

Est-ce qu'il n'y a pas de hors-curriculum?

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In my 2003 Shanghai paper (http://iaacs.org/mod/fileman/files/Whitson_IAACS.pdf), I proposed dialogue across national and language communities to develop common understanding of what we mean by “curriculum”: in other words, what is it that we seek to understand, when engaged in inquiry aimed at the understanding of curriculum?

The “Call for Papers” for this conference notes a paradigm shift for Curriculum Studies, in which “popular conceptions of curriculum as protocol and as social engineering [have been judged] as devaluing the intellectual character and moral responsibility of the teaching profession.”

Yet, such conceptions of “curriculum” remain common not only in popular usage, but in the education profession itself, and even in the academic world of education studies. Even in traditions (such as that of Didaktik in Europe) where there is no such devaluation of teaching as a profession, the word “curriculum” can still be seen as referring only to delimited components of education such as the “Richtlinien bzw. Lehrpläne” in Germany (Klafki, 1998, p. 315), to the 学習指導要領 in Japan, or to comparable “Guidelines for the Course of Study” in other systems.

In the project of these papers, I argue that there are serious consequences resulting from the persistence of inadequate but widespread conceptions of curriculum, and that there is a great deal to be gained by supplanting such conceptions—in professional communities of educators and in broader public discourse, and not only within the more specialized community of Curriculum Inquiry—with a more adequate conception of the manifold reality that we understand as “curriculum.”

Conceptual (and, more broadly, intellectual and cultural) diversity is a great strength of our field, and I am not suggesting that we need some kind of definitional consensus as a prerequisite—or outcome—of the “complicated conversation” in which our transnational field is taking form. At the same time, I believe it will be beneficial to articulate both the areas of agreement and of difference in our conceptions of what it is we mean by “curriculum” —i.e., what it is that we are now, diversely and variously, seeking to understand “not only in institutional terms but, as well, in historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, postmodern, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological, and international terms.”

While I agree completely that our complicated conversation will be abundantly fecund and valuable without need for conceptual consensus, I also believe that there is a considerable degree of agreement in our field on what it is that we are striving to understand more fully, and I believe that there will be considerable value in conversation to explore areas of agreement and of difference on this matter.

One point on which I expect there is widespread agreement within our field, which will be a particular focus of this paper, is the recognition that what we seek to understand as “curriculum” is not some segment or component of the schools’ institutional program, such as might be found in the “Lehrplandatenbank” featured on the Rheinland-Pfalz “Bildungserver” at <http://bildung-rp.de/lehrpläne/index.phtml> .

Of course, there is nothing necessarily wrong with the conventional usage that refers to such study plans as “curricula,” so long as we don’t forget that such plans can figure as no more than specific elements of the full, manifold curriculum of life (i.e., curriculum vitae) in which human being(s) come to form (i.e., in a notion of Bildung that cannot be fully served by any cyber-”Bildungsserver”!

For many years I have begun my introductory curriculum courses by asking students for their ideas about the meaning of the word. The overwhelming majority understand “curriculum” to mean an official plan of study in a school, or in a degree program, a specific course, etc. In one rare exception, a public school principal one year said that “curriculum” includes “everything that happens, and everything that does not happen, within a school.” I expect that scholars in our field would agree that there is no a priori basis for excluding anything that happens—or anything that does not happen—from consideration as something that might play a part in the curriculum of (someone’s) life. In fact, we would not limit this to things that happen (or don’t happen) within schools (i.e., the “school curriculum” must be understood as part of the broader life curriculum, although it may well be the particular part of the full curriculum that is the specific focus of attention for many of us).

A broader conception of curriculum, not excluding anything at all a priori, leads to the question at the center of this paper: Est-ce qu’il n’y a pas de hors-curriculum? This paraphrases Derrida’s (in-)famous assertion that “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” which was attacked by critics who insisted that Derrida was denying the existence of anything outside of what they (the critics) understood as “texts.” But Derrida’s claim was not that “il n’y a rien hors du texte.” He was not claiming that the only reality is that of things that are inside of “texts.” His point, rather, was that text is not the sort of thing that’s bounded between an inside and an outside, or “hors-texte.”

A conception of curriculum as simply including anything and everything, and excluding nothing whatsoever, could be useless at best (since a word that refers to everything indifferently has no proper meaning of its own); or it could have reductionist, imperialist, or other harmful consequences. But, as with “text” and “textuality” in Derrida, curriculum is a distinctive feature of the world we live in. There is nothing that in principle would be excluded a priori from playing part in the distinctive aspect of our world that is curriculum, and which our field of study seeks to better understand. While curriculum, like text, is not the sort of thing that has an “outside” and “inside,” it does have its own character by which it is distinguished as curriculum. What is distinctively “curriculum,” will be the focus of this paper.