

# Learning the Art of Curriculum Deliberation: One Professor's Story

Don Livingston  
LaGrange College  
LaGrange, GA 30240  
(706)-880-8017  
[dlivingston@lagrange.edu](mailto:dlivingston@lagrange.edu)

**Abstract:** This paper uses narrative methodology and theoretical sources found in the field of curriculum studies to tell the story of the author, who, while in his doctoral program, dismissed learning about the practical aspects of the field as being insipid time wasting activities. During this time, he chose to concentrate only on the theoretical aspects of the curriculum field in his doctoral studies. Yet, when he found himself in charge of two major efforts to change his department's curriculum as well as reconceptualize a college-wide seminar program for first year students, those aspects of the field once perceived as insipid suddenly became critically important to his career.

Fortunately, he was attentive enough in his classes to remember one old time scholar, Joseph Schwab (1970). Schwab made an attempt to bridge the Tylerian world of prescriptive curriculum with the reconceptualist's notion of curriculum as a racial, gender and political text. Although it was Schwab who proclaimed the field of curriculum studies as moribund in the late sixties, he also offered a resurrection for the field that was not in the least prescriptive, but was instead a process grounded in deliberation. For Schwab, and scholars such as Decker Walker and William Reid, the process of deliberation was central to curriculum development (Pinar, et al). Walker (1975) considered deliberation to be a natural method that others involved in the process could readily understand. Thus, the role of the university-base specialist is not to prescribe, but to advise. Through the lens of Reid (1978), curriculum development becomes a moral undertaking rather than a technical blueprint. Legitimate curriculum development depends on many voices that are woven into the fabric of the end product. What becomes clear after reading about the deliberative art of the practical is that the role of the curriculum specialist should not be as an expert, but as an advisor who promotes full participatory democracy through the deliberative process. Once the curriculum is viewed as a messy, indeterminate process, the university-base curriculum specialist can begin to facilitate a conversation that results in a text that is both rich and rigorous with regards to concepts and content (Doll, 1993).

What this author learned through this experience is that a prescriptive curriculum surely does not solve a curriculum dilemma, nor will an indeterminate philosophy by itself enough to get the practical aspects done. What is needed is an amalgam of perspectives that congeal into a cogent pathway for others to use as they navigate the deliberative process.

## Learning the Practical Art of Curriculum Deliberation

When I was a doctoral student in Curriculum Studies, I put most of my efforts into the theoretical aspects of the field. My eyes lit up in classes that spoke of philosophy, and glazed over when the discussion turned to rationales and matrices. After all, from a career perspective, I knew that public schools didn't have curriculum specialists anymore who actually designed curriculum and the professorate surely wasn't interested in someone who can recite the four steps of the Tyler Rational (Tyler, 1949), or is it five steps? Surely, there was no need to concern myself with curriculum planning for instruction's sake. Not only did I privately find curriculum as a technical text an "insipid time wasting adumbration of the obvious, and probably irrelevant"

(Koerner, 1963, p. 56), among my doctoral cohort, I was perceived as a zealot who was on a relentless campaign to convince others to abjure such rational technical silliness.

After defending my dissertation about the work of a dead French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, who thought that curriculum was more like weeds than trees, I accepted a post at a liberal arts college. My philosophical orientation was a perfect match for this college's mission to challenge the mind and inspire the soul. At this college, teacher preparation is something you synthesize with a liberal arts education; it's not a teacher training program by any means. Although the department chair who hired me clearly understood that the real agenda of public education is not about challenging minds and inspiring souls, but an economic and political one, she was adamant that we, as faculty, must keep abreast of what the schools were doing.

"Schools?" I thought, "do anything well?" The only things that public schools do well are to perpetuate race, class and gender divisions. They are also sorting machines that create docile and obedient workers who are seduced, through consumerism, into believing the big lie that they have some sort of power over their own destiny. Although I still believe that this is the hidden curriculum in schools, I have been able to maintain my composure long enough to notice that our k-12 schools are, at least, trying to assuage reticent educators to teach for conceptual understandings.

None of this "getting closer to the schools" stuff would have mattered very much until the Dean of my college informed the education faculty that the department chair had decided to retire. After initially making it quite clear to all that I would rather stick needles in my eyes than become department chair, the Dean offered the position to me anyway maybe because I had the right qualifications, a doctorate in Curriculum Studies, but probably because no one else in the department was crazy enough to accept the job. Surely, I couldn't tell him that my doctorate in Curriculum Studies prepared me more for creating rhizomes within the hyper-texted simulacra of a postmodern ontology rather than skilled with tweaking a rational technical model of curriculum. No, I would not tell the Dean that I was sorely lacking any sort of working knowledge of curriculum studies that pre-dated the reconceptualization of curriculum during the 1970's. Instead, I would simply suggest that I was crazy enough for the job.

Fortunately, I was attentive enough in class to remember one old time scholar, Joseph Schwab (1970; 1978; 1983), who made an attempt to bridge the Tylerian world of prescriptive curriculum with the reconceptualist's notion of curriculum as a racial, gender and political text. Although it was Schwab who proclaimed the field of curriculum studies as moribund in the late sixties, he offered a resurrection for the field that was not in the least prescriptive, but was instead a process grounded in deliberation.

### The Art of the Practical

Schwab (1970) was an advocate of a particular approach to curriculum development; a deliberative process which he called the "art of the practical". His approach began with forming a team to deliberate the curriculum; next the university-based specialist would monitor the activities of the team, supervise development activities followed by a facilitation the conversation to allow the particular curricular values imbued by the group to surface (Schwab, 1978; Jackson, 1992). Although his curricular methods are closely related to the rationale proposed by Tyler (Tyler, 1949), he differed from Tyler in the sense that he did not precisely define curricular objectives. To do so would stymie the deliberative process. Schwab viewed the

deliberative process as the sine qua non of the curriculum, not the particular objectives that emerged as a result of it (Schwab, 1970).

To give the deliberative process a framework, Schwab (1978) suggested that the facilitator be attentive to four categories, what he called commonplaces: subject matter, learners, millieus, and teachers. Gail McCutcheon's (1995) discussion of Schwab's commonplaces is particularly instrumental because she explains these terms when these concepts are placed in context with the responsibilities of the university-based curriculum specialist.

*Subject matter* means more than the knowledge gleaned from the disciplines. It also means the development of cognitive processes for the growth of the self, and for service to others.

*Learners*, of course, are our students. Knowing their abilities interests and needs is critical for a meaningful curriculum.

*Millieus* are the contexts from which our students come to us. Where are their communities and how do they identify themselves culturally?

*Teachers*, the fourth commonplace, are essential to the success of the deliberation because it is important to understand their strengths as well as their limitations.

The first role of the university-based curriculum specialist is to remind the group of these commonplaces as s/he facilitates the deliberation. The second role is to offer instructional pathways for the teachers to consider once the deliberators have defined the values that they want to imbue upon the students (Schwab, 1978).

For Schwab, and scholars such as Decker Walker and William Reid, the process of deliberation was central to curriculum development (Pinar, et al). Walker (1975) considered deliberation to be a natural method that others involved in the process could readily understand. Thus, the role of the university-base specialist is not to prescribe, but to advise. Through the lens of Reid (1978), curriculum development becomes a moral undertaking rather than a technical blueprint. Legitimate curriculum development depends on many voices that are woven into the fabric of the end product. What becomes clear after reading about the deliberative art of the practical is that the role of the curriculum specialist should not be as an expert, but as an advisor who promotes full participatory democracy through the deliberative process. Once the curriculum is viewed as a messy, indeterminate process, the university-base curriculum specialist can begin to facilitate a conversation that results in a text that is both rich and rigorous with regards to concepts and content (Doll, 1993).

### Placing the Art of the Practical into Play

Re- reading the deliberative process scholarship (this time in earnest) taught me how to listen and gave me the confidence to guide the curriculum deliberation. During my first year as department chair, through guided curriculum deliberations, the education faculty completely retooled the Master of Education program into a research-oriented program, created a joint bachelors and Masters of Arts in Teaching option for highly qualified undergraduates and proposed a new Masters of Arts in Teaching Early Childhood program. All of these curricular proposals had to be shepherded through the college's Academic Council, then on to Academic Policies Committee in order to bring it to the floor of the full faculty assembly for final approval. While there were some bumps along the way, for the most part, they were smoothed over, not through confrontation, but by deliberation. Inviting all voices, including those who seemed to

relentlessly enjoy the role of perennial obstructionists, to join the conversation was the key to success.

### Deliberating the Cornerstone Course Curriculum

In need of someone to revitalize the first-year seminar, an academic course called Cornerstone, the Dean called on me to collaborate with the fifteen faculty members who teach the course to revitalize this first-year student program.

Most institutions of higher education have the equivalent of our first-year Cornerstone course. Curricular objectives vary from institution to institution; some view the course as a way to get to know their respective campuses, while others use the course to strengthen academic and study skills. Our objectives are unique in the sense that we use the first year Cornerstone experience to explore the ethical dimensions of the self and of others. In the old curriculum, there were specific readings that were assessed through quizzes, oral presentations, a service learning experience, an ethical exploration final paper and a final examination. The intent of these assignments was to develop first-year students into young adults who have acquired a strong foundation from which they can draw from to make decisions about themselves and the world around them.

Cornerstone is a seminar course whose charge is to enhance the valuing and decision-making processes with an emphasis on influences that shape ethical behavior. Students are supposed to use skills of comparison, contrast, analysis, and synthesis of multiple perspectives as they examine an issue of common concern. The course emphasizes active learning, small group problem solving, and service learning, including reflection on these experiences.

The problem with the course, as it was designed, was that some of the senior faculty thought that it failed to meet high standards for academic rigor. A few Cornerstone faculty expressed some frustration as well. Many of these colleagues felt disconnected from their own academic expertise and thought that curriculum was too prescriptive with regards to assignments and assessments. Rather than become defensive about the critique launched upon the program, I saw this as an opportunity to begin a deliberation about the Cornerstone curriculum as a way to meet the goals for the program and to set the standards for academic rigor.

### Beginning the Deliberation

My first action was to form a curriculum committee that was representative of the entire Cornerstone faculty. Through a series of meetings, the Cornerstone Curriculum Committee members decided that the curriculum should be deliberated from the ground up as if it were a brand new course. From an initial brainstorming session emerged the “big idea” for Cornerstone, along with four enduring understandings and four essential skill sets that the student should acquire as a result of taking the course (Wiggins & McTighe, 1999).

What emerged was that the big idea is essentially an experience that aspires to imbue an informed sense of ethical obligation to oneself and to the community. First, to accomplish this objective the student needs to possess an enduring understanding of global ethical perspectives. Second, it is also most important that the student acquires an enduring understanding that morality is a developmental process that requires investigation into multifarious ways of knowing. Third, there must be recognition, followed by action, that the world community needs responsible stewardship. Thus, caring for the community is an integral aspect of the

course. Fourth, a student must understand why academic integrity is essential for individual success and critical for sustaining a college community.

To wrestle with this big idea students must acquire the skills to think critically and read critically about ethics and the world. They also must possess requisite life skills for a successful personal experience that includes coming to know oneself in relationship to others, as well as time and career management knowledge. All of these enduring understandings are not achievable unless the student is equipped with library and research skills. It is through these skills that the student can begin to synthesize and evaluate complex phenomena.

### Drawing from the Field of Curriculum Studies

Although the Cornerstone Curriculum deliberation continues to be an ongoing conversation, the whole Cornerstone faculty have embraced this proposal as a way to make the course interesting for both the student and the faculty alike. At the same time, it sets a high standard for academic rigor.

What I learned through this experience is that a prescriptive curriculum surely does not solve a curriculum dilemma, nor will an indeterminate philosophy by itself enough to get the practical aspects done. What is needed is an amalgam of perspectives that congeal into a cogent pathway for others to use as they navigate the deliberative process.

For instance, as a way to give my colleagues a structure from which they begin thinking about the course, I relied on a neo-Tylerian proposal made by Wiggins and McTighe (1999). Wiggins and McTighe's (1999) book *Understanding by Design* is a text that has enthralled public school instructional specialists and content oriented teacher educators in my area. Specifically, Wiggins and McTighe (1999) frame the process as:

- Step 1.- Determine the desired goals for the course.
- Step 2. – Prioritize responses into distinct categories.
- Step 3. – Create performance assessments and evaluation rubrics.
- Step 4. – Suggest instructional methods

Because there weren't any education professors involved in the Cornerstone deliberation aside from me, the use of education jargon had to be tempered if there was any hope for action. As a curriculum facilitator who had to work with faculty from disparate disciplines and worldviews, I found that it was instrumental to have a deliberative framework that we all could agree upon before the conversation began. Without question, this framework encouraged full participation among the faculty that resulted in a rich and rigorous Cornerstone Curriculum.

### Doing Curriculum in the Time of Change

When it comes to the practical aspects of curriculum in the present structure of education it is difficult to envision a plan that would be acceptable to faculty that was not based on a rational scheme. Does this mean that I have forsaken a postmodern perspective on curriculum by repudiating the wisdom of the dead French philosopher who desired a proliferation of ideas akin to the temporality of weeds rather than strict structural growth of trees? Hardly.

Although it would be an interesting time in which to live, our world is not going to suddenly become entirely postmodern tomorrow. We see signs in art, music, architecture and, yes, in curriculum studies, that a postmodern world is emerging. It is surely a wave that will stall from time to time precipitated by modernist reactions, but over time, our life experience will

become more indeterminate and temporary, much like a weed that connects for a time with another then breaks away to form an entirely new rhizome (Deleuze, 1987).

In the meantime, it is important to be successful in the structure that sustains you (Deleuze, 1989). Once you are on the inside of a discursive structure such as an education department, a first year seminar or any classroom in which you find yourself, you can locate the fault-lines that are, all too often, taken for granted. Not only can you “crack the dish” a little bit every day, you can also use the liminal wisdom of old timers such as Schwab, Reid and Walker to incrementally cross the threshold into postmodernity. It is my view that these scholars show us how to bridge modernity and postmodernity.

I regret that I didn’t make that connection when I was a curriculum studies doctoral candidate. It all was too binary then, you were either this or that; a modernist or a postmodernist. What I learned from my dissertation chair, Bill Reynolds, is that we are both (Reynolds, 2001). Another thing that Reynolds was fond of saying is that we ought not to dwell on the technical; rather he insisted that one must develop deep intellectual understandings first. Reynolds assured me that the technical stuff comes easily once the intellectual foundations are built. He was right.

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