

Running Head Right-hand: Complex Conversations on Curriculum
Running Head Left-hand: Eero Ropo and Veli-Matti Värri

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Complex Conversations on Curriculum

Ghosts and the Five C's Revisited

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Introduction

Education is not only for knowing, but it also plays a pivotal role in constituting what a person is, what he will be, and how she positions herself in personal, social, or societal life contexts. All those life contexts are interpreted, experienced, and constructed by people themselves. The resulting narratives are sometimes explicit and verbalized, sometimes implicit and unreflected.

One of the most inspiring thoughts in Bill Doll's theorizing of curriculum has been the groundbreaking analyses of ghosts. The ghost is a powerful metaphor, character in a narrative, related to understanding the life world. A ghost is something that intervenes in peoples' actions, thinking, or storytelling. The ghost is typically unrecognized, invisible, able to come and go wherever and whenever it wants to. It is even able to intervene in the educational processes. As such, the ghost is a scary creature, indeed.

After hearing the idea years ago, it sounded strange, but forced us thinking. Ghosts reminded of the fairytales in which spirits sometimes appeared in visible form communicating with people. They were also said to live in certain places or locations. Bill Doll has convinced us that there really are invisible "ghosts," not only in places but in certain processes, objects, and phenomena such as curriculum.

Theoretically we categorize this idea under the umbrella of narrative paradigm in which human knowledge of the world is understood in terms of narratives (e.g. [Barthes, 1977](#); [Fisher, 1985](#)). A narrative paradigm emphasizes:

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that even scientific (technical) discourse, which is in a form of literature, is informed by metaphor (and myth), contains “plots,” and is time-bound. ([Fisher, 1985](#), p. 356)

This paradigm aims at giving perspectives and understanding the reasons, or like [Fisher \(1985\)](#), p. 357) says, “good reasons” for the perspectives of texts. Referring to control as one of “the ghosts,” Doll, asserts that “control as an operating concept is actually embedded in the history of curriculum from the very first usages of the word in an educational setting” ([Doll, 2002](#), p. 34). Applying the metaphor, the ghost of control seems to exist in many countries in the form of religious or ideological dominance through education (e.g. [Azhar, 2017](#)).

By acknowledging the existence of “ghosts” to which Bill has introduced us in his speeches and writings, we will now discuss the ghosts that current curricula should recognize. As a frame, we apply the narrative paradigm described briefly above. Particularly, we want to reflect the perspectives of the five C’s Doll proposed.

Ghosts as Narratives in Education

[Barthes \(1977\)](#) and many others have argued that one’s life is best understood in terms of narratives, temporally relevant stories having a plot. In this sense narratives are personal, social, and cultural interpretations, constructed from experiences, social interactions, and history. Like many others, we argue that narrative understanding is essential for the complex existential relevance of being in the world ([Meretoja, 2014](#), p. 2). Abbott (2008) describes a narrative as a “representation of an event or a series of events” (p. 13). It can be presented in verbal form or seen as a mental image, like a “ghost of control” in Doll’s thinking.

According to [Doll \(2002\)](#), p. 28), we should throw away “the ghosts” acting as controllers and replace them with novel representations, a “livelier spirit of control.” Doll refers to a possible need to rename “control” with a new term, but is satisfied with the expression “emergent control” with which he means a milder control ([Doll, 2002](#), p. 56).

It is interesting to speculate what the new spirit of control might be. To us it seems that there are also other types of ghosts, even more scary than the ghost of control. The time we are living can be described as the age of wicked problems. The term was first introduced by [Rittel and Webber \(1973\)](#). Wicked problems are typically hard to formulate and solve. It is even difficult to find out if the introduced solutions are appropriate or working at all. Examples of those kinds of problems are easy to find (e.g. climate change, over-population, waste). To our understanding these “wicked problems” are like ghosts. They control life without us having much power or control over them. [Latour’s](#)

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(1993) concept “hybrid object” and [Morton’s \(2010\)](#) “hyperobject” both refer adequately to such kind of ghosts.

A “hyperobject” is a strange being, a ghost, we may say, without a strict situation in time and space. It is something we can speak about, but not see or touch. Education and curricular thinking cannot ignore these “hyperobjects” as constituting “elements” of our individual and common life and prospects for future. The border between human creatures, human culture, and nature are mixed in them and thus they are a kind of a combination of nature and culture.

According to Morton’s definition hyperobjects are “vicious.” This means that we are not able to isolate them or abjure their existence. They have become part of our life and world narratives. The more we try to abjure them the more they will be engaged in our ways of living and affecting our expectations for the future ([Morton, 2010](#), pp. 130–135; [Morton, 2011a](#); [Morton, 2011b](#)).

“Hyperobjects” were created as an unintended consequence of our technological culture. Pollution, such as nuclear waste or floating plastic rafts in the ocean, for instance, can be understood as scary “ghosts” causing a reaction of repression and rejection. This collective refusal, and reluctance from considering those phenomena as real, is very ambivalent in our technological civilization. It is evident to us that this “ghost” exists, but we make every attempt to reduce its influence by denial.

Nonetheless, in the context of a technology—driven world, the instrumental ontology with isolated “hyperobjects” seems to be a self—evident basis for the socialization process in civic education. The result is that the socialization process, and the curriculum, maintains and reproduces the unstable and even dangerous order of wicked “ghosts.” It is a big problem if curricula keep these kinds of ghosts alive.

The ghosts acting globally, like the above described “hyperobjects,” threaten our lives in a lot more serious ways than the “ghost of control” or its milder forms. To save our planet, we need new ways of thinking to create new narratives. Our traditional dualistic and anthropocentric concepts do not reach the “reality” of “hyperobjects.” Consequently, Doll’s idea of ghosts is phenomenal in opening novel visions for theorizing in the deep “metaphysical” sense of our being in the world.

Is this realistic? Have we experienced this kind of development in our educational systems, from the worldwide perspective? We have no clear answers. We may just say that we have seen both positive and negative developments in different systems and parts of the world.

Curricula and Five C’s From the Perspective of Emerging Narratives of the World

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We believe that education is the forum to discuss these emerging narratives. Curricula, as the intellectual bases for education, are the main documents or tools to enhance discourses towards new kinds of thinking and understanding. Bill Doll has described the emerging new curricula as something related to acknowledging the importance of relations ([Doll, 2002](#), p. 42). He chose to discuss the novel curriculum concept in terms of five C's, namely *currere*, complexity, cosmology, conversation, and community. We will revisit these C's, keeping the ghosts we have introduced above in our minds.

Currere

Like [Doll \(2002\)](#) mentions, *currere* is the concept [Pinar and Grumet \(1976\)](#) introduced and Pinar developed further in his theorizing (e.g., [Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995](#)). The emphasis in this concept is on the individual progress (running, from L. “to run”) of a person based on autobiographical processes ([Pinar, 1994](#), pp. 19–27).

From the societal point, *currere* is an individual process. Typically, *currere* is not a content issue in the curricula, but deals with the individually important learning and transformation processes. From the narrativity point of view, it also deals with the ontology of being in the world. In the Finnish basic education curriculum educational goals are divided into the knowledge and performance goals in different subject domains, and those related to personal growth, identity, and citizenship ([National Board of Education, 2016](#)). The objectives related to students' *currere* processes are not well explicated in the text and are left for the teachers to decide. Partly this may be due to the lack of theoretical understanding of what *currere* might mean in school practice. To us it means growing into personal understanding of life and world narratives in which wicked ghosts take an increasingly active role. It is also necessary to construct ways to control the power of such ghosts.

Complexity

Typically, curriculum design begins by asking what knowledge is the most worth knowing. Instead of what, we might ask what kind of knowledge. *Complex* is an excellent adjective for the current nature of scientific knowledge. We have realized that the scientific knowledge base is not a coherent entity, but full of often very contradictory “truths.” The “ghosts” we have described, are part of this narrative complexity of understanding our common world and life contexts. Theories can be considered as narratives consisting of rules, truths, and also beliefs that are objects for continuous change and evolution.

Personal narratives are typically based on one's own autobiography in which the whole is experienced and interpreted. Socially and culturally shared narratives are created through conversations, which are always complex. The

process is never-ending, including continuous reinterpretation. Like we have already written, [Doll \(2002\)](#) refers to complexity when thinking of replacing the original ghost of control with a new type of ghost having less control over children, young people, or people overall. This dominant “ghost” advocates simplicity by casting control on the nature and quality of learning results. Those results are typically considered as quantitative and measurable with the aim of assessing the effectiveness of the education system. This kind of control does not acknowledge the individual meanings based on life experiences or autobiography. Instead of giving space for complex and contradictory meanings (personal, community, or cultural), the “ghost” markets and controls the achievement of clearly defined and verbalized performance goals, violently simplifying both the learning process and the resulting narratives of the studied phenomena.

New types of ghosts—hybrid objects, hyperobjects, and often contradictory narratives created out of them—complicate both our current life, and prospects for the new generations. Our clear vision is the same as Doll’s: we cannot and we should not avoid complexity. If we do, the ghosts will take over.

Cosmology

Cosmological perspectives on curriculum are very seldom dealt with in curriculum literature. Typically, they are reduced to subject-specific questions in physics, philosophy, or religion. Scientific cosmology is usually regarded as belonging to physics. Doll has, however, shown that this perspective has many implications in our understanding of life, world, and ourselves ([2002](#), p. 46). He ([Doll, 2002](#), pp. 46–48) discusses cosmology in curriculum by referring to a paradigm change. This shift from a cosmology (including ecology, ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, pedagogy, and worldview) based on the “brute facts” of independent atoms to a process cosmology based on the dynamic flux of entities or occasions, all “complex and interdependent,” is a truly paradigmatic shift.

This kind of understanding that everything is related and dependent on other perspectives keeps the knowledge “alive.” Particularly, it is the spirit that keeps knowledge alive. Consequently, he proposes a curriculum that combines the “rigorousness of science, with the imagination of story, with the vitality and creativity of spirit” ([Doll, 2002](#), p. 48).

Our descriptions of the new “wicked ghosts” as parts of emerging world narratives, threatening and limiting the prospects of life, indicate that even more serious problems must be encountered and solved in the future. We believe that solutions cannot be reached without following the cosmological model Doll has suggested.

Conversation

Conversation is a process in which people share thoughts, ideas, and information. It is typically spoken communication, interchange of information, experiences, and meanings related to them. Conversation and negotiation are close concepts—both deal with discourses and understandings between people. Negotiation aims at agreement whereas conversation has no such a goal. Instructional conversations have a special purpose of enhancing students’ construction of socially shared and accepted narratives, whatever they are in different social communities and societies. Some are based on research and facts, some on beliefs and ideologies. Although instructional conversations deal with meanings, it is evident that meanings like beliefs are often created through autonomous and unconscious processes. [Doll \(2002, p. 50\)](#) emphasized the importance of respect and honor between the partners of the conversation. He also mentions the importance of respecting “otherness” of other people and texts in which the ways of thinking can vary.

In education and instructional conversation, referring, for instance, to classroom conversations, there are typical “topics” that the conversations focus on. [Yrjänäinen \(2011\)](#) studied classroom discourses in junior high and high school science classes. She recognized four types of discourses, namely, science and scientific, the school subject matter, pedagogical—related to teaching and learning—and the curriculum. This all shows that educational reality includes all types of knowledge from scientific to social and contextual, facts, beliefs, and attitudes, to mention a few. Narrative construction of personal, social, and cultural knowledge takes place in different discourses, some of which are based on exactly defined concepts, some on loosely described beliefs or opinions.

If the purpose of school learning is to acquire only measurable learning outcomes, the classroom conversations become artificial. The metaphysical or cosmological perspective, the reason to be at school, disappears, like [Doll \(2002\)](#) might say. Realizing that the “ghosts” have not left us, but that there seems to be more “ghosts” than ever before, makes the school context more equal for teachers and students. We all have the same problems as citizens and learners. Constructing solutions requires myriad conversations, new ways of thinking, and creative narratives to the challenges and threats of the “ghosts” we have created by our own culture and technology.

Community

We agree with Bill that community may be the most important of the five C’s ([Doll, 2002, p. 50](#)). Doll refers to the concept of identity in respect to belonging to a community. If identity is a narrative, constructed and negotiated through conversations in relations, then other people, communities, and cultures are crucial for understanding who I am and who we are. Without others, we converse only in our own minds, intra-individually, with silent

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speech or phrases, typically re-enforcing our limited interpretations of meanings related to ourselves, others, knowledge, or “ghosts.”

In those conversations, narrative construction and reconstruction of personal, social and cultural identity stories are the main processes (cf. [Yrjänäinen & Ropo, 2013](#)). Those narratives are also applied when we decide our positioning as teachers or students, citizens, members of different communities, or individual persons. Like [Jansen's \(2009\)](#) book has showed, communities are strong in maintaining the ontological and epistemological narratives about themselves and others.

Community conversations are important in creating common interpretations and meanings shared through narratives. Those narratives are, however, often limited. They omit important facts or phenomena, sometimes because of political purposes, sometimes because of history and traditions. Certain types of narratives, which are rich in beliefs and poor in facts, are delivered to new generations without revision or criticism. Attitudes separating cultures, communities, and people, are built into the narratives that children adopt as true knowledge. Communities and cultures also seem to be selfish in the sense that ugly “ghosts,” knowledge or facts not supporting the way of understanding life, can be totally ignored, often until they begin to limit and interfere with the adopted way of life.

In the time of globally affecting wicked “ghosts” it is important that thinking about communities is expanded from local to global. We are part of the global community whether we recognize it, or understand what it means. Conversations we participate in must be globally motivated and themed. Globally affecting “ghosts” bring the signs of wicked problems into our vicinity in the form of objects or global social problems. Waste, unemployment, or masses of refugees are all signs of “ghosts” that cannot be ignored from education and the curricula anywhere in the world.

Concluding Remarks

We conclude the discussion with the same recommendation as many other researchers in this field have done before us. Continue the complex conversation! As humankind, we are more aware than ever of the threats, challenges, and problems facing us all. Believing mostly in positive development we seem to ignore many of them from the everyday conversations in our ontologically and epistemologically separated communities, cultures, and nation states. Communities are necessary for identity construction, but they have weaknesses. Typically, they collect only similarly thinking people into the conversations. If the curricula are based on community narratives and values, education does not integrate; it separates.

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involving our relations to the universe, nature, and each other. “Ghosts” are myriad and they have not left us!

How do we respond to the challenges in education, as curriculum theorizers? Is this the end of common education and beginning of self-serving learning communities? If local is global, are the learning communities better able to respond to locally and globally acting “ghosts”? Are we happy with locally valid curricula in which local goals, permanence of communities, societies, and their traditions are maintained? Or do we need a global curriculum, something that responds to the very basic needs of the whole humankind, to develop global citizens, transform people towards universally positioning thinkers, and to help them grow into responsible agents, willing to serve the universal good, equity, equality, and democracy? Maybe we also have to introduce a new PISA test promoting the common understanding of the world and ghosts we have with us.

This is the legacy from Bill Doll. Thank you Bill! Is it time to start the work, together?

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