

# In Search of Ordinary Places

## The Intellectual Journey of Donald W. Oliver

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**M**Y FIRST ENCOUNTER with Donald Oliver, my assigned advisor for my master's program, didn't start off as well as I had hoped:

*Uncertain whether I can find his office in time to make our appointment, I arrive to our meeting way too early. Standing outside his door, I wait for him to finish his meeting with another student. A frazzled-looking man, talking without pause to the student leaving his office, he immediately turns to me when the other student leaves and introduces himself.*

*"Adam? Hello, Don Oliver."*

*"Hi, Dr. Oliver."*

*Waving me to a seat in his cluttered office, he instructs, "Come in and sit down. When did you arrive on campus?"*

*"Last night. Well, actually, really early this morning."*

*"You talk funny. Where you from?"*

*I responded with a nervous laugh, "Up here, I guess so. I'm from Kentucky."*

*Sensitive about a speech impediment I had as a child and my noticeably different dialect from others around me in this context, his negative comment about the way that I speak did little to make me feel comfortable. It is certainly an unfortunate beginning to our relationship.*

Although our relationship had gotten off to a rocky start, we eventually developed a close relationship. During my master's program, I took two of his classes, worked with him on a research project on folk education and in a study group on community and sustainability, and spent as much time outside these academic contexts with him as possible at his home and on campus. His tendency to be confrontational and argumentative made it exhausting to be around him as much but in such an intellectually stimulating way. Nothing remained unchallenged. In and outside the classroom context, he faithfully maintained the role of both teacher and student and insisted we do the same. Little patience for small talk, he constantly engaged us in intellectual discourse even on ordinary topics. In fact, Oliver regularly focused on the ordinary. As a mentor, friend, and teacher, he led his other students and me on an intellectual journey in search of the ordinary. I learned through my relationship with him – and have been reminded a

few times from other sources since then – that what is often understood as the ordinary, is quite deserving of our attention.

### A Lasting Legacy

Oliver’s focus on the ordinary is not really surprising given his origins. He was born in 1929, the year of the infamous stock market crash, and was a product of the Great Depression. His family was working class, and he attended a one-room schoolhouse in Connecticut during the early years of education. He excelled at his public high school and earned a scholarship to Amherst College (Bohan & Feinberg, 2010). In 1952, he graduated from Amherst with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. He went directly into a graduate program at Harvard Graduate School of Education and earned his doctorate in 1956. Soon after, he joined the faculty at Harvard. Despite his elite background in higher education, Oliver held strong anti-elitist sentiments throughout his life, due, in part, to his working class origins.

In the field of social studies education, Oliver became a prominent leader in the 1960s and 1970s. Earlier in his career, he set in motion the intellectual framework for inquiry-based social studies education in his 1957 *Harvard Educational Review* article, “The Selection and Content in Social Studies.” The article launched the “New Social Studies Movement,” which profoundly impacted social studies education in the 1960s and early 1970s. During those years, his work with Fred Newmann and James Shaver on the Harvard Social Studies Project attempted to transform the social studies curriculum nationwide by confronting basic beliefs about how K-12 students should learn social studies. More specifically, Oliver, Newmann, and Shaver placed greater emphasis on inquiry-based lessons, participation through decision-making, and case study analysis than traditional approaches to social studies education that emphasized content over process (Bohan & Feinberg, 2008). In so doing, they forged a new way of thinking about the teaching and learning process in social studies education.

The Harvard Social Studies Project was a collaborative effort by Oliver, several of his graduate students – including Newmann and Shaver – and 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade school teachers to change traditional social studies teaching and to promote analysis of societal problems. Through their work in this project, a series of pamphlets were published in the 1960s and 1970s. The curriculum materials developed from the project became known as the Public Issue Series. This series emphasized an inquiry-based, interdisciplinary approach to social studies education. Oliver’s inquiry approach provided specific instructional strategies that sought to facilitate discussion in the classroom. He loved classroom debate, so it is not surprising that he would encourage such methods in social studies classrooms and textbooks. He wanted students and teachers to **think** about important questions that had no clear-cut, simple answers. His analytical approach was drastically different from the post-Sputnik emphasis on content knowledge and traditional teaching methods. Although the materials of the Public Issue Series were never widely adopted, many of the intellectual concepts, instructional methods, and overall approach produced a lasting legacy on social studies education (Bohan & Feinberg, 2008).

When he worked on the Harvard Social Studies Project, Oliver drew heavily on Deweyan beliefs about education and Jeffersonian perspectives on society. After his work on this project, he took a critical theory educational stance. Influenced heavily by the student unrest at Harvard during that time, he lost faith in authority and believed that real learning occurred when students rejected obedience and hierarchical structures (Bohan & Feinberg, 2010). Oliver increasingly

became more radical in his beliefs about education. He stopped focusing on the problem solving approach that guided the Public Issues Series as he became convinced that people could discuss topics *ad infinitum* but change would not occur because people do not really listen to each other. He abandoned the notion that human beings were exceedingly rational, and he no longer believed that the secular state could provide solutions to problems. Rather, he believed that people need community, spirituality, and religious institutions with their moral codes to provide structure. He no longer believed that an adherence to an abstract set of values was possible. People, he came to believe, simply aren't all that rational.

Several personal and professional events in the early 1970s led Oliver to change some of his earlier ideas and the focus of his research. He began to explore broader intellectual interests instead of a singular focus on social studies. Oliver's seminal work, *Education and Community: A Radical Critique of Innovative Schooling*, reflected a change of focus in his scholarship. In this work, Oliver (1976) critiqued the notion of helping professions as agents of change. He described different cultures, including kibbutzim, Hutterites, the Highlander Folk School, the Marathon House, and Japanese Americans. He also explored various human experiences, such as the varied dimensions of the quality of life. Oliver used these descriptions of cultures and human experiences to develop a theory of community. In outlining this theory, he noted that integral to the building of a viable community is "a move away from living 'in one's head'" (p. 46) toward shared human activity. He argued that contemporary life, namely modernity, is shaped by a technocratic worldview – a concept is developed, then applied, and then analyzed. As Summers (1994) explains in discussing Oliver's perspective, "It is as though the concept and its application and further development are conferred a reality apart from the sensate world wherein they are employed" (p. 466). According to Oliver, because we often "live in our heads," we separate what we can conceptualize from our actions, from the rituals of life. His extensive study of community led him to reject traditional public schooling and assumptions of progress. Believing that true learning and real cultural exchanges occur in ordinary places, such as hair salons and coffee shops, he took a sabbatical in 1978 from Harvard to study hairdressing at a beauty school in Lowell, Massachusetts.

Oliver continued to write throughout the remainder of his life. Two important books followed his 1976 work on community, *Education, Modernity, and Fractured Meaning* (1989) and *The Primal, the Modern, and the Vital Center* (2002). In his 1989 book, Oliver continued to question the assumptions of advanced industrial societies and believed that the age of "modern scientific-materialistic culture" would come to end because the technical achievements of this culture failed to fulfill people and provide deep meanings. In search of something different than what this modern culture provides, he focused on small communities, spirituality, sustainability, and religious communities. And Oliver lived what he believed. As Stern (2007) describes, "He rode a bike, walked, or took public transportation; and drove a car as little as possible. He sang in the church choir. He invited students to large meals on Friday nights for friendship and conversation" (p. 285). Moreover, he spent most of his time in the areas where he worked and lived, and while he took day trips from time to time, he never traveled – even to academic conferences and gatherings – that far from home. He enjoyed the pleasures of home, neighborhood, and community. Tellingly, his last book was decided to "the domicile at 18 Willow Street," his home address in Lowell, Massachusetts.

In the summer of 2002, Donald Oliver died at the age of 73. From the early 1970s until his death, Oliver's two main philosophical interests were the development of a theory of culture and the study of human experiences. He kept these interests grounded in the fabric of everyday life,

asking how we can create meaningful local places that encourage people to live balanced lives (Gewertz, 2002). He was a man filled with contradictions, which may explain why his favorite word was “ambiguity.” His friends and colleagues have described him as confrontational and argumentative yet warm and caring; intensely committed to other people and devoted to community yet distant and intensely private. He made significant intellectual contributions not only to social studies education but also to the curriculum field and the larger field of education.

**“A move away from living in one’s head” (Oliver, 1976, p. 46)**

In 2005, Kent den Heyer presented a paper at a town-hall gathering at the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Curriculum and Pedagogy Conference titled, “An Experiment into the Public Face of Education Scholarship: Or, How to Stop ‘Roiling Along’ Tenure and Promotion Tracks.” Since this paper is being published in this issue as an invited article, I will not summarize the various points he made in his presentation, but the overall argument he made was for curriculum scholars to take a self-imposed hiatus from submitting new articles to journals for two years. In my fourteen years teaching at the college level, I have never taken this hiatus from publishing, even after receiving tenure. Nevertheless, his proposal stuck with me and connected with some of what I learned from Oliver about my work as teacher and scholar. During den Heyer’s presentation, I was reminded of one particular moment:

*We are walking to the station to catch the next train back to Cambridge. With graduation approaching, I’m talking to Don about plans for next year. I tell him about how my job search for a teaching position is going. He reassures me that I’ll find something and then asks what else I have planned.*

*Not understanding his question, I ask, “What do you mean?”*

*“What other plans to do you have?”*

*“I don’t really have plans other than to teach.”*

*“Why not?”*

*“I haven’t thought about it much.”*

*“How can you not think about your life?”*

*“I have to some extent, but I guess that I’ve been too focused on finding a job and where I’m going to think about much else.”*

*“And you want to teach?”*

*“Of course.”*

*“Then you better start thinking about life and living more holistically.”*

*“I’m not ready to start thinking about other things.”*

*“Maybe you’re not ready to be a teacher.”*

*His statement hits me like a ton of bricks. I don’t even begin to understand what he is suggesting. As he turns his attention to the others traveling with us, I stew over his words. But as I continue to think about what he has told me, I begin to accept that I really have no other plans than to find a teaching job. I’ll think about this more later. I’m too busy to sort this out right now.*

If I understood what Oliver was actually trying to tell me that day, then he was proposing that I needed to live a more balanced life in order to be an effective teacher. Although den Heyer was making a very different point in his paper, he also emphasized the point of disrupting the routines we often find ourselves following as educators and scholars that leave little room to be fully effective in our work. For Oliver, we engage in this disruption of the everyday by locating

ourselves in ordinary spaces. Throughout his career, he found such spaces as a hairdresser, a tenor in a trio known as “Maddie, the Professor, and Polly,” and an active member of his local community – to name a few. He lived and worked within these spaces not only to achieve a more balanced life but also to be more effective in his work as a curriculum scholar.

At the end of my five-year tenure as editor of *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* and director of the Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice, it may be finally the time to follow Oliver’s example and to begin searching for the ordinary. Only time will tell if I actually begin such a journey into the strangely unfamiliar context of the ordinary. Whatever the case, Oliver and den Heyer’s similar, yet different, call for disrupting the routines many of us in the curriculum field find ourselves faithfully following is certainly worth (re)considering. Their proposals call on us to find the needed spaces for examining more closely why we do the work we do and what it actually takes to do that work effectively. This kind of thinking about our work as curriculum scholars should be central to the routines guiding our efforts.

Since this is my last editorial, I would like to take this chance to thank several people – especially Hongyu Wang, the former co-editor. Wang’s devotion to and work with the journal was remarkable. The intellectual vigor of the journal would not be as alive as it continues to be without her leadership as co-editor. Her work continues to impact the journal, and I assume it will for quite some time. I also want to thank Greg Dimitriadis, associate editor, for his constant support and brilliant work with the journal and conference. His leadership has been incredible valuable during these five years. My appreciation also goes to the former assistant editors, Bruce Parker and Aliya Rahman, for their technical support that was necessary for publishing an online journal. I also thank my current and former editorial assistants, Karlyn Adler, Emma Creeden, and Alex Chase, for their diligent work. Finally, I want to thank the section editors for their extraordinary contribution to the journal.

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