

*A Response to “Provoking the very
‘Idea’ of Canadian Curriculum Studies
as a Counterpointed Composition”*

WILLIAM F. PINAR

University of British Columbia

In a period where skills threaten to replace knowledge in education now construed to be solely in service to the economy,¹ it is, it seems to me, our professional obligation to affirm erudition and expertise. In Canada the curriculum question – what knowledge is of most worth? – can be aggravated by the country’s allergy to any identity that seems stodgy, e.g. reminiscent of especially its Anglophone past.² Attitude adjustment sometimes substitutes for working through the trauma of history.³

To contravene these “present circumstances” we can affirm those intellectual histories knowledge of which is prerequisite to disciplinary expertise. Nicholas Ng-A-Fook acknowledges key concepts, past and present. Some may take issue with emphases and sequences, but who

could contest that this is a sophisticated summary statement of contemporary curriculum studies in Canada?

It is also a palimpsest, inviting scholarly genealogy and, in introductory courses, pedagogical explanation. Each of us would study and teach in distinctive ways. I emphasize canonical scholarship that precedes and informs the present Ng-A-Fook summarizes so succinctly. I might start with my own Group of Three⁴: George Tomkins, Ted Aoki, and Cynthia Chambers. Tomkins provides a history from which one can work through the past. While reissued, the book is dated – everyone's work is of course – and it requires supplementation⁵ and amplification.⁶ That is my point.

In his cosmopolitanism, his devotion to teaching and teachers, Aoki's work reverberates loudly today.⁷ It also provides a focused but panoramic portrait of the intellectual histories – especially those associated with phenomenology and post-structuralism – that inform much of the present intellectual scene. Cynthia Chambers configures the field through her comprehensive survey of it,⁸ emphasizing indigenous knowledge.⁹ In her various essays are expressed many of the elements Ng-A-Fook identifies. This multicultural, international, post-colonial field is reflected in much of the work Ng-A-Fook references; it is also reflected in what could qualify as a fourth volume¹⁰ on the list I've started here.

The Group of Three could be linked – perhaps on the CACS webpage – with scholarship that works from and apart from these sources, providing a set of “crossroads” – intersections between intellectual

histories and contemporary scholarship - that conveys bibliographically the “complex coherence” of the “very idea” of curriculum studies in Canada.

Endnotes

¹ See Williamson 2013 for a succinct if chilling statement of this future of curriculum. Thanks to Nicholas Ng-A-Fook for bringing the book to my attention.

² Any identity at all seems disquieting, except one structured by negation, as I’ve noted (Pinar, 2011). Not only in the Sumara-Davis-Laidlaw essay is there such certainty about uncertainty, such a conspicuous absence of ambivalence over ambivalence.

³ There is work on Islamophobia, for instance, that ignores the centuries-long tensions among Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Changing attitudes is indeed preferable to “phobia” but is it not condemned to superficiality if uninformed by historical and cultural knowledge? What is at stake subjectively as well as historically in “working through” the past is articulated in the important work of Deborah Britzman, Roger Simon, and Teresa Strong-Wilson.

⁴ I trust this ironic invocation of the Group of Seven brings amusement, momentarily at least. In its reminder that art and land are often intertwined in Canada – and in Canada’s curriculum studies (see Irwin and de Cosson 2004/2013; Springgay et al., 2008) – its playfulness has its earnest point as well.

⁵ Including attention to residential schools, the new immigrants’ experience, and that of LGBT communities, as well as ongoing attention to race, class and gender across Canada.

⁶ Christou's (2012) invaluable study of Ontario provides such a photographic blow-up of American progressivism in Canada. While focused on history education rather than the historicity of the curriculum overall, Clark's (2011) collection is important to curriculum studies as well.

⁷ See Hurren and Hasebe-Ludt (2013), for instance.

⁸ See, for instance, Chambers (2003).

⁹ See, for instance, Chambers (2004, 2008).

¹⁰ See Ng-A-Fook and Rottman (2012). Other collections testify to the complexity of the contemporary field: see, for instance, Stanley and Young (2011). I realize Chambers' work is yet to be collected in one volume, although that is not due to lack of trying. I trust others will succeed where I have failed.

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