

Curriculum Theorizing

THE
RECONCEPTUALISTS

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Search for a Method

Introduction

As we know, discipline inquiry requires both a subject and a method for inquiry. That this book is subtitled *The Reconceptualists* suggests dissatisfaction with established research methods and, by implication, with that area that is traditionally researched in the field of curriculum. In the preceding chapter I briefly outlined in a way that differs markedly from, say, Schwab,¹ why the traditional questions we ask in curriculum, the methods we have employed to answer the questions, and the answers themselves, have stalled and stumped us to the point where the adjective *moribund* is commonly used to describe the state of the field. Resurrection of this Lazarus requires two parts: identification of the area we wish to investigate that can be investigated and a systematic procedure by which to investigate it.

First, a note about these traditional areas of concern. It appears to me, as it evidently does to Schwab and others, that the areas of curriculum development and design have not proved amenable to systematic study. Furthermore, the attempts to borrow conceptualizations of theory development from the social sciences have never surpassed the borrowing stage, and this is no accident.² Meanwhile criticism of current research conceptualization grows louder both inside and outside the social sciences.³ Ours is a time of transition.

The reconception of the field that I will propose is not a break with the past. There are definite precedents for it in the field,⁴ although I have not noticed much awareness of them; that is understandable given our nearly compulsive adherence to conventional and now almost useless ideas of what our work is. In the preceding chapter I impressionistically outlined some of these precedents in the work of three important curriculum theorists. Now I wish to discuss my view of the nature of the reconceptualization and to propose a research method that is appropriate to this redefined area of inquiry.

The paper is usefully divided into the following parts. First, brief speculation regarding our dissatisfaction with current research methods, which I see as intimately related to a similar discontent in the social sciences. Secondly, description of four structural elements of educational experience, and in the present case, the educational experience of literature. After concluding a sketch of this one area to be researched in a reconceived curriculum field, I will allude to its parent disciplines. Finally, I will describe the present state of a method that will encourage disciplined inquiry into the area.

Dissatisfaction

It is clear we are in a critical stage in our work. I suppose it is a crisis, as Gouldner suggests, but the dimension of the dilemma interests me less than an understanding of what will or can come of it. I acknowledge that I am outside my field of expertise when I discuss this matter, but I offer my impressions—however naive a historian or philosopher of science may find them—because they are importantly related to what I previously characterized as a “phenomenological” research method. (Why I now place phenomenological in quotation marks will become evident later.)

Positivistic, so-called empirical research methodologies now unmistakably occupy center stage. Clearly they represent an advancement over the research methods used in the first decades of educational research. Even so, many scholars are dissatisfied, and this dissatisfaction has been adequately expressed by writers in disparate traditions like Polanyi in philosophy and Gouldner in sociology and by recent critics in the curriculum field. One way the dilemma poses itself is: for the sake of precision, clarity, and utility, we have taken to studying that which is observable and, at times it seems, quantifiable. Not surprisingly this approach necessarily omits something, whether we call this something the tacit dimension after

Polanyi, synnoetics after Phenix, or domain assumptions after Gouldner. What is noteworthy is that most of us agree that quantitative research answers many questions well, other questions not as well, and some questions not at all. Not interested in berating a concept of research for not doing what it cannot do, I have been attempting to formulate a method that would allow those interested to study the latter category of questions, which is roughly equivalent to the something we know is missing and is the source of our dissatisfaction.

I continue to refer to what it is I think many of us wish to study as “something” not to be vague, but to convey the yet unknown nature of the “object” of investigation. It is, in a sense, a tacit dimension, and it also encompasses domain assumptions, but finally we are vague about what it is. Needless to say, I have not found it. But I am working, and I have found some tracks, if you will, and I am ready to suggest a tentative outline of a method of looking.

Tracks

In a word, the manifestation of this unknown in the field of curriculum involves the concept of experience. It is experience in a special sense, as I tried to indicate with the use of the word *currere* in the previous chapter. Briefly, experience is not thought or feeling, or sensation, although these three notions are embedded in it. They typically serve as both media for and partial content of experience, but they do not exhaust it. This use of the concept recalls the work of Husserl, and the idea of the *Lebenswelt*, or life-world. With these words I introduce the scholarly tradition known as phenomenology, which I cannot, in the space of this chapter, satisfactorily explain to those unfamiliar with it. I can only provide a tenuous bridge to where I want to go with it. As Merleau-Ponty explains in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, all codified knowledge, including that which comprises science, is derived from and contingent on a prior level or realm that is preconceptual or pre-ideational in nature. This is the fundamental substratum of knowledge, and gaining access to and describing this layer, is the proper objective of “pure science.” However, we have become so severed from this layer that we have forgotten its existence. Thus our intellectual systems, uprooted from their proper basis, take on an autonomy and abstractedness that make intellectual life Kafkaesque. As in *The Trial*, these systems make a certain sense, although finally we know they are false and their claims unwarranted. Yet without proper theoretical grounding

our minds work mechanistically, asking the wrong questions, forced to accept a logic that oppresses us. Until we recognize, as Joseph K. did not, that our dilemma is metaphysical, not just technical and logical, we are nearly certain to be arrested. Rather than constantly asking "how many," "what," and "how" questions, we must force ourselves to ask "why" and not be satisfied until we get to the source. The source and the *lebenswelt* are related; they may be equivalents.

From my present state of understanding, this layer is not "out there" in the world, although it becomes a transparent yet disfiguring veil over the world. It lies inside us, and to search for it, I am convinced, involves heightened awareness of our immediate experience. As vague and viscous as experience often is, I am persuaded that it constitutes our only link to this now lost preconceptual layer, which is the basis, as Merleau-Ponty explains, of all codified knowledge.

This search is not at all equivalent to what is called the introspectionist movement in American psychology, which was discredited during the years just before and after the turn of the century. For example, it is clear to me that internal experience has its external and observable behavioral manifestations, although it is also clear that to the untrained eye and given the current developmental stage of technology, internal experience often might as well be buried, unobservable, inside. At this point we are not ready for a study that transcends the internal-external and subject-object splits or apparent splits. What is appropriate now is a research project that aspires to the *lebenswelt* and is confined to an identifiable and limited area of experience. For several reasons I have chosen literary experience as this area to be explored in this certain way, a way that I know I have yet to explain.

Curriculum as Educational Experience

In the field of English curriculum there is a nascent subfield characterizable as the study of the psychosocial consequences of studying and teaching literature. (For those scholars of literature who read this, I hasten to add the assurance that such a study in no way challenges or diminishes the value of literature or art on its own terms. Any attempt to reduce a work of art to its psychic effects on the reader would be tantamount to a variant of the genetic fallacy.) Louise Rosenblatt has done interesting work in this area, which she discusses in the following way.⁵ The experience of literature permits

exploration of self and others in an intimate, individualistic way. It allows study of individuals in a variety of contexts: psychological, cultural, historical. Vicarious experience itself encourages a breadth and depth of view that so-called ordinary or life experience rarely includes. And so the argument goes.

Other writers have dwelt on these aspects of literary experience, and some have underscored what they see as the unique contribution that literature can make to self-study. Yet, aside from asserting such potentialities, no one has systematically studied this relation between literary experience and psychosocial and cognitive development. Similarly, apologists for the humanities in general have, in varying ways, argued that study in the humanities "humanizes" the student. Yet to my knowledge, no in-depth description and analysis of this phenomenon called "humanization" has ever been done.

I do not intend to berate my colleagues' work by such an appraisal. It is at this point that investigation becomes extremely complicated, and I become more and more convinced that this seemingly insurmountable complication has to do with our estrangement from the preconceptual and from our interior experience of literature. To surpass this point requires both a heuristic conceptualization of the dilemma and a research method that permits us to work fruitfully.

This psychosocial study of literary experience suggests aspects of a larger study: the educational experience of literature. The two are of course not the same; I see the former subsumed in the latter. It is this concept—educational experience, and in the present case, the educational experience of literature—that most broadly and simply summarizes the area to be researched. Understandably, the idea is too complex to study in this form, so for purposes of analysis its fragmentation is necessary. (The last steps of the explicative process must be synthetic, to return us to where we conceptually began, although granted on an ontologically different level. This matter of procedure or method must wait a little longer.) At this point let me lay out four of the structural elements that comprise this notion of the educational experience of literature. These categories are not discrete but overlapping; however, each one calls for a unique focus.

1. The first element is the literary text itself, in literary terms. There is little need to explain this first element. The text must be taken on its own terms and understood independently of its determinants and consequences. Of course textual analysis is the focus of literary criticism, as is the study of determinants, whether authorial or societal. Psychoanalytic and Marxian criticism have made interesting contributions to studies of the text.

2. The second element is the text's place in literary and intellectual history, and it is much related to the first. Rather than attending to the text exclusively, attention here is given to its place in the history of the novel and in the intellectual history of the particular culture in which the text appeared and, most broadly, to the relation between art and culture: between art and the sociopolitical forces in the midst of which it was created. This area is also a traditional focus of literary study.

3. The third element is the response or reply of the reader. With this element or step (I do not wish to be rigid about procedure, but I do suggest that these elements can be viewed as developmental steps that, as you will see, coincide with the method) we enter the relatively unknown territory of the educational significance of the text. This element involves the response of the student, a sort of phenomenology of reading. The subject records what occurs while he or she reads, what intellections and emotions surface and at what time and place in the text. Description of the immediate physical and interpersonal environment is appropriate.

I must emphasize that this stage involves description of the contents of consciousness, not analysis, which is appropriate at times for the fourth element and step.

4. The fourth element is the context of the reader, which I currently understand to have the following parts:

a. The first of these is biography. Perhaps an illustration will help explain what is involved here. A student, now in her mid-twenties, recalls an earlier time. "It was my nineteenth year, and I was commencing my second year of study at the university. I had grown up unusually dependent on my parents, as I was then beginning to understand, and now that I was away from them and their nearly complete domination of me, I was left alone and profoundly uncertain. Without their loud presence to direct me, I was aimless, and my consciousness, so long focused on them, fell back, as it were, on myself. Literally it was as if I had spent my life gazing at those in front of me, and now in their absence, my gaze slips down, first to the wall across from me, then to the floor, to my feet, then to my body and finally to my internal thoughts and feelings. These I had had to keep hidden much of the time, given the external demands of my home environment. Now, without external distraction, my attention slips inside.

"At this same time I found myself engrossed, not merely studying but absorbed, in the fiction of Sartre and Camus. Formal philosophy interested me in the abstract, but when I encountered it concretely

in a class I was bored, my need somehow unmet. The physical and social sciences seemed distant; what drew me intellectually was literature, and literature of a certain sort."

I interrupt here to ask the questions that must be asked here: why is this student drawn to existentialist literature at that point in her life? Is there always a correspondence between biographic situation and intellectual interests? If so, what is the nature of the correspondence? Is it dialectical; does each inform the other; and if so, in what ways, to what ends? These questions suggest areas for study in this biographic aspect of educational experience.

b. The second component of the context of the subject involves the notion of intellectual gestalt. This is the ideational configuration which is one's image (although that word does not convey the complexity of it) of the so-called community of scholars, the intellectual world, and the history of thought. However dormant our awareness of it may be, we, at least many of us, carry with us a picture of the boundaries and content of the disciplines and how various groups of scholars tend to regard themselves and others. This takes concrete form of course when we chat with our colleagues in physics or medicine or in other fields of education. We gain partial and distant understanding of what they are about and what relation our work bears to theirs. These understandings and impressions are actually quite complex; they form a gestalt that not only helps to determine but also partially becomes one's theoretic point of view. Its role in research and scholarship is similar to domain assumptions; it shapes research conceptualization in ways we are usually unaware of. To understand its precise role in these matters is one aim of study in this realm. Other questions come to mind: To what extent is this gestalt formed by formal study and by informal conversations? To what extent is the individual's unique organization of this information a consequence of information received (environment) and to what extent is it a function of genetically determined cognitive structures?

c. The third aspect of the reader's context is his or her conceptual lens. Like the intellectual gestalt the lens is also a configuration of impressions and information, of what experience is. So it can be thought of as the individual's language system, which is used to describe and explain what he perceives, both in himself and in others. While one's language almost invariably lies in the public semantic domain, connotative meanings usually differ sufficiently to make necessary individualistic study. Where does this language, which in the Heideggerian sense forms a lens through which we view the

world, come from? Surely from our parents, but also from our teachers, friends, and, especially for those of us who have spent much if not most of our lives in educational institutions, it derives from educational experience. For the student of literature, one's lens or conceptualization of self and experience derives in varying degrees from the novels and poems she reads. Often such a person borrows the language characters use, and in her identification with them, applies it to herself and her situation. So it is that the life-force that comprises the *Lebenswelt* comes to us and is thus transformed by our cognitive lens. This translation of preconceptual into conceptual works to determine the content and meaning of our experience, and it usually does so unconsciously. What is the formative process of this lens, and what relation exists between it and the books we read, the teachers with whom we study—in short, to our educational experience? With which literary characters do I empathize, which do I scorn or ignore, and to what extent is this process of identification explainable by an understanding of my lens? Which script or which parts of it do I take as my own, and to what extent does it shape my reception of information? How does it conform to apparently deeper psychic structures? Such questions suggest the study of the cognitive lens.

d. Finally, the fourth element I have identified thus far as part of an understanding of the context of the subject is the psychological. Questions like these present themselves: If a novel is assigned in a course, then why or why not, in a psychological sense, am I able to read it, to immerse myself in it? Or, in a "free" situation, why am I reading this poem now? What drives, needs, impulses seek expression now, why, and what symbolic, in this case literary, form do they take? What is the nature of my identification with this character? Why do I read Virginia Woolf urgently and cannot abide James Joyce?

This concludes a brief mapping of aspects of one's educational experience of literature.

Roots

This is not the time to explain the relation between this incipient area of study and those fields from which it grew. I hope the following short sentences will suffice. First, this developing point of view has embedded within it a depth or dynamic psychological model of human being; nonetheless, there are important divergences. Such a model portrays the individual as partially unaware of what

occurs in him or her at present, and that heightened awareness of the present is at least partly contingent on dredging up one's remembered past, to gain what psychoanalysts typically call insight into the nature of one's early experience and its relation to present behavior. One presently edits information and that which is presented but not recognized enters and is stored in preconscious and unconscious layers. The technique of free association permits access to the contents of the unconscious. It is stretching the concept, but one can regard literary texts as a kind of Rorschach test onto which the self projects itself. You can begin to divine how certain psychoanalytic concepts and techniques may be employed in an analysis of educational experience.

Further, the present is created also by what is not the case, that is, the future. Some existentialists, Heidegger notably, have contributed to our understanding of the importance of what one imagines or wishes to be the case in the future in determining what is the case in the present. Of course both the past and the future in all their complexity converge on the present to mingle with one's immediate environment and with one's functioning self to create what Sartre has termed a situation. After Tillich and Marcel, one is continually being called, or lured, and a proper path lies ahead, which is partly explicable by understanding the components of the present, by reclaiming the movement and direction of the past, and by assessing the meaning of one's imagined, aspired to, and feared future. This is possible because objective knowledge is possible, as phenomenologists like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty explain. Part of what we must do is reestablish contact with the preconceptual and describe the essences of both substances and situations as they disclose themselves to us. Such an absolute perspective or transcendental ego (to be distinguished from the natural ego, which is the predictable *persona* or public self that the behaviorists attempt to explain) is not a given, but a developmental possibility indicated by transpersonal psychology and Zen Buddhist psychology. It is hoped that this method carries with it beneficial developmental consequences.

This approach, then, is grounded in existentialism, phenomenology, Jungian psychoanalysis, the radical psychiatry of Cooper and Laing, and aspects of literary and educational theory.⁶ The ambition is that it surpass these roots and becomes an area in its own right, with its own boundaries, content, and research method.

The Present State of the Method

One responds to educational situations, whether they be artifacts like poems or actors like teachers or peers or combinations of these in certain understandable ways. We can decipher the educational meaning of the present by studying this response, by (a) recalling and describing phenomenologically the past and then analyzing its psychic relation to the present; (b) describing one's imagined future and analyzing its relation to the present; and (c) placing this phenomenological-psychoanalytic understanding of one's educational present in its cultural and political context, which I must add is the least-developed step at this time.

So finally we can characterize the method. It is (a) regressive, because it involves description and analysis of one's intellectual biography or, if you prefer, educational past; (b) progressive, because it involves a description of one's imagined future; (c) analytic, because it calls for a psychoanalysis of one's phenomenologically described educational present, past, and future; and (d) synthetic, because it totalizes the fragments of educational experience (that is to say the response and context of the subject) and places this integrated understanding of individual experience into the larger political and cultural web, explaining the dialectical relation between the two.

Notes

1. Joseph Schwab, "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum," in *Curriculum and the Cultural Revolution*, ed. David E. Purpel and Maurice Belanger (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan Publishing, 1972).
2. For example, George Beauchamp, *Curriculum Theory* (Wilmette, Ill.: Kagg Press, 1968).
3. Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, 1972). Also, Isidor Chein, *The Science of Behavior and the Image of Man* (New York: Basic Books, 1972).
4. In the work of Maxine Greene, Dwayne Huebner, and James B. Macdonald. See chapter 29.
5. *Literature as Exploration* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1938).
6. The Jungian and Laingian aspects are more evident in earlier chapters. See chapters 26 and 28.
7. I borrow heavily from Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

George Willis

In imaginative literature the voyage has long been a symbol of the development of insight. But like Odysseus's or the Ancient Mariner's most fictional voyages end in a homecoming, in the recognition of an old world seen in new ways and in the discovery of tasks yet to be done. Perhaps, then, William Pinar has classified as reconceptualists those people in curriculum who have unfinished business in common with the voyagers of fiction.

If this is true, then I suppose my own intellectual voyage began at Hamilton College, where I had the opportunity to study philosophy and English language and literature within a liberal arts tradition, among men who had a healthy regard for the adequacy and consistency of ideas and who taught as if they had advised Joseph Schwab on the early drafts of his papers on curriculum. A year's study at Harvard provided a close-up look at currents in pedagogy and in educational policy-making. There followed three years of practice as a secondary school English teacher.

But dissatisfied with my grasp of educational theory, of the external demands made by institutions on individual students, and of the internal demands made by individuals on themselves to render experience meaningful, I returned for doctoral work to Johns Hopkins University, where, I hoped, I would have the opportunity to increase my knowledge of education generally and to synthesize ideas drawn from such areas as analytic philosophy, existentialism and phenomenology, esthetics, and linguistic and literary theory. I was not disappointed, for I studied education as an autonomous, intellectual discipline and curriculum as its multifaceted, integrating center.

As have others, I have discovered that the usual modes of conceiving curriculum are incomplete, and the work of reconceptualizing is complex and arduous. Nonetheless, the task is not