

Household at the Shore: A Marshall McLuhan Metaphor

PAULINE SAMESHIMA

University of British Columbia

One of the major tasks of the curriculum field is to demonstrate in consistent fashion the process of self-criticism and self-renewal. (Giroux, 1981, p. 27)

Rather than treat the body as a site of knowledge, a medium for thought, the more classic philosophical project has tried to render it transparent and get beyond it, to dominate it by deducing it to the mind's idealizing categories. (Gallop, 1988, pp. 3–4)



FIGURE 1. The Tetrad Figure, Hempell, 1996.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) contend that “no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis” (1980, p. 19) pointing to the fact that metaphors both presented by the user and interpreted by the reader always present ambiguity and thus provide openings for learning. The tetrad was developed by McLuhan and

Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies
Volume 4 Number 1 Fall 2006

Powers (1989) as an exploratory probe, a metaphoric means for discussing the effect of particular technologies on society. In the following poem, I use the tetrad graphic, which displays four elements as points of change on a continuum, as a metaphor for understanding how the body, head, heart, and spirit are inter-relational, resonating, and complementary, suggesting that when this foursome dances holistically as a collective, learning can be enhanced.

I encourage the continued development of complicit curriculum discourses based on paths of *currere* (Pinar & Grumet; 1976, Irwin, 2003, 2004). The word *currere* means *to run* and shares the same etymological root as the word curriculum. Here I use *curricula of currere* as meaning paths of running which together make up courses of learning. I want curriculum to serve as a *déclencheur*, the French word a pre-service teacher used at the end of an art education methods course to describe how art transformed her understandings of teaching. *Déclencheur* means: “to release a mechanism, activate, set off, trigger off an alarm, press a button; to launch, start, trigger off a debate” (Coffey, 2006, n.p.). Teaching and learning in *curricula of currere* is to swim into and through dynamic, fractalling, opening spaces of relational rhizomatic conversations which hearten generative places of creative knowledge construction. To develop these spaces of complicit *curricula*, the boundaries of form must be troubled (see Sameshima, 2006; Sameshima & Irwin, 2006). Cohen and Stewart (1994) explain that *complicit systems* are not dependent on initial conditions which frame and limit the space of the possible. Sumara and Davis (1997) explain that complicity:

in addition to sharing an etymological heritage with “complexity”, evokes senses of being *implicated* in or *servng as an accomplice* to and thus announces a need to be attentive to one’s own participation in events. (p. 303)

In reading the poem, the reader becomes complicitly knitted into the unfolding segments, assembling them from the particular and separate to the general and whole. The reader is invited to become the interlocutor: It is this enactment which paves the potential of creative research representation.

Cole and Knowles (2001) suggest that “when researchers have a particular commitment to pushing the boundaries of method and audience, representational form is central to the achievement of research goals” (p. 213). Eisner (1991) suggests that “the forms through which humans represent their conception of the world have a major influence on what they are able to say about it” (p. 7). Cole and Knowles agree that form itself has the power to inform. I use the poetic form to create what Laurel Richardson (2006) describes as a “social science art form”—a form of representation which seeks to meld the creative arts in social scientific publications (p. 964).

Modality is the sensory preference introduced by McLuhan and Powers (1989). These researchers suggest that our current modality is visually dominant and to move toward an acoustic modality is to embrace holistic, creative thought based on relationships and patterns. Left-brain hemisphere *Visual Space* is described as rational/scientific thinking marked by lines, planes, and grids. Right-brain hemisphere *Acoustic Space* surrounds, has no demarcation, and approaches from 360 degrees. Visual Space speaks to perspective, linear conceptualizations and causality while Acoustic Space speaks to relationality through heightened response of the ear, oral culture, myth, and time as a cycle. Poetry dwells in acoustic spaces because it performs even when unspoken. Words are mindfully selected to stand for and to perform for the unwritten. Poetry draws different pictures for each reader thus supporting Bakhtin's (1986) notion of *heteroglossia* which refers to the inclusion of all conflicting voices as having value, and Denzin's (1997) view that postmodern research "values and privileges the authority and voice of the reader and thus changes the role and authority of the researcher as meaning maker and theorizer" (p. 36).

In "Household at the Shore", I seek to draw attention to the often ignored body, heart, and spirit which are historically "othered" by the head, to share that the body speaks if we would listen, to suggest that form creates meaning, and to encourage a movement toward sensibilities in *Acoustic Space* (McLuhan and Powers, 1989). I have attempted to make the poetic form itself a tetrad and to demonstrate the contiguity, complex interaction, and metonymy of head, body, heart and spirit. If the tetrad figure is imagined as the self immersed in a dynamic process of currere, curricula would be composed of a multitude of tetradic learners moving in an amongst each other—shape-shifting figures which speak to the mobile identities, contiguity, reverberating complexities, and entanglements of learning in the dynamic space of relationality.

HOUSEHOLD AT THE SHORE: a Marshall McLuhan Metaphor

My body

She speaks to me in sounds I cannot decode
with unfocussed signs and signifiers
non-linguistic signs so loose
they form a sparkling necklace
beautiful and boldly sentient
a "floating chain of signifieds"¹
some even empty clarity, flawless gems²
I feel her on my neck, cool jewels, radiance blurring

as natural as the earth, charms of the land
on the bridge between body and head
I hear her in me
tossing on the sound of sea
always moving
using rhythm as the anchor
of her poetic language³
strong even beneath the languid surface
tension forever elastic
The body is poet
made of 75% water
writing the body's liquid song
a vibrant nomadic body of text
not alphabetic nor Cartesian
She evokes
salty in my mouth
She moves and lulls
but I cannot still her logic
intuition, inkling, sensation, sagacity
all cloaked in the morning mist
without lexicon nor translation

So I let him have his way

My mind

Firm as the ground that stands
deep as history can be buried
he sorts and deduces
categorizes the stories and connects the webs
stretched out across the land
a meticulous illustration of precise details
of the surface features
He is a Cartesian chart I can read
*Being able to interpret topographical maps will help you
in choosing the best route with the least resistance
and will also help you to avoid
natural barriers like swamps or terrain that is too steep.*⁴

He justifies adjustments for declination

Many people do not know how to properly adjust for declination.

*Adjusting for declination is important for accuracy in route finding.
To have your map and compass speaking the same language,
north on your compass must equal true north on your map.
To make them equal you need to either add or subtract the declination.⁵*

My mind, he makes sense
even when sense seems amiss
sequential and linear
He has power

My heart
Their child, part of the family
so vulnerable, open, sensitive
listens to the parents push and pull
tentative in the din
of the sea crashing on the land
Her love embracing so strong
eroding his edge
clawing at him
waves washing him to her
pulling him to become
a part of her
To become
To awaken to
comprehensive awareness
The not yet understood
drawing the understood
The child is silent
standing on the beach
looking for home

My spirit
Completes the family of four
History, she swirls the fragrance of the past
through our house so I know my mother
grandmother and great-grandmother
without words
She plays our homologous tetrad⁶
in a fugue⁷ made by the fusion of four strings on a Greek lyre
meiosis merged in double complementarity
in the text of the body, as an artifact, a

'resonating interval': an object which transcends time; and is affected by both its own attributes and the environment which surrounds it.⁸

McLuhan and Powers explain:

The tetrad illuminates the borderline between acoustic and visual space as an arena of spiraling repetition and replay, both of input and feedback, interlace and interface in the area of imploded circle of rebirth and metamorphosis.⁹

Irit Rogoff says art is the interlocutor,
a bridge to the next step of thought¹⁰
on the neck between body and mind

I can learn the art¹¹
of bridging the body and head
in motion and rhythm of the body poet
paint colour on the clear jewels signified on my neck
find home for the child

Then we move from this place together
home wherever we are
winds weaving us through continents of
post-colonial, post-centralized
and post-modern notions
liberalizing the culturally shaped
though entangled symbiotic communication
to see curriculum and pedagogy
opened

My Spirit, she'll guide us as one
hopes and dreams hold me in
four that belong
body, mind, heart and spirit
and I know our family will stay together
The self as the whole
weather the tumbling times
rushing and receding with the tide
delight in the frothy white¹²

Notes

1. Roland Barthes (1977, p. 39) refers to non-linguistic signs as being so open that they constitute a “floating chain of signifieds.”
2. “An ‘empty’ or ‘floating signifier’ is variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even any signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean” (Chandler, 2002, p. 74).
3. Jeanette Winterson (1997) believes rhythm is the anchor of the poet’s language (p. 87).
4. Chris Conway (1999). See web link.
5. Ibid.
6. The concept of the tetrad as a theoretical model for assessing, analyzing and predicting the social effects of technology on society was proposed by Marshall McLuhan and Bruce Powers (1989). Tetradic logic as a cognitive model is used to refine, focus, and discover unknown and unobserved entities in cultures and technologies (p. 128).
7. The word fugue has two meanings. It is a musical form in which a theme is first stated, then repeated and varied with accompanying contrapuntal lines. Fugue also refers to a disordered state of mind, in which somebody typically wanders from home and experiences a loss of memory relating only to the previous, rejected environment. The use of the word fugue is a play on words. The latter definition is a reminder to the reader that the spirit *will* remember collective memories even when the head has not yet articulated the body’s knowing. Simultaneously, the musical definition of fugue suggests that we live in a storyline that is themed as normative, that the main theme often states our living.
8. A. Hempell (1996). See web link.
9. McLuhan and Powers (1989), p. 9.
10. Rogoff (2000), p. 9.
11. *Art* is defined as the products of human creativity while *an art* is a superior skill that can be learned through study, practice, and observation. I believe we need to focus on the art of teaching in pre-service programs instead of the products of teaching.
12. Being in the frothy white of the sea is to be on the edge between liquid and land. The “edge” is the liminal place, the place where revelations and newness begins (see Sameshima, 2006).

References

- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-Music-Text*. London: Fontana.
- Chandler, D. (2002). *Semiotics: The basics*. London: Routledge.
- Coffey, N. (Ed.). (1996-2006). *French linguistics: Site for the study of the French language*. Retrieved June 13, 2006, from <http://www.french-linguistics.co.uk/dictionary/>
- Cohen, J., & Stewart, I. (1994). *The collapse of chaos: Discovering simplicity in a complex world*. New York: Penguin Press.

- Cole, A. L., & Knowles, J. G. (2001). Qualities of Inquiry. In L. Neilsen, A. Cole, & J. G. Knowles (Eds.), *The art of writing inquiry* (Vol. 1. Arts-informed Research Series, pp. 211–219). Halifax, NS & Toronto, ON: Backalong Books and Centre for Arts-informed Research.
- Conway, C (1999). *Backcountry Navigation*. Retrieved July 14, 2005, from http://www.geocities.com/Yosemite/Falls/9200/land_navigation.html#Topographical%20Maps
- Eisner, E. (1991). *The enlightened eye*. New York: Macmillan.
- Gallop, J. (1988). *Thinking through the body*. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press.
- Giroux, H. (1981). Toward a new sociology of curriculum. In H. Giroux, A. Penna & W. Pinar (Eds.) *Curriculum and instruction: Alternatives in education* (pp. 98–108). Berkeley, CA: McCutchan.
- Hempell, A. (1996). The resonating interval: Exploring the process of the tetrad. Retrieved July 14, 2005, from <http://www.anthonyhempell.com/papers/tetrad/>
- Irwin, R. (2003, October). Curating the aesthetics of curriculum/leadership or caring for how we perceive running/ guiding the course. University of British Columbia, Department of Curriculum Studies, Artful Salon. Retrieved July 12, 2005 from, <http://www.cust.educ.ubc.ca/whatsnew/Papers/irwin/irwin1.html>
- Irwin, R. L. (2004). A/r/tography: A metonymic métissage. In R. L. Irwin & A. de Cosson (Eds.), *A/r/tography: Rendering self through arts-based living inquiry* (pp. 27–38). Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Retrieved August 30, 2004, from <http://www.theliterarylink.com/metaphors.html>
- McLuhan, M., & Powers, B. (1989). *The global village: Transformations in world life in the 21st century*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pinar, W., & Grumet, M. (1976). *Toward a poor curriculum*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. (2005). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed., pp. 959–978). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rogoff, I. (2000). *Terra infirma: Geography's visual culture*. London: Routledge.
- Sameshima, P. (2006). *Seeing Red: A pedagogy of parallax*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, Canada.
- Sameshima, P., & Irwin, R. (2006). *Rendering liminal currere*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Sumara, D., & Davis, B. (1997). Enlarging the space of the possible: Complexity, complicity and action-research practices. In T. Carson & D. Sumara (Eds.), *Action research as a living practice*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Winterson, Jeanette. (1995). *Art objects: Essays on ecstasy and effrontery*. Toronto, ON: Alfred A. Knopf .