Theoretic Dimensions of Curriculum: Reflections from a Micro-perspective

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L'auteur est un théoricien en didactique qui s'est associé aux travaux de la Fondation dans le Projet Canada ouest; dans cet article il évoque ses expériences et souligne trois problèmes liés à l'élaboration didactique: (1) le rapport entre la théorie et la pratique; (2) la nécessité de repenser les problèmes associés à la mise à effet des programmes; (3) la nécessité d'avoir de nouveaux modèles d'évaluation des programmes. L'auteur de cette étude largement centrée sur le sous-projet SURT (Study of Urban–Rural Transition) conclut que l'expérience de la Fondation à cette date offre de nouvelles possibilités d'élaboration de principes et de méthodes permettant de rehausser la dimension théorique de l'élaboration didactique qui intéresse tant de spécialistes.

Six years ago in June of 1970 Project Canada West (PCW), the western regional arm of the Canada Studies Foundation's curriculum development consortium, was launched in Edmonton. As a part of the "bon voyage" message I was invited to give, I discussed with the assembled representatives of the PCW project teams "A Curriculum and Instructional Design" based on my adaptation of Mauritz Johnson, Jr.'s conception of curriculum and instruction (1). I concluded the talk with the following remarks:

> This conceptual scheme is presented to you not as an ILO (Intended Learning Outcome) but as instrumental content. I hope it is seductive enough to entice you to touch it, feel it, play with it, think about it. You may wish to reject it, modify it or accept it. What is important is that each sub-group in Project Canada West makes explicit its own commitment to a curriculum and instructional design position, for the worth of the product of efforts expended will be determined to a large extent by the worth of the conceptual design which gives it birth. (2, p. 11)

At the same time I urged the assembled curriculum developers to consider what Hodgetts was really asking when he posed the question to social studies educators across Canada, "What Culture? What Heritage?" (3). I claimed then that he was fundamentally challenging social studies educators to examine with rigor what they think and what they do in social studies education. Hence, I urged on the PCW team members present by saying, "We need to retain that critical stance that Hodgetts took, and ask openly and rigorously 'What Curriculum? What Instructional Plan? What Instruction?' " (2, p. 11)

Now, some six years later, with the Canada Studies Foundation's Five Year Phase 1 completed, it seems timely to reflect critically upon selected

dimensions of curriculum theoretics that emanated from the activities in particular of PCW. After five years of curriculum development activity involving many hundreds of people, and after an expenditure of several hundred thousand dollars, it is not remiss to ask whether or not, aside from the production of multiple social studies programs, some advances have been made in the theoretic realm of curriculum design.

In this reflection the vantage point given to me is the limited perspective of my experiences when I made contact with segments of the ongoing life of the Canada Studies Foundation. In CSF's embryonic days I became involved, for instance, with Ernest Ingram, then of OISE, when he was making his preliminary exploratory junket across Canada, or with Gordon McIntosh, then with the Human Resources Research Council (Alberta), who was very much involved in the creation of PCW. During the five years' life of PCW I sat as a member of its board. From these contacts, however, what I gained reflects the external view of the actual work of the program development – hence, my comments are limited to the outsider's view. Fortunately and most significantly for me, I was, during its life, directly or indirectly, party to the activities of Project SURT (Study of Urban–Rural Transition), one of the fourteen curriculum subprojects of PCW. It was this involvement that provided me with opportunities to develop an insider's view, even though it was but a small segment of the multiple and varied curricular worlds of CSF. Nevertheless, it was a view that allowed me to reflect as an insider upon three curricular theoretic concerns within my purview which form the major themes of this paper. They are

(1) Exploring the theoretic in "the practical" of curriculum development;
(2) Reconceptualizing the concept of curriculum implementation;
(3) Reformulating a curriculum evaluation paradigm.

These themes suggest immediately that I am not dwelling in the domain of the major thrust of CSF, that is, the development of actual school programs, where its achievements have been without doubt productive. My interest, rather, is in what I see as some thrusts the CSF-sponsored curriculum development activity has brought forth at the conceptual level in curriculum theory, and in future possibilities of these and other thrusts.

EXPLORING THE THEORETIC IN "THE PRACTICAL"

Without doubt the characteristic curriculum development modality nurtured and pressed by Project Canada West and the Canada Studies Foundation has been the massive focus on the practising teacher as the key personality in curriculum development.

In this connection, it is worthwhile to recall J. J. Schwab, who, deploring the lack of conceptual advance in curriculum theoretic thought in recent years, was prompted to exclaim: "The field of curriculum is moribund, unable by its present methods and principles to continue its work and desperately in search of new and more effective principles and methods." (4, p. 79)

I view his utterance as a call to curriculum thinkers to shift the very ground they stand on, that is, to assume a new stance that will compel them to view the curriculum world with a decidedly changed attitude.

Consequently, he has called for "a renaissance" in the field of curriculum, to be achieved by deliberately diverting the bulk of curriculum energies "from the theoretic to the practical" (4, p. 79). In urging us to assume a practical stance, however, he advises caution:

> By the "practical" I do *not* mean the curbstone practicality of the mediocre administrator and the man on the street for whom the practical means the easily achieved, familiar goals which can be reached by familiar means. I refer, rather, to a *complex discipline*, relatively *unfamiliar to the academic* and differing *radically* from the discipline of the theoretic. It is the discipline concerned with choice and action, in contrast with the theoretic (4, p. 79). (Emphasis added.)

Students of curriculum theory acquainted with Schwab's work in this decade know that in the three papers on "The Practical" (4, 5, 6) he has pressed for the study of "deliberation" as the central concept in the "complex discipline" of the practical. Readers not familiar with his pertinent remarks will want to examine the papers in detail. Noted here is the relevance, in the context of the Canada Studies Foundation's curriculum development, of Schwab's advice that we approach the study of the world of curriculum from the point of view of the practical. When under CSF's banner so many are involved directly in the practical world of program development, it seems worthwhile to consider opportunities that exist for studying the domain of the practical.

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.

An authentic radical departure calls for 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. This stance may be implicit or even unconscious, based as it is on assumptions that are frequently taken for granted in dealing with the practical problems of program development.

Hence, I see the possibility of viewing the curriculum developer not only as a being engaged in program engineering and solving curriculum development problems, but also as a being engaged consciously or otherwise in the construction of his own meaningful human and social reality. He is simultaneously engaged in self-reflection as he turns over in his mind what he is taking for granted in the way of cognitive interests, his assumptions about man and world, and approaches to that world. In such a reflective activity, we can see 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.

In the search for a fresh orientation towards the practical world of cur-

riculum activities, curriculum theorists can, as a few reconceptualists such as Michael Apple (7) and James MacDonald (8) have already done, begin to explore at a fundamental level fundamental perspectives found in the lived practical world of curriculum developers, perspectives which typically are unconsciously held and unavoidably used by curriculum developers.

The limitations of this article do not allow elaboration. Suffice it to mention, though briefly, the work of J. Habermas to which Apple (7) refers as an example of a set of root metaphors I speak of. Apple, in interpreting Habermas, outlines three perspectives in terms of the relationship between human interests and knowledge. They are:

(1) Strict Science Perspective:

> The *practice* of this form yields *information* that is based on and presupposes *the interests of certainty and technical control.* Examples would be physics and the social sciences that model themselves after it, such as the behavioral psychology on which curriculum work has often patterned itself so completely (7, p. 125). (Emphasis added.)

(2) Hermeneutic Science Perspective:

> These are historical-interpretive modes of scientific activity that yield, not "information" in the sense implied in the strict sciences, but an understanding of the "social cultural world". The *practice* presupposes an underlying *interest in extending intersubjective understanding rather than control.* Here we find the sciences with a "verstehen" orientation such as phenomenological psychology and ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism in sociology (7, pp. 125–6). (Emphasis added.)

(3) Critical Theory Perspective:

> Habermas's analysis is an excellent example of this form of action. It is an activity that seeks to illuminate the supposed actual "necessity" of the historical modes of authority extant in industrialized and overly rationalized societies. . . . Critical science has as its fundamental interest the *emancipation* of individuals from lawlike rules and patterns of action in "nature" and history so that they can reflect and act on the dialectical process of creating and recreating themselves and their institutions. (7, p. 126)

The above is Habermas's conceptual schema for typically taken-for-granted perspectives – root metaphors that guide thought and action in typical day-to-day activities of humans. Although the above is but a rough sketch, I believe it has the potential for a theoretic study of the practical, the domain of the practical lived experiences of program developers as in CSF.

I believe that Schwab's admonition to us to shift to the practical fits hand in glove with the CSF's emphasis on the practical. I feel strongly that the CSF is in a good position to make a contribution to curriculum reconceptualization by coming to grips with the meaning of the practical and by pursuing rigorously the theoretic of the practical. By so doing, a measured move can be made in the direction of what Schwab regards as a quest for "new principles and methods in curriculum thought."

RECONCEPTUALIZING THE CONCEPT OF IMPLEMENTATION

Towards the end of Phase 1, I participated in implementation-oriented mini-conference sessions conceived as a post-prototype program development activity of subproject teams. The idea for the sessions arose, I understand, as a reaction to the typical difficulties confronted by implementers who see the act of implementation as a phase of a natural linear schema of practical events whereby "one builds a program and then one puts it into practice." In this common-sense schema, "implementation" is seen simply as a process of "putting a program into practice."

At a more elaborate level we find people speaking of the RDDA model (Research – Development – Diffusion – Adoption). In this conception (although I find no fundamental differences from the former schema) implementation carries the fancier labels of "diffusion and adoption." In popular curriculum language, "pilot-testing" seems to be synonymous with "putting into practice" or "diffusing and adopting."

In Project Canada West an interesting wrinkle was introduced – the mini-conference. I attended a few of these mini-conferences, recalling best the SURT conference held in Westlock, Alberta. Aside from the SURT teacher and student team members, I recall meeting board members from both PCW and CSF; teachers from Nova Scotia, from Sundre in Alberta, from Chilliwack in B.C., from St. Albert in Alberta; a representative from the Department of the Secretary of State; and external evaluators of the project. The workshop program included a report of the history of the SURT project and a description of the prototype program; a report from an internal evaluator (a team member whose formative evaluation of a part of SURT became his M.Ed. thesis at the University of Alberta); a report of the formative evaluation of the total project (done by a doctoral student and his advisor, University of Alberta); actual participation of invited teachers in selected segments of the prototype program; and a report of the projected pilot evaluation procedure.

From the perspective of implementation, what is of interest is the way in which PCW recognized the conceptual problem of "implementation" and made attempts to overcome the traditional difficulties encountered by program developers who in this phase tend to assume the stance of the "salesman" selling his wares as a means of promoting curriculum change.

Recognizing the problem of implementation, PCW conceived of the mini-conference as an approach in which prospective initial users from across Canada were brought together with developers. In the mini-conference approach, an attempt was made to integrate program evaluation, program revision, and program diffusion. Invited teachers were not only informed of the program but were also requested to participate in the pilot evaluation of it, and simultaneously to participate in the revision of the prototype. Thus the invited teachers were not viewed as merely passive consumers of the program, but rather as co-actors in productive activities – trying the program out in a classroom situation, evaluating it, and

recommending revisions. This shift from a conception of potential users as consumers to a conception of producer-consumer is a significant one which merits closer study. It is interesting to note that the mini-conference conception developed by PCW parallels the remodelling of the RDDA model which Guba and Clark (9) described as the "configurational perspective" of the RDDA. They criticized the unified systems view associated with the typical interpretation of RDDA and reconceptualized it with a configuration view using the metaphor of "community."

PCW's conceptual advance regarding implementation is indeed one that merits extended study for it deals with a dimension which has plagued many curriculum-developing agencies. One is tempted to query what the practical perspective may offer if the problem of implementation is viewed not in terms of dissemination of a product but in terms of the meaning of a given program to teachers. From this latter viewpoint, the producers and potential users establish a relationship in the mini-conference situation whereby they are enabled to assume complementary roles in the implementation process.

Again, CSF's current activities in phase 2 seem to provide ample opportunity to direct more rigorous thought in this direction.

A CURRICULUM EVALUATION PARADIGM

In my opinion, one of the strong theoretic advances that CSF and PCW have made is in the area of curriculum evaluation. We are aware of the probing work done by Bernier, Duckworth, Lecuyer, and Sutherland in the evaluation report of CSF phase 1 (10), an evaluation which reflects well the scope and depth of the CSF operation in its totality.

In this section I wish to offer comments at a much lower level, again that of SURT, mainly because of my own familiarity with the evaluative activities associated with that subproject.

Typically, curriculum developers do give cognizance to the importance of evaluation. Often, we hear of "continuous evaluation" as a necessary feature of program improvement, but more often than not, only lip service is given to this concept. The prevailing view is that curriculum evaluation is an activity secondary to the primary activity of curriculum development. Further, even when evaluation is considered as a necessary component, it is typically treated as the last of the four steps of curriculum design set forth in the Tyler rationale (11). The low importance attached to evaluation is often reflected in the usual procedure in which funds for evaluative activity are allocated, that is, *after* program development budgeting is completed. Further, enduring as a tradition is the psychometric/experimental design in program evaluation, which in its dominance has overshadowed other complementary approaches to evaluation which merit consideration. Coupled with this is the predominance of goal-based evalaution as *the* evaluation model which regards the question "How well are the goals being achieved?" as the key concern of evaluation.

In SURT, evaluation, conceptualized fairly early in conjunction with ongoing program development activities, entertained Scriven's notion of formative and summative evaluation. The evaluation activities were as follows:

Evaluation A — An Ethnographic Formative Evaluation of the Simulation Game, "Transition" (12).

Evaluation B — A Formative Evaluation of Program Products Developed by SURT (13).

Evaluation C — A Summative Evaluation of the Implementation of SURT (part of a doctoral dissertation) (14).

Evaluation D — A Pilot Evaluation of SURT by pilot teachers.

Certain dimensions of the overall evaluation of SURT deserve some comment. (*a*) The way in which evaluation, particularly formative, was considered early as a component complementary to program development allowed conscious attention to the evaluative dimension particularly in formative activities, both the ongoing dynamic process and the emerging products. (*b*) The use of the ethnomethodological approach in SURT evaluations A, B, and C is in itself a feature worthy of note. The approach enabled program development to be viewed as a dynamic historical, social, and cultural process, a view not possible with the standard psychometrically oriented approach to evaluation. (*c*) Further, the approach accommodated both the outsider's (etic) and insider's (emic) perspectives, that is, the conceptual scheme of both the external evaluator and that of the program developers themselves. Such an approach enabled examination of the meaning that program developers assign to their own activities. A conceptual formulation of evaluation which to some degree advances existing ones is found in Evaluation C (14). In it Wilson brought together on the one hand Gene Glass's (15) conception of "elucitatory" and "evaluative" forms of inquiry, and on the other Pike's (16) conception of "etic" and "emic" perspectives, the latter being modified by Wilson to accommodate methodological concepts from the literature of phenomenology. Wilson's successful usage of his emic-evaluative methodology in evaluating the implementation efforts of SURT in two case studies revealed new dimensions, not heretofore found to my knowledge in any evaluation or implementation literature. His conceptual and empirical contributions to evaluation efforts done in part under the aegis of CSF are, I consider, significant.

CONCLUSION

The thoughts developed above under the themes of the practical in curriculum theorizing, curriculum implementation, and curriculum evaluation emerged from reflections based on my limited experiences with PCW and CSF. As such they reflect but a narrow vector of the multiple dimensional worlds of curriculum development within the compass of CSF.

Yet, it seems to me, they point to some pertinent thrusts made within

CSF activities to date in advancing the conceptual dimension of curriculum theorizing, and simultaneously to CSF's possible role in making further advances in the future. In the task of advancing the theoretic of the practical, the CSF is in an advantageous position, for in the current phase of its activities there are many practising teachers who must relate their personal and social realities to the curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation they are experiencing.

In a curriculum world in which naive conceptions of the practical still prevail, it is appropriate that the Canada Studies Foundation, rooted as its work is in the realities of classrooms and schools, consciously made problematic the concept of "the practical" in an endeavor to provide new principles and methods which many scholars, including Schwab, are at this moment seeking.

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