

BUILDING FOUNDATIONS

BETWEEN THE SCRIPT AND THE MOMENT

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I am sitting at my desk in my center. The front desk is quiet for the moment. A student has just left after asking where to find an office on campus. My laptop is open in front of me, connected to two additional screens. On those screens are three documents I have written during this semester. They began as course assignments, pieces developed through the *currere* method (Pinar, 1994). Now they sit beside one another, asking for something more.

The space around me is not silent. Someone answers a phone call. A printer hums and stops. Students move in and out of the center. A tutor leans over a paper with another student. Nothing here remains fixed for very long. Questions arise unexpectedly. Plans shift. Meaning is made in conversation. This space feels far removed from the classrooms imagined and remembered in my earlier writing, yet those pieces now seem connected by a common concern: What happens when curriculum becomes so scripted that it leaves little room for human presence?

Scripted curriculum is often justified through the language of consistency, accountability, and efficiency. If every teacher uses the same materials, follows the same pacing guide, and delivers the same lessons, then students are presumed to receive equitable opportunities to learn. Yet scholars have long cautioned that standardization can narrow curriculum, constrain teacher judgment, and reduce learning to measurable outputs (Au, 2011; Timberlake et al., 2017). What appears simple and scalable may also flatten the relational and interpretive dimensions of teaching.

This article uses the *currere* method to examine scripted curriculum through lived experience. *Currere* invites educators to move backward, forward, analytically, and synthetically through their own educational histories in order to understand curriculum as lived rather than merely planned. The article moves through regressive, progressive, analytical, and syncretical moments, weaving autobiographical narrative with curricular analysis to examine how scripted curriculum shapes educational experience. One movement returns to a moment of vulnerability within a structured classroom experience. Another imagines a future in which structure has become totalizing. The final movement reflects on my present work with students and the growing tension I feel between efficiency and responsiveness in educational spaces. Together, these experiences lead me to a central argument: Scripted curriculum is not inherently the problem. The problem emerges when scripting eliminates the interpretive, relational, and responsive space where teaching and learning actually happen.

CURRERE AS METHOD

Curriculum is often discussed as standards, maps, pacing guides, assessments, and materials. These forms matter, but they do not capture the full experience of teaching and learning. Pinar (2019) argued that curriculum must also be understood autobiographically, through lived experiences of those who inhabit educational spaces. *Currere* shifts the question from “What should be taught?” to “What is the nature of my educational experience?” That shift matters

because schools are not merely delivery systems; they are places where identities are formed, constrained, affirmed, and negotiated.

Pinar et al. (2002) similarly framed curriculum as a complicated conversation rather than a fixed package of content. This understanding opens space for contradiction, memory, uncertainty, and self-reflection. It also resists the notion that educational quality can be fully captured through fidelity measures or standardized scripts. Curriculum, in this sense, is not only what is written in guides and pacing charts. It is also what is lived, remembered, feared, revised, resisted, and carried forward.

This autobiographical approach matters particularly within conversations about scripted curriculum because standardization often attempts to minimize variability and unpredictability. *Currere*, however, asks educators to attend closely to precisely those moments. Emotional responses, discomfort, hesitation, and uncertainty are not distractions from educational experience; they are part of it. The body, memory, and self become important curricular texts. Through *currere*, educational experiences that may initially seem isolated or personal begin to reveal larger tensions related to power, professionalism, agency, and control.

This method also aligns with the work of Eisner (2002), who emphasized artistry, judgment, and connoisseurship in teaching. Teaching requires noticing what is emerging in the room, responding to subtle cues, and making decisions in conditions of uncertainty. When curricular systems undervalue these capacities, they risk mistaking uniformity for quality.

My experiences were initially written separately, yet together they reveal a coherent inquiry into structure, agency, and presence. They ask what kinds of educational moments endure in memory and why.

THE FAIRY TALE

We were in a small, windowless classroom on the fourth floor of one of the university's older academic buildings. Once the door closed, the room felt sealed in. The walls were blank. The fluorescent lights cast a flat brightness over everything. I was a mathematics major enrolled in a graduate English course, already feeling out of place before class began. Our assignment was unusual: not to analyze a fairy tale, but to tell one. We were to immerse the class in it. I was last to present.

When my name was called, I walked to the front carrying notes clipped neatly together. They were, in effect, a script. I had practiced them. I had tried to memorize pacing and transitions. I asked the class to close their eyes and began: "Imagine you're standing at the edge of a forest." As I spoke, I described cool air, damp earth, leaves moving, and a crooked cottage glowing faintly in the distance.

Inside my body, however, I was tense. My heart raced. My face felt hot. Part of me focused on pacing the script correctly while another part hovered outside the moment entirely, embarrassed by my own participation in it. I remember thinking that storytelling in this manner felt unnatural to me, almost illegitimate. I was someone who solved equations. I understood numbers, procedures, and solutions. Narrating forests and voicing fairy tale characters felt deeply outside the identity I had constructed for myself academically.

Looking back, I realize that this discomfort was not simply performance anxiety. It also reflected assumptions about what kinds of knowledge and expression are valued within different educational spaces. Mathematics had taught me to value precision, certainty, and correctness. The

assignment required imagination, embodiment, vulnerability, and interpretation. I felt exposed because the activity demanded a different version of myself than the one I had learned to present comfortably in academic settings.

Then, I lost my place. The next line disappeared from memory. The pause felt long. I swallowed, reshaped the sentence, and continued. No one opened their eyes. Someone inhaled sharply during a tense moment in the story. That sound steadied me. It meant they were with me.

This moment has stayed with me not because the presentation went perfectly, but because it did not. The educational experience deepened precisely when the script failed. I had to improvise. I had to respond in real time. The moment still depended on my judgment, pacing, recovery, and willingness to continue. The script supported the experience, but it could not replace me within it.

Research on adaptive teaching suggests that responsive instruction often depends on such moments of adjustment rather than perfect adherence to predetermined plans (Vaughn et al., 2021). Powell et al. (2017) similarly found that teachers working within scripted programs still sought ways to exercise professional agency, even in constrained settings. Structure, then, need not erase humanity. Structure becomes problematic when it seeks to replace the educator rather than support them.

Many classrooms function this way. Teachers prepare lessons, anticipate misconceptions, and organize materials. Yet they must still respond to students in real time. Planning can scaffold meaningful work. It becomes harmful when fidelity matters more than presence.

At the time, I understood the experience primarily as discomfort. I focused on my nervousness, my performance, and my relief when it was over. Years later, however, I began to reconsider what actually stayed with me from that room. What remained was not simply the anxiety of standing in front of others but the realization that, even within structure, the moment still depended on human judgment. The story could not continue without me responding, adjusting, and moving forward.

THE SCRIPT

Years later, I imagined another classroom.

The room is bright, but not in a warm way. Thin ceiling panels cast a steady white glow. Rows of desks face a wall-sized screen. Each desk holds a tablet. Students sit in identical chairs waiting for the lesson to begin. At the front is not a teacher's desk but an instructor station with a docking panel and monitor. When I place my tablet on the panel, the room wakes up. "Lesson 14: Narrative Immersion Exercise." A timer begins counting down from three minutes.

Prompts appear automatically. A forest image fills the front wall. Wind sounds play through speakers. My tablet tells me what to say next: "Imagine you are standing at the edge of a forest." The words feel familiar, though I did not write them. Graphs begin measuring heart rate, focus level, and engagement. A notification appears: "Instructor adherence to curriculum script: 99%." Students later receive their scores: "Narrative engagement level: Proficient."

The number unsettles me because it transforms teaching into compliance. The system does not measure whether students are moved, challenged, or changed by the experience. It measures fidelity. In this imagined classroom, success is defined not through interpretation or connections, but through accurate implementation of predetermined steps. Even engagement becomes quantifiable. Bodies, attention, and responses are translated into data points that can be tracked, stored, and evaluated.

This imagined classroom extends tendencies already present in contemporary schooling. Au (2011) described high-stakes accountability systems as a form of “new Taylorism,” where curriculum and instruction are increasingly standardized, fragmented, and monitored. Golann (2021) similarly documented cultures of control in tightly managed schooling environments where compliance becomes central.

What disappears in this room is not only teacher creativity. What disappears is interpretive space. The educator no longer decides when to pause, when to linger, when to redirect, when to simplify, or when to follow curiosity. Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020) argued that scripted curriculum can undermine democratic educational possibilities by narrowing opportunities for deliberation, responsiveness, and shared meaning-making.

I find myself thinking about the forest in the earlier classroom and the forest projected across the wall in the imagined one. In the first room, the forest emerged imperfectly through memory, nervousness, pacing, and improvisation. The scene shifted slightly depending on my delivery and the reactions within the room. In the imagined classroom, the forest is optimized. The sounds calibrated. The prompts are timed. The experience unfolds exactly as intended. One version depends on interpretation. The other depends on adherence.

The classroom also reveals a paradox. Everything works smoothly because nothing is left open. The system has solved unpredictability by eliminating it. Yet unpredictability is often where education lives. Questions emerge unexpectedly. Misunderstandings surface indirectly. Trust develops in unscripted moments. A classroom can become orderly while becoming less human.

THE SPACE BETWEEN

I return to the center.

A student walks past my office and hesitates. “Do you have a minute?” she asks. She sits down, opens her laptop, and reads a sentence aloud from an assignment. She asks if it makes sense. We talk through it. She rewords part of the sentence, pauses, reads it again, and smiles. “That sounds better,” she says.

Another student arrives holding a planner. Midterms are approaching. We spread his schedule on the desk. He points to classes, work shifts, obligations, and deadlines. I ask questions. He pauses to think. Then he begins crossing things out and rearranging blocks of time. “I think I should move this,” he says. We revise the plan together. Nothing about the conversation follows a script. It moves according to what he says, what he understands, and what he needs in the moment.

These scenes are not dramatic, yet they are deeply educational. They involve reflection, language, planning, confidence, and growth. They also depend on responsiveness. If I ignored hesitation, insisted on predetermined steps, or forced every student through the same sequence, the work would become less effective precisely because it would become less relational.

What makes these moments meaningful is not efficiency, but responsiveness. The conversations move predictably. Students pause, rethink, hesitate, and revise. Often, the most important part of the interaction emerges only after the original question has shifted into something else. A conversation about a sentence becomes a conversation about confidence. A planner becomes a discussion about feeling overwhelmed, managing priorities, or fear of failure. None of these moments could be fully anticipated beforehand.

These experiences have changed how I understand the earlier classroom experiences. Some educational environments resemble the earlier storytelling classroom: structured, planned, but still

human. There is room for forgetting, pausing, redirecting, and recovering. Other environments resemble the imagined classroom: tightly aligned, efficient, and complete, but leaving little room to move outside what has already been decided.

My understanding of teaching has changed since leaving the secondary mathematics classroom. At one point, I associated teaching primarily with lesson delivery, pacing, and content expertise. In my current role, I increasingly understand education through interaction and relational support. Much of my work now happens in conversation rather than presentation. This shift has changed how I think about curriculum itself. I no longer see curriculum only as what is formally delivered. I also see it in the pauses, adjustments, uncertainties, and negotiations that emerge between people in educational spaces.

Giroux (2004) argued that education must remain a democratic practice rooted in dialogue, critique, and human agency rather than mere reproduction of systems. The interactions in the center reflect that insight. Learning emerges through conversation rather than transmission.

I increasingly recognize that the moments I remember most clearly are not the ones that went exactly as planned. They are the ones where something shifted. A student says, “I don’t understand.” A room goes unexpectedly quiet. A plan needs revision. A question opens a new direction. In those moments, curriculum is no longer merely what was written in advance. It becomes what is happening now. Reading Poetter (2025) helped me begin to understand these moments differently—not as interruptions to curriculum, but as curriculum itself. His framing of curriculum as lived, reflective, and continually becoming has reshaped the way I interpreted my own educational experiences and the spaces in which they occur.

WHAT MUST REMAIN UNWRITTEN

I do not argue that all structure is harmful. Students deserve coherent courses, clear expectations, accessible materials, and intentional design. New educators often benefit from models and guidance. Institutions need some degree of consistency. Timberlake et al. (2017) noted that scripted curricula often appeal because they promise simplicity and equity. These desires are understandable. The issue is not whether curriculum should be planned. The issue is whether planning leaves room for professional judgement and human encounter.

All curriculum is written by someone. Decisions about pacing, content, sequencing, assessment, and instructional strategy are always shaped by particular values and assumptions. The problem emerges when those decisions become so fixed that teachers and students are left with little room to interpret, question, or reshape them in response to lived experience. A curriculum that leaves no space for uncertainty may appear efficient, but it risks reducing education to compliance rather than engagement.

A useful curriculum might resemble the notes I carried into the storytelling classroom: prepared enough to guide, open enough to adapt. A harmful curriculum resembles the tablet in the imagined future classroom: precise enough to control, complete enough to render the educator secondary.

Teachers are not merely implementers of content. They are interpreters of moments. Students are not merely recipients of lessons. They are participants whose questions, fears, insights, and misunderstandings shape what learning becomes. Vaughn et al. (2021) argued for adaptive teaching that honors responsiveness over rigid compliance. Bettina Love (2018) urged educators to pursue forms of schooling that move beyond survival toward freedom, dignity, and

humanity. Valdez (2020) similarly demonstrated how educators can “flip” scripted curricula through inquiry-centered and culturally responsive approaches. These works remind us that teachers need not accept scripts as final. Curriculum can be interpreted, expanded, resisted, and humanized.

Increasingly, I believe the most meaningful educational experiences are not the ones that unfold exactly as planned. They are the ones where something changes in the room. A student asks an unexpected question. A lesson slows down. A conversation moves somewhere unanticipated. These moments resist scripting precisely because they require presence. They ask educators not merely to deliver curriculum but to inhabit it alongside students.

Perhaps the most important parts of the curriculum are the parts that cannot be scripted in advance: the pause after confusion, the question that redirects the room, the forgotten line that requires recovery, the conversation neither person expected to have.

CONCLUSION

Another student appears at my office door.

“Can you look at this with me?” she asks.

I turn my chair toward her. She explains what she is working on. I listen, ask a question, and wait. She pauses, thinks, and tries again. The conversation moves in a direction neither of us planned before it began.

This is where I find myself now—between the script and the moment, between what is written and what is happening, between structure and movement. The room in front of me continues to change.

I turn to the student and begin.

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