On/Beyond *Currere*

By Susan R. Adams & Jamie Buffington-Adams
Butler University

Critical feminist scholars have contributed much theory that enriches our understandings of curriculum. They have pointed out the perniciously patriarchal nature of schools and schooling while posing alternative ways of understanding the work of teaching and learning as embodied, deeply emotional, relational, and autobiographical (Grumet, 1988; Lather, 1991; Miller, 2005). The understanding of curriculum as autobiographical generated and has fed the Reconceptualist notion of *currere* first introduced to the field over four decades ago (Pinar, 1975). And it is clear that the field collectively and individually continues to value and work from this deeply impactful framework. No question—we are indeed indebted to Pinar's profound contribution to the field, and we remain grateful. But if a post-*currerian* moment is indeed emerging, as we, the authors, believe is the case, it is necessary to indicate what we mean here by "post."

Curriculum scholars certainly continue to return to c*urrere* as a framework for curriculum theorizing; its seminal status and continuing influence within the field of curriculum studies is not in question, but that same prolific influence can be put to work effectively in order to move beyond *currere* and to generate post-*currerian* conceptualizations of curriculum. While, the concept of *currere* continues to resonate deeply with us as women and scholars committed to a vision of teaching and learning that honors the complexity and richness of the human experience, it was in illuminating such complexity and richness through a series of paradoxes within our work with a cross-racial affinity group of teachers that we began to tentatively and then with growing confidence ask: what lies beyond *currere*?

The Affinity Group

In July 2010, a group of 10 educators from across the country met at a small midwestern college to participate in a Teaching for Educational Equity (TFEE) seminar. The participants represented a wide array of racial identities and experiences from an African American male working as a program administrator to a Latino immigrant who had just earned his degree in education to a white middle-aged, self-employed female working in professional development and personal coaching and a little of everything in between. The TFEE seminar was designed to immerse participants in experiences and discussions that surfaced the disparities that exist in our society along racial lines. As we have described elsewhere (Adams, 2013; Adams & Buffington-Adams, 2016, 2020; Adams & Peterson-Veatch, 2012) across the course of five days in an immersive, residential setting, TFEE seminar participants utilized structured protocols to explore how race shaped not only our current contexts and the myriad historical moments that led to these contexts, but also how we might begin to identify, interrogate, and ultimately disrupt pernicious traditions, practices, and narratives of U.S. schooling that perpetuate systems of racism and oppression.

From that seminar, a smaller group of teachers, the affinity group, formed following its conclusion. While the members of this affinity group were from the same urban center, they had little else in common outside of the shared experience of the TFEE seminar. However, as a result of the seminar, the group members came together around a deep commitment to abiding with and posing uncomfortable questions and to accepting

Adams, S. R., & Buffington-Adams, J. (2020). On/beyond *currere. Currere Exchange Journal*, *4*(2), 63–70.

non-closure. Like the members of the larger TFEE seminar, the members of this smaller affinity group represented a variety of racial and other identities. Of the six members, five were women. One woman identifies as African American. Another identifies as Jamaican American. The last three women are white. The sole male is African American and the only member of the group who did not attend the TFEE seminar but who was known to several group members through school networks and consequently invited into the work at his request. Two members taught in the same K-12 school district, and the others taught in neighboring educational institutions. The group was composed of an elementary classroom teacher, a middle school science teacher, a high school English teacher, a high school art teacher, a special education teacher, and a university instructor. We ranged in age from early thirties to early fifties. The authors of this article, Susan and Jamie, were two of the white, female members of the affinity group.

For nearly two years, the affinity group met on a monthly basis to explore questions of race as they impacted our professional contexts and personal lives. Like the TFEE seminar, the affinity group relied on structured protocols to guide our explorations and hold us accountable to engaging in the work in ways that saved space for each member to construct their own understandings. The goal was not to advise or solve a problem for a fellow member, but to offer questions to prompt deeper reflection on the challenges in hopes of illuminating new understandings for that individual and for the group as well.

In the affinity group's analysis of their work (Adams, 2013), the members articulated how membership in the group could be characterized as, and consisted of, holding up the mirror *for* as well as *to* one another. Holding up the mirror *for* one another speaks to the ability to engage in critiques of ourselves and our practices in a community of trust and support. However, holding up the mirror *to* one another highlights the critical power of engaging others' perspectives in our attempts to surface our own presumptions and moments of complicity so that we might each not only journey towards greater awareness, but take action in our individual contexts. It is the delicate balance of offering (and receiving) both support and challenge to take on new, more complex perspectives.

This shared commitment to holding a mirror *for* and *to* one another resulted in moments of reflexivity in which members created the conditions and space to evolve individually and collectively. In these moments of collaborative reflexivity, we witnessed and experienced realizations that were synergistic, that surpassed the sum of their parts, and to which participants said they could not have come on their own. We also witnessed and experienced personal and professional transformations that we, Susan and Jamie, have since struggled to find theory to explain.

Analysis and Comparisons of Adult Learning Theories with Currere

Transformational Adult Learning

The initial study that included the affinity group utilized adult learning theory as a frame for understanding and analyzing the experiences of both the original TFEE participants and the affinity group members. Adult learning theorists explain how reflexive practice results in personal growth and how engaging in reflexive cycles across a lifespan brings the learner ever closer to self-actualization. Kegan (1994, 2000) referred to this level of adult development as self-authorship and claimed it is characterized by the ability to examine one's positionality and relationships and to act, not upon commitments that originate in the discourse communities to which you belong, but from your own analysis of the world and your role in it. Likewise, Mezirow's (1991, 2000) transformative learning phases describe how adults, through reflection and in reaction to crises, have the potential to travel through a series of orientations that potentially result in a more complex world view.

While Kegan's (1994, 2000) use of the term *self-authorship* in describing the ultimate destination of adult development is largely self-explanatory, his use of *worldcentric* to describe stage four development invites a bit more explanation. Adults who exhibit worldcentric characteristics are open to new epistemes and, thus, are able to understand and accept that people in other times, circumstances, and geographies make ethical decisions that are different from our decisions and positions, yet are "right" for them. For example, members of a number of contemporary societies might contend that polygamy is an abhorrent practice. In Kegan's stage three development, the subject, in identifying and offering allegiance to her/his culture community's stated values, extends those same anti-polygamy values to all people everywhere, regardless of the origins of the practice. To put it simply, in this example, polygamy for any reason anywhere is deemed wrong, and a person in stage three forms these judgments in light of her/his membership rooted within identity community values. In stage four, however, the worldcentric subject comprehends that the limited economic options of unmarried females in a community in which the male population has been decimated by war make polygamy a far more humane and sensible system than one that callously relegates unmarried women to remain homeless and hungry on the margins of society. In short, the worldcentric subject demonstrates an ability to see situations and practices from a variety of nuanced and more complex perspectives and in doing so understands the ways in which other choices, traditions, and practices are valid given the unique contexts from which they spring.

It is also possible, however, that the subject will choose to maintain and reinscribe previously held beliefs, perspectives, and practices even after encountering new knowledge and experiences. Thus, self-authorship or worldcentric orientations are possible but are not necessarily achieved by all adults. And this development is neither fixed nor neatly linear across all aspects of one's identities or allegiances; regression and inconsistencies are always possible. In both Kegan's (1994, 2000) and Mezirow's (1991, 2000) theories, transformation is a choice after all; across the long arc of adult lifespan, one often faces changing conditions (war, global pandemic, societal upheaval, economic or environmental events), life crises (divorce, illness, loss of relationship, unemployment, death), or grapples with unsettling new knowledge that calls into question what the adult has previously held to be reliably "true."

In the face of such challenges and upheaval, adults can choose to embark on doing the deep work that potentially results in an expansion or change of perspective, likely resulting in new identities and allegiances, and the possible rejection of previously held values and beliefs as the subject now sees the limitations and consequences of the previously held perspective. Mezirow (1991, 2000) noted that this transformational process produces both exhilaration and grief for the learner who can experience transformational learning as both personal growth and the metaphorical or literal death of relationships, epistemes, and ways of being and doing. Drago-Severson (2009) added that, "All developmental movements involve some form of philosophical crisis, pain, emergence, and rethinking of what was taken previously to be of ultimate importance" (p. 49).

An important question of the original study (Adams, 2013) was how the affinity group functioned to support each member's ability to make and sustain these life-altering shifts of perspective and practice, particularly as they related to questions of race. The collaborative analysis (Adams, 2013; Adams & Buffington-Adams, 2016) of the affinity group's learning supplied some early understandings of the extent to which disruptive experiences transformed members' belief systems and assisted them in moving towards self-authorship and worldcentric views. However, we now question

whether adult learning theory as articulated by Kegan (1994, 2000) and Mezirow (1991, 2000) fully articulates the richness and complexity that characterized the collaborative reflexivity of the affinity group.

The descriptions of transformative adult learning from Mezirow (1991, 2000) and Kegan (1994, 2000) outline adult stages and possible outcomes as if this transformation can be represented neatly, as in Piagetian decision trees, while the affinity group's experiences were rarely tidy and characterized by members more as oscillations between past commitments and new perspectives rather than a linear progress through well-defined stages. While the TFEE seminar was explicitly founded on Mezirow and Kegan's foundations and these concepts were incredibly helpful to our analysis in the early years, now we sense that these theories feel a bit too clinical.

Kegan's (1994, 2000) and Mezirow's (1991, 2000) theories both pit the lone subject against an occurrence or upheaval that has caused such dissonance that the individual must engage with it to reinstate equilibrium, whether through stagnation or transformation. While some of Kegan's later work with Lahey (2001) explored how an outsider might intentionally create these moments of dissonance as a means of prompting transformative thinking, the subject continues to grapple with and make sense of them on their own. Additionally, in both theorists' work, the moments of dissonance or upheaval that prompt the subject to pause and reflect are largely uninvited and invasive, rather than pursued. Conversely, the affinity group invited dissonance and complexity into their midst in the belief that doing so created a fruitful space for personal and collective growth.

A Post-Currerian Adult Learning Perspective

In an era in which understandings of curriculum had come to be dominated by mechanistic and technocratic definitions, *currere*, Pinar's (1994) declaration that "the curriculum is not comprised of subjects, but of Subjects, of subjectivity. The running of the course is the building of the self, the lived experience of subjectivity" (p. 220) was indeed radical. This reconceptualization of curriculum shifted the focus from the static content too often compartmentalized into specific content areas to the dynamism of the knowledge building process experienced by the individual and laid out in the method of *currere* (Pinar, 1975).

The method of *currere* challenges us to reflect on our pasts, to project forward into our future aspirations, to take stock of our present commitments, and, in doing so, to identify their relationships to one another. "Juxtapose the three photographs: past, present, future. What are their complex, multi-dimensional interrelations? How is the future present in the past, the past in the future, and the present in both?" (Pinar, 1994, p. 26). The goal of examining the connections between one's past, present, and future is to weave the common strands into the shape and direction of one's life not only conceptually but concretely through action. Like the upper echelons of adult learning theory, the point of *currere* is to foster the kind of self-knowledge that leads to changes in the way people go about living their daily lives, to foster the ability to take action in your personal context, to encourage praxis. Unlike adult learning theory, *currere* encourages the transcending or transgressing of artificial boundaries in developmental stages. That is to say, it invites complexity.

To the extent that affinity group members engaged in individual cycles of reflexivity that resulted in changed ways of being, *currere* rings true. In addition, parallels to *currere* can easily be identified in many of the group's processes where emphasis was placed on connecting past experiences and future aspirations to understand what actions or decisions were needed in the present moment. Likewise, the group members' understandings of

themselves and their positionalities in most cases approached if not exemplified Kegan's (1994, 2000) or Mezirow's (1991, 2000) self-authorship or worldcentric orientations. However, in our estimation, both the seminal and contemporary texts addressing or employing *currere* as a framework or process fail to account for the rich complexity that collaboration brought to moments of reflexivity in which members not only created the conditions and space to evolve individually, but perhaps more importantly, to evolve collectively.

For Pinar (2004), the synthetical moment results in change for both the individual and the collective as through the steps or stages of *currere* the individual "undertake[s] [the] project of social and subjective reconstruction" (p. 4). As Pinar (2004) stated clearly, "I outline the autobiographical method of *currere*, a method focused on self-understanding. Such understanding, I believe, can help us to understand our situation as a group" (p. 5). That *currere* holds both the progression of the individual and the collective as its aims is clear. Additionally, Pinar (2004) emphasized that the method of *currere* requires an understanding of the Subject as contextualized within specific historical and political contexts. Thus, the method of *currere* engages the contextualized Subject in what Pinar (2004) termed "autobiographical confession" (p. 39) in the hopes that a growing body of individuals will shift the trajectory of the whole or the collective. Yet, ironically, despite feminist curriculum theorists' conceptions of teaching and learning as relational acts and their significant contributions to the concept of *currere* and the undertones of interdependence in Pinar's writing (1975, 2004), the method of *currere* still seems to be a journey upon which one is apparently supposed to embark alone. While the collective is certainly a focus of *currere* outcomes, if you will, collaboration or the collective are absent from the process. There appears to be no process, or perhaps, no need, for the holding of mirrors up to and for one another.

Boler's (1999) Collective Witnessing

Tucked neatly into Pinar's (2004) discussion of autobiography as a revolutionary act is the explicit inclusion of Megan Boler's (1999) assertion that self-knowledge may not lead to self-transformation as well as Pinar's (2004) observation that "self-knowledge and collective witnessing are complementary projects of self-mobilization for social reconstruction" (p. 37). Boler (1999) situated collective witnessing as an integral component of what she terms a "pedagogy of discomfort," the goal of which is to "see things differently" (p. 176). Like *currere*, a pedagogy of discomfort involves both inquiry and action, introspection and reconstruction, or as the affinity group called it *inside and outside work*.

As the name would suggest, a pedagogy of discomfort also calls upon its participants to commit to engaging with what is not easy, to learn to live with/as what Boler (1999) called an "ambiguous self" (p. 176). The use of a collective is particularly crucial in supporting these aims as "collective witnessing is always understood in relation to others, and in relation to personal and cultural histories and material conditions. To honor these complexities requires learning to develop genealogies of one's positionalities and emotional resistances" (p. 178). The descriptions here are familiar to the affinity group experience: striving together to "see things differently," agreeing to live in discomfort, working to trace the genealogies of one's beliefs and perceptions.

Yet, as Boler (1999) provided examples of collective witnessing from her own pedagogical experiences, a pattern emerged which strays from the affinity group experience in an important way. Boler consistently provided examples in which she and her students were working to see an event or text outside of themselves differently as a means of identifying and evaluating the beliefs each individual brings to their perception

of the object. Conversely, the affinity group made its own experiences, texts, and questions the objects of focus. Or, one might say, the affinity group chose to collectively witness subjects from within its own ranks.

While Boler (like Pinar, Mezirow, and Kegan) admitted that "the Socratic admonition to 'know thyself' may not lead to self-transformation" and "may result in no measurable change or good to others or oneself" (p. 178), a group of people simultaneously working to unpack their reactions to an external object as she described certainly stand to benefit from sharing their individual journeys, to learn through observation or proximity as the collective engages in what almost reads like tandem or parallel experiences of *currere*. The affinity group, however, repeatedly, intentionally, and willingly chose their own moments of reflexivity, or their own genealogies if you will, as the object of witnessing, shifting focus from one group member to another as need and time dictated. In doing so, they created an environment in which the work of reflection was never undertaken alone, but instead was supported by members who committed to probing, questioning, and checking each other's thinking.

On/Beyond Currere

While the thought of moving on/beyond *currere* from the autobiographical into collaborative transformational learning is not terribly radical at first glance, the act itself of learning under these conditions certainly is. It means making yourself vulnerable and immersing yourself willingly in moments of dual consciousness, not in order to discover the ways in which others' perceptions might oppress or impose upon you, but because through others' perspectives we might discover truths that otherwise we would likely hide from ourselves, truths that are difficult knowledge, that are instructive, or that might trigger moments of crisis. Sometimes, to put it bluntly, when we work alone and in private, we are far too likely to let ourselves off the hook. Herein lies our search for a post-*currerian* conceptualization of curriculum as we continue to hearken to the voices of a group that insisted on holding up the mirror for and to one another no matter how painful the experience or how bitter the knowledge (Britzman, 1998) revealed by the mirror. The group exemplified the trust and faith that makes vulnerability and transformative learning possible.

Additionally, members of the affinity group identified ways in which participating in collaborative reflexive practice not only spurred their personal and professional growth, but provided them with a source of positive accountability. In short, when you know that your allies will ask you difficult questions but will do so with utter faith in your capacity to change yourself and your context for the better, you hold yourself doubly accountable—accountable to creating a more equitable world within your own sphere of influence and to upholding the integrity of the group's collective work. If we return to Pinar's (1975) claim that curriculum is the building of the self via the running of the course, we believe that it is best to join a running group in which the members provide fresh eyes to critique your form, with running partners who expect you to show up to train, who offer encouragement when your strength is waning, and who spur friendly competition to push your pace. The affinity group believes that we are better off personally and collectively when we do this inside and outside work together rather than in isolation and self-protection.

Conclusion

While the frenetic connectivity and conflict of a globalized society makes moments of quiet introspection or a return to *currere* both increasingly rare and perhaps sometimes even personally necessary, the complexity of this moment also poses a challenge and an

opportunity to engage one another critically and compassionately in the service of both individual and collective transformations that result in social action. Examples abound of the need to create spaces in which members feel both safe *and* challenged and in which the work is both personal and collective, both within U.S. K-12 schools and in the larger community beyond.

The spring and summer of 2020 have witnessed an upwelling of racial conflict, ongoing protests and clashes, and the surfacing of the ongoing implications and consequences of inequitable systems of policing, schooling, housing, and economics so powerful and persistent that they have even trumped and transcended a global pandemic. Voices too long silenced are at last finding audiences. Perspectives previously considered invalid or irrelevant are coming to the fore of American consciousness. Perhaps now more than ever before, a collective will to reckon with America's long, destructive history of racial oppression is emerging with potential to result in schools and communities that are truly equitable for all community members, but especially for members of any identities historically oppressed and silenced.

But the question of how this bitter knowledge (Britzman, 1998) is taken up and grappled with in order to create meaningful, necessary social change remains an open question. *Currere*, while much appreciated for its long and meaningful impact on curriculum studies scholarship, will not be sufficient for this moment. We are convinced this moment can only result in meaningful outcomes when the deeply personal work we each must do is collegially and collaboratively rooted within and accountable to a collective that spans a rich variety of identities and experiences, including racial identities. The affinity group's practice of, and insistence on, holding up the mirror for and to one another offers some practical, yet theory-shaping guidance for ways other educators could create similar spaces in which to do this long, patient, and urgent work. It is in theorizing the transformative power of the synergistic collective that we hope to approach a post-*currerian* conceptualization.

References

Adams, S. (2013). *The meaning of race-based professional development: A critical feminist ethnography* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (1324465698)

Adams, S. R., & Buffington-Adams, J. (2016). *Race and pedagogy: Creating collaboration for teacher transformations.* Lanham, MD: Lexington.

Adams, S. R., & Buffington-Adams, J. A. (2020). Processes and protocols for creating and sustaining cross-racial dialog between K-12 educators. In J. Heybach (Ed.), *Racial incidents and the public school.* Springfield, MO: Academy for Educational Studies.

Adams, S. R., & Peterson-Veatch, R. (2012). "Critical friendship" and sustainable change: Creating liminal spaces to experience discomfort together. In J. Faulkner (Ed.), *Disrupting pedagogies and teaching the knowledge society: Countering conservative norms with creative approaches* (pp. 32–46). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Britzman, D. (1998). *Lost subjects, contested objects: Toward a psychoanalytic inquiry of learning.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Drago-Severson, E. (2009). Leading adult learning: Supporting adult learning development in our schools. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Grumet, M. (1988). *Bitter milk: Women and teaching*. Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press.

Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kegan, R. (2000). What "form" transforms? A constructive-developmental approach to transformative learning. In J. Mezirow and Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 35–69). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2001, November). The real reason people won't change. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2001/11/the-real-reason-people-wont-change

Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow and Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 3-34). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miller, J. (2005). *Sounds of silence breaking: Women, autobiography, curriculum.* New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Pinar, W. F. (1975, April). *The method of "currere."* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Research Association, Washington, D.C.

Pinar, W. F. (1994). *Autobiography, politics, and sexuality: Essays in curriculum theory 1972-1992*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Pinar, W. F. (2004). *What is curriculum theory?* (1st ed). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.