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Teaching as Indwelling Between Two Curriculum Worlds: The Coming Into Being of a Pedagogical Situation¹

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Even before day 1 of the term, our teacher, Miss O, walks into her assigned Grade 5 classroom. Because Miss O is already a teacher, by her mere presence in the classroom as teacher, she initiates a transformation of a sociocultural and physical environment into something different. Even before a pupil walks in, she silently asks: “Can I establish myself here as a teacher?” and the classroom’s desks, walls, chalkboards, floor, books, and resources jointly reply, albeit wordlessly, by what they are. They respond to Miss O’s intention and presence. And when the pupils arrive, things and pupils arrange themselves, as it were, around Miss O’s intention. They become “suitable,” teachable,” “harmful,” “difficult,” “hopeful,” “damaging.” The environment ceases to be environment, and in its place comes into being a pedagogic situation, a lived situation pregnantly alive in the presence of people.

Within this situation, Miss O soon finds that her pedagogic situation is a living in tensionality—a tensionality that emerges, in part, from indwelling in a zone between two curriculum worlds: the worlds of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived-experiences.

Curriculum-As-Plan

The first of these, the curriculum-as-plan, usually has its origin outside the classroom, such as the Ministry of Education or the school district office. But whatever the source, it is penetratingly and insistently present in Miss O’s classroom. This curriculum-as-plan is the curriculum that Miss O is asked to teach the Grade 5 pupils who are entrusted to her care.

In curriculum-as-plan are the works of curriculum planners, usually selected teachers from the field, under the direction of some ministry official often designated as the curriculum director of a subject or a group of subjects. As works of people, inevitably, they are imbued with the planners’ orientations to the world, which inevitably include their own interests and assumptions about ways of knowing and about how teachers and students are to be understood. These interests, assumptions, and approaches, usually implicit in the text of the curriculum-as-plan, frame a set of curriculum statements: statements of *intent and interest* (given in the language of “goals,” “aims,” and “objectives”), statements of what teachers and students should do (usually given in the language of *activities*), statements of official and recommended *resources* for teachers and students, and usually, implicitly, statements of *evaluation* (given, if at all, in the language of ends and means).

If the planners regard teachers as essentially installers of the curriculum, implementing

assumes an instrumental flavour. It becomes a process, making of teacher–installers, in the fashion of plumbers who install their wares. Within this scheme of things, teachers are asked to be doers, and often they are asked to participate in implementation workshops on “how to do this and that.” Teachers are “trained,” and in becoming trained, they become effective in trained ways of “doing.” At times, at such workshops, ignored are the teachers' own skills that emerge from reflection on their experiences of teaching, and, more seriously, there is forgetfulness that what matters deeply in the situated world of the classroom is how the teachers' “doings” flow from who they are, their beings. That is, there is a forgetfulness that teaching is fundamentally a mode of being.

Curriculum-As-Lived-Experience

The other curriculum world is the situated world of curriculum-as-lived that Miss O and her pupils experience. For Miss O it is a world of face-to-face living with Andrew, with his mop of red hair, who struggles hard to learn to read; with Sara, whom Miss O can count on to tackle her language assignment with aplomb; with popular Margaret, who bubbles and who is quick to offer help to others and to welcome others' help; with Tom, a frequent daydreamer, who loves to allow his thoughts to roam beyond the windows of the classroom; and some 20 others in class, each living out a story of what it is to live school life as Grade 5s. Miss O's pedagogic situation is a world of students with proper names—like Andrew, Sara, Margaret, and Tom—who are, for Miss O, very human, unique beings. Miss O knows their uniqueness from having lived daily with them. And she knows that their uniqueness disappears into the shadow when they are spoken of in the prosaically abstract language of the external curriculum planners who are, in a sense, condemned to plan for faceless people, students shorn of their uniqueness, or for all teachers, who become generalized entities often defined in terms of performance roles.

On one side of Miss O's desk are marked class assignments ready to be returned with some appropriate remarks of approval or disapproval—some directed to the whole class, others directed to selected pupils. And on her desk, too, sits a half written memo eventually to be delivered to the office to make sure that a film ordered 3 months ago will be available for the first class in the afternoon.

Living within this swirl of busyness where her personal life and her life as teacher shade into each other, Miss O struggles with mundane curriculum questions: What shall I teach tomorrow? How shall I teach? These are quotidian questions of a teacher who knows, from having experienced life with her pupils, that there are immediate concerns she must address to keep the class alive and moving.

Dwelling in the Zone of Between

In asking these questions our teacher, Miss O, knows that an abstraction that has distanced but “accountable” relevance for her exists, a formalized curriculum, which has instituted legitimacy. She knows that, as an institutionalized teacher, she is accountable for what and how she teaches, but she also knows that the ministry's curriculum-as-plan assumes a fiction of sameness throughout the whole province, and that this fiction is possible only by wresting out the unique. This kind of curriculum knowing she understands, for she knows that generalized knowing is likely disembodied knowing that disavows the living presence of people, a knowing that appeals primarily to the intellectual. So she knows that this generalized knowing views a

teacher like her as one of the thousands of certificated teachers in the province, and children like Andrew, Sara, Margaret and Tom merely as Grade 5 pupils, children without unique names, without freckles, without missing teeth, without their private hopes and dreams.

But she knows deeply from her caring for Tom, Andrew, Margaret, Sara and others that they are counting on her as their teacher, that they trust her to do what she must do as their teacher to lead them out into new possibilities, that is, to educate them. She knows that whenever and wherever she can, between her markings and the lesson plannings, she must listen and be attuned to the care that calls from the very living with her own Grade 5 pupils.

So in this way Miss O indwells between two horizons—the horizon of the curriculum-as-plan as she understands it and the horizon of the curriculum-as-lived experience with her pupils. Both of these call on Miss O and make their claims on her. She is asked to give a hearing to both simultaneously. This is the tensionality within which Miss O inevitably dwells as teacher. And she knows that inevitably the quality of life lived within the tensionality depends much on the quality of the pedagogic being that she is.

Miss O knows that it is possible to regard all tensions as being negative and that so regarded, tensions are “to be got rid of.” But such a regard, Miss O feels, rests on a misunderstanding that comes from forgetting that to be alive is to live in tension; that, in fact, it is the tensionality that allows good thoughts and actions to arise when properly tensioned chords are struck, and that tensionless strings are not only unable to give voice to songs, but also unable to allow a song to be sung. Miss O understands that this tensionality in her pedagogical situation is a mode of being a teacher, a mode that could be oppressive and depressive, marked by despair and hopelessness, and at other times, challenging and stimulating, evoking hopefulness for venturing forth.

At times Miss O experiences discouragement by the little concern the public seem to display for teachers’ well-being—zero salary increases, colleagues’ layoffs, and problems of too few teachers resolved simply by increasing class size with little regard for the quality of the curriculum-as-lived experiences. Yet even in such greyness, her blood quickens when she encounters Andrew’s look, Sara’s rare call for help, Margaret’s smile, Tom’s exuberant forgetfulness, when light that comes from contacts with children glows anew.

And Miss O knows that some people understand teaching for the second year a Grade 5 class, as she is doing, is teaching the same class as last year, in the same room as last year, in the same school as last year, with the same number of pupils as last year. But Miss O knows that although technically people may talk that way, in teaching this year’s Grade 5 class, the seemingly same lessons are not the same, nor are the Grade 5 pupils though they sit in the same desks, nor is Miss O herself for she knows she has changed from having reflected upon her teaching experiences last year with her Grade 5s. She no longer is the same teacher. Miss O knows that “implementing” the curriculum-as-plan in this year’s lived situation calls for a fresh interpretive work constituted in the presence of very alive, new students.

Our Miss O knows that some of her colleagues who faithfully try to reproduce the curriculum-as-plan are not mindful of the lived situation, and that in so doing, they are unaware that they are making themselves into mere technical doers. In so making, they embrace merely a technical sense of excellence matched by a sense of compliance to the curriculum-as-plan, which exists outside of themselves. They tend to forget that gaining such fidelity may be at the expense of the attunement to the aliveness of the situation.

She knows, too, that some of her colleagues who are tuned into the pragmatics of what works in everyday school busyness—the curriculum grounded in the pragmatics of life as experienced in everyday life—may become skilful in managing the classes and resources from period to period—

and survive well—keeping the students preoccupied and busy. But our teacher, Miss O, wonders whether a concern for total fidelity to an external curriculum-as-plan and a lack of simultaneous concern for the aliveness of the situation do not extinguish the understanding of teaching as “a leading out to new possibilities,” to the “not yet.” She wonders, too, if an overconcern for mere survival in the lived world of experience may not cause a teacher to forget to ask the question, *Survive? What for?*—the fundamental question of the meaning of what it is to live life, including school life. Miss O realizes the challenges and difficulties that living within the Zone of Between entails, but she learns, too, that, living as a teacher in tensionality is indeed living teaching as a mode of being that with all its ever-present risks, beckons the teacher to struggle to be true to what teaching essentially is. Miss O, our teacher, knows that indwelling in the zone between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived experience is not so much a matter of overcoming the tensionality but more a matter of dwelling aright within it.

Comments

In our effort to understand the world of curriculum, we joined our teacher Miss O in her indwelling between two curriculum worlds: the world of curriculum-as-plan and the world of curriculum-as-lived experiences. We have seen a glimmer of what it is like for a teacher to be situated in the Zone of Between. The calling into presence of two curriculum forms, even though often singularly understood—like the reading curriculum, the social studies curriculum, the music curriculum, and so on—allows us to understand more fully teachers' curriculum life. Some features of this life are sketched next.

1. We can see in Miss O's story, how truncated our understanding becomes when we see only a single curriculum-as-plan awaiting implementation. In this truncation, teachers are often technicized and transformed into mere technical implementers, and good teaching is reduced to mere technical effectiveness. The portrayal of Miss O's indwelling in the Zone of Between calls on us to surmount such reductionism to seek out a more fully human understanding of who a teacher is and what teaching truly is.
2. The portrayal of Miss O's indwelling shows us, too, how the appeal of commonplace logic can, at times, give credibility to simplistic and mechanical understandings of pedagogic life, which sees a linear movement from curriculum-as-plan to curriculum-as-lived experience. The story of her indwelling in the Zone of Between, by revealing the naiveté of the linear understanding with its linear logic, calls on us to take heed of understanding indwelling as a dialectic between complementaries with a logic of its own. For many of us, grounded in linear logic, such an understanding may seem to be a totally new way of understanding. Hence, many of us may need to open ourselves to this fundamental way in which we all experience life.
3. We also can see in Miss O's story how indwelling dialectically is a living in tensionality, a mode of being that knows not only that living school life means living simultaneously with limitations and with openness, but also that this openness harbours within it risks and possibilities as we quest for a change from the is to the not yet. This tensionality calls on us as pedagogues to make time for meaningful striving and struggling, time for letting things be, time for question, time for singing, time for crying, time for anger, time for praying and hoping. Within this tensionality, guided by a sense of the pedagogic good, we are called on as teachers to be alert to the possibilities of our pedagogic touch, pedagogic tact, pedagogic

attunement—those subtle features about being teachers that we know, but are not yet in our lexicon, for we have tended to be seduced by the seemingly lofty and prosaic talk in the language of conceptual abstractions. We must recognize the flight from the meaningful and turn back again to an understanding of our own being as teachers. It is here, I feel, that teachers can contribute to fresh curriculum understandings.

4. In Miss O's indwelling in the Zone of Between we see the teacher's dwelling place as a sanctified clearing where the teacher and students gather—somewhat like the place before the hearth at home—an extraordinarily unique and precious place, a hopeful place, a trustful place, a careful place—essentially a human place dedicated to ventures devoted to a leading out, an authentic “e(out)/ducere(lead),” from the “is” to new possibilities yet unknown.
5. We are beginning to hear that in Canada, some architects—developers of lived space who have claimed disciplined understanding of human space, guided by their zeal for high technology—have constructed buildings (places-to-experience-life) that now are called sick buildings. We hear that the architects of these buildings were not attuned to the fundamental meaning of space-as-lived-experience. What does this say to curriculum architects?

For curriculum planners who understand the nuances of the indwelling of teachers in the Zone of Between, the challenge seems clear. If, as many of us believe, the quality of curriculum-as-lived experiences is the heart and core as to why we exist as teachers, principals, superintendents, curriculum developers, curriculum consultants, and teacher educators, curriculum planning should have as its central interest a way of contributing to the aliveness of school life as lived by teachers and students. Hence, what authorizes curriculum developers to be curriculum developers is not only their expertness in doing tasks of curriculum development, but more so a deeply conscious sensitivity to what it means to have a developer's touch, a developer's tact, a developer's attunement that acknowledges in some deep sense the uniqueness of every teaching situation. Such a sensitivity calls for humility without which they will not be able to minister to the calling of teachers who are themselves dedicated to searching out a deep sense of what it means to educate and to be educated. To raise curriculum planning from being mired in a technical view is a major challenge to curriculum developers of this day.

Note

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