

Currere as Transformative Story Telling in Religious Education

William Pinar, a contemporary North American curriculum theorist recognizes the importance of subjectivity and narrative voice in education. He suggests an autobiographical method (*currere*) that provides a helpful framework for reflecting on religious educational experiences from a subjective and narrative perspective (Pinar, 2004, 35-37).

CURRERE

William Pinar sees reconceptualized curriculum theory as an integral part of the educational process. He suggests that the term *currere* indicates a framework for autobiographical reflection on educational experiences from a subjective and narrative perspective. He describes *currere*:

The method of *currere*—the infinitive form of curriculum—promises no quick fixes. On the contrary, this autobiographical method asks us to slow down, to remember even re-enter the past, and to meditatively imagine the future. Then, slowly and in one's own terms, one analyzes one's experience of the past and fantasies of the future in order to understand more fully, with more complexity and subtlety, one's submergence in the present. The method of *currere* is not a matter of psychic survival, but one of subjective risk and social reconstruction, the achievement of selfhood and society in the age to come (Pinar, 2004, 4.)

Reconceptualized curriculum theory focuses on the experiences of the teacher/learner and their reflection and articulation of these experiences. These reflections become the impetus for transformation.

Pinar primarily discusses *currere* in relationship to the realm of contemporary public schooling in North America. He critiques public schools' standardized testing, anti-intellectualism, lack of freedom, and political agenda and suggests school reforms

that reconstruct curriculum as a process that connects academic knowledge, student and teacher subjectivity, society and historical context. *Currere* offers possibilities for change in public education as it encourages reflection on educational experience that connects academic content, subjective knowledge of teachers and learners, society and historical context (Pinar, 2004, 21). Pinar's argument is pertinent to religious education: *currere* offers possibilities for transformation in religious institutional settings as teachers, individually and as groups, reflect on the relationships between content, subjective knowledge, society and historical context.

Framework

Pinar refers to curriculum as an “ongoing, if complicated, conversation” (Pinar, 2004, 188) that is an interdisciplinary exploration of educational experience. He offers “four steps or moments in the method of *currere*: the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the synthetical” as a “strategy for students of curriculum to study the relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self understanding and social reconstruction.” Pinar demonstrates these four steps, using them as the framework for reflection on curriculum theory and public education in *What Is Curriculum Theory?* This four step process includes retelling the story of one's educational experiences, imagining future possibilities for self-understanding and educational practice; analysis of the relationships between past, present and future life history and practice; and new ways of thinking about education (Pinar, 2004, 35). Although Pinar describes *currere* as a process of “steps”, he recognizes that these “moments” may occur concurrently (Pinar, 2004, 131).

The first or “regressive step or moment” encourages the teacher/learner to remember a particular educational experience. Pinar describes this remembering as creation of a “data source” that serves as the foundational material for reflection. He articulates his assumption that one’s past affects present educational perceptions and practices. The regressive stage is a “discursive practice of truth telling ... to oneself” (Pinar, 2004, 55). The teacher/learner describes what happens in her own words, responding to the generative question “What happened in that particular educational experience?” This question may address personal, professional and/or political past. Pinar notes that one’s past is “shared, each in his or her own way, by us all.”(Pinar, 2004, 125)

The “progressive step” offers possibilities for the future. Pinar offers two modes of exploration in this progressive phase: “stylistic experimentation” and “thematic” imagining. “Stylistic experimentation” or writing offers the opportunity to “become other” as one imagines possibilities for the future. The thematic mode explores a “futural subject ... in hopes of dissolving what blocks us from moving forward toward a future not yet present ...”(Pinar, 2004, 125-127) Pinar chooses to the subject of cyberspace to demonstrate a thematic approach to the progressive stage.

The third or “analytical step” creates a “subjective space of freedom from the present.” This “critical self-examination” of the past and present seeks understanding of the multiple facets of an educational experience (Pinar, 2004, 36). Pinar’s discussion of public school anti-intellectualism illustrates this critical approach to the “relations among academic knowledge, the state of society, the processes of self-formation, and the character of the historical moment in which we live, in which others have lived, and in which our descendants will someday live” (Pinar, 2004, 187.)

The final or “synthetical step” involves re-entering the present in light of the knowledge gained in the previous steps. The question “What is the meaning of the present?” hopefully offers opportunity for reenergized pedagogical practice. One utilizes insights from past, present and future to create transformed educational environments. Mary Ashwell Doll illustrates the “moment of synthesis” well: “Curriculum is also... a coursing, as in an electric current. The work of the curriculum theorist should tap this intense current within, that which courses through the inner person, that which electrifies or gives life to a person’s energy source (Pinar, 2004, 37).”

CURRERE IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Every religious educator has stories of educational experiences that can provide the data for autobiographical reflection using the framework of *currere*. My reflections on a personal educational experience model this framework as I illustrate each step.

“Regressive Step or Moment”- Remembering

I received a request to lead a women’s retreat for a large Presbyterian congregation. The two organizers met with me to discuss their expectations for the retreat which would be held in a comfortable hotel on the beach. The women were very specific about the anticipated role of the retreat leader: they wanted me to provide content and facilitate the process of group meetings. They had some ideas about activities they felt would build fellowship among the women. One committee member was preparing materials to create journals; another member wanted to use jars filled with questions to elicit journal reflections. The leaders stressed the importance of singing together and expected to choose appropriate music as soon as a topic was selected. Arrangements to attend

worship at a local Presbyterian Church were underway and retreat members hoped to sing with that church's choir.

My initial reaction to their request to facilitate the retreat was spoken spontaneously at that meeting. "Why do you need an outside leader?" I asked. "You seem to have thought everything through!" "We need help with content- the group wants a Bible Study and we are not experts in that area," they answered. "And this group needs someone from outside to direct them."

We further explored their expectations for content. They explained that the women's retreat had occurred annually for as long as they could remember and reminisced about previous retreats. The goal of these retreats was to give the women "space away from home and responsibilities" and time to form supportive relationships. The leaders gave me a copy of printed objectives that would be a part of the written material given at the retreat: "to meet new friends and deepen existing friendships; to identify areas of growth in faith and ways in which to nurture that growth in our lives; to spend time in reflection and meditation on nurturing our relationship with God."

A significant factor for this retreat was the "need to heal from the brokenness of a severed pastoral relationship." (The women explained that the Session had to initiate termination of their pastor because he was a "bad fit." They observed that many members were disillusioned with the church because of the pastoral leadership. The pastor did resign.) The leaders wanted to remind the women on the retreat of the positive aspects of their faith and church membership. They specifically mentioned "wisdom passed down through generations of women."

I suggested that the content of the retreat might focus on biblical wisdom and gave a brief overview of what I knew of that subject, stressing that I would need to do further research. They were excited with the topic and offered examples of wisdom they had received from their mothers. One of the leaders shared that her mother would also attend the retreat. She spoke of her mother as her “example in faith”, and said that she served on the Session in response to her mother’s example. Both women shared stories about ways they hoped to pass on their faith to their daughters.

We met again before the retreat to create a schedule, agreeing that the content would be biblical wisdom. The leaders came with a tentative schedule of activities, a list of possible songs appropriate to the topic and a desire to talk more about the content. I shared my research and as we talked together, three categories emerged that they wished to address: wisdom in “good times”; wisdom in “tough times”; wisdom in “letting go”. They illustrated these categories with personal stories. One of the women told of the death of her father and her surprise at her mother’s ability to deal with her grief. “I asked her how she was managing so well,” she said. “My mother told me that she had watched her mother cope with her father’s death and learned some valuable lessons. She said that someone from her circle (church women’s group) called or visited every day and that helped immensely.” Our meeting ended with agreement on a schedule of events. The weekend was divided into four topical sessions focused on wisdom that were interspersed by meals, worship, free time and fellowship. Members of the planning team would provide all materials for activities, music and refreshments. I was responsible to teach the group about biblical wisdom and to lead them in discussion during the three sessions scheduled for Saturday. The retreat would conclude with attending worship together on

Sunday morning, eating together and viewing a video of interviews with three of the church's founding mothers.

Twenty- five women gathered for the weekend women's retreat at the beach. They appeared to be a homogeneous group: all Caucasian, well dressed and articulate. I later learned that their ages ranged from 27- 72 years and that two other people (including myself) were not church members. The women represented diverse careers: there were physicians, psychologists, teachers, office managers, accountants and homemakers present. Friday evening activities encouraged multiple conversations among participants and reflected a genuine desire to form relationships.

Three sessions were planned for Saturday. Each session opened and closed with prayer and music. The meeting room faced the beach and participants were seated at four tables. Each table contained a jar of systematically colored slips of paper with Bible verses and pertinent questions for the group to address. Table group seating changed for each session.

The first session began after breakfast. After presenting an overview of biblical wisdom, I asked each table to explore the particular colored slips for that session and to document their discussion for later sharing with the large group. This session, "Wisdom in Good Times" focused on the image of Lady Wisdom in the book of Proverbs. A sample slip contained the following "I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently will find me." (Proverbs 8:17) "Lady Wisdom's blessings begin with returning the love of those who love her. How is love related to wisdom?" Group members needed little guidance in responding and engaged in fruitful discussion. They shared fragments of their conversation with the large group: "We receive wisdom best when we look for it."

“Wisdom and love go hand in hand: say it out of love; accept wisdom out of love.” I noticed that each table had one or two members who were quiet. They talked when specifically questioned, but were not as verbal as most of the participants.

This session concluded with the planning team offering materials and directions to make a journal. While most participants were interested in creating a personal journal, I heard the following comments: “I’m just not crafty. I’m not good at this.” “I don’t really care what this looks like, I probably won’t write in it after I leave.” “Decorating isn’t my thing, I’ll write my name.”

I opened the next session, “Wisdom in Tough Times,” with instructions on the practice of lectio divina, asking the women to engage in the practice three times on a selected verse from Proverbs 17:17a (“A friend loves at all times.”) After exploring the theological implications of the book of Proverbs, I invited the women to read the session slips and to take time to think quietly (without talking to one another) before responding in their journals. I asked them to discuss their reflections with their groups and told them that we would again share in large group when they were finished. I noted that the “quiet” women from the previous session were enthusiastically writing in their journals, while the “talkative” women found silent reflection difficult. Some women left the room—three women said it was too noisy; two women said “we’re going to go outside and talk about these questions.” The shared responses were extensive and focused on friendships’ difficulties and joys. Some of the responses were intimate stories of “tough times” and I observed women reading from their journals with tears flowing. This session ended with prayer and singing as the group adjourned for lunch and free time. The planning team communicated an opportunity to learn how to make a dessert with the hotel chef. A few

women were interested; others voiced a desire for free time. One woman loudly exclaimed, “I hate to cook,” and others agreed.

The third session, “Wisdom and Letting Go,” began with my talking about Sophia, a biblical metaphors for wisdom in the New Testament. Discussion material focused on wisdom in different situations and contexts. Participants were asked to share sources of insight, favorite Bible passages, music, and guides for responsible living. I asked the participants to choose the discussion method for this session, as I felt that both of the previous methods had worked well for different people. I shared my observations of the previous sessions and briefly explained the theory of multiple intelligences. Participants decided by consensus that quiet journal time, followed by large group discussion allowed for fullest member participation. Large group discussion occurred after thirty minutes (participants requested further time for reflection.) The conversation included telling stories related to favorite Bible passages and music. One older participant shared life-long memories of the Twenty-third Psalm as she gave the group images of herself at different ages. We saw her as a small child happy with the thought of lying in the grass (“after all God says lie down in green pastures”); as a young woman teaching her Sunday School class of second graders; as a daughter choosing Scripture for her father’s funeral; and as an elderly woman reciting the words in times of stress. “This passage changes in meaning for me depending on the situation,” she said. The music leader taught the group one of her favorite songs to close the session. She explained her reasons for choosing the song, augmenting her explanation with simple instruments given to group members to play.

Participants lingered when the session was over, discussing insights gained. I felt a feeling of tired contentment, as I realized the breadth and depth of our discussion of wisdom. Personal stories continued afterwards in the hospitality suite, as women spoke of difficult parenting issues, the death of a child in their school that week and the meaningfulness of supportive community where they could speak honestly and intimately.

“Progressive Step or Moment”- Thematic Mode

The thematic focus of “voice” became evident to me as I wrote the material in the “regressive step.” The concept of *voice* appears in American feminist writings of the 1980’s and is still referenced by feminist curriculum theorists as they critically engage teaching and research practices. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule used the concept of voice in *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind* to communicate the metaphors of listening and speaking as alternatives to other masculine epistemological approaches. Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* describes women’s experiences and perspectives (voices) as being different from those of men, but equally valuable. Later feminist theorists recognized that there was no “one” voice that was representative of women as a whole, but rather a multiplicity of voices. Feminist curricular theorists began to investigate the possibilities of discourse between these various voices by noting different contexts formed by gender, race, sexual preference, class and ethnicity.

My hope for the future of these women (and other women in the church) lies in their valuing their own voices-their own experiences and perspectives. This concept is visible in the women’s perceptions of themselves as planners of the retreat. Initially, I

sensed a devaluing of the planning team's leadership skills through their perceptions of themselves. I perceived these women as capable, intelligent and creative. They told stories of experiences they had as church leaders, mothers and Bible study facilitators. They assessed the needs of the group, (in retrospect, accurately), created teaching methods, planned and implemented a cohesive retreat. But they saw my voice as more valuable than theirs- "You're the expert – you know the Bible," one said. They shared their sense that the group would not appreciate a planning member as retreat facilitator. "They need someone from outside – that has credentials," another conveyed. Although they were willing to recognize my feminine voice, they did not consider their own voices as valuable in this arena. I realize that cultural expectations may be a factor in these perceptions- Presbyterians believe in a biblically literate, educated clergy, whose academic knowledge is valuable in understanding issues of faith.

My second hope for these women is that they recognize and accept diversity. Some assumptions were made in planning the retreat: that all women like to cook, engage in arts and crafts, focus on the care of their children, enjoyed talking and had good relationships with their mothers. Group members articulated the diverse reality. "I hate cooking," one said. "I'm just not good at crafts," another lamented. "That's why we have a nanny- I don't have time to worry about proper meals and clothing for my children," a physician shared. "I would rather sit quietly and think," a participant confessed. "I was adopted when I was a baby – my adoptive mother and I never agree on anything," one woman stated. Women share a variety of likes and dislikes. Some of the women felt excluded by these assumptions. One woman articulated her sense of her membership in

the group, “I’m not like everyone here- I don’t cook or like crafts. I’m shy and prefer not talking. I’m not a member of their church. But I still like to come (on the retreat).”

Voice was a recurring theme of the retreat as participants reflected on their thoughts and experiences of wisdom. Their telling of personal stories about good times, tough times and the difficulty of letting go was encouraged and valued. Participants gained insights about themselves as women of faith, both individually and as members of a faith community.

“Analytic Step or Moment”- Teaching and Learning

Reflections on the “analytic step” underlined the importance of teaching and learning style perspectives. Howard Gardner’s “Theory of Multiple Intelligences” (Gardner, 1999) serves as a helpful tool in critical examination of this educational experience. Gardner suggests ways that teachers can apply multiple intelligence theory in educational settings to enhance understanding. He suggests three focused approaches: “entry points” that “can be roughly aligned with specific intelligences” and encourage students’ engagement with a topic; “telling analogies”; and “approaching the core.” The retreat unintentionally used four of Gardner’s suggested entry points as it provoked story telling; addressed existential questions through discussion of wisdom and a life of faith; encouraged participants in music appropriate to the topic; and provided a group setting for engagement. Gardner assumes that use of multiple entry points increases the possibility of understanding (Gardner, 1999, 167-172.)

The retreat (again inadvertently) engaged participants in analogies on the concept of wisdom. The teacher explored different biblical metaphors for wisdom in the discussion of Hebrew Lady Wisdom and Greek Sophia. The use of analogies would have been more

effective when specific discussion included ways that these metaphors were not comprehensive.

Gardner's third focused approach recognizes that learners understand "core features of a concept" when the teacher uses "multiple approaches (that) explicitly call on a range of intelligences, skills, and interests" (Gardner, 1999, 176.) Retreat participants graphically demonstrated distinct preferences in the ways they engaged the presented material; some people enjoyed group discussion, while others preferred writing privately in their journals. One insight that arose from reflection on Gardner's suggestion is the need for multiple approaches to enhance the concept under discussion. For example, appropriate music provokes engagement with the topic of biblical wisdom. It is more difficult to connect cooking and biblical wisdom.

"Synthetical Step or Moment"

The "ongoing, complicated conversation" of curriculum theory is interdisciplinary. Theology, feminist theory, psychology, and curriculum theory were four conversation partners that revealed the importance of attention to difference in the conversation of this educational experience. Each discipline asked different questions that deepened the conversation and posed questions that impact present pedagogical theory and practice.

Taking into account the variety of students' religious experiences and belief systems, what enhances a search for meaning and supports a life of faith? Recognizing diversity that arises from socio-political contexts such as class, ethnicity, race, cohort, socio-economic status, age and health/disability, what gives promotes listening to students' voices? What pedagogical approaches communicate valuing of this diversity?

What are the curricular strategies that activate students' engagement with content, given their unique combinations of biophysical potentialities? What promotes the connecting of subjective experience, academic knowledge, history and society? What encourages the transformation of individuals, groups and institutions?

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