

Postmodern Curriculum and Autobiographical Experience

As I read *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era* (2nd ed.) by Slattery (2006), I was captivated by the level of honesty presented in the author's autobiographical approach. The author's willingness to share details of his personal history, including not only what he learned as a student and educator but also what he did *not* learn, is reassuring to someone who often feels she is too honest for her own good. It is this same attentiveness to autobiographical and phenomenological experience that Slattery describes as one of the central features of the Reconceptualization of curriculum studies. The author proposes that postmodern curriculum scholars should critically examine curriculum development in the context of their own autobiography and life narratives in order to advance an experiential and participatory perspective in education (p. 57). With this in mind, this short paper draws upon autobiographical experience of both myself and another author in response to Slattery's discussion of the disconnect between personal history and education, and William Pinar's emphasis on individual experience.

I personally identified with Slattery's inability to remember studying the Civil War in his schooling. I was very good at preparing for tests and "playing the game" as I like to call it. Most people will admit to not retaining factual details over a long period of time, however, I've always believed my own lack of memory to be much more than that – a topic I have been exploring within art and writing since my first year of university nearly fifteen years ago. Memories of my childhood are vague and, with the exception of a few, most are dependent on photographic documentation (or at least that is a theory within my research). Slattery's story triggered an experience that I actually do remember from my childhood. When I was in grade 3 or 4, our teacher played a lengthy audio story from a cassette tape. Immediately after we were given a series of questions regarding the details of the story (I think it might have been multiple choice). I panicked because I could not answer the questions. I received an F on the test and was devastated since this was the first time I had ever 'failed' something. I remember that the questions were very specific and that the test was a complete surprise. The questions did not involve any critical thinking, reflection, or analysis, but rather they seemed to be designed to monitor our listening skills. Many years later, in an undergraduate art class, I was requested to create a dialectical work stemming from a topic of my choice. I critiqued the information-processing model and the three stages of memory (sensory, short-term, long-term), having just read about this model in an intro psychology course. The linear structure of these cognitive stages seemed too simplistic and in my opinion the memory process had to be more complicated.

I have come to realize that my memory is perhaps more of an abstract memory, one that is not concerned with minute details but more focused on larger ideas. Slattery states that postmodern curriculum development today investigates narratives that will develop student-centered connections for long-term memory and individual enhancement (p. 53). The author's discussion of the research of Caine and Caine (1991) fascinated me and reaffirmed thoughts I have had regarding specificity of facts being obstructive to students' genuine understanding and transfer of learning.

Slattery draws upon the work of Pinar, particularly his four stages of autobiographical reflection, and describes Pinar's method of *currere* as a challenge for educators to begin with the individual experience and then make broader connections (p. 64). Pinar's (and Schubert's) belief in the curriculum becoming a reconfiguration of one's perspective on life reminded me of an article by Ron Burnett (1999) titled "The Radical Impossibility of Teaching," in which the author discusses an experience teaching an undergraduate class at McGill University while he was Director of the Graduate Program in Communications. After feeling distanced from his students for the first two classes, Burnett initiated a discussion about the students' backgrounds and their motivations for taking the course. The class transformed into a debate about the meaning of learning and Burnett, although resistant at first, decided to let the students direct the content of the class towards subjects that would help them analyze their own personal histories. Burnett later describes the experience as "learning to learn" yet cautions that this meant he had to "unlearn what it meant to be a teacher and to recognize how the students themselves were handling the process" (p. 4). Burnett uses the phrase "equality of exchange" and further describes a need to break the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student. In the same light, Slattery's emphasis on a postmodern curriculum attentive to autobiographical experience suggests methods for educators and students to deepen the learning process.