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THE FIELD OF CURRICULUM IS DEAD

In the early days of my postgraduate studies, my fellow students and I were asked to read Joseph Schwab's (1969) "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum." Schwab began this article with the following, provocative declaration: "The field of curriculum is moribund. It is unable, by its present methods and principles, to continue its work and contribute significantly to the advancement of education" (Schwab, 1969, p. 1).

At first, I thought, "Wait a minute. It's dead? I'm just getting started!" It was a strange introduction to curriculum theory and theorizing, and in those few moments, I felt more like a medical student examining a corpse than an educator coming to terms with a living, breathing body of theoretical work intended to inform how curriculum workers come to create, experience, and understand curriculum. My state of discombobulation was eased somewhat after reading Schwab's reasons for his post-mortem analysis. According to him, the cause of death was an "inveterate and unexamined reliance on theory" (p. 1) in areas in which he felt theory was either inappropriate, inadequate, or both. Additionally, he argued that several "flights" of and from the field, including an unrestrained pursuit of theories and meta-theories, the dogmatic preservation and rearticulation of tradition(s), and what he described as the "eristic, contentious, and ad hominem debate" (p. 4) among curriculum scholars contributed to this crisis. Fortunately, although Schwab believed the field to be dying, he also believed it could be resurrected through a "renaissance" if those concerned with curricular work withdrew from abstract and often divergent theoretical pursuits and instead focused on the practical, quasi-practical, and the eclectic. In this paper, I focus primarily on "the practical." For Schwab, the practical does not refer to the quotidian and often banal exigencies of teaching and learning. Rather, the practical is the "discipline concerned with choice and action" that leads to "defensible decisions" (p. 2). My inclination when reading Schwab and considering the "practical" and "theoretic" is to interpret his emphasis on "choice and action" as a central concern for the achievement of agency.

THE PRACTICAL, AGENCY AND PRAXIS

Currently, my thoughts on agency are largely informed by Dewey's (1916, 1933, 1934, 1938) general educational theory, work on inquiry, and, more specifically, his philosophy of experience. Of particular significance are his criteria for experience: Continuity (i.e., how experiences flow from and into other experiences) and Interaction/Transaction (i.e., the purposeful engagement between an individual and their environment). Equally important to my understanding of agency is Freire's (2005) emphasis on conscientização (i.e., critical consciousness) and his problem-solving pedagogy that involves critically-oriented, dialectical dialogue generated through an unwavering commitment to our "ontological vocation" of becoming more fully human (p. 74) that is energised by a radical hope for real, social transformation. In many ways, Dewey and Freire complement one another as they both share aims of enabling the joint-communication of experience in achieving individual, group, and broader social aims. For both Freire and Dewey, action—doing, the practical, is inextricably allied to reflection and theory—in other words, agency and praxis are intimately and ultimately conjoined.

From this position, the achievement of agency is reliant upon the critical consideration of actions occurring in socio-cultural contexts undertaken in the present, informed by past experiences, and shaped by aspirations for experiences in the future. Agency, for me, is something that is “achieved through the active engagement of individuals with aspects of their contexts-for-action” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 132). This ecological understanding of agency is supplemented by Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) definition, which argues agency is

the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (p. 970)

Emirbayer and Mische, in their attempts to theorize how humans achieve agency, developed the “chordal triad,” a model for agency comprised of iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative dimensions or tones. The iterative dimension refers to the “selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action,” while the projective encompasses the “imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action.” Finally, the practical-evaluative element entails the “capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action” (p. 971, emphasis mine). In each situation and through experience, our agentic potential, according to Emirbayer and Mische, can be understood through a chordal triad composed of various tones that are arranged, performed, and perceived in particular ways through the practical negotiation of choices and the determination of action. The achievement of agency through reflective engagements with the past, in consideration of ideas and imaginings of the future, and orchestrated and synthesised through inquiries into and about our present share a striking similarity to praxis, which Freire (2005) defines as “The action and reflection of men and women upon their world to transform it” (p. 79). From this understanding, agency and praxis—the synergistic amalgamation of action, reflection, and theory that comprises the foundations for learning, informs our ontological being/becoming, and produces the self—are inseparable. Agency—the negotiation of choices and action—is unconditionally and irrevocably tethered to reflections and theories of the “practical.”

CURRERE

William Pinar (1975) responded to Schwab’s morbid diagnosis with *currere*, a reconceptualization of curriculum theorising emerging from phenomenological and existential philosophy and psycho-analytic techniques, with the process and outcomes of these considerations being represented through four stages of critical self-reflection:

- The Regressive—remembering/restorying episodes from our past
- The Progressive—imagining our future
- The Analytic—analysing and comprehending our “now”
- The Synthetic—constructing new “knowings”—ways of understanding, being, and acting that enable us to better understand the relationship between choices, actions, and their consequences in working towards desired aims.

Riceour (1988, as cited in Goodson and Gill, 2014) writes that “the ‘self’ of self-knowledge is the fruit of an examined life” (p. 33). *Currere* is a form of self-examination

focused on the aim of transforming simple and often assumed understandings of, and associations with, curriculum into “complicated conversations” (Pinar, 2011, p. 32). These conversations are both political processes for identifying and negotiating values, as well as attempts to locate, recognize, and understand how our subjective experiences as educators/learners (Freire, 2005) inform our curricular work, with these efforts often being organized through specific aims, such as the actualization of socially-just and/or transformative education (Baszile, 2017).

There have been numerous critiques of *currere* since its introduction in the mid-1970s (Connelly & Xu, 2013; Westbury, 2007, 2008; Van Manen, 1978; Wraga, 1999; Wraga & Hlebowitsh, 2003). Deng (2013, 2018), using Schwab’s “the practical” as a diagnostic tool for what he believes is the current “crisis” in curriculum theorizing argues that reconceptualist approaches extend and reinforce many of the “flights” mentioned by Schwab. Additionally, he argues such approaches sustain a fascination with “eccentric and exotic” theories and models that exacerbate the “crisis” in curriculum rather than offering suitable solutions, with the culmination of these efforts effectively contributing to a complete abandonment of the “original subject of curriculum studies (i.e., practice and the inner work of schooling as an institution)” (Deng, 2018, p. 705). Many of these critiques include important considerations for those involved in reconceptualist and postreconceptualist theorising, and I share some concerns held by these scholars. However, my position is that too severe of a “flight” to practice and the inner work of schooling (i.e., choices and action) without accommodating approaches for reflection and enabling theorization will not solve any crises existing in the field of curriculum or in the actual goings-on of teaching and learning in school. This is simply because such an approach would fail to comprehensively acknowledge how individuals come to understand how to navigate choice(s) and action(s), and how these decisions produce multiple possibilities and expressions of their agentic potential.

SOME TROUBLE WITH THE METHOD

I have always had a complicated relationship with *currere*. I understood it was intended to enable one to “sketch the relations among school knowledge, life-history, and intellectual development in ways that might function self-transformatively” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 515), and at first glance, this seemed like a fairly straightforward undertaking. *Currere* is a four-step process of careful, creative, and critical self-investigation involving the construction and rumination of the self within various temporal, experiential, and relational contexts, all circumscribed by a desire to enhance our understanding and awareness of our educational-selves. What this means for me is that *currere* is curricular work centered on the aim of making sense of our values, how they contribute to our understanding of self, and how these new considerations inform meaningful expressions of the kinds of educational experiences we believe others and we deserve, as well as insight into how we can create them.

Of course, understanding *currere* is not doing *currere*—and it was in the “doing” of *currere* where I struggled most. Every time I attempted it, I was beset by distracting (often debilitating) questions. “Am I doing this right?” “Is this *currere*?” “How can I know?” When faced with these questions, I’d return to Pinar’s work to see if I could glean some insight into how to go about the method. Unfortunately, I often found articles on *currere* to be prolix, recondite, and, at times, more of an obstacle than an aid in helping me come to terms with “doing” *currere*. Additionally, examples of *currere*, which are regularly engaging, thought-provoking, and in some cases challenging can also seem methodologically ambiguous and often fail to convey how the process was undertaken by the author(s), leaving the details of their *currere* undisclosed and unexamined.

My ongoing uncertainty about the process led me to practice *currere* privately, primarily as a method of curricular, pedagogical, and personal development. I explored my uneasiness with the process in small-scale experiences with students and/or colleagues in seminars and workshops, but never as a research activity that I intended to share widely or publish. Kierkegaard (1843) writes that life must be lived forward but understood backward, and perhaps that is why, although I struggled with doing *currere*, I was still persuaded by its promise. As a general recapitulation of the Chordal Triad and praxis, *currere* enables us to examine life in both directions, with healthy pauses in-between to situate ourselves in “the now,” and to perceive how future, past, and present are entangled in the choices before us, the decisions we make, and actions we take. Unfortunately, while I believed in and pursued the promise of the method, I had yet to figure out how to “do” *currere*.

WE MAKE THE ROAD BY WALKING

A few years ago, my wife and I moved our little family to a small town in the south Wales valleys. My mother was born and raised in this area before meeting my father and eventually immigrating to the States in 1964. As a child, her stories of Wales and the occasional visits to my extended family indelibly fixed in my mind a strong, unwavering desire to live in Wales. In *Cymraeg*, the Welsh language, that sensation is called *Hiraeth*, a term that refers to a kind of melancholy, longing for home—a disquieted desire that can only be placated by living in Wales. After settling into our new home and realizing that *Hiraeth*, while eased, never completely goes away, I grew more and more curious about the generations of my family who lived here before me. My mother, our family’s genealogical expert, was eager to share her stories, and it wasn’t long before we were holding weekly sessions online where I would record our conversations about our family and the narrow valleys they once called home.

One evening, my mother mentioned that she wished she could visit an old parish church positioned high upon the hilltops above the Cynon and Rhondda valleys to view the birth, baptism, and other historical records stored there. This small stone church is special. It’s situated in an ancient, holy place dating back to and most likely beyond the sixth century. The beautiful old building, erected sometime in the 12th century, has been a site for various pilgrimages with worshippers climbing the steep mountainsides to receive inspiration, revelation, and a sense of the supernatural. “You know, your great-great-grandfather used to walk up the mountain to that church,” she said, and for some reason, the notion of following in the footsteps of family members generations before me caught my imagination. That’s when I decided to go walking, first to the ancient church frequented by my great-great-grandfather and then to new destinations and locales—Iron Age cairns, Roman marching camps, and, of course, the occasional village pub for a cheeky pint! Clambering up mountainsides, winding along banks and rivers, and striding across undulating grasslands and fields that lead to remote and sundry locations is where I connected with and indulged notions of family, setting, and self. Goodson and Gill (2014) write “to understand ourselves is to understand ourselves in action” (p. 32), and it was during these episodes of action, of walking over, under, and through the wilder spaces and places of the valleys that I began to learn about *currere*.

I call these expeditions my “reading walks.” My routine usually consists of packing a small rucksack with a light lunch, some water, a notepad and pen, and something to read. Then I grab my walking stick and headphones and head out the door. During a reading walk, I either read as I’m walking, or I’ll break off from the winding trail and head into the woods, sitting under lofty bows and listening to the sounds of rocks and trees as I delve into my reading. Sometimes I listen to music, sometimes I don’t, but

during these walks, I'm purposefully trying to situate myself wholly into the experience and "in the midst of those phenomena" (Abram, 2010, p. 9) that add meaning to the experience and are conducive to me achieving my aims.

For the past few months, my contemplations have focused almost exclusively on a module I designed and convene called "Radical Education." This module is my modest attempt to introduce students in their final year of undergraduate study to various philosophies of education so that through thinking philosophically about educational problems they can come to identify the roots of those issues and collectively investigate, through dialectical discussions organized through an "engaged pedagogy" (hooks, 1994), solutions and alternative courses of action. As part of this module, I don't simply want to introduce students to ideas. I want to embody notions of philosophical thinking, conscientization, and "engaged pedagogy." I aspire to personify these concepts and qualities through the enactment of my pedagogy—or, perhaps more accurately, depending on the degree of success in achieving this aim—the enactment of our pedagogy.

Part of this process, whether I'm walking or taking a break, involves me recalling, interrogating, and re-storying my experiences as a learner when first coming to grips with these concepts. This leads to considerations of how those experiences contribute to what I hope to achieve with my students. In short, I'm considering the future potential of what the shared educational experiences with my students might be. Of course, then I must consider what I am doing now so that I can analyze and evaluate my present circumstances in light of the knowledge and insight I've gained from the past and future. Finally, I am sometimes able to derive a better sense of what choices are available to me now and what actions (and consequences) those choices may lead to in the future.

For me, this process is indicative of three, key dispositions of those engaged in reflective activity described by Dewey (1933): open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. Open-mindedness "is an active desire to listen to more ideas than one, to give full attention to alternative possibilities, and to recognize the possibility of error even in beliefs that are dearest to us" (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 10). Responsibility refers to personal, academic, and socio-political consequences (Pollard & Tann, 1994), and wholeheartedness is an earnest commitment to both open-mindedness and responsibility and our due diligence in the enactment of those principles in our reflective and pedagogical undertakings. The sounds, smells, sights, and other sensations brought into close communication with me through this solitary immersion are necessary components of this meditation. I extend my open-mindedness to the contributions of trees, wind, and birds and to the characteristics of my ambulatory proceedings, which are slow, measured, and subject to change if I so desire. I recognize my responsibilities in a more-than-human sense, connecting my reflective considerations to the immediate circumstances of my students and me, and how the ripples of our pedagogical engagements extend beyond the limits of our classroom and further into the wider world of their current and future realities and potentialities. With each walk, I rediscover a sense of wholeheartedness, as with each series of reflection I am reminded of my motivations for these journeys and the benefits they produce.

While I discovered *currere* sometime ago, I didn't understand how to make the process mine, to give it meaning for me (and ultimately my students), until my reading walks. For me, *currere*, with an emphasis on "running the race" was the wrong method, the wrong metaphor. My method is not *currere*. It is *Ambulare*.

THE RUNNING OF THE RACE

My understanding of *currere* emerged from praxis: action, reflection, and theory. During my reading walks, my mind and body ambled through varied landscapes as I

contemplated past, future, and present experiences. I theorized their significance and meaning in relation to what I understood to be my values and how this undertaking infused my sense of agentic potential with purpose. This occurred to some degree through an unintentional departure from *currere*. As the infinitive form of the word curriculum, *currere* emphasizes the “running” of a race, and that emphasis not only represents many of the issues I believe are troubling education today, but also potentially characterises and circumscribes our curriculum theorizing and consideration of choices and actions through discourses such as speed, competition, and a focus on outcomes.

The race itself, with a set beginning and end, along with its emphasis on speed, competition, and outcomes forces a compression of experience. Speed is important. A race isn’t a race without speed and a concern over who is fastest and who will win. There is a deadline, an audience, a ceremony, a medal—a winner and a loser. I’m reminded of Guto Nyth Bran (a.k.a. Griffith Morgan) a local folk hero and legendary runner from the south Wales valleys. He is buried in the cemetery of the ancient, stone church on the hill that my great-great-grandfather once frequented. Legend has it that, in 1737, Guto ran 12 miles in 53 minutes. What an achievement! Immediately after winning the race, Guto’s sweetheart rushed to his side and held him in her arms as she congratulated him on his victory. He then collapsed and died. While running can have salubrious effects, a fixation on racing and its appurtenances can offer more liabilities than advantages.

Of course, the “illusion of speed is the belief that it saves time,” but speed accelerates time (Gros, 2015, p. 37). Walking, on the other hand, liberates us from these obsessions. When walking, we do not have to propel ourselves forward at the quickest speed possible. Our pace quickens or slows depending on what we choose to experience. Our focus is not fixed solely on the finish line. We are not concerned with medals and laurels. We can divert from the path and explore alternative trajectories or even decide to return home if we feel unprepared or unsure about the road ahead. Walking erases (e-races?) curriculum. It is not a race to be run. There is no race. There is no racecourse. All these characteristics constitute a liberation from time, and “with the liberation from time comes an alienation from speed” (Gros, 2015, p. 4).

Ambulare, which simply means “to walk,” offers a philosophical alternative to *currere*. It rejects “the race” and “running” in favor of more valuable concerns than speed, competition, and ranking. It emphasizes health and wellbeing, in both an individual and socio-cultural sense. Walking, unlike racing, is conducive to other activities that nourish us—eating, drinking, laughing, listening, and more. *Ambulare* also acknowledges alternative routes, choices, opportunities, avenues, and trajectories. There is no fixation on the course, finish line, or stopwatch. We can accelerate, decelerate, veer, turn, or simply stop—whatever is needed. Finally, *Ambulare* argues that it is better to walk than run, in most situations, and that it is better to take time when engaging in complicated conversations.

During long, easy walks, on well-traced routes, when all you have to do is follow an interminable set of hairpins, you hatch a thousand plans, invent a thousand tales. The body slowly advances, with measured steps, and that same tranquillity gives the mind a day off. Relieved of duty by the automatic functioning of the body, it follows up its fantasies and projects itself into a labyrinth of stories. While the gentle shock-free rolling of happy legs drives the evolving narrative forward: Challenges arise, their solutions are found, fresh ambushes appear. As you follow the wide, single, clearly marked route, a thousand bifurcations swarm in your mind. The heart takes one and renounces another, then chooses a third. It wanders away, comes back. (Gros, 2015, p. 69)

NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST

The virtues, aims, and method of *currere* did not become apparent to me while “running the race.” Rather, it occurred through ambulatory expeditions stretched out over the course of weeks and months of me walking through and over the south Wales valleys. It was in consideration of *currere* and its four steps that I recognized I was personifying the method through my walking. While walking, I often looked back along the trail, thinking about the different characteristics, circumstances, and experiences of that stretch of road before turning my gaze towards the summit, lake, church, or whatever goal I had in mind. Then, I would take stock of my current situation, often admiring the view and evaluating my progress and process before thinking about my next steps. It was thinking about these steps where things “clicked.” Praxis, agency, and *currere* are all concerned with purposeful reflection on action undertaken in various temporal and relational contexts, the generation of images of our potential, future actions, and evaluations of how we currently negotiate choices, actions, and consequences. Goodson and Gill (2014) argue that “whilst we are examining our phenomenological experiences, the transition from experience itself to reflection and to interpretation permits us to illuminate our scope of action” (p. 37), and it was through serendipitous happenstance that I realized that *Ambulare* enabled me to employ the method of *currere* at my own pace, and through this reinterpretation, I have come to recognize its potential in illuminating my “scope for action”—my potential for agency, if you will, set within my contexts of teaching and learning. Further still, it has emphasized for me the ethical and moral dimension of autobiographical reflection: “the key question for men [sic] is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (MacIntyre, 1984, as quoted by Goodson & Gill, 2014, p. 33).

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper, I discussed Schwab’s famous diagnosis of the field of curriculum and his call for an emphasis on “the practical.” *Currere*, as a response to this call, has been both celebrated and criticized, with criticisms arguing that it fails to acknowledge the “discipline of choices and action.” In *We Make the Road by Walking*, Myles Horton (Horton & Freire, 1990) reminds us that, in teaching and learning, it’s essential that you start where people are. He then continues,

But then if you don’t have some vision of what ought to be or what they can become, then you have no way of contributing anything to the process. Your theory determines what you want to do in terms of helping people grow. (p. 100)

In walking my road, I believe I have come to a greater understanding of Pinar’s method and its offering as a response to reconceptualize curriculum theorizing. In my rearticulation of *currere* as *Ambulare*, I slowed the process down and embedded it in meaningful activities that enabled me to be more open-minded, responsible to and for my knowings, and to purposefully examine my commitment to theorizing my pedagogical and curricular work. Through this purposeful deceleration, the characteristics of autobiographical theorizing, praxis, and agency (as understood through the Chordal Triad) became entangled as a single entity, a *Gestalt*, where the organization of concepts and ideas combine as a representation of knowledge and understanding of my pedagogical/curricular practice/praxis that is greater than the sum of its parts. As a result, *Ambulare* aligns to theories of agency and praxis, of the practical considerations of enacting values in educational settings that make a difference in the lives of those who experience them. Through

this autobiographical account, I have attempted to demonstrate that autobiographical curriculum theorizing is both relevant and appropriate to considerations of how to negotiate choices and action set within contexts of teaching and learning. As a result, and particularly as a researcher and educator, I have better realized the methods of self-examination and the fruits they bear. Perhaps most important, I have gained a greater understanding of the relationship between action, reflection, and theory—of praxis, its association with agency, and “the practical.”

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