

“Course” Work: Pinar's *Currere* as an Initiation into Curriculum Studies

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Abstract

In this article, four new doctoral students reflect on Pinar's *currere* process as an initiation into the discipline of curriculum studies. *Currere* involves examining one's experiences as curricula that shape understandings: each of us undertook the steps of *currere* individually and then shared our reflections through collaborative autobiography. This collaboration expanded our self-reflexivity in relation to curriculum and to discursive contexts and, unexpectedly, created an authentic learning community. The *currere* process has not only written us into curriculum studies, but also compelled us to "participate in the constitution and transformation of ourselves" (Pinar, 1994, p. 74) that is so vital to our work in education. The following article—which consists of collaborative and personal writing—describes a valuable practice for bringing graduate students into curriculum studies. It also considers whether the self-reflexivity encouraged by *currere* might still be relevant for contemporary scholars and educators almost four decades after its inception.

Introduction

It is not unusual for graduate education to be compared to a journey (Smith, 1996; Young Joo, 2004). But what kind of a journey is it? Now that we are nearing the end of the first year of our doctoral studies, we—a cohort of four curriculum studies students enrolled in a graduate program in education research—have begun talking about our journey as a pilgrimage. This metaphor resonates with us in many ways. Like modern pilgrims embarking upon the Camino de Santiago, we arrived in September as strangers with different motivations, different desires, and different fears. We came with our own experiences, research interests and expectations. Ultimately we will each traverse this road on our own, but we find ourselves on the same path with the common goal of attaining our PhDs; along the way we find ourselves, like pilgrims, sharing tales, visions, obstacles, and understandings.

Like pilgrims of any era, we do not expect our journey to be easy, but, in a tradition as old as the 14th-century *Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer, 1987) and as recent as the film *The Way* (Alexanian & Estevez, 2010), we have found unexpected community among our fellow travellers. This community did not develop by happenstance, however. During the first week of our first course together, we were assigned a project that included autobiographical writing following William Pinar's (1975) *currere* method. The stages of *currere* became for us, individually and collectively, the first steps of our pilgrimage—of our shared journey into the discipline of curriculum studies.

Currere as a method involves looking at relations between academic experiences, life histories, identity, and social (re)construction. Pinar (1975) outlines a process by which participants write about their educational experiences in four stages: regressive (with a focus on past experiences), progressive (with a focus on the future), analytical (with a focus on the present) and syncretical (with the aim of integrating the previous three stages). Pinar's method was linked to his aim of reconceptualizing curriculum studies and the role of curriculum scholars (Graham, 1992), but it has precipitated a range of further analyses within and beyond curriculum studies. For instance, Kanu and Glor (2006) have argued that *currere* can equip teachers with what they need to function in a "knowledge society"; Norris and Sawyer (2012) build upon *currere* in formulating duoethnography as a dialogic methodology; Hongyu (2010) highlights the temporality that *currere* enables for transformative teacher education; Chien and colleagues (2013) incorporate *currere* into a virtual Second Life curriculum demonstration for education graduate students. Such scholars view "self-interrogation" (Norris & Sawyer, 2012) as integral to *currere* and to its significance within education and within curriculum studies in particular. Indeed, for the four of us, *currere*, with its attendant examinations, was presented as the entry point to curriculum studies and to our evolving identities as educational researchers. It was our initiation.

We were not asked to undertake the challenges of *currere* alone. Although we were retracing and projecting forward our individual educational pathways, we were also encouraged to share these stories with each other. While *currere* was originally conceived of as a solitary activity (Pinar, 1975), the collaborative aspect of our *currere* process enriched and enlivened the experience for each of us. After engaging in our own thought and writing, we sat

together and shared stories that both highlighted our distinctiveness and emphasized the depth of our common experiences as students and educators. We then returned to our individual writing with the encouragement and questions of our colleagues to spur us on to further self-reflection. The result was that, in a very short time, we established an authentic learning community that now provides camaraderie and perspective during what could otherwise be a lonely journey.

What follows is a compilation of each of our reflections on *currere* and its lingering impact on each of us as new graduate students and novice curriculum scholars. In the four individual sections below, we consider the insights that *currere* provided for each of us, the significance of this method within curriculum studies, and the connections we have made between *currere* and other discursive contexts.

Susan: Remembering *Currere*

I have kept a journal for most of my life, and so when tasked to partake in a *currere* writing project at the start of my doctoral program, I embraced the opportunity with enthusiasm, interested in looking at my life in terms of my academic or curricular experiences specifically. What resulted from this writing was a type of clearing or pathway that enabled me to begin to understand the particular influences that have shaped my perspectives and what I know. In fact I was now able to view my own life as a curriculum (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). The collaborative aspect of this project enabled the participants—myself included—to construct a trusting, supportive and nurturing environment which was necessary in order to invite the “self-interrogation in which one reclaims one’s self from one’s self as one unpacks and repacks the meanings one holds” (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 13). This safe environment allowed for us to engage a critical lens through which to begin challenging our assumptions and pre-conceived understandings of what we know and how we have come to know it.

Partaking in collaborative autobiography through the utilization of Pinar’s (1975) method of *currere* has put into motion a process in my own way of thinking that has enabled me to continue to become aware of the multitude of curricula that are at play in my own life-path—past, present, and future. The process of looking back (regressive stage) enables me to gather together what I know and how I have come to know it in regard to my own curricula experiences. Looking toward the future (progressive stage) allows me to put forth my questions and map out where this line of questioning will take me. Stripping away both the past and the future then allows me to take an inventory and put into action whatever is required to bring me closer to answering the questions that are presenting themselves to me. In terms of my doctoral program, *currere* has provided me with a valuable starting point, a place where assumptions, biases, values and beliefs can be realized and analyzed. Sharing such experiences provides an opportunity to step away from our own experiences and see them through fresh eyes.

Becoming aware of the plethora of curricula, through *currere*, that have been at play during my life span has made me aware of the societal stories that have played a shaping role in who I think I am. By focusing on curriculum as I moved through the stages of *currere*, I was able to locate my own history within some of the oppressive, formulating and prescribing curricula that have been in operation, just below the surface of my own awareness, such as the curricula—including hidden and null—of fashion, media, television, music, videos, cinema/movies, health, and so on. Also, as we move forward in our academic programs, and as we continue to interrogate, examine, critique and understand curriculum, *currere* can be valuable in reminding us to re-examine our own assumptions, beliefs and thoughts on a regular basis, continually introducing the critical perspective and pushing us to deeper and more meaningful understandings of our own life-worlds.

There is something to be gained in the form of confidence and clarity by sharing your story with others who are able to receive it with compassion, understanding, and a true desire to get to know you better. In our situation, we had four colleagues who were all very committed to the process, and so the environment and bond created was positive and supportive. *Currere*, in order to be effective, requires the author’s honesty, integrity, trust, and confidence. It also requires the willingness to grow—academically, socially, personally, and professionally—and to allow oneself to be pushed to move beyond pre-conceived boundaries and limits, to challenge assumptions, and to begin to

understand the world and your own capacities within this world in new ways. Our pasts do not have to become our futures, but in order to make change (social or personal) we need to first understand where we (individually or collectively) have come from and what has shaped not only what we know, but also who we think we are.

As researchers in the social sciences, awareness of one's self and who or what one represents is crucial. *Currere* enables one to gain this awareness, to discuss with others the implications of one's self in research, and to formulate strategies to accommodate or address one's self within one's own research. Self-reflexivity combined with collaborative autobiography enables participants to confront their assumptions and view them through the lens of another. Building a community of colleagues who will challenge and interrogate our understandings of our worlds will provide for integrity, validity, and authenticity in our collective works. As a new doctoral student and as a curriculum scholar, *currere* provided me with a starting point and a process which I can utilize as I continue to unravel who I am as a researcher, as a single, middle-aged woman, and as a human being.

Kim: Fragmentation and Integration

I entered the process of *currere* somewhat reluctantly. In retrospect, I see that part of my reticence was due to my lifelong, but until then unexplored, understanding of what it means to be a student, especially a student in this particular field.

Although my master's degree has the words "Curriculum, Learning, and Teaching" attached to it, I had focused almost exclusively on the teaching aspect of that trinity. After fifteen years as a classroom teacher, my identity at the time was "teacher on hiatus," and I filtered readings and assignments through that lens. I began my graduate work with the simplistic paradigm that curriculum was what I taught to learners. My understanding of curriculum as a field of study emerged slowly.

By starting a PhD in a new curriculum studies program, however, I had unconsciously shifted both my focus and my identity. I had begun to see myself as a student once again, and that shift uncovered a different set of expectations. My understanding of the field of curriculum studies was murky and somewhat fluid, but my understanding of how to be a successful student felt solid. I envisioned my role as an avid, but silent, observer: sitting in on this "complicated conversation" (Pinar, 2004), listening carefully to the established voices, and internally forming my own understandings without participating in the actual conversation.

As a result, I struggled with the purpose of the *currere* assignment. I was unsure why I would start this rigorous academic journey by looking back at my own experiences. After all, I had been raised in a modernist educational system that considers "the narrative *I* as a form of intellectual narcissism" (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 20). When I was a teacher on hiatus taking classes for professional development, it was fine to explore my own experiences, but now as an earnest doctoral student, it was time to learn from the recognized scholars in the field.

Nevertheless, as a good student, I dutifully worked through the *currere* process. Because I had focused so closely on my teaching experiences during my master's degree, I now restricted my writing to my experiences as a student. By the time I started the syncretical step in which one is to reintegrate the perceptions and projections of past, present and future in order to "conceptualize the present situation" (Pinar, 1975, p. 13), I was beginning to see some of the interrelations and themes that have characterized my educational experience. Some of these insights arose as I wrote, but even more significantly, they were clarified and validated as my peers thoughtfully read and responded to my *currere* writing. Although I did not appreciate it immediately, taking the time to reflect on the particularities of my student experiences has allowed me to begin, and continue, the process of reshaping my understandings of what it means to be a student and what it means to study curriculum.

By way of example, I will highlight how this occurred in the regressive step of the *currere* process. The most difficult experiences to write about were those that emphasized the tension between my faith and my academic ambitions. As a product of the public school system in British Columbia, I had been taught both explicitly and

implicitly that academics and religious belief are mutually exclusive. Naively, I had accepted the idea that knowledge is value-free and that in order to be a good student I must not taint my learning by trying to reconcile it with my faith. However, as I began my university education, I found it increasingly difficult to maintain this artificial dichotomy: I regularly struggled with what I perceived as my dilemma: keep quiet about my differing world-view in order to get along, or speak authentically and be labeled an outsider. Usually I went to talk to my professors to discuss these issues before I started writing assignments. One sociology professor dismissed me with these words: “I feel sorry for you because you can't even see how blind you are.” To someone who loves learning, loves wrestling with ideas, and values (probably too much) the opinions of those who teach her, those were painful words.

When I moved from the regressive to progressive and analytic steps, I realized that this experience of tension and fragmentation was still at work in my understanding of what it means to be a student. Having returned to university, this time with the aim of becoming an academic, I realized that I was feeling anxious about how to be a successful student while maintaining my integrity and authenticity.

While it would be overstatement to say that the *currere* writing process was singularly transformative, it was helpful as a vehicle to “give voice to a private experience within a public setting” (Graham, 1992, p. 35). Because the *currere* assignment included sharing our writing with our classmates, I was not left to my own private interpretations and musings. Instead, my experience was made public even if to just a few people. I was able to challenge and be challenged about the notion that students are recipients of established knowledge. I began to see how hidden curricula had shaped my definitions of knowledge, academia, religion, and learning. Although each of us had different school experiences, we could all relate to the experience of feeling that parts of ourselves or of our identities were not welcome at school.

Perhaps the most significant lesson that emerged from this process was the realization that, as both a teacher and a student, I am already a part of the curriculum conversation. Although I initially discounted the significance of my own experiences, through the process of writing, reflecting, and most importantly sharing the *currere* process with my peers, I have begun to see the potential of the *currere* process to “assist in healing the breach between much educational research and the actual experiences of teachers and students” (Graham, 1992, p. 29). Rather than tethering us to the past, sharing our stories within a supportive community allowed us to move ahead in the field of curriculum studies with greater perspective and optimism.

Aubrey: Writing Myself into Curriculum Studies

Participating in the *currere* writing process enabled me to identify significant moments in my personal history, and to make connections between those experiences and discursive contexts. I, like my collaborators, had previously engaged in a number of autobiographical exercises, but I found that our *currere* process focused my autobiographical inquiries in ways particular to curriculum studies, so as to strengthen my interrogations of knowledge and schooling. One experience stands out for me as an example of this kind of focus. The following excerpt from my personal *currere* writings describes the moment when I realized that not everyone in Canada was Métis, which I understood at the time to mean being of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry:

It's grade five. We're doing flags about who we are, with pictures about where we come from. I ... am trying to tell my teacher about being part Native. She is helping me figure out what to draw for that. We decide I should put a Canadian flag. To me, Canadian means both—European people and Native people. If your family is in Canada, you come from both. Everyone is part Native. My teacher tells me that this is not true, that I am the only one in the class. She seems pleased by what I've told her. I look at the other kids. If they are not part Native, where did they come from? ... Maybe Canadian doesn't mean what I thought.

This memory is significant in that it reveals the difficulty that I had understanding and representing my Indigenous ancestry in the assigned nationality-based task. It also locates the instant of my disillusionment about Canada's

ethnic makeup: I had truly maintained until that day a nascent assumption that our country was made up of “mixed” people, that everyone was “part Native” like me. As a curriculum scholar, it is vital that I am able to theorize such experiences: to see, for instance, the ways in which this memory can be read through critical writings around race and Indigenous studies. This day in grade five helped to shape my cultural identity, and experiences like these inform my scholarship now. My doctoral research, for instance, grapples with the question of what it means to me to be Métis in Canada and the role of school curricula in shaping this understanding. The process of *currere* and the dialogue with my colleagues has pushed me critically, so that I am better able to contextualize my experiences in relation to our discipline.

Working through the process of *currere* on my own, I unearthed a great deal of material that I could add to my foundation as a new curriculum scholar; however, the subsequent collaborative steps that we took together were even more valuable for me as I sought to set myself up in this new location. The four of us were required and enabled—by an assignment from an insightful professor—to work together in a highly intimate and respectful way within a few short weeks of starting our PhD programs. This closeness in itself was an invaluable initiation for us as a group of collaborators going forward in our studies. More particularly, our conversations enabled us to see parts of our own stories more clearly. When the others misunderstood a certain section or challenged my thinking with their questions, I was able to generate richer interpretations of my own stories. The following example from my *currere* writings led to such a conversation:

It is grade four. ... Our teacher is giving tests back. ... She says someone got one hundred percent on the test. She is proud. In my reimagining of this memory, all the young faces turn to look at me ... I feel sick, down in my belly, and I want to vaporize. She says it's me. I stand, and walk the long, long walk to the front to take my paper. I am sorry, I am bad... I walk back to my seat. Shiny sticker feeling, hundred percent feeling, shameful feeling, lovely neat rows of numbers on the paper feeling. It was me again. I want to be erased.

This was a vivid memory for me that speaks to my self-image in elementary school. I felt that I stuck out from the other kids and that I did not get positive attention from them for my academic abilities. I was unpopular and geeky. I had a hard time reconciling and celebrating my own achievement. The piece that I had to look at more closely during my conversation with my curriculum colleagues was this latter point about shame. As I described the memory, I assumed that my feelings of shame made sense. I aced a test, so I felt bad—it seemed like a natural reaction to me. However, my colleagues drew this point out in conversation, questioning my use of the word “shameful” and asking me to explain why I had had this response. Why did I feel ashamed of myself as a child when I performed well in school? Did I still have those kinds of feelings? Was this an issue of fitting in, of wanting to be more like the other “normal” kids in my school? Our discussion denaturalized my feelings: I turned a critical eye to my self-shaming for the first time, and was able to extend that gaze into my present, and to recognize that I still, sometimes, hold myself back from doing what I am good at, simply because I feel that I should not attract attention to myself. I would not have been able to come to these realizations on my own. My enactment of Pinar’s four-step process allowed me to locate particular sites of experience, but it was the collaboration with my colleagues and our respectfully critical discussions that enabled me to further understand the significance of these sites. This work has enriched my engagement with others’ research and has strengthened my situation as a new scholar in curriculum studies.

Eelco: *Currere*, a Flash Back and Forth

Being invited to write what your life is about helps to get a hold of it. It forces you to pause on your busy trail and look back, look around you, look up and look down, to find words to catch your findings and the emotions that accompany them; the understanding that flows forth from the process gives an opportunity to know oneself better, and, in our case, to get to know the other.

Because we engaged in writing our life history in a teachers' or educational context, we discovered that our self-reflexivity was spoken to first as individual writers, and secondly as readers of each other's works. How we read the writings of the others in our little research group, and how the reading confronted us with questions about it, and how we tried hard to grasp what each of us had really told us in the writings, taught us about the other, but, in the way we approached it, we found that it even more so taught us about ourselves.

The routine of *currere* brought about that we all felt a safety and openness with each other far more than any of us had expected or had experienced before in any class, because we all opened up in our writings—which is somewhat safer than just talking in class— and we were able to read the other writings in the privacy of our homes. Of course the size of our group enabled this too, but without the *currere* assignment, we would not have known so much about each other. Because the process was phased in steps and we sent out our pieces when we felt that we were up to it, we were seduced into opening up more, sharing more of our hidden worlds, confiding more of our secrets; interestingly enough all of that related to our profession and to our research field of curriculum studies.

Due to previous experiences with autobiographic writing by students whom I have supervised in the past number of years, I am not surprised by the powerful impact the *currere* method had on the four of us. I felt confident about the effects and was conscious about the subtleties and necessary arrangements needed to create safe space in the group. I took my own responsibility for that in the group and felt valued for it.

Having made the comparison between autobiographic writing and *currere* forces me to highlight the differences too. What Pinar did was probably a first in the context of curriculum studies. In its structure, I can recognize the need for tangibility that can be associated with the year 1975—when the method was introduced—and with something new surrounded with measures to keep it pure and reducible to its creator.

Pinar as one of the founders of Reconceptualism also worked out a lot about our understanding of curriculum. In our exercise in our curriculum studies course, our professor had us include our lives-as-curricula in the *currere* writing. That worked out well. Four students from very dissimilar backgrounds and walks of life, with a strong motivation for improving education, guaranteed a good diversity in the results. Criticality and diversity as well as feminism, anti-homophobia, anti-racism and politics became inescapable elements in our combined writings, brought into dynamic interaction with Reconceptualist ideas. We brought in those elements, which might be considered an extension or critique of the movement and of the *currere* method: *currere* itself seemed to avoid criticality and politics. As we learned, *currere* is still useful if taught and supervised well, but we would advise future users to make sure that you update the method of *currere* to your needs and to the needs of the time we live in.

Conclusion

We tentatively took the first steps of our doctoral programs, engaging in *currere* in a collaborative way. This provided for both an individual framework and for the beginnings of a nurturing, considerate and supportive community within which we could explore, experiment, and wrestle with ourselves, with our academic programs, with our topics, with our beliefs, and with our assumptions. While each of us approached the process of *currere* in a unique way, and despite the diverse backgrounds the four of us brought, we all came to appreciate the role *currere* has played in our individual journeys and the role it continues to play as we move forward to the next stages of our academic programs.

This collaborative autobiography process brought us together as a community, but it also enabled each of us to become acquainted with ourselves as learners at the beginning of a significant educational trek. Pinar (1994) urges us to “speak in our own voices” (p. 70), and *currere* has provided the means for us to begin to do so, within the powerful discourses of education systems. Looking at where we have come from and becoming aware of the curricula, structures, and forces that have shaped our ways of knowing have led us to see ourselves and our own paths more clearly. This work has, as Kim wrote in her *currere* writings, opened a space for awareness, growth and change. It is akin to stepping back from one's life, or extracting oneself from one's own life to gain a different, more

informed, perspective. Pinar (1994) writes that “the ‘truth’... is not a static set of beliefs, no catechism, but a vital, self-transformative state of being in which the relation between self and belief, self and artifact, self and other is, we may say, dialectical” (p.73). This process engaged each of us in dialectical relationships with our own selves and urged us to begin questioning our own beliefs and, to move toward transformative self-growth. Once we were able to step back from our lives, we gained insights that we then were able to weave into our new way of seeing and understanding our locations and perspectives as curriculum scholars.

Sharing our writing with each other deepened each individual journey further. As we became more vulnerable, when the lens became critical and questioning, the group support became stronger, guiding each of us to reach new depths in our own pilgrimages. Having people walk along side us who are also contemplating such life-searching questions provides the support we need to be able to question what we think we know. Through our writing process, each of us wrestled with dominant discourses, unquestioned beliefs and multiple identities or selves. This type of work requires authenticity, vulnerability and a willingness to interrogate our perspectives. However, as Eelco has said here, being invited to write what your life is about helps get a hold of it. This experience has offered up a new vantage point in which we are able to see our own paths with more clarity and to (re)locate ourselves within our own research topics, within our discipline, and within the world. In enacting this process together, we have realized the significance of Van Manen’s (1996) insistence upon the power of sharing: “when secrets are shared, disclosed, and confided between partners, then the interpersonal relation tends to turn even more intimate, more close, more sharing” (p. 12). *Currere*, for us, was more than just a milestone along the road of our first year together; it was a shared initiation that both brought us into curriculum studies and established us as collaborators.

Our writings, as colleagues and as pilgrims, also reflect critically on the place of *currere* in education research, thirty-eight years after Pinar’s 1975 text. As teachers and as academics, it is our responsibility to work towards an improved curriculum and school system together with our colleagues and administrations. As Pinar (1994) writes, “we cannot expect to meaningfully participate in the transformation of the nation and its educational institutions if we fail to authentically participate in the constitution and transformation of ourselves and our work” (p. 74). *Currere* is still needed as we move into the middle part of the 21st century. The self-transformational work that *currere* enables can empower us with the agency and the momentum required to bring about social transformation.

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