

## Notes Toward a Feminist Curriculum Theory

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In this paper I attempt to demonstrate how particular dichotomies within individuals mirror particular dichotomies within contemporary social structures. I use autobiographical material to illustrate the nature of individual struggle and my knowledge of the reconceptualized curriculum theory field to point to current division in a social structure. I then move on to suggest that an analysis of feminist theory and practice can be helpful in loosening the tensions of individual and collective dichotomies.

## 1976-77

I am at the University of Rochester beginning the second year of a doctoral program in curriculum theory. I am supervising student teachers (observing them teach in high schools and assisting to teach a course on methods). At the same time I am living in a college dormitory as the resident director for 650 undergraduates. My lesbian lover is closeted away in my apartment, keeping me sane.

Outwardly, the year is a successful one. I am invited to return to both positions. Inwardly, I am almost devastated. The year has been costly in terms of self expression. My voice is blocked and my response is to check out of the university.

## 1977-78

I am in the Bay Area...Berkeley, Oakland, occasionally San Francisco. Feeling the freedom of no time structure, no commitments...mingling in cafes, cultural centers, going to political and artistic events that mirror parts of myself. Gay schoolworker rights in California are threatened and I take on political expression. I am running daily, paying attention to nutrition (striving for balance). I am employed to counsel ex-convicts, women involved mostly in drug related crimes...and I learn the street scene.

Outwardly, I have moved to the fringe of the culture, sharing the strains of material poverty with my friends. My ties with academe are tenuous. Inwardly, I am nourished; moving day by day from my own needs, rediscovering myself.

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1978 - August

I sit at the typewriter in my home in the Berkeley hills...eucalyptus trees outside my window overlooking the bay. I am nearly peaceful, seeking words to describe how the oscillations within my own life course parallel a similar movement I see within the field of curriculum theory...within any field attempting to become more whole, attempting to give birth to the new parts of itself.

I have travelled across the country to get away from academic dialogue and now, with the passage of time and personal development, am drawn to join with it again.

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The purpose for giving a brief chronological account of my herstory is to show how the focus of my development changes from expression in a well established university community to expression in an unstructured, newly forming community (I refer to the lesbian feminist community in the Bay Area); to show how each environment taps only one part of my being and my struggle to integrate the two (private and public, within established structures and outside of them); to create channels of communication between heretofore insulated sectors.

I see the same kind of searching for self definition going on within the reconceptualized field of curriculum theory. It leans to one side and then the other...specifically in relation to two major approaches that have characterized its body thus far.

Both approaches critique existing curriculum theory in a similar vein; they fault its alienation from individual lives and its indoctrination of societal values. They differ, however, in the directions they go from here. One line of inquiry follows the path of self development: expanding human consciousness through a growing awareness of self motives, actions, and desires. It draws from psychology, philosophy, perhaps even religion. Its method is phenomenological, and not limited to rational thinking. The other line of inquiry directs its attention to institutions outside the individual, to proposing alternative organizational structures. It draws from political science, sociology, and political philosophy. Its method is intellectual, based on observation and analysis of the material world.

My sense about the place of these two theories in the reconceptualized field of curriculum theory is aptly put by Fritjof Capra in his discussion of physics and mysticism: "*Neither is comprehended in the other,*

*nor can either of them be reduced to the other; but both of them are necessary supplementing one another for a fuller understanding of the world."*<sup>1</sup> A curriculum theory based on self exploration does not need social structure theory to survive; nor does a curriculum theory based on social structures need theory to survive, but it is my conviction that the field of curriculum theory needs both.

Why are both of these theories essential to the field?

Because they speak to very different problems in existing curriculum theory. One uproots the causes for our alienation from society; the other goes to the heart of our alienation from self.

I recognize the need for a dual focus upon examining my own experience. In terms of individual growth (me becoming myself) I find the necessary strength, energy, and often tools to continue struggling to overcome the blocks ahead when I know something about the routes that others have taken before me. Likewise, as I come to terms with the political, sexual, economic, racial, and psychological oppression of our times, it is essential to find companionship and dialogue with others who are committed to making sense of this waking nightmare and to waging war against it.

What is particularly frustrating to me is not that these theorists criticize and sometimes ridicule each other's work, but that they fail to see the necessity for a theory of curriculum that synthesizes their varied approaches and goes beyond them to create an independent framework of its own.

I found an examination of the feminist movement useful here for the purpose of gaining perspective and insight on the places where the reconceptualized curriculum theory field is in danger of stasis. The development of feminist theory powerfully reflects some of the same struggles that we as curriculum theorists are dealing with. I am referring to our struggle for definition, and, once, we have identified who we are, the nature of our interrelatedness.

For feminists, the resolution of these questions has meant long hours of debate on the extent to which lesbians, middle class housewives, third world women, leftists, and others, will be considered in the movement. Arising from all of this anguishing debate seems to be a growing awareness of the myriad ways and forms that oppression has burrowed into our lives and a growing realization that there is room for each one of these groups and/or individuals to participate in the struggle. To prioritize by saying,

for example, that we are first committed to legislative reform and then to building alternative structures; or that our first goal is to perfect a way of working together and secondly, to determine what we are working for; is to create allegiances and limits where hard work and thought is called for. Each new situation needs to be considered for its individual characteristics as well as its relationship to the field as a whole. Because of its willingness to question and to redirect its focus as a result of questioning, feminism has been difficult to pin down in one sentence, in one compact definition. It encompasses such a huge number of oppressed people; there is no single class background, age, or life perspective that represents the movement. The advantage here is in becoming a broad power base sensitive to and conscious of all the subtle forms oppression takes on in society. The risk of being so open is in losing clarity of vision and in being sidetracked by internal struggle. The feminist movement has certainly had its share of struggle within, of splintering, and of redefining. However, as a movement it continues to grow and its experimental process yields the inevitable and desirable outcome in the selection of new life forms.

What does this discussion of feminism have to do with the reconceptualized curriculum theory field? Both fields evolve in response to the same source, disillusionment with life the way it is. They also display similar patterns of adaptation in their stages of development as revolutionary theories. Feminism validates our sense that we cannot root out one problem (like sexism in our schools) without unearthing the whole problem (sexism in society/self which leads to racism/classism/the isms in society/self). We need to be willing to listen to the different voices within our field: the neomarxists, the phenomenologists, the feminists, to see where we are connected and where we are separate. From there we can begin concretizing our vision, grounding our language in terms that are accessible to more people, and resolving our different points of view. By incorporating a feminist perspective, we do not affirm the struggle of women over men, but of the liberation of the feminine quality of life (in both men and women) and the receding monopoly of its masculine counterpart. An understanding of how feminist principles when put into action, differ from patriarchal organizational principles, could add a new dimension of depth to curriculum theory.

Clearly, feminism is just one lens through which to survey the field. There are other approaches and issues harboring in the periphery of the field that await investigation. I am speaking about discussions on values, aesthetics, and language.

My hope for the journal is that it will provide an environment where the work of radical curriculum theorists evolves individually and collectively through dialogue in papers, that contributions will be made from people in other fields and walks of life, that a field will begin to take shape with much broader and deeper implications than it has had to date. *"Our greatest potential lies in taking ourselves seriously as a powerful, though relatively new nucleus for profound change. Although we may work with and learn from other groups where it is appropriate, our primary concern must be the expansion of our insights and our movements as feminists (or curriculum theorists) for in that process, we will create new possibilities, new perspectives on ending all oppression. Our potential rests not in being absorbed into existing ideologies or groups, but in actively creating new efforts toward reshaping the political, cultural, economic, and spiritual (educational) structures of the world."*<sup>2</sup>

#### Footnotes

1. Capra, Fritjof. THE TAO OF PHYSICS. New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1977, p. 297.
2. Bunch, Charlotte. "Beyond Either/Or Feminist Options" in QUEST, [QUEST is a feminist quarterly], 1976 Summer, Washington, D.C., p. 6.