

CURRERE IN THE SPACE BETWEEN: ON A PATH TOWARD DIALOGIC LEARNING

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Photo Courtesy of my husband, Earl Novendstern

While in Iceland, I slogged through the one place on earth where the mid-Atlantic rift rises above the ocean, and it is possible to walk in the space between the North American and Euro-Asian tectonic plates. Progress through the rift is slow as one's feet sink deeply into pulverized lava. But traversing the space between two foundational forces can be exhilarating.

As a child, I never dreamed of being a teacher. I envisioned a career in medical research seeking a cure for cancer. That vision evaporated in college when faced with incontrovertible evidence that I had absolutely no aptitude for science. Set adrift, I ended up majoring in English literature and after graduation pursued a master's degree in the subject. As a graduate assistant for an introductory course in English composition, I had my first teaching experience. Let's just say that did not ignite my passion for life in the classroom—or for the lifelong study of English literature. Adrift once again, I lucked into an administrative position where I worked with a physician who was spearheading efforts to improve the quality of pre-hospital emergency care in Southwestern Pennsylvania. Here, I could linger in a space between medicine and health care planning. Ironically, I was less interested in mastering life-saving skills than in the educational preparation of emergency medical technicians (EMTs).

This was in the early 1970s when the idea of training lay persons to deliver life-stabilizing, on-the-scene, emergency treatment was new and still controversial. In the absence of standardized licensure exams tied to a uniform curriculum, the training was

fraught with inconsistencies. Slightly more experienced and competent ambulance personnel were anointed as instructors, none of whom had any preparation for their new role. This, it seemed to me, was an undesirable state of affairs, so I began looking for an educational consultant who could help me bring some semblance of order to this educational free-for-all. I was told, "You ought to go see Dr. Noreen Garman in Pitt's School of Education." Although I didn't know it at the time, following this suggestion set me on a life-long course of learning about curriculum.

In 1975, two years after Noreen helped me to develop an EMT instructor-training program, I entered doctoral study in the Curriculum and Supervision program at the University of Pittsburgh. As a neophyte in the world of education, I tended to put Noreen on a pedestal, along with the other curriculum theorists she referenced (e.g., William Pinar, William Schubert, Madeleine Grumet, Janet Miller, Michael Apple, Maxine Greene, Dwayne Huebner, Dennis Sumara, and James Macdonald). Often, I did not understand what she or they were talking about, and in my ignorance, assumed the heady discourses of curriculum theorizing weren't relevant to me. Even more, I assumed that my thinking about curriculum development was inconsequential to them. I found myself in a space between my world of curriculum practice and the world of theory inhabited by those I admired.

I also inhabited a space between the world of Noreen's courses, and the world of the University's External Studies Program (UESP) where I had a graduate assistantship. In my naiveté and admiration, I assumed Noreen had figured out "all that curriculum stuff." As she later recounted, in the mid-1970s, she was grappling to enact a different form of curriculum in her classes:

There were no stated learning objectives [in my courses]. I was not telling students ahead of time what they should be learning and why (a cardinal sin in the traditional curriculum thinking of the day) In those early years, many students were frustrated at first, but by the time the semester ended they would often say, "This was the most exciting experience I've had in graduate school. I don't exactly know why, but it is." A few went away angry, because I never really told them directly what to learn, and they felt they hadn't learned very much because their frustration level was so high. I hated that part. And I struggled, not only with enacting this form of curriculum, but also with the ethical questions it raised. (Garman, 1990, p. 176)

In my enthusiasm for her courses, I didn't fully grasp that Noreen was struggling for a language to articulate her vision of curriculum, and never dreamed she might count me as a useful contributor to her deliberations. In the meantime, at UESP, no such struggle for language or curriculum design seemed to be occurring. There, Doris Gow's (1973) highly structured, building-block model of curriculum design was being used to transform in-person, on-campus courses into an independent study format. For many professors, this was the first time they had been asked to provide a rationale for the content they were teaching and the learning outcomes they expected the students to achieve. In this space, I could see the value of designing courses in a way more closely aligned with the traditional, outcomes-based curriculum thinking that the theorists seemed to be criticizing. Thus, as I traversed the campus from the building where doctoral courses were held to the UESP office, I was moving between two theoretical spaces that I had no frame of reference to comprehend.

A breakthrough occurred for Noreen (and consequently me), when she came to a metaphor that she characterized as two fundamentally different curriculum “contracts.” With this metaphor, it seemed to me she found a language for helping students to understand the nature of the educational experience they were encountering without lapsing into reductionistic, prescriptive behavioral objectives. Figure 1 summarizes assumptions that underpin what I was doing in UESP (left column) and what I found so exciting, even transformative, about Noreen’s curriculum enactments (right column).

Figure 1

Contrasting Assumptions of Curriculum Structure (Garman, 1990, p. 179)

Closed Contract assumes that	Open Contract assumes that
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ...teaching and learning can be systematically organized, based on predictable learning behaviors of students (implying that learning experiences can be organized in order to guarantee that a reasonable percentage of students can achieve the predetermined outcomes; 2. ...the evaluation procedures can provide adequate evidence indicating to what extent the learner has achieved the given outcomes. Generally, this is done by measuring the predictable results through quantitative data; 3. ...the management system (agreement) implicit in the contract is primarily for the control of behavior and accountability (for both teacher and learner) in order to achieve the intended outcomes. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ...learning events can be imagined in such a way that a reasonable number of participants, by involving themselves in the situation, can articulate the meaning they find as a result of their involvement and their reflective inquiry about the significance of the events; 2. ...the discoveries of participants, which are not controllable and predictable, can be described, interpreted, and evaluated by the participants within the limits of the contract; 3. ...a reasonable number of participants can become aware of their own consciousness as an important part of the open contract; 4. ...knowledge is unfolding in time in a manner that leads to ever new and unpredictable states.

The contract metaphor made sense to me because I had experienced both forms of curriculum and could see a value in both. I kept silent, however, in the presence of curriculum theorists for fear that my curriculum-making efforts would be dismissed as “mere design.” At the same time, I was met with blank stares when trying to describe the open curriculum structure to those deeply immersed in “closed-contract” education. I felt mired in a theoretical rift unable to talk confidently with those on either side of what I framed as a curriculum divide.

Somewhere in the material I was reading for my work at UESP, I ran across a distinction between the “logical organization” of knowledge and the “psychological organization.” In an “aha moment,” I recognized this as the most significant in-between space—the gap between what makes sense to an instructor and what makes sense to a learner. Of course, I wasn’t the first or only person to have that insight. Indeed, a robust literature exists on the importance of incorporating advanced organizers and scaffolding into instructional plans precisely to bridge that space. The ability to create such bridges

falls under the umbrella of what Sternberg and Horvath (1995) call “pedagogical-content knowledge” (p. 11). As important as it is to know how to convey content knowledge, it still seemed to me to miss a more fundamental point that the curriculum re-conceptualists and Noreen were trying to get at. Namely, what is the meaning of that knowledge to the learner? As David Cohen (2011) points out, teachers, like those in other helping professions, “can succeed only if their clients strive for and achieve success” (p. 10). As Noreen said, “I can invite students into an open space of learning, but only they can choose to participate; and in the end, only they can say what meaning they ascribed to the experience.”

The idea of “invitation” evokes another memory from this time in my journey; an annual gathering of curriculum theorists referred to as the Bergamo Conference. Noreen invited several of us to accompany her to the conference, where in a retreat-like setting, I met the luminaries of the curriculum world. I would have been at liberty to talk with them, but my fear of sounding stupid kept me silent. As Noreen later wrote, open learning spaces are dialogic and entail a willingness to be present (which I was) and also the willingness to

- ... *value multiple perspectives* (which I didn’t know how to do);
- ... *engage in the shared learning of others* (which I didn’t realize was the point of the conference);
- ... *risk engagement* (which I definitely lacked the courage to do), and
- ... *become an active member in a community* (which I assumed wouldn’t want me). (Garman, 1990)

At these gatherings, my stance as an intellectual wall-flower allowed me to observe, but not participate in, the richness of deliberations. In contrast, a psychologist with whom I was working invited me to participate in a group leadership training program offered through the Living-Learning Institute (Kuebel, 2002). The Institute had been founded by Ruth Cohn, a psychoanalyst; workshop leaders (and many participants) were also psychoanalysts or clinical psychologists. Logically, it would seem I should have been equally reticent to engage fully with this group of intellectuals. Yet, in those workshop spaces, I became a fully engaged participant and, consequently, experienced some of the most meaningful learning of my life.

I valued this form of learning so much, I wanted to help others experience something similar. Noreen cautioned me, however, about the risk of playing amateur therapist. Once again, I internalized this as a message that my educational interests were not appropriate within the deliberations of curriculum. This was perplexing, because William Pinar (1975) was drawing from psychoanalysis for his theory of *currere*. Why wouldn’t it be acceptable to create educational encounters meaningful enough to yield therapeutic side effects? Wasn’t the construction of personal meaning at the heart of the open contract and *currere*? Without adequately understanding *currere* as a method of inquiry, not an approach to curriculum design, I remained in a confused space where, for reasons I couldn’t comprehend, theory seemed to be separate from practice, knowing from meaning, and thinking from feeling. Working my way out of that confusion has been what I consider to be my *currere* project. It is akin to what William Schubert (2021) describes as “shaping the theory within me” (n.p.).

I have carried this project with me as I’ve sojourned through the world of hospital-based education and then through a series of curriculum development projects including

a special summer program for gifted students interested in health care careers, a geriatric education project, an elder abuse training program for social workers, a curriculum reconstruction project in a school of pharmacy, preliminary conceptualization of an interdisciplinary doctoral program brought to an abrupt end by a Provost's failure of imagination, and co-development of a Master of Arts in Teaching program. In so many of these endeavors, the press was to articulate clear programmatic goals and specific learning outcomes. I couldn't fully ignore this pressure, because in truth, I could see a value in making instructional purposes transparent to students. At the same time, I wanted to help both teachers and students to understand that learning entails more than the transmission of knowledge or the acquisition of skill sets. I worked to show how an open curriculum structure could provide an overarching framework that could encompass "closed contract" elements. As a "glass is half empty" sort of person, I'm inclined to cast these endeavors as failures. To do so, however, would disrespect those who did create spaces where I could try out my ideas. Yet, more often than not, when I talked with Noreen, I focused on my frustrations. I was so self-absorbed; I missed the irony of not hearing what Noreen was trying to tell me as I was complaining that others were not hearing me. Here's a seemingly innocuous example.

When I heard about the instructional technique of concept mapping, I was excited. This was a way to make students' thinking visible and to see how they were incorporating new ideas into their conceptual frameworks. Eagerly I shared this insight with Noreen, whose response I so little comprehended, I cannot call her words to mind. Just as subterranean forces tug the North American tectonic plate westward, my attention is always drawn to my own interior spaces. Like the forces tugging the Eurasian plate eastward, Noreen is always nudging my attention toward something else—something I can't really see from my place deep within the rift. Given my insecurities and longing for approval, I tended to experience her nudging as a judgment that my ideas are wrong or inadequate. From her perspective, Noreen was simply sharing ideas that had been sparked by my comments. So, when I said, "concept map," her mind immediately went to mapping discourses. And that's why I characterized this as a seemingly innocuous example. Looking back, I now understand that Noreen's intent has always been to engage in generative dialogue, a form of thinking that would help me see some broader landscape of education where various ideological forces are constantly tugging in different directions.

Recently, Noreen and I have been talking about the problem of those who react to educational issues with little or no sense of history. Lacking an historical perspective, current concerns can be too easily misunderstood or dismissed. This was exactly my shortcoming when I entered the world of curriculum. With no previous exposure to the field of education, I didn't appreciate the discursive landscape into which I had stumbled. More fundamentally, I didn't grasp the point that, as a student of curriculum, I had some obligation to develop an understanding of the landscape, not just focus narrowly on my own work. In the picture of the Mid-Atlantic rift at the beginning of this essay, is a bridge that spans the two tectonic plates. In a sense, Noreen has always been trying to get me onto a bridge where I can look more neutrally in both directions, instead of reacting dismissively when something doesn't relate to my immediate concerns.

What I didn't understand back in the mid-1970s were the ways in which William Pinar and the other curriculum reconceptualists were resisting the powerful forces of behaviorism, industrial standardization, and scientism that had dominated public schools since the early 20th century. When Dwayne Huebner (1999) wrote about curriculum as

the journey of the soul or Dennis Sumara (1996) wrote about laying down the path while walking, they were calling attention to the importance of consciousness, agency, and meaning-making through educational experience. This, it seemed to me, was what Noreen was striving to enact within an “open contract” curriculum. This was a terrain I wanted to explore through curriculum-making, so I just couldn’t make sense of what I heard as disparagement of curriculum design. Because I was working in the space of professional education, I had no intellectual, let alone visceral, objection to designing curricula with clearly stated learning outcomes. This missed the point, however. The disparagement, I now understand, was for the totalizing and over-reaching imposition of behavioral designs to the exclusion of all else—and often to the oppression of the most socially vulnerable students. I’m more than a little embarrassed to admit that my own narcissism would lead me to think anyone was denigrating my efforts as a curriculum worker. The discourses weren’t about ME, but about important matters of inclusion, respect, equity, and justice.

In the same vein, Pinar was making an argument against a privileged mode of educational research. Back then, teachers, students, and educational institutions were often treated as objects of study by researchers in disciplines like psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The knowledge generated through such studies contributed to those disciplinary discourses but spoke little about the nature of education as it is experienced. In proposing *currere* as a mode of inquiry, it seems to me that Pinar was making a threefold point: (1) that curriculum lies at the heart of education as a field of study, (2) the field could have its own body of theoretical knowledge, and (3) education could have its own distinctive form of inquiry, not simply a derivative of methods in the disciplines.

I can well imagine those who have remained in the conversations about *currere* saying, “Well, of course, dummy. We all know that.” But I didn’t. And because I didn’t see myself as a curriculum scholar or theorist, I didn’t understand that reflection on educational experience as part of an open curriculum structure was related to, but different from, *currere* as a method of inquiry into the nature of education experience *writ large*.

Recently, I had a conversation with my colleague Patricia L. McMahon about the work of students in her master’s level creative inquiry class. When asked to recall a troubling moment of practice, several students recounted moments so painful that they were moved to tears. One student, writing in her final scholarly personal narrative said, “I was so caught in reflection as recollection and introspection, I couldn’t move forward toward conceptual reflection.” What a powerful insight. It is in that final metacognitive turn that theorizing occurs. Without that turn, the narrative may be poignant, even compelling, but still lacks a “so what” in terms of broader educational discourses. As Patricia and I talked, I was brought back to the layered difference between reflection as an engaged mode of learning and *currere* as a mode of metacognitive conceptual reflection inherent in inquiry. All of this, however, comes years after I was caught in a rift of my own ignorance where I struggled to find a stance from which to think and write.

This began to change when Noreen invited me and several of her other advisees to form a group to study alternatives to the science-like dissertations privileged at that time by the University’s School of Education. Although I still found it hard to believe, Noreen insisted that she had no ready answers for crafting such dissertations and was learning along with us. However, when our group began attending the annual conference of the American Education Research Association (AERA), I could see that many

scholars (including those in curriculum) were also struggling to define distinctive forms of educational inquiry. By attending the conference in consecutive years, I could see how knowledge was being developed discursively. Each successive year brought clearer language and the coalescence of new special interest groups that tackled the problem from different perspectives. I witnessed debates between Elliot Eisner and Maxine Greene, between Eisner and Howard Gardner, between Norman Denzin and a panel of experts who insisted they had developed all-inclusive criteria for “qualitative research.” This was the push and pull of ideological tectonic plates I had missed when I entered the field of curriculum studies. I began to see how I could be a participant in the midst of such deliberations and what it meant to enter dialogic learning spaces.

I would like to say I had an epiphany that permanently freed me from a simplistic way of thinking about knowledge. But, in truth, I still struggle. The difference is having a safe community in which to voice my naïve questions and, just as often, my obnoxiously judgmental opinions. Noreen has told me more than once that she is amazed by my capacity to make vehemently negative pronouncements about an issue and then come back in a day or two with a more thoughtful, reasoned perspective. To the extent this might be true, it is the steadfast pressure of Noreen’s intellect that brings me back to a dialogically deliberative space.

In the winter of 2023, Noreen and I embarked on a collaborative writing project about the dialogic nature of our work together. In reflecting on her early teaching career Noreen wrote, “I became a novice instructor in Pitt’s English Department, struggling to teach a methods course to education majors.” Reading this, I couldn’t help but think we had been fated to meet. Although we had missed each other in the English Department, we were brought together serendipitously a few years later. Because of that fated meeting, my *currere* project has evolved through the most important space between—that between two colleagues and friends as we engage in the dialogic push and pull of ideas that enrich the pathways on which our minds run.

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