A Personal Theory of Curriculum: Neo-Traditionalism

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**Introduction**

Aoki stated that teaching is fundamentally a mode of being (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 427). I agree. Good teaching is always centered in being one’s self. Teachers are doing nothing, after all, than helping others to learn what they’ve already learned. But not everyone can do this. Being able to successfully teach others is a gift. Sure, some can learn it, but most either have it or they don’t. The rest is just details and those details are the meat of curriculum theory.

The great thing about curriculum theories is that it is hard for one to be categorically wrong. Theories from some perspectives apply to a wider range of circumstances than others, but most contain at least a little truth. They all have great ideas and strategies to offer and knowing when to apply which ideas and strategies is what separates good teachers from great teachers.

As I studied the various perspectives of curriculum theory over this past summer, I realized I like them all. If I had to choose just one favorite, I never could, at least not with a clear conscience. They each offer a very unique and valuable perspective. And, going back to my original point, good teachers know that there is no one right way to educate students. The education system should be as varied and colorful as the students it serves. Good teachers have always differentiated instruction just like good teachers have always sprinkled jewels of moral and civic responsibility into their everyday lessons. These things need to be to be learned by those whose state of being is not that of “teacher.” Those of us who were born to it already know what to do.

In the writing that follows, I will try to communicate what I’ve learned about curriculum theory through this course. If you find a theme, I hope it is this: A thoughtful, varied approach to educating students is better than any single perspective broadly applied.

**Structural Analysis**

I came into this course knowing virtually nothing about the different perspectives of curriculum theory. I feel that I am leaving it much better informed, if not completely enamored with any particular perspective. What I feel I have gained is a broad understanding of what curriculum theory is and how I might use the wealth of knowledge, and opinions, about curriculum to increase the positive impact I am able to make in students’ lives.

The first and most lasting theory I’ve encountered in this course was also one of the first. It is the traditionalist Joyce’s proposal of a “three-tiered” curriculum. The first tier would be comprised of reading, writing, and mathematics. The second tier would focus on nurturing the talents and differences of the individual student. The third tier would be a time for the student to societal problems and how he or she was related to those greater issues. This curriculum structure was designed to move the focus of education away from the cognitive and toward fostering well-rounded, globally conscious citizens through a more liberal approach (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 190). This plan may seem overly simplified, but it is actually quite representative of many of the curricular ideas that followed it. It represents each student’s need for content knowledge, self-actualization and societal values. This is, as curriculum theory goes, the complete package. Each school of thought that follows the traditionalist perspective has a very similar focus.

What the traditionalist theorists lacked was the details, or, more precisely, “how” to go about educating students in this way successfully. This is where I believe that the work of subsequent perspectives comes in to play. The work of political, gender, phenomenological and poststructural theorists offers the avenues to achieve what the traditionalists sought, but did not yet understand. Additionally, this approach also solves the problem of each of the more specialized perspectives having good qualities, but not being liberal enough to apply effectively to all situations. Applying each of these perspectives best qualities to the “three-tiered” approach of the traditionalists enables them each to work to their highest potential by being used precisely when and where they will each be best suited. I have titled this application of these various perspectives to the structure of the “three-tiered” approach “Neo-traditionalism.”

**Theoretical Analysis**

**The Individual**

To properly educate students according to the “three-tiered” approach laid out by Joyce and, thus, begin explaining “Neo-traditionalism,” one must first consider the individual. Political theorists Weinstein and Fantini feared that, “Our educational institutions may produce cold, detached, individuals, uncommitted to humanitarian goals” (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 190). This is, of course, not optimum. One way to keep this from happening is to focus on the poststructuralist idea of discovering and fostering each student’s authentic self. Hwu stated that it is only by finding and embracing each of our authentic selves that we may find true satisfaction (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 492).

One way to do this is to instruct by leading students themselves to create. To create an original work is to truly understand not only the creation, but the force inside one’s self that imagined it into being. For instance, Block posited that to live is to read texts, but to be alive is to write them. Reading is the process by which a reality is consumed; writing is the very production of that reality (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 475).

The creation of independent creative projects by students is something that theorists from nearly all perspectives would support. Without understanding and accepting one’s self, one can never hope to reach the necessary level of inner peace needed to truly change the world. The phenomenological theorists Aoki stated that an educated person, first and foremost, understands that one’s way of knowing, thinking, and doing flow from who one is. Such a person knows that an authentic person is more than a mere individual, an island unto himself or herself, but a being-in-relation with others and hence is, at core, an ethical being (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 404). Furthermore, gender perspective curriculum theorists such as Sears found that as human beings we are all bestowed with gifts of the differentness: sexual, racial, gender, regional, and so forth. These differences are the portals toward knowledge-of-being; they allow us to see the world upside down; they are the moon and the stars that allow us to chart our journey (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 399).

This personal approach to education, focused on embracing one’s authentic self, brings the individual to the center of the educational process. It is through the individual’s personal experiences and their perceptions of those experiences that they might reach their highest potential as thoughtful and social minded citizens.

**Society**

Next, one must consider how this new approach to curriculum theory views society. Poststructuralist theorist Cherryholmes felt that if we could be critically pragmatic in the construction and deconstruction of how we live and together build communities using our best visions of what is beautiful, good, and true, then the unreflective reproduction of what we find around us, including some of its injustices, might be tamed and changed a bit (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 489). In other words, we must learn to live together peaceably if we are to ever build communities that are above the common woes of injustice and prejudice that we suffer from today. But, understanding and tolerance is the answer. Political theorists believe that creating a common culture in education is not the answer. Creating a society where cultural differences are valued should be the goal of education (Giroux, 1992).

Political theorists, like Giroux, feel that schools only perpetuate the negative aspects of a demoralizing and oppressive culture. Teaching students to value not only themselves, but others could only help them to become more accepting adults. In fact, Cherryhomles believed that the possibility of such a poststructural understanding brings with it the promise of increased freedom and more power to create our societies and schools rather than the other way around (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 489).

Much of this could be accomplished by acknowledging that the context of students’ lives is important to their educational success. According to phenomenological theorist Langevald, educators must share a fundamental understanding of this indeterminate place and must not call into the mistake of viewing the whole world as the institution of school. Much is to be learned outside of the school-world (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 441).

It will only be through the acceptance of the importance of students’ lives outside of school that educators finally maximize on student success in the classroom. The experiences each of us has at home with our families and our perceptions of those events shape our understanding of the world. We must learn to embrace what our life experiences have taught us so that we might teach our students that their own experiences are not only valid, but meaningful and worthy.

**Schooling**

Political theorist Frymier said that the public school is something like an Army tank: it possesses fantastic power and has extremely thick walls, but is very vulnerable in spots, is extremely slow moving, and requires tremendous amounts of support and fuel (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 191). But, with the proper resistance, it doesn’t always have to be so. Doll has stated that a new sense of educational order will emerge, as will new relations between teachers and students, culminating in a new concept of curriculum. This new order will be more complex, pluralistic, and unpredictable. In such an order teachers and students will emerge as individuals interacting together in the mutual exploration of relevant issues. Traditional methods of evaluation and assessment will become obsolete, replaced by a focus on dialogue and the quality of inquiry. Finally, curriculum will not be viewed as a course to run, but as a passage of personal transformation (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 498).

This would be a very exciting change, but there are many structures that will have to change first. Our current system is plagued with outdated ideas of who can do what. For example, gender theorists Tyack and Hansot stated that schooling and the discourses on schooling have been informed historically by the meanings we have given to the division of human beings into male and female (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 359). Furthermore, McDonalds argued that the so-called hidden curriculum reproduces familial sex-role stereotyping at worst, and fails to challenge the gender status quo at best (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 387). If our curriculum is to ever address the actual educational and personal needs of our students, it must first begin treating every student as equally worthy of the same opportunities.

Huebner has stated that true educational activity is the human encounter among persons (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 418). If this is true, educators must learn that true instruction is more than the content areas of reading and math. While these areas are important, it is equally important to train students how to think and how to feel. Without the proper intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, even the most educated student will be hard pressed to use their content knowledge in any way that betters their fellow man.

**Teaching and Learning**

As I stated earlier, teaching is a state of being. This state of being is based on each teacher’s self-image and how they perceive that they themselves can impact the world around them. Taubman felt that the identity of a teacher is initially formed in the gaze of someone else, and so informed by what being a teacher meant consciously and unconsciously to the person in whose gaze one becomes a teacher (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 478). So, according to this theory, not even our identities as teachers are completely self-made, as they are many times representative of the influences which helped to shape our perspectives. According to phenomenological theorist Huebner, the educator must free himself from these self-confining schemas, in the order that he may listen anew to the world pounding against his intellectual barriers (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 419). Likewise, Pinar believed that one should teach as a mode of relation to oneself, to others, to subject matter (2008).

Gender theorists take this a step further by stating that what it means to teach and learn is related to what it means to be male or female and to our experience of reproduction and nurturance, domesticity, sexuality, nature, knowledge, and politics (as cited in Pinar, 2008, p. 403). Who we are as teachers, is who we are as people. The part of us that acts as “teacher” has been formed by not only our own experiences in education, but by all our personal experiences throughout our lifetime. These perceptions that we form as a result of our experiences cannot be separated from our roles as educators, nor should they. They are the thread by which we are tied to the material world. And, knowing this, educators should be aware of how important student perceptions of their experiences are to the development of their authentic selves and treat their formative years in school as precious and delicate.

**Conclusion (Reflection)**

At its center, this theory of curriculum is a focus on content, development of the authentic self and an attention to one’s responsibility to the larger society. It is different from the original theory from which it is based because it welcomes the influence of subsequent theories. The result is a focus on the three areas of education which most agree to be essential and no limitations as to how translate that goal into practice.

My ability to develop my own curriculum theory is a direct result of the work I have completed in this class. Previously, I knew nothing of the different perspectives which I’ve mentioned in this paper. As a public school educator, I have always thought of curriculum as the list of skills and points of information that one is responsible for teaching. In a way, that’s true. But curriculum theory is much different. It’s not the “what,” but the “why” and the “how” of instruction. More than anything else, this class has caused me to question why it is that we do what we do. The answer, of course, is that we do it for many different reasons based on who we are, which is in turn based on our perceptions of the world around us which we have developed as a result of our personal experiences.

That is sure a mouthful, but it sums up my interpretation of the topic quite nicely. As educators, some of us have political motivations. Some others have motivations based on gender and equality issues. Others still, are motivated by the belief that if we could all just embrace our authentic selves the world would be a much nicer place to live. In truth, most educators are motivated by a mix of these beliefs, plus a few extra. Very few of us fit neatly into any one of the perspectives I’ve studied this semester. No one idea is likely to cover every base or prepare for every contingency. That is why I have decided to employ each of these theories in my own work as an educator. With this wide range of ideas and strategies floating around in my head, I should be ready for anything that comes my way.

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