LIFE AND UNLIFE

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EDUCATION AS LIFE

In *Democracy & Education*, Dewey (1916) argues that the distinction between living and inanimate things is the capacity for renewal. Living things renew themselves through a continuous, transactional relationship with their material environment and socio-cultural *milieu* that generates energy. If the energy derived is in ample supply, we grow. If it is equal to our needs, we subsist, and if it is insufficient, we begin to die. In school, this energetic exchange is articulated through curriculum. Whether one understands curriculum as a course, or as the running or walking of the course, curriculum is the central, organisational medium through which educational experiences are planned, enacted, and lived (Marsh & Willis, 2007). Dewey writes that such experiences can be educative or mis-educative. Educative experiences promote growth, while mis-educative experiences distort it, causing the "wrong kind" of growth or growth in the wrong direction (Dewey, 1938, p. 26). Regardless of the type or direction, educative and mis-educative experiences share a *biophilic* quality (Fromm, 1964) because they reflect an intrinsic orientation toward life, renewal, and growth that is achieved through the doings and undergoings (Dewey, 1925) of experience.

DOING AND UNDERGOING

For Dewey, doings and undergoings encapsulate the rhythm and structure of experience itself. At its core, experience arises through the dynamic, reciprocal interaction between what an individual does—their actions, impulses, and engagements with the world—and what they undergo in return, the consequences and feedback of those actions. Dewey (1934) writes that these actions are driven by "impulsions" (p. 64), or the innate tendencies or drives that prompt action. While there are theoretical tensions between Dewey's and Freire's philosophies, Freire's (1994) conceptualisation of hope as an "ontological need" (p. 2) and existential necessity adds an important dimension to these motivations. Impulsions refer to a need to be satisfied through a transaction with one's environment, but hope is the *belief* that this need can be met. If impulsions guide our education (and life), then hope motivates, mediates, and makes education manifest.

Dewey argues that meaningful experiences are those in which this rhythm achieves balance and harmony. This interplay is not merely sequential but transactional, where doing and undergoing form a unified whole, mutually informing and shaping each other in a continuous process (Pappas, 2016). In education, this process underpins how curriculum mediates the relationship between learners and their environment. When the organism engages with its environment, it temporarily falls out of alignment with it, encountering tension or imbalance. Through effort or adaptation, however, equilibrium is restored—not passively, but through active participation in a process that generates energy and promotes further possibilities for action. This

rhythm, Dewey suggests, mirrors the fundamental processes of life itself: growth, change, and the restoration of unity.

Importantly, Dewey's notion of doings and undergoings rejects the idea of experience as either entirely subjective or objective. Instead, it emphasises the continuity between the individual and their environment, where actions and consequences are inseparably linked. For Dewey, this integration is essential to any experience that is educative, as it connects activity to reflection and grounds learning in a relational, lived context (Dixon, 2020).

But what if experiences prohibit growth and, therefore, education? Drawing on Fromm (1964), such curricula shift from being biophilic (i.e., curricula that affirm, enhance, and promote life) to *necrophilic* (e.g., curricula that thrive-on, but ultimately oppose, life), rendering even mis-educative experiences *ineducative*. They lack an educative capacity, power, or effect. Put simply, curricula that provide ineducative experiences are necrophilic in that they mimic the vitality of life but lack its transformative potential.

In the following article, I draw upon Dewey (1916, 1925, 1933, 1938), Fromm (1956, 1964, 1968), and Freire (1994, 1968/2018) in theorising necrophilic, or undead, curricula. Rather than serving as a medium for continual, transactional, and educative experiences that promote growth through renewal, necrophilic curricula prohibit these outcomes by drawing energy from living creatures to justify and perpetuate their own, lifeless existence.

Ambulare

I discovered this connection between life and unlife through critical reflection and reflexive, hermeneutic, and iterative analysis using *Ambulare* (Smith, 2022), my rearticulation of the *Currere* method developed by William Pinar (2011). *Currere* is a four-stage process of critical self-reflection informed by existentialist and phenomenological philosophy and psycho-analytic technique. The aim of the method is to investigate the subjective and personal dimensions of curriculum as an active, lived experience rather than a static product. This enables individuals to engage with and interpret their educational identities, practices, and voices in transformative and emancipatory ways that deepen self-understanding, challenge traditional norms and assumptions, and that advocate and promote creativity, criticality, and agency.

Ambulare is a reconceptualisation of *Currere*, developed in response to calls for greater embodiment and emplacement in curriculum studies (Ohito & Nyachae 2019; Radina et al. 2022; Snowber 2021). While *Currere* is rooted in existentialist and phenomenological traditions focusing on reflective engagement with educational experiences, *Ambulare* seeks to take *Currere* out of the mind and into the body by grounding reflective practices in the sensory and physical experiences of movement and emplacement. This embodied perspective expands the relational interplay between self, environment, and others, deepening the reflective process through incorporating critical-pragmatist perspectives, including Freire's (1968/2018) emphasis on conscientization and Dewey's (1925) doing and undergoing with considerations of new-materialist and posthumanist philosophy (Abram 1996; Alaimo 2010; Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2013; Massumi 2002). *Ambulare* uses walking in natural spaces as a central practice for fostering embodied reflection. However, while walking is a key component, the method broadly emphasises various forms of embodied reflection, where physical engagement—whether walking, gardening, or collaborative activity—grounds the transactional relationship between body, movement, environment, self, and other(s).

This embodied approach shifts the focus from "running" (as implied by the Latin root of *Currere*) to "walking" (i.e., *Ambulare*). For example, by slowing the pace, we resist the normative assumptions of running the race and can engage deeply in an integration of our surroundings, bodies, and thoughts as sites for meaningful, transformative reflection. With its focus on relationality, *Ambulare* promotes concepts like communitas (Turner, 1969), which emphasizes our interconnectedness with human and other-than-human communities, as explored in Alaimo's (2010) trans-corporeality and Bennett's (2010) vibrant materiality. Finally, *Ambulare* represents a shift toward agency in our research, practice, scholarship, and activism. Unlike racing, walking allows for choices that can lead to alternative routes, pauses, and deviations, opportunities to consider and select new experiences for growth.

Curriculum Fragments

The subject of my reflection and analysis were a handful of curriculum fragments I generated during the Currere Cymru retreat in Aberystwyth, Wales, in June 2024. Curriculum fragments Poetter (2024) represent the unfinished, disjointed, and varied aspects of curriculum knowledge, theory, and experience that erupt through narrative accounts generated from critical reflection. Rather than inert, experiential accounts, fragments are pregnant with opportunities for inquiry, reflection, and meaning-making. Engaging with fragments involves embracing their incompleteness, recognising them as entry points for deeper exploration of the intersection between self, curriculum, and experience.

Fragments emerge from both personal and professional contexts, bridging autobiographical experiences with theoretical constructs. Their meaning is developed relationally and contextually, aligning with hermeneutic and existential dimensions of curriculum theorising. By resisting the impulse to impose artificial coherence or linearity, educators working with fragments honour the complexity and diversity of socio-cultural, political, and philosophical contexts. Through critical examination, fragments become catalysts for creativity, dialogue, and transformative curricular understanding.

In the months following the retreat, I employed *Ambulare* to recollect, record, and restory these fragments of my curricular history. In regard to *Currere*, this is representative of the regressive phase (Pinar, 2011), where individuals examine past experiences, memories, and educational encounters to better understand how they have shaped their present identity, beliefs, and practices. This is not a passive recollection but an active, reflective engagement with the past, interrogating how socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts have influenced one's development. The regressive phase illuminates the emotional, existential, and narrative dimensions of experience, allowing individuals to critique the norms and assumptions that shaped their educational journey. Over time, my understanding of each vignette increased, and certain stories and their narrative components became of greater import and significance. Eventually, my efforts focused entirely on one instance from my educational past that led me to the following conclusion: If education is life, and life is growth through renewal, then necrophilic curricula consume life and promote alienation, compliance, and, ultimately, hopelessness.

Dawn of the Dead

It was a warm, late-summer afternoon in Ohio, 2005, when I first entered the classroom where I would begin my career as a teacher. The room was filled with furniture—too much furniture, to be precise. Desks were neatly arranged, end-to-end, in tight, lengthy rows where students would eventually have to twist and wriggle their bodies as they sidled between them and each other before settling into their seats. A few, pitiful decorations hung on the wall. You know the kind I'm talking about—a chimpanzee reading a book while scratching its head as if deep in thought or, better yet, an image of a small, orange kitten with "Hang in there!" written in bright, bubbled text along the bottom of the picture. They had been there for some time, based on their faded appearance and the discoloration of the paint on the wall behind them, there but not there—hung and then forgotten.

On each desk was a new computer and monitor, each already obsolete. Toward the back of the room, in front of a wide array of slightly tinted windows overlooking the relentless traffic thrumming down the freeway below was an oversized desk, a well-padded, high-backed chair with wheels, and a dilapidated HON 501 file cabinet. This was a small, Title I school in a deprived neighborhood, with a close community and passionate educators, but sometimes the challenges of education in difficult circumstances, coupled with the anachronistic design and features of the classroom, made teaching there feel more like working in a mausoleum than a school.

During my first visit, the principal—a gruff and grizzled veteran and football enthusiast—handed me a thick, white book called *Learning Microsoft Office*. "Here!" he said abruptly, "See what you can do with this." He then wished me luck, turned toward the door, and disappeared down the hall.

Over the next few weeks, I cleaned the desks, computers, monitors, and keyboards, rearranged the furniture, and redecorated the room. In between sessions, I read the textbook and began planning my lessons. It was all very neat and tidy. Every decision about what to teach, when, and how had already been made for me—all I needed to do was to "go by the book," and everything would be OK. Or so it seemed.

School began, and weeks went by without a problem. I had been warned by my new colleagues that many of these students were "unteachable" and that I'd spend most of my time "managing behavior" rather than "actually teaching." I braced myself for conflict, but apart from one incident, it never really happened. In fact, there were times when I wished things would get a little more lively! In many situations with my students, there was precious little conversation—very little interaction with each other or anything else beyond the computers on their desks. Were they tired? Were they hungry? Were they all in a bad mood? I didn't know, and the unknowingness of it all consumed me. "This isn't what I signed up for!" I thought to myself. But what, then, should I do?

Westrup (2015), in discussing assessment practices in higher education, describes a similar phenomenon as students existing in a "zombie" state. In my case, the issue didn't sit solely with the students but rather with the broader systemic and environmental factors, from the seemingly all-encompassing social deprivation experienced by the community to the rigid curricula and lifeless environments that undermined the dynamic interplay of doing and undergoing that are essential for meaningful education. Bumiller (2022), in writing about her experience shadowing a student to see school through their perspective, also recognized a form of zombification. Initially, she suspected teachers were the source of unlife. However, after reflecting on Dewey's (1902)

work, she realized that the absence of life stemmed from how the curriculum was organized, not solely from students or teachers.

In reflecting on this experience, I realised it wasn't just my students who felt bereft and empty. I found myself unmotivated and dejected. The clearly written, highly detailed *Learning Microsoft Office* textbook was lifeless but not dead. It was undead.

Necrophilic Curricula and Ineducation

The curriculum I was asked to employ with my students demonstrated the characteristics of necrophilia as theorised by Fromm (1964): a fixation on control, rigidity, and destruction, and an attachment to what is lifeless, mechanical, and predictable (Braune, 2011). These qualities are further reflected in curricula that prioritise compliance, standardisation, and efficiency, imposing a mechanistic order that mimics vitality but lacks the dynamism Dewey and Freire argue are essential to learning. Such curricula are animated by external forces, such as bureaucratic mandates (Dewey, 1938), technocratic designs (Giroux, 2011), and discourses of accountability (Polikoff, 2021), which consume the energy of teachers and students without offering renewal or growth.

This necrophilic orientation, as Fromm (1964) describes, is not merely an absence of life but an active preference for stasis and control. In education, this manifests as alienation (Fromm, 1955; Giroux, 1983)—a profound disconnection and estrangement of both teachers and students from the meaningful, creative, and relational dimensions of education that promote growth. Alienation occurs when schooling prioritises technocratic and standardised approaches that reduce education to pointless procedures, mechanical compliance, and the inability to connect what happens in school to the realities of our lived experience.

Alienation severs the dynamic interplay of doing and undergoing that Dewey (1925) identifies as vital for growth. By stifling curiosity, spontaneity, and reflection, necrophilic curricula impose inauthentic aims, objectives, and activities that effectively disenfranchise learners and teachers from the achievement and expression of their agency, creativity, and freedom. When this occurs, teachers and learners are confronted with the futility of ineducative experiences. As a result, hope is lost, life (e.g., education) becomes unlife, and the potential, transformative quality of education is destroyed.

Necrophilic curricula undermine the very conditions necessary for education as life. Experiences terminate with the completion of tasks, rather than reflecting previous experience and indicating new opportunities and trajectories for growth. Fromm's (1964) critique of necrophilia as a parasitic force is particularly apt here: these curricula drain the vitality of teachers and students, sustaining themselves through external mandates and metrics while replacing the possibilities of growth and renewal with cycles of compliance and alienation. Restoring life (e.g., education) requires a radical approach to identifying the root causes of alienation by reimagining curricula that promote biophilia—a love of life sustained by hope and committed to the transformative possibilities of education.

Restoring Life

Where necrophilic curricula drain vitality and alienate learners and teachers, biophilic curricula affirm life through their orientation toward renewal, unity, and growth. Fromm (1964)

describes biophilia as "a passionate love of life and all that is alive" (p. 45). It is a force that sustains growth and enables connection. At their core, biophilic curricula integrate the dynamic interplay of doing and undergoing (Dewey, 1925). They are characterized by openness and creativity, resisting rigid structures and instead creating environments where learners can experience, reflect, and grow. As Fromm (1964) emphasizes, the biophilic person "wants to mold and to influence by love, reason, and example; not by force" (p. 365). Similarly, biophilic curricula prioritize relationality, engaging learners in dialogical, collaborative processes that honor their voices and perspectives.

Perhaps most crucially, biophilic curricula are animated by hope. This hope sustains the vitality of doing and undergoing, with a need for integrating experience to larger processes of renewal and growth. In contrast to the stasis and lifelessness of necrophilic curricula, biophilic curricula embody the possibilities of life itself, affirming the fundamental human capacity for connection, creativity, and transformation. Biophilic curricula align to Dewey's declaration that education is not preparation for life but life itself, and it is through the dyadic relationships of continuity and transaction and experience and reflection that individuals are roused from routine, exercise their intellectual freedom (Dewey, 1938), and achieve the agency through which they meaningfully engage with their world. Furthermore, biophilic curricula capture Freire's admonition that such engagements are predicated upon radical hope, the intrinsic desire to transform ourselves and the world as we seek to achieve a fuller sense of our humanity.

I didn't want to feel animated as an educator; I wanted to *live*. For me, *Learning Microsoft Office* was a corpse-curriculum intended to be "brought to life," but I couldn't summon enough necromancy in my pedagogy to achieve such a feat. In order to break free from the necrophilic grip of the zombie curriculum, I decided to talk to my students—"real talk" (as they would say) about my frustrations. It wasn't easy. They were suspicious and hesitant at first, but I realised that only when I shared my struggles—my dissatisfaction with teaching, the school, and *Learning Microsoft Office*—things began to shift.

In retrospect, I believe I had started to develop what hooks (1994) calls "engaged pedagogy," where educators recognise and respond to the lived experiences of their students in ways that honor the vulnerability inherent in teaching and learning. Sharing my vulnerability as a teacher dispossessed of creativity, agency, and meaningful interaction was an essential step toward rehumanising our classroom. Most important, through a critical and engaged pedagogy, I recognised the value of a radical, pedagogical love as a motivational force in my pedagogy and an organisational feature of the experiences I shared with my students founded upon an irreducible hope that we could restore life to our necrophilic curriculum. This hope was a vitalizing force, a vibrant quality of our experiences together that nurtured curiosity, communication, understanding, and unity.

Through the perspective of engaged pedagogy, we took advantage of opportunities to resurrect our undead curriculum and imbue it with vitality. In the days and weeks that followed, my students and I discussed their interests, aims, and current circumstances. We considered how our individual experiences and understanding could be interpreted through a broader sociological and critical perspective (Smith, 2013), and we deliberated over how to organise educative experiences through these new perspectives in ways that recognised and responded to opportunities for growth. Rather than relying on *Learning Microsoft Office*, we co-created learning opportunities that met the curriculum requirements of the school and state that were grounded in the immediate realities of my students' lives with an aim to enhance and widen their experience. They wrote and formatted business letters to local politicians, created posters expressing their

political views and values, and were open to useful, effective, and creative ways of using Microsoft Office (for example) as a tool to engage in, understand, and learn from their lives.

As I was navigating these challenges with my students, I *sensed* these connections, but it is only through *Ambulare*, through a purposeful, systematic, and critical reflection on this experience, coupled with an application of theoretical perspectives from hooks, Dewey, Freire, and Fromm, and undertaken through frequent, prolonged, and embodied reflection that my instinctive understanding was analysed, reconstructed, and understood. In order to explicate and elucidate this understanding into a what I hoped was a cogent and sophisticated articulation of curriculum understanding, I came to the following conclusion: If education is life and we must love life, then we must also love education.

Love Begins with Hope

To counteract necrophilic curricula, we must restore not only life but also the hope that sustains it and gives it vitality. Hope is the "psychic concomitant to life and growth" (Fromm, 1968) and, by extension, education and transformation. Both Freire (1994, 1968/2018) and Fromm (1968) argue that hope is not a passive state but an active orientation toward possibility. For Freire, hope emerges from our incompleteness, the recognition that we are always becoming, always striving toward something more. It is through this striving—grounded in the belief that change is possible—that education acts as an emancipatory and transformative practice.

For Fromm (1968), hope is the energy that sustains biophilic actions, imbuing them with purpose and direction. Hope fuels the creative and life-affirming acts that counteract necrophilia's stasis and rigidity. It is the underlying force that allows us to see beyond the present constraints, imagining and working toward a future where growth and renewal are possible. Without hope, Fromm suggests, biophilia collapses into despair, and the potential for love, creativity, and transformation vanishes.

Hope is the foundation for meaningful transaction. The interplay of doing and undergoing is sustained by a hope that our actions will yield growth and/or connection. Without hope, this transactional rhythm is disrupted; actions become mechanical, and experiences become lifeless. Necrophilic curricula, by severing the connection between action and renewal, frustrate hope at every turn. They replace the open-ended possibilities of growth with rigid objectives, pointless exercises, and a promise of an education unfulfilled.

Conversely, biophilic curricula affirm the centrality of hope by fostering conditions where learners can enhance self-understanding and work toward meaningful futures. These curricula engage education as a hopeful, dynamic process of being-and-becoming that seeks to enlarge and fulfil one's humanity (Freire, 1968/2018). As Fromm (1964) writes, hope is not simply an expectation but a commitment to life's possibilities, a poised and ready desire for active engagement with the world.

Conclusion

Freire (1968/2018) reminds us that hope is rooted in praxis—the critical interplay of theory, reflection, and action. It is through this praxis that educators and learners alike resist despair and reimagine what education can be. To restore life to necrophilic curricula, we must cultivate hope

as a generative force, reconnecting the dynamic rhythm of doing and undergoing to the conditions that foster renewal, growth, and love.

A love of life and education is predicated upon the belief that our doings and undergoings will lead to renewal and growth. As such, hope is the root from which all transformative action grows (Freire, 1968/2018). It sustains the possibility of renewal, enlivens reflection and imbues action with vitality and direction. It is the excitement of, expression of, and response to, hope that ensures education remains a living, dynamic force for growth and change, rather than a lifeless endeavour that dominates, isolates, and destroys.

Both Freire (1994, 1968/2018) and Fromm (1964) assert that love and hope are intrinsically intertwined. In *The Art of Loving*, Fromm (1956) describes love as an art that requires discipline, practice, and dedication, with hope as its sustaining foundation. Hope is not passive; it is an active, essential energy that imbues our humanistic state with a transformative and connective potential that affirms life and resists despair (Fromm, 1968). In a radical sense (Beauchamp et al., 2022), Freire (1994) similarly frames love and hope as the very roots of education, the genesis of critical consciousness, and as necessary qualities for transformation. Hope is an ontological necessity, an existential imperative that compels educators and learners to act critically and creatively in the world. Like Fromm, Freire (1994) sees hope as active, persistent, and grounded in relational understanding, critical reflection, and intentional action.

If education is to remain a living, transformative process, it must be rooted in hope. Without hope, education becomes static, lifeless, and alienating—a necrophilic force that denies life and love. With hope, education flourishes as a biophilic practice, affirming life, nurturing growth, and inspiring transformation.

For if hope cannot endure, how can love, or life, exist?

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