

ESSAY REVIEW

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Feminist Curriculum Theory: Notes on the American Field 1982

The curriculum field is an American invention dating to the 1920's.¹ The superintendent of the Denver, Colorado schools is sometimes credited with initiating curriculum studies when he initiated a system-wide study and revision of the Denver public schools curricula.² At this time there was no professional specialization called curriculum, although what should be taught — a question some regard as the central curriculum question — has been debated for centuries. During this project teachers from every subject area worked to standardize and “update” curriculum in very subject.

Beginnings often play an inordinately powerful role in sculpting the shape of things to come, and the present instance is not an exception. That the field began in the United States — today there are curriculum specialists in most countries of the world, including a well-developed field in Canada³ — guaranteed that instrumentalism and practicality would be culturally as well as economically maintained aspects of all curriculum work. That the field began in an administrative interest in revision meant that curriculum studies as well as curricula themselves would function as a means for increased organizational cohesion and conformity. The result is a curriculum field as well as a school system that is now generally “reproductive” of fundamental social and cultural tendencies in North American society, such as standardization and bureaucratization of organizational behavior. They did not function so in the 1920's however. At that time the effort to standardize was a progressive step away from overlapping and repetitive academic programs. The testing movement was as well a progressive step away from rituals of recitation and forms of teacher authoritarianism of the nineteenth century. Thus the curriculum field and the testing establishment did not function in politically reactionary ways, as they tend to do today.⁴

This administrative origin of the field meant that, unlike philosophy or sociology of education, the field did not develop as an offspring of an established academic discipline. Its interests were not intellectual, but ‘practical.’ Its conceptual cohesiveness derived from its focus upon development procedures, still epitomized by the Tyler rationale. Until the 1970's, the interest in curriculum development, and more recently in evaluation, constituted the source and focus of curriculum theory.

The (American) National Curriculum Reform Movement, funded by the Kennedy Administration in response to the Sputnik scare, dealt what would be seen later as a “deathblow” to the traditional curriculum field. In time it would become clear that the status of the field began to deteriorate due to this selection of scientists over educationalists. Faculty of Education colleagues (especially those in educational psychology and educational foundations) took note that governmental funding agencies did not regard curriculum specialists as worthy of leading the national effort at curriculum reform. As enrollments in curriculum courses and in Schools of Education generally began to decrease in the

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1970's, and reliance on external funding increased, curriculum departments would become increasingly vulnerable, not only economically as their enrollment base eroded, but intellectually as curriculum writing was criticized as conceptually primitive.

This critique was truthful, yet misguided. Taken from historical context and compared to the growing conceptual sophistication of philosophy and history of education, curriculum studies compared unfavorably. But such a comparison ignores the origin of the curriculum field and hence its traditional function. It was conceived and developed over fifty years to fulfill its mission to provide rationales and procedures for the periodic review and revision of school curricula. This mission was fulfilled, as partly indicated by the popularity of curriculum specialists in schools and by the popularity of curriculum courses. In their heyday curriculum departments often comprised one-half the faculty of a School or Department of Education. Curriculum writing was indeed atheoretical, but it was never intended to be. It was meant to be journalistic, easily accessible to schoolteachers of varying academic ability. The traditional curriculum field, from this point of view, became a victim of a change of the rules of the game, a change it refused to notice as it occurred and one which it was relatively powerless to combat.

No longer was curriculum review and revision the field's reason for being. School district budgets for such work shrivelled, and political developments, such as teacher unionism and militancy generally, challenged the traditional obsequious posture of teacher to curriculum specialist. The increasing control of textbook publishers over curriculum materials and the decreasing autonomy of teachers to exercise academic freedom, i.e. to teach what and how they deem appropriate to teach, left little room for traditional curriculum specialists. As schools of education lost their economic base with the over-supply of teachers at all levels and with the deterioration of the North American economy generally, arts and science faculty took an increasingly aggressive position in demanding their version of academic standards in education schools. In a ward, the economic and political basis of traditional curriculum work began to disappear.

By the 1970's the field was in crisis. The first indications that our sun in a faraway system had burned out began to reach us. Schwab issued his famous although unanswered accusation that the field had abandoned its historic preoccupation with the practical.⁵ Two further characterizations of moribundity and arrest respectively were to follow during the decade.⁶ "External" conditions — such as the oversupply of teachers — figured as much as "internal" ones — such as the intellectual exhaustion of the curriculum development focus, although an explication of their relation to each other must wait.⁷ The traditional paradigm — the term is overused but a commensurately powerful replacement has yet to be advanced — of the field fractured; two discernible "splinters" became visible.

The first is "conceptual-empiricism", work which is sometimes conceptual, sometimes empirical, but always in the senses of those terms associated with "mainstream" social science.⁸ This work has progressed during the last decade, and recent papers suggest continued progress.⁹ Consideration of this work is outside the purview of this paper.

The second, and the strand which concerns us here, is what has been termed "reconceptualism," and "reconceptualization." The first term is inappropriate, as I have explained on occasion, but it seems to gain in usage.¹⁰ "Reconceptualization" is the accurate characterization insofar as the movement was comprised of individuals as well as ideas. These individuals represented disparate intellectual traditions but joined together in a fragile political coalition, uniting in opposition to traditional curriculum work, work they judged to be politically native and theoretically primitive. This origin of the "Reconceptualization" meant that the bond united this group was as political as it was intellectual. The Reconceptualization was in this sense a social movement within an academic

field. It is crucial to recognize that its collapse is as a social movement only; the intellectual work continues. Here, however, we are ahead of our story.

The movement, as we note, was primarily that, a coalition of disaffected curricularists. Two thematic threads quickly developed, one was political and economic in nature, and drew upon Marxism and critical theory.¹¹ Its function for the curriculum field was "critical," as its interest was discrediting the naive claims to value-free and politically neutral work characteristic of traditional curriculum development rationales and procedures. The second theme or strand was existential in its early stage, but finally autobiographical in theme and method.¹²

These two traditions and groups were represented at what turned out to be the first of yearly conferences held in Rochester, New York in May 1973¹³. This phase of the Reconceptualist movement has been well documented in studies by Janet Miller, Barbara Benham, Margaret Huber, Karen Mazza, and Paul Feinberg¹⁴. In 1981 an introductory curriculum text appeared which made use of the terms "reconceptualist," "conceptual-empirical," and "traditional," in its classificatory schema.¹⁵ The present purpose is not to summarize this history, but to add to it.

As a social and political movement within the socio-intellectual community that is a field, the "Reconceptualization" has collapsed. The demise is complex in character, and an adequate analysis must await, in part, further temporal distance. One element at work is clear now, however. As the Reconceptualization developed as a movement, i.e. as it gained increasing visibility and attention as a significant development within the field, the initial political and psychological vulnerability which helped bond specific individuals together in alliance was lost. Differences between reconceptualists and traditionalists became psychologically smaller than differences between Marxists and humanists/autobiographers, between critical reconceptualists and post-critical reconceptualists. The Marxists had never been happy with the position assigned to them in the movement by the humanists, nor did subsequent efforts at negotiation to bring resolution to the conflict which eventually broke the alliance apart succeed.

Toward the end of the 1970's the Marxists left both the alliance and the field, characterizing themselves no longer as "politically and economically oriented curricularists" but as sociologists and their work as "the new sociology." The latter term had been applied in previous years to the work of important British social analysts such as Bernstein, on whose work the Americans had relied. Now these students of the British work characterized their reports of this work as sociology, a disciplinary and status claim at least one prominent social theorist finds ludicrous. Be that as it may, the "critical reconceptualists" are no longer — by their own claim — curricularists.

The work on autobiography continues, if in adagio.¹⁶ Work utilizing autobiography, often feminist in theme, intensifies and increases. It is to a review of this work that we turn to next.

Feminist Curriculum Theory

Feminist analyses and critiques provide a major contribution to the reformulation of energies and tensions which had characterized early Reconceptualist work. As many initially focused upon the existential nature of individual educational experience, some began to explore the relationships of personal experience and theory. What has emerged from such explorations is a vigorous inquiry into feminist analysis and perspective as a analytic tool which can be used in creating curriculum theory.

Feminist studies within the curriculum field focus upon the transformative possibilities inherent within the nature of such studies as well as upon the necessary representation and reconstruction of women's lives and their roles within the educational realm. Some women curricularists utilize the autobiographical mode to examine the effects as well as implications of their own schooling

experience upon their conceptions of themselves as educators, and as curriculum specialists. In that process feminists are exploring varied methodological approaches in which women can be defined in and of themselves. By concentrating upon women as subjects and knowers in their worlds, feminists also are creating a radical critique of the cultural and epistemological underpinnings of school curriculum. As they explore the connections between text and life, they constitute new forms in which to tell their stories. As they reveal the evolving forms, feminists also are exposing whole parts of worlds which heretofore have remained in shadows or have been mere reflections of the larger (male) educational paradigm. That revealing and revisioning of ourselves is the energizing force which allows as well as impells the transformation of the very premises upon which we base our thoughts and actions in the world.

One form of feminist analysis emerged in curriculum studies from the method of *currere* as conceived by Pinar and as initially enacted by Pinar and Grumet. As women worked to uncover conceptions and expectations of themselves, they began to reconstruct ways in which they had misrepresented themselves through others' expectations and structures.

This autobiographical work moved into methodological as well as foundational implications for curriculum and teaching. As feminists collected and constructed new information about themselves and their roles within education, they also began conceptualizing on the basis of the new patterns and shapes which were emerging, and which were challenging the epistemological foundations of the traditional disciplines.

Initial examples of the autobiographical work which provided the impetus for movement into feminist analysis are found in writings by Sandra Wallenstein, Florence Krall and Janet Miller.

Wallenstein, in her "Notes Toward a Feminist Curriculum Theory," provides the first attempt to link autobiographical material with an analysis of feminist theory and practice as means by which to illuminate tensions of individual and collective lives. In examining the processes of self-identification and the nature of interrelatedness, Wallenstein's work foreshadowed the transformative power which would emerge from feminists' perspectives of themselves and their relationships to curriculum theorizing.

By incorporating a feminist perspective, we do not affirm the struggle of women over men, but of the liberation of the feminine quality of life (in both men and women) and the receding monopoly of its masculine counterpart. An understanding of how feminist principles, when put into action, differ from patriarchal principles, could add new dimension of depth to curriculum theory.¹⁷

Wallenstein extends her initial connections between feminist and curriculum theory in "The Reflexive Method in Curriculum Theory: An Autobiographical Case Study." This work stands as a prime example not only of an interesting use of the method of *currere* but also of the emergence of gender and specifically feminist study in curriculum. Wallenstein pointed to several directions in which explorations of gender stereotyping in curriculum might lead: 1) an historical analysis of gender relations, 2) a socio-economic analysis that look at the relation of gender to work status and income, and 3) a psychological analysis with respect to sexual relations and body consciousness.¹⁸

Florence Krall's writing provides examples of a new form created by the intertwining of feminist curriculum scholarship and autobiographical method. As Krall shares segments of her journal, of her interaction with students as they explore the interrelationships between the Navajo and their reservation environment, she enlarges the concept of the poetic as a mode within which to examine issues of self, of other, of curriculum. By sharing the physical as well as psychological journeys undertaken by her students and herself, Krall connects life contexts with academic structures and, in so doing, moves beyond the containment of institutional boundaries¹⁹. Krall physically moves herself and her students into the flow of the earth's life forces, and her descriptions of those

conceptions of curriculum become metaphors for the feminists' striving for life-giving and sustaining paradigms for education.

I teach through metaphors. Living, not literary. What are they? Encounters. Encounters with nature, purely sentient and personal in their conception. Vivid, intense, clear, they grow and go on living in my heart and mind, tapes, replayed over and over telling me more and more about my Earth niche. Tools of pedagogy? Perhaps. Sometimes. But shared with students with great care and humility only when a common ground is sensed. . . . Where are they found? Wherever. Rainbows, they come as gifts after the rain. Seeking them unintentionally, I discover them in proper time . . .²⁰

Janet L. Miller utilizes autobiography as a mode of reflection and presentation of feminist issues. Her work has moved through an initial discussion of problematic issues which face women who are educators and theoreticians²¹ to an examination of underlying constraints of patriarchal form which threatens to convolute the evolving feminist conceptions of pedagogy and curriculum.²² Combining the lyric with the analytic, Miller continues to reflect upon the personal effects of the dictomous situation of being woman and educator; at the same time, she is revealing that individual's struggle against fragmentation as example of one means by which to resist the infiltration, in minds and hearts, of oppressive conceptions of ability and desirability of action.

As we continue to enlarge our vision of the possibilities of educational experience, as we continue to work toward the reconceptualization of the curriculum field, I suggest we look to the feminist vision as a way in which to acknowledge our uneasiness with our multiple explanations for the sources and functions of curriculum. By recognizing the uneasiness which we attach to the lack of one apparent direction or form which some feel our work should exemplify, we then may begin to let go of preconceived or limited viewpoints and assumptions . . . I believe that feminists' awareness and acceptance of an evolving and fluid conception of educational experience may suggest ways in which we may proceed with our individual concerns and yet reach out to receive and to incorporate the vision of others.²³

Miller's work, by addressing the implications and possibilities of feminist and curricular forms, provides a transition to the more specific methodological issues examined by Barbara Mitrano and Meredith Reiniger-Shapiro.

Mitrano specifically explores ways in which the method of *currere* might be used in a teacher preparation program; further, she attempts to connect curriculum theorizing and feminist theorizing as a basis from which to theorize about teacher education. Mitrano sees the feminist perspective in education as "a restoration of self, of wholeness, of experience, of critical thinking, of institutions which serve persons instead of enslaving them."²⁴ She provides examples of the ways in which the feminist perspective can inform research methodologies which are personally integrated with the life of the researcher, and as such, her work is a major contribution.

Reiniger-Shapiro seeks to advance the theoretical debate over the significance of gender and women for curriculum studies. Utilizing the "meta-ethical" feminist framework of theologian Mary Daley, Reiniger-Shapiro examines autobiographical material written by her high school English students as well as by herself. She studies this material for traces of internalized misogyny, which are interpreted according to the "meta-ethical" perspective. This radical methodology has implications for the transformative possibilities within the student/teacher relationship as well as within feminist conceptions of curriculum and teacher education.

Wide-awakeness can be an attribute of the teacher as well as the student. It is only when the teacher functions as both teacher-and-student that the process will potentially be transformative for both the teacher and student, for both persons. This mutual wide-awakeness must question the taken-for-granted, the hierarchal, patriarchal structure of the explicit and hidden curriculum. This wide-awakeness is uncreation by Wild Witches.²⁵

Understanding issues of gender origin, identity and prejudice as issues of curriculum study requires an awareness of linkages between gender and epistemology. Madeleine Grumet's seminal work, "Conception, Contradiction, and Curriculum,"²⁶ considers gender in terms of both the

political theorists' notion of the reproduction of culture and the hermeneutical theorists' study of the reproduction of the self. She is able to transcend the boundaries of each by applying object relations theory to her experience of infant/parent relationships; through this exploration, Grumet establishes the basis for feminine epistemology as a dialectical dependence of subject and object. Male epistemology is a subject-object dyad order in terms of cause and effect.

Grumet's analysis of the psychosexual dimensions of curriculum, particularly as curriculum functions to perpetuate the law of the father and to contradict the inferential character of paternity through control and predictability, provides a significant breakthrough in feminists' attempts to conceptualize and to reformulate the very structures of knowledge.

Grumet continues her contribution to the redesigning of our curriculum paradigms by tracing the gender history of pedagogy in American common schools during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She concludes that the growing number of female teachers, in their complicity and passivity, functioned to ensure pedagogy for patriarchy.²⁷ Grumet's work stands as remarkable evidence of the possibilities of placing the roles of women into codified knowledge and of transforming not only the knowledge itself but also the processes whereby knowledge is produced.

The feminist perspective, then, is revitalizing and reformulating curriculum theory. Women are working to identify reified forms and sanctioned modes which perpetuate the separation of self from self as well as self from other. Feminists reveal the contradictions within themselves that they have come to understand, and through that sharing of the on-going processes of revelation, they participate in the larger task of examining the very structures of knowledge which heretofore have constrained and blurred the active agency of women.

The works of feminist curriculum theorists are fluid and transformative through the very processes of their evolvment. These women, and others who address issues of gender in curriculum research, are providing the synergistic energy for enlarged conceptions of curriculum theory.

The State of Things

The field is no longer moribund; the field is no longer arrested. The imagery of both characterizations differs, but the internal movement they portray is similar. The field in the 1970's was still like a photograph, but the Reconceptualization, both as an intellectual and social movement within the field, functioned to restore motion. There is turbulence now.

The feminist work offers the possibility of integrating political, cultural, and autobiographical interests. Within its themes and methods traditional curricular issues of scope and sequence, of development and evaluation, of theory and practice, can be reconceptualized and thereby transformed. Feminist thought to date operates in relative isolation from other eddies of curriculum theory and practice, but its ripples will have profound, if inexplicit, influence upon traditional and conceptual-empirical curriculum thought. The present economic problems of schools and universities, of North American society generally, may be so loud as to snicker at the voice speaking here. However, it is their very loudness which signifies their transience, and the inevitability of the new day coming.

Notes

¹ Others might point to the establishment of the Society for the Study of Curriculum in the 1930's as a more suitable birthdate for the field, but given its historic preoccupation with curriculum revision, associating the birth with the Denver project seems more appropriate. When we use the concept "field" we are referring to the

professional field so designated, not to curriculum theory as a subspecies of philosophy of education. JoAnne Pagano's notion of a field as a "socio-intellectual community" provides both abstract and concrete referents for the idea. See her "The Emergence of the Curriculum Field as a Discipline," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, Volume three, Number one, pages 171-184.

² *The Denver Program of Curriculum Revision*. Denver: Denver Public Schools, 1927. Monograph #12.

³ Of recent interest on the point is the 1982 state of the art report. Tomkins, F. Michael Connelly, and Jean-Jacques Bernier. *State of the Art Review of Research in Curriculum and Instruction*. Prepared for the Art Review of Educational Research, Canadian Society for the Study of Education.

⁴ For this point I am grateful for the conversation of Professor Leonard Berk, Department of Curriculum, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto.

⁵ Schwab, Joseph. *The Practical; A Language for Curriculum*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1970. For an important elaboration of the notion of empirical, see David G. Smith, *Eidetic Understanding as a Way of Entering Curriculum Language From the Group Up*, *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 5:1, in press.

⁶ Huebner, Dwayne. "The Moribund Curriculum Field: Its Wake and Our Work," *Curriculum Inquiry*, Volume 6, Number 2, and Pinar, William F., "Notes on the Curriculum Field 1978," *Educational Researcher*, 7:8 (September 1978): 5-12.

⁷ These terms are associated with Kuhnian history of science. For an interesting examination of the appropriateness of applying the Kuhnian work to an analysis of curriculum studies and of the Reconceptualization in particular, see Brown, Theodore, "How Fields Change: A Critique of the Kuhnian View," paper presented to the Second Conference on Curriculum Theory and Practice, held at the Airlie House, October 1979; printed in *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 3:1, 5-13.

⁸ For an explication of the notion of "mainstream social science," see Bernstein, Richard J., *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976. This work is useful as well for understanding "conceptual-empiricism", phenomenology and critical theory in curriculum studies.

⁹ For instance, see Posner, George J., and Kenneth Strike. "A Categorization Scheme for Principles of Sequencing Content." *Review of Educational Research*, 46:4 (1976).

¹⁰ See, for instance, Pinar, William F., "The Reconceptualization of Curriculum Studies," *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 10:3 205-214, and Pinar, William F., "What is the Reconceptualization?," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 1:1, 93-104.

¹¹ This work is by no means monolithic, although it can seem so upon first reading. See Anyon, Jean, "Schools as Agencies of Social Legitimation," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 3:2, 86-103. Apple, Michael W., "On Analyzing Hegemony," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 1:1, 10-27. Giroux, Henry A., "Beyond the Limits of Radical Educational Reform," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 2:1, 20-46. Wexler, Philip "Body and Soul," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 4:2, in press.

¹² Pinar, William F. and Madeleine R. Grumet, *Toward A Poor Curriculum*, Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1976. Now out of print. Copies may be obtained, however, by enclosing \$10 and sending your order to The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, Drawer "J", Churchville, New York 14428, U.S.A.

¹³ The proceedings of this conference are published. Pinar, William F. (ed.) *Heightened Consciousness, Cultural Revolution, And Curriculum Theory*. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1974.

¹⁴ Miller, Janet L. "Curriculum Theory: A Recent History," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 1:1, 28-43. Benham, Barbara. "Curriculum Theory in the 1970's: The Reconceptualist Movement," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 3:1, 162-170. Huber, Margaret Ann. "The Renewal of Curriculum Theory in the 1970's: An Historical Study," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 3:1, 14-84. Feinberg, Paul. "A Bubernain Critique of Four Reconceptualists." Chicago, Illinois: Loyola University Ph.D. dissertation, 1982.

¹⁵ Giroux, Henry A., and Anthony Penna, and William F. Pinar (eds.) *Curriculum and Instruction: Alternatives In Education*. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1981.

¹⁶ Grumet, Madeleine R. "Restitution and Reconstruction of Educational Experience: An Autobiographical Method for Curriculum Theory," in Lawn, Martin and Leonard Barton (eds.), *Rethinking Curriculum Studies*, London: Croom & Held, 1981, 115-130.

- ¹⁷ Wallenstein, Sandra. *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 1:1, p. 189.
- ¹⁸ Wallenstein, Sandra. *The Reflexive Method In Curriculum Theory: An Autobiographical Case Study*. Rochester, New York: University of Rochester doctoral dissertation, 1979, p. 23.
- ¹⁹ Krall, Florence, "Navajo Tapestry: A Curriculum for Ethno-Ecological Perspectives," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 3:2, 1981.
- ²⁰ Krall, Florenace, "Living Metaphors: Real Curriculum in Environmental Education," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 1:1, p. 184.
- ²¹ Miller, Janet L. "Women: The Evolving Educational Consciousness," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 2:1.
- ²² Miller, Janet L. "The Sound of Silence Breaking," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 4:2, in press.
- ²³ Miller, Janet L. "Resistance and Women Academics: An Autobiographical Account." Paper presented to the 1982 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York City, 1982. Available from the author, Old Dominion University, Darden School of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Norfolk, Virginia 23508, U.S.A.
- ²⁴ Mitrano, Barbara. "Feminist Curriculum Theory and Teacher Education," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 3:2, 1981.
- ²⁵ Reiniger-Shapiro, Meredith. "Traces of Misogyny: An Autobiographical Search for Gyn/Ecology," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, in press, p. 21.
- ²⁶ Grumet, Madeleine, "Conception, Contradiction, and Curriculum," *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 3:1, 1981.
- ²⁷ Grumet, Madeleine. "The Feminization of Teaching: Pedagogy for Patriarchy," *Interchange*, 12, 2/3, 1981.