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Currere and the Beauty of Soulful Classroom Moments

Jessica Sierk

Abstract

Drawing on Pinar's (1975, 2011) work on *currere* and the author's own experience as an educator both in the K-12 and higher education arenas, the author argues that curriculum is a living entity and should therefore be allowed to deviate from the "plan" that most people think of when the topic of curriculum arises. Gaudelli & Hewitt's (2010) idea of "the beauty of soulful moments" is also used to illustrate the utility of such deviations. Dewey's (1934, 1938) themes of improvisation, participation, communication, and experience, as well as the idea of "the unexpected turn" also serve as backdrops to discussing curriculum and learning. These ideas are explored through the use of the author's narrative about her journey as an educator. Issues of space, time, and intention are discussed, while the current trajectory of K-12 education toward standardization, accountability and scripted teaching is problematized. The author explores the concept of *currere* and its potential to breathe new life into the educational process.

Keywords: *classroom communication, curriculum, learning, standardization*

Introduction: One Educator's Journey

My K-12 teaching experience had a short lifetime of three years. As I finished my third year of teaching, I barely recognized myself. The narrow focus on test preparation and accountability left me with little time and energy for the improvisation that is the lifeblood of the living nature of the act and art of teaching. I still loved helping my students realize their unique potentials. I still believed deeply in the work I was doing, but something had changed. I had become cynical and jaded. I had

stopped believing that education had the power to change the often inequitable status quo of our society. The bureaucratic nature of the institution of education had stolen a crucial part of my identity. I carried this cynicism with me as I started my doctoral studies. However, through my encounters with the ideas of Dewey, Pinar, and Eisner, among others, and my experiences teaching in the realm of higher education, I have come to reclaim what was originally mine: a passion for and sincere belief in the power education can hold for students and teachers alike. This repossession is encapsulated in the following quote from Dewey (1938): “Improvisation that takes advantage of special occasions prevents teaching and learning from being stereotyped and dead” (p. 78-79). One could say that the disconnect I was feeling at the end of my K-12 teaching experience was due to the fact that my teaching was, in the words of Dewey, dead.

However, my life as a teacher has since been resuscitated. Macintyre Latta (2013) states, “The space generated a movement of thinking that invited and valued my participation” (p. 104). I now realize that space was the missing variable in my K-12 teaching experience. Although I always had a physical space to work within, there was not much curricular or creative space with which to play. Reeves (2010), drawing on Sawyer (2004), describes expert teaching as “disciplined improvisation, wherein teachers plan instruction using their knowledge of content, students, and context while simultaneously opening space for improvisation around that plan, space that invites digression and the ‘collaborative emergence’ of learning” (p. 245). Leaving room in the curriculum for students’ interests is of the utmost importance. The idea of *currere* allows for this space in the curriculum.

Currere’s most literal definition stems from Latin, in which it means “to run.” *Currere* is used here to represent a postmodern philosophical approach to education that acknowledges personal and temporal dimensions of the learner, and the effects such dimensions have on the curriculum. Utilizing *currere* in the classroom, then, recognizes that all students have unique pasts, presents, and futures. It allows for students’ biographical idiosyncrasies to mold and shape classroom life and practices. *Currere* acknowledges that curriculum is a living entity and therefore should be allowed to deviate from the “plan” that most people think of when the topic of curriculum arises (Pinar, 2011). Gaudelli and Hewitt (2010) men-

tion “the beauty of soulful moments” which, to me, is a perfect way of framing instances that illustrate such deviations. Students and teacher, in effect, co-create the curriculum in a *currere* classroom. “To run” implies movement. *Currere*, then, suggests a dynamic entity, constantly changing as it continues to develop.

The current trajectory of K-12 education is aimed at standardization, accountability, and scripted teaching (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Derthick & Dunn, 2009; Eslinger, 2012; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). In an era when improvisation and exploration are devalued, it is essential to consider the question: How can *currere* and the beauty of soulful classroom moments be utilized to breathe new life into the educational process? Potential answers to this question will be explored through the lens of existing literature and the author’s own journey in both the K-12 and higher education arenas.

Leaving Loose Ends

Within the last decade, teaching has become more and more tied to accountability measures. The practice of “teaching to the test” has become rampant in classrooms across the country. Barone (1983) states, “The use of objectives in this way is the educational equivalent to revealing the punch line before telling the joke” (p. 23). One can imagine that the joke would not be as enjoyable if the punch line was revealed too early. In the same manner, education that strictly relies on external objectives, to the exclusion of all else, is often less gratifying and less intellectually stimulating. How then, can *currere* flourish in this testing culture?

Eisner’s (1991) work presents an alternative to the current system’s unyielding approach to standards. “Teaching that is not hog-tied to rigid specifications often moves in directions and explores ideas that neither the students nor the teacher could envision at the outset” (p. 46). This notion suggests the idea that there is more to learning than is generally included in your typical standardized test. These tests, as students and teachers have come to know them, only account for a handful of educational possibilities. Pateman (1997) compares life’s infinite possibilities to art, stating that “not all the permissible moves are prescribed in ad-

vance” (p. 7). Similarly, when used as one measure of student success, rather than an end-all-be-all, students are encouraged to go above and beyond what the test is able to measure.

Benchmarks meant to serve as a minimum boundary now function to delimit student achievement. Eisner (1991) suggests that “goals are not stable targets at which you aim, but directions towards which you travel” (p. 47). To assume that goals are stable targets implies that learning is something that has a definite end. However, there is an infinite amount of knowledge in this world and one cannot possibly ever know everything there is to know about everything. Therefore, to consider goals as “directions towards which you travel” allows us to instead view learning as a process that is never fully accomplished. The summative nature of standardized tests directly contradicts this train of thought. Therefore, these measures of student achievement should be seen as a snapshot in time. We must all recognize that there is a broader realm within which these snapshots are captured. Such measures only give us a narrow view of what students are capable of, as any teacher can attest.

The strict adherence to scripted curricula is problematic as it does not allow for the influence of students and other contextual factors. Dewey (1934) asserts, “Those who carry on their work as a demonstration of a preconceived thesis may have the joys of egotistic success but not that of fulfillment of an experience for its own sake” (p. 144). Dewey’s idea of “a demonstration of a preconceived thesis” may be thought of as a bow that is already tied, or in the context of classroom procedures, a lesson that does not allow for student-derived digressions. If teachers leave some ends loose in their lesson preparation, the end result may surprise them in its complexity and ingenuity. One way of leaving loose end is through the incorporation of open dialogue and communication as a classroom norm.

Dialogue and Communication in the *Currere* Classroom

Communication cannot freely occur when one is subscribing to a scripted curriculum. The *currere* classroom, in contrast, allows for the free exchange of ideas via open dialogue and communication. Pinar (2011) describes communication as “an ongoing social ceremony aspiring

to shared understanding while engaging difference and protecting dissent” (p. 19). This type of exchange cannot be planned ahead of time. Rather, it must be lived in the present moment. It allows for and respects conflict, tackling it head on rather than sweeping it under a metaphorical rug. It is authentic, honoring students’ responses and building off of the knowledge students bring to the classroom context. Allowing for this kind of communication in the classroom means relinquishing some control as a teacher; this is not to say that nothing is planned in such situations. “Strong professors prompt, guide, enrich, but often simply observe student conversation” (Barone, Berliner, Blanchard, Casanova, & McGowan, 1996, p. 1122). Through thoughtful prompts and watchful guidance, teachers are still able to move the class in the direction it needs to go. However, the path taken to get from point A to point B may look different than the teacher originally expected.

Information and knowledge is shared through processes of communication. Dewey (1934) stated, “Communication is the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolated and singular” (p. 253). The richness of curricular conversations is increased by the exchange of different opinions and points of view. This resonates with my experience of teaching multicultural education. It is through agreements, disagreements, new ideas, shared opinions, and differing perspectives that true learning occurs. In educational ventures, teachers often rely solely on one perspective for insight and information (e.g. the required textbook). However, the world is made up of many different viewpoints, and students must be prepared to encounter viewpoints with which they agree, disagree, or had not previously considered. Therefore, giving students opportunities to share their viewpoints allows for the widening of others’ horizons. It also allows for the student sharing their viewpoint to practice articulating their opinions. This exercise gives students the opportunity to find and hone the language they use in explaining what they believe and why, an important life skill for all to possess.

Education is a means by which we socialize our youth. Schooling aims to impart certain values and reinforce a shared culture and experience so that students may become productive citizens who contribute positively to society. According to Dewey (1934), “[I]t is by activities that are shared and by language and other means of intercourse that qualities and values become common to the experience of a group of mankind” (p.

298). This is not to say that everyone comes away from the dialogue in complete agreement, abandoning their original train of thought. However, it does mean that everyone comes away with a new understanding that has been influenced in some way by other people's ideas.

Many times, boisterous conversation, that often occurs when students disagree with one another, is not welcomed in classroom settings. Such conversation is seen as disruptive and off-task. However, Dewey (1938) states, "Enforced quiet and acquiescence prevent pupils from disclosing their real nature" (p. 62). In not giving students adequate opportunities to openly express themselves in classroom settings, we are often-times asking them to be something they are not. We are sending the message that who they are as a person is not something that fits within classroom expectations. In communicating ideas with others, students are able to add their unique twist on the curriculum, making it something that is meaningful to them... something with which they want to engage. Open dialogue and communication often occurs extemporaneously. This process is not predictable, rather it is quite messy.

The Messiness of Creative Teaching

To the untrained eye, the *currere* classroom may be seen as chaotic or disorganized. Barone (1983) speaks of "spontaneity in teaching" and "instantaneous responses" (p. 25) as essential to teaching as a creative practice. These elements of the *currere* classroom occur when teachers take advantage of their students' unique interests and questions. May (1991) argues that "unusual events" that naturally occur in the world of teaching and learning are "extraordinarily meaningful to students for a variety of reasons" (p. 146). These unusual events are usually overlooked by students and teachers alike... ruled as things that "don't fit," things that are outside the realm of what counts as teaching and learning. However, these moments of eccentricity are what we often remember of our own schooling experience. They stand out from the dull moments that tend to blur together... the note taking, the cramming for tests, the filling out of worksheets, and the reading of textbooks.

Taking tests and completing rote tasks, such as filling out worksheets, is oftentimes not a natural inclination students possess. However,

learning is an innate ability that students constantly engage in, whether they are conscious of it or not. Dewey (1934) states, “An activity that was ‘natural’ – spontaneous and unintended – is transformed because it is undertaken as a means to a consciously entertained consequence” (p. 65). In traditional classrooms, teaching generally revolves around what is natural for the teacher. However, the level of influence students are allowed to have on that practice depends on the level of openness that teacher possesses. Eisner (1992) states:

The arts teach that goals need to be flexible and that surprise counts; ...that being open to the unanticipated opportunities that inevitably emerge in the context of action increases insight; and that purposeful flexibility rather than rigid adherence to prior plans is more likely to yield something of value (p. 594).

If the teacher is flexible and open to surprises and unanticipated opportunities, as suggested by Eisner in his discussion of the arts, then the students are able to develop the teacher’s natural inclination into an intended, designed part of the class through the manipulation of that particular classroom practice. This manipulation creates something that is unique to that group of learners... something that can never be recreated in the same, exact way, and something that feels natural for both the teacher and the students.

This act of manipulation mirrors Dewey’s (1934) idea of “the unexpected turn,” something that is not originally envisioned, but that saves the work from becoming habitual, routine, and lifeless. In this respect, the students’ manipulation of the teacher’s natural inclination to teach represents an unexpected turn. No one knows what the end result will be until that end is reached and they turn to look back at where they have been. This element of surprise keeps students guessing and wondering... reverent of the educative experiences they are living. Dewey suggests, “To generate the indispensable excitement there must be something at stake, something momentous and uncertain – like the outcome of a battle or the prospects of a harvest. A sure thing does not arouse us emotionally” (p. 69). The uncertainty present in the *currere* classroom maintains students’ interest while encouraging them to press on. The spontaneity of

engaging with “the unexpected turn” alters, or contaminates, the classroom environment.

Contaminating the Classroom Environment

In the current testing culture, the classroom environment is largely used as a place to administer the information necessary for students to pass standardized, high-stakes tests. Dewey (1938) states, “The history of educational theory is marked by opposition between the idea that education is development from within and that it is formation from without” (p. 17). Development from within allows for individuals to choose their own educational pathway; whereas, formation from without imposes a standardized educational pathway on all students, regardless of their own unique interests. Although written over 75 years ago, Dewey’s sentiment still rings true. Through policies like No Child Left Behind and the imposition of the Common Core, formation from without has become an increasingly prevalent influence on educational realities across the nation. However, individual teachers have been known to tug back in the form of development from within in this perpetual game of tug-of-war.

Educational policy, as a method of formation from without, may dictate that certain things should be happening in classrooms, and those things usually do happen to varying degrees; however, to expect full fidelity to policy would be foolish. Dewey (1934) states, “There is no experience in which the human contribution is not a factor in determining what actually happens” (p. 256). Teachers and students, whether they intend to or not, alter educational policies to meet their needs and the needs of the particular classroom, district, and regional contexts within which they reside. Pinar (2011) states, “There is no ‘pure’ school subject to be transmitted uncontaminated by those who study and participate in it” (p. 6). There are certain topics that obviously must be taught in each specific subject area; for instance, teaching the types of triangles in geometry or the difference between a noun and a verb in English language arts are seen to be essential components of such classes. Nevertheless, how one goes about teaching these concepts effectively contaminates the “pure” subject.

Similarly, students may choose to follow exactly what the teacher says, does, or demonstrates. Conversely, they may deviate from the teacher's approach, making their own path. Dewey (1938) describes "the plan" as "a co-operative enterprise, not a dictation," stating that "the teacher's suggestion is not a mold for a cast-iron result but is a starting point to be developed into a plan through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process" (p. 72). The teacher, in this situation, acts as a facilitator. Students' ways of doing are honored as having a place in the inner workings of the curriculum. They are allowed to "contaminate" the classroom environment. Teachers, too, are allowed this right as they attend to the medium of curriculum.

Attending to the Medium of Curriculum

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines medium as "the materials or methods used by an artist." Therefore, the "medium of curriculum" may be seen as the materials or methods used by an educator. May (1991) wrote, "Curriculum is the dynamic interaction of persons, artifacts, and ideas in a particular context over time – it is not a script. It has no formulaic and definitive beginning, middle, and end" (p. 143). The dynamic nature of curriculum means that it is always changing, never static. More specifically, in a classroom, the cast of characters is not always constant. New students come midway through the year, students move out of the district, substitute teachers come and go as needed, all changing the trajectory of the curriculum as a living entity. New artifacts and ideas are introduced, also altering the learning route taken. Forks in the road emerge as new directions are discovered through changes in the curricular environment.

Successful navigation of these forks in the road requires that teachers be open to and skilled at improvisation. Sawyer (2004) argues that this improvisation allows students to participate in the co-construction of their own knowledge in ways that scripted, teacher-centric instruction does not. Continuing with the analogy of forks in the road, if a route has been preselected, the possible forks in the road that could be taken would still exist; however, they would be mere sights on the journey, taunting all who desired to take them as the car passed them by. Taking the im-

provisation out of teaching reduces the act and art of teaching and learning to something one-dimensional and superficial. Attending to particularities, and allowing students to traverse the forks in the road, adds dimension and depth to teaching and learning.

One argument, that is often alluded to, against improvisation in the classroom is that there is not enough time to allow students to go down these proverbial forks in the road. However, as Dewey (1934) suggests, sensitivity to a medium does not “lug in extraneous material” (p. 207). In being sensitive to the medium of curriculum, teachers should carefully consider what information, skills, and knowledge is pertinent to their subject area and to the particular group of students that will be tasked with engaging with it. Students should also play a role in this decision. What do they want or need to know? What information interests them? How will what they learn in this particular class help them meet their individual and collective goals? In asking students these questions, teachers will begin to see what material is extraneous and how to best use their limited time with students. In essence, students lead teachers to the core of the matter.

Following the Leader and Leading the Follower

Who, then, is the leader in a *currere* classroom, and who is the follower? According to Walker (2003), teachers should not force students to “follow adult interests” (p. 62); instead, teachers should follow the interests their students possess. Curriculum is often centered on what adults think students should know or be able to do. It is a rare occurrence for a student’s interest to play a central role in the development of curriculum. When students’ interests are considered, they are often relegated to the periphery, a minor consideration at best. Students are expected to follow the teacher. We underestimate students’ ability to lead the way; after all, how could they possibly know how to get from point A to point B having never travelled that road before? As anyone who has ever visited a new place can attest, even if you do not know the way, you can manage to find what you need. You may not travel the most direct, efficient route, but through trial and error, many wrong turns, and possibly even a helpful stranger’s directions, eventually, you will arrive at your destination. So is

the case with following students' interests in the classroom and in the curriculum.

The teacher's expertise is not null in this scenario, however. Barone (2001) describes the teacher's role as follows:

It is the role of the educator consciously to select and arrange features of the classroom environment so as to increase the likelihood of such encounters... she must never coerce students into particular activities, or attempt to force upon them 'correct' descriptions of their selves and their world (p. 129).

The same curricular objectives can be accomplished while following students' interests. Teachers are tasked with creating a classroom climate and an instructional framework that allows for students' identities to be known, appreciated, and developed. Students are forced to "do school" in classrooms that do not honor who they are as individuals, classrooms that do not leave space for student identities to influence the curriculum. Students in this position are playing a role in an act of fiction. The teaching and learning that occurs in such situations is inauthentic and contrived. Students are not deeply impacted by this type of education, because they are removed from it. In order for education to have a profound effect on students, they must be invited to engage in the curriculum as they truly are, not as we wish they were.

Conclusion: Returning Anew

Returning, then, to my journey to becoming the educator I am today. You may ask yourself why I share my meager story in conjunction with the theoretical work of great minds like Pinar, Dewey, and Eisner. In the words of Pinar (1975), "I discern that the theme of my current situation differs from, say, yours, but the fact that we are both facing an issue is the same" (p. 14). In one way or another, we are all affected by the current trajectory of educational policy.

In my own journey as an educator, I feel as though I have, in a sense, come full circle. Since the beginning of this journey, I have experienced many ups and downs. Comparing my experience as a student in multicul-

tural education and my experience as an instructor of the same course, I cannot help but recognize that I am not the same person that started this journey several years ago. There are bits and pieces of the original me that remain. However, there have been chunks of me that have been broken, rearranged, replaced, and altered forever. I have wished that I knew then what I know now. However, was I ready to hear these messages at that time? I now realize that I got exactly what I needed when I needed it the most.

The phrase “come full circle” is misleading, however. When the circle is closed, one may think that the journey is complete. There is a sense that you’ve returned to the place from which you began, and I would argue that you can never do that. I have in fact returned to the physical place, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, from which I began this journey. However, since I am a different person in many ways, I am not experiencing it in the same way. Although I came back knowing many of the professors, they have also changed and our interactions demonstrate the inadequacies of the phrase “come full circle.”

A better phrase may be “returning anew.” Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary defines return as “to go back or come back again” and anew as “in a new and different form.” These definitions, when put together, embody what I feel I have accomplished at this stage in my journey... I have come back again in a new and different form, rejuvenated from having experienced *currere* and the beauty of soulful classroom moments.

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