

# Freire and the U.S Reconceptualization: Remembering Curriculum as International Conversation<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

*I see the windows, the wall, the chairs in the room.*

*I cannot remember any specific anecdote;*

*But I do remember the feeling of the intellectual revolution happening in that classroom.*

*In was the fall of 1969<sup>3</sup>. The whole semester was just one book:*

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

William F. Pinar, conversation in Chicago, IL, April 18<sup>th</sup> 2015.

In this text I present an in-progress interpretation of Curriculum Studies as an international conversation. I went back to the seminal texts of the reconceptualization of the field of Curriculum Studies in the United States in the 1970's, hoping that a close reading of them would provide some connections between the main authors of that movement and the work of Paulo Freire. My intention is to show that these writers engaged in intellectual conversation with Freire's work at the time, although the field may now have forgotten how important this influence was for those early involved in reconceptualizing curriculum. Freire's concept such as *conscientização*, humanizing education, liberating education are important concepts in which these scholars elaborate to talk back to the mainstream of the field conceived exclusively as curriculum development. Freire's work was also a taking back to that rationale that had arrived in Latin America in the 1960's as a new educational technology. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* appeared strongly influencing the US reconceptualization of the field in the 1970's. The reconceptualized field of curriculum was also international from the very first moment.

Recovering the past is part of the "evolution in consciousness" (Pinar, 1974) that is called for by that reconceptualization. For this, I use the concept of consciousness, curriculum consciousness<sup>4</sup>, as a cultural device to follow and provoke an international conversation in Curriculum Studies: a sort of "forum for exchange for –in Freire's still useful notion –"dialogical encounter." (Pinar, 1978a, p. 65) What follows is what I have learned so far.



TO CITE THIS ARTICLE PLEASE INCLUDE ALL OF THE FOLLOWING DETAILS:

Johnson-Mardones, Daniel F. (2015). Freire and the U.S Reconceptualization: Remembering Curriculum as International Conversation. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* 12 (1)

<http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci> <access date>

## Heightened Consciousness and *Conscientização*

*Liberating education consists of acts of cognition*

Greene, 1974, p.82<sup>5</sup>

I begin with *Heightened Consciousness, Cultural Revolution, and Curriculum Theory* (Pinar, 1974); Pinar's collection of the proceedings of the 1973 curriculum conference held at the University of Rochester. This conference is important since it "may be cited as the starting point" (Pinar, 1976a, p. 23) of the reconceptualization of Curriculum Studies in the United States in the 1970's, a sign of what was underway. Some of those now regarded as major curriculum scholars were present in Rochester in 1973, among them Maxine Greene, Dwayne Huebner, James MacDonald, and William Pinar; among the attendees were Madeleine Grumet and Janet Miller, then graduate students. In the preface of the proceedings, Pinar says that if the field of curriculum is "to survive these strange times, then it must evolve morally and intellectually; it must evolve in consciousness." (p. ix) These strange times in which "man is partially unaware of himself; he is not himself; he is dehumanized," (Pinar, 1974, p. 3); strange times when is required *conscientização* to restore humanness.

The Freirean language resonates among the seven conference papers and is quoted, rather extensively in four of them, especially in Donald Bateman's<sup>6</sup>. In his Introduction, Pinar (1974) informs us, that Bateman, in his "The Politics of Curriculum," draws "on the work of Freire to support his belief in the need to 'demythologize' curriculum" (p. ix). To demythologize is the task of a pedagogy of liberation, Bateman argues. "The pedagogy of domination mythologizes reality; the pedagogy of liberation demythologizes it" (p. 60), Bateman (1974) continues. Schooling, he concludes, is not neutral neither it is its curriculum. The idea of curriculum reform must also be demythologized if it wants to contribute to the liberation of people.

Freire appears explicitly and strongly in Maxine Greene's presentation "Cognition, Consciousness, and Curriculum." In the first sentence, she says my "theme derives in part from Paulo Freire, particularly from his notion that 'liberating education consists in acts of cognition'." (Greene, 1974, p. 69) That act of cognition makes possible to "change the given." (Greene, 1974, p. 69) As Freire, Greene is drawing on Sartre in this idea. Seeking implications for the field needed to 'evolve in consciousness,' we may remember, Greene continues

I find Freire's phenomenological approach to education suggesting new vantage points when I ask myself whether anything can be done in schools and what curriculum ought to signify in a world so dominated by bureaucracies and inhuman technological controls<sup>8</sup>, when I considered the inequities and corruptions surrounding us today, and when I ponder ways of arousing students to choose themselves as persons who are committed, responsible, involved. (Greene, 1974, p. 69)

Curriculum, Greene argues, must provide students opportunities "for them to see that they themselves, whoever they are, constitute those worlds as self-determining human beings existing with others in intersubjective community." (1974, p. 69) In other words, curriculum must offer students opportunities to become aware of themselves as historical beings. However, she cautions us, that "becoming aware cannot happen if what Freire calls the 'banking' approach is maintained, or if teachers talk about 'reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable'<sup>9</sup>." (p. 75) School under the banking



principle prevents students from becoming conscious of their historicity, making it particularly difficult for students “to break with the given later on” and to identify the themes in their “biography that are truly significant –the kind likely to generate cognitive quest.” She remarks, “Freire talks of such themes in connection with human aspirations, motives, and objectives, which are as historical as men themselves” (p. 75). This process of *conscientização* allows us to restore human beings’ humanity; that is “Freire’s notion of ‘man’s vocation and the struggle to recover a lost humanity.’” (p. 77). Then, Greene concludes, we discover “how to present learning as integral to the struggle Freire describes, and curriculum as a resource for transforming what exists;” (p. 77) to surpass what has been given.

Greene also referred to Freire in his famous essay “Curriculum and Consciousness” (1971) when in opening it she uttered her intention of talking about curriculum from the learner’s standpoint. From that point of view, meaning must be constituted through “cognitive action,” which cannot be done while students are “as Freire puts it, submerged in a ‘dense, enveloping reality or tormenting blind alley’ and will be so unless they can ‘perceive it as an objective-problematic situation’<sup>10</sup>” (p. 310). Provided with the opportunity to take distance from that reality, to move away from “‘the silence of primary consciousness’ (...) what Freire calls ‘background consciousness’,<sup>11</sup>” (p. 303) the student can become an ‘epistemic subject’; a subject capable of consciously naming and expressing the world. Thus, Greene’s 1973 essay elaborates in her initial, and better known, work *Curriculum and Consciousness* (1971); a foundational writing in Curriculum Studies. This writing was re-published in *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists* (1975); a book edited by William Pinar and considered a major work of the reconceptualization of the field underway in the 1970’s.

In Pinar’s own writings in *Curriculum Theorizing* (1975), we find again an explicit and strong Freirean influence. Pinar begins his “Sanity, Madness, and the School” (1975) by pointing to the then pervasive criticism of schooling experience as a dehumanizing one<sup>12</sup>. His paper focuses on “the impact of teachers on students, the impact of the oppressor on the oppressed” (p. 360) in order to study the ‘unexamined effects’ of schooling. Schooling that, he claims, is informed by a ‘banking’ or ‘digestive’ concept of education, referring to Freire and Sartre. Under that conceptualization education is an ‘act of depositing,’ or an act of ‘filling out,’ knowledge into students. “For apart from inquiry, apart from praxis, men cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world and with each other;” after quoting Freire (1971, p. ) Pinar argues that teacher-bankers “deposit rather than inquire” (p. 361). Pinar quotes Freire (1970):

The central problem is this: How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be the ‘hosts’ of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy. As long as they live in the duality in which to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor, this contribution is impossible (Pinar, 1975, p. 365).

Based on this duality, Pinar explains why horizontal violence replaces vertical violence in the oppressed. Quoting Freire again, Pinar<sup>13</sup> elaborates: “B[b]ecause the oppressor exists within their oppressed comrades, when they attack those comrades they are indirectly attacking the oppressor as well.” (p. 365) In that dynamic, schooling atrophies us, and its cumulative effect “is devastating. We graduate, credentialed but crazed, erudite but

fragmented shells of the human possibility.” (p. 381) That is Pinar’s conclusion in his “Sanity, Madness, and the School”; an essay published, after its inclusion in *Curriculum Theorizing* (1975), in the *New School of Education Journal* with the subtitle *A Phenomenological Analysis of the Psychological Effects of ‘Banking’ Education*<sup>14</sup>. As we see, reconceptualizing the field is also a Freirean theme from the beginning.

Now, going back to Pinar’s 1973 statement about the need for curriculum to ‘evolve in consciousness’, he opens his “Currere: Toward Reconceptualization” (1975) claiming that “the field has forgotten what existence is” (p. 396); it is unaware of itself, “uprooted from geographical, social, and psychological ambience” (p. 399). In order to overcome that situation, we “require a strategy that will allow us to ‘bracket’ educational aspects of our taken-for-granted world” (p. 406). That enabling experience can be described as “expanding and losing what then feel like constraints in my mind’s structure, what Freire might in part mean by ‘limit situation’” (p. 407). That can lead, Pinar continues, to a “change in consciousness”; a process of raising awareness, a process of *conscientização*. In a later text (1979) he will say: “In one sense I am speaking of Freire’s *conscientização* or learning to perceive social, political, and economic considerations and to take action against oppressive elements of the reality.” (p. 110) Pinar closes his essay affirming that “C[c]urrere is thus experience in educational context” and it is “the kernel of a reconceived and revitalized curriculum theory field” (p. 413), a field conceptualized.

### Freire and the Reconceptualization

*The thematic characteristics of American reconceptualization were not limited to the North American continent ... Freire’s (1968) radical pedagogical work in Brazil a decade earlier would inspire hundreds of scholars worldwide to link literacy, culture, and politics.*  
Pinar et al, 1995, p. 230.

The Freirean influence on the US reconceptualization of curriculum, is not surprising, given that both intellectual projects are built on similar philosophical roots. Existentialism, Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, and Marxism are European traditions that both endeavors draw upon. This must have been a factor that facilitated the US reception of Freire at that such early moment. Besides the above, the common emphasis on process is certainly something that cannot go unnoticed. As we have seen, Freire’s concept of *conscientização*, becoming conscious, is a central topic in times of *reconceptualization*<sup>15</sup>, a time of both ethical and intellectual challenge. It is worth noticing that this last word replaces the word *reconceptualists* in the second edition of *Curriculum Theorizing* in 2000. Reconceptualization is a word Pinar used “to inform the mainstream of the field what might be expected from the few of us I saw working honestly in ways that would indeed reconceptualize the field mainstream curricularists knew.” (Pinar, 1978a, p. 63) The substitution in the second edition is consistent with the idea of the book as “a transitional statement” (Pinar, 2000, p. x) from a field in crisis to a field revitalized. In that manner, Pinar rectified one of his mistake in the first edition (1975) when using the word *reconceptualists* he focused on the scholars rather than in the process of *reconceptualization*. This emphasis on the process it is also present in Freire’s use of the word *conscientização* instead of consciousness. Same thing can be said about the use of the word *theorizing* instead of *theory*.

Pinar’s second self-acknowledged mistake was the use of the distinction between critical and post-critical scholars within the *reconceptualists*, following McDonald’s, which



he used to organize the book on the reconceptualization. This mistake, Pinar reports, “irritated the Marxists in the field. The distinction was accurate but it did provoke a continuing rift between various figures in the new field.” (Pinar, 2000, p. xi) What is interesting regarding our topic is that it was not the scholars labeled in that book as ‘critical’ (Apple, Mann, Molnar, and Mooney) who referred to and quoted Freire but some of the labeled as ‘post-critical’ (Greene, McDonald, Pinar). Therefore, Freire’s influence in the field of curriculum studies came from those working on existential, phenomenological, and psychoanalytical streams and not from those working on Marxist perspectives. From another point of view, certainly related to the previous one, it can be said that Freire’s influence came from those working on curriculum from humanities fields rather than from those more oriented to social sciences.

In a broader sense, regarding Freire’s influence on the reconceptualization, Pinar et al (1995) have pointed out that Freire’s work “brought the social crisis of contemporary Latin America very much to the heart of the international curriculum dialogue.” (p. 827) Following on Freire’s belief that ideas are part of broader social practices, it is interesting to remember that Freire, like every writer, writes within a tradition. That tradition, I argue, is Liberation Theology, and the widely conceived Latin American thought of liberation. Liberation Theology is a “movement associated with –some would say indebted to –Paulo Freire and other educators working in Latin America” (Pinar et al, 1995, p. 643) and one of whose main representative is the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez. In this sense, Slattery’s (1992) claim that “Pinar, like Gutierrez, begins his commentary on *currere* paraphrasing Freire’s (1968) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.” (Quoted in Pinar et al, 1995, p. 645) is quite intriguing. Personally, I found this train of thought extremely suggestive in the attempt to develop an actual international conversation in Curriculum Studies. And, I think, I have proved that this conversation started from the very beginning of the reconceptualization.

### **Freire and Currere: The Autobiographical**

*Talking about Freire: not sure what I can provide in addition to the references to Freire in Understanding Curriculum as to his influence on the reconceptualization – their number gestures toward his pervasive influence – except to speak autobiographically.*

Pinar, personal communication, April 8<sup>th</sup> 2015

*I accept with Freire that the ontological vocation of the human species is humanization... the fundamental assumption of currere.*

Pinar, 1976b, p. 93

I have suggested that there are at least references and resonances regarding Freire’s influence on Pinar’s *currere*, whose main turn is biographical. Can it be fairly claimed then that Freire’s work also informed the reconceptualization in that regard? In this section, I address that question. I begin by claiming that there are several references to Freire’s influence in *Curriculum Understanding* (Pinar et al, 1995), the book that mapped the field after its reconceptualization. Now, I would like to go further and see how Freire influenced the development of the concept and method of *currere*. This of course entails the arrival of the autobiographical turn in Curriculum Studies, a turn fundamental to the field’s reconceptualization. The main reference will be here *Toward a Poor Curriculum* (1976) a book co-authored by William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet, which is the main text on the initial stage of *currere*.



The same comment I made already regarding common sources in the two intellectual projects is pertinent here. *Currere* has phenomenological, existentialist, and psychoanalytical foundations, as Pinar and Grumet extensively explain in their book. Freire shared these influences. Therefore, it is not surprising to find conceptual correspondences in *Currere* and Freire's pedagogy. Moreover, giving an account of the initial project, Grumet says that "phenomenology and psychoanalysis had provided language and evidence to justify the place of *currere* in educational theory and research. The previous year we had taught the seminar in the theoretical voice, reading Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Maxine Green and Freire" (Grumet, 1976d, p. 149). As we see, Freire's influence seems having gone further than mere correspondences in the sources of that project. He was part of the readings in the pedagogical deployment of *currere* as a research method. In this sense Pinar writes,

From one perspective *currere* starts with Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and with the major themes in that book. The first is that human vocation, ontologically, is humanization; the second is, that to pedagogically act in accord with this meaning of the human endeavor is to dialogically encounter one's students; the third is, to so encounter our students as to cultivate thought *and* action, a sort of *praxis* Freire terms "Concientizao." (Pinar, 1976b, p. 93)

Conceptually, we are situated in the political dimension of *currere*. This political dimension requires political work, its thought and action "is [to] be conducted self-rememberedly..., ordinarily in some dialogical fashion" that "can help raise the specific (say intellectual) and general (ontological) level of his students (or students-teachers to use Freire's term)."<sup>16</sup>(Pinar, 1976b, p. 103) But, how does one work to become on an ontologically higher level? Pinar asks. Such work is and can be social in nature, but it is also

(...) fundamentally individual. At least, it becomes individual at some biographic-developmental point, as it became a few years ago for me. This self-work is work to become more fully human and is fundamentally consonant with Freire's intention, his affirmation that man's ontological vocation is humanization. (Pinar, 1976b, p. 104)

Freire's pedagogy, Pinar will say later, "demonstrates [that] *praxis* can occur only as these contradictions are understood in the context of immediate individual and social life<sup>17</sup>." (Pinar, 1979, p. 110) In his "Search for a Method" (1976), Grumet (1976a) adds "William Pinar proposes to study both the individual's subjectivity and the impact of his social milieu upon it." (p. 45)

Objective constitution is the life of the subject and it is constituted as subject in and through this life. And we have heard echoes of this theory in Freire's assertion that "authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the man without men, but men in relations with the world." (Grumet, 1976b, p. 68)

The kind of education Freire proposes requires working in context, but not being immersed in that context, in order to become aware of one's historical situation and act upon it. This is "a sort of *praxis* Freire terms *Conscientização*", in Pinar's words. According to him,

This work is, in some measure, autobiographical. It aspires to assist the student to return from submersion in reality to a distanced, self-reflective comprehension of his life in relation to cultural and economic life. Such work may initially occur by didactic instruction but only initially. In didactic instruction the student remain

passive. In Freire's term, the procedure is 'banking education.' It is extreme indoctrination. Extrication from reality, from unconscious, conditioned participation in oppressive political reality to self-reflexive, active movement in order to alter that reality is an important function of the autobiographical work that is the method of *currere*. (Pinar, 1979, pp. 110-111)

This autobiographical work had been usually regarded as elitist, as if only upper classes had the right to tell and write their lives. The blame put on the biographical before was also put onto *currere* since the beginning. In that sense, Freire provided an example of a work that without forget the political and the collective was indeed also individual. For Freire, biography is a human capacity; "things neither communicate nor recount," (1973), "but this cannot be the case of people, who are historical beings, able to give an autobiography of themselves" (p. 110).

Freire's work to awake critical consciousness among the illiterates in Brazil supports our conviction that self-awareness is not confined to an elaborate code, that language is not our relationship to the world but merely a system of signs devised to talk about experience that is always prior to and more than what words can say. (Grumet, 1976b, p. 84)

Methodologically speaking, the method of *currere* proposes to look into one's own experiences, looking for images of our past, present, and future. Pinar sees that work connected to what Freire calls 'limit situations.' Therefore, Freire's work was also used to develop the method devised to study one's educational experience. Even more, the emphasis in self-reflection in Freire's work, led Pinar to think in the work that the researcher should conduct from within. *Currere* enables that process. He elaborates,

(...) fundamental to our view is the sense that curriculum research must emancipate the researcher if it is to authentically offer such a possibility to others. We have devised a method by means of which the researcher can examine his or her 'limits situations,' in Freire's sense, his or her own participation in frozen social and psychological structures. (Pinar, 1978b)

If every academic field is also an intellectual community, then, a field needing to evolve in consciousness requires from those who profess it to evolve in consciousness, too. *Currere* provides that opportunity for those involved in curriculum work. Freire was also inspiring in that way.

## Final Remark

If every consciousness is a consciousness of something, what should the field of curriculum be conscious of? I think, the field of curriculum studies must be aware of that the international conversation that it started a long time ago. Internationalization was a dimension of a reconceptualized/zing field decades before internationalization was institutionalized at the turn of the century with the founding of the *International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies*. In the 1970's, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* appeared strongly influencing an inspiring the US reconceptualization of the field. The reconceptualized field of curriculum was also international from the start, not just given to European but also Latin American influences.

In our current concerns about internationalization, Freire (1965) still resonates: "a society [field] that decolonizes itself more and more... is the basic dilemma. (p.13)" This is the dilemma when academic fields become international conversations. In that process, uneven relations are certainly at play and may always be reproduced. To conceive a field,



say Curriculum Studies, as an international conversation, a place of dialogical encounters, entails an effort of decolonization. The international field needs still “evolve in consciousness.” In dialogue both voice and silence, speaking and listening, are required. Freire’s, Greene’s, and Pinar’s conversation offer a great example of that kind of scholarship.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An early version of this paper was presented at the 5th Triennial Conference of the International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies, held at the University of Ottawa in May 26-29 2015, under the title of “What is Curriculum Consciousness? An international perspective.”

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<sup>3</sup> 46 years later, Pinar writes: “In my senior year –Fall 1969 –I enjoyed an opportunity to believe again in meaningful public service, thanks to Professor Donald R. Bateman, who permitted me to join his experimental urban program. There I was introduced to Freire while working in the inner city of Columbus.” (Pinar, 2015, p. 3)

<sup>4</sup> It was in the title of the International Conference on Curriculum Consciousness, Curriculum Construction and Curriculum Capacity Building held in Zhejiang University in Hangzhou in November 2014 where I saw this concept of ‘curriculum consciousness’ for the first time. I was intrigued by the formulation and its possible meanings. Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, and William Pinar came to mind immediately.

<sup>5</sup> Maxine Greene writes this sentence in quotation marks, referring to Freire’s statement quoted at the beginning of her paper.

<sup>6</sup> “Bateman taught Freire” (Pinar et al, 1995, p. xviii) he “employed Freirean language to assess the political role of schools.” (Pinar, 1995, p. 221)

<sup>7</sup> Greene is quoting Freire, 1970, p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> Pinar would add, “given the assessment–political oppression, psychic estrangement, in short, madness –was there a way out? In 1972, Jung, Maslow, and Freire pointed a way.” (Pinar, 1976a, p. 12)

<sup>9</sup> Greene is quoting Freire, 1970, p.113.

<sup>10</sup> Greene is quoting Freire, 1970, p.108.

<sup>11</sup> Greene is quoting Freire, 1970, p.100.

<sup>12</sup> This view of the student’s role in contemporary education is similar to that of Freire’s (1968), in which the student is viewed as the repository of banking deposits (i.e. information). Pinar, 1995, p. 781



<sup>13</sup> Pinar draws here on his previous analogy between the teacher-student and the oppressor-oppressed relationships. In a later work he states: reminds us such a duality is always characteristic of the oppressed, and it explains why horizontal violence, (i.e., violence across class lines, say among black Americans or among public school students) is more frequent than horizontal violence, which is violence that aims at the oppressors. This is so because the oppressor dwells in the oppressed; a duality he must attack himself. (Pinar, 1976a, p. 12)

<sup>14</sup> Referenced in Pinar's essay "The Analysis of Educational Experience", also included in the 1975 book.

<sup>15</sup> Reconceptualization "describes what is underway in the curriculum field in the 1970's." (Pinar, 1978a, p. 71)

<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Pinar continues "this view does not disparage traditional political strategies, such as organizing workers, strikes, legal and administrative efforts. To those committed to social justice, to perform such actions self-rememberedly means, in Freire's terms, that such workers do not fall victim to oppressors by resorting to their humanizing strategies to achieve political superiority." (Pinar, 1976b, p. 103)

<sup>17</sup> Freire alludes, for instance, to analysis of peasants' afternoon drinking. What is necessary is that these students analytically grasp the political meaning of this drinking; that it is born in frustration that has not yet been politically expressed or materially remediated. The necessity of matching such as 'oppression' to concrete incidents (such a compulsive drinking or incidents of 'horizontal violence') is clear.

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**Submitted: June, 16th, 2015**

**Approved: July, 14th, 2015**

