Gail McCutcheon

What in the World is Curriculum Theory?

To be sure, we curriculum folks have written more about what curriculum theory ought to be than we have provided examples of such theories. Perhaps we write so frequently and verbosely about curriculum theory to allow us to call ourselves "curriculum theorists," for it sounds so lofty, high falutin and scientific. Perhaps also, we write so much about curriculum theory because it diverts us from actually constructing curriculum theory; procrastination is easy and making theories is hard work. Or it could be we're into sadomasochism or punk rock—it's great to point out our own deficiencies, shortcomings, and weaknesses to ourselves and to each other and we can do so by self-flagellation about our lack of curriculum theory.

But I believe so many articles appear because curriculum theory presents perplexing problems. How can we make theories about phenomena that do not seem to be universally generalizable when we pay attention to the idiosyncracies of each case? How can we do research about what goes on in people's heads, where much of curriculum does? Because curriculum matters are practical, does this imply we cannot generate theories about them? How can case studies, ethnographies, educational criticisms, and survey and experimental research data be consolidated, arranged, or assembled into theory? Each is so unique that the generalizations among them seem light or mundane. Theory should be heavy or lofty, it seems, not light or mundane. This is all very troublesome and vastly perplexing.

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In this (yet another) article about curriculum theory, I will define curriculum theory, discuss its functions, describe processes of making theories, and speculate about why we have virtually no curriculum theory. By setting forth my own view about curriculum theory making, I am not attempting to create an orthodoxy, a view to which everyone must adhere if she or he is to be thought of as a curriculum theorist. In the field, we have disparate interests and varying abilities; to constrain us all to one set of concerns or to one process for making theory would limit our potential as a field, in my view. We're in an exploratory era about theory building, and as theories are developed through any set of processes, we should all benefit in one way or another, by having something to build upon, to critique, or an example to demonstrate how a particular way of theory making facilitates or obscures the field.

Understanding various views of theory making is important for several reasons. For one, understanding another's view permits us to judge the potential that view may have for leading us to theories, thus providing the opportunity for scholarly debate and subsequent strengthening of a particular view. I am not calling for us to harp at each other, nit-pick, or slander, but rather to critique one another's positions in a supportive, yet intellectually rigorous fashion. Secondly, understanding one another's views about theory building may permit us to examine a theory internally, that is, by the theorist's rules rather than by the rules of another view of theory making. Just as we would not judge Stravinsky's music merely according to the rules of musical form followed by Vivaldi, neither should we judge some-

one's theory solely by a set of rules regarding theory making that is foreign to the particular endeavor. Finally, such understandings may open windows for some who have assumed theory making to be of only one sort; alternatives may permit readers to conceive of ways to make theory appropriate to their beliefs and concerns or to improve their view.

What Is Curriculum Theory?

Curriculum theory is an integrated cluster of sets of analyses, interpretations, and understandings of curricular phenomena. By curriculum I mean what students have an opportunity to learn in school, through both the hidden and overt curriculum, and what they do not have an opportunity to learn because certain matters were not included in the curriculum, referred to by Eisner as the "null curriculum" (1979, p. 83). Curriculum phenomena include a host of matters such as sources of the curriculum and the curriculum in use, its enactment. Examples of some sources of the curriculum that might be accounted for through curriculum theories are processes of curriculum development, the politics of curriculum argumentation, social forces (such as federal or state mandates, local regulations, and court or board of education decisions), the sociology of knowledge, and the development and the nature of educational materials (such as textbooks, filmstrips, curriculum guides). Examples of aspects of the enactment of the curriculum might include teachers' planning; how teachers and materials render the curriculum accessible to students; the received curriculum (the sense students make of it); the relationships among the enacted curriculum, society, human development and learning theory; organization of the curriculum; influences on its use (such as teachers' conceptions of schooling, parents', students', and other teachers' pressure about deviation from the norm); and what students learn through the overt, hidden, and null curriculum. Curriculum theorists have constructed categories, developed concepts, definitions, and interpretations, and done research about many matters. While this work is an early phase of building curriculum theories, it has yet to be integrated into theories.

Curriculum theory has several characteristics. It must be open to challenge, both in terms of the evidence supporting the theory and in terms of the line of reasoning — how the analyses, interpretations, and understandings are assembled, juxtaposed, ordered, or strung together. In other words, researchers must be able to refute or support the theory through studies; otherwise, the work is not theory. Through some manner, the way in which the theory is assembled must also be open to challenge.

Another characteristic of curriculum theory is that undergirding it and permeating it there must be a strong value base. We construct curriculum theories and do research ultimately to improve some aspect of curriculum-related matters, not merely to theorize or describe it in a detached fashion. Biologists studying the mating habits of turtles on the Galapagos Islands do not undertake the study to improve the turtles' mating, but rather to understand it. Similarly, when astronomers study satellite photographs of Saturn's rings, they do not intend to enhance the color, density, composition, spacing, or number of rings, but to add to their knowledge and perhaps to alter their theories about physics. However, since we ultimately hope to improve the curriculum through our research and theory-building activities, our theories must have a strong value base, and our particular value base or ideology must be understandable to readers. This implies that we must unearth our educational and social values, and question them before and while we do research and construct theories.

In my view, our values do not merely influence our work whether we like it or not; rather, they are a vital aspect of our work, for in certain respects, we are the instruments of research and theory making. Through our efforts, we produce studies and theories. For this reason, we must understand ourselves — our beliefs about what constitutes good schooling and a just society, how people should be treated, the role of the good citizen, and so forth. Some of the new sociologists interested in curriculum matters rely on Marxist, neoMarxist, and Freudian theory for their base. This need not be the case; we can employ other theories, values, and systems of belief as well.

Further, curriculum theory must be drawn from a variety of disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, as well as concentrating upon curriculum studies in their own right. Learning theory, studies of human development, research about the relationships between schools and societies, theories of culture change, and studies of the influence a culture has on what is acceptable or believable or important to know in that culture are but a few areas where disciplines may be relevant to curriculum theory.

Curriculum theory, then, is an integrated collection of sets of analyses, interpretations, and understandings of curricular phenomena. Such theory must be open to challenge in terms of evidence and

line of reasoning, must be based upon a strong value base, and must draw from multiple disciplines.

What Are the Benefits, Uses, or Functions of Curriculum Theory?

If we had curriculum theories, they could guide the work of teachers, researchers, curriculum developers, policy makers, administrators, and other educators. They could help us envision a general framework, organization, or map that in turn might facilitate our perceiving matters differently through new awareness, conceiving of alternative courses of action, envisioning consequences of those alternatives, examining our own practice, and hence deciding how to act. In other words, they could facilitate our deep understanding of curriculum matters and that understanding could enable us to improve what we think and do. For example, John Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), a powerful science fiction novel, calls into question our over-use of pesticides, overeating of beef, and the devastating, long-term effects of air and water pollution on our planet. Relationships among many facets of daily living are explored throughout the book with a depressing message underlying the work. Now, I am not claiming that Brunner's work is theory. However, its function is similar to the function of theory in helping us to understanding a complexly interrelated set of phenomena, and calling into question certain beliefs and practices by exposing a problem to readers who may not have been as aware of the problem's many manifestations before they read the book. Perhaps such work, like curriculum theory of the sort proposed in this article, generates action by raising our consciousness about matters to which we were oblivious before our reading. In Brunner's case, perhaps action could be taken by readers to decrease the rate of deterioration of the planet, if done on a large scale. In the case of readers of such curriculum theories, action could be taken to improve the curriculum.

The way in which such work guides our actions is somewhat different from many positivists' attempts at making theory in order to predict and thereby control phenomena. Positivistic control over phenomena is external to an actor, and rests on the assumption that if we can predict something, we can manipulate some feature of a situation, thereby permitting its control. For example, recent research (e.g., Fisher et al., 1980) indicates, among other things (and not surprisingly), that when students spend more time on a particular subject, their achievement test scores increase. To take this research into account, one feature being changed in many elementary schools is the school schedule. By lengthening the amount of time devoted to reading, it is hoped that students' test scores will rise. This sort of control through administrative edict is external to the teacher.

By contrast, Brunner's novel works internally, within the reader, to change his or her perspective about how we are misusing the Earth; as a result, personal actions may change because of new awareness and because changed beliefs cause one to act or to view the world differently. The positivistic notion of control involves altering the external conditions (such as the schedule) to change a person's actions. The assumption of the sort of theory proposed here is that people involved in curriculum-related work are thoughtful, and mindful of the matters they consider and practice; by permitting them to perceive particular problems or the general, through theory, they will be enabled through heightened consciousness to improve matters.

Curriculum theory could guide teaching, curriculum development, and policy formulation and administration; it could also guide research. One way is through the generation of research questions. David Easton (1967) has cited the problem of "hyperfactualism," where scientists all too often merely compile data without organizing it into theory which would permit scientists to classify and discern the significance of facts or relationships among them. Curriculum researchers have accumulated facts, descriptions, analyses, and interpretations through descriptive/interpretive/critical studies, experiments, surveys, case studies, and other forms of research, but with no theories to guide the research, those facts do not fit together even as neatly as a patchwork quilt. No organization exists for the welter of facts, compounding the problem of hyperfactualism. Curriculum theories could be used to guide researchers in posing questions and also in interpreting what they observe by providing a structure, a map of the field to permit us to see where studies fit.

Finally, theory could also be seen as a quest for curriculum scholars. One scholar might work during most of a career doing research and developing theory about a particular aspect of curriculum matters, such as the sources of the curriculum and what happens to the curriculum in schools. Others might be interested in elaborating upon extant work, such as the work of John Dewey, for example, by collecting some evidence refuting or supporting his theory of experience.

What role could teachers have in creating curriculum theories? In my view, teachers must take an active role as researchers, co-researchers, and developers of theories from their perspective. Such theoretical work would be helpful to outsiders (such as academics), to the teachers themselves, and to other teachers or to administrators. Curriculum scholars whose work is largely outside the classroom, who may not have seen a school in years (except to drive by it), cannot understand matters from the teachers' view. Teachers involved in action research or collaborating with outsider researchers could publish their research and their theoretical work. This work might help outsiders understand the nature of many curriculum matters. Teachers must also develop personal theories appropriate to their personalities, beliefs, values, and unique situations, to guide them in their daily decisions and actions. These theories have the same characteristics as described earlier, an integrated cluster of understandings, beliefs, and analyses, only such theories further account for the idiosyncracies of the teacher's specific situation. They may be elaborations of theories outsiders develop, or they may be developed independently, growing out of the teacher's role and perspective, and hence quite different in focus and content.

Both outsider-curriculum scholars and teacher-curriculum scholars are necessary to the venture of theory building to develop a balanced view. In the past, we have not enjoyed such a collaboration. In writing about research, Jon Nixon (1981, p. 195) said,

> On the one hand, teachers have blamed the research community for failing to appreciate the practical nature of their concerns; while, on the other, researchers have blamed the teaching profession for not discerning that the purpose of research is to pose and clarify questions rather than offer solutions. No doubt each side has a point, but the effect of these counter-accusations has been to generate an atmosphere of mutual mistrust, which ultimately can only serve to weaken still further the impact of research in schools.

This observation appears true of the theory-building venture as well.

Theory could function, then, as a general framework, an organization, or map of the relationships among analyses, interpretations, and understandings of curricular phenomena. Because of its organization, it could chart the territory of curriculum matters, point out relationships among them, and guide our action, by teaching us and by raising our consciousness about relationships to which we might have been oblivious. Our new awareness would enable us to alter practice or maintain it, to conceive of alternatives, and to envision possible consequences of courses of action. Because such theory would link disparate analyses, interpretations, and understandings, it could help us make sense of the jumble of unrelated evidence we now have and continue to amass. This could guide us in framing research questions and interpreting what we observe.

How Do We Create Curriculum Theories?

Clearly, an important aspect of theory creation is to know our own ideology, values, and beliefs about various matters related to the curriculum and society. This clarification and dredging up of our own values and belief system is an ongoing process, but must be brought to consciousness and made deliberate. Until we know a particular value we hold, it holds us — we are not in possession of it; it affects our work and thinking although we are unaware of it. Since we make use of these values and beliefs in our theory building, we must be aware of them.

We also need to read the work of other curriculum scholars, current research, and relevant work from other disciplines. Continuing to immerse ourselves in settings where curriculum-related matters are considered and acted upon, then standing back to interpret and critique practice is another crucial activity, as is continuing to define, to distinguish among aspects of curricular phenomena, and to conceptualize matters. Each of these activities alone is not enough, however. Much synthetic, analytic work is necessary to draw together related research materials from other disciplines as well as definitions, categories, and concepts from our own field to create theories. Somehow, we must conceive of various aspects of curriculum work, while maintaining a view of its unity. The act of theorizing while we do research, of observing practice while creating interpretations, must be linked to other disciplines and to other curriculum research. This sort of work has taken researchers in other disciplines such as Freud, Darwin, Piaget, and Copernicus years of observation and reflection to conceive of theories, so perhaps we should be patient.

What Could We Do to Facilitate the Creation of Curriculum Theory?

One problem with developing curriculum theories is that few (if any) examples exist; hence, we have no models, making it difficult to envision what one would look like, what it would take into consideration, and how it would be written. This is one reason why the creation of curriculum theories can be seen as exciting, challenging, pioneer work. Because such an endeavor is creative in many respects, "development" seems too mundane a word to use in referring to the process of theorizing.

Additionally, it could be that in their courses in curriculum theory, graduate students do not learn of processes of theory making and what constitutes theory, but rather they learn curriculum-related definitions, concepts, or categories that could be viewed as an early phase of theoretical work. Hence, curriculum theorists of the future may be inadequately prepared for the task. Various views of theory making from the social sciences, such as positivism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and critical science could be studied and their relevance to curriculum matters could be explored.

A third problem relates to the split between academia and the settings where curriculum matters are considered, such as schools, boards of education, textbook companies, state departments of education, and legislatures. Without research from those settings, it is all but impossible to form theories about curriculum practice. We tend to discuss idealized practice, oblivious to the exigencies of everyday life in such settings. If we hope to formulate adequate theories, it seems we must turn to such settings as research sites and for collaborators in the endeavor.

Fourthly, many schools, colleges, and universities have an anti-intellectual environment in certain respects. In some, there is a lack of human interaction about matters that might lead to theory; people meet occasionally in the hall to discuss how pitiful the weather forecasts are, the chances of a winning season for the team, or a news event. Colleagues are rare. Many time-consuming tasks in schools and academia, such as committee work and consulting with administrators and students may be worthwhile and enjoyable, but they also divert us from reading research reports, learning about theories and research studies in related disciplines, reading the work of other curriculum scholars, and the difficult work of integrating what we know into theories. In some schools, top-down mandates may discourage reflection that could lead teachers to develop personal theories, as they grow to feel highly managed, part of an assembly line. Locating supportively critical colleagues is important to this task of theory building as is securing a concentrated amount of time for reading, thinking, and writing.

As far as I can tell, we have no curriculum theory of the sort I have described here, with the possible exception of John Dewey's. Dewey's work integrated his theory of experience (1938) and discussed implications of that theory for the curriculum (1902). Further, his values were clear; his views about democracy (1916), how people learn, and the proper relationship between the child and the curriculum permeated much of his work. Finally, Dewey drew from sociology and psychology for parts of his theory.

For many curriculum workers, the primary interests of late seem to have concerned organizing technical means for curriculum development, arguing against such practice, measuring students' attainment of predefined objectives on tests, and arguing against that. We have also written at great length about curriculum theory. We continue to do research, and some appears to be aimed at theory building. Some effort has also been directed toward distinguishing among various curricular phenomena such as kinds of objectives, types of orientations to what should be taught, and the overt, hidden, and null curriculum. This research, categorization, and conceptual work is important, but we have not synthesized it into theories. Perhaps we're getting closer, although it still appears to be piecemeal.

And so I wonder . . . will the next issue of *Theory Into Practice* devoted to curriculum theory actually contain some?

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