

Voyages Out in Curriculum Theory

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We live in an age of fundamental insecurity and vulnerability—one with profound implications for education. More and more, young people are entering a world that offers little recourse to personal, social, or economic stability. Smaller and smaller groups of elites are competing and thriving in the emerging information and knowledge economy, leaving the vast majority of youth and young adults with few prospects outside of poorly paying service sector jobs with limited benefits. Moreover, these young people cannot fall back on ready-made and stable notions of self and community, as did previous generations. These, too, have been destabilized by global forces and trajectories.

Of course, the role and function of schools has been profoundly complicated in this context. The traditional 20th Century twin roles of schooling—preparing youth for work and citizenship—no longer provide clear mooring. Increasingly, our so-called new economy demands creative and flexible thinking, while our contemporary global terrain demands more cosmopolitan notions of citizenship (Hargreaves, 2003). If nothing else, our moment is marked by difference and multiplicity. However, public policy initiatives around schools and schooling have tended to erase this complexity, opting instead to claim a kind of fullness of knowledge and control over the curricula. We see “resentment” logics informing a range of school activities today, from the cognitive and intellectual to the political and social (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001; McCarthy, 1998). Mainstream educators and policy makers alike, it seems, have not yet risen to the challenges of our times in creative and thoughtful ways, opting instead to rigidly enforce soulless standards while calling for reductive forms of multiculturalism. More than anything, our moment is marked by a profound failure of the imagination.

It is precisely here that Dennis Carlson's recent work proves so valuable. *Leaving Safe Harbors: Towards a New Progressivism in Public Life* (2002), is a call for educators to rethink and re-imagine education from the ground up. It is a call for educators to forge new and less certain ways of thinking about the contemporary educative landscape, to forge new discourses about schooling. For Carlson, a fundamental "return to basics" does not imply a return to a technical language of standards, of minimized inputs and maximized outputs. Rather, it implies a fresh dialogue and new kind of engagement with a range of philosophers and thinkers—each of whom allows a particular angle of vision on what education (to evoke Maxine Greene) "might be" today.

Leaving Safe Harbors

Contemporary school life, as noted, has been marked by resentment logics. For Nietzsche, resentment (or, *ressentiment*) implies a notion of self and identity defined strictly through the annihilation of the other. Cameron McCarthy (and Cameron McCarthy and I) have discussed elsewhere how discourses of resentment play out in contemporary discussions around schooling, often girding key debates in the field (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001; McCarthy, 1998). I highlight here how resentment impulses are reflected in the contemporary push for standards as well as narrow notions of cultural competency. In both cases, we see a definition of schooling forged only through the annihilation or emptying out of the other. In both cases, Carlson offers us another way to think through what a thoughtful dialogue with disparate constituencies might look like.

First, public policy has placed schools under enormous federal pressure to respond to standards, particularly around Language Arts and Math. The most notable of these movements,

of course, has been the No Child Left Behind legislation. The effects of this legislation have been broad and deep—including the attenuation of the curricula, both in terms of substance and pedagogical practice—though they have been particularly profound on the most vulnerable of public schools. At the most basic level, a corporate language has overtaken school discourse, a language that implies clear inputs and outputs, assessments and measurements that can be correlated and compared across disparate sites. Knowledge itself has come to be treated like a perfectly transparent commodity, one that can be treated and dispensed independent of particular actors in context.

A kind of technocratic approach to schooling and curricula has thus come to the forefront of public education today. While these impulses have of course been embedded in school life for nearly 100 years (Dimitriadis and Carlson, 2003), never before have they so clearly pedagogically inappropriate for the emerging social and cultural landscape young people face. According to Carlson and others like Andy Hargreaves, students in our so-called knowledge-society must learn to “create knowledge, apply it to unfamiliar problems, and communicate it effectively to others” (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 24). These require new modes and approaches to teaching and learning—constructivist and cooperative approaches that imply a range of learning outcomes and goals. New testing regimes—in stark counter-distinction—encourage just the opposite. They encourage a kind of rote drill-and-skill approach to teaching, one which helps encourage “teachers to focus on low-level knowledge and skills, resulting in less in-depth understanding and less focus on higher-order thinking skills” (Jones, Jones, and Hargrove, 2003, p. 40).

Second, contemporary approaches to difference seem wholly informed by similar technocratic pressures. Narrow notions of “multicultural education”—often marked by

discussions of iconic figures taken out of social and cultural context—have taken over discussion of multiplicity and complexity in our schools. (Indeed, elsewhere, Carlson looks at how Rosa Parks has been deployed by conservatives in similar, ahistorical ways [Dimitriadis and Carlson, 2003]). Notions of “cultural competence” have provided school administrators with a managerial language which looks to contain difference, rather than engage it in productive ways. Working against the “tide of difference,” many such educators have tended to draw a sharp line of distinction between the established school curriculum and the world of multiplicity that flourishes in the everyday lives of youth outside of the school. These educators still insist narrowly producing a socially functioning citizenry, students who have a kind of narrow “competence” to deal with issues of difference. Such approaches to difference insist on bringing the problems of multiplicity and difference into a technocratic framework of institutional control (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001).

Such approaches, however, are not well suited to help young people navigate the complex realities of our contemporary global terrain. More and more, young people will have to negotiate a world that is truly cosmopolitan, a world where one must co-exist with difference—not simply control it. If nothing else, recent world events—most notably, the events of September 11th—have complicated clear demarcations between “here” and “there,” “self” and “other,” “first” and “third world.” Our evolved reality is quite different—that of eternal and complex encounters between disparate ideas, ideologies, and peoples. Our schools must therefore prepare students to be “world citizens” in the most humble and partial sense of the term.

In sum, we see contemporary movements in education as attempts to control a reality that far outstrips popular imaginative capacities. If nothing else, these efforts to contain global

complexity and difference both mask and highlight widespread uncertainty about the role and function of formal schooling institutions today. Importantly, these efforts have been quite successful in capturing the imaginations of disparate publics and policy makers alike. This corporatist language—of inputs, outputs, and products—has come to represent a certain kind of “common sense” in discussions about pedagogy. What might be called a “mythological bottom line in corporate discourse in education” tells a particular “story” about education—that it is really is (or should be) run like an assembly line. Here, “people are assembled and fine-tuned for various sectors of the new labor force” (p. 23).

Dennis Carlson provides a useful intervention here. For Carlson, a return to basics implies a broad and progressive engagement with the philosophies which gird the notion of education itself. These philosophies have produced the “myths” about education which circulate throughout culture and history at any particular time. And they are to be found deeply embedded in our stories, images, and metaphors about education. Unlike some important progressive work, Carlson does not attempt only to demystify these stories. Rather, he argues that progressives must engage in what he calls a battle over competing myths. They must offer compelling counter-myths about education—particularly in this moment of uncertainty and vulnerability. In the end, Carlson tries to draw together disparate myths and stories to help forge a vision of education that speaks to what he sees as the “new progressivism” in education today.

Carlson excavates four such myths here, highlighting their particular powers as well as their weaknesses—the Platonic myth of Enlightenment, the Hegelian master / slave dialectic, Nietzsche’s Zarathustrian struggle towards self knowledge, and Heidegger’s ecological mythologies. First, Carlson addresses Plato’s story of the cave. The goal of education, for Plato, is “Enlightenment”—the journey out of the darkness of the cave towards the luminous cosmos.

This Enlightenment is achieved through dialogue and deliberation between teacher and student, girded by clear splits between “mythos” (knowledge that is personal and subjective) and “logos” (knowledge that is rigorous and objective). He writes:

Dialogic reflexivity provides the new progressivism with one way out of the dilemma of late modern culture, in which the only alternative has seemed to be logocentrism on the one hand and mythocentrism on the other. Only through the process of questioning, and engaging in dialogue with others in pursuit of answers, does a democratic public actually exist. (p. 65)

Plato provides a compelling way to think about democratic education as embedded in dialogic impulses.

Second, Carlson discusses Hegel’s notion of the master/ slave dialectic. For Hegel, all history is a result of the ongoing struggle for recognition between oppressors and oppressed. Individual consciousness is formed, here, in social, cultural, and historical contexts. There is no such thing as “truth” divorced from its moment in history. Education is an situated, ongoing struggle towards a better society, one that necessitates a constant process of retrenchment and reengagement. He writes:

Hegel’s story is one that gives us reason to hope that stoicism and skepticism are merely detours on the road of history. For within the heart of withdrawal from the world, within the core of disappointment in the world, lies an implicit belief in a better world. Every critique of the dominant culture, every refusal to participate in it, is silent affirmation of something that should be or could be. (p. 97)

In highlighting the idea that history is an “ongoing struggle,” Hegel underscores the notion that education is “emergent,” is “becoming,” helping us look towards something better.

Third, Carlson discusses Nietzsche’s notion of the “overman,” and the struggle for self actualization and freedom. Unlike Plato or Hegel, Nietzsche explicitly draws on “myth”—that of Zarathustra—to frame his notion of education. As Nietzsche tells the story, Zarathustra struggles with how to understand and move beyond both the “sheep like” mentality of the middle

class as well as the “resentment” of the working classes. For Zarathustra (and Nietzsche), the goal of education is self-actualization, becoming an “over person” able to self-regulate outside of prevailing social and cultural norms, looking toward new futures. He writes:

The Zarathustra myth . . . provides progressives with a narrative of possibility and hope, in which the meaning of phrases like “human freedom” take on new and more democratic meaning. Zarathustra stands at the beginning of a new era in history and looks forward more than backward. (p. 128)

Nietzsche’s myth of Zarathustra allows us, then, to see education as embedded in a radical kind of self-actualization, one that can (potentially) open up new personal and political horizons.

Fourth and finally, Carlson discusses the ecological myths of Heidegger. For Heidegger, particular cultural “technologies” mediate the relationship between nature and human consciousness. Heidegger, importantly, sees technology and poetics are inextricably intertwined as a kind of *techne*. The goal of education, here, is to sharpen our perspectives on this kind of engagement, to look towards what might be called “eco-progressivism.” He writes:

Eco-progressivism forms of education we might define as those that question the taken-for-granted character of technology and the way the dominant technology frames the way we dwell upon the earth and relate to others. Eco-progressivism also needs to be about introducing young people to counter-narratives and counter-technologies, one that can be used to stitch together a new *teche*, a saving *techne*. (p. 173)

Heidegger gives us a way to think about education as an emergent interface with the world, a potentially progressive technology.

Throughout *Leaving Safe Harbors*, Carlson argues for a rapprochement with the best impulses of each of these myths. While he offers critiques of each—e.g., Plato’s elitism, Hegel’s binary understanding of oppression, Nietzsche’s radical individualism, and Heidegger’s unitary stress on the environment—Carlson focuses more on how each can help inform emerging progressivisms in educational discourse. Throughout, he argues that progressives can no longer simply do battle against myth—“progressives must live by and advance their own mythologies”

(p. 21). This is key. Carlson contends that contemporary corporatist approaches to education constitute a particular myth about how education works—that it is just like a business, one that aims to maximize outputs (i.e., test scores) through efficient use of inputs (i.e., practical teaching techniques). Carlson stresses the importance of forging new myths to similarly capture the popular imagination—“including those very basic underlying narratives of knowing and becoming educated” (p. 21). These myths will help gird the “new progressivism,” as it leaves the safety of the port, and heads out to new and uncertain terrains. They will provide some points of reference for a struggle that can not and should not take recourse to old answers or solutions. He writes:

Progressives must resist the desire, born of insecurity and fear, to “fix” the world under a clarifying gaze, to offer students and “the public” ready answers to perceived problems, to stay with what is comfortable and safe. For one thing, there is no safe harbors, even if we may like to pretend there are. There is no one, unified, unchanging truth that we can rest our feet upon, no firm foundations that we can use to define who we are. (p. 179)

Throughout *Leaving Safe Harbors*, Carlson highlights the importance of moving beyond simple reactionary positions. Indeed, many of us have been put (or put ourselves) into a position of simply responding negatively to conservative logics. Critiquing No Child Left Behind is important—but it doesn’t necessarily empower us in offering parents and children something more attractive or compelling. Education was not idyllic before the imposition of NCLB, although that is the subtext is much current debate on the left. Carlson asks us to rethink “the basics” in a very different kind of way, one with the potential to help us re-imagine education from the ground up. Moreover, he does so with a unique ecumenical spirit. Carlson does not spend much time in the book engaging in disciplinary debates, but taking (to echo Deleuze) a “line of flight” that takes him (and us) to new uncharted spaces—hence, leaving safe harbors.

Carlson's lesson is timely for several reasons including, as understood against the 2004 elections. The Right's victories in the 2004 election were clear. Bush won the popular and electoral vote decisively. The Republican Party gained seats in both the House and Senate. While the vast majority of Bush's support came from whites, of course, he did capture enough of the Black and Hispanic vote to make a difference. Bush did not win the election only through the support of the country's elites and upper classes. He won it through the support of many of the nation's poorest, particularly in the rural South. Religion played an unprecedented role in the election. Many cited morality issues as most important in their choice.

Many progressives are struggling to understand what happened—though many are locked into a debilitating binary. On the one hand, mainstream vestiges of the left (such as those represented by the Democratic Party) have been largely reduced to critiquing the implementation or execution of conservative policies (e.g., No Child Left Behind has been under funded, the War in Iraq should be more effectively carried out, etc.). On the other hand, radical critiques from within the academy have interrogated and deconstructed unfolding conservative machinations, pointing out their errors, lies, and strategies. In both cases, progressives have failed to articulate a vision of what a better world would look like—and the right has stepped squarely into this space.

In the end, if the left can't offer people compelling narratives for how to live their lives, progressive spaces will continue to shrink. Material analyses are critical, though they only get us so far. Recall that so-called morality issues (however perversely defined) were more important to many poor and disenfranchised than health care and jobs. The right has given people something to believe in, particularly in the wake of 9/11. So can the left. Education, following Carlson, is one key area where this project can begin to unfold.

Curriculum Theory and Cultural Studies

A truly “re-mythologized” education, then, would have to gird work across several areas without being contained by any one. It should not be surprising that Carlson turns towards cultural studies for this project, nor that he seems largely ground in curriculum theory. In closing this essay, I would like to ask what a project such as this one tells us about the intersection between these two fields, now and in the future.

As is well known by now, curriculum theory enabled or called for a “re-conceptualizing” of the field of education beginning in the 1970s, opening up a space for the interdisciplinary, autobiographically grounded interrogation of educational experience. It represented an important turn away from the behavioral and programmatic approach to curriculum studies which had, by then, taken firm hold in the academy. Ultimately, it allowed space to imagine education as a journey out, a way to reflect personally on the ways in which one’s biography was mapped in and through the curriculum. Cultural studies, in turn, has offered education another kind of re-conceptualization. Evoking a more expansive and less clearly defined tradition than (perhaps) curriculum theory, cultural studies has largely been concerned with drawing larger and multiple kinds of social context to bear (most often) on everyday cultural practices. For the field of education, cultural studies has allowed for the dynamic contextualization of education within culture, history, and politics, opening up a space to think about what it means to be an educator in much more expansive and ecumenical ways.

While distinct in several ways, each area has forced us to de-center and challenge the imaginary space which has defined and propelled “education” for so long—an imaginary space which has tended to clearly delimit the kinds of texts, settings, and political dispositions

considered relevant for discussions around education. As noted, the enormous social, cultural, and material dislocations of the last decade have destabilized any certainty around the traditional twin roles of schools—preparing young people for work and for citizenship. This new landscape, Carlson argues, demands a different set of understandings as to what constitutes what we call “the research imaginary” in education today, how we contextualize and understand what we envision as education and how we think students get it.

In the end, Carlson provides one example of a project that draws on key impulses of both curriculum theory and cultural studies—in particular, the impulse to re-think education from “the ground up.” Recognizing that education, and theorizing about education, happens in a wide range of site, Carlson looks towards a wide span of material to help him (and us) think about what education might mean, taken outside of the dominant “myths” of accountability and standards which have taken hold today. This impulse seems at the heart of any discussion of education today—the idea that we no longer can claim fullness of knowledge over young people’s lives that we need to renegotiate in a very fundamental way what counts as “meaningful” education for youth.

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