Nailing Jell-O to the Wall: Pinpointing Aspects of State-of-the-Art Curriculum Theorizing

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I should start by acknowledging that my present task, attempting to review and pin down characteristics of the status quo of the expansive and nebulous field of curriculum theorizing, and to do so in the span of a single essay, is, if not presumptuous, then certainly improbable. Given the penchant for employing metaphors and similes in curriculum theorizing, and the fact that in the field of educational research reviews, knowledge production has often been likened to the construction of a wall, I would say my task is rather like undertaking to nail Jell-O to a wall.

When it was first proposed that each of the Section Heads for AERA Division B’s 1999 meeting give a brief presentation on the status quo of their field (based on a review of submissions to their sections), I, as Head of Section 2 (Curriculum Theorizing), greeted this proposal with somewhat mixed feelings. On the one hand, the proposed panel made sense in terms of indicating in one session where the various aspects of the field of curriculum studies currently stood. On the other hand, it seemed to me that in giving such a presentation, there was the very real danger that one would either be so overly general as to be simply superficial, or else so detailed as to go well beyond the allotted 12 minutes for each presentation. The suggested themes (“Curriculum Theorizing on the Threshold of the 21st Century” in my case) only served to underscore in their startling breadth, how difficult it would be to successfully undertake this task. To make the task more manageable, I needed to bring some focus and coherence to it, and at the same time attempt to provide a survey or elements of a survey as well as some in-depth discussion of aspects of the status quo of the field. Also, it only stood to reason that the proposals should not be discussed in isolation but in the context of the contemporary literature on curriculum theorizing. I therefore decided to identify and present, very briefly, six principal interrelated characteristics which can be discerned from the literature and individual papers and sessions accepted for inclusion in the program for AERA’s 1999 Division B, Section 2 meeting, and to discuss two of these characteristics in a little more depth. In other words my intention was not to attempt a comprehensive survey of the entire wall of curriculum theorizing but to undertake a more modest task of identifying and affixing six small globules of characteristics representing the essence of the contemporary scene to that wall for perusal. The broader discussion of two of these characteristics, hopefully, helped cement them to the wall. This essay is an extended version of that presentation and maintains the original approach.

The stances taken and the variety of positions articulated in various submissions and in the literature provide an indication of the first of the primary characteristics of contemporary curriculum theorizing: Namely, that it is inherently political, contested, and in a state of productive flux. The journal Curriculum Inquiry epitomizes the state of flux in which curriculum theorizing finds itself through its ongoing practice of juxtaposing a very eclectic collection of papers in each of its issues. In the annual meeting program, this state of flux was reflected in the exciting variety of the sessions, from some dealing specifically with schooling (e.g., Weiss’s “A Great Clock of Society: Compulsory Education and the School Calendar”) to others dealing with other pedagogical spaces (e.g., Fountain’s “Curriculum by Design: Museum Exhibits and Issues of Representation, Audience, Time, and Space”); from sessions dealing with individual racial/cultural groups in specific U.S. contexts (e.g., Craig’s “Adding, Subtracting, and Dividing: Latino Students in Urban School Curriculum Contexts”) to considerations of various forms of social identity in international contexts (e.g., Maher’s “Extending Discourse Communities: Gender, Race, Class, and Sexualities in International School Contexts”), from specific theoretical and discipline areas (e.g., Weaver’s session on “Curriculum Theory, French Post-Structuralism, and the ‘Science Debates’”) to combinations of theoretical foundations and quite general discussions of curriculum (e.g., Jetty’s “Cultural Studies, Post-Colonialism, and a Multicultural Curriculum”).

This variety in the sessions represents more than just a multiplicity of theoretical approaches and subject matter, or numerous static alternative approaches. Rather, it is evidence that curriculum theorizing is not singular but multiple discourses, related to each other, if at all, only very tentatively. Epitomizing the multiple, fractured, and contested nature of contemporary curriculum theorizing was Craig...
Kridel's session on "Curriculum Studies on the Threshold of the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities," which not only brought together some of the most prominent figures in the field (O. L. Davis, Elliot Eisner, Maxine Greene, Madeliene Grumet) but brought out how varied and divergent conceptualizations of curriculum have become.

A second characteristic of contemporary curriculum theorizing is that theoretical frameworks and discourses such as progressivism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and critical theory, and canonical figures such as John Dewey, Ralph Tyler, Jean Piaget, Jurgen Habermas, and Paulo Freire, while still dominant, appear to have waned (though to different extents) in overall representation in both proposals and the literature in general. Pinar and Reynolds's (1992) "Understanding Curriculum as Phenomenological and Deconstructed Text" is one indicator of the process of theoretical transitions in that it marks a moment of the simultaneous mainstreaming of phenomenology and introduction of deconstruction (and postmodernism and poststructuralism more generally) in curriculum theorizing. In terms of theorists, there were no submissions to Curriculum Theorizing that proposed to address the work of Tyler and very few references to his work in the lists of references of the proposals. Dewey, on the other hand, remains a perennial figure. There were numerous references to his work and there were paper proposals based on his work, such as Allen's "Spatiality and Experience in Curriculum: A Remapping of Dewey's Theory of Experience." However, much of the discussion on Dewey in the literature is about his work as foundational and historical rather than as work that points the way to the future of curriculum theorizing. Similarly, while Freire is still regarded as highly influential in critical pedagogy circles, his influence is increasingly discussed in terms of the development of critical pedagogy rather than in terms of its future directions. (In fact, as I shall indicate later, even critical pedagogy itself, which evolved in part from Freirean liberatory pedagogy, is on the wane as cultural studies and cultural pedagogy increase in popularity among radical left educators.) McLaren's (1999) recent concise tribute to and engagement of Freire's work includes a statement on the shortcomings of Freirean pedagogy, a statement to which one could add the argument that postmodernist and poststructuralist theories and conceptions of multiple, shifting identifications have rendered Freirean theory and pedagogy, with their reliance on stable, modernist identities and unambiguous oppressors and oppressed classes, rather inadequate.

One of the conference sessions, "Feminist Engagements: Male Theory and Education in the 20th Century," identified and addressed the work of John Dewey, Antonio Gramsci, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Paulo Freire, and Roger Simon as influential male theorists in education in the 20th century. The list of male theorists is an interesting mix of established staples and, in terms of the field of education, relatively new figures. Would that a panel of men had formed to discuss, say, Maxine Greene, bell hooks, Jean Clandinin, Madeleine Grumet, Nel Noddings, Janet Miller, and Judith Butler as influential female figures in education in the 20th century. To give only one example, Namulundah's (1998) bell hooks' Engaged Pedagogy: A Transformative Education for Critical Consciousness is indicative of hooks's influence on the field of education (and provides a sustained discussion of her work and its relevance to education).

Curriculum theorizing is increasingly being undertaken within the framework of the "post-discourses": postmodernism (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Lather, 1991; Peters, 1995–1997; Slattery, 1995; Usher & Edwards, 1994), poststructuralism (Cherryholmes, 1998; Doll, 1989, 1993; Ellsworth, 1997), post-Freudian psychoanalysis (Appel, 1996, 1999; Britzman, 1998; Shaw, 1995), and to a lesser extent, postcolonialism (Olson & Worsham, 1999; Willinsky, 1998, 1994), and we can identify this development as a third distinct characteristic. The post-discourses have thrown up new figures, several of whom are now emerging as canonical (Jacques Derrida, Shoshona Felman, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva), with Michel Foucault being principal among them. JCT: Journal of Curriculum Theorizing continues to lead the way in showcasing this avant-garde work. The essays in Pinar’s (1999a) Contemporary Curriculum Discourses: Twenty Years of JCT provide a comprehensive account of what has constituted cutting-edge curriculum theorizing published in JCT over the past two decades. The increasing influence of the post-discourses and new canonical figures is a contributory factor in the decline of more established traditional discourses and canonical figures.

This rise in the "posts" was marked in the program by the fact that the post-discourses were present not only in the theoretical framework of several papers but indeed several entire sessions. Such sessions included "Curriculum Theory, French Poststructuralism, and the 'Science Debates';" "The Postmodern Challenge to Historical Knowledge: Implications for Teaching History, History Education, and the Museum Display"; "Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma"; "Using Arts-Based Research in Postmodern Curriculum Theory Courses"; and "Shaking the Ivory Tower: Writing, Advising, and Critiquing the Postmodern Dissertation."

A fourth characteristic of contemporary curriculum theorizing is that the politics of social and cultural theory and social difference undergirds and is the dominant premise from which much curriculum theorizing is currently undertaken. Multiculturalism is clearly the predominant discourse in which this is represented, closely followed by critical pedagogy. There is evidence, however, of a cutting-edge shift from multiculturalism and critical pedagogy to cultural studies. One session, "Cultural Studies, Post-Colonialism, and a Multicultural Curriculum" juxtaposed the turn to cultural studies, the rise in the post-discourses and the predominant discourse of multiculturalism.

A fifth characteristic has to do with the supposed struggle between "traditionalist" and "reconceptualization" approaches to curriculum theorizing. Many of the submissions theorized about pedagogical spaces well beyond the K-12 classroom: from museums to cityscapes to cyberspace. Heavily influenced by the discourses of feminism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis, and the participation of increasingly influential feminists such as Patti Lather, Janet Miller, Deborah Britzman, and Elizabeth Ellsworth, the JCT conference (or the Bergamo conference, as it is more commonly known) is one site one might be tempted to identify as a space where "reconceptualization" has become the virtually uncontested norm. One way of interpreting the growth and success of the JCT conference and the fact that several submissions to curriculum theorizing undertake to theorize about curriculum in non-school settings is that these are clear signals that reconceptualization
is firmly established and thriving despite ongoing critiques. However, it would be overly simplistic to classify the very wide variety of work presented at the JCT conference as reconceptualization. And the fact that writers of proposals do not feel they have to justify curriculum theorizing outside of the K–12 classroom indicates that they do not necessarily see their work as positioned consciously against so-called "traditional" curriculum theorizing. Also, it is significant that there is virtually no debate at JCT on reconceptualization versus traditionalist curriculum theorizing. Similarly, none of the 56 or so proposals to Section 2 propose to address the supposed struggle between traditional and reconceptualization curriculum theorizing. This deafening silence in the submissions is a clear signal that this supposedly highly charged dualism has in fact become passé and we have entered a post-dualist (though not necessarily post-duelist) era in curriculum theorizing. 4

The sixth and final characteristic touches on the way forward from the status quo to the immediate future of curriculum theorizing. While the mainstream of curriculum theorizing has yet to come to grips with the mainstreaming of the post-discourses, theorists on the cutting edge have yet to articulate what is to be done about the limits and limitations of the post-discourses, and what the combination of the current lull in sociocultural theorizing in general and the related movement "past the last post"5 into what we might call the "post-post era" will mean for curriculum theorizing.

At least two strategies have emerged in social and cultural theorizing when it comes to addressing the issue of what is to follow or how we are to proceed beyond what is emerging as the ironic hegemony of the post-discourses. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990, 1993) calls for strategic pauses in what could be the endless process of deconstruction. The idea is that one deconstructs up to a point and then stops in order to undertake necessary praxis based on more overtly political theory and politics (e.g., Marxist and/or feminist). Others, like the contributors to John Fekete's (1987) Life After Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture, return to and revise older theoretical traditions to produce a hyper-pragmatism of liberalism and Marxism as the way forward from postmodernity's denial of value. In his two presentations, "Coming About: Reason, Rebellion, and Responsibility in Post-Modern Curriculum Theorizing" and "The Simulacra of Science Education and Curriculum Theory," David Blades illustrated both the usefulness and limitations of postmodernist thought for curriculum praxis and took a position similar to Fekete and other contributors (Fekete, 1987) in addressing those limitations. In the first paper, he called for tacks to the older, humanist concepts of reason, rebellion, and responsibility as a means of avoiding the danger of the boat of education drifting into and becoming lost in the deep waters of relativism that is postmodern education. In his second paper, his discussion/performance first illustrated how Baudrillard's (1981/1994) notion of the simulacrum could be used to unveil problems in the taken-for-granted science curriculum. He then argued for a need to reconceptualize reason, validity, and so forth, rather than abandon them as lost with the supposed "loss of the authentic" Baudrillard asserts.

Neither of the two strategies represents a paradigmatic shift in cutting edge theory and theorizing. Rather, they are both means of either curbing what are seen as the excesses of the posts or making interventions that render post-discourses more practical/political. While it is significant that curricularists are contributing to the development of these strategies, there is work to be done by all who theorize the social and cultural in anticipating and determining where avant-garde theory is headed after the posts (which were not meant to be grand narratives but contingent, temporary, incisive theoretical tools). For curricularists who straddle the worlds of curriculum theorizing and more general social theorizing, the curricula of educational institutions and individual subject areas, and a much more generalized curriculum of lived experience and social change, undertaking such work should be a particularly urgent and significant challenge.

Moving Beyond Dim-Sum, Steel Band, and Sari Multiculturalism

What follows is an expansion on the fourth and fifth characteristics, starting with the fourth. The sessions and the literature clearly indicate that the politics of social movements and social and cultural theory based on identity politics undergird much of contemporary curriculum theorizing. The critical pedagogy mantra of race, class, and gender is clearly at work, with the discourses of multiculturalism, closely followed by critical pedagogy, being the principal frameworks within which these forms of social difference and struggles for educational and social change are being theorized. There is evidence, however, that the substance behind the mantra has changed considerably in the past decade or so. Race and gender are still predominant, as important recent publications such as Castenell and Pinar's (1993) Understanding Curriculum as Racial Text and Gaskell and Willinsky's (1995) Gender Informs Curriculum indicate. Race in general and Black identity in/and education were well represented in the program through papers like Anderson's "National Identity and the Black Experience," and Maher's "How Do We Define Black?" An Exploration of the Construction of Race and Ethnicity in Women's Studies in England and the U.S.," and in sessions like "Unpacking in Public: Exploring Social/Racial Identities in an Urban University." One of the latest developments in the theorizing of race in sociocultural theory in general is the often interdisciplinary work being undertaken in "whiteness studies." Works like Fine, Weis, Powell, and Wong's (1997) Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society; Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, and Chennault's (1998) White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America; and McIntyre's (1997) Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity With White Teachers are representative contributions from the field of education. It is rather surprising that this relatively new but already burgeoning discourse on whiteness was virtually completely neglected in the sessions, with the notable exception of Holcomb-McCoy's paper "Understanding 'Whiteness' in Academia: A Black Woman's Perspective."

In terms of gender, there was a small but encouraging set of sessions and papers on critical approaches to the study of masculinity (e.g., Lesko's session entitled "Masculinities at School"). On the other hand, although many of the sessions and individual proposals were clearly feminist, very few papers or sessions overtly proposed to address women and girls, with Casey's and Canzona's papers (both on welfare mothers) being the exceptions that proved the rule. Is it becoming passé to overtly name women and girls just at a time when it is becoming important to name and critically
address boys, men, and masculinity? One wonders whether there is a connection between the two developments and whether, as Canaan and Griffin (1990) ask in their essay, the new men’s studies are “part of the problem or part of the solution” when it comes to addressing the problematic of gender.

Ironically, the original category of social difference, social class, has receded quite substantially in representation in curriculum theorizing (as it has in social theory in general). It is highly significant, but simultaneously not particularly noted, for example, that Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman’s (1995) Understanding Curriculum, which provides a comprehensive list of ways in which curriculum could be conceptualized, does not contain a section on “curriculum as social class text.” Today, encountering a piece like Lois Weis’s (1995) chapter on the construction of White working-class males in high school in McLaren and Giarelli (Eds.), Critical Theory and Educational Research, or Kincheloe and Steinberg’s (1997) chapter “The Importance of Class in Multiculturalism” in Changing Multiculturalism is like finding a rare gem.

Sexuality, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability have been added to the mantra but as is often the danger with the add-on approach, they remain underrepresented and not fully integrated. Important works like Pinar’s (1998) Theorizing Education; Harne & Miller’s (1996), All the Rage: Re-asserting Radical Lesbian Feminism; and earlier works like Sears’s (1992a) Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education and Sletter and Grant’s (1991) essay on “Race, Class, Gender and Disability in Current Textbooks” in The Politics of the Textbook are contributing to increasing the volume and profile of work on sexual orientation and (dis)ability and the integration of such work into the literature, which increasingly treats social difference as multiple and interrelated. Queer theory, sexual orientation, and disability were represented in individual papers sprinkled in various sessions like Sumara’s paper “Inventing Queer Subjects,” Pallotta-Chiarolli’s “Coming Out/Going Home: Culturally Diverse Australian Girls and Young Women Interrogating Heterosexism and Racism,” Rockhill’s “Narratives of Embodiment,” and McSorley’s “Reframing the Preparation of ‘Special Education’ Teachers.”

Liberal multiculturalism (characterized by stable social and cultural categories, neat individual forms of oppression, and means of addressing them) continues to be the dominant discourse within which social difference is addressed in the K–12 classroom. However, the literature and the sessions reflect the fact that considerable strides have been made in examining and representing difference in curriculum theorizing. For example, the influence of “the posts” has served to render neat identity categories into messy, complex sets of identifications. Leftist educators in Canada and the United States have taken politically similar but differently named approaches to addressing the inadequacies of dominant liberal multiculturalism. In Canada, leftists have opted to eschew multiculturalism and, following the British example (Carby, 1982; Mullard, 1980; Troyka, 1987), have developed Canadian antiracism discourse (Dei, 1996; E. Lee, 1985; Ng, Staton, & Scane, 1995; Thomas, 1984). In the United States, radical educators have chosen to critique multiculturalism from within and have developed more radical versions such as critical, radical, and revolutionary multiculturalism (McLaren, 1997; Weil, 1998). Such work includes that of figures like McCarthy (1988, 1990) who are working to develop more complex ways of looking at racism (i.e., McCarthy’s exploration of the notion of dysconscious racism) and the relationship between identity and forms of oppression (i.e., McCarthy’s notion of non-synchrony). Reflecting a more complex multiculturalism in its very choice of subject matter, Huang’s session entitled “Negotiating and Constructing a Cultural Point of View in Elementary Reading Classes for At-Risk Asian American Children” works against the insidious stereotype of the Asian younger as universally overachieving poster-child minority (S. Lee, 1996).


Although the shift to cultural studies is relatively new, we can already discern from the characteristics of cultural studies what the implications will be for curriculum theorizing. Because of the cultural studies emphasis on working on the cutting edge of theory and theorizing; taking the popular seriously; doing not only interdisciplinary but anti-disciplinary and even post-disciplinary work; undertaking praxis rather than theory or practice, and so forth, we are likely to see (indeed we are already seeing) a greater emphasis on curriculum theorizing that employs cutting edge theory and juxtaposes a number of theoretical discourses; deals with popular culture, the new media (taking up television and the World Wide Web rather differently than current dominant approaches), and a very expanded notion of pedagogy and pedagogical spaces; and utilizes an inter/anti/post-disciplinary approach.

Current cutting edge curriculum theorizing tends to deal with the complex juxtaposition and integration of theories, discourses, and forms of social difference. Kelly’s (1997) Schooling Desire: Literacy, Cultural Politics and Pedagogy, which integrates feminism, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, and critical pedagogy in dealing with an expanded notion of literacy; Miller’s chapter (1998) “Autobiography as a Queer Curriculum Practice” in Queer Theory in Education, which integrates autobiography, curriculum theory, feminist theory, and queer theory; and Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren, and Peters’s (1996) Counternarratives, which integrates cultural studies, critical pedagogy, and postmodernist theory,
are typical. This trend was reflected in the program in sessions such as Maher’s on “Extending Discourse Communities; Gender, Race, Class and Sexualities in International School Contexts,” and Jetty’s on “Cultural Studies, Post-Colonialism, and a Multicultural Curriculum.”

Finally, new technology and cyberspace as an alternative pedagogical space are offering the most fascinating new set of challenges and possibilities in terms of identity/identification and community in curriculum theorizing, from representations of identities in cyberspace to cyborg identification, from the hell of dystopia to the idyll of digi-topia. There is important work being produced on new technology in/and education and much of this body of literature takes up computers and the World Wide Web as information sources, and still sees students, teachers, and computers as being located in the classroom (e.g., Kent & McNerney, 1999). An alternative to this approach is a cultural/media studies approach that works not with the notion of technology entering the school but with the notion of the school-based user of technology entering the world of technology. The computer, for example, can locate the user in cyberspace, an alternative “space without space,” and provides the potential for the student, like any other user, to explore and take on many other identities (Harraway, 1991; Spender, 1996; Wilbur, 1997) and become part of “cybersociety” (Kitchin, 1998) and communities in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1993; Smith & Pollock, 1998). Thus, while work on computers in schools and in the classroom is crucial, there needs to be more work that takes up cyberspace as an alternative place and examines such issues as how traditional identities are represented and transformed, what new identities and identifications are open to students, and what it means to theorize identity and curriculum in cyberspace (a space that does not readily lend itself to classroom management and other means of social control and surveillance). These two approaches need not be mutually exclusive: Bromley and Apple’s (1999) Education/Technology/Power: Educational Computing as a Social Practice brings the two approaches together by having sections on computing and discursive social practices, on computing and democracy, as well as on computing and classroom practices. At the conference, work that took a similar dual approach of considering computing and new technology in terms of both classroom practice and wider “social” interaction included the paper and roundtable presentation by Iseke-Barnes and Yeoman on “Aboriginal Educators in Cyberspace,” Voithofer’s session on “The Cyborg Diaries: Emerging Curriculum Issues in Media Design, Literacy, and Identity,” and Scheurich’s session on “Using Video Documentaries as a Representational Practice: A Research Documentary on Mexican American Migrants and Their Educational Experiences.”

Surfing the “Third Wave” to the End(s) of Reconceptualization

As the collection of essays in Pinar’s (1975) Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists shows so clearly, reconceptualization was a very efficacious concept marking a bold turn to nontraditional topics in and conceptualizations of the substance and role of curriculum theorizing in the 1970s. However, what has sometimes been taken up as a neat dualism with a clear divide between “traditionalism” and “reconceptualization” was always somewhat reductionist, and continued use of both terms only perpetuates what has become an outmoded hindrance to undertaking more nuanced discussions of the present and future of curriculum theorizing.

It is quite significant, for example, that none of the individual and session submissions to Curriculum Theorizing proposed to address, even in passing, the political struggle over curriculum theorizing itself in general or the supposed struggle between “traditionalist” and “reconceptualization” approaches in particular. It is also significant that none of the writers of proposals one would be tempted to identify as reconceptualization actually chose to label their proposals “reconceptualization,” let alone to defend or justify their supposed “nontraditionalist” approaches. What all of this indicates is that while it was necessary to mark the radical shifts undertaken in the 1970s, as Lather asserted in her presentation, “Curriculum Studies: State-of-the-Art, 1980s,” the projects, perspectives, and approaches marked by the term had become well established and commonplace in the 1980s. Now, at the turn of the century, there is no longer a need to label similar work or derivative work reconceptualization. Rather, reconceptualization ought to be taken up as a specific historical intervention that has made possible and strongly influenced much of contemporary curriculum theorizing.

The traditionalist/reconceptualization dualism depends on the homogenization of very different kinds of theoretical work in what is now a very varied and highly fragmented field, and the forcing of these variously shaped pegs into two neat round holes into which they cannot fit and which can hardly begin to hold all of them. The dualism is not only reductionist, it also hinders more complex ways of conceptualizing curriculum theorizing. One alternative approach is to identify the purposes for which curriculum theorizing is undertaken. Macdonald (1971), for example, identified three purposes for curriculum theorizing: developmental (using theory to aid in practical application work of curriculum development, research, and evaluation); empirical (the use of empirical research to validate already proposed or established relationships); and reconceptual (making theorizing itself the issue: problematizing established approaches and developing new approaches and concerns). Macdonald therefore originally identified three categories based on the purpose for which theorizing is undertaken (and also included the political and ideological). The traditionalism/reconceptualization dualism reduces the field to two contrasting antagonistic approaches locked in battle on ideological and political grounds and eschews the purposes for which theorizing is undertaken as a criterion for evaluating curriculum theorizing.
The mainstay of critiques of “reconceptualization” remains an objection to the so-called “flight from practice” (Klein, 1992; Sears, 1992b; Wraga, 1999a, 1999b), with practice conceptualized very narrowly as classroom teaching in schools (K-12). The essence of this critique is that curriculum theorizing is supposed to be about or directly and immediately applicable to practice, and since theory is supposedly divorced from practice in reconceptualization, it follows that reconceptualization is not particularly useful, perhaps even totally irrelevant to practice. Sears (1992b) asserts not only that the original “reconceptualists” and their work have not had any effect on curriculum and pedagogy in the schools but that their proteges and their work, what he calls the “second wave,” are proving equally irrelevant and ineffectual. In particularly harsh versions of the flight from practice critique, the insinuation is that reconceptualization is in fact invalid and needs to be either abandoned or reined in (and “de-politicized”?) to make it directly applicable to practice.

The “flight from practice” argument is based on an insistence on a clear distinction between theory- and university-based theorists on the one hand and practice- and school-based practitioners on the other. This distinction is depicted and endorsed in everything from the literature on curriculum theory (Klein, 1992) and curriculum planning (Connelley & Clandinin, 1988) to the cultures of both the universities and schools, and in the assumed and assigned roles in the majority of relationships between representatives from schools and universities.

Sessions at the conference such as “The Postmodern Challenge to Historical Knowledge: Implications for Teaching History, History Teacher Education, and the Museum Display”; “Pedagogy: Teaching Practice/Practical Theory”; and “Shaking the Ivory Tower: Writing, Advising, and Critiquing the Postmodern Dissertation” could be seen as having served as reminders that in many ways and in various circumstances theory and theorists and practice and practitioners do not exist in different, hermetically sealed worlds but come together in praxis. For example, by illustrating how a postmodern approach could be utilized in teaching history, history teacher education, and the museum display, the presenters in the first of the sessions mentioned showed by implication that avant-garde theory is relevant to “traditional” subject curricula and pedagogy; that professors are not only theorists but practitioners/teachers, that pedagogy happens in “non-traditional” places such as museums, and that addressing theory and pedagogy in these varied spaces can cohere in a very stimulating, interrelated discussion of praxis.

Thus reminded, we can identify any number of examples of how theory and practice come together in praxis and individuals alternate between and/or blend the roles of theorist and practitioner in spite of restrictive labels which tend to fix them as one or the other. For example, though they are usually assigned and indeed most often self-identify strictly as practitioners, teachers’ knowledge and their pedagogy are in fact a blend of theory and practice (Ross, Cornett, & McCutcheon, 1992; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, 1996, 1998). In addition there are the various reconceptualizations of teachers’ roles such as “teachers as intellectuals,” and “teachers as researchers.” Theory can be derived very directly from practice (Ellsworth, 1997; Simon, 1992), practitioners can have a direct influence on and input into theory and theorization (Schubert, 1992), and work in the critical tradition which some would identify as being irrelevant to practice can be shown to be of direct relevance to practice (Martusewicz & Reynolds, 1995). In his acceptance speech at the conference (for the Lifetime Achievement Award in Curriculum Studies), Michael Connelly asserted that his students, who are usually current or former teachers, have had the most influence on his theoretical work. In her Vice Presidential Address, Janet Miller talked about a group of teachers who presented their theoretical work with her on panels at the ICT conference. Both these examples are illustrations of teachers’ active engagement in theorizing. To simply label a figure like Connelly a “theorist” would be to acknowledge his work in theorizing while overlooking his pedagogy, research activity, active and ongoing work in local schools and with teachers and principals, and his administrative work at the university, including the establishment and successful coordination of the Centre for Teacher Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.

Contrary to the argument that reconceptualization is irrelevant if not invalid since curriculum theorizing has always been and therefore ought to continue to be about schooling, Schubert (1982) has argued persuasively that the reconceptualization’s expansion of curriculum to address social justice issues and pedagogy in nonschool environments is quite justified. Going back to the essence of curriculum study, the what, why, and how of education, Schubert argues that there is no reason to restrict those questions to schooling because, first, these are questions that have existed well before the institutionalization of education and the formal establishment of curriculum studies; second, education is not synonymous with schooling but ought to be conceptualized much more broadly and hence curriculum itself ought to be about education broadly defined rather than about schooling; third, curriculum should be concerned with aspects of human lived experience, not just school experience if it is to have an effect on society as a whole; and fourth, schools are a microcosm of society and for some curricularists the ultimate aim is to change society for the better, not to improve schooling as an end in itself.

There are many reasons, therefore, for moving beyond the traditionalist/reconceptualization dualism. These range from the shaky foundations on which critiques of reconceptualization are based to the reductionism involved in the dualism, to the fact that reconceptualization has passed from a cutting edge intervention to a well-established foundational moment for much current work. As Molner (1992) asserted early in the 1990s, the struggle between traditionalist and reconceptualization approaches to curriculum theorizing is “too much ado about too much nothing.” In fact it could be asserted that with the turn to cultural studies and the virtually ubiquitous post discourses, the literature and the conference sessions indicate that we are surfing a “Third Wave” of cutting edge curriculum theorizing, one which draws on the work of the original reconceptualists and figures and work Sears (1992b) described as the “Second Wave,” but which takes erstwhile supposedly radically untraditional characteristics (such as theorizing about non-school pedagogical spaces, theorizing for social justice) for granted and concentrates on pushing the theoretical limits of
curriculum theorizing, stressing inter/post-disciplinarity and complexifying the struggle for social justice in theory and in praxis.

A Concluding Note on the Importance of Looking Up in Wall Climbing

Curriculum theorizing has been overtly politicized: It has been variously institutionalized, freed of institutional constraints, restricted to K-12 schooling and opened up to other pedagogical spaces, queered, raced, gendered, aestheticized, psychoanalyzed, moralized, modernized, and postmodernized, all to such an extent that it presently demands a high degree of flexibility and tolerance from all involved. In fact from the six characteristics I have identified it is obvious that curriculum theorizing has diversified and fragmented to such an extent that it appears to have put to rest the possibility of continuing to falsely describe it as a cohesive field. This state of affairs is not necessarily to be seen as negative. Of course it is frustrating for those who are invested in the nostalgia of a unified field that never was unified; those who insist on policing the borders, demanding conformity and decrying all who overstep what they see as the limits of the field; as well as those who are invested in being seen as being on one side or the other of an uncomplicated dualism locked in ideological conflict. These stances are simply both inadequate and inappropriate in the face of the status quo of the field. As Miller asserted in her Vice-Presidential Address, curriculum studies is an ongoing and never ending project, characterized by multiple perspectives and what she described as “a riotous array of theoretical approaches,” all of which need to be held in productive tension with one another.

What is demanded from all curricularists at present is flexibility, open-mindedness, and eclecticism. This is not to suggest that the field is becoming or ought to be contention free. Indeed the characteristics of current curriculum theorizing ought to generate considerable debate on such issues as whether curriculum theorizing can offer other answers to the potentially immobilizing excesses of deconstruction other than using modernist, humanist concepts to curb those excesses; whether we could and should be using postmodernism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and postcolonialism as approaches to teacher education and in the teaching of school subjects; what the limitations are of a cultural studies approach to curriculum theorizing (thus far cultural studies has been celebrated but not seriously interrogated as an alternative to critical pedagogy and multiculturalism); to what extent it is possible to utilize the post discourses in the interrogation and improvement of individual subject/discipline curricula at all levels of formal education and in other pedagogical spaces; what challenges are posed and what opportunities opened up by the new media in general and the internet and World Wide Web in particular; how we could take up curriculum theorizing such that it includes more seriously and consistently conceptions of theorizing and practice as praxis; how ideology and politics can be utilized in debates such that they inform rather than shut down discussion; how curriculum theorizing can become more comprehensive and complex such that it includes simultaneous considerations of schooling and other pedagogical spaces, formal education and popular culture, history, examination and critique of the status quo, pointers and concrete strategies for educational reform, and projections for the future of education.

Facing the expansive, winding, and still growing wall of literature on curriculum theorizing, it would be all too easy for you to look down and point to the great globs of curriculum theorizing my presentation has left uncovered on the floor. Appropriating Pinar et al.’s (1995) classifications as an expedient guide, we see that I have neglected to examine curriculum as aesthetic text, as international text (and as global text), as religious text, as institutionalized text, as phenomenological text, and as autobiographical/biographical text. I ask, however, that you not look down and stress my neglect of these aspects (this would be bad form in rock climbing, after all), but instead look up and focus on the little globules nailed to the wall. Don’t let their present quivering state nor their precarious perch fool you. Already slowly hardening, they are in fact solidifying to become part of the collection of secure, concrete handholds on which we are to use to climb into curriculum theorizing in the 21st century.

Notes

Many thanks to Janet Miller who invited me to join the 1999 Division B Program Committee and who read and made insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper; to Mimi Oinar who encouraged me to accept Janet’s invitation and whose rigorous scholarship, bravery, and good humor in the face of illness is a great inspiration to me; to the other members of the Division B Program Committee—Craig Kridel, Barry Franklin, Paula Wick, Liz Buerger, Karen Evans, Kate Cruikshank, Magda Lewis, and Rebecca Luce-Kapler—for a wonderfully smooth and stimulating working relationship; and lastly to the two ER reviewers who were particularly thorough in their reviews and who made very helpful suggestions for improving the paper.

This metaphor is a hybrid derived from an appropriation of an existing metaphor and an existing simile. As Graue and Grant (1998) point out, in the case of reviews of educational research, “metaphors have depicted the scholarly literature as the construction of a wall ...” (p. 389). The simile is one used in an advertisement for the Prudential Insurance Company. Travelling on a train in London, having just completed the first draft of this paper, I saw an ad which contained the following quote: “Trying to nail a mortgage that fits you perfectly can be like nailing jelly to a wall. . . . Right, let’s nail some jelly. The man from the Pru.” It struck me that the combination of the improbable task and the attitude of trying one’s best to accomplish such a task nonetheless, constituted a very apt description of my endeavor in writing this review. In North America the brand name Jell-O is most commonly used for what the British refer to as jelly (while the word jelly is usually used for what the British commonly call jam), so assuming a predominantly North American audience I have substituted the word Jell-O for the original jelly in this essay.

The session was eventually put together as “Curriculum Studies on the Threshold of the 21st Century: Contemporary State of the Art,” with prominent curricularists Barry Franklin and Janet Miller acting as chairs and respondents. Details (chairs, respondents/discussants, and presenters names) on all sessions referred to throughout this paper are listed in the reference section at the end of the paper.

For example, there is considerable contention over whether Dewey’s work is to be regarded as traditional pragmatist, or progressive in the liberal or the radical sense (e.g., Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Hiebowtish, 1992; Schubert, 1986). What is at stake in making these claims and counterclaims is which philosophical and political tradition can claim Dewey as foundational to its current discourse.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Pinar (1999b) most recently refused to pick up the gauntlet to directly defend the honor of reconceptualization after the latest challenge by Wrage (1999a). After his early spirited explication and defense of reconceptualization (e.g., Pinar, 1978, 1980), and given the growth and wide acceptance of work
that derives from and builds on reconceptualization, it is not altogether surprising that Pinar’s response this time around seemed to be characterized by bemused weariness. It should be noted, however, that while the traditionalist/reconceptualization divide has become passe for many, it has not disappeared and can still evoke strong reactions. As one reviewer of this paper pointed out, the “Professors of Curriculum” session (which I did not attend) was dominated by the traditionalist/reconceptualization debate.

This phrase is appropriated from Ian Adam & Helen Tiffin’s (1990) Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism. Contributors to the book variously theorize modernism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, and most importantly the links, divergences, and contradictions of these discourses in relation to one another (specifically in terms of literary criticism). Annamaria Caruss’s (1990) “Post, Post and Post. Or, Where is South African Literature in All This?” for example, examines South African literature and literary theory in the juxtaposed and interrelated theoretical contexts of postcolonialism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism, while John Frow’s (1990) “What Was Post-Modernism?” provides an early harbinger of our present theoretical impasse by asserting that both postmodernism and postcolonialism operate through a “logic of anti-periodization” (p. 139) (which makes even a chronological progression difficult).

The neglect of social class has become manifest not only in terms of theory and theorizing but also in pedagogy and social and employment policy. In terms of pedagogy, bell hooks (1994) has observed that class is rarely talked about in the United States; nowhere is the importance of class differences in educational settings particularly noted. Class differences are particularly ignored in classrooms. From grade school on, we are all encouraged to cross the threshold of the classroom believing we are entering a democratic space—a free zone where the desire to study and learn makes us all equal (p. 177).

In terms of social and institutional policy, Andy Hargreaves points out in his “Critical Introduction” to Ivor Goodson’s (1994) Studying Curriculum that “Many employers now designate themselves as Equal Opportunities employers that do not discriminate according to gender, race, sexual orientation or disability. None, to my knowledge, proclaim that they do not discriminate according to social class” (p. 7). He goes on to make the link between curriculum and the neglect of social class in policy by pointing out that “it is through the content and categories of a curriculum that remains alien to much working-class experience that the achievements of working-class students which qualify them for or disqualify them from better employment and opportunities for social influence are fundamentally delimited and defined” (p. 7).

In their presentation, “They Don’t Want to Hear it,” Suzanne Miller and Gina DeBlase Tryzna dealt with a school classroom in which one reviewer of this paper pointed out, the “Professors of Curriculum” session (which I did not attend) was dominated by the traditionalist/reconceptualization debate. This review has simply put some hand and footholds onto the wall of the literature on curriculum theorizing and the invitation is for the reader to utilize these (among others) in negotiating that wall.


Campana, C. “Welfare mothers’ in an historically black university: Stories of students and faculty on the edge” on Ideology and Curriculum Revisited: Alienation, Privilege and Dispossession in the College Classroom.


Iseke-Barnes, J., & Yeoman, E. “Aboriginal educators in cyberspace: Issues of language and pedagogy” [Roundtable]


Maher, F. “How do we define black?” An exploration of the construction of race and ethnicity in women’s studies in England and the U.S.” on Extending Discourse Communities: Gender, Race, Class, and Sexualities in International School Contexts.


Miller, J. “What’s left in the field... A curriculum memoir” [Division B Vice-Presidential Address]

Miller, S., & DeBlase Tryzna, G. “They don’t want to hear it” on Contextualizing Curriculum: Politics, Policy, Practice.

Paliota-Chiarioli, M. “‘Coming out/going home’: Culturally diverse Australian girls and young women interrogating heterosexism and racism” on Extending Discourse Communities: Gender, Race, Class and Sexualities in International School Contexts.


References (Conference Sessions)

Adding, Subtracting and Dividing: Latino Students in Urban School Curriculum Contexts. [Chair/Discussant: Kris Gutierrez. Participants: Cheryl Craig, Linda McNeil, Angela Valenzuela]

Cultural Studies, Post-Colonialism, and a Multicultural Curriculum. [Chair/Discussant: Peter McFarren. Participants: Dennis Carlson, Ronald Jetty, Cameron McCarthy, Greg Dimitriadis, Dan Reyes]

Curriculum by Design: Museum Exhibits and Issues of Representation, Audience, Time and Space. [Chair/Discussant: Renee Fountain. Participants: Elizabeth Ellsworth, Mimi Orner, Barb Tarockoff, Brenda Trofarenko]

Curriculum Studies on the Threshold of the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities. [Chair: Elaine Collins. Participants: O.L. Davis, Elliot Eisner, Maxine Greene, Madeleine Grumet]


Curriculum Theory, French Post-Structuralism and the “Science Debates”. [Chair: John Kaven. Participants: Denise Egea-Kuehne, Eva Kugly-Smolska, Marla Morris, William Doll, David Blades]


Extending Discourse Communities: Gender, Race, Class and Sexualities in International School Contexts. [Frances Maher. Participants: Frances Maher, Julie McLeod, Debbie Epstein, Mary Jane Kehlly, Maria Pallota-Chiarolli]

Feminist Engagements: Male Theory and Education in the 20th Century. [Chair: Kathleen Weiler. Participants: Maxine Greene, Jane Kenway, Linda Tuhuiw Smith, Lynda Stone, Kathleen Weiler, Roxanna Nag]

A Great Clock of Society: Compulsory Education and the School Calendar. [Chair: Joel Weiss. Participants: Joel Weiss, Todd Rakoff, Robert Bronz, Rafael Barreto-Rivera]

Masculinities at School: Gender Relations and Representations of Boys, Men, and Masculinity. [Chair: Nancy Lesko. Participants: Melody Shank, Khaua Murtadah, Laurie Mandel, Jackson Katz, James King]

Negotiating and Constructing a Cultural Point of View in Elementary Reading Classes for At-Risk Asian American Children. [Chair/Discussant: Lena Choe. Participants: Shuvu-Yu Lee, Jai-Iing Yau, Carol Huang]

Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma. [Chair: Sharon Rosenberg. Discussant: Roger Simon. Participants: Andrea Liss, Claudia Eppert, Julie Salverston, Ines Dussel]


Unpacking in Public: Exploring Social/Racial Identities in an Urban University. [Chair: Carol Korn. Discussant: Peter Taubman. Participants: Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy, Dennis Parsons, Carol Korn, Alberto M. Busztyn, Kathleen McSorley, Sherry Giles]

Using Arts-Based Research in Postmodern Curriculum Theory Courses. [Chair: Patrick K. Participants: Raina Podmore, Luna Hershey Magi, Rebecca M. Spehler, Deanna Binder, Betty-Anne Schlennder, Marnie Rutledge]

Using Video Documentaries as a Representational Practice: A Research Documentary on Mexican American Migrants and Their Educational Experiences. [Chair: Jim Scheurich. Respondents: Maricela Olivia, Michelle Young, Participants: Jim Scheurich, Miguel Guajardo, Elissa Fineman]

References (Publications)


