

Communities of Knowing: Curriculum Making in/of Community

Christie Schultz

Abstract

This paper explores experiences of becoming a “curriculum maker of community” as part of the University of Alberta’s Building Peaceful Communities Summer Institute, held annually over a two-week period each July. Prompted by the experience in 2018, the author explores the ways in which curriculum can be co-composed as a community of learners, moving beyond prescribed curriculum. Throughout the account, the author narrates autobiographical life experiences that serve to illustrate ways of knowing and ways of coming to communities of knowing.

Coming to Community

In July 2018, I was introduced to the idea of becoming a “curriculum maker of community,” learning and experiencing learning alongside Dr. Florence Glanfield and 13 other graduate students at the University of Alberta’s Building Peaceful Communities Summer Institute. We inquired together and individually into what it means to shift our thinking about curriculum towards “a curriculum of community” and to see ourselves, through autobiographical narrative inquiries, as curriculum makers in and of community. These writings are both personal and scholarly, bridging the liminal spaces inside and outside the classroom. While these writings are my own and tell my story of a particular time, I recognize that they owe their existence to the people with whom and the places in which they were written. In these reflections, and in this writing, my intention is to show the ways in which communities of knowing can come to be written and known.

First Words—July 3, 2018

There are many stories to tell. Too many stories to tell in these lines. Today’s story includes a line from a classmate, one that he shares with teachers who are struggling in the springtime, a translation of Cree teaching shared with him by Elder Bob Cardinal of the Enoch Cree Nation of Treaty 6 Territory. The question he asks: “What are you trying to lift?” I brought this line home with me, unexpectedly. I shared it as my spouse and I were finishing dinner, as I was wondering if I should get to the work of this writing. But, I stayed. We talked a while longer.

My mother-in-law is living her last days. (My own mother has reminded me that my mother-in-law is not merely dying, she is living these days, and so I am becoming attentive to this difference.) This may go on for a week or two, or a month or two, but probably not more. And my spouse is struggling. With life and living. With death and dying. And alongside all of this, she is struggling most especially with her work

world, a world that is not lifting her right now—and in which she finds she is unable to try to lift the things that matter most to her. And I am struggling to lift her up, but I am trying to do so because that feels at least as (or more) important than my professional life or my scholarly life.

But I am also trying to remember why I am here, writing these words, taking on this inquiry, taking on these doctoral studies. With this work, what am I trying to *lift*? In this remembering, I am attentive to the ways in which “a person, young or old, gets out of his present experience all that there is in it for him at the time in which he has it” (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 49). I will be experiencing this present learning as a white, middle-class, queer, able-bodied, married, cis-gendered woman, who has spent most of her life in the Canadian city where I now reside. And so, I am looking for all that there is in this for me at this very specific moment in time.

Learning, Still

My present experiences beyond this classroom feed the classroom. I am attentive to others’ experiences, knowing they, too, are not here as *tabula rasa*. In the same way, I attend to my own previous experiences, recognizing that “the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 35). I am still learning, changing, experiencing—becoming. Already, today, I am (still) becoming. I am bringing new lines to the dinner table, lines I hadn’t heard before. In this way, I recognize my home as part of my experience of this particular curriculum.

And I am reflecting further upon what (previous) experience provides to the ways in which we learn. My present and past experiences are shaping this experience of becoming, of learning, of being and living alongside others. As Connelly and Clandinin (1988) suggest in *Teachers as Curriculum Planners*, “When the word ‘curriculum’ is used, the picture that flashes before your mind is one in which the persons are storytellers living out their past and remaking that past to deal with their current situation” (p. 8). That is what I am doing. I am sense-making and making sense—experiencing the ways in which “every situation leads to another situation” (p. 8). This is my own “experiential continuum” (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 33). I hope I can use it, in some small way, as Elder Bob Cardinal reminds us, *to lift up*.

As I went upstairs to write, my spouse called out, “I meant to ask, what did you learn today?”

The Space Between—July 4, 2018

Today was unexpected. My computer’s space bar has stopped working reliably, shedding my normal experience of writing, becoming especially attentive to the experience of space and spaces, spaces within which we write and within which we live.

I’m probably a little bit broken today as well.

My mother-in-law no longer has an oncologist. She has moved today, away from a system that has been part of our lives for a few years. She is now within the system of palliative end-of-life care. We are researching hospices tonight. Soon, we're told. Soon. Her cancer doctor is no longer her doctor. That means something. We know what it means. There have been hugs we didn't understand until now.

Permeable Classrooms—July 5, 2018

I am reminded that we so often see ourselves and our experiences in what we read. As I travelled today, continuing to reflect upon curriculum and community, I am drawn into Joseph J. Schwab's (1973) world of the milieus within the context of curriculum-making. An idea later developed by Clandinin and Connelly (1992) as they worked to envision and create narrative inquiry as a methodology, Schwab is attentive to milieus that include the school and the classroom, but also include the family, the community, and other groupings particular to an individual. Put another way, as I come to understand a "vision of curriculum as a course of life" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, p. 392), how I make sense of the idea of curriculum is "intimately connected with the life stories of each person and the intermingling of storied lives in the lifespace of the classroom" (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2003, pp. 347–348).

I am thinking in this way because I know intimately in this moment that my home and my life are intermingling within this classroom space. Perhaps more than intermingling, today, the spaces of home and the classroom feel deeply permeable to one another; they pass through one another, crossing a barrier that is not a barrier, like "a bridging of two worlds by a bridge, which is not a bridge" (Aoki, 1981/2005, p. 228). And in this permeability, the classroom expands, and the curriculum encompasses one's full community and life.

I recognize, too, that in this I am not alone. While end-of-life experiences cause us all to attend to the permeability of our life spaces in ways that can be significant, each one of us in this classroom is experiencing life outside the classroom. We are living our milieus at all times.

Curriculum as Lived—July 8, 2018

I am certain that the curriculum-as-planned did not include this: I shared the news of my mother-in-law in class on Thursday. On Friday, a classmate, Shaun,¹ presented me with bound sage, a medicine bundle his wife had prepared for my spouse and me. He had mentioned before class began on Thursday that, over the course of his degree, both his mother and his mother-in-law had passed, leaving this earthly existence; I recognized and acknowledged that he knew something of my present experience when I shared my morning reflections with the class. He heard this and, as he has shared with me later, he wrote "sage bundle" in his notes. This gesture of kindness (Michell, 2005), grounded in the Cree culture, was unexpected—and welcome.

When I shared the story and the sage bundle with my spouse, we delighted in its scent, its earthiness, together. What I didn't know is that my spouse carried the bundle with her that evening, feeling connection. I wrote to Shaun the next day with a story:

The sage medicine is helping. I didn't know it, but Shell² tucked the bundle under her pillow last night. (She hasn't been sleeping well, perhaps unsurprisingly.) We woke up at six this morning, rested. She showed the bundle to me and I asked: "Did you sleep?" She said, grinning: "No ... I dreamed." We both slept all through the night—and Shell slept so well that her dreams returned. (C. Schultz, personal communication, July 7, 2018)

This is a curriculum-as-lived (Aoki, 1993), not at all what I had expected from what is really (only, at least for now) a "found community" (Nelson, 1995), not (yet) a community of choice, but one in which I am sensing relatedness and relationality. Perhaps I am even sensing an experience of *care*, ideas connected to my doctoral research and something we so often—or too often—erase in the landscape of higher education as we genuinely

expect to become experts, to engage in knowledge production, to debate others, to separate criticism of the person and the criticism of the ideas, to participate in social criticism, to critique school practices, to ferret out school ideologies, and to make expert prescriptions for improving practice. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 249)

I had a plan about what I thought I might write as part of this experience, and this writing is not at all that plan. But I have been settling in to the rhythm of learning about peaceful communities and the lived experiences that shape a curriculum. I have been spending my time with my wonders about how a curriculum extends beyond the classroom, into one's life, into one's community, into one's home. I have been wondering about how far a curriculum reaches, whether the formal learning space is a graduate school classroom or the classrooms of our earliest learners.

We find ourselves, brought together, sharing our personhoods deeply, with or without intention or expectation, affecting one another, changing one another—in this experience, this narrative, this story of learning.

We are living our shared curriculum. We are creating a curriculum of community.

Some Tensions—July 9, 2018

"It's so interesting that you and your husband talk about the course at home."

It is not an accident that I speak of "my spouse" in class. Of course, this is my chosen language, language I am comfortable using in public and private, in class and elsewhere, appreciating the politics of more gender-neutral language. But, since 2006, my mother has been more likely to refer to my spouse as her "daughter's wife," language I appreciate, too, and that I know is one way my mother expresses her love. I am thinking about this language today.

Before I formally applied to begin doctoral work, I was advised by a genuinely caring colleague to be cautious with disclosure about anything that would suggest, albeit accurately, that I was married to a woman. I understood from the brief conversation that there are those in our midst, as yet unnamed and unknown to me, who wouldn't be accepting and who may make my experience as a doctoral student more difficult. Students, even those returning to that role in mid-career, are vulnerable. Precarious. And, so, my *wife* is almost always my *spouse* in these spaces.

As I write this, I hesitate to disclose this tension. First, I feel a kind of guilt in this uttering, recognizing that I do not know who I need to (supposedly) be afraid of, so perhaps I shouldn't mention this ever, at all, lest I harm the reputation of a place I am coming to love. Second, I experience a sincere sense of wonder at my own willingness to regulate my language, to hide (again), knowing that in most of my professional circles, those circles external to my student life, I am known to love and to be married to a woman.

And, yet, I know from my own lived experiences that “a truly inclusive society and a curriculum for human beings” (Greene, 1993, p. 214) remains aspirational, complex, complicated, and delicate. Maxine Greene offers us the following observation, connecting her sense of this curriculum for human beings, to the ways in which we have the capacity to so easily gloss over, instead of dwelling with and within, difference:

Thinking of curriculum, realizing that it always emerges out of an interplay among conceptions of knowledge, conceptions of the human being, and conceptions of the social order, I want to lay stress once more on the way in which universals are structured (like the managerial or the military or the technological norm of what it is to be human), categories are invented, and discourse is manipulated. Just think of the taken-for-granted assumption that heterosexuality is universal, or that public space is (by definition) a patriarchal space available only to those who live by patriarchal norms. (pp. 216–217)

In other words, my experiences of shielding my whole self from the spaces of the classroom may not be particularly unusual, especially because using the language of “my spouse” allows others to inscribe their own assumptions and expectations on me, in whatever way they are most comfortable. I know this happens, and so I was not surprised to be asked about my husband today. Still, I replied with *hers* and *shes*, instead of *hims* and *hes*, as if it was the most natural thing. In doing so, I disclosed and we moved on together, in peace.

I do not know how to make this scenario better right now. But, I do hope that, in moments when people “begin disclosing who they are to one another ... that persons begin to recognize each other and, in the experience of recognition, feel the need to take responsibility for one another” (Greene, 1993, p. 218). In these moments of *hers* and *shes*, I sense the possibility of moving from merely *glossing over* to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of *heteroglossia*, that Greene describes as “the existence of many voices, some contesting, some cohering, all demanding and deserving attention” (p. 212).

I also know that some dissonance might be okay. It might even be “a necessary dissonance between what is taken for granted at the center and what might, what ought to be” (Greene, 1993, p. 220).

While this specific experience of curriculum-as-lived—of acknowledging that my spouse is not a husband—continues to work on me, I find myself wondering how my place in our curriculum of community may (or may not) be working on the other voices in this class, each life as it is lived and told, always and forever unfolding. If I have created any dissonance in my role as a curriculum maker of community, I hope it's the good kind.

A Retelling and a Reliving Addressed to *This* Community of Knowing— July 11, 2018

I have told stories. We have told stories. We have not told all the stories. We have not told all our stories.

I know this to be certain, that stories remain unspoken and unwritten, because I have not told all my stories. This cannot be surprising. There is a story in everything—in every moment of the past, the present, and the future we imagine and into which we are becoming; in every space and place we've lived; in every story of love and loss and longing; in everything said and unsaid. As Thomas King (2003) reminds us, “the truth about stories is that that's all we are” (p. 32). And we are infinite.

The stories I have told have been ones that put me at ease in this world, in Lugones' (1987) sense of being at ease in a world. The stories I have told were stories I was scared to tell. And, the stories I have told burst forth because of the life I am living right now, because of circumstances beyond these walls, beyond my control, and between these lines.

The stories I have told are because of you, because you listened and read and responded to me. For me. Even in the moments of writing, alone at my desk, I imagined you might be reading. You have been with me all along.

In these 10 days, I also became a listener, a reader, a part of a response community. Your response community. Our response community. And, in doing so, as I listened and read and responded to your stories, too, we each became people experiencing “*relational living alongside*” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 23, emphasis in original) one another.

I am thinking today of Adriana Cavarero's (2000) *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, in which her central claim is that we always turn to a *you* in order to become a narratable subject. For Cavarero, there is no possibility of an *I* without a *you*. Over these 10 days, I have been grateful for the subject I've been able to narrate, the one who has been inquiring into her own life, her own present and past and maybe even into her future, and into what it means to be or become a curriculum maker of community.

Towards a Curriculum of Community

Ten days ago, I wondered aloud, confused. I asked: What is the difference between a “curriculum of community” and a “curriculum maker of community”? At the time, I had no rational or reasonable response to this wonder. I merely wondered. I let this wonder work on me, like a story.

As I reflect on this wonder now, I find myself needing to begin with the first part, sensing that I'm making sense of what it might be to experience a curriculum of community. I connect the sense I'm making about this curriculum of community to Ted Aoki's (1993) idea of "curriculum-as-lived," a curriculum that steps outside the curriculum-as-planned and towards a curriculum that is a little bit messy and composed (or co-composed) because of the chorus of individuals that make up the community that arrives, even if it's a "found community" as Hilde Lindemann Nelson (1995) might suggest. Here, in these spaces, the curriculum of community emerges from what might be described as, in Aoki's (1993) words, an "understanding of 'self/other,' one that intertwines the self as subject and the other as subject—an intersubjectivity, which, in the hermeneutic language of Hans Georg Gadamer understands it as a fusion of horizons, an intersubjectivity fused into a 'we'" (p. 265).

In other words, this—this we—is our curriculum of community. What we have learned together would not be without one another, in this time and in this place. It is specific to us.

Becoming a Curriculum Maker of/in Community

Understanding the idea of a "curriculum of community" in this way has been helpful, at least for me, as I've worked to (begin to) understand the ways in which I might consider myself a "curriculum maker of community" or the ways in which I might wish to practice the work of being a "curriculum maker of community" beyond this classroom and these days, out there in the worlds in which each of us lives. Imagining the "curriculum of community" as a community-composed, lived curriculum returns me to another earlier wonder: How do we create spaces for "curriculum as lived" to happen? Put another way, who am I and what is my role in creating and acknowledging a curriculum of community as worthwhile and valued? And, then, how do I contribute to being a curriculum maker of community—as a student, a teacher, a professional, or even a spouse, an aunt, a daughter, a sister, a friend, a neighbour? I want to gesture towards a few possibilities—possibilities I will not call answers, but possibilities that may hold some meaning, some potential, and perhaps even some playfulness.

First, while I may embody any or a number of possible roles in a given space, I must always be willing and able to acknowledge that, through my lived experiences, I am learning and becoming. (I'm not done yet.) What this entails, in being a curriculum maker of community, is to embrace myself as part of the community of learners. This is easy as a student. I know this role well. I am a learner and I am supposed to be learning. But in other spaces, where I may be perceived as an *expert* of some kind, or someone who might have an answer, I must be willing to remind myself that I am one of the community, one of the ones doing the learning. In doing so, I imagine I can create space for, help to make, a curriculum of community.

Second, coming together as a community—creating space for and becoming a curriculum maker of community—necessitates, rather than erases, the need to honour each individual as an individual, filled with stories of experience, who is also still becoming. As Maxine Greene (1993) offers, "[t]his means responding to one another as a sister or a brother being in the process of choosing, of becoming what that person (in the midst of others) is not yet" (pp. 218–219). What this does not mean, of course,

is that there is an expectation of universal agreement, a silent symphony of expected nodding heads. Rather, in working to become a curriculum maker of community, diversity of lived experiences must be given space to emerge. The expectation, of course, is not that this is easy, but that dissonance can be “a necessary dissonance between what is taken for granted at the center and what might, what ought to be” (p. 220).

And then, as the final possibility I’ll offer for now, once I remember that I too am always learning, becoming, and once I begin to listen to and for individuals’ stories, as a curriculum maker of community, I must challenge myself to, as Lugones (1987) would have us, engage in “world-travelling.” That is, for me, becoming a curriculum maker of community isn’t a call merely to listen to stories. Rather, it seems to me that the work is to, “learn to love each other by learning to travel to each other’s ‘worlds’” (p. 4), worlds that are not our own, that may even bump up against worlds that are our own. As I move into my future work and world, I want to create spaces to experience these bumpings within a curriculum of community, because “[w]ithout knowing the other’s ‘world,’ one does not know the other, and without knowing the other, one is really alone in the other’s presence because the other is only dimly present to one” (p. 18). And I do not want to live in this world alone.

Communities of Knowing: A Closing, for Now

As Jean Clandinin (2013) reminds us, “[r]esponse is a concept frequently used in narrative inquiry. Taken from the same root as responsibility, it signals the importance of making spaces for telling and listening to stories as well as responsibilities for sustaining each other” (p. 28). It is my sense that this is where communities of knowing, communities of knowledge, begin. As we engage in living and telling, reliving and retelling (Clandinin, 2013), we “begin to recognize each other and, in the experience of recognition, feel the need to take responsibility for one another” (Greene, 1993, p. 218).

After these weeks of inquiring together, as a class and as a community, I can say that your stories are still working on me—and my own stories of living and learning alongside you are still working on me, too. I’m reminded that our stories, our autobiographical narrative inquiries, “refuse closure” (Miller, 1998, p. 153).

I am changed. I am changing. And I continue to wonder.

Notes

1. Name used with permission.
2. Name used with permission.

Acknowledgments

The University of Alberta's Building Peaceful Communities Summer Institute is cosponsored by the Departments of Secondary and Elementary Education and the Mahatma Gandhi Canadian Foundation for World Peace. The Institute is coordinated by the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development. This paper has benefitted from conversations with and thoughtful comments provided by Dr. Florence Glanfield. I wish to respectfully acknowledge that I live and work on Treaty 6 territory. I dedicate this paper to Diane Stepney, who passed from this world on July 31, 2018.

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Christie Schultz is the Assistant Dean (Academic) of the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta. She leads the Faculty’s teaching and learning activities within its continuing and professional education portfolio. In addition, she is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Educational Policy Studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. The focus of her research is care-centered leadership in higher education. She has published and presented work in the areas of organizational change, continuing and higher education, settler-allyship, and feminist leadership.