Learning Empathy: A *Currere* Reflection on Parenting, Medicine, and Education

By Laura B. Liu
Indiana University-Purdue University

Currere as Methodology

Currere, a Latin verb translated as "to run," reconceptualizes curriculum in its literal meaning as the "running of a course" (Maxwell, 2002, p. 13). *Currere*, in this light, may be conceptualized as curriculum realized through lived experience. Gibbs (2013) described *currere* as professional knowledge "enacted in practice rather than enshrined in propositional knowledge" (p. 148). Pinar (1975) described *currere* as "the complex relation between the temporal and the conceptual" and the "self in its evolution and education" (p. 1). Grumet (1975) also highlighted the lived, temporal aspect of *currere* in her view of *reconceptualization* as central to the educative experience and as a dialogue between the professional and the environment. To reconceptualize is "to update our abstractions" and "reform" the world (Grumet, 1975, p. 2). The work of *currere* emerges where philosophy, politics, and our lived experiences intersect and are engaged for growth.

This autobiographical narration (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991; Grumet, 1990) bridges right-left brain creativity and logic (Goleman, 2006; Siegel & Hartzell, 2014) to connect past and present meaning from personal and professional lived experiences (Zhang, 2013). Practicing the work of *currere,* this reflection engages the four stages of Pinar's (1975) methodology—the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the synthetical. This *currere* reflection practices past-present-future analysis across personal and professional contexts in a horizontal (Pinar, 1975), rhizome-like storytelling format (Stewart, 2015) to synthesize experiences confirming and maintaining an inner character quality first learned from a parent no longer physically present, a quality valuable to the researcher's present and future personal and professional contexts: empathy.

Parenting

In this essay, I reflect on my mother as both person and professional to realize empathy as a strength transferable and valuable across contexts. In many ways, empathy toward others begins with a felt empathy toward ourselves and the challenges faced. In this space, we can set and work toward dreams that initially may seem hard to reach. My mother's empathy toward others perhaps began with a learned empathy toward herself, leading to a quiet confident work ethic in working toward her early dream of becoming a doctor.

My mom worked her way through college and medical school to become a professor of medicine and to help establish an adolescent medicine program that became regarded as one of the top programs of its kind in the nation. For this, she received an annual award given to a few women across the state for their professional leadership. This was no small feat for someone who had walked to and from elementary school each day as there was no other form of transportation in the small southern Indiana town, and her family did not own a car. As the oldest of seven children, my mom took to heart her self-selected role to pave a path for others. Yet, her capacity to exercise empathy remains the brightest of her achievements—a practice engaged as a mom, a physician, and eventually as a patient. Parenting is a wonderful arena to learn the practice of empathy. As I grew up, in seasons of struggle to discover my own abilities, interests, and identity, adolescent

Liu, L. B. (2020). Learning empathy: A *currere* reflection on parenting, medicine, and education. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *4*(2), 42–47.

criticism at times became a defense against my own fears faced in that journey. I now peer over the horizon of raising two pre-teen daughters and can only hope I picked up some of mom's parental resiliency. In an afternoon of gardening with my then 10-year old, I was feeling pretty good about our shared quality time. Heeding advice from our neighbor, I reached to clip some over-flowering grass and jolted upon hearing, "That is *so* barbaric!" While pleased to witness my daughter's growing sense of eco-justice, I was challenged to receive this descriptor in gracious stride, mumbling something about being kind with our words as our mommy-daughter gardening moment came to a close. I realized in that moment that the *tween* years had begun. I worked to exercise a skill my own mom modeled so effortlessly—empathy. In many cases, a critical word comes from a place of inner criticism. I took a deep breath, let go of the criticism without and within, and tried to return to a non-barbaric self-image.

I was in awe one month later when we returned to our front yard with Grandpa, who explained the importance of pruning to support new plant growth in a way that our justice-oriented pre-teen accepted. This memory serves as a reminder that some relational moments benefit from a third party, whose neutrality holds both actors in place long enough to realize their complementarity and connectedness, to serve as empathy's activating agent. The original grass-clipping moment became a source of humor with empathy's restorative property.

In some contexts, the professional may be called upon to serve as such an agent to restore the relationship of a patient to one's environment or a student to the classroom setting. Across contexts, empathy may restore connection and transform loss into soil for new growth. Adolescence is an insecure stage, floating between childhood and adulthood and with fleeting footing. This life stage also provides opportunity for parents, physicians, and teachers to develop and demonstrate empathy and understanding toward the individuals navigating the awkward space of moving from agency-less to agency-full living. This development of agency does not just happen between ages 10–24, but repeats itself across seasons of the lifespan. Learning to cultivate empathy for adolescents also provides opportunity to learn and re-learn empathy in our own lives, as a vital lifelong capacity. As a person extends empathy to children, patients, or students, empathy is also extended to oneself.

Empathy lets go of the need to judge and embraces the opportunity to understand. As a professional skill, empathy is less interested in measurement and more interested in restoration. Empathy does not find its fullest expression in comparison, but in relationship. It is a skill vital not only in parenting, but also in professional contexts.

Medicine

Engaging *currere* as autobiographical inquiry, this reflection explores empathy as a quality needed as much in professional contexts as personal contexts. Merging Pinar's *currere* with Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic mode of thinking "displaces binary logic for open pluralistic thinking" to engage autobiography as rhizomatic curriculum inquiry (Stewart, 2015, p. 1169). This autobiographical reflection also builds branch-like connections across time and across contexts, rather than following linear modes of life progression or thought. This reflection explores the practice of empathy in medicine to understand better its role in the professional work of a parent and how she was able to transfer this skill to her role as a patient.

The physician's committed spirit of empathy is articulated well by David Kessler (as quoted in National Geographic Society, 2015), pediatrician, lawyer, author, administrator, and Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (1990-1997): "There is within each one of us a *potential for goodness* beyond our imagining; for *giving*

which seeks no reward; for listening *without judgment*; for loving *unconditionally*" (p. 91, emphasis added). My mom sent me this quote, from a book of inspirational quotes that I had given to her as a holiday gift. Only two months later, this book became a source of encouragement during a tough season in her life, when my mom suddenly found herself battling uterine cancer with surgery, chemotherapy, nutrition, and exercise. She became cancer free in less than five months. This medical miracle was the product of hard work combined with medical knowledge and experience, along with an intuitive wisdom regarding the layered complexities involved in the healing process. My mom texted me our daily inspirational quotes, remaining the steadfast supportive spirit that she has always been in my life. It was as if she were showing me empathy in this shared struggle, first finding it herself. This generosity of spirit persistently looks for, sees, and draws out the best in others. In a season of suffering, her strengths shone brighter than ever. It was awe-inspiring to observe my mom navigate this new time-space of becoming a patient with grace and develop an even deeper agency than what grew within her as a practicing physician. It was a blossoming that I will always draw upon, in seeing the most capable of professionals endure a humbling life trial and come out on the other side stronger, wiser, and with a far greater regard for the beauty and complexity of healing. To reach this place, I believe my mom had to learn to practice the same empathy toward herself that she so naturally offered to others. She practiced acknowledging her genuine needs, listening to her own experience, and recognizing new insights.

A remarkable shift observed in my mom's perspective and practice in this journey was movement toward a more integrated, system-based approach toward health than even that embraced as a physician of an inter-disciplinary adolescent medicine program. While Western medicine has offered great capacity to identify and eliminate "problems" in health, these measures applied alone can add to health problems. Offering balance, for example, a system-based approach might emphasize community education for preventive strategies to support holistic health. My mom's response was to apply her nearly 50 years of experience in American medicine with an integrated approach she was just learning to value. She combined these two approaches by first benefiting from surgery and chemotherapy, followed by intentional and rigorous application of nutrition, exercise, and acupuncture. Each of the latter holistic approaches recognized and strengthened the body's natural health-enhancing capacities. Acupuncture enhances neurotrophil repair work (Manni, Albanesi, Guaragna, Paparo, & Aloe, 2010). Curcumin, the natural chemical and supplement found in turmeric, sends excess carcinogenic white cells into natural apoptosis or cell death (Bengmark, 2006; Zheng, Ekmekcioglu, Walch, Tang, & Grimm, 2004). Distance running results in the production of nitric oxide, causing the body to treat chronic inflammation naturally (Lorne, 2008). My mom had to exercise empathy for her own struggle and unique journey to tune into these emerging insights and be able to apply what she was learning.

Exercising *currere* by actively listening to and learning from one's unique lived experiences takes more work than following pre-determined standardized practices. Empathy is a powerful tool that shifts focus away from simply identifying the targeted problem and enables *understanding and identifying with the person*—the child, patient, student, or other—who is experiencing challenge in some aspect of development, health, or learning. A targeted approach aims to remove what is "bad" but in the process may damage or eliminate other surrounding context important to the system. Empathy comes along side of the child, patient, or student to inspire and strengthen an innate capacity to address challenges met in one's development, health, or education.

Education

This reflection considers life experiences that have contributed to my development as a professional and charts the connected rhizomatic (Stewart, 2015) lessons in empathy gleaned in my personal and professional worlds—and recognizes the cross-field importance of this quality. As an educator-researcher, I began my career as a high school English teacher and English as a New Language program coordinator. It became clear in supporting teens, particularly those on the margins of society, how powerful *regard* can be, how encouraging when regard is wielded well, and yet how destructive when handled carelessly. Cobo (2013) wrote that learning in the 21st century is primarily about soft skill development, particularly the skills of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. As adolescents face more "soft power" relational challenges, in-person and online, in classrooms and in their social worlds, it is important to help teens cultivate the ability to extend empathy to themselves when a peer, teacher, parent, or other community member may cut them down.

Goleman's (2006) social intelligence theory suggests that empathy is integral to our human evolutionary composition and concludes that empathy involves *social awareness* and *facility*. *Social awareness* includes being receptive to and feeling other's feelings with an understanding that connects one to the broader world, while *social facility* is the ability to shape social outcomes, particularly by caring for and meeting others' needs. Goleman's research demonstrated, neurologically, that we depend on one another, relationally. Likewise, Brown's (2007, 2012) sociological research showed empathy's power to connect and counter isolation that may result from internalized criticism or judgment. Brown (2007) described resiliency as the ability to receive and extend empathy, with less concern for "right-wrong" narratives and a recognition for the potential value of mistakes.

Education research in language learning (Gottlieb, 2016) also emphasizes the importance of allowing children the freedom to make and learn from their mistakes as a vital component in the learning process. In a global era of standardization (Spring, 2008), empathy is a virtue needed more than ever within and across classrooms to cultivate the ability to connect with one another in meaningful collaborations, rather than comparative competition (Liu, 2015; Renshaw, 2013). It is helpful to recognize ways in which cultures conceptualize and apply empathy similarly and uniquely (Pang, 2005) and to appreciate these diverse approaches as part of our cultural tapestry (Gay, 2010). It is helpful to *receive* empathy in order to extend empathy thoughtfully to others and authentically guide adolescents in this. Giving and receiving empathy is a culturally embedded practice. In some cultural lenses, to receive empathy from another *is* a generous act, validating the relationship and the person. To give and receive empathy from another involves seeing and welcoming that person into our lives. As educators engage the quality of empathy, it is vital to consider the cultural lens through which one's students might experience this practice and the extent to which it is or is not part of their family's funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

Currere as Continual Renewal

Empathy is a valuable developmental skill and pedagogical tool that involves generous regard toward fellow humans viewed with appreciation for their strengths and consideration for their challenges to build our relational support networks (Brown, 2006). This was my mom's daily *currere* as a person and as a professional, as a mom and a physician: using her past experiences to muster the empathy needed to see and

appreciate the strengths in others. This was not a choice she made once and programmed herself to repeat, but a daily lived experience that continued to shape who she became and, as a result, who others in her orbit might become. In her own personal-professional journey, Adams (2014) described *currere* as retrospective examination of "my experiences and my actions in light of my new learning, thereby changing my sense of self in the present" and resetting the "boundaries of my imagination for my future (p. 8). Mezirow (1991) advised that new knowledge cannot be consumed by the intellect alone, but must become a part of "our hearts, souls, and bodies" and "interactions with others in the world" (p. 93). In this light, perhaps the only professional knowledge that is fully internalized is that which extends across personal and professional realms. This suggests that professional schools across fields may benefit from greater curricular connection across the personal and professional. In applying this insight, I am grateful for my mom's lessons in empathy and hope to practice routinely their applications as a person and a professional, as a mom and an educator-researcher.

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