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Review of

## *The Syllabus as Curriculum: A Reconceptualist Approach*

by Samuel D. Rocha, New York: Routledge, 2021

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### On Arguments and Philosophy

As a fresh graduate teaching assistant, I stood once in front of an Introduction to Philosophy course, sly smile on my face, and told the class that, “Philosophers, when presenting or defending their views, give us arguments. Some philosophers,” I continued, “strongly object to what I just said.” (Pause for effect.) “Some even offer very good *arguments* to tell us why...” and so on. You get the gist.

I am less cavalier about those words today, although it seems odd, to my analytical and Anglo-trained sensibilities, to think of philosophy without claims and arguments. But perhaps claims, arguments, objections, and so on need not appear as I am used to. That is, it seems odd to think that *all* philosophical work must conform to what I know, to what I deem familiar. Of course, what is unfamiliar may take more effort to understand, so much that almost by reflex, we seem driven to reject it, to give up before trying. We may even commit the ultimate sin and label the unfamiliar *not philosophy*, or what amounts to the same thing, *not important*, not worth the effort, not worth *anyone’s* effort. This behavior, so perfectly flawed and so perfectly human, seems bizarre when we consider that the people and works philosophers spent so much effort reading and talking about, be they called Socrates, or Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, were treated likewise by most of their contemporaries. A bit of patience and willingness, then, to look harder for the familiar among what at first seems strange, I am trying to say, is worth the effort.

Using the (I hope) not too cryptic remarks above as segue, I will discuss Samuel Rocha’s book *The Syllabus as Curriculum: A Reconceptualist Approach*. In this book, Rocha analyzes his own course syllabi in philosophy of education to advance a philosophical reconceptualization of what the curriculum is. Note that Rocha avoids giving an exact definition that would “underdetermine” what he means by a “reconceptualization of the curriculum” (p. 8). As he is aware, though, this approach may invite the charge of “theoretical opaqueness” (p. 8). I don’t agree with the charge, however. Rocha may not make a linear argument, but the book is highly structured, dealing with concrete syllabi.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, then, I will briefly discuss Rocha’s project, focusing on its aims and the way Rocha sets about reaching them. I finish with a brief critique of the overall project. First, though, I comment on matters of subject and form.

One last remark before we start: the phenomenologically trained or inclined reader will perhaps have an easier time with this book. That is exactly, in my view, who the book is *not* intended for (more on this below). Again, for the rest of us, a bit of patience at first may be needed, but soon enough Rocha’s vision and project reveal themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to acknowledge and give thanks to Lauren Bialystok for these (and many others) points.

## Aim, Structure, and Gardens

Rocha's project, the reconceptualization of the curriculum ideal, is in truth more of a "reconceptualization 2.0"; Rocha is quick to point out that an attempt was made in the 1970s to move away from what he calls the "textbook engineering" approach that came from the work of Ralph W. Tyler<sup>2</sup> and others, but in his view, the project lost its way and failed to deliver (p. 8). Or rather, it delivered something undesirable: curriculum studies is now a discipline and field dominated by inquiry in the social sciences, accountability, and testing, incapable of appreciating, let alone carrying out, the task of reconceptualization. Like others before him,<sup>3</sup> Rocha wants the humanities, broadly defined, to be at the center of curriculum studies. What is different in Rocha's case is that instead of giving us the argument first, he is both arguing for this vision and showing us what this would look like in practice. For instance, notice that Rocha's vision of the syllabus as the curriculum is one of action, of "making" something, an item, a thing (pp. 2–3). To make better sense of this, notice that he draws our attention to the idea, made in prior work (Rocha, 2015), that "art precedes metaphysics" (p. 4). I cannot do justice to this idea here, but roughly speaking, he is talking about doing first, and theorizing after.<sup>4</sup> Consider this: as stated in the introduction above, the syllabi in the book come from Rocha's teaching. In fact, some of the most interesting ones are different iterations for the same course (e.g., syllabus 8B and 8C, pp. 128–150). Would Rocha's project work, we must ask, if the syllabi were but fabricated examples, having never been used in practice?

My answer to the above is a clear "no." At the end of the book, Rocha points out that there seems to be two ways "to talk about a concept": in the first, we give a definition at the outset of a discussion and apply it consistently throughout (p. 207). The second way is indirect, using the terms associated with the concept, so that the sense of the concept emerges in usage (p. 207). Note that the second method is indirect not for the sake of being indirect, but because it rejects the idea that things are in practice as clear and easy to define as the first method deems them to be (p. 207). Rocha's book, therefore, does not offer arguments or definitions supporting the idea of the syllabus as the curriculum. Or rather, I should say that Rocha is giving us an argument by *showing us* the syllabus as the curriculum. As he puts it, the syllabi presented have been "empirically tested" through Rocha's teaching, their effectiveness thereby confirmed (somewhat) further by two institutional pre-tenure reviews (p. 39). But the point is that it is necessary (albeit insufficient) for the syllabi to be seen first and foremost as empirical objects (pp. 39–40). Thus, offering some artificial, untested syllabi would just not do, as it would weaken the argument, a fact not lost on Rocha: "art precedes metaphysics" (p. 4), or put in a coarser way, a making, a doing, necessarily precedes argument.

Notice that Rocha calls the second way, above, the "humanistic way" (p. 207). This is, as Rocha tell us, the correct reconceptualization he seeks, one in line with Plato's and Aristotle's sense of the curriculum found in the *Republic* and *Poetics* (p. 7), but very much applicable and needed in the here and now. This sense in which Rocha uses the term "humanities" is one that goes beyond schooling and academia. As he points out, after all, many of the now called "academic disciplines" predate "the professional discourse of higher education of the last century or so by millennia" (p. 209). If we agree a reconceptualization of the curriculum is needed, why steer it towards the humanities, so broadly constructed? Rocha is clear here: only this humanistic reconceptualization can free curriculum studies from the current status of the field, "where qualitative social scientific studies and methodological theories about how to best conduct social science ... overpower the original expression of curriculum studies within the humanities" (p. 18).

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<sup>2</sup> See Kliebard, H. M. (1970). The Tyler rationale, *School Review*, 78(2), 259–72.

<sup>3</sup> Rocha mentions William H. Schubert, Janet L. Miller, and Madeleine R. Grumet (p. 8).

<sup>4</sup> I believe that Rocha's affinity for the classics shows in the way he uses terms like "art," *poesis*, etc. (see the comments on this in the foreword by William F. Pinar). In the case of "art," his use is closer to the original Latin *artes*, as in skills or crafts.

After a brief guest foreword by William F. Pinar, the book begins with three essays by Rocha: the preface, forethought, and introduction, which foreground and prepare the reader to engage with the sets of syllabi. Following each syllabi set, Rocha gives us a “garden” essay, a place for both reader and author to reflect on the prior syllabi set, and prepare for the next one. After the third and final syllabi set and its accompanying garden essay, Rocha offers three final essays: the conclusion, afterthought, and epilogue, each with a different theme, that tie up the whole project together.<sup>5</sup> Each syllabi set and garden pair are followed by a doodle by Alexander “Sasha” Sidorkin, who is credited by Rocha with creating “the genre of the syllabus as a form of scholarship” when he founded the journal *Syllabus* (p. 12). Rocha confesses his fear that the book’s composition may seem “arbitrary,” and argues for a “linear, front to back, traditional reading” on grounds that the book may be mistaken for some sort of “teaching materials” textbook (p. 40). I find this fear overstated and slightly amusing; that form, sequence, and style matter as much as content in this work (and I would venture, all of Rocha’s work) seems obvious to me. Intuitively, I place Rocha’s concern for, and awareness of, how sequence impacts content delivery on his performative background as a singer and songwriter, a point noted by Pinar in the guest foreword when he writes that “a strong sense of the performative structures [Rocha’s] scholarship and teaching” (p. xi). That said, I think the issue for Rocha is not that someone will decide to read a book or article after seeing it in one of the syllabi included here; I certainly did so. (The one I am most excited about, by the way, is Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.) Rather, the issue, given the aims discussed above, is missing how a particular selection fits in with the overall work.

Rocha notes that the structural idea of “gardens,” while full of metaphoric content and historical precedent, is taken directly from Panteleimon Manoussakis *The Ethics of Time*, while the titles “forethought” and “afterthought” come from W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (pp. 38–39). Again, this is Rocha as the artist and the writer, but also as the philosopher and the teacher, paying attention to how structure shapes and influences content and the effectiveness of its delivery, and vice versa.

## Philosophy, Dialogue, and Thinking

In syllabus 1A, Rocha writes to his students that the main takeaway from the course will be “to become more *thoughtful*, to think and even to think about thinking,” (p. 45). In 1B, he writes that, “In practice, philosophy is chiefly comprised of thinking” (p. 48). And so on. I am not going to debate the pedagogical importance or veracity of these claims. Certainly, learning to think, including thinking about thinking, is at least, if not more, worthy an educational goal as there can ever be. Thinking, however, particularly when talking about philosophy, invokes what I call a “Rodin thinker-like”<sup>6</sup> ideal and solitary geniuses, of philosophy being something that we do by ourselves. I am not sure that is the kind of thinking we do in philosophy (or even if that is thinking at all). The thinking or reasoning philosophers do seem to be more akin to what Anthony Laden (2012) calls “the social picture of reasoning.” It happens in classroom seminars, hallways, and dorms, via Zoom and in person at conferences, where the *disputatio* that Rocha (and all of us) teaches his students happens (e.g., syllabus 5, p. 95). Even the student writing a paper by themselves, in as much as they are taught to anticipate objections from the reader (e.g., syllabus 1D, p. 54), are thereby engaging in social reasoning.

If philosophy is therefore social, and we do philosophy via arguments, those arguments must be taken up by others and engaged with, for which it is in turn imperative that they be understood. Did

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Jamie Herman for her comments on this section.

<sup>6</sup> From Auguste Rodin’s famous sculpture “Le Penseur” (“The Thinker”), which is commonly used to represent philosophy.

Rocha then jeopardize the reconceptualization project by not arguing in a linear fashion? Why give us syllabi (“teaching materials,” p. 39) instead of a more accessible argument? The answer to the first question is a simple “I don’t think so.” The reason is related to the answer to the second question. Others, as Rocha reminds us, have battled “the philistines” who opposed the reconceptualization project and made no progress (p. 8). A “more nuanced way,” as Rocha puts it, may perhaps succeed (p. 8). The syllabi approach is also closer to Rocha the teacher, as it emphasizes the *poesis* of teaching that he discusses in the preface at length (pp. 1–16). At times, however, Rocha sounds resigned to the idea that his project will not be understood and that its important arguments and points will be missed (e.g., see the epilogue, pp. 211–212). To some extent I agree: while one of the book’s more interesting features is its structure, this is one of the things that the reader may struggle with. Indeed, the question “What kind of book is this?” which every book review must at minimum answer, may often be decided on grounds of structure. Yet, it is the book’s structure and non-linear argument that places it squarely in the one place it can be studied, vis-à-vis, the humanities, which are at the center of what a fresh look (or start), that is, a reconceptualization of curriculum studies, must emphasize. Again, in my view, there is nothing accidental in that.

To Rocha, though, we must say that it is not enough to declare, “So be it,” or “this is all I have to offer” (p. 212). After all, is it *entirely* the student’s fault if they made a good faith effort, and they don’t understand what they read? Any decent teacher (and Rocha is aware that he is a good one – p. 11) would perhaps give the reluctant reader a nibble, something familiar to hold on to, to orient themselves, to soothe their fear amidst the unfamiliar. For many readers, this book may not do that. Even if sometimes it is necessary to ditch everything, to start in medias res, as Rocha tells his students (syllabus 5, p. 96; and epilogue, p. 207), it may be more effective (and a nice thing to do) to prepare the reader so they can better follow along. Again, my view about this book is that the destination is well worth the journey. But too many, I fear, may end up missing out on it.

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