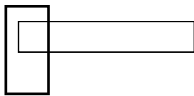

Deepening Democratic Curriculum Work

by James G. Henderson

The longstanding argument between advocates of curriculum development and critical curriculum studies is examined from the perspective of democratic inquiry artistry. From this alternative vantage point, both advocacies possess certain strengths and limitations. A map of democratic inquiry artistry has been created to capitalize on the strengths of each position and to deepen democratic curriculum work. This map—an eclectic adaptation of seven ancient forms of inquiry—is designed to help educators negotiate the "terrain" of democratic wisdom, which is understood as a demanding professional challenge incorporating disciplined inquiry, democratic hermeneutics and human artistry. The daily enactment of democratic inquiry artistry can assist educational researchers by informing ethical-political decisions and by advancing the integration of the science and art of education.

Over 2 years ago in this journal, Wraga (1999) and Pinar (1999a) engaged in a curriculum scholar interchange from two contrasting perspectives that did little or nothing to resolve their differences. Wraga's lengthy critique of the "reconceptualist" phase of curriculum studies and Pinar's terse response to this criticism exemplify the type of ideological conflict that has bedeviled the field of American curriculum studies since its formal inception approximately eighty-three years ago (Kliebard, 1986).[1] I think there is a constructive way to address the differences between Wraga and Pinar that has important implications for future curriculum work and educational research. I begin with a recapitulation of Wraga's critique and Pinar's response and then propose an alternative perspective for understanding both the strengths and limitations of their respective arguments. In effect, I will present the broad parameters of a way to deepen democratic curriculum work. I will then conclude by briefly introducing two important implications for educational research.

Wraga's and Pinar's Curriculum Perspectives

Wraga (1999) argues that, historically, curriculum scholars have been interested in curriculum development due to their desire to improve "the quality of education in school settings" (p. 5). Working from this perspective, he is bothered by Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman's (1995) opening position in their lengthy synoptic text on contemporary curriculum studies:

> We aspire to put an end to the exclusionary politics of traditional curriculum textbooks which repeat the litany, now without scholarly foundation, of curriculum objectives, design, implementation, and evaluation. These are no longer the major concepts of the day. True, they do retain a certain, very much reduced, institutional currency—that is, in the schools. . . . The main concepts today are quite different from those which grew out of an era in which school buildings and populations were growing exponentially, and when keeping the curriculum ordered and organized were the main motives of professional activity. *That was a time of curriculum development.* Curriculum Development: Born: 1918. Died: 1969. (p. 6, emphasis in original)

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Beginning with this "death" metaphor, Pinar et al. (1995) go on to present a sophisticated multitextual understanding of curriculum work: "Curriculum is intensely historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological, and international. . . . Curriculum is a extraordinarily complicated conversation" (pp. 847–848).

It is precisely this "conversational" metaphor that bothers Wraga. From a Deweyan pragmatic standpoint, he wonders how this multidimensional understanding of curriculum dialogue plays out in practice: "Whether Dewey's imperative for practical application can be reconciled with the reconceptualized notion of curriculum theory distanced from curriculum practice remains to be seen" (p. 9). After reviewing what he considers to be the "facts" of reconceptualized practice, he concludes that "critical" curriculum studies, as represented by Pinar et al. (1995) and other leading curriculum theory scholars, "has advanced curriculum practice very little" (Wraga, 1999, p. 11). In effect, Wraga examines contemporary critical work in curriculum through the lens of curriculum development and finds this work wanting.

Pinar (1999a) responds to Wraga's critique with a brief excerpt adapted from his Foreword in an edited text (Pinar, 1999b). He argues that there is, currently, a "curriculum gridlock" in American education due to a complex set of political and cultural forces. This problem is not the fault of curriculum professors, whose work has been devalued by policy makers over the past thirty years. He thinks there are, at least, two unhelpful responses to this circumstance. The first response, which he thinks is well represented by Wraga's (1999) critique, would be to try to go back to the earlier days when curriculum professors attempted to "direct practice" through their theorizing, whereas the second response would be to engage in a kind of narrative "witnessing" of practitioner routines. Pinar (1999a) feels that both responses miss the important challenge of democratizing education through a theory-practice dialogue involving all curriculum stakeholders:

> Democratization as we understand [it] today is a gendered as well as political and pedagogical aspiration. When we speak of the relation of theory to practice, let us imagine a day when traditional and unjust divisions of labor are memories only, when men regard women not as practice to be guided . . . but as equal and respected

colleagues in that complicated conversation with our children that is the curriculum." (p. 15)

An Alternative Curriculum Perspective

Interestingly, both Wraga and Pinar draw on democratic principles to make their respective points. I will do the same, but from a different curricular angle. My starting point is Dewey's (1939/1989) insight that democracy is a *moral way of living*: "We have advanced far enough to say that democracy is a way of life. We have yet to realize that it is a way of personal life and one which provides a moral standard for personal conduct" (p. 101). Though I could cite the works of a number of philosophers who interpret democracy through a moral lens (e.g., Greene, 1988; Garrison, 1997), I will, instead, move the argument forward into new curriculum territory. Imagine a group of educators treating the "morality" of democratic living as a *wisdom challenge*. They see their work as the daily discipline of attempting to practice "democratically wise" professional judgments.[2]

These educators' practices are guided by three principles associated with humanity's diverse wisdom traditions: (1) they work in the inquiry spirit of "not knowing," (2) they approach their work as a democratic "calling," and (3) they embrace the "artistry" of their challenge. Let me briefly explain each principle. Davidson (1998) writes that

> Wisdom is knowing how little you know. Ignorance is the beginning of wisdom, Socrates cautioned us. Zen practitioners call it "beginner's mind," which is truly open and fresh, willing to remain innocent and receptive to life, not attached to our knowledge. It is the willingness to be empty, and thus open to learning and growing. This is the source of creativity and innovation, the key to continuous improvement. (pp. 36–37)

Throughout his voluminous writings, Dewey's "continuing inquiry" message is quite clear: The "end in view" or goal of educational experiences is, simply, the deepening of pro-active experiencing (Dewey, 1938/1963). Stated another way, the problems of pragmatic inquiry are best resolved through a deepening pragmatic inquiry (Dewey 1927/1984).

Work that is embedded in a sense of democratic "calling" is hermeneutic in nature. Smith (1991) provides a concise explanation of hermeneutic practices: "The hermeneutic imagination constantly asks for what is at work in particular ways of speaking and acting in order to facilitate an ever-deepening appreciation of that wholeness and integrity of the world which must be present for thought and action to be possible at all" (p. 197). Hermeneutics can simply be explained as the challenge of acting out of a deep sense of integrity or conscience. Over the eons humanity has constructed, practiced, and nurtured many diverse wisdom traditions (Robinson, 1990). Hermeneutic wisdom has been an important part of this story, particularly in the ministry and legal professions and in the disciplines of philosophy, history, and literary studies. Hermeneutics is practiced at the deconstructed boundaries of the sacred and the profane, the enchanted and the mundane, the whole and the part. It is the "space" *between* the spirit and letter of some matter. As Gadamer (1975) argues, hermeneutics is practiced in the playful dialogical space between truth and method. When a specific theological, legal, philosophical, historical, or literary judgment is constructed through contemplating the "big picture" in the context of the specific facts of the matter, it is hermeneutic in nature.

Finally, the word, *artistry*, traces back to the old Latin term, *ars*. *Ars* means "putting things together; joining" (Ayto, 1990, p. 37). Artistry refers to the personal challenge of integrating diverse elements into a coherent whole. Artists are sensitive to Dewey's (1934/1958) point: "The enemies of the esthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure. Rigid abstinence, coerced submission, tightness on one side and dissipation, incoherence and aimless indulgence on the other, are deviations in opposite directions from the unity of . . . [art as] experience" (p. 40). Eisner (1994) carefully explores the implications of Dewey's conception of "art as experience" for curriculum and teaching practices:

> Teaching can be done as badly as anything else. It can be wooden, mechanical, mindless, and wholly unimaginative. But when it is sensitive, intelligent, and creative—those qualities that confer upon it the status of an art—it should, in my view, not be regarded, as it so often is by some, as an expression of unfathomable talent or luck but as an example of humans exercising the highest levels of their intelligence. (p. 156)

The challenge of engaging in "democratically wise" professional judgments takes place at the intersection of the domains of disciplined inquiry, democratic hermeneutic, and professional artistry. I have recently created an "inquiry artistry" map of this intersection (Henderson, 2001). In this text *democratic professional artistry through inquiry* is defined as learning to integrate seven ancient forms of inquiry into one's daily work.[3] These forms in English and ancient Greek are (1) craft inquiry or *techne*: improving one's work through cycles of problem-based study, application, observation, and reflection; (2) public moral inquiry or *theoria*: contemplating the values and virtues of democratic living; (3) multiperspective inquiry or *dia-logos*: exploring diversity and interdependence in democratic social relations; (4) deliberative inquiry or *phronesis*: the case-based consideration of problem definitions and solutions; (5) autobiographical inquiry or *poesis*: constructing a de-centered, service-oriented teaching self through attunement to the "call" of democratic life; (6) critical inquiry or *praxis*: questioning the relationship between knowledge, power and justice; and (7) collegial inquiry or *polis*: examining ways to construct localized ethical-political covenants.

Space does not allow for a more complete examination of this "inquiry artistry" map, which is, in effect, a particular application of *the practice of "democratically wise" professional judgments*. The viability of this way of deepening democratic curriculum work is clarified through a comparison to Wraga's and Pinar's curriculum arguments.

Comparative Analysis

Both Wraga and Pinar present important but limited curricular "truths." Wraga's point is that curriculum work is practical in nature. I agree. However, I want to know more about how he interprets "practice." If his interpretation is limited to Tyler's (1949) highly influential curriculum decision-making "rationale," which is a system-wide action inquiry cycle linking educational purposes,

learning experiences, instructional organization and learning evaluation, there are at least two problems. What ensures that this action inquiry approach is "democratic" in the Deweyan, moral sense of the term? The problem with the Tyler rationale is that it can readily be interpreted in narrowly technocratic and autocratic ways; and, in fact, there is a history of such interpretations in American education (Kliebard, 1975). Second, what ensures that this action inquiry approach will be "artistic" as opposed to rigid and/or incoherent? Schwab (1978), who was Tyler's colleague at the University of Chicago, tackles this particular problem with his examination of the "eclectic artistry" at the heart of curriculum problem solving. Schwab's curricular argument moves educational practices in the direction of sophisticated, case-based deliberations, and such a perspective is a rallying cry for those who are advocating professional empowerment and reflective teaching in the face of rigid and insensitive educational bureaucracies and policies (Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, & Richert, 1996; Sergiovanni, 2000). Is this what Wraga has in mind when he argues for the centrality of "practice" in curriculum arguments? He is not clear on this point.

Pinar (1999a) argues that curriculum work should be informed by a sophisticated, multitextual "conversation." I agree. However, I want to know more about how he interprets this multidimensional dialogue. What are the "moral" purposes informing this curricular conversation? Simply put, what will the conversation be about? I ask this question for two reasons. First, the Pinar et al. (1995) book does not include a chapter on "curriculum as a democratic text." There are some indications in the concluding chapter of this lengthy book that curriculum studies should be democratically oriented, but there is not a chapter-long treatment of this philosophical discourse. Why not? Secondly, the "reconceptualist" phase of curriculum work includes a wide range of "critical" approaches to curriculum studies (Pinar, 1998). I will echo Wraga's (1999) critique of this scholarly tradition by asking two questions. To what degree are particular critical curriculum projects "democratic" in nature? Just because work is "critical" does not make it "democratic"—a key point that Dewey emphasized throughout his scholarly career (Westbrook, 1991). Do particular critical curriculum projects encourage educational artistry? Again, as Wraga (1999) observes, critical theories can result in rigid and/or incoherent practices. Dogmatic, inartistic action is as much a problem of the "left" as it is of the "right" (Elshtain, 1995).

In sum, both Wraga and Pinar are making important curriculum points. Curriculum work involves both practical inquiry *and* sophisticated dialogue. From the point of view of the challenge of *democratic wisdom* this is not an either/or issue. The problem is how to enact daily our democratic ideals through an *inquiry artistry*. Can our educational work be congruent with our best democratic intentions? This is quite a professional charge.

Implications for Educational Research

The curriculum argument I am advancing has, at least, two important implications for educational research. A position that is gaining currency in the educational community is that the selection of an appropriate research method is not just a technical problem but involves complex epistemological (or post-epistemological) considerations (Scheurich, 1997). Stated formally, distinctions between "episteme" (true knowledge) and "doxa" (mere opinion) readily deconstruct in a number of ways (Lather, 1991). However troubling, the episteme/doxa binary opens the door to ethical-political deliberations (Bruner, 1999). Curriculum study is, literally, the disciplined examination of the "good" educational path. To the degree that curriculum scholars and practitioners deepen the democratic nature of their work, their efforts can inform educational researchers' ethical and political choices.

The "inquiry artistry" map challenges curriculum workers to deconstruct any context-specific boundaries that exist between educational practice, disciplined inquiry, and human artistry. To the degree that curriculum workers cross these boundaries, their more integrated efforts can serve as an inspiration and model for educational researchers. Imagine future educational research practices that trouble the boundaries between the sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities (Barone, 2001), and imagine how democratically robust curriculum work might inform, and even necessitate, such research practices.

NOTES

[1] Though different curriculum scholars date the formal beginnings of American curriculum studies at different times, the year 1918, as Schubert (1986) explains, is a frequent historical marker:

> In America, the year 1918 marks a time of certainty that the curriculum field was likely to be quite permanent on the educational horizon. Three major contributions occurred in that year. William Heard Kilpatrick published an article entitled "The Project Method" in *Teachers College Record* that was read around the world as a concrete embodiment of Deweyan curricular philosophy. . . .The second event . . . was the publication of *The Curriculum* by Franklin Bobbitt, who was the father of the social efficiency movement in curriculum. . . . The third event . . . was NEA's [National Educational Association's] Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education report entitled *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. (pp. 75–76)

[2] Although "wisdom challenges" are associated with many "moral" traditions (Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu, Christian, Islamic, Sufi, Native American, and others), this is not the case with the tradition of American democratic pragmatism. This is, of course, the historical "problem" that I am addressing.

[3] In the text, the first six forms of inquiry are introduced in a narratively based "inquiry scaffolding" format, while the seventh form is presented in the context of "transformative teacher leadership." In effect, the book provides an eclectic inquiry blueprint for democratic, curriculum-based pedagogy.

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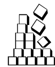
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