

Reimagining Curriculum Leadership During a Pandemic: A Deleuzo-Guattarian Thought Experiment

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ABSTRACT

This essay details ways in which curriculum leaders can critically engage with contemporary needs to produce a “becoming-curriculum”—with lines of flight breaking free from prescriptive, reductive triangulations—by opening curriculum to present and future (rather than past) realities. Evolutionary theory, the work of Deleuze and Guattari, and culturally responsive leadership can help to reconceptualize curriculum studies and community-based education. As we prepare students for an unknowable future, how can we better care for the actual students and communities in front of us rather than the potential lives of abstract, future adults?

Keywords: critical theory, curriculum, education, leadership

Amidst investigating, challenging, diversifying, and implementing curricula for public safety and social justice, school leaders must envision curriculum theory as an ever-expanding field that reveals empowering presents and futures for our students. Deleuze and Guattari—nineteenth century French philosophers who critique psychoanalytic thought through post-structuralism—challenged stagnant Oedipal triangulations, where individuals desire predetermined outcomes rather than finding new possibilities in life. They insisted on “lines of flight,” or ideas that burst forth from one object or reality into another, continually linking systems in an ever-expanding conceptualization (Lorraine, 2005). Thus, curriculum conceived as a “becoming-curriculum”—with lines of flight breaking free from prescriptive, reductive triangulations—opens curriculum to infinite possibilities. How, then, do leaders pursue a line of flight through curriculum studies? Why does it matter *now*? With COVID-19, technological inequity, and racism centered in our lives, can we imagine a curriculum that addresses everything? Connecting curriculum to the global pandemic is one aperture to enter into a “becoming-curriculum” project.

EVOLUTION AND LINES OF FLIGHT

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, biology and virology have infected public health and news media discourse, so how can biological-evolutionary concepts inform curricular leadership? Moelling and Broecker (2019) claim viruses are “drivers of evolution, as transmitters of genetic material, as innovative agents” (p. 1). While curriculum is not a species, Kliebard’s (2004) historical account of curriculum as a work of broader genealogy reveals Deleuzo-Guattarian rhizomatic connections between the otherwise-disparate concepts of Darwinism and curriculum. Casey and McCannless (2018) reassert that the “orientation toward the future [of every student being college-ready] runs counter to a student-centered approach to curriculum and pedagogy by rejecting present concerns and interests of actual students for the imagined concerns and interests of future adults” (p. 27). If educators cannot know what awaits the lives of future adults—as the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated—to what extent are we disregarding the present needs of our actual students? We

have been preparing students for the twenty-first century for at least two decades, but has our “future-ready” curriculum prepared Americans for contemporary social and medical well-being?

Grosz (2005)—in her theorizing of feminism, temporality, power, and nature—informs an evolutionary reading of life that resonates during a global pandemic, where people “are impelled forward to a future that is unknowable” (p. 29). Grosz (2005) maintains that “evolution is a fundamentally open-ended system which pushes toward the future with no real direction” (p. 26), but where the future is made possible by the realities of the past and present that are “unpredictable in advance” (p. 32). Although life may be unpredictable, schools work to exert some control. Apple (2019) contends that “schools give children little choice about the means by which they are distributed into certain roles in society” (p. 133), and “children are transformed into manipulable [sic] and anonymous abstractions called ‘learners’” (p. 153). Life, Grosz argues, is not so easily contained and always engages with futurity.

Containment—or signification, the act of limiting an object by naming it—is what Deleuze and Guattari worked to disrupt. In curriculum work, the curriculum-instruction-assessment triad (Achtenhagen, 2012; English, 2010) is three connected elements that are reminiscent of Pinar’s (2019) explanation of the “method of *currere*—the Latin infinitive form of curriculum meaning to run the course” (p. 24). The curriculum-instruction-assessment triad is a track, where curriculum leads to instructional choices that are then assessed before reevaluating the “curriculum” (Figure 1). Achtenhagen (2012) warns against curriculum and instruction serving “only as pure suppliers for assessment tasks” (p. 6) and so averred against “linearity and hierarchy of goals” (p. 23). Rather than a unidirectional “track,” we can conceive of this triad with each aspect opened with bidirectional flow to the other two elements (Figure 2).

Figure 1

Curriculum-Instruction-Assessment Loop

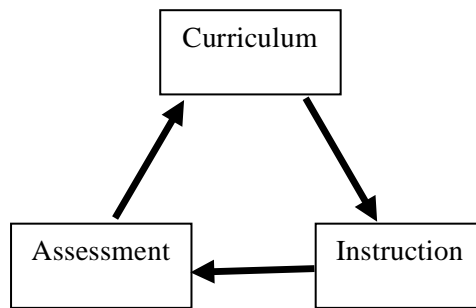
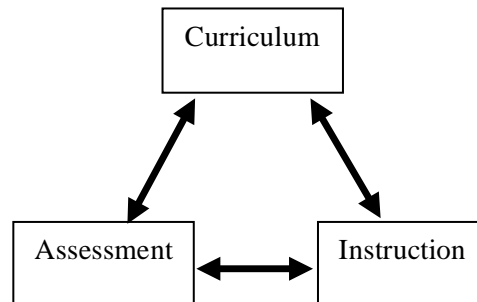


Figure 2

Curriculum-Instruction-Assessment Triad



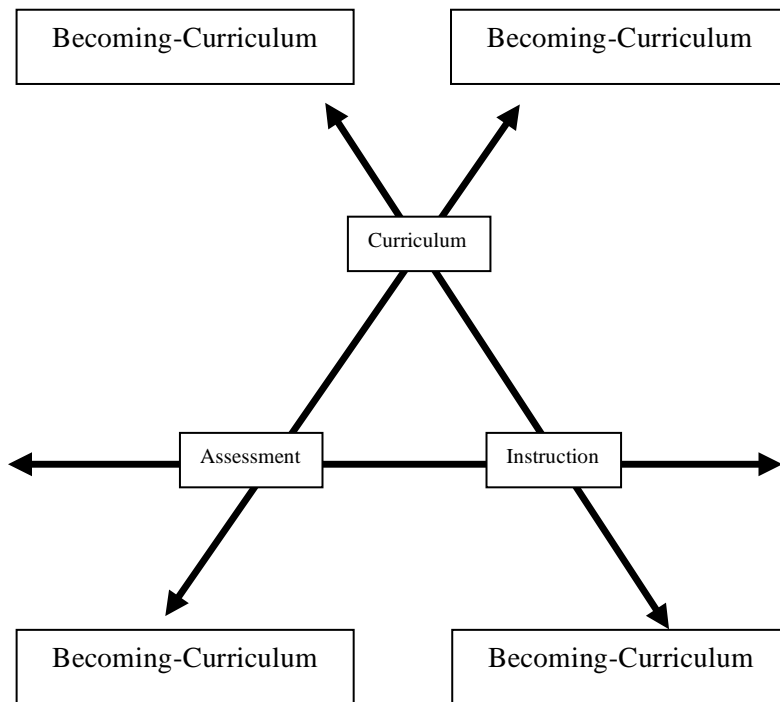
And yet, cannot curriculum, instruction, and assessment all contribute to possible futures rather than staying stuck within their track? The curriculum-instruction-assessment triad configuration is another Oedipal triangle, where the only options for being are those already contained within the three points. A loss of the mother results in a desire for the mother; thus, the triangle seeks to reproduce itself. Conversely, Deleuze and Guattari write of the anti-Oedipus, where desire is found in seeking beyond the constraints of a closed system: the open-ended transformative futures described by

Grosz (2005). Indeed, the triangle itself is insular, incestuous, looping around (on its own track!) to reproduce itself. Deleuze and Guattari (1972/2009) state, “from the moment that we are placed within the framework of Oedipus [...] the cards are stacked against us, and the only real relationship, that of production, has been done away with” (p. 24). A curriculum-instruction-assessment triad can block productive, desiring flows, and Pinar (1991) observes that the “trend toward curriculum standardization mirrors the macro-trend toward cultural homogenization” (p. 166), which can be understood today as systemic racism. Reducing—and reproducing—everything to the “same” is the limitation of Oedipal triangulations. How do we move beyond stagnant curricula?

Famously stated by Dewey (1929/2013), education “is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p. 35). The connection between life and curriculum is finely interwoven, and such a conceptualization can draft Deleuzo-Guattarian lines of flight from Oedipal curricula. We can burst through these Oedipalizations that run the predetermined “track” of curriculum to engage with multiplicities, divergences, and becomings. Grosz (2005) insists that “[l]ife introduces a kind of veering-off-course” (p. 41). Just as Deleuze finds desire as multiplicity, so too can curriculum be construed as a becoming-curriculum, blossoming forth from the curriculum-instruction-assessment “course” in all directions and beyond traditional labels (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Becoming-Curriculum Map



In Deleuze and Guattari’s (1972/2009) concept of a “body without organs,” the “subject itself is not at the center, [...] with no fixed identity, forever decentered, *defined* by the states through which it passes” (p. 20, emphasis in original). Rather than stopping the lines that connect the curriculum-instruction-assessment triad, those lines can be extended to connect with other points and lines: the triangle transforms into a becoming that connects with other flows, seeking ever-outward (Wallin, 2010; Kress & Lake, 2016). COVID-19 exposed historical inequity, and schools must engage with—not ignore—these social realities. Extending these lines of flight can lead us to curricula that are simultaneously sustaining, disruptive, and connective, situating curriculum within the broader evolutionary scope. Becoming-curriculum connects with students, communities, social justice, and *life*.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

Just as viruses and life evolve and transform, so too must leadership. Powell (2011) warns that “[w]e know what happens when curriculum is imposed on teachers and schools from some distant, invisible place: we get the schools we have now” (p. 150). However, the schools we have in this moment cannot be the schools we have reproduced for the past century. Whether embracing transformational leadership (Hallinger, 2003) or servant leadership (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004), it is only when trust is established with communities that educational leaders can initiate and sustain transformative opportunities critical to social, economic, and cultural equity amid global crises (Karalis Noel, 2020).

As pedagogies shift to virtual spaces, curriculum leadership must openly engage with curriculum, not only instruction and assessment. Opening lines of flight beyond the self-replicating track of the triad and into a broader “body without organs” brings us into discussions of social justice and racial equity. Muhammad (2020) proposes a four-pronged approach of identity, skills, intellect, and criticality as a framework for historically responsive literacy. Khalifa (2018) explores culturally responsive school leadership, imploring principals and school leaders to engage with their communities, similar to Hallinger’s (2003) note that leadership “must be conceptualized as a *mutual influence process*, rather than a one-way process in which leaders influence others” (p. 346, emphasis in original). Applying “bodies without organs” and “lines of flight” to curriculum *necessitates* connecting with communities, student identities, contemporary needs, and the world-at-large. Rather than preparing students for the future, perhaps curriculum leaders can work to bridge school to the actual, contemporary, collective communities that schools exist to serve.

What does a becoming-curriculum do for us in this time of educational disruption and opportunity? Wallin (2010) invites us to “approach curriculum as an act of creation rather than reproduction” (p. xii). In creating knowledge, becomings show the way forward, a way off-track, off-course, toward the unknown. The COVID-19 pandemic challenges the inequity and proposed outcomes of our curricula: What are schools’ effects on the present and future? Wallin (2010) avers that “becoming, in turn, opens space(s) for a people not yet seen, a pedagogy for a *people yet to come*” (p. 39, emphasis in original). Contemporary movements toward social justice education work to disrupt oppressive curricular practices for a more equitable future (Kumashiro, 2015; Adams & Bell, 2016; Au et al., 2016). Curriculum-as-futurity opens our possibilities when we sit to create curricular documents. Curriculum as a body without organs connects with and represents minoritized communities in instructional and assessment practices. Lines of flight will help us see beyond the standardization of schooling. A dynamic view of curriculum, however, is also unsettling, unnerving, uncanny.

Just as we enter and explore curriculum studies variously, we may also find many ways out: out of a predetermined course, out of old ways of thinking, out of time.

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