

# *Actionable Curriculum Theory*

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In this paper, I propose that curriculum theorizing is a practice of expansion of the possibilities of signification. Such a practice involves identifying and interrupting the reproduction of collectively inherited epistemic frames so that these frames can be opened and expanded in one's encounter with the world and with frames of different contexts. The title 'Actionable curriculum theory' indicates my intent to share some reflections on the imperative to, and difficulties involved in, making this work intelligible in education. This title also refers to the challenges of reaching out to different audiences without sacrificing intellectual and analytical depth and complexity.

In order to situate myself theoretically and illustrate what I mean, I will start with a metaphor I often use to start conversations in different educational contexts. I ask participants to imagine a field of corn, to imagine harvesting their corn, peeling their harvested corn and then tell me if what they imagine is similar to the image of Latin American multi-colored corn cobs I show on a screen. I have used this visualization countless times in different metropolitan contexts and invariably what most people imagine is a harvest of yellow corn cobs. I use the metaphor of yellow and multi-coloured corn cobs to illustrate what I mean by an 'epistemic frame' and to talk about hegemony, ethnocentrism, normalization of social hierarchies and the colonization of our imagination in ways that create what Souza Santos calls 'epistemic blindness' and 'abyssal thinking' that often result in 'epistemicides' and the potential sources of the difficulties we experience in establishing ethical solidarities with 'Others.' These constructs are the concerns of many sites of theoretical inquiry such as postcolonial, poststructural, critical, cultural, international development and indigenous studies, to mention a few.

But before going deeper into these issues with reference to curriculum studies, I would like to highlight our shared context in social sciences and humanities oriented education and its current

vulnerability in the face of neoliberal and neoconservative attacks on education in general, and higher education in particular. I believe that at this time, it is very important for us to loudly defend the university in relation to a role that is disappearing from public imagination as a viable stance of signification: the role of the university, or of higher education, as a critic and conscience of society and as a space for independent, trans-disciplinary, critically informed, and socially accountable debates about “alternative collective futures” (Nandy 2000). It seems to me that if this idea disappears completely from public imagination, the future of the humanities—or the justification of our existence, which is already compromised—will be sealed. Therefore, in my practice of curriculum theorizing, I have identified the safeguarding of this role as a priority.

Having said that, it is equally important to recognize that independent, trans-disciplinary, critically informed, and socially accountable debates are also very difficult to create in universities for different social, cultural and historical reasons—hegemonic ethnocentrism, as in the metaphor of the yellow corn cob, being one of them. Postcolonial critic David Scott (1999, 2004), gives another example of why this is difficult. Scott has argued that traditions of academic knowledge production have led academics (especially in the humanities and social sciences) to become obsessed with arguing over the adequacy of answers to questions that they take for granted or that they have forgotten. Scott explains that if questions are taken for granted or forgotten, two consequences follow. First, academics assume that other people are answering the same questions as they are, and respond as if their own questions are (or should be) everyone’s priority. Second, academics keep on seeking or defending adequate answers without realizing that their original questions may no longer be relevant. Scott argues that both questions and answers need to be historicized and that a debate over relevant questions (that can have multiple answers) is more relevant than a debate over adequate answers to questions (incorrectly) assumed to be common. And my implicit message here is that this paper will raise questions without necessarily providing answers that are useful to every context.

In this spirit, I commend the conference organizers who structured the AAACS conference in 2013 around begged questions. The president of the association, Professor Peter Applebaum, started with these questions on Wednesday, I will repeat them here:

If to interpret society is to change it, how can we produce any change with blemished theoretical tools? Can we head on a global theory? What do we really want? Do we want to change the field? Do we want to change curriculum theory? Do we want to change society? Do we want to challenge the Western modern discrepancy between social experience and social expectations? What are we doing now? How can we engage in a theory that is aware of different historical patterns within the West and beyond the West and between West and non-West platforms? How can we produce a theory that doesn’t seek a predominant pattern? In what ways does the lack of such a theory make the pleasure of wanting such a theory even more pleasurable than any seemingly perfect theory could be? (call for papers AAACS 2013).

Ideas of pleasure and desire in the conference questions brought to my mind Gayatri Spivak’s insight that education (in the humanities) should be an “uncoercive re-arrangement of desires”

(Spivak 2004, p.526) oriented towards an “ethical relationship to the Other, before will” (535). In trying to understand and ‘action’ her assertion, I have asked myself (Andreotti 2012): How on earth can one uncoercively enable a “re- arrangement of desires” that may command an imperative for an ethical responsibility toward the Other, “before will”? How can a pedagogy of self- reflexivity, self- implication, dissensus, and discomfort support people to go beyond denial and feelings of shame, guilt, or deceit (Taylor, 2011)? How is an education based on uncoercive rearrangement of desires different from transmissive, “transformative” or “emancipatory” education? How can one ethically and professionally address problematic patterns that abound in educational approaches benevolently concerned with helping, fixing, defending, educating, assimilating, or giving voice to the Other (Andreotti, 2011)? How could a pedagogy address the arrogance of the “consciousness of superiority historically lodged in the self” (Spivak 2004, p.534), including my own? How can we learn from social breakdowns in ways that complicate conversations (Pinar, 2009) and that might open ourselves to ethical obligations (Pitt and Britzman, 2003; Zembylas, 2010) and to being taught by the world (Todd, 2009; Biesta, 2012)? How can one theorize learners, teaching, and learning in ways that take account of power relations, of the complexity of the construction of the self and of alterity, and of the situatedness and the limits of my own constructions and theorizations? The focus of the AAACS 2013 conference on the interrogation of pleasure and desire also prompted me to ask: how can we unmake the tangling of our desires with epistemic, systemic and structural violence? But this questions begs another: how have desires and forms of violence become entangled in the first place? If we do not understand the ‘making’ of this entanglement, we will likely not be able to uncoercively rearrange desires into something different.

In my attempt to illustrate what I mean by the ‘actioning’ of a theory and the importance of questions of intelligibility, I would like to share with you today one possible explanation of the making of this entanglement through a series of metaphors and acronyms that I have started to play with in order to take these ideas to different audiences. Please remember that while metaphors may be very useful to communicate something quickly in dynamic and yet still complex ways, they are also limited. Different theorists have inspired the work that led to the metaphors I employ, including Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Jacqui Alexander, Lewis Gordon, Ramon Grosfoguel and Boaventura Souza Santos, but it was the work of Walter Mignolo who offered most of the visual prompts. Mignolo examines Western modernity (which will be referred to only as modernity from now on) as the source of the entanglement. Starting from his premises, I have tried to create a problem space of disentanglement that makes connections between modernity’s ‘trick’, modernity’s shine and shadow, modernity’s grammar, modernity’s intellectual crutches and modernity’s gaze in order to generate new questions that could take my own curricular work forward. I will conclude with a few general thoughts on some wider implications for education.

### **Modernity’s trick**

Mignolo (2000) conceptualises modernity as a changing ‘global design’ planned and projected by particular global histories to manage the world. He locates the start of modernity in the 16th century with the incorporation of the Americas into the global vision of the European Renaissance

and into the Atlantic commercial circuit. Mignolo conceptualises the epistemic privilege of modernity as modernity's self-definition from the centre of enunciation: modernity can define what is universally good, true and real in dichotomous terms at the same time that it makes it sound like these definitions are natural and objective. There are three important associations here: a) Modernity's self-definition as the 'present' of time, and b) this happening as the only possible result of 'history' (imagined as a divine plan, even when conceptualized in secular ways), c) which leads to the association of modernity with the evolution of humanity (the association between linear time, divine history, and human evolution). Modernity's 'magic' is to effectively hide the making of these definitions and to script them in our imaginaries of past, present and future creating a hidden 'grammar' of thinking where only the 'content' of what we think is visible. This will be explored more in the section on modernity's grammar.

### **Modernity's shine and shadow**

Modernity's trick of making its construction invisible is complemented by a selective focus on its principles and outputs. Mignolo (2000, 2011) states that modernity is generally defined in relation to a bright, shiny side associated with concepts such as seamless progress, industrialization, secularization, humanism, individualism, scientific reasoning, and nation states, amongst others. Mignolo argues that modernity's 'shine' is articulated in ways that hide its shadow, its darker side, or the fact that for us to inhabit the shiny side, we systematically and necessarily have had and still have to inflict violence on other people. This violence is articulated in the concept of coloniality (borrowed from Quijano 1997) as the system that defines the organization and dissemination of epistemic, moral, and aesthetic resources in ways that mirror and reproduce modernity's imperial project. In other words, coloniality ensures the forgetting of spaciality (expansionist control of lands), of epistemic racism (elimination and subjugation of difference) and of the geopolitics of knowledge production (epistemic violence) that is constitutive of modernity (Maldonado-Torres 2004). Mignolo argues that coloniality is both the hidden face of modernity and the condition of its possibility (p.772).

Therefore, modernity's shadow is 'foreclosed,' meaning that the link between deep modern investments and their role in the systemic production of discrimination and inequalities inevitably has to be negated so that we can continue to believe that we are good, altruistic people moving 'ahead' in linear time and history towards a homogeneous better future of rational consensual unanimity. In other words, we are 'scripted' to desire modernity's shine and to deny the hidden costs of that shine—our collective and individual complicity in the systemic harm of modernity's shadow. Thus, the connections between the shiny side of modernity and its unavoidable shadow of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, genocide, cultural repression, land theft, dispossession, destitution, extractivism, unfair trade, crippling debt, border controls, criminalisation of dissent, marginalisation, militarisation, environmental disaster and so on, are 'foreclosed.' I use foreclosure here as a constitutive disavowal—something we necessarily need to deny in order to continue to believe what we want to believe. A disavowal that makes the connections between modernity's shine and shadow seem implausible and that makes learning about these things very difficult as it

mitigates against one's investments in specific cherished conceptualizations of identity, knowledge and reality that are perceived to be natural and normal, and not contingent upon history, society, culture, power and politics. In this context, existence is captured and trapped into cages of institutional scripts and counter hegemonic movements that challenge such cages using the scripts (bricks and tools) that have made them possible, often end up constructing wider cages to capture existence. Let me explain this further.

### **Modernity's grammar**

Modernity's shine is grounded on modernity's 'grammar' (interlinked ontology, epistemology and metaphysics) of universal reason and history, seamless progress, teleological, dialectical, totalizing and anthropocentric thinking, allochronism<sup>1</sup> and Cartesian selfhoods who see themselves as 'heading humanity.' Modernity's cherished shine and the foreclosures that are necessary for the animation of this shine create systemic modes of knowledge production and representations of the self in relation to Others that need to be constantly repeated in order to repress the difference, contingency, uncertainty and complexity that denaturalize these conceptualizations by exposing their social, historical and cultural roots (Bhabha 1994). Historically, these modes of knowledge and representation have been used to justify violence and subjugation. For example, the narrative of manifest destiny mobilized excitement with the notion of a chosen people with responsibility for expansion and redemption and justified theft and genocide in the Americas; the narrative of the 'white man's burden' constructed one ethnicity as closer to God and more mature, and as therefore authorized to enslave and exploit Others who were 'half child and half devil;' the narrative of a 'civilising mission' constructed the notion of a more rational, knowledgeable, and exceptional people 'heading humanity' and responsible for lifting Others out of darkness, tradition, and ignorance. Today's slogans of Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), illustrate how concepts may have changed in history, but the basic mechanism remains the same: dominance is rationalised through both ideas of exceptionalism, allochronism and benevolent responsibility which justifies and sustains the violence and exploitation that it simultaneously denies.

### **Modernity's gaze**

Modernity's systemic modes of knowledge production (grounded in modernity's grammar) generate extremely problematic patterns of engagement with those considered to be 'dragging modernity's or humanity's progress' for their lack of (universal) knowledge and technology (see also Souza 2011). I have summarised these problematic patterns in the acronym HEADS UP. These common patterns of engagement are characterized by:

- Hegemony, they justify superiority and support domination
- Ethnocentrism, they project one view as universal
- Ahistoricism, they forget historical legacies and complicities

- Depoliticization, they disregard power inequalities and ideological roots of analyses and proposals
- Salvationism, they frame help as the burden of the fittest and self-interested and self-betterment as altruism
- Un- complicated solutions, they offer easy, 'feel good' solutions that do not require systemic change
- Paternalism, they seek affirmation of superiority through the provision of help (Andreotti 2012)

Trying to address these issues using the same 'grammar' that has created the problems in the first place is likely to take us to the same configurations of representation and engagement, but with different 'content'. For example, counter-hegemonic strategies may become new hegemonies; 'allowing' the Other to 'speak' for themselves or 'empowering' them (from within the same grammar) by projecting modern protagonism as a single path for change or emancipation (which is very often promoted in progressive education) may end up reproducing all the problems described above precisely when one is trying to challenge these problems. Thus, recognizing our temporal and contextual epistemic frames, and the limits of those may help us explore new territories of signification. That takes me to 'modernity's intellectual crutches'.

### **Modernity's intellectual crutches**

This metaphor was inspired by a student who expressed that being exposed to analyses or frames completely different from what she was used to and what she expected was equivalent to having the floor taken from beneath her feet and the sensation of falling down. So I tried to imagine what intellectual frames kept us walking in the same way: what people would tend to hold on to when asked to explore the edges of their sense of being in the world when this sense of being is shaped by modern institutions. I have called these concepts 'modernity's intellectual crutches'. The first words refer to things we tend to desire that can provide comfort (and prevent the collapse of our sense of being), the words in brackets refer to that which is 'foreclosed', what is denied or perceived as non-existent in the process of investing in the aspects that come before:

- Certainty, linear causality (complexity)
- Rationality, universal reason (racialization)
- Universalism, rational unanimity (uncertainty)
- Teleology, linear time (trauma)
- Cartesian subjects, coherence (contingency)
- Humanity, historical progression (heterogeneity, hegemony)
- Emancipation, essentialism (ethnocentrism)
- Salvation, security (segregation)<sup>2</sup>

Similar to 'modernity's trick', where the shadow-violence of modernity is disavowed by those enchanted with modernity's shine, foreclosures follow the same mechanism by disavowing and rendering unintelligible perceptions that trouble what is cherished, what we are enchanted with.

For example, if we invest our desire in expectations of certainty and linear causality, we will have to deny that which does not fit with our narrative of what is ‘normal’ and expected, in this case, we will need to ignore complexity. If we invest in expectations of rationality and universality, we will have to close our eyes to uncertainty. If we invest in teleology and linear time as inherently benevolent and absolutely necessary for modern progress, we will not want to hear stories of trauma that reminds us of our complicity in violence in the imposition of single possibilities of knowing and being. If we see modernity as a result of humanity’s historical progression, we will see our privilege as a result of merit or natural evolution, rather than an effect of hegemony. If we invest in notions of emancipation and essentialism (in its different forms), we become blind to our own ethnocentrism. And if we invest in salvation and/or security, we turn away from the segregation that has been necessary in attempts to secure these aims.

The crutches suggest that our narratives of what is good and ideal are based on aspirational (and metaphysical) choices that depend on the disavowal of the process of choosing and of other possible choices, creating a situation where we can only comfortably see what we expect to see, what we expect to be normal and intelligible. Therefore, for my student, the uncomfortable acknowledgement of complexity, racialization, uncertainty, trauma, contingency, heterogeneity, hegemony, ethnocentrism and segregation called her to re-arrange her investments (or disinvest) in the comfort of the crutches. In this sense, perhaps education could be defined as an expansion of fields of signification: making intelligible the mechanisms of our choices, and their consequences, creating a sensibility towards the choices and effects we have learned to ignore or deny, and provoking shifts in our relationship with knowledge and its mediating effects in our relation with Others and with the world.

So what?

My point with the creation of these metaphors was not to trash modernity, but to problematize its universalization. I wanted to point to difficult entanglements that rely on issues hidden from view and that often result in us repeating problematic discursive, material and affective patterns precisely when we are trying to transcend them. For example, when trying to address modernity’s gaze taking into account modernity’s intellectual crutches, we would need to ask:

- How can we address hegemony without creating new hegemonies through our own forms of resistance?
- How can we address ethnocentrism without falling into absolute relativism and forms of essentialism and anti-essentialism that reify elitism?
- How can we address ahistoricism without fixing a single perspective of history to simply reverse hierarchies and without being caught in a self-sustaining narrative of vilification and victimisation?
- How can we address depoliticization without high-jacking political agendas for self-serving ends and without engaging in self-empowering critical exercises of generalisation, homogenisation and dismissal of antagonistic positions?
- How can we address salvationism without crushing generosity and altruism?

- How can we address people's tendency to want simplistic solutions without producing paralysis and hopelessness?
- How can we address paternalism without closing opportunities for short-term redistribution?

I have highlighted before (Andreotti 2011, 2012) the fact that these messages require that we have the courage, strength, confidence and humility to rise to the challenges and difficulties of current times; they command that we educate ourselves to become comfortable with the discomfort of the uncertainties of living the plurality of existence; and they call us to become inspired and excited by the new possibilities opened by uncharted spaces, processes and encounters that do not offer any pre-determined scripts or guarantees. How do we teach for that? And how do we prepare ourselves to teach for that given that we have been over-socialized in forms of education that go exactly in the opposite direction of finding personal comfort and security in certainties, conformity, subtle deference to institutional authorities, unexamined ideas of progress, and indulgent narcissism?

Teaching about these issues in contexts hostile to these ideas and where my body is perceived not to be a body of a legitimate knower has shifted my scholarship in significant ways. I think one of the positive unintended consequence of these shifts is the orientation towards questions of intelligibility which adds an extra layer of analysis to the idea of curriculum as the practice of expansion of possibilities for signification, with which I started this paper. How can we articulate what we are doing in curriculum studies in more precise and, at the same time, more accessible and exciting ways? How can we create bridges and inspire more people to engage in complicated conversations without losing depth or clarity?

## **Conclusion**

Needless to say, these last questions are invitations to deeper complicated conversations in the field itself. My situated answer points to a clarification of questions and the use of discursive devices such as metaphors to attract attention to the process of meaning-making. I would like to conclude with a last metaphor, this time, related to institutional scripts of identity (this metaphor actually came to me in a dream, so I cannot really identify its source). It deals with the social disease of hostility and the idea of education as a host and/or medicine for this disease:

- What if racism, sexism, class divisions, nationalism and other forms of toxic, parasitic and highly contagious viral divisions are preventable social diseases?
- What if the medicine involves getting to terms with our violent histories, being taught to see through the eyes of others (as impossible as it sounds), and facing humanity (in our own selves first) in all its complexity, affliction and imperfection: agonistically embracing everyone's capacity for love, hatred, compassion, harm, goodwill, envy, joy, anger, oppression, care, selfishness, selflessness, avarice, kindness, enmity, solidarity, malice, benevolence, arrogance, humility, narcissism, altruism, greed, generosity, contempt and reverence?
- What if our holy texts (religious, activist, and academic), our education (both formal and informal), our politics and agency, and our ways of knowing and being have carried both the

mutant virus that spreads the disease and the medicine that prevents it?

- What if learning to distinguish between toxins, viruses and medicines involves disciplining our minds, bodies, psyches, and spirits by confronting our traumas and letting go of fears of scarcity, loneliness, worthlessness, and guilt (generated precisely by the imperative for autonomy/independence, self-sufficiency and control)? What if we have to learn to trust each other without guarantees?
- What if the motivation to survive alongside each other upon our finite planet in dynamic balance (without written agreements, coercive enforcements or assurances) will come precisely through being taught collectively by the disease itself?
- What theory and curriculum would be appropriate, and what possibilities would be opened, then?

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Allochronism refers to the ontological habit of placing the Other in another time based on a seamless idea of progress where the 'I' is in contemporary (modern) and the 'Other' is lagging behind. Allochronism denies the possibility of simultaneous co-presence.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Lisa Taylor for her inspiration and ideas in relation to this metaphor-acronym.

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