# From Power to Influence: Rethinking Classroom Learning Environments with *Currere*

## By Logan Rutten
*The Pennsylvania State University*

Separating myself from the familiar routines of teaching in an American high school and no longer being required to eat lunch at 11:17am, I have entered the unstructured realm of graduate school. Time flows unevenly here. Sometimes a day seems to sprawl out and permit endless creativity. Other times a single meeting or email can exhaust my energies. I am in the thick of a protracted identity transition from teacher to teacher educator, though I tend to think teachers never really *arrive*. I frame and reframe what I think it means to teach well, wondering whether my former colleagues would still accept me while also hoping for acceptance into new discourse communities unfamiliar to many teachers. My already tenuous hold on my former self slips and slides with each passing week. Should I grip tighter or let go?

This uncertainty opens space for *currere* and an earnest attempt at exploring "the complex relation between the temporal and conceptual" (Pinar, 1994, p. 19). As I continue the circuitous trajectory toward the PhD, *currere* invites taking stock of my past teaching life as I anticipate one of my new roles—teacher of pre-service teachers. For this exploratory essay, I begin by dwelling with some of my childhood memories of classroom control and management. Next, I envision the future later this year when I will teach a university course on classroom management and learning environments. Then, I tease apart some of these visions of the past and future, coming to a present notion of schools as learning communities (Sergiovanni, 1994). Finally, I reassemble the fragments, raising questions about teacher education and simultaneous renewal (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004) in an era of clinical practice.

### The Long Apprenticeship

The day after my twenty-ninth birthday, I returned to my childhood home in Bismarck, North Dakota. My parents met me at the municipal airport, warmly embracing and then whisking me away to the same house where I had lived from Kindergarten through the summers of my college years. After a few joyful days of eating and talking, I needed a moment to myself. Despite the blustery chill of late November on the Great Plains, I strolled the same route I followed when I walked each day to the local elementary school, noticing the neighborhood where I grew up.

The church on 8th Street had been fitted with new windows. The yellow house on 7th Street had the same rusted, rectangular air conditioning unit. A rusted coupe still sat in a 6th Street driveway, partially blocking the sidewalk as it had for over two decades. The aging tree on 5th Street, in whose crook I had once secreted a shiny pebble, had been pruned and no longer had a hiding spot. The arched sidewalk that embraced the corner with 4th Street had been replaced with a square intersection.

When I arrived at the school on 3rd Street, a two-story reddish brick edifice, I strolled the alley abutting the playground. The brown and orange metal equipment I had enjoyed as a child, and which was rather worn even then, had been replaced with brightly colored plastic. The schoolyard itself was no longer open to the public as it had been in the 1990s, the fences having been completed to seal off access to the chipped blacktop with locking gates. I paused on the threshold of my childhood, a

flood of memories returning. Here was the spot where a classmate had vomited in front of everyone while waiting in line to return to class from recess. There was the retaining wall we had been forbidden to climb but ascended anyway. Here was the teeter totter on which a girl lost a front tooth when someone jumped off the other end.

Along the alley was a particularly long stretch of chain link fence. Students who had misbehaved in a third or fourth grade class were not held indoors for recess like they were in other grades but were told to "walk the fence," pacing back and forth along the length of the fence by the alleyway until the gray school bell (which sometimes froze in winter) rang and we lined up to go indoors. How humiliating to be one of the fence walkers.

As I circled the schoolyard and returned home, memories returned of how my elementary school teachers maintained order in a variety of ways. In Kindergarten and second grade, no one really got in trouble. It just wasn't the way those classrooms operated. In first grade, however, we had to come to the front of the class to write our names on the green chalkboard if we misbehaved. A check mark meant a partial loss of recess. Two checks meant no recess and a note or phone call home. The same was true in third grade, except fence walking was the fate of those with their names on the board. Punishments were open for all to see.

My teachers' creativity seemed to me to blossom in upper elementary school. In fourth grade, we had a laminated color change chart, which, on the day before Christmas break, my teacher commented was "lit up like a Christmas tree." Going from green to yellow wasn't so bad, but if you went to orange, red, or, heaven forbid, black, walking the fence was the least of your concerns. In fifth grade, we had red cards that we had to bring to the teacher's desk at the back of the room to "come get a punch" on the card. This meant a loss of Friday free time. We also had yellow and red "talk tickets." Talk out of turn, lose a ticket. Lose both and get a punch. In sixth grade, we had to write checks to pay fines from our token economy bank accounts.

Given the omnipresence of visible management systems in my elementary school, perhaps it is little surprise that classroom management was an endless source of interest while playing school with my childhood friend, "Christine." Her parents were both educators, as was my father, so we had no shortage of retired classroom materials. Whether at my house or in Christine's, we never tired of creating official-looking rosters of our stuffed animals. Once the class lists had been negotiated, it was time to take attendance and lunch count, with one of us serving as teacher and the other as a student. My father's discarded blue planning book said, "Indicate below those absent or tardy." We took down the names solemnly. At any moment, a someone might talk out of turn or run in a hallway, and either Christine or I would administer the appropriate measures. In general, we favored writing names on a sheet of dry erase board leaned against the wall at my house or (best of all) the green chalkboard at Christine's house.

In middle and high school, the daily intercom announcement came like clockwork before the dismissal bell: "The following students, please report to Mr. So-and-So's room for detention…" The usual suspects were rounded up once again, and the rest of us went home. Every once in a while, the name of someone in your eighth period class would be called. After the requisite "OOOOO," everyone else would ask, "Whadja do?"

The first real detention I ever assigned was around October of my first year of teaching, which was in a charter middle school where I was the founding Latin teacher. The reluctant participant in this dubious distinction was "David," a sixth grader from

my homeroom. David would not stop blurting out and interrupting class discussions. I had previously issued bright green write-up slips, talked with him after class, and called his mother. One day, I had him call his own mother to tell her why he had detention. Then David stayed after school and squirmed in boredom for half an hour. After that, he stopped blurting out in class for a while, but soon, the old behavior returned. I assigned another detention.

During the next detention, a school administrator walked by and asked what was going on. She didn't challenge me directly, but later, she called a meeting of the middle school team to talk about discipline. Our team consisted of five teachers, and we had collaborated over the summer to design a charter middle school expansion to an existing elementary charter school. Some members of the team supported detention. Others opposed it. We had some basic procedures in place to address typical middle school behaviors, but we had no plans for what to do when those failed. We left the meeting no closer to consensus about how to respond to ongoing disruptive behaviors.

David kept blurting out in class. I came to see that my approach was failing, so I changed tactics. I continued assigning time after school but used it to clean the classroom with David, help with his homework, or talk about school and life. I learned more about David's family, his home life, his interests. Perhaps unsurprisingly, David's behavior began to change. He still talked out of turn sometimes, but he was far less disruptive. We worked out a private signal for me to give to him to let him know when he was becoming too loud. We found ways to work together and began to find more appropriate behaviors for him.

I took a year away from classroom teaching to work in assessment. I worked in communities on and around a Native American reservation, coordinating and supervising the administration of a federally mandated standardized test. The protocol required me to schedule and conduct multiple pre-assessment planning phone calls with the assessment coordinator of a district on the reservation. My emails and phone calls requesting an appointment went unanswered. I had the option to escalate the issue of the coordinator's non-responsiveness to a supervisor, but something held me back. After a meeting at a nearby district, I simply dropped by the school to try to see the assessment coordinator. I was in luck. The coordinator dropped what she was doing to meet with me. She apologized profusely for not being in touch. She was caring for a student whose parents had kicked her out of her home in the middle of the winter and had taken the girl into her own home while working out a solution. This was one among several similar crises that month.

I returned later in the winter to supervise the administration of the assessment. A group of teachers greeted me with open arms. They fed me lunch in the school cafeteria and invited me to eat with the students who would be taking the assessment. The salad bar was excellent, and the soup was homemade and served with a smile. All students, the teacher told me, ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the school, free of charge. Extra food was unobtrusively sent home to the students who needed it. Students told me they were excited to take the test and prove how much they had learned with their teachers. This was a community that was unlikely to benefit much by participating, with many members who were facing the very real threat of hunger, yet it was also a community that welcomed this federal representative all the same.

## Lesson Planning

Later this coming school year, I will be the instructor for a course titled, "Strategies in Classroom Management." I took this same course as a master's student.

Now, as a doctoral student, I will teach it. I am excited for the opportunity to think deeply about teaching with the students who will enroll. Enthusiasm is my primary emotion when anticipating this work. However, I also feel a sense of trepidation as I question what a course on classroom management can realistically achieve when divorced from the richness of clinical practice. On the other hand, through this first attempt at *currere*, I am reminded that, by turning inward, I can come to a place of recognition of my past experiences' influences on my future teaching. The work of introspection may also be a powerful starting place from which my students may proceed. How might I approach teaching this class, informed by the process of *currere* and by my own *currere*?

Strategies in Classroom Management is a catalog course, and the planned curriculum is mostly predetermined. This worries me: where is the voice of the instructor, let alone the voices of the learners, in such a curriculum? Still, it may also be helpful or even appropriate for a first-time university instructor. Indeed, the readings will walk students through some exercises that I think will be useful, especially if this will be the first time some of them will consider these ideas: holding a morning meeting, organizing the physical space of the learning environment, and developing a management plan that attends to equity and students' humanity. Hopefully, we will all come away from the course with new or sharpened tools for our classroom management toolboxes. However, I feel that, if honing and collecting new tools is all that we achieve, we will have missed the mark.

One avenue for accomplishing something greater may actually be the same assignments that I thought were the silliest when I took the course. They are now the ones I most eagerly anticipate when thinking about teaching it. In fact, a couple of them may even entail elements of *currere*. In the first week, students complete an "I am from…" poem, in which they recall some of the people, places, and experiences that have shaped them. They also write six-word memoirs, in which they attempt to capture some experience with classroom management. I am not sure I took these assignments seriously as a student in the course. I was much more interested in drawing a map of my dream classroom and articulating my management plan. I'm not sure I appreciated at the time how closely those decisions were connected to an understanding of myself, my values, and my beliefs about teaching and learning that were articulated through those initial assignments.

Perhaps those initial tasks were more important than I thought, and perhaps they might even be expanded to include more of *currere.* As retrospective and prospective steps, students could write "I am from…" poems at the beginning of the course and "In my classroom, I will be…" poems at the end. Linked with final papers and reflections, students could create a more comprehensive portfolio documenting their present thinking about classroom management and creating nurturing learning environments. Due to the structured nature of the course, the possibilities are not endless, but perhaps as I begin to plan, I ~~can~~ must find some flexibility within that structure.

## LOOSENING UP

I didn't realize it at the time, but my experiences on the reservation initiated a journey toward thinking about schools more as learning communities than as learning organizations (Sergiovanni, 1994). In an organization, hierarchies legitimize and elevate some voices above others. People pursue their own interests, which may or may not align with the organization's goals. Power and trusting relationships may be leveraged to get things done. In a community, relationships and trust matter for

different reasons. Fragile connections are forged and tested, bringing people together around shared values and purpose. Progress can be halting, but relying on power can risk the entire enterprise.

After working in that assessment role, I returned to the classroom. This time, I was teaching high school Latin. Eighth period each day, freshmen burst through the door. They would not stop talking. I planned lively deliberations and collaborative projects. We played games using spoken Latin, went outside to try Roman games, and greeted one another in the hallways. We came from all corners of the school to a room on the second floor where, although most were not friends outside class, we shared a sense of looking out for one another in this large building where we met each day. No one failed my classes while I taught in that school. I assigned no detentions.

Perhaps being a high school teacher and teaching that class of freshmen made it easier to take the first step toward community than it might have been when I was teaching middle school. In middle school, with one or two eighth grade exceptions, I was always the most commanding physical presence. Maybe I let that overly influence my thinking about my classroom. In high school, I taught students ranging from tiny freshmen to senior football and basketball stars. I am 6' 2", and while I may have been fairly tall, someone else was always taller. My voice could carry, but someone else's could always carry farther. It is especially obvious in this kind of space that classroom management is largely an illusion, or at least a misnomer. I may think I am managing the classroom, and perhaps I have great influence, but students and teachers ultimately make our own choices about how to relate to one another.

Sometimes my high school students brought baggage into the classroom from outside that I learned about only after a challenging class period, often during lunch or hall duty: a breakup with a significant other, failing a math test the period before my class, an abusive guardian, a suicidal friend, an awkward promposal, a first sexual encounter. To think that these experiences can or should be managed is folly. Power might bring temporary compliance or superficial learning, but it cannot force students to set aside the real issues they face and sustain deep interest in what I may have to say about Latin grammar. Only a nurturing influence and shared purpose can truly make room for that.

Some classes don't form communities easily. Maybe that's inevitable, or perhaps that's on me. One class sticks in my mind: fourth period sophomores, right before lunch. When I surveyed this group at the beginning of the year about how they preferred to learn, "worksheets" was the most popular answer. Discussions of translations, cultural activities, even class potlucks all fell flat during fourth period. More often than not, the silence spiraled as the teenagers smiled and shifted awkwardly in their seats. I invited an administrator to observe a class discussion. He said my students seemed highly engaged. One student's response to a regular classroom climate survey commented on the "dysfunctional" discussions we were having. In the end, fourth period produced more award winners on the National Latin Exam than any other class. I never did figure out what would bring this group together, and I only hope that the fact that I kept trying meant something. Ultimately, where I sought a community, I got basic respect and politeness. I still wonder what I might have done differently with that particular class, but perhaps even an awkward discussion in fourth period Latin sets a higher standard for civility and democratic deliberation than the highest political leadership in the nation today.

Thinking of schools as communities—even dysfunctional ones—opens the possibility of new ways of being in the classroom with my students. It allows me to begin to set aside some of my ingrained notions of what my classroom *should* be and

begin to think differently about what it *could* be. Striving to become a community repositions my voice with less certainty and rectitude, but it doesn't mean abdicating moral responsibility for the children entrusted to my care. In fact, I think it allows a greater realization of that trust by more fully acknowledging children as fellow citizens with lives emplaced within their families and neighborhoods as well as the four walls of my classroom.

## Reassembling

I truly believe my teachers acted in what they thought were the best interests of their students. I have no reason to think otherwise. However, I now find their control- and conformity-oriented management systems rife with problems. In their defense, I have no doubt that a teacher must maintain some level of control. This is fundamental to acting *in loco parentis* and preserving the safety of all students. However, I am also reasonably confident that control must not be an end in itself but one among many tools to enact a nurturing pedagogy for shaping a thoughtful public (Goodlad et al., 2004). Whether they are working silently and alone or noisily and together, my students' presence reminds me that I teach future political leaders, park rangers, musicians, doctors, priests, letter carriers, parents, business executives, and Latin teachers. Even in Kindergarten and most certainly in high school, they are fellow citizens of our social and political democracy. Some, especially indigenous students, may also be citizens of other nations. All are members of rich communities with meaningful ways of knowing and being in the world.

I recall my preparation to teach, that period of time between my long apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) and that October day when I assigned David detention. What part of that curriculum gave me real pause to reconsider my apprenticeship? My student teaching semester, that all-important culmination of every teacher education program, wasn't quite up to the task. I had the privilege to complete my student teaching with two award-winning educators. As they were presented in my program, though, they seemed to be role models to be copied, perhaps gently questioned, but ultimately the experts. As I experienced it, student teaching didn't feel real. It was an apprentice's extended effort to please his masters, interrupted by occasional performances for the grumpy, retired university supervisor who knew no Latin but would scribble on carbon paper and drop a copy on my desk. It was exhausting, and I looked forward to having my own classroom where I could finally begin to find my own teacher voice.

In my first year of graduate school, I attended a conference at which I dined with a table of teacher educators. The conference was a few months after the release of the 2018 report of the Clinical Practice Commission of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, which affirmed the importance of highly qualified, school-based teacher educators (p. 34). I shared some of my experience and raised the question of whether it is wise to place student teachers with the "best" teachers. The response was unanimous, almost reflexive: clinical experiences should take place in the classrooms of seasoned experts. Perhaps I'm naïve, but I'm not so sure. I think this approach has the potential to position the pre-service teacher as an empty vessel to be filled with other people's wisdom. Perhaps pre-service teachers need this kind of handholding, at least at first, but how do in-service teachers, and university faculty, let alone students, really stand to benefit in such a model? If, however, schools and universities truly seek to come together and simultaneously renew one another (Goodlad et al., 2004), there must be a greater balance between transmitting and co-constructing what it means to teach. What might happen if the opportunity to be

a mentor teacher weren't restricted to the "best" in-service teachers but instead were open to those most eager to learn and to serve (B. Badiali, personal communication, August 2018)? What if pre-service teachers were systematically invited to work with adequate or even struggling in-service teachers? Would it necessarily be a disaster, or could it invite growth for everyone involved?

Buoyed by *currere*, I affirm a view of teaching as a lifelong learning process, never completed, entailing a unique journey for each of us bold enough to step up to the profound moral responsibility of teaching or preparing others to join this profession (Goodlad, 1990). This view is not original or recent, but its implications are extensive and contemporary, inviting ongoing consideration of classroom management, building relationships with students and their families, and pre-service teacher education—in sum, the whole enterprise of schooling. Separated from the familiar routine of copying the master, choosing this kind of teaching life can feel daunting. Nevertheless, each day I choose to begin again down the teacher's winding path.

## References

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education Clinical Practice Commission. (2018). *A pivot toward clinical practice, its lexicon, and the renewal of educator preparation*. Retrieved from https://aacte.org/professional-development-and-events/clinical-practice-commission-press-conference

Goodlad, J. I. (1990). The occupation of teaching in schools. In J. I. Goodlad, R. Soder, & K. A. Sirotnik (Eds.), *The moral dimensions of teaching* (pp. 3-34). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Goodlad, J. I., Mantle-Bromley, C., & Goodlad, S. J. (2004). *Education for everyone: Agenda for education in a democracy.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Lortie, D. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Pinar, W. F. (1994). *Autobiography, politics, and sexuality: Essays in curriculum theory, 1972-1992*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1994). Organizations or communities? Changing the metaphor changes the theory. *Educational Administration Quarterly 30*(2), 214-226.