



The Basic Understory: A Curriculum of Interrelation

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Abstract:

This editorial is an inquiry into the curriculum of interrelation. In preparation of the articles for this issue, I was struck by the spiritual, ecological, and genealogical resonances in the complex search for meaning. My makings invite you on a thread that networks here and there in a synaptic ontological question of re-storing experience in the languages we know. Through reverence, restoration, reflection and reparation, how might we find grace in the curriculum of learning life? What is the understory of education?

Keywords: curriculum; interrelation; education; understory

Le sous-bois de base : un curriculum de l'interrelationnel

Résumé :

Cet éditorial est une enquête sur un curriculum de l'interrelationnel. En préparant les articles de ce numéro, j'étais saisie par les résonances spirituelles, écologiques et généalogiques dans la recherche de signification. Je défile des questions ontologiques ici. Je demande si, par révérence, restauration, réflexion et réparation, nous pouvons trouver de la grâce dans le curriculum de vie. Aussi, quel est le sous-bois de l'éducation?

Mots clés : curriculum; interrelationnel; éducation; sous-bois



Sameshima, P., & Morchel, P. (2018). Understory.
3' x 3'. Acrylic paint and India ink on canvas. From the series, *Canopy Promises*.

"We exist in profound interrelatedness—in ways we barely apprehend."
(Charlene Spretnak, 2002, p. 45)

"'Grace' is what I call the experience of non-duality, the perception of the unitive dimensions of being in the cosmos. Modern cultures regard such experiences—which can either be cultivated through spiritual practice or come at unexpected moments—as "supernatural" and generally deny their existence. I think it's more accurate to call them "ultranatural": it's as if the cosmos suddenly bursts through our mundane level of consciousness and reveals to us another dimension of reality, the unbroken continuity of life. I think this is when we come closest to grasping our participatory relationship to ultimate mystery." (Charlene Spretnak, 2002, p. 44)

Reverence: Layers in the Understory

What does it mean to live reverently?" asks Carl Leggo (this issue) in his book review of *Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education*. The author, Michael Derby (2015) writes,

What if . . . we approached ecological education as a practice of learning to fix our attention on the resonant structures of meaning—the voice—of the world? Might we begin to recognize with more frequency the immeasurable, yet strangely familiar, polyphony of things? (p. 9)

In the collaborative painting "Understory" with Patricia Morchel, I imagine myself in the forest, looking up, through the trees, looking to the light. The painting, one of a series of pieces created as an inquiry into our personal practices of artmaking in the academy—for a curated edition of the journal *Visual Arts Research*—focuses on the networked and organic nature of inspiration and the deep layerings of history, palimpsest and trace. Making the artworks has reminded me that interrelation is immanent in life, such that our thinking, living, making, learning, teaching and researching all exist for the purpose of meaning-making and love. A curriculum of interrelatedness is an acknowledgement that life is the curriculum of love.

Surely, education must start with questioning what it means to be human in the creation, what it means to live in relationship with all of creation, what it means to resonate with voice and voices. Ecological education is located in imagination, spirituality, creativity and love. (Leggo, this issue)

Charlene Spretnak (2002), an ecological postmodern theorist, speaks of the palimpsest of isolation, separation. She posits that the "discontinuity between the self and the rest of the world . . . [develops] layers upon layers of alienation . . . [including] the belief that all relationships have a dualistic structure: dominance and submission" (p. 45). She believes that living in awareness of nonduality is "best realized through a deep and broad understanding of nonviolence" (p. 45). While nonviolence includes all we might interpret from the word, she extends nonviolence to the other as "the evoking of the richest possible unfolding of the person, not in an isolated, atomized way, but in relationship to the rest of the natural world . . . and to the community" (p. 45). Her description of nonviolence attends to the space outside of the middle, the middle being the self-absorbed centre. Spretnak's explanation of nonviolence asks for an awareness of the not yet.

The difficulty of this imagining is that our real is always pressed toward constructed centres, to the nostalgic oligarchy of a centralized metanarrative, to a plutocracy that is fed by the belief that conformity divines success. Contrarily, the move toward an awareness of consciously living outside of the middle can be uneasy. This alternate space, what Sean Wiebe and I call the *liminal studio* (2018), is the generative space of the not yet (Sameshima, Wiebe, & Hayes, in press). It is a space where the making of newness is a creation of love. It is not a new space and it not newly discovered. All the papers in this JCACS issue, speaking from different cultures, using various lexical semantics, referencing sacred world texts, and sometimes even using the same educational jargon, share the stories of the generative learnings that occur in the education of the margins. Marie Battiste's *Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy* reviewed by Joanne Tompkins (this issue) offers an interweaving of Mi'kmaw knowledge and Eurocentric knowledge systems to create a trans-systemic construction of understanding in order to seek decolonization and transformation in the academy.

Tompkins opens with words from Thomas Berry (2015), an eco-theologian, who states that "the old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective" (p. 4). I ask how our stories of education and living might not just be re-storied, but how they might be *re-stored* in our minds through new conceptualizations. As I think about healing processes, I note that violent memories may remain in the mind, but through new meaning-making networks, and through the placement of the memory into a different "folder", the mind might allow a different balance. The term re-store, as used here, is more a neologism than a pun as I am interested in how the storage of the story might restore harmony.

Dennis Sumara (2005) started the JCACS 2005, Volume 3(1) editorial with Madeleine Grumet's quote, "When education forsakes the middle for the ends or the beginnings it is deadly" (1995, p. 17). Sumara summarizes:

In her response to the question of what is basic to education, Madeleine Grumet (1995) argues that learning that matters to people is rooted in history, context, and practice. The basics of education emerge neither from the learner nor the curriculum, but, as Jerome Bruner (1990) has explained, from the subjunctive spaces of lived experience. (2005, p. iii)

Sumara goes on to say that "What is basic to education, then, is not so much the 'core' or 'central' curriculum, but, instead, what we might call the 'eccentric curriculum'—a formulation that might at first seem oxymoronic" (p. v). He suggests that decentred knowledge and ex-centred schooling is crucial, that "all knowledge is both simultaneously personal and collective" (p. iv).

How do we think of personal knowledge as collective knowledge? To think of yin and yang together has long been didactic. For example, the Chinese literary koan-curriculum¹ explores nonduality and the pairing of opposites (Hori, 2000) as a pedagogical strategy to train higher order thinking. Truth is multiple and even oppositional. Bruner (2004) ascertains that "any story one may tell about anything is better understood by considering other possible ways in which it can be told"

¹ A koan is a Zen paradoxical challenge that can require a non-bifurcating intellect to solve. Oneness is a result (Kakapleau, 1989, see pp. 66-69).

(p. 709). Our personal experiences move to collective knowledge in the action of sharing. What is basic to education, then, is learning how to live well in the world. It is learning how to make meaning and to materialize the hope for something better. Cornelius Castoriadis (1975) says imagination is the creative energy of society. As we think, make, teach and research, we are materializing the margins, developing the platform of accessibility and inclusion. We are constructing a new social (Sameshima, Maarhuis, & Wiebe, 2019). Our personal curriculum is the work of the continuous making of a new world.

Re-storation: Interpreting Experience

Can changing the way we use language to convey experience change the way we make meaning? Lera Boroditsky (2017), in her TED Talk, "How language shapes the way we think" explains how Kuuk Thaayorre, a Paman language spoken by an Australian Aboriginal group, offers 16 cardinal directions and allows for the organization of time as moving east to west. Can we re-store the way we conceptualize meaning through language to create better paradigms of wellness?

What if we fully accepted interrelation as immanent to learning, if we foreclosed constructions of dichotomous middles and margins, and instead conceptualized the curriculum of education as fluidly open? Ashwani Kumar and Adrian Downey's example (this issue) asks us not to think of the "good" self and the "bad" self, but instead to "observe how the self operates". Could we ask better questions? Could we use the questions to build different stories of teaching, learning and researching (stories that would have previously been in the margin but now viewed only as different) so full access, inclusion and equity become pervading qualities of the whole?

As stated, Grumet (1995) says our interpretation of experience is rooted in history, context and practice. In Leggo's review of Derby's book (this issue), Leggo too, raises the importance of experience. Leggo notes that the key reminder he wants imparted from Derby's (2015) book is the awareness that "the substratum of education remains constituted by competition, abstraction, compliance, fatalism and dominion (pp. 97-98)" and that he wants "everybody involved in schools to focus on well-being, experience, questioning, hope and love." I focus here on experience because the interpretation of experience determines the trajectory of questioning, hope, love and well-being.

If we, as researchers and pedagogues, have the responsibility of telling personal stories that have an effect upon on the world, how do we tell the truth in our words so the words fly, have sound, say what we mean and carry the beauty of truth? On Soundcloud, in a clip called "On craftsmanship: The only surviving recording of Virginia Woolf's voice", Woolf aptly notes that

one of the chief difficulties in writing today, [is that words] are stored with other meanings, with other memories and they have contracted so many famous marriages in the past. . . . Our business is to see what we can do with the English language as it is. How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth? That is the question. (1937, 0:15-2:10)

Bruner (2004) uses the phrase "life-story meshing" (p. 700) as he recounts Jean-Paul Sartre's notions that we always view our stories in relation to other's stories, that stories must fit into a

community of stories to be believable, and that the stories must share a deep structure about the nature of life in order to be educative. Bruner proposes that “if we can learn how people put their narratives together when they tell stories from life, considering as well how they might have proceeded, we might then have contributed something new to that great ideal” (Bruner, 2004, p. 709). Bruner is suggesting that we consider the layers in the structures of meaning.

Reflection: Creating Meaning

Derby (2015), too, recommends reflecting on the structures of meaning (Leggo, this issue). Shannon Leddy (this issue) reflects deeply on a comment that appeared to hurt a student and from that exchange, she invites a curriculum of humour. Holly Tsun Haggarty (Managing Editor) and I struggled with how to include the contentious Indian spiritual guru and philosopher Osho in this issue. Kumar (this issue) writes that while Osho was a controversial figure, his commentary on *The Bhagavad Gita* and other works were foundational to his meditative inquiry. We juggled with what can and cannot be published in JCACS and how judgements and interpretations are made. Educational theorists freely cite Martin Heidegger, once a Nazi Party supporter. In fact, I did not know about the controversies related to Osho until Haggarty brought them to my attention and I further researched his work. It is unlikely that an editorial team or reviewers will always recognize all cited works. We decided that the controversies surrounding Osho had to be expanded in the footnotes, but I question the curriculum of life—which life is being promoted in JCACS? Do I know anything at all about the lives of the authors and those they cite? Does this matter? How do our lives influence our philosophies? What is the under-story of why this citation is a concern? I did not know that one of Osho’s most famous works is his commentary of *The Bhagavad Gita*.

The *Gita* is a preeminent Hindu spiritual text with numerous commentaries and interpretations. A section I highlighted when studying a commentary on the *Gita* a few years ago noted how the sages of ancient India sought

to analyze the data that nature presents to the mind. Penetrating below the senses, they found not a world of solid, separate objects but a ceaseless process of change—matter coming together, dissolving, and coming together again in a different form [and below that] they found something changeless: an infinite, indivisible reality in which the transient data of the world cohere. They call this reality Brahman: The Godhead, the divine ground of existence. (Easwaran, 1985, p. 24)

Eknath Easwaran’s commentary of the *Gita* also describes the Atman, the Self, as “layer on layer of components—senses, emotions, will, intellect, ego—each in flux” (p. 25). Atman and Brahman are described by Easwaran as “God immanent and God transcendent—as separate, but there is no real distinction” (p. 26). Easwaran explains this indivisibility between self and Godhead with a quote from Ruysbroeck, a Flemish Christian mystic:

The image of God is found essentially and personally in all mankind. Each possesses it whole, entire and undivided, and all together not more than one alone. In this way we are all one, intimately united in our eternal image, which is the image of God and the source in us of all our life. (Easwaran, 1985, p. 27)

The Hindu *Gita* scriptures of the Self, the world, and God as one harken across cultures and disciplines, connecting with Spretnak's unitive cosmos of the world, with the Chinese Zen koan curriculum of non-duality, and with *imago dei*, the Christian notion of the human being created in God's image and thus of the unity to co-create with God.

In Easwaran's (1985) introduction to his commentary of the *Gita*, he explains that the observed world—what we perceive as real, where objects are in a framework of time, space and causality, is but a mind-constructed reality created to allow for human manipulation. Our higher consciousness is a unitive state, fluid, always in process and change, where there is no separation between the Self, world or God. "Life cannot offer any higher realization. . . . Life cannot threaten such a person; all it holds is the opportunity to love, to serve, and to give" (p. 30).

This call to focus the curriculum of life outside of the middle is a collective encouragement, reiterated in various ways by numerous authors. If self-centeredness is a focus on the middle, then to love is to serve, to give, to offer focus away from the self. The basic education, then, is to offer more of the stories outside of the middle.

The characters in the allegory of the *Gita* are not unlike the student and the pedagogue, who by etymological definition is a "slave who escorts boys to school and generally supervises them" (Pedagogue, 2018). The *Gita* is a dialogue between a prince named Arjuna and his charioteer-guide Krishna. Krishna advises Arjuna that in the battlefield of ethical and moral choice, the answer is selfless action. I suggest that selfless action is a creation of the not yet. It is the doing to, or the doing for, the other. In the creation for the other, love is constructed. Selfless action is not an engagement with the political struggle in the moment, but a turning away, and a nurturing of new networks and systems of social relationships (Sameshima, Wiebe, & Hayes, in press; Wiebe & Sameshima, in press). In the painting "Understory", the organic smudgings of the extending tree lines can be viewed as excrecent outgrowths, or the strange (abnormal) beginnings of life-giving foliated branches. These differences in the margins are our personal makings that construct new futures. In a similar way, Margaret Latta (this issue) describes habits of practice as agentic and espouses curricular growth through participatory enactments of co-creation.

Reparation: A Balance Emerges

The authors in this issue, like many Canadian curriculum scholars, seek restoration and reparation in their communities and question their roles and their anthropogenic impact on the ever-changing ecological, social and political landscape. The marking of the Anthropocene on the geological timescale is significant in that it designates a distinguishable confluence of changes in earth systems (Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, & Crutzen, 2010) and this is the context from which none of us are absolved. Everything is interrelated and as ecological systems fail, social and cultural systems will degrade. Societal calls on pedagogies for settler colonialism, Indigenous and civil rights, "conscientization" (Freire, 2000), social justice, ecological sustainability, peace, well-being, and more, boil at the surface of our work and demand attention.

Matt Reingold (this issue) speaks of empowerment, confidence, agency and meaning creation when using the arts in learning, while Marie-Josée Vignola and Bernard Andrews (this issue) provide an analysis of French immersion teachers' professional development in the visual arts. These are stories of teacher's lives, stories of making meaning, that when shared, lay ground for more stories of lives in learning. In an interview in 1982, John Holt described his definition of education as unbifurcated from life.

I don't know of any definition of education that would seem to me to be acceptable. . . . I would talk about a process in which we become more informed, intelligent, curious, competent, skillful, aware of our interaction with the world around us. . . . I learn a great deal, but I do it in the process of living, working, playing, being with friends. There is no division in my life between learning, work, play, etc. These things are all one. I do not have a word which I could easily put in place of "education", unless it might be "living". (Falbel, 1993, 13-14)

Reparation is balance. In the Yoga Sutras of Pantanjali, the eight limbs of yoga offer guidance on living a meaningful life. The first limb is about the Yamas, which focus on self-conduct and behaviour. Within Yama, the first teaching is Ahimsa, nonviolence, the foundational core of all other ethical precepts. Nonviolence is right relationship with others and self, doing no harm (Adele, 2009). Like Spretnak's (2002) broad use of the term nonviolence, the yoga context refers not only to physical, visible, gross forms of violence, but also to nonviolence to and within the self. Adele (2009) explains that "our capacity to be nonviolent depends on our proactive practice of courage, balance, love of self, and compassion for others" (p. 22). Adele affirms that nonviolence in the self will allow the emergence of a balance that will impact the harmony of self in the world. A constructed meaning of self that is one with the world and God is one of community, harmony and balance. Maybe this is the understory of education.

"The type of wisdom that Socrates offered was not gained by acquiring items of knowledge but by learning to *be* in a different way". (Armstrong, 2009, p. 62)

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