BOOK REVIEW

Understanding Curriculum: An Introduction to the Study of Historical and Contemporary Curriculum Discourses

W. F. Pinar, W. M. Reynolds, P. Slattery, & P. M. Taubman. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2000

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When it comes to educational tomes, it would be hard not to recommend *Understanding Curriculum* (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2000). The book offers a thorough overview of the last 150 years of curriculum thought and is organized in such a way that, although lengthy (nearly 1000 pages), it is palatable to both the generalist and the specialist. I would recommend this text unhesitatingly as a breakthrough work of scholarship and as an invaluable guide through what can seem to the weary traveler a bewildering curriculum landscape.

Understanding Curriculum (Pinar, et al., 2000) provides a sense of the sheer diversity of the curriculum field and the challenge this diversity poses for democratic community building, although one has to read between its many lines to infer this democratic spirit. In the first place, the text is comprehensive in scope, dealing with over a century's worth of curriculum development and understanding. Indeed, the text is broadly divided into two parts—curriculum “development” and curriculum “understanding.” For it is not just a survey of curriculum thought, but also an attempt to define in a rigorous way the disciplinary parameters of curriculum study. The authors do this by showing the diversity of the educational conversation carried on over the past century.

In turn, this diversity is treated as an essential feature of curriculum as a discipline. The book, as well as being an invaluable historical survey, is also self-reflexive—labouring consistently to formulate and clarify the internal rationale of the discipline it is surveying. I found the text noble for this reason, but not without its tensions.

One of the most prominent tensions in the text arises from the attempt to reconcile the autonomy of curriculum study as a discipline with many often competing and acrimonious voices. Amidst all the diversity of voices that makes curriculum study so adventurous and energizing, the reader seeks some deeper meaning, a nobler ideal that is weighty enough to be commonly striven for.

My own bias, if it can be called that, is unabashedly Deweyan, and to this extent I am always on the lookout for how and to what degree texts like this one foster and attempt to enliven democratic practices. Sadly, in *Understanding Curriculum*, democratic practice is conspicuously absent as a working ideal. I say as a working ideal, because although democracy is mentioned frequently, it is always as part of the survey aspect of the book. It is presented as a theme within the many competing academic and cultural discourses, but not as an informing ideal for the whole book. I think it is there implicitly, but it is as if the authors are hesitant to express it openly lest their book appear to hold a cultural preference for a democracy narrative which might appear incompatible with a post-modernist agenda.

In a way, then, the book succumbs to an internal tension between taking diversity and plurality as its motivating energy and attempting to avoid an overly fragmented discourse that would make it extremely difficult to define curriculum study as an autonomous discipline. This tension is manifest in the final pages of the book's last chapter, "A Postscript for the Next Generation." Here, where the authors speak as and for themselves, where they sum up what they and their book have attempted to show, the word "democracy" is mentioned explicitly only twice, and one of these is in a negative light. The negative reference shows the tension that exists between "defining with" and "defining against."

The reference comes in a commentary on the work of Henry Giroux. Here, the authors highlight what they view as an imminent conceptual shift in curriculum theorizing. The parent theoretical disciplines from which contemporary curriculum theory descends (social theory, phenomenology, feminist theory, race theory, etc.) and from which it derives its own telic impulse, are now exhibiting highly porous boundaries that allow curriculum theory to at once move away from its parent disciplines and gain its own sophisticated conceptual voice expressed in a more nuanced interdisciplinary conversation. This healthy hybridization they find potentially expressed in Giroux's notion of "bordercrossings."

Giroux's notion of bordercrossings (1992a) might apply here, in one sense, that is, of moving easily across borders that before seemed to employ customs agents. For true hybridization to occur, however, the identity of the traveler must fuse with those with whom he or she travels and visits. (Pinar, et al., 2000, p. 853)

I quite like the subtle image of the identity of the traveler fusing with those he or she visits. But note how the authors define such identification negatively as they go on to point out that Giroux's notion of "bordercrossings" is only half-hearted, because he has not sufficiently moved away from what are now, apparently, the antiquated themes and language of "critical pedagogy."

[Giroux] can be said to have moved from a nearly exclusive political emphasis to concerns for curriculum as racial and gendered text, but these later aspects seem to be, in the context of his opus, "add-ons." *That is, the basic theses do not seem to have changed much from the "language of possibility," struggling for a more democratic public sphere, resistance to the status quo, and so on.* Giroux seems to have "added on" concerns for race, gender, and postmodernism in his most recent writing, leaving intact his core theme of "critical pedagogy." (Pinar, et al., 2000, p. 854 [italics mine])

In this comment on the recent work of Giroux, the authors imply that the political militancy associated with critical theory was a necessary "violent" phase in the paradigm shift from "development" to "understanding" in curriculum thought, a phase which has now passed. Quite apart from the validity of their comment, this reader is dumbfounded by the authors' language: If the identity of the traveler, that is, the next generation of scholars, is to fuse somehow with these multiple postmodern "others," then what in the world will this identity look like when 'the language of possibility,' 'struggling for a more democratic public sphere,' and 'resistance to the status quo' are deemed antiquated notions? What am I missing here? Are we to assume that the language of possibility has been realized, that a democratic public sphere has been achieved, and that the status quo has been overcome? If we are to assume this, then can we abide by such a comfortable assumption? Perhaps this is not what the authors are implying. My sense is that in attempting to situate curriculum study within its own autonomous theoretical matrix, the authors have inadvertently employed a reckless choice of words, which is expressive of the tension within curriculum theorizing between what I am calling "defining with" and "defining against." Curriculum theory's own crisis of identity spills out in the above-cited passage as the authors equate democracy with a brand of institutional politics and fail to offer a broader understanding of what contemporary democratic struggle might look like. This is representative of the kind of postmodern fumbling that wishes to latch onto everything, but cannot find a way of adopting any explicitly informing ideals that would provide some

integrating moral glue. If democratic struggle is not a vital component of identifying with others in a more deeply meaningful way, then what is? What finally are the stakes of this burgeoning educational conversation?

If democratic practice is a worthy ideal, then this ideal has not been conceptually fleshed out enough in the postmodern landscape. It is as if it is too much a part of the business of modernity to take up in a serious and rigorous way. However, there is ample business of the modern that is far from being settled. To take up Dewey's project, for example, in a more comprehensive way than has been done amongst curriculum thinkers, *is* to take up this unsettled business. The rush of many postmodernists has prematurely deemed much already settled. The rest is just the job of sophisticated conceptual clarification. But does not such conceptual sleight-of-hand, popular amongst many postmodern thinkers, also run the danger of potentially re-silencing many voices? In attempting to gain an identity, is not much curriculum theory re-colonizing a vast terrain, only this time with a kinder and gentler discourse? What I sense is a sliding away from "defining with" to "defining against." The balance is shifting dangerously, and there appears to be a diminishing of the merits of real democratic struggle in the concrete world. And so I ask, "So what?" What ideals will bind the terms, sophisticated in understanding as they might become, of the multi-vocal conversation that will allow curriculum thinking to identify itself? What shall it talk to itself about, and who will struggle, and who will feel it not as a struggle? Is the real world awaiting conceptual reconstruction or concrete action?