

AAACS Presidential Address
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A Process Philosophy Analysis of the Intersection of Economic Policy, School Reform, and Cultural Commons: Implications for Curriculum Studies and AAACS

I begin my address with a warm appreciation to my Executive Committee colleagues. It has truly been a pleasure to work with Susan Edgerton, Ugena Whitlock, and Patrick Roberts these past three years. Janet Miller has been an invaluable support for all of us throughout the past three years. Thank you Janet! I also deeply appreciate the fine work of all of our standing committee members, and the program and site committees in New York, San Diego, and Denver. I especially want to single out this year Bruce Uhmacher and Brad Conrad who have done a magnificent job planning the 2010 meeting here in Denver. I am also especially grateful to Louise Allen who has chaired the conference committee and Peter Appelbaum who has chaired the program committee. I am absolutely confident that both Louise and Peter would be an outstanding new President of AAACS. The purpose of the Executive Committee, standing committees, and ad hoc committees of AAACS is to serve the community and advance the field of curriculum studies. Congratulations and thank you to all of the other members who are willing to serve on the various committees.

I begin with a short citation that appeared last week in the Obituary for our colleague David Purpel of the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. David passed away on April 19, 2010. It is fitting to remember his life work as we begin the AAACS conference since our theme intersects his life work in many significant ways.

“Problems surely can and should be ameliorated, suffering and pain reduced, justice and equity increased, peace furthered, violence lessened, meaning strengthened. To accomplish even limited gains is exalting and exhilarating, for as the Talmud teaches, ‘It is not for us to finish the task -- but neither are we free to take no part in it.’”

I served on many committees with David over the years, including the Greening of Higher Education project in California in the 1990s along with Bill Pinar, Bill Doll, and David Orr. David Purpel had an unwavering commitment to justice, ecology,

and spirituality in education. In his book *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education*, for example, he presents his concern for ecological and epistemological issues in the context of a wide range of social pathologies and ideological sources of human suffering: war, terrorism and abuse of human rights, totalitarianism and racism, gross inequality and injustice, poverty and famine, as well as ecological devastation and existential alienation. He held the view that these problems reflect a cultural, political, and moral crisis of historic dimensions, and he argues that an extraordinary chasm between this profound crisis and the technical and managerial issues that concern educators and policy makers, amounts to a trivialization of education.

Like David Purpel in his scholarship, I investigate the narrow economic focus of public education and deconstruct the language of contemporary reform movements such as excellence, effective schools, time on task, and performance evaluation. Starting in my 1995 essay in *Harvard Educational Review*, I presented alternatives to US Department of Education Documents such as “Prisoners of Time” and other proposals based in scientific management, time management, and accountability movements (Slattery, 1995). Conditions in schools and society have only been magnified and exacerbated in the intervening years.

Consider this recent development in New York State as reported in the New York Times last week titled “Alternative Path for Teachers Gains Ground.” While there are many excellent alternative certification paths and degree paths available in our universities, this article points toward a new trend to certify alternative groups like Teach for America to offer their own degree plans. While the implications for all of us in AAACS are significant, I am most alarmed by the philosophy of education expressed by David Steiner, Commissioner of the New York State Department of Education and former Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Hunter College. He states that “colleges of education devote too much time to abstract notions about ‘the role of school in democracy’ and ‘the view that schools exist to perpetuate a social hierarchy.’” (NY Times, April 19, 2010, p. 1). So what should we be teaching? “When to make eye contact, when to call on a student by name, when to wait for a fuller answer.” We all know examples of similar rhetoric; however now there is a powerful Commissioner who is certifying programs that advocate this curriculum philosophy.

What should we do individually in our universities and collectively as AAACS? I believe that the efforts to professionalize our association through the Canon Project and the Commission on Curriculum Studies is a step in the right direction. Our deliberations on these two projects are very important. There is a line from the

Broadway musical *Company* that comes to mind: “Don’t be afraid that it won’t be perfect, just be afraid that it won’t be.” Our complicated conversations about these two projects that have consumed our attention for four years must come to a fruitful conclusion this week. Continuing revisions will always be necessary, but now is the time to stand together and not be afraid that the reports are not perfect.

Individually, we each make decisions about our scholarship and teaching that will impact the current “nightmare that is the present” as Bill Pinar (2004) appropriately analyzes in “What is Curriculum Theory?” Sometimes I prefer to deconstruct and resist. Sometimes political action and solidarity are necessary. However, it is not always impossible to work from within the system to make changes. I have attempted to do this in my work at the co-director along with Steve Carpenter of the Texas Governors School for high school students. We have created an arts and humanities summer program that is quite subversive in some respects, but still operates within the political climate of Texas curriculum mandates.

I would like to describe one other collaborative project with professor Jim Jupp who is in the audience and can offer further comments later. Jim and I submitted an application to the “New Schools for New Orleans Charter School Program.” Why would we want to be involved with a program that incorporates the management and accountability perspectives described above by the Commissioner in New York? Citing David Purpel (1989): “Social values of competition, hierarchy, order, and achievement are antithetical to educational values of free inquiry, the development of a critical and creative consciousness, and the struggle for meaning. Education should be a moral and spiritual endeavor that holds our social and personal lives up against the highest ideals we can conceive.” How can we do authentic curriculum work within the current structures of school reform? I will take a circuitous route to answer this question through process philosophy and economic policy and then back to charter schools.

Process philosophy teaches that reality is conceived as a *process* of creative advance in which many past events are integrated in the events of the present, and in turn are taken up by future events. I am a member of the *Center for Process Studies* in California, and my scholarship is highly influenced by Process thought. With a foundation in the metaphysical system of Alfred North Whitehead (among others), and a methodology that integrates both speculation and empirical verification, process thought brings its unique metaphysical perspective to bear on many fields of reflection and action.

Whitehead writes in his 1929 text *Aims of Education*:

In the history of education, the most striking phenomenon is that schools of learning, which at one epoch are alive with a ferment of genius, in a succeeding generation exhibit merely pedantry and routine. The reason is, that they are overladen with inert ideas. Education with inert ideas is not only useless: it is, above all things, harmful—*Corruptio optimi, pessima*. Except at rare intervals of intellectual ferment, education in the past has been radically infected with inert ideas. That is the reason why uneducated clever women, who have seen much of the world, are in middle life so much the most cultured part of the community. They have been saved from this horrible burden of inert ideas. Every intellectual revolution which has ever stirred humanity into greatness has been a passionate protest against inert ideas. Then, alas, with pathetic ignorance of human psychology, it has proceeded by some educational scheme to bind humanity afresh with inert ideas of its own fashioning. (Whitehead, 1929, p.1)

Ultimately, process thought seeks to integrate and reconcile the diverse facets of human experience (i.e. ethical, religious, aesthetic, and scientific intuitions) into one coherent explanatory scheme. The most common applications of process thought are in the fields of philosophy and theology. However, process has also found a meaningful foothold in many other discussions, including ecology, economics, physics, biology, education, psychology, feminism, and cultural studies. Process thinking, in general, seeks to elucidate the *developmental* nature of reality, emphasizing *becoming* rather than static existence or being. It also stresses the inter-relatedness of all entities. Process describes reality as ultimately made up of experiential events rather than enduring inert substances. The particular character of every event, and consequently the world, is the result of a selective process where the relevant past is creatively brought together to become that new event. The universe proceeds as "the many become one, and are increased by one" in a sequence of integrations at every level and moment of existence. Process thought thus replaces the traditional Western "substance metaphysic" with an "event metaphysic." Terms that further characterize process thought are inter-relatedness, unity-in-diversity, non-dualism, panentheism, mutual transformation, person-in-community, and panexperientialism. In my book *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era*, Process thought permeates each of the chapters (Slattery, 2006). I will say more about this in a moment.

I now turn to a short commentary on economic policy. There are currently two books that I am using with my graduate students. The first is a 1989 text titled *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the*

Environment, and a Sustainable Future. The authors are Herman E. Daly, who was a professor of economics at LSU in the 1980s and was a popular elective course professor for graduate students in education at the time, and John B. Cobb, Jr. who is a world renowned theologian and member of the Greening of Higher Education project that I referenced above. Their main goal is to deconstruct neoclassical economic theory and set forth a more holistic model that more fully accounts for the individual, the community, and the natural world. Daly and Cobb discuss the implicit assumptions and theoretical fallacies governing contemporary economic scholarship. According to Daly and Cobb (1989), contemporary economic theory holds to a crude, mechanistic worldview of *homo economicus* as an autonomous individual driven solely by self-interest and of society as an aggregate of such individuals. This view tends to equate gains in society as a whole with the increases in goods and services acquired by its individual members, but it says nothing about the changes in the quality of the relationships that constitute that society. They therefore propose a "paradigm shift" from economics conceived as "crematistics" (maximization of short-term monetary gain) to the sort of economics Aristotle called "oikonomia" (management of a household aimed at increasing its use value over the long run for the community). In "economics for community," their term for the latter alternative, there is no aim for unlimited accumulation or "growthmania." Instead, "true wealth is limited by the satisfaction of the concrete need." Such a conversion entails a departure from radical individualism to the notion of a "person-in-community," as well as a fundamental shift away "from cosmopolitanism to communities of communities." Daly and Cobb claim that the emerging global society must develop democratically controlled institutions at all levels: international, national, and local. It also needs to create a decentralizing context for economic activities that returns institutional control to people, roots economic interests in local soil, and reestablishes some sense of human community.

The second book is one that Susan and I will both be using this summer at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts; it is the popular *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* by Naomi Klein (2007). This text provides the details on how corporate and international trade interests manipulate and eventually control the community wealth of nations through privatization while inflicting tremendous suffering and death on the population. I was reading this book on a long flight to Cape Town to attend IAACS last September. What I found on our four week adventure throughout South Africa was a confirmation of all that Naomi Klein writes. The shock of the end of Apartheid not only brought political change, but also economic solidification of privatization. While visiting the Apartheid museum in Soweto, Michael O'Malley and I listened to many interviews with Nelson Mandela's political assistants who said that they assumed that political power

would translate into economic power. They were wrong; and the devastating consequences are evident throughout South Africa. Perhaps this will be discussed in the IAACS session later in our program. (As a side note, there is a 3 minute film clip of the opening ceremony in Stellenbosh on my Facebook Page.) Mandela admitted that he unwittingly allowed corporate interests to create an economic structure that continues to keep masses of people in poverty, disease, suffering, and shanty towns in South Africa today.

Naomi Kelin begins and ends her book with an analysis of post-Katrina New Orleans. She sets the stage for exactly what is happening in my hometown: the dismantling of the public school system for charter schools and privatization of public education. Jim and I hoped to work within this system to affect change in perspectives. Alas, our proposal was a finalist, but was rejected in the final interview.

What we were attempting to do is to create an International Baccalaureate school with a focus on the arts, music and local history. We believe that such a curriculum is essential to counteract globalization in favor of sustainable community. Additionally, we had hoped to bring together the various religious, racial, and ethnic communities of New Orleans. Here is how we described our project:

We intend to locate the International Baccalaureate school in the context of the rich history of the city of New Orleans. This charter school has the potential to contribute positively to the rebuilding of the educational system and social structures of New Orleans if it is attentive to the physical, psychological, and cultural context of the city. Obviously, the citizens of New Orleans have been traumatized by the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. However, prior to Katrina, New Orleans was a city steeped in contradictions: the *joi de vivre* of the Mardi Gras, Jazz Fest, and international tourism contrasted with the poverty, crime, and desperation of the majority of citizens; the glitz and glamour of casinos, Bourbon Street, championship sporting events, and political conventions contrasted with the rotting infrastructure of the neighborhoods, schools, and levees; the abundance of decadent foods for tourists and socialites contrasted with the malnourishment and poverty of children; pristine Catholic and private schools with advanced curriculum and stately facilities for the middle class and wealthy (mostly white) contrasted with totally dysfunctional, dangerous, and neglected public schools for the poor (mostly black) citizens; abundant commerce, ports, industry, and tourism but high unemployment and abject poverty among the people. New Orleans is known as “The Big Easy” to outsiders, but is called “Little Haiti” and “The City That Care Forgot” among locals. There has been little opportunity for a

quality education for the majority of children in New Orleans. This charter school will provide excellence in the midst of depression and desperation.

We are interested in locating the school in the 7th Ward of New Orleans, a section of town that was particularly hard hit by the floods in 2005. This neighborhood in New Orleans is near the intersection of St. Bernard Avenue and Interstate 10. It is in close proximity to the French Quarter and easily accessible from all parts of the city. The school will stand symbolically in the heart of the New Orleans and bring diverse students together from all parts of the city in order to contribute, in some small way, to a new social order in the community as the city is rebuilt.

Why do we chose this location? We are participating in the fund raising project of the New Orleans Public Library system, and we have a particular connection to the rebuilding of the libraries. On August 29, 2007, President Bush and Laura Bush visited New Orleans on the second anniversary of Katrina. During this visit, Laura Bush met with leaders of the public library rebuilding committee and was named honorary chairperson. One of the branch libraries that was totally devastated in Katrina was the Nora Navra Library on St. Bernard Avenue in the 7th Ward. We are committed to the expansion and rebuilding of this branch library.

Nora Navra was the great-aunt of Patrick Slaterry. Aunt Nora lived in a magnificent home on St. Charles Avenue from the 1880s to the 1940s. She inherited a large estate from her father, the founder of the Jacob Candy Company in New Orleans. Aunt Nora was Jewish and a member of Touro Synagogue. She never married. She used her wealth to support social causes in New Orleans. Her philanthropy was much appreciated by many. She had a particular concern and compassion for the poor black children of the 7th and 9th Wards of New Orleans, and she bequeathed a sizable estate to the New Orleans Public Library system for the construction of a branch library. The Nora Navra Library opened in 1954 and served the educational needs of many poor children and citizens until it was destroyed by Katrina. We are committed to the effort to expand and rebuild the Nora Navra Library. (The history of Aunt Nora's philanthropy is tied into the history of the quadroon ball room in New Orleans and other political, economic, religious and racial dimensions of the city.)

Because this library is well known and much appreciated in the community, we want to connect this charter school to the historical significance of Nora Navra's wisdom and compassion. She knew the importance of education, reading, and libraries. But she also knew the importance of bringing together the diverse people of a racially, culturally, religiously, and economically divided city. We intend to

locate the International Baccalaureate school physically, historically, and psychologically in this rich cultural context of New Orleans. We intend to extend Nora Navra's legacy, and possibly even name the school "The Nora Navra IB Academy." Such a designation will provide legitimacy and cultural context for the school. It will also attract donors and supporters who share the original vision of the Nora Navra Library. Finally, we believe that this IB school will contribute to educational excellence and cultural diversity for a city that so desperately needs beacons of hope.

The best way through the "Nightmare that is the Present" (Pinar, 2004) is to engage the process fully with deep understanding of the economic systems at work. This project was an attempt to bring together Process Philosophy and Economic Policy in a devastated community with local history and the cultural commons and autobiographical connections at the heart of the project. This, Jim and I believe, is the most effective way of dismantling the management and accountability structures that we deconstruct in our scholarship. We believe that this can be accomplished by similar projects. While we will continue to work on this project, we will also look for ways to intersect process and economic policy for the greater good.

Finally, I conclude with this most important summary of the work of our colleague David Purpel. Education, says Purpel, must treat each student as a meaning-seeking and meaning-creating individual, enabling the learner to develop a critical, passionate, and nourishing engagement with oneself, one's culture, and with the natural world. The curriculum should be organized around life's fundamental questions and the serious moral and existential concerns of young people. Knowledge, institutions, and paradigms are not eternal, especially in this time of cultural instability, and we are responsible for engaging the world with critical intelligence and moral commitment, which a trivial and technique-driven education cannot prepare us to do.

Reference

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Note: I would like to thank Susan Edgerton for reading my Presidential Address in Denver. I was unable to attend the conference due to illness.