Curriculum Development: Merging Postmodernism with Critical Theory

Drawing on readings assigned in this seminar (and additional sources if you choose), compare, contrast, and evaluate “postmodern” and “critical” approaches to curriculum studies (e.g., curriculum development, theorizing, and/or research).

During the past two weeks I have been struggling with a response to this question and my mind has been spinning around and within multiple understandings of “postmodern” and “critical” approaches to curriculum studies. As I now begin to articulate my scattered ideas, charted and mounted on the walls around me, I realize that I have prepared myself for a much larger project than what has been asked of me. Upon discovering that the choice of format for our response was open, I began to align my thinking with visual examples from historical and contemporary art that might be used to accompany my written responses. I will incorporate only a few of the artworks I researched – that component of this essay is larger work in progress.

Deconstructing the Question
In order to compare, contrast and evaluate “postmodern” and “critical” approaches to curriculum studies, I feel it necessary to first discuss the language within the question itself. There are overlapping elements between the two approaches – certain “postmodern” approaches can be considered critical and certain “critical” approaches may contain postmodern elements. In referring to Habermas’ comprehensive theory of knowledge, postmodern approaches can be thought of as hermeneutic inquiry (yet they may also include critical conceptual aspects) and critical approaches obviously fall under critical forms of inquiry, with possible hermeneutic processes applied. While doing research for this essay, I had to constantly remind myself that the critical theory being discussed stems from social theory (as opposed to literary theory), emanating from the Frankfurt school and Marxist traditions. Critical theorists within curriculum studies are distinguished from postmodern theorists by often focusing on singular issues (social class, sexuality, ability, race, etc.), seeking emancipation through active movement towards social change. Postmodern theorists within curriculum studies choose to disrupt notions of meaning through methods of deconstruction in order to reveal problematic ideologies. Throughout this essay I expand upon these definitions by addressing specific examples of these two approaches to curriculum studies, acknowledging moments of overlap and contention. Embracing the interdisciplinary qualities associated with postmodernism, I will incorporate images of artwork as a response to the text but will refrain from written explanation for now, allowing for your own interpretation.

Obsession for Balance
In previous writings, I have been fixated on a need to balance different theories and approaches, refusing to choose one or the other. Although I will distinguish between postmodern and critical approaches, I find clear distinctions between the two to be problematic and am drawn more to recognizing how they can be used together within curriculum studies. Postmodern approaches should be thought of as a possible tool within a larger, perhaps more realized, critical approach that works towards the goal of ideological transformation leading to social change. The layered intersections of the aesthetics of postmodernism can be thought of as a process within the larger study of critical theory. Postmodern theorist Lyotard incorporated a kind of aesthetics into his work that has been described as “a tool to expose often unseen tensions, shifts, and complications in philosophical thinking and its relations with society…we find not one philosophy but many talking to one another, held together without being unified, the notion of aesthetics itself assuming different guises with the rhythm of their unresolved tensions.” (Rajchman, 1998) I feel that this self-reflective and fluid process can be incorporated into the more grounded structure of critical stances towards curriculum development.

Visualizing Postmodern and Critical Structures
In the abstract illustrations below I have attempted to convey the visual structure of “critical” and “postmodern” approaches to curriculum studies. The illustrations are meant to complement
the written examples that follow. With the illustration of critical theory, the optimistic movement towards social change is represented through a dynamic, upward spiral movement. The smaller red circles represent the individual themes, each one positioned on a separate ring. There is an overall feeling of stability and purpose that unifies the individual themes within the context of curriculum and pedagogy. The structure appears solid, yet the composing forms (stages of curriculum development) are in fact circular and non-linear when viewed up close. In comparison, the postmodern illustration is fragmented and less unified, implying randomness within an extremely non-linear and deliberative curriculum process. The themes, identified again with red circles, have been repeated to create a visual rhythm, suspended against a textured background made up of multiple layers of lines that create a circular motion when combined. Similar to Aoki’s “Rhizome curricular landscape” (Pinar & Irwin, p. 419) the circles are spaced apart with lines in between, however, you will notice that the lines don’t indicate direct connections to the circles. The lines are in constant movement to represent the ongoing dialogue. The composition invites the curriculum maker to make the connections themselves through a hermeneutic interpretive process in inquiry. There is a slight optical effect created by the lack of solid outlines around the circles in the postmodern illustration – this adds depth of field and a discordant sense of movement – yet this unsettling feeling is actually created by our minds as we visually perceive the forms. There is an overall feeling of uncertainty in the postmodern illustration yet a great sense of depth that draws you into the image.

In comparison to the spiraling motion of the critical illustration, the postmodern illustration can be thought of as a web of intersections that recede into space and outside the boundaries of its frame. With both illustrations in the same visual field, one can use his/her imagination to foresee different levels of combinations of the two – hybrid constructions that could potentially be applied to a range of social and economic issues within curriculum studies. The placement of forms within the illustration of postmodern approaches implies a visual rhythm that directs the viewer’s eye around the image in a circular motion, emphasizing an aesthetic experience of teaching and learning that contrasts the more symmetrical design of its partner.
“Postmodern” Positions
Slattery (2006) describes a postmodern approach to curriculum studies based around the hermeneutic circle and the proleptic experience. He calls for a holistic model of curriculum in the postmodern era that allows for natural processes and self-reflective perspective. Slattery references David Orr (1992) in stating that “landscape shapes mindscapes” and attests to the significance of the seminar circle in facilitating discourse, contrasting the rigid arrangement of rows of desks. The circular arrangement allows for group conversation in critique situations, allowing participants to make eye contact and simultaneously view any visual or textual artifacts. Based on personal experience in the art classroom, the nature of the studio critique is very much what Slattery calls for with his vision of curriculum in the postmodern era – a process of hermeneutic interpretation that ultimately leads to self-reflection and critical inquiry. The teacher can in no way predict or plan for the discussion that emerges, thus it is the perfect situation for the teacher to relinquish control and allow for a more organic and non-linear method of discourse. Slattery describes interpretation as something that should emphasize possibility and becoming since human consciousness can never be static (p. 282). The critiquing process in the studio classroom operates in a circular manner in which participants each build upon each other’s comments, one idea triggering another and so on. In further describing the process of interpretation, Slattery states: “…each new experience adds to the accumulated meaning of experience for each individual and sets the stage for present and future possibilities….the “proleptic experience” or the “synthetical moment”…a gestalt or heightened consciousness.” (p. 282) A similar kind of circular process was described by McCutcheon in Developing the Curriculum (2002) when she connected the act of deliberation in curriculum-making to Senge’s theory of systems thinking (1990). Senge argues that reality is made up of circles and when we limit our thinking to linear systems we misunderstand reality (McCutcheon, p. 155).

In writing about postmodern approaches to curriculum development, Slattery draws upon the work of Pinar, particularly his four stages of autobiographical reflection. He describes Pinar’s method of currere in which educators begin the process with individual experience and then move to making broader connections (Slattery, p. 64). Pinar’s (and Schubert’s) belief in the curriculum becoming a reconfiguration of one’s perspective connects to an article by Ron Burnett (1999) titled “The Radical Impossibility of Teaching,” in which the author describes an experience teaching an undergraduate class at McGill University. After feeling distanced from his students, 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 described 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” between teacher and student, and I view this as a valuable component to the postmodern approach to curriculum and pedagogy.

In developing the Curriculum Spaces Research Theory, Cary uses a poststructural/postmodern perspective to investigate the social practices and subject relations within the discourse between teacher and students (Cary, 2007). Cary draws upon the Foucauldian notion that power circulates and produces knowledge and ways of being (p. 2). When comparing “postmodern” and “critical” approaches to curriculum studies, Cary’s views seem to be targeted at critical approaches that limit discussion to social/identity issues without analyzing the epistemological perspectives of those involved in the discourse. Cary makes an ethical choice to reveal paradoxes in any dialogue in the classroom to help avoid reductive socially constructed knowledge (p. 131). In this light, wouldn’t Cary’s approach be considered even more critical of structure/power relations than some “critical” approaches to curriculum studies? Is it possible for a combined approach of postmodernism and critical theory to be the most critical? I believe so. Cary references Elizabeth Ellsworth’s famous “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering?” (1989) as an example of a researcher who uses psychoanalysis as a way of addressing paradoxes in education. Ellsworth presents a strong critique to critical pedagogy. She argues that if certain assumptions and issues of who produces valid knowledge remain untheorized than critical pedagogues will only perpetuate relations of domination in their classrooms (Ellsworth, p. 297).

“Critical” Positions
As described earlier, “critical” approaches to curriculum studies aim to produce emancipation by revealing problematic ideologies and then work towards actively creating social change. Critical theorists claim that postmodernists, particularly those heavily influenced by poststructuralism, only deconstruct notions of ideology without any form of social reconstruction. An important aspect of critical approaches to curriculum studies is identifying the social mechanisms by which ideologies acquire their symbolic import and causal power, yet remain hidden from agent views (Fay, 1996, p. 129). In comparison, postmodernists analyze how schemes of meaning can be different from what they seem to be by applying notions of difference and methods of deconstruction (Fay, 1996, p. 130). Applying this to my own experience within curriculum development of art education, projects that involve juxtaposition of disparate images that refrain from suggesting a socially relevant idea would be considered a postmodern approach whereas projects that involve the visual communication of a concept to provoke social inquiry might be considered more critical (at least in terms of social theory).

In Cole’s neo-marxist approach to curriculum studies (2005) he attacks the work of poststructuralist/postmodernist educational theorists Atkinson, Lather and Baxter for their inability to recognize the dialectical praxis of Marxism. Cole states that poststructuralism and postmodernism are about neither theory nor practice and remain an academic process, based on deconstruction alone, with no practical implications for social or educational transformation (p. 67). The postmodern defense often reverts back to Derrida’s definition of deconstruction as
a valuable process in itself, however, contemporary theorists who incorporate postmodern approaches often describe how changes in thinking lead to changes in society. Marxism offers a method of analyzing social relations that puts relations of production at the center of the argument. It emphasizes dialectical materialism and the need for individuals to analyze the present by looking to the past to determine how society became the way it is. Postmodernism is lacking in its acknowledgement of history yet, because of that, it prevents a unitary way of thinking that is sometimes associated with Marxism.

Apple (2004) also takes a neo-marxist approach in demanding an analysis of the ideologies incorporated into curriculum, stating that the researcher must situate education within a larger arena of economic, ideological, and social conflict (p. 12). He calls for an examination of the neo-liberalist attitudes and strategies that occur within academic institutions, drawing upon Foucault’s theories of power and knowledge. Both Cole and Apple believe that power is not located in a specific class, or capitalism or the state, but is diffuse and saturates the social field (Cole, p. 4). The neo-marxist approach to curriculum studies is to uncover the hegemonic relationship between educational institutions and economic values, allowing teachers to understand that they are not neutral participants or “agents” of cultural and ideological hegemony (Apple, p. 5). Apple believes that the researcher must think structurally or relationally. Although his views come from the Marxist tradition, I believe he makes a similar argument to Ellsworth’s desire to examine how we know what we know but perhaps Ellsworth views are more inclusive of the teachers and students.

Some relatively newer forms of critical research within curriculum studies zero in on identity issues, combining aspects of critical neo-marxist theories with postmodernism. Erevelles (2005) points to the absence of disabled identity in poststructuralist discourses and combines methods of deconstruction with a more critical approach in researching “the historical, social, the ‘disabled’ and the ‘normal’ world” (p. 421). Erevelles states that to understand disability within curriculum theory we need to understand how and why the curriculum has historically been constituted as ‘normalizing’ text (p. 422). The author refers to Castenell and Pinar (1993) who suggested that students get in touch with their unconscious disabled Other to regenerate into multi-cultural, multi-classed, and multi-gendered selves, ultimately advocating for a school curriculum that undermines the construction of an ideal type of body (Grosz, 1994 in Erevelles, 2005). Erevelles states that although this argument appears to be empowering it is problematic because the subject is being asked to embrace the aspects of its unconscious that it is also being urged to reject, and it upholds the denigration of the category of disability. In the end, Erevelles realizes the limits of poststructuralism when concerned with the disabled subject.

The last critical approach to curriculum I will describe is Leonardo’s Critical Social Theory (2004) since I feel it responds to my initial desire for approaches that merge postmodernism and critical theory successfully.
CST combines critical theory (from the tradition of Marx and Kant) with a form of social theory that acknowledges more recent discourses, such as postmodernism and cultural studies (p. 12). Leonardo emphasizes the strengths of the use of criticism to ‘cultivate students’ ability to question, deconstruct, and then reconstruct knowledge in the interest of emancipation’ (p. 12). I believe it is the focus on ‘reconstruct’ and ‘emancipation’ that provides this curriculum theory with the ability to transcend the critical arguments that have been made towards the methods of postmodernists. As with pretty much all curriculum theories there are of course negatives to CST as well, notably argued by Ellsworth (1989) in her analysis of unrealized aspects of critical pedagogy. Like most theories, it doesn’t always answer the questions being asked but I do believe it responds to Apple’s concerns for curriculum that acknowledges structural social relations through critical discourse. CST, at least in the way Leonardo describes it, presents an optimistic vision (slightly utopic) of hope and a sense for alternatives that compels me…yet I don’t know if and when I will ever be convinced of the perfect blend of postmodern and critical approaches to curriculum.

References from outside course:


Students often want to answer a question related to the course material that does not appear in any exam or assignment. Write such a question, keeping in mind that a good question in this context will require analysis, synthesis, and critique as well as application of ideas and concepts from course readings. Then answer the question.

Should students be involved in curriculum development?

One of the most important things I have learned in this course is the necessity for curriculum-makers and teachers to be open to new ways of thinking and to be mindful about personal views we hold about education and curriculum. Slattery (2006) said it well in his preface when he quoted Thich Nhat Hanh’s reflections on mindfulness. He states: “Do not think that the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others’ viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge…” (p. xviii).

We are all learners and need to be open to engage in the learning process with our students, this will only enrich the experience for everyone. In my response to the first question of this workbook, I referenced an article written by Ron Burnett (1999) in which he describes a classroom experience of letting the students develop the course content. Within that response I neglected to analyze the results of the course itself. Burnett noticed a change in the student’s attitude from “expectant consumers of the information” and ideas he prepared for them, to “excited participants in a debate about the meaning of learning” (p. 4). The students actually wanted to change the parameters of the course and redesign the content. Burnett soon realized that the content of the class was being directed toward subjects that helped the students analyze their personal histories, and they were slowly developing the tools to analyze cultural history at the same time. He sums up the experience by stating that the most important aspect for him was the confirmation of an intuition, being that “learning comes about when we understand what motivates us or attracts us to a particular set of ideas or practices (p. 5). The traditional classroom experience, often existing of a hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, doesn’t always allow for the communication process that Burnett experienced. We also have to recognize that the course he was teaching was an undergraduate course at the third and fourth-year level. How can we create the same kind of student engagement in our courses? How can students be involve in curriculum development at the pre-college level? Is this something we should even consider?

As discussed in some of our classes, when all is said and done, teachers are the real curriculum-makers, not the curriculum supervisors. This was made evident in McCutcheon’s book (2002) as she researched pedagogical practices of teachers. McCutcheon described how the teachers she interviewed often deliberated, planned, and performed simultaneously within the classroom. In my opinion, a general curriculum plan should be created in advance but we should resist a systematic approach that is too linear, particularly in terms of defining objectives and evaluating the learning outcomes. The deliberative approach to curriculum-making should be utilized, but the Tyler Rationale does not necessarily need to be avoided in this process. It provides a basic structure and direction that can be considered as a general guide, a starting point, for creating certain curriculum, however, it should be viewed as just one of the many parts to a complicated and challenging system. The students’ interests and experiences also needs to be considered as this has been shown to create more engaged learning. Teachers should pay attention to levels of participation in response to different learning activities and be willing to have a dialogue with the students about what and how they are learning. I will admit that this is often difficult to do when there are certain expectations to meet and timelines to consider, however, adhering to a strict schedule will not create good students if they can not find ways of connecting to the content.

Cary (2007) states that we should embrace undecidability and uncertainty as teachers. She further discusses the construction of the ‘good teacher’ in that it “promotes the mastery of technical
competence that ignores the im/possibilities of learning by reducing teaching to simplistic representations” (p. 132). Unpredictability can make the teaching and learning experience feel more authentic, less rehearsed, and can also remind the teacher why they chose to become teachers in the first place. Slattery (2005) embraces the challenge of enhancing the learning experience by altering the environment, incorporating an autobiographical narrative approach, and challenging subject matter for discussion (ie. theology) to connect to the needs of the students. The other authors we have read in this course, particularly Apple, Pinar and Aoki, have each possessed a voice of enthusiasm and commitment to the field of curriculum studies, something I have found to be quite inspirational. Each of these authors have addressed power/knowledge relationships in either direct or indirect ways. Although it may not be easy for trained teachers to relinquish some of the control, I am interested to read more about the dialogic relationship between teacher and student to determine just how much students should be involved in curriculum development.

Finally, it seems appropriate to conclude my response by acknowledging the live(d) curriculum that Ted Aoki writes about (Pinar & Irwin, 2005). Aoki describes the live(d) curriculum in opposition to planned curriculum and explains his concept by using a visual illustration of what he terms the “rhizomean curricular landscape” (p. 419). He suggests that the rhizomean landscape signifies the multiplicity of curricula that occurs in the learning space and the relationships that happen “between” the forms that represent the teacher and students – the exchanges of communication. In quoting Deleuze and Parnet (1987) he draws attention to the term “multiplicity” not being a noun, since within multiplicity it is not the elements that matter but what is in between them, “…as site of relations which are not separable from each other” (p. 420). I understand this to mean that the curriculum is about the experience, the process, the relationship between the teacher and students…the currere.