

“All We Are Saying....”

The Case for Peace in Curriculum Theory

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I WOULD LIKE TO use this space to say thank you to Hongyu Wang for her service to *JCT* as co-editor. She is a gracious scholar who has that unusual ability, through setting a high bar for her own work, to encourage those with whom she comes into contact to strive for excellence. Her intellectual expectations and meticulous attention to organization and detail have upheld *JCT* as the premier journal of curriculum theory. I am proud to have served as section editor under her leadership.

It is fitting, then, to engage briefly with her Editor’s Introduction to the December issue entitled “Identity, interdependence, and curriculum of social and global imagination.” I consider it a good day when theory and practice come together all at once. Oddly, Thursday was one of those days. I had an idea for my Section Introduction that had literally come to me in the middle of the night. I re-read Hongyu’s piece over coffee, excited to begin. I highlighted the part where she talked about her frustration with her students’ determination that violence was part of human nature and must therefore be accepted as such. Her introduction further develops her recent work about non-violence and peace.

I put the essay away and began my long day, which consisted of three meetings and an evening class, but much of what Hongyu had written continued to resonate throughout the day. Thursday evening, I attended a presentation at my university that was part of a “Pathways to Peace” series. The event featured Nobel Peace Prize winner Jody Williams, who had received the award to honor her decades of work to ban land mines in Central America. All I really had wanted to do Thursday night was come home after my long day of meetings and teaching, but the very astute department admin assistant asked, “When will you have this chance again?” I decided not to take any chances. I went, but I found an end seat in the back of the auditorium, in case I needed an escape route.

Now, I expected a woman who had been the recipient of *The Nobel Peace Prize* to be a sort of Eleanor Roosevelt type—stately and discerning. This woman didn’t seem anything like Eleanor Roosevelt, or Bess Truman, for that matter. Instead, she had her hair pinned up in a questionable ponytail and wore a T-shirt and one of those long, shapeless skirts. She walked onto the stage, digging through a huge black purse and said, “I just got back from a 10-day trip to

Mexico where 20 other women and I worked with impoverished villages on a peacekeeping project. And I am tired.” She then perched herself on the edge of the stage and kicked off her shoes and said, “*and*, my feet hurt.” I must admit, I was a little disappointed and impressed at the same time. As she began to talk about violence and peace, of course I thought back to my morning reading of Hongyu’s essay on those very same topics. Williams, speaking mostly to students who were sitting in the front rows (they had not thought to plan escape routes), admitted that people who work for peace are often considered wimps (and yes, she really said *wimp*). Then she named some workers for peace: Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, and Bishop Desmond Tutu. She paused for a second, smiled and said, “By the way, Bishop Tutu is funny and *such a flirt!* He is a delightful man who is so much fun.” (These are always my favorite parts of speeches.) She looked back at the front row and said in a tired but serious voice, “These people are no wimps. The work of peace is not for wimps. The work of peace requires courage and fortitude.”

When Hongyu writes in her Introduction about violence, she specifically mentions intergenerational violence as it occurs in intellectual life. Just as she vociferously rejects her students’ beliefs that violence is unavoidably ascribable to human nature, she also rejects that intergenerational violence is a given in intellectual life, which I here am interpreting as the curriculum field. Hongyu’s editorial centers around William Doll’s keynote address at the 2011 Bergamo Conference last October in which Doll called for a “systemic approach to life, education, and pedagogy.” Hongyu writes: “It just seems to be a good fit to acknowledge three generations of intellectual works in the field of curriculum studies, to which we are commonly committed, as I depart *JCT*” (Wang, 2011, p. 1).

One of my fondest memories of Dr. Doll, when I was a student and he a professor at Louisiana State University, was in a doctoral seminar where we would present our writings on a given topic. Following our readings of our work, Dr. Doll would slowly lean back in his chair, his long legs crossed and stretched out in front of him, put his hands behind his head, and say in that voice that anyone who has ever been around him knows, “Ahhhhh.” And often, nothing followed the *Ahhhhh*. Dr. Doll had left us all to figure out what was to follow, and there was beauty and a spirit in that. That was his system, and as Hongyu states, “He has practiced what he proposed and...such an approach can be enacted with pedagogical and educational craft” (p. 3). It is this kind of “relational dynamic,” such as Doll “nurture[d] in and out of the classroom” (p. 3) that Hongyu advocates to “connect different realms of life” and “see through separation and fragmentation to uncover the fundamental relationality of human life” (p. 3). Herein lies the “capacity of social imagination” within a systematic approach: our awareness of the interconnectedness of all life.

Hongyu explains her concerns about intergenerational violence in intellectual life. She writes, “It is not unusual for the older generation to feel that the younger generation has lost values of the good old days and for the younger generation to feel that the older generation has lost their creative energy, so mutual complaints can be heard in almost all cultures. But what I think is unique to our culture is the demand for the younger generation to break away with the old in order to pursue their independence and claim ‘singularity’ through separation rather than interdependence.” She also notes that the “celebration” of “rebellion of the young against the old” is “not necessarily unrestrained creativity but fragmentations that split rather than integrate the system” (p. 2). Hongyu leaves it to us as readers to make the connection of what intergenerational intellectual violence looks like. She critiques this violence as a non-generative suffocation of our imagination. And through her carefully crafted narrative, she disabuses us of

any assumption that intellectual violence is human nature. It seems to me that the difference between this and the assumptions voiced by her students is that at least the students voice their assumptions, while we intellectuals practice a more subtle generational violence. As Jody Williams (sounding like a Nobel Peace Prize Winner, tired or not) also noted, “Violence is a continuum; violence is a choice—not human nature.” Theory and practice come together.

Williams ended with a call to action that I think we, as curriculum theorists, tend to avoid in our scholarly work; I suppose activists have the license to suggest actual action. She said that we can have all the moral conviction in the world about a cause, but if we do not take any action to try and make the world a better place, then we might as well stay silent. Her advice was simple, “Find a cause, and get off your butts (and yes, she did say butts) and do something.” It seems to me that opposing the violence that Hongyu writes about is as good a cause as any for members of our field to undertake. Intergenerational violence in intellectual life is detrimental to an already shrinking field of curriculum studies, and where *JCT* and Bergamo are concerned, to curriculum theory. A “generation gap” need not be a normal occurrence in our field. Neither must a seismic rift mark the “next generation” or “next moment.” And the critiques of some about the supposed “negative hold of the old over the new” (p. 2) does little to “enhance the interconnectedness that we share in a generative system” (p. 2). We are each left to examine our complicity.

No less distressing to our field—which, recall, is made up of people—are the layers of *intra*-generational violence prevalent within it. While Hongyu does not address it in her essay, I would mention it briefly here in conversation with her comments. Speaking from the orientation of “new scholar” (which was not that long ago...), it is a hard thing to insert one’s work—and thereby one’s self—into an academic field, armed with a Ph.D. and a few conference presentations. If one looks around for guidance and is perceptive, one sees the jockeying for position at conferences. The over-the-shoulder glances to see whether an academic “celebrity” has entered the room. The endless networking with young colleagues who are also scrambling. These are seen as rites of passage, another kind of human nature, really. Let us say for argument that it *is* an expected part of the process. What is unnatural, in my opinion, is the “desire of pushing for singularity at the expense of the network” (p. 2). In our ambition, and in this pushing, we fail to nurture and interrelate with and to one another. And, as Hongyu notes regarding other violences: “We have learned not to ‘see’ such an impact as it does not seem to be immediate and we have to march on to create a new world and claim it as our own” (p. 2). I can’t explain what runs through my mind as I work, but just now I am reminded of Sophia’s impassioned words, in *The Color Purple*, to Celie about the beatings by Harpo that Celie had tacitly condoned. I wish to non-violently appropriate them here. “She say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight....But I never thought I’d have to fight in my own house” (quote retrieved from <http://www.shmoop.com/color-purple/violence-quotes-all.html>). I believe freedom from *intra*-generational, *inter*-generational, raced, classed, and gendered violence in what should be safe, generative, imaginative places is a reasonable expectation for those entering this field. Let us learn to “see” the shifts, breaks, and pushing—and then instead search for ways and reasons that we might connect.

Hongyu concludes her Editor’s Introduction with a call for “courage, compassion, and capacity” (p. 3). She challenges us to engage a curriculum in which we call forth our better natures—that is, the parts of our human nature that are interconnected and dependent upon one another. Through social and global imagination, we might become aware of our mutual dependence and see it as a good and generative state. When we are engaged in such a way, energies formerly expended toward intellectual violence can be re-directed toward the “life-

affirmative capabilit[ies]” (p. 4) Hongyu imagines. The courageous work of peace, our work as curriculum theorists, might then become human nature.

