. Haruspication is a complex and refined science; it provides the most effective methodology for reaching the best political and social decisions. The liver of heifers is known to be the most reliable source of relevant information.

The problem with trying to continue this argument, of course, is that those you wish to argue with take as beyond question precisely what you want to question. They consider themselves common-sense realists because they are intimately familiar with how things are and how they work. If you press your case, the kinder among the group will smile at each other and, when you aren't looking, tap their heads to indicate you are an echinas and hypotrachelion short of a column—or not the sharpest adze in the toolshed.

Now imagine that you are an historian two and a half thousand years in the future. Your special area of study is the distant twentieth century, and you are composing a thesis about that peculiar institution found in every industrialized society, the school. The school existed as a central institution of what were then considered modern states for just over two hundred years, beginning roughly in the mid-nineteenth century. You are trying to explain, in a clearer way than anyone before you, how such an institution could have come into being in the first place and could have survived so long—despite people at the time constantly complaining about its ineffectiveness. Your thesis is that twentieth-century people, even though they conducted endless inquiries and commissions and task forces into the ineffectiveness of schools, simply failed to identify what was the fundamental problem. Most reformers were intent on insisting on some particular changes that, they claimed, would make the system, finally, more effective. They seemed unable to recognize that the real problem was in what they so took for granted. You are thinking of preceding your thesis with an quotation from Ludwig Wittgenstein, a philosopher contemporary with the schools of your research: "one must uncover the source of error otherwise hearing the truth won't help us" (1963, p. 47). A part of your difficulty in composing your argument is that those who will view it, spread across eight star systems, find it incomprehensible that anyone could ever have believed such an institution provided a sensible way to educate children. You recognize the size of your explanatory problem this morning in particular because last night over dinner you tried to outline your thesis to your children and husband.

Your husband knows something about these ancient schools, and he asked how they came into being in the first place. You began by talking about *skhole* which meant for the even more ancient Greeks, the suitable use of leisure in cultural activities—particularly literature, music, and gymnastics, with some study of mathematics, cosmology, geography, and the natural world in general. You also mentioned in passing that many of these cultured ancient Greeks believed that state policy should be decided by cutting up animals and inspecting their entrails. Your children looked up from their plates with some amazement. *Skhole* over time became the word used

for the place in which instruction of the young for the proper use of their leisure occurred.

One problem for the later schools you were studying was built in from this earliest time, you explained; this was the belief that learning certain kinds of knowledge made you a more virtuous person. So, learning advanced geometry, say, didn't just mean you knew more geometry than an uneducated person, but that your mind had been made superior in some way. And having a mind made superior by much knowledge enabled you to be a better citizen and better person in general. Such an idea persisted for a long time in those countries that drew on Greek ideas about education, encouraging those who were schooled in privileged forms of knowledge to think of the uneducated classes of their own country as ignorant, boorish, and brutish, and to see people from societies that did not even use writing and had no literate stories as primitive or savage.

Your youngest pointed out that these Greeks were a long time before the kind of school you had been studying. You explained that schools of many kinds—as places where some children received instruction in how best to use their leisure, and so become superior people—were to be found for centuries. The great events that brought about the kind of school you were studying included the industrial revolution and the agricultural revolution. These, and their associated changes, led to increasingly powerful centralized states and also to mechanized war that required huge armies. States needed increasingly to control the lives of their populations. One of the main institutions for controlling populations was the school. A new kind of school was invented, grafted rather clumsily onto the Greek kind.

The older school had been a place where the male children of the wealthy learned to use their leisure, whereas the new school was a place to which all children had to go in order to be equipped for productive work, for emotional commitment to the state and its values, and for whatever remnants of the old ideas of cultural and personal development their social backgrounds might be able to support.

Calling the new institutions “schools” helped to disguise their important differences from the older *skhole*-inspired institutions. The illusion of continuity was further disguised because a number of people hoped the new schools would do for all children what the older schools did for the privileged few. And the old and new institutions shared enough features to justify seeing the new schools as simply a state-led expansion of the older schools: literacy, mathematics, and history, for example, were taught in both, specialized teachers dealt with groups of children, and so on.

You tried to explain how nearly everything anyone might want to do to or for children became the new school's job. The young of each country became captives within specially designed buildings, sitting more or less

docilely in age-sets, available for whatever the state or influential interest groups wanted to try. And all kinds of things were tried. Everyone wanted the best for the children; however, ideas about what was best were often quite different. So, while some people still believed that certain forms of knowledge would make children more virtuous, others didn't; some wanted to teach them to accept certain beliefs and values, and others wanted to teach them to be critical of the beliefs and values foisted onto them. Some wanted them to follow a careful curriculum towards disciplined knowledge, and others wanted them to explore the world of knowledge for themselves following their own interests. Some wanted to teach the practical skills that would enable the children to get good jobs after school, and others wanted them to concentrate on opening their minds to the arts; some wanted....

But your oldest child interrupted, asking why such a confused institution should have lasted so long, especially if people were always arguing about it and complaining that it was generally ineffective. You explained that most people—like the ancient Greeks deciding policy from entrails—just took for granted the institutions they found around them. They considered such institutions to be almost like a part of the natural world; they wouldn't question whether trees should be around or could be improved, and similarly they just took the school for granted, a bit as though it was a part of the natural world.

While some people argued endlessly and bitterly about the school, nearly everyone assumed that some particular reform would fix it. And even after pretty well every reform imaginable had been tried and failed to solve the problems, people just concluded that there would always be tensions among the different ideas people had for what the school should be and do. So it staggered forward year by year, with people heroically doing their best to make it work—even though there was a lot of vagueness, confusion, and argument about what it would look like if it was working properly.

Well, let us leave our ancient Greeks eating their roasted heifer, anxious and excited at the prospect of war, and our historian preparing for her morning's work, feeling the warmth of distant Sirius rising and obliterating the sight of the five moons currently in the sky. I have dragged you through these past and future scenarios—if you're still with me—to suggest, perhaps over-dramatically, that our problems with the school are more fundamental than people today generally believe. In reading most books about education, you get the idea that some particular reform—more attention to "the basics," more freedom for children's exploration, voucher systems and market disciplines, greater use of technology, and so on—would make the school work satisfactorily. But I think we would be sensible to consider whether or not the problem lies elsewhere, and whether fixing it

requires of us the tougher task of rethinking the idea of education we have inherited from ancient and more modern Europe and its tangled history. Starting with answering what the curriculum is, then what education is, might help, eh?

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