

*Spinning Curriculum Designs at a
Crossroads: Big Ideas, Conversations,
and Reconciliation*

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Curriculum and Instruction refers to one of the largest and most diverse set of activities within the field of education.

(Connelly, & Fang, & Phillion, 2007, p. ix)

In this context, I consider Schwab's major contribution to be his insistence that we shift our orientation to the practical. I concur with him that the practical day-to-day world of curriculum development merits intensive attention. I feel, however, that merely moving to the practical is not sufficiently fundamental.

(Aoki, 1977, p. 51)

The cultivation of the very “idea” of our diverse intellectual landscape requires “not only a lateral shift to the practical but also a vertical shift that leads us to a deeper understanding of the program developers’ theoretic stance” (Aoki, 1977, p. 51). In generous, and yet different ways, Ingrid Johnston, Madeleine Grumet, Peter Hlebowitsh, and William F. Pinar have offered their responses to the very “idea” of provoking Canadian curriculum studies as a counterpointed conversation. In this light, we might first turn our attention to Peter Hlebowitsh’s general critique of understanding and situating the field of the Canadian curriculum studies as an overly complicated, grandiose, ideological conversation that fails to translate big language, or even “big ideas,” into practical realities.

His astute, eloquent, and thought-provoking soliloquy seemed, at least to me, more triangulated toward certain individuals within the American field of curriculum studies (see Hlebowitsh, 1999, 2005a, 2005b; Pinar, 1999; Westbury, 2005; Wright, 2005). Provocations for us to remember the “practical” comprise his past and present accounts of an American field of curriculum studies. In 1999, when Cynthia Chambers evocatively provoked Canadian curriculum scholars to create tools of our own in this place and at that time, Hlebowitsh (1999) reminded American scholars about the burdens (as opposed to breakthroughs) they faced then as new curricularists. “I tried to explain,” he tells us, “what I believe it means to be of the field, as it has taken shape historically” (p. 369). He continues, “by confronting the issues and showing that the history of the field has been somehow misdirected or

that the central tenets of the field, which I assert are centred around the issues of school practice and school design, are no longer viable” (p. 369). Hlebowitsh (1999) goes on to state, “you have probably read how Pinar responded to my original piece. He ignored it... The field, as a result has never really experienced any kind of open discussion about the self-proclaimed reconceptualization” (pp. 369–370). To that end, he asks us not to forget “traditional” and “practical” concepts that live amongst and through “curriculum” and “instruction.” In this regard, curriculum scholars who are located within the United States, Canada, and elsewhere should consider the ground breaking work put forth in Connelly, Fang, and Phillion’s (2008) edited handbook on curriculum and instruction. This key text includes the work of two Canadian consulting authors (Roger Slee and Jim Cummins) as well as three contributing authors (Michael Fullan, Ben Levin, and Xu Shijing). In their own right, each has made significant contributions to educational research and policies across Canada. At the crossroads of his triangulated critique, we are asked to encounter, study, and challenge the canonical, disciplinary, differing historical readings of the American field in terms of the real and/or imagined burdens created by certain curriculum forefathers.

Here, we might take note of the brilliant work of Jennifer Gilbert at York University. In *Reading Histories*, Gilbert (2010) asks us to reconsider the theoretical groundings that inform each of our theories for “reading” histories, for what constitutes the worldliness of curriculum and instruction as we face the pressing market demands of globalization. “If

education and educational theory have a primal scene," as she tells us, "it may be the act of learning to read" (Gilbert, 2010, p. 67). Moreover, learning to read, she continues, is more than acquiring skills or mastering techniques. Instead, reading evokes our intimate connections to the "conflicts and pleasures that animate family life," where the psychic dynamics of that life "insinuate themselves into the school" (p. 67). And such conflicts, she suggests, do not ruin our capacity of thinking things through. Rather historical and interpretive conflicts are necessary to the formation of our differing subjectivities as curriculum scholars working with one of the largest and most diverse set of researched activities within the field of education. How might we then, foster theories for reading that seek to foster, as Gilbert (2010) proposes, a psychical space to repeat and perhaps work through the conflicts that come from being a next generation of teachers, curriculum scholars, university educators, and educational researchers in the face, among other things, the globalization of standardization?

Regardless of the kinds of readings we perform, as William F. Pinar points out in his response, a more detailed account of our contributions that moves beyond a footnote is needed. However like Madeleine Grumet, I was more interested in the intellectual and imaginative resources that colleagues bring to the very idea of "curriculum," rather than repeating the ongoing historical and institutional debates taken up by foxes and hedgehogs (see Hlebowitsh, 2010a, 2010b; Malewski, 2010). And as Grumet keenly points out, the discursive and interpretive communities who attend our annual Canadian Association of

Curriculum Studies conference and who contribute to this journal are less splintered by the “low” and “high-minded” epistemological, identity, and institutional politics that have historically fragmented the field in the United States. From my recent visits to conferences in the United States, I sense that such political fragmentation is not as prevalent among the next generation of curriculum scholars. But, such sensibilities could be wrong. In Canada, the *Canadian Association of Curriculum Studies* and the *Canadian Society for the Study of Education* are currently attempting to reconcile their—cultural, epistemological, linguistic, political—relations with Francophone, First Nation, Métis, Inuit, non-status, and other marginalized colleagues (which includes school administrators, teachers, and students) working at different institutions and with different local communities across Canada.¹

Several scholars have been and are committed toward taking up the curriculum-as-planned, -implemented, and lived within their inter/trans/disciplinary work with government policy makers, school administrators, and teachers. As William F. Pinar points out Ted T. Aoki (1980/2005, 1977, 1983, 1996/2005) and Cynthia Chambers (2004, 2008) corpus of work is a testament to that commitment. And we recognized such kinds of commitments through the Ted T. Aoki *Lifetime Achievement Award* and the *Cynthia Chambers Master’s Thesis Award*. At our annual meeting this past year, Amy Boudreau (2013) a compassionate teacher who studied at Mount Saint Vincent University was honoured with the Chambers master’s thesis award. Her title is *Relational Theory and Critical Race Theory as Social Practice in School: The Restorative Approach*. Reviewers

praised her thesis in the following ways:

Her work definitely demonstrates a sophisticated engagement with both theoretical and practical considerations (that is, informed by matters of theory and method rather than driven by or simply applying them). She is a practicing teacher who is deeply invested in restorative justice practices and community development. In fact, she clearly addresses limitations, including her own “deep immersion” and worldviews, and she embraces them as well as other worldviews. She acknowledges how her work and growth have been informed by different theories and worldviews. (CACCS, 2014, p. 5)

Here Ingrid Johnston (2014) reminds us, that the “deep immersion” of others worldviews within the very “idea” of Canadian curriculum studies must be more than a compositional burden contained within the cultural, geographical, material, and psychic borders of our past, present, and future curriculum designs. Like Aoki before her, she calls for us to take a reflective stance that recursively questions the “assumptions that are frequently taken for granted in dealing with the practical problems” that might haunt our professional collaborative curriculum inquiries (p. 51). Riffing from, and on Gould’s counterpoint documentaries, Johnston asks us to pay more attention to certain human voices, to the tragic historical sounds of 329 passengers, which have been edited out of the scenes, spaces, and dialogues that inhabit our present curriculum

designs as a restorative justice approach. “In such a reflective activity, we can see,” as Aoki (1977) suggested four decades ago, “the possibility of the curriculum builder becoming conscious of the perspective which he himself takes for granted as he acts, and also of how his perspective gives shape to the program he designs for his students” (p. 51). As a practicing teacher, a curriculum builder, Amy draws upon a case study methodology and talking circles with staff and students at her school to facilitate storytelling sessions. In turn, the talking circles provide “valuable insights and information” for her research, as well as “consciousness-raising and restorative experiences” for the teaching staff, students, and her (p. 45–46). Drawing on talking circles, relational theory, critical race theory, and a restorative justice praxis, Amy, a practicing teacher, is able to make sense of the noisy happenings that spontaneously take place in the middle of classroom life. She shares stories of her lived experiences with curriculum as an event, a complicated conversation, which asks us to *listen* to the worldliness of others that are not already part of our social imaginary.

Drawing on the work of Charles Taylor, “a social imaginary is,” as Rizvi and Lingard (2010) describe, “a way of thinking shared in a society by ordinary people, the common understandings that make everyday practices possible, giving them sense and legitimacy” (p. 34). Such common countenance can also create blinders for reading past academic articulations and compositions of one’s life history in relation to their professional work as a teacher, university educator, curriculum scholar, and educational researcher. In Canada, as Hlebowitsh reminds us, we

have a rich history studying the life histories of teachers. Our capacity to engage life-writing research rests on the shoulders of innovative scholars such as but not limited to Carl Leggo, Cynthia Chambers, Dwayne Donald, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Jean Clandinin, Michael Connelly, and Teresa Strong-Wilson. Moreover “in narrative inquiry,” as Connelly and Clandinin maintain (1990), “it is important that the researcher listen first to the practitioner's story, and that it is the practitioner who first tells his or her story” (p. 4). Such kinds of listening provides, as Britzman (2003) notes, a curricular process that situates the self in history whereby each of our individual experiences becomes meaningful in terms of their relationships and intersections—both given and possible—to our personal and professional biographies and the different institutional structures that shape them like curriculum policies, public schooling, and teacher education. And “theorizing about such connections,” as Britzman writes, affords those learning to become teachers, and those already teaching, “a double insight into the meanings of their relationships to other individuals, institutions, cultural values, and political events, and into how these relationships interpellate the individual's identity, values, and ideological orientations” (p. 232). As I read and listen to my colleagues' conversations in journals like *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Curriculum Studies*, or *JCACS*, I remain fascinated by the kinds of insight and hindsight we might provoke through studying our life histories as eventful happenings inside and outside the cacophony of the classroom.

As a field, how might we take seriously Hlebowitsh and Grummet's concerns about big business, psychometricians, school entrepreneurs and legislators having more to say on matters of the "curriculum" than curriculum scholars? Here in Canada, David G. Smith (2003, 2011, 2014) is an ardent critic of the neoliberal Market Logic that currently informs the ideological underpinnings of a backward curriculum design, with its profiteering as the end in mind. In many ways, several provincial governments across Canada utilize a core curriculum and standardized testing that often "contains" our capacity to imagine the potential multiple readings of Canadian histories. And now when we plug into social media like Facebook or Google it utilizes different logarithms to calculate our historical search patterns and then filters our future navigations, local, national, and international re-searches, on and across the Internet, while targeting us with personalized advertisements. In this future virtual reality, as Hlebowitsh warns, in the absence of "input" from curriculum scholars, the CompPsy complex has become the next promised educational salvation for humanity.

In the *Future of Curriculum*, Ben Williamson (2013) explains,

The CompPsy complex is an emerging scientific field and style of thought, then, which melds understandings of the technical and immediate social contexts of learning with the design of effective interactive technologies, informed by computational thinking, and the psychological management of student emotions it embodies certain values, concerns, and politics, and through the design of

specific curricular programs and technical systems it catalyzes certain actions and experiences. (p. 81)

Within the discursive regime of “CompPsy,” authority is given, as Williamson optimistically point out, “to transdisciplinary knowledge, to innovation, and to creativity in addition to self-improvement, well-being, and personal competence” toward producing subjectivities that are composed of individual entrepreneurship, ethical-economical and psychological quality (p. 82). And yet, the CompPsy complex, like that of the nation-state, or multinational corporations, still “seeks to act upon and make up persons to be self-managing [or self-consuming] in order to benefit an economy that requires expertise across informational and technical discipline” (ibid.). Within this complex there has been a “thorough hybridization” of our conceptualizations of “leisure time” as a “playground” and our “work” within “the factory” in relation to “Internet culture,” and what Williamson calls, “the interactive economy” (p. 51–52). This 21st century merging “of play and work has resulted in ‘playbor,’ a neologism that accurately captures the ways in which the affective elements of play have now been merged into,” what he calls “the value-making tasks of the expert learners” now positioned as “creative playborers whose affectiveness, well-being, and creativity are understood to be essential prerequisites for economic reinvigoration” (p. 52). The CompPsy complex has afforded us an opportunity, Williamson argues, to switch from hard to soft governance in turn permitting a greater number of players to participate in curriculum design within public schooling. The future of curriculum design he suggests will

embody cool “soulful capitalism,” if there is such a thing, and the “affective playbor of the creative and digital industries,” where “the future of the economy is positioned as being dependent upon creativity and innovation that in turn are to be promoted and encouraged through new and innovative forms of schooling” (p. 63). And yet, do we want to hand over our creative souls to the curriculum designs of a backward market economy? In many ways these are the kinds of “big ideas” put forth in the Ontario government curriculum policy documents.

The newly revised Ontario Social Studies curriculum invites teachers and students to “learn about what it means to be a responsible, active citizen in the community of the classroom and the diverse communities to which they belong within and outside the school” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 9). Specifically, this curriculum policy document asks future Ontario citizens to:

- 1) Work for the common good in local, national, and global communities.
- 2) Foster a sense of personal identity as a member of various communities.
- 3) Understand power and systems within societies.
- 4) Develop character traits, values, and habits of mind. (p. 10)

The scope and sequencing of this curriculum is structured by the principles of backward design and specific disciplinary thinking concepts across the different subject areas (*spatial significance* in geography, *historical significance* in history, and *cause and consequence* in social studies).

We can trace its conceptual framework through the work of Wiggins and McTighe to Ralph Tyler's (1949) four basic principles:

1. What purposes should the school seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
3. How can these learning experiences be effectively organized?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained? (p. 1)

Since its publication, and as Dillon (2009) reminds us, curriculum professors, graduate students, directors, researchers, or theorists have yet to publish an improved scheme of questions for policy makers to consider within their curriculum designs. This "fact is not," he stresses, "cited in praise of Tyler" (p. 352). Rather it provokes us to wonder once again about "the state of the curriculum field" (ibid.). Several Canadian curriculum scholars like Johnston have sought to critically question the kinds "essential" questions that frame the "big ideas" put forth in our past, present, and future curriculum designs (see also Battiste, 2013; Den Heyer & Abbott, 2011; Dion & Dion, 2004; Donald, 2004, 2009a, 2009b; Tupper & Cappello, 2008). "The big ideas reflect," as the Ontario Ministry of Education (2013) tell us, "the enduring understandings that students retain from their learning, transfer to other subjects, and draw upon throughout their lives" (p. 8). For example by the end of Grade 7 history, students are expected to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding, application, historical thinking, and communication

skills in relation to the following big ideas:

1. Understanding the experiences of and challenges facing people in the past helps put our experiences and challenges into context.
2. Different groups responded in different ways to the shift in power in Canada from France to Britain.
3. The significance of historical events is determined partly by their short- and long-term impact.
4. Throughout Canadian history, people have struggled to meet challenges and to improve their lives.
5. The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of major conflict and change in Canada.
6. Social and political conflicts and changes in the first half of the nineteenth century have had a lasting impact on Canada. (p. 136–137).

Teachers are asked to take up these very “big ideas” of what it means historically to be a Canadian citizen within their classroom conversations. And such historical conversations remain complicated. Studying the conversations that have and are taking place within the field of Canadian curriculum studies enable us in part to understand how these “big ideas” are taken up (or not) amongst the noisy fray of grimaces, winks, and refusals of teachers and students. Perhaps we might heed Roger Simon’s (2013) body of work to reconsider how we are reading and listening to such past, present, and future refusals “as a form of worrying-in-public” (p. 129). And heeding Johnston’s

forewarning, and drawing on the peacebuilding work of scholars like Jennifer Tupper (2012, 2014), we might then sit in talking circles with curriculum policy makers, teachers, and students to provoke and disrupt some of the colonial logics that continue to underpin these “big ideas” as a possibility of reconciling past, present, and future difficult dialogues. Here in Canada we can continue to strive as Haig-Brown has called for, and take Indigenous thought seriously. And ask instead, how have different groups, like curriculum scholars, responded in different ways to the shifts in power, and the redistributions of territories, and the exappropriation of natural resources from First Nations to France, and from France to Britain? These kinds of “big ideas,” as Battiste (2013) stresses, have real practical constitutional implications for reconciling our relations as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal treaty peoples. They demand different kinds of curriculum questions? They call for different kinds of curriculum inquiries. The current composition of the Ontario curriculum as one example, and our future complicated conversations within the field and in our work, need more counterpointed interruptions within their melodies so that we might “cultivate a new kind of curricular imagination that not only honours the multitude of ways the Canadian landscape shapes how Canadians “see” things, but, more importantly, that explores how such shaping itself is an active process that cannot be simply described through the Eurocentric instrumentalities of previous generations” (Chambers, 1999, p. 143). Imago. Imago. Imago...a more hopeful praxis of these kinds of curriculum inquiries.

Endnotes

¹ The Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa won the bid to host the 5th Triennial Conference for the *International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies* (IAACS) which will take place from May 26-29th, 2015. This four-day educational conference event is a key event that will bring together international voices and knowledges in the curriculum studies field. As such, this conference is a valuable opportunity for national and international scholars to present, share, and mobilize their research with each other and various local educational stakeholders (Ontario Ministry of Education members, school board superintendents, and teachers) as well as emerging scholars in curriculum studies and education more largely. The first iteration of this conference began 15 years ago at Louisiana State University. At that time, a community of curriculum scholars gathered to “talk about issues in curriculum, hearing what people do, how they do it, how they think about things” with the hope that we could learn from each other (Trueit, 2003, p. x). Like Aoki (2000) suggested then, the IAACS and its associated conference provided a potential space to “generate newness and hope” (p. 457). Even as we face what some might call a world in political, environmental, economic, existential, and so on crisis, the “radical” concept of hope continues to sustain our triennial gathering. As part of the next conference theme, we ask presenters to consider what are the local, national, and international tasks of curriculum scholars that *defy conventions* while responding to such times of real and/or imagined global crises? Moreover, the conference theme asks participants to reconsider what are curriculum scholars’ tasks for the 21st century in the face of a globalized knowledge economy. In turn, the conference thematic structure corresponds with the University of Ottawa’s “Destination 2020” strategic goals (defy the conventional) and the Faculty of Education’s emphasis on global education (Developing A Global Perspective Program). This international conference reflects the increasing push for us to share our research across borders while providing a spotlight for Canadian scholarship. By bringing together international scholars, the conference will help to foster, exchange, and generate new ideas about what it means to be a cosmopolitan citizen, administrator, curriculum policy maker, researcher, teacher educator, teacher, and student.

Furthermore, these are exciting times for Ministries of Education, universities, and curriculum scholars in Canada. In Ontario, for example, major teacher education and curriculum implementation reforms will be

taking place. On the national stage, the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE) recently published their *Accord on the Internationalization of Education* at our annual Canadian Society for the Study of Education conference this past May of 2014. One of the key areas of practices put forth in the *Accord* is to understand the internationalization of Canadian curriculum. Consequently, the IAACS conference will provide curriculum scholars, graduate students and other stakeholders a unique opportunity to engage and work with several prominent international and national curriculum scholars that seek to advance knowledge and inform practice across different educational settings. As an international conference, the conference program will work to mobilize and share different kinds of curriculum scholarship. For the conference theme, and with such thought-provoking excitement in mind, we might ask what are the local, national, and international tasks of curriculum scholars that *defy conventions* while responding to such times of real and/or imagined crisis? How ought we respond to, and/or question, this question as an ethical engagement with what Adrienne Rich (2001) has called elsewhere the *arts of the impossible*?

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