ORDINARY JOE

Jonathan Giddy
Open University Team

By their very nature, transformative curricula seek to challenge established paradigms, nurture critical thinking, and advocate for social justice. The long-established paradigm of Welsh education that I have witnessed largely followed a teacher-centred approach, which advocated an emphasis on the traditional subject areas, focused on examinations and assessment, placed limits on curriculum flexibility, and deemphasised skills and experiences. This characterisation of the difference between the two types of curricula is simplistic yet reflects a snapshot of the discourse around curriculum development in Wales in 2024. Nevertheless, the success of the Welsh curriculum is contingent upon navigating multifaceted challenges, including political and ideological opposition, resistance to change, the fear of freedom (Freire, 1971), institutional support deficits, resource limitations, educator readiness and resistance, and the complex landscape of assessment and accountability (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). This article intertwines my personal journey from past experiences to present reflections, contemplating my future as a teacher educator. Positioned within the educational context of Wales, my subjectivity strengthens this scholarly inquiry. As such, this autoethnographic research authentically and transparently acknowledges, explores, and contextualises the biases, perspectives, and identities shaping my professional life.

In outlining the method of *currere*, I attempt to capture the experiences that have defined my identity. This *currere* is unapologetically a self-realisation, a longing to be comfortable in my skin, an acceptance of self—the pursuit of authenticity. First, I define the concepts of *currere*, agency, and self as I understand and use them in this paper. I then outline the method using my own experience as an example of how *currere* can be applied to (re)kindle one's agency and (re)write one's self. I end by exploring some themes relevant to the method that situate, both figuratively and literally, my ongoing encounter with *currere*.

THE CONCEPTS & AN INTRODUCTION

I begin by introducing a definition that sits well with me: *currere* is "an act of self-interrogation in which one reclaims one's self from one's self as one unpacks and repacks the meanings that one holds" (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 13). Searching between the fragments of my life, I am reluctant to ascribe meaning to subjective memories and events and the introspection that activates emotions from relationships in the past. If "time changes everything except memories," then "memories are timeless treasures of the heart." Rather than paralysis in doubt of these memories, I attempt to accept them as my biography. It feels less of an indulgence when there is, on the face of it, more meaningful work I could be doing, less of an over-imaginative and unrealistic fanciful jaunt. Why. when I spend hours every day in my own head, occupied by problems and dilemmas, do I find justifying spending time on this *currere* so hard. Maybe it is hard. Introspection requires honesty and vulnerability, which can be daunting. Introspection on an ordinary life can seem so underwhelming.

This paper reflects my ongoing *currere* as a science teacher educator, following the approach Pinar (1975) defined as one examining their educational experiences to understand what shapes their identity and professional practice as an adult. Deriving from the Latin word meaning "to run" or "the course to be run," *currere* outlines the process of educational experience as the journey I have lived, "the race I ran" and counters the notion that curriculum is a static set of content to be delivered. Rather, this *currere* presents as a corollary to this.

I composed this *currere* to free myself of the doubt of not knowing myself, what formed my views, and where they came from. What frightens me most is this introspection comes after my professional life as a teacher trainer has finished, and I sit at a time in hindsight knowing what I know now. The "tyranny of the urgent" mentality of one's professional life rarely allows or warrants someone to do *currere* work. For that reason, it is valuable to me because I have been given this time. At the heart of this are the that the values and ideas I espouse and behaviours I exhibit that are contradictory. *Currere* for me has become about understanding my emotions and the patterns in my life, both positive and negative so I can make better decisions in my job, my life, and my research. Rather than disappear or withdraw, I want to "get myself out of the way." I want to know my own mind yet wonder if everyone feels the need to do this.

Holland et al. (1998) describes how the identity of a teacher and teacher educator are formed and are enacted within the social and cultural context they have inhabited. What fascinates me most is untangling the *currere* of my own education from this figured world.

LIVING ON YOUR INSTINCTS

I often feel like I'm guided by my instincts, and I deeply value and embrace this approach to life—the adventure of setting off on a trip, walking through the woods, the joy of exploring a mase. That is how I try to live my life, and my professional identity is also framed by this. When you are relatively ordinary, lived and ordinary life in an ordinary place, these things tend to work quite well. Any risk associated generally pays off, you achieve satisfaction and strong sense of trust in yourself. At heart, I am a risk-taker, a gambler well aware of the odds.

Richard Branson was said to behave in business in this way. It is said he started Virgin Atlantic because he had a "gut feeling" the airline industry needed a more customer-friendly approach, despite having no prior experience in aviation. Virgin is now one of the world's most recognisable brands, spanning industries from music and airlines to space travel and telecommunications. Conversely, the same instinct-driven approach led him to take significant risks, such as unsuccessfully launching Virgin Cola to compete with giants like Coca-Cola.

Similarly lauded is Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple. Jobs was undeniably an innovative and ultimately successful person living on his instincts and building his company against the views of market research and focus groups. His instinct was focusing on aesthetics and user experience, rather than just functionality, something that seems pretty obvious to us today. The other side of this risk taking was his initial decision, based on his belief in alternative medicine, to unsuccessfully treat his cancer with non-traditional methods.

What strikes me is how I, like many, read the autobiographies of Branson and Jobs in awe and use them in similar ways as manuals to aspire to. They feed my inner risk-taker. A more practical book along the lines of "being more realistic and thinking a bit more about taking risks" might not make the best sellers list.

Getting Myself Out of the Way

This is my problem with the regressive—that it is natural to look for causal reasons to connect the dots between now and then, almost as if what happened and what resulted were inevitable. Ignoring circumstance, serendipity, and practicality, I get the sense that I was always destined for this life. It strikes me that is how teachers think or at least are encouraged to think.

Whether believing I was destined to be a teacher makes me a good or bad teacher is intriguing to consider. I espouse the student-centred curriculum the way I do to my students, from an ethical standpoint of do no harm. I don't believe I woke up one morning with these beliefs, but *currere* carved them into my psyche through my personal experiences, values, and perspectives. Maybe it has come with age, position, or engaging in *currere* as a process of self-realisation—the desire to peel away the fabricated layers of my personality and understand what I have become. I get the sense that is what people do when they get older. Why I am not friends with this or that person anymore, what happened, to what extent were these decisions conscious? Why did these seemingly innocuous things happen? What does it say about who I am and what I do today?

Far from a Life "Less Ordinary"

Reflecting on my school days of the 1980s, I remember a time marked by simplicity and a certain unspoken acceptance of life's flow. My experience, like that of many of my peers, was fairly typical. We enjoyed happy childhoods without major aspirations or fears of failure. Back then, a clear sense of direction was a concept that seemed foreign, a stark contrast to the structured goals and ambitions that shape my life today.

Football was a central part of my childhood, with memories of endless games etched warmly in my mind. I would often find myself on the substitutes' bench during weekend matches, a situation that, surprisingly, never left me feeling particularly disappointed or upset. Reflecting on it now, I find that rather strange. As an adult and a coach for my son's football team, my sense of fairness is much more heightened. I am determined never to let a child come and not get any playing time, and I doubt their parents would tolerate it either. Looking back, I realise those early experiences shaped who I am today. Perhaps that acceptance of my situation was a reflection of the societal attitudes of the time—maybe it was influenced by the values of Thatcherism (strangely to me someone my parents adored), which emphasised individualism and self-reliance, leaving little room for questioning one's circumstances. Perhaps I didn't feel frustrated simply because I held no power. We might call that lack of control "agency" now. I grew up without much agency or even an awareness of its importance. I wonder if my life is reactionary. It would make sense and help me make sense of my life.

I question to what extent my early schooling influenced my upbringing. The Alumni page for my secondary school details only one notable former pupil—a right-wing UKIP (UK Independence Party) and now REFORM UK politician from around the 1960's. The connection between the type of education and the notable success of its pupils is a foundational principle of the history of schooling around the world. Why do some schools in some places produce a wealth of innovation and others don't? Many people frequently rise up from extreme poverty with resilience, determination, with a willingness to take risks and work hard. These driven people dedicated to pursue opportunities and overcome obstacles. JK Rowling (*Harry Potter*), Chris Gardner (*The Pursuit of Happyness*), Lebron James (*ML Basketball*) and many others have

overcome challenging upbringings, often without social and governmental support programmes, to create remarkable lives for themselves. It seems remiss to discount the trauma associated with these life stories, and I am positive if given the choice anyone would want similar for themselves. What I take from these life stories is that they were far from ordinary, bland, or uninspired.

Death Valley

I often wonder why certain ideas resonate so deeply with me or others. Though I know it's a bit of a cliché, I was particularly moved by Ken Robinson's (2013) thought-provoking lecture, "How to Escape Education's Death Valley." In it, he draws a powerful analogy between the impact of rain on the flora and fauna of Death Valley and the effect of nurturing opportunities on students in our schools.

Although I have not personally visited this arid landscape, Robinson's metaphor profoundly resonates with me, symbolising the immense potential for growth in the face of adversity when the right conditions are provided. Death Valley, known for its extreme temperatures and minimal rainfall, serves as a powerful metaphor for the formidable challenges within struggling educational systems. The rare but life-giving rain in this harsh environment mirrors the infrequent yet crucial opportunities for nurturing in these educational contexts. Robinson's comparison highlights the transformative power of resilience and determination when even small amounts of support and resources are available—just as a single rain shower can bring forth vibrant blooms and sustain life in the desert.

What surprises me most isn't the initial reaction to this idea but rather the rejection of it within practitioners' own teaching practices. I understand the reasons behind this rejection all too well, as they reflect the neo-liberal nature of my own education. Through Robinson's metaphor, I perceive a powerful message about resilience and optimism in education—qualities that drive me as an educator and that I strive to instil in my teachers. The metaphor underscores the inherent potential of individuals and institutions to thrive and evolve, even in environments where educational resources and opportunities are scarce. By embracing this metaphor, I recognise my own *currere*. I can't help but feel a sense of unease when I think of words like "average," "lukewarm," and "lacklustre"—terms I now use in teaching science. Ironically, these scientific terms mirror the very lack of inspiration I felt as a student. I find myself wishing that someone or something—perhaps a more enriching curriculum—had rained on me during my adolescence.

Similar to many other average people, I go to work, try to please, ultimately fear for my job, and do my best. In a mathematical sense, the "curse of the mean" implies the limitations of relying on the mean to understand a dataset. This number summarises the data and fails to capture the variability or distribution of values around the mean. I am reminded by my comprehensive school music lessons here with a sense of revelation now rather than any sense of bitterness. These music lessons performed (not in any dramatic sense) by an uninspired teacher consisted of copying text about the great musicians of any age (Bach, Beethoven, Mozart) from acetates projected at the front of the class. If someone had asked a question about Beethoven during those school days, not a single person in that class would have been able to give an answer. To this day, I have never learnt to appreciate the genius of Beethoven, ironic given the pleasure many people get from his music.

What I find most profound is how little anyone in that class actually cared. Moments of unrest did occur when the most adept at this skill copying had finished and insisted the acetate be

"moved on." The slower copiers amongst us complained that we were not ready or let out sighs of "just one more minute" before the page was replaced and we were consigned to missing four lines that would never be captured. This was abject compliance, and it seemed to have no limits. I think it is plain for many to see how this might affect someone's later love of music, culture, even opera. Given the chance, I may have developed such a love of opera. I don't know. But an accumulation of experiences like these shape people they shaped me and continue to do so.

A second cliché that can be levelled at me is the impact Friere's (1970) work had when I read it and the reaction of others who find it irrelevant in particular contexts. Critical pedagogy (something I profess to having only a surface understanding of) speaks to the idea that, to have some agency—to make choices and act independently and have some influence and see yourself in the world—you have to know your own identity. Not having any clear sense of identity can lead to uncertainty and passivity. Mirrored here is the story of my *currere*, a nagging sense of a lack of identity crafted in the curriculum.

Maybe growing up is about finding an identity. Maybe that is naturally what everyone does—we grow into ourselves. You go looking for an identity. Maybe a symptom of the secondary schooling at least is that feeling (whether manufactured by teachers and the system) that somehow that is the end, that time and those grades represent your lot in life. My memories of that time seem to tell me so.

Cultural Identity

Many people leave their hometowns; equally many people never do. What is relevant for this *currere* it is why I left and, for the same subjective reason, why it springs to mind. Introspection leads me to believe I left Wales to find an identity, something I felt I was lacking. Maybe that is what travel does to people; it changes them. I think I like others do these things in the blind faith or hope of change. The impact on my "self" of living in different places clouds those memories and makes those memories. What I have learnt is that what the Welsh call *Cynefin*—culture, society, history, roots—does matter and matters a great deal.

I question what happened in my schooling, as a student and as a teacher, that sanitised it. How did I come to feel excluded by my own cultural identity, its language, customs, festivals, music, art, mythology, history and politics by virtue of my schooling. In the book, *Climbing Mount Improbable*, Richard Dawkins speaks of evolutionary dead ends from which species are unable to adapt when conditions change. The fossil record catalogues these species as falling victim to circumstance through no fault of their own. It is fair to say that alienation, marginalisation, and disenfranchisement is an improbable peak from which it is not possible to return. How is it that I can live at the foot of the Rhondda Valley and possess the sociocultural and political identity, history, community, and geography and feel completely untouched by it? This makes me Welsh but not a Welshman.

How I Became a Teacher

Richard Dawkins coined the term Meme in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, to describe how cultural information spreads and evolves in a manner analogous to the way genes propagate biological information. On multiple scales of success, one of the most impactful measures can be

how a message influences opinions. George Bernard Shaw (1903), in his play, "Man and Superman," coined the maxim, "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches" (p. 230), as a statement to revolutionists to be provocative and challenge conventional wisdom. This phrase has "evolved" and been taken out of the original context to form a more cynical interpretation: "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." This meme is something of a taboo among the teachers and students with whom I have worked. When brought up in conversation, it is difficult to decipher whether the listener is angered, aggrieved or experiencing some other emotion. It divides and demeans. It grates with teachers and can be discomforting. It has been so successful as a meme partly because it speaks much truth and speaks to the heart of the emotions around personal *currere*. Facing such a meme requires "knowing a bit about yourself," having the authenticity to move beyond what your CV happens to say, confront your true motivations, and be happy in your skin. For me that is what *currere* has become. Can I confront uncomfortable truths, recognise biases and blind spots, and do I have the courage to do so? Two recollections that stick in my mind on the road to such self-awareness relate to my time training to become a teacher and my time after teaching.

Teachers say so much during the course of their work that there is always something that sticks with certain people. Whilst I enjoyed people reminding me of my amusing analogies and revelling in our successes, it almost inevitably is those not-so-positive recollections that students feel liberated to tell and that make a mark. I was motivated by the unintended lessons of those music classes, the passivity at the heart of my schooling, and my identity to become a teacher, and like many teachers I wear it like a badge of honour. Still I was not immune from student anecdotes about the teacher who told them they would amount to nothing and how they "*showed em*." It wasn't until a few years after graduating that one of my former students sought me out to share their success story, directly challenging my earlier assertions of their likely failure. They wanted me to understand the impact of their achievement. I am almost sure I never said they would fail, partly because I know I didn't think that, but maybe that is the signal I really was giving off.

My PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) tutor once remarked that I was "the type of guy who would write a lesson plan on the back of a cigarette packet." Aside from my frequent trips outside for a smoke, which I suspect annoyed him endlessly, I fully understood the deeper meaning behind his words. I think to his annoyance I became quite proud of that statement, not for the slapdash sort of work he meant, but because I had learnt to improvise in the classroom, whether that showed or not. Still, my recollection of that time was largely negative, sad, and full of tension. I wonder if the cigarette packet story really did hold the meaning it did for my tutor, like it did for myself. Perhaps it is just another case of needing to prove someone, anyone wrong. Nonetheless, it is serendipitous, considering my views now and my interpretation of the curriculum in Wales at this time, that I trained when lessons were so tightly controlled, lesson schema so ingrained in teachers and their pupils. Without that, would I have such an apparent objection to the imposition of prescribed content and its memory retention, the continual demonstration of progress (real or artificial) that was demanded, and an obvious sign of teacher quality as the strategy dictated?

Searching for identity, tackling the problems of the past, proving people wrong could be considered corrective measures towards a life less ordinary. When I interview prospective student teachers, in contrast to some others in education, they see the idea of correcting the education of the past as almost arrogant, immature, or naive. Not so with me. It chimes with the history that is part of me—my story and my *currere*.

Like the peaks of "mount improbable," maybe there is no going back. My schooling and subsequent experiences have shaped me. Maybe it is time to wear that badge, whether I truly

understand it or not. My university profile has remained blank through the fear of projecting bias, attracting criticism. Maybe the time to own that badge has come, warts and all. If you are reading this, you are free to visit my profile and reflect upon the extent this *currere* has impacted how I see the future of curriculum in Wales. I think it will allude to a somewhat romantic notion of the wind of change sweeping through the education system in Wales, of a progressive student-centred pedagogy contributing whole-heartedly to performance. If anything, this *currere* has given me the moral standing to push forward, the confidence to cut through much of the knowledge-rich vs. skills noise that dominates the discourse on curriculum in Wales. Moreover, it has deepened my conviction that true educational reform must embrace both knowledge and skills, not as opposing forces, but as complementary pillars that support the holistic development of students.

The glimmers of clarity that shine through are not those professed in my obsession with the manuals of Richard Branson and Steve Jobs but a pragmatic reflection of me and the evolving landscape of Welsh education. Perhaps the most important message I can leave for myself is that not every code is meant to be cracked. It's possible that no one can solve it, and maybe I'm not the right person to do so. I should stop searching for the answer and focus on side stepping the social media feeds that generate this angst. Perhaps taking risks is an antidote to taking yourself too seriously. After all you are what you are. This is what they might call "getting out of your own way."

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