The Need for Revision
Curriculum, Literature, and the 21st Century
David P. Owen, Jr.

Can we have more teacher/intellectuals in our classrooms? This book demonstrates that we can. But many things have to change before intellectual standards appear again in public schools. David Owen attempts to show, but not in outline form, how we can revise our schools. Can we escape the rut in which public education finds itself, dominated by the inane (tests), the stifling (reduction of school to job training), and the insane (transformation of a life-affirming odyssey of the mind to clichés, information gathering, and slogans)? We can reclaim the beauty of an education if we join David and re-vise our classrooms. Education is uncertain, risky, wondrously adventurous—yet schooling has become stale. No—tediously dreadful. There is a need to revise. Reject standardized tests! Repeal pay for performance! Eject No Child Left Behind before no child has a thoughtful mind left. It is time to revise, and David’s book explains why. Are we still interested in the mind, soul, and substance of the individual? Does it matter who we are and become, or just what we do? If these questions still matter, dwell carefully with David’s ideas and transform yourself, your students, school, community, state, nation, and world. It is time to revise them all.

John A. Weaver, Georgia Southern University
THE NEED FOR REVISION
TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

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This book series is dedicated to the radical love and actions of Paulo Freire, Jesus “Pato” Gomez, and Joe L. Kincheloe.
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity – youth identity in particular – the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving.
Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* seeks to produce – literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
The Need for *Revision*
Curriculum, Literature, and the 21st Century

By

David P. Owen, Jr.
For Courtney, just like everything else.
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When people find out that I teach high school literature, the most common thing they say is, “Why would you want to do that? I couldn’t do what you do.” They don’t mean, of course, that they are impressed with my job—they just think it’s hard, and probably not worth the trouble. Well, I certainly think it is worth the trouble, and will spend the rest of this work talking about why. But as for the difficulty of teaching high school literature today: no kidding. People don’t read the texts we assign much, essays seem to get a little worse all the time (certainly the mechanics do), and students will usually confess that they don’t take class seriously unless we happen to study something they like. It is hard, and I can hardly do it, either.

In fact, the difficulty of teaching the word today has dire ramifications for all teachers and researchers in and of public education, and particularly for the field of curriculum studies. For one, whatever the content of the subject matter, we all still do most of our teaching and research work with words, lots of them, and publish those words in scholarly books and journals, precisely when the world around us is reading these kinds of things less and less. Can we really help determine whose knowledge matters most, or what should be passed from one generation to the next, if no one reads our work, or knows what we are talking about—let alone why we are talking about it? Here I am, after all, writing page after page about and for people who will, very likely, never read them. In fact, the people I want to talk to most don’t read much of anything anymore, let alone works of curriculum theory. The problem is that many people today, particularly young people (roughly in their early 30’s and younger), are used to—literally and metaphorically—“changing the channel” whenever they lose interest in whatever is before them, just about wherever they go, ever since the technological gadget explosion of the mid-90’s. They don’t necessarily hate books; they just have a lot of options, and we have little time to hook them (ever seen a restless teenager with a remote control?). This is true whether the “text” before them is a television channel, an iPod track, a radio station, a Web site, or whatever we are trying to teach them at school. It is also true that some of these “channel-changers” are teachers now, not just students.

What to do, then? Quit writing books? Quit hoping that people read them? As an illustration of this problem in curriculum studies and public education, I offer an image from William F. Pinar’s (2007) *Intellectual Advancement Through Disciplinarity*, in which Pinar argues that we need more scholars working specifically on the history and current state of the field of curriculum studies. I think he is right, but I also think we need another kind of scholar as well. Pinar says in his introduction that “disciplinary conversation is hardly held in a sound-proof room,” and that “the sounds of events from outside the field … influence
what we say to each other and to schoolteachers” (p. xiv). I absolutely agree, but I find those outside “sounds” particularly intriguing, and I think we need to do more than hear muffled traces and rumors of what is going on outside that metaphorical room; in short, I’m worried that if we are not careful, when we want to emerge from the room of our disciplinary studies, we will find the doors locked and the lights off, so to speak. I’m worried that the young students and teachers we want to help will change the channel on us.

To prevent such a thing from happening, I propose a kind of liminal scholar, one who works in the windows and doorways of the academy, now at the conference table or library, now in the hallways, now in the open air of the world “outside the field,” lest those spaces-between where the inside and outside commingle become instead impermeable walls. I, for one, have never felt quite at home in either place; I often wish the world were a little more academic and the academy a little more worldly, and I am sure there are others like me. So, rather than force ourselves into places we do not fit, I propose that some of us make a home of our homelessness, and serve as conduits for the open transit of ideas across academy thresholds. Perhaps if we do this work well enough, we can convince the academy (and the public school) to open its doors a little more and young people to “put down the clicker” every now and then, or at least hand it over and let us do the clicking. These liminal scholars will need to do what I call the work of revision; they will need to constantly see how what’s going on inside affects what’s going on outside, and vice versa, and revise public education to suit the new circumstances.

I would like to begin my own version of this work with why I think we in public education today need our vision checked, as it were, when it comes to the place of the humanities and literature in our curriculum, and use as a springboard for that discussion a book by Mary Aswell Doll. The introduction to Doll’s (2000) Like Letters in Running Water: A Mythopoetics of Curriculum serves as a sort of defense of the study of the humanities, particularly the works she calls “fiction,” or written texts united by their use and exploration of the imagination. She finds fault with what she perceives as the humanities’ relegation to the role of “stepsister in the academy” (p. xi); she decries the attitude that devalues the study of these arts simply because they might not “fatten the pocketbook” (p. xi); and she laments the sad fact that even when her students admit that they have learned from a literary engagement, they do so reluctantly and immediately discount the discovery, assuming it to be accidental, or inconsequential, or at least unconnected with the words on the page. Doll insists that adventures in language are not “‘mere’ exercises” (p. xi), that reading literature is not an “‘only’ experience” (p. xi); indeed, she says that “the engagement with fiction (prose, drama, poetry, myth, fairy tale, dream) can be a learning experience of the first order” (p. xi). And she promises us that the aim of her book is to rectify this misunderstanding of the value of fiction to the curriculum.

Doll argues that many of the virtues and benefits specific to fiction are overlooked or mis-quantified by its detractors, perhaps because while in fiction “one learns about living,” it is also true that “the learning is subtle” (p. xi). First
and foremost, she seems to trumpet as its defining characteristic that fiction can “revivify” (p. xi) our ailing imaginations, keeping us from completely falling prey to an increasingly literal, glaringly available world. In addition, as our imaginations are stirred by exposure to fiction, so are our societies and consciences shaken by it. We are poked, and prodded, and disturbed by fiction until we must reconsider and possibly reform our views of the world around us and the people with which we must share it; as she says, “when stories are told, one sees differently” (p. xi). And, interestingly, fiction accomplishes these things despite, and possibly because of, the fact that the world it describes is inherently false, and the characters it saves and destroys, kills and breathes life into, are not us. And as for us, Doll finds that fiction helps us know ourselves better, too, tapping “that which courses through the inner person,” helping us to “grasp more coherently the world within as well as without” (p. xii). Fiction, paradoxically, is the “lie that pedagogy needs in order to uncover the truths that make us human” (p. xii).

I imagine many of Doll’s observations and arguments strike a chord with those who have devoted their lives to letters (and curriculum studies). Patrick Slattery and Kevin Daigle, for instance, find that “literature is one of the important sources for our curriculum theorizing, particularly … as literature might help us envision curriculum as a place of turmoil that is capable of nourishing our being in the midst of the frustration, violence, despair, and anguish of modern schooling” (1994, p. 438). Unfortunately, as many of us are all too aware, Doll is right that the humanities do seem to suffer dismissal in academia. For example, the alumni publications sent to me invariably find the work of those in the science and business departments far sexier than the work of those in the literary or visual arts, and I do confess to small twinges of inexplicable defensiveness when I tell new people what I do for a living. I even distinctly remember the worried faces of our dearest friends when my wife and I explained our plans for graduate school, in English and Art Education no less, immediately after getting married. And I see evidence every day of the increasing dismissal of Doll’s “fiction” from education, entertainment, and all over the working world—people simply don’t have to actually read as much as they did before, in the traditional sense at least, and so they don’t, even in their free time (also disappearing).

Doll also recognizes “literalism as the problem of our culture” (p. xiii). The world is far too available, she says, and both the gore and the glory have been laid bare for anyone who wants to see them. But this is not so much a root problem as it is a symptom of our culture’s great, unchecked proliferation of images and information, and to begin a discussion of our information age in “the old days” (way before computers) makes this relationship clear. Before the printing press and many other revolutionary scientific, technological, social, and political changes, the world’s great texts were held by few hands. Anyone who wanted to know about God had to go see the man who had His Word and could read it to him. Anyone who wanted to know the law had to ask the men who wrote it and the king who enforced it, and either of those might decide to change it on the spot. This world required an immense amount of trust and rigid social structure and created immense power in the hands of those who knew, and the history books are full of
the abuses and manipulations that power allowed. But as the world became gradually more literate, individual, and equal—sometimes pushing the technology, and sometimes pushed by the technology—it could be experienced, formed, changed and changed again by a far greater number of people. We often called this “progress.”

But a funny thing happened on the way to personal autonomy: the information eventually outran people’s ability to understand it and use it, and this is increasingly the case today. In our affair with availability (a positive at first) and our lust for more answers faster, we forgot some fundamental things about ourselves and our lives. We forgot that though the truth (little t, at least) about things is now much easier to get to on our own than it used to be, having 50 voices speak it does not make it more true, or clearer—in fact, the opposite is often the case. An example of this problem is readily available to any surfer of the Internet; as I often half-jokingly warn my students, any one of them could be an expert on nuclear physics tomorrow. All it would take is a nice-looking Web site.

And, also quite obviously, we forgot that we are not all nuclear physicists. In fact, we are not really experts on very much—maybe one or two things, if we are hard workers or highly educated or both. Most of us still need somebody to fix our cars, the world seems to contain more lawyers every day, and millions of people weekly still go ask somebody else to explain God to them. Not only are we back where we started in many ways, but we are in danger of moving into an age of post-literacy, where all information is available and no one knows anything. In summary, we forgot that we often still need, and want, people to tell us what is and what isn’t. Before the literacy revolution, power rested with those who had the few texts; now our new masters are those who can filter through the many texts, making determinations about what matters most, to whom we should listen, what is the most helpful/harmful for us, and how these discoveries ought to be expressed and shared with the rest of us.

After the initial discouragement caused by such an observation, we can see that there is still hope for us in curriculum studies—especially in literature and the humanities—to become these filters, learn to recognize other filters, and help our students to learn filtering skills themselves, even if the way to make that hope real has been pushed to the very brink of complete dismissal as a subject for study. Some of that dismissal, though, is understandable, and humanities classrooms everywhere need to blow off the dust a little, and could use a little fresh air from open windows. Doll (2000) is certainly right that we still need to study fiction, that it retains an important role in our education even in our much-changed, 21st-century world; however, the humanities classes in which we study fiction, particularly our literature classes, would also do well to expand their study of the word to include the various, mostly digital forms it has taken in that 21st-century world. It is true that sacred texts, constitutions, and political manifestos still rule the day, but they have been joined by (relative) newcomers like advertising, popular music, film, television, hypertext, and the nearly innumerable children of communication technology. All are written, even if the writing is an unfamiliar kind; all are texts; all can be studied wherever texts are. What’s more, everything
that can be studied—inside the humanities and out—must be studied through language, even if the dialects vary; 24 and twenty-four are equally useless without an understanding of language and the signifier-signified relationship. In short, the world is still run by the word. And the word is ours. And if we teach our students anything at all, it should be the word’s peaks and valleys, its powers and weaknesses, its beauties and its terrors, because to fail to teach the humanities is to fail to teach.

However, though putting more emphasis on the humanities in the curriculum, and particularly the literature classes in which Doll’s (2000) “fictions” are so readily available, are perhaps the most important educational tasks we can undertake today, actually doing so in this particular time and place is, and will be, difficult. Our students today, for a variety of reasons, are just not in much mental shape right now for the kind of thinking the humanities and literature require. In “Journeying: A Meditation on Leaving Home and Coming Home” (1994/1999), David G. Smith seems to be worried that our young people today are under attack, living in a culture full of “lying, duplicity and misrepresentation” (p. 3) they are little equipped to resist or change. To this dire pronouncement I would add that our students today might not even be able to recognize they are under attack, let alone what kind of attack it is or how to resist it, and for this we, their educators, must share much of the blame. Even if we do not harm children ourselves in schools as much as Alan A. Block says we do in I’m Only Bleeding: Education as the Practice of Violence Against Children (1997), if our policies make them less equipped to defend themselves, we are complicit in their injuries.

As evidence of the current educational state of our students, I offer an illustration from my own classroom. Every year, just before we begin to discuss the special language, techniques, and general quirks of poetry, I like to lay all the cards on the table, so to speak, as is my style. I just come out and ask, in the manner common to my classroom, why everyone hates poetry, or finds it boring, or thinks it is “un-cool,” etc., and I use an old article from Newsweek announcing the death of poetry as a way to spark open discussion. Once we have registered our complaints, cleared up some misconceptions, and generally talked about what makes art “important,” if anything, each student writes an essay weighing in on the debate in a more organized manner, determining individually poetry’s vitality and diagnosing its various illnesses in a media-saturated, broadband America. Reading those sixty-odd essays is rough, and not just for my aesthetic interests; the vast majority of my students each year focus their critical vitriol not on poetry’s tendency toward language tricks, forced rhyme and rigid structures, or flowers-and-feelings sentimentality, but rather on the thinking it requires. They say poetry takes patience, time, and analytical effort to appreciate, and they just do not have those things in great supply. It makes them think, and they do not want to.

So why do students not want to think? And where are we in all of this? It is interesting that in D. G. Smith’s (1994/1999) fear for our students’ futures, he locates their only chance for salvation in luck, divinity, or genetics—not in curriculum or in teachers, even though he is one. This may be because Smith is a teacher, and knows that teaching today involves plenty of measuring, assessing,
numbering, analyzing, and inculcating of students, but not much saving or protecting them, except from each other, of course. In fact, teachers may have become just one more of the many hands who cannot wait to get at students, to write on their “blank slates” (Littleford, 1982/1999, p. 118), molding them and shaping them like so much clay, a guild of selfish Pygmalion’s producing a nation of Galatea’s, but maybe without the love. It is bad enough that children are a demographic brainwashed with brand loyalty of all kinds through media before they know what brands are, but public education’s “buying in” to the powerful forces like standardization, censorship, and consumer culture that hold sway in our schools today has all but sealed their fate, barring as D. G. Smith (1994/1999) implies some sort of divine intervention.

The effects of standardization and censorship in our schools, which seem superficially like efforts towards equality and strong moral fiber, can actually severely handicap our students, if we are not careful, even if it is not by design. The more we work to make assessments, methods, and materials the same (and safe), the more our students end up with an increasingly narrow worldview and set of skills. Sure, we can technically teach in whatever way we feel is appropriate for our students, but if the test is the same for everyone at the end, so will the teaching likely be. What we are currently offering our students in schools is, as Block (1988/1999) puts it, a curriculum and a world in which people may read, but not write. To Block, writing is “the construction of reality” (p. 178), what it takes “to be alive” (p. 177), but we have largely constructed that reality for young people already, having dramatically reduced their curriculum, career, behavior, and lifestyle options without their input and often without their knowing it. All that is left for them right now is reading, or “observing someone else’s reality,” and it is no wonder that we see so much of the “boredom, frustration, and alienation” (1988/1999, p. 178) in our students that Block says is the inevitable result—and no wonder that they do not like poetry, which asks them to use writing muscles they have not flexed much in a long time.

However, all is certainly not lost, and teaching the humanities and literature are no less important to the curriculum because they are difficult. In fact, it is important that we remember that these recently neglected subjects carry within them already the tools for their revival, or resurrection, depending on how dire the particular case may be. These studies of the word do teach us to read the world, but they can also teach us to write it, to use Block’s (1988/1999) language, and they offer each of us a place to ask the most important questions and explore the most influential ideas in our lives—and as such, they offer curriculum studies theorists a valuable foothold in the everyday life of public education. And though our students are not used to thinking much, or at least thinking hard about hard things, that does not mean that they cannot think, if given a chance. And such thinking is certainly good for them, and good for us, too. The world will be theirs one day—soon—and I, for one, want them to have carefully considered it. So, in short, we have come to a place where we who work in curriculum studies can find in public education studies of literature and the humanities in general a position to begin the work our vocation needs—the work of revision. I will begin, as we all should, with myself.
I didn’t want to call this section a *foreword* for a number of reasons. First of all, that’s the part of the book I usually skip when I’m reading, since it is often full of words from one of the author’s author friends about why the book is good or important; I already agree, since I bought it, and so I skip the foreword. I’m also not completely comfortable with its “prefatory comments” meaning, or “words before the main words,” because I want to go ahead and get to what I have to say. I do, though, think I ought to explain what I’m about and why I think that way before I just jump right in, but *foreword* always sounded too extra, too added-on.

Secondly, while I do like the positive connotations (at least the auditory ones) of *forward*, the word is just too linear, too promising of the modernist idea of “progress,” as if simply putting one foot in front of the other is necessarily a good thing. What if we should slow down or stop sometimes, let alone double back, or skip, or dance? Doesn’t the direction, or the goal, matter as well? Are there really any straight lines to anywhere anyway? *Forward* sounds nice at first, makes us think of getting out of ruts or overcoming obstacles, but it’s just too simple to be very useful in such a complex world (or a book about that complex world).

So, *for|word* it is. It’s not in the dictionary, but if Beyonce can get *bootylicious* included, maybe there’s hope. In any case, the term seems perfect for what I’m about here. I get the positive auditory connotations of *forward* and the prefatory connotations of *foreword*, but with *for|word* it’s also clear that I’m aiming at something different, and that my focus will be on, and in defense of, words and what they can do and mean. I am writing *for word*. To sum up a book in a sentence, I think curriculum as it is practiced in high school education needs *revision*, I think literature class is the place to start that *revision*, and I think that literature class itself needs to be *revised* so that such work might take place there. And yes, the italics mean that I’m not just talking about mechanical tune-ups of essays. My argument—addressed to anyone like me who works with or is interested in secondary public education and wants to know what else it can do—is much bigger, and wants to include everything it can: 21st-century America will still need literature class, but literature class will need a good strong dose of 21st-century America as well, and we will need *liminal scholars* of curriculum studies to keep this relationship a healthy one. This relationship will be complex, full of *feedback* loops and iterations that at first seem to belong more to a math or science class. However, this kind of work, these new ways of looking at the world inspired by mathematicians like Benoit Mandelbrot (1983), are also new ways of doing what reading and writing teachers have tried to teach all along: the need for *revision*. And I hope the *for|word* is a good indication of my intention to both argue for *revision* and also practice some of what I preach.

*Revision*, of course, is not a new term (appropriately, given what it means); it is both old and new, the kind of work interested in looking at old things in new ways and new things in old ways, a fact not lost scholars like James Hillman. Hillman’s (1975) *Re-Visioning Psychology* is both “old-fashioned and radically novel” (p. ix) because it looks backward to its roots and forward to its future in order to see what
both have to do with current psychology; Hillman also points out that to see psychology clearly one must also look outside of it as well, and so his “vision leaves the field of psychology as it is usually thought of, and moves widely” (p. ix) to explore other ideas that touch his field or are touched by it. Though I don’t work much with the field of psychology, and will not here either, I am inspired by Hillman’s approach; I feel a kinship with him across both time and academic fields when he says that “what is needed is a revisioning, a fundamental shift of perspective out of that soulless predicament we call modern consciousness” (p. 3).

However, what I am doing here is not just Hillman’s “revisioning” applied to curriculum studies of literature and the humanities; actually, I think the term revision belongs first to the study of letters, though it can be applied to other fields as well. In fact, one of the primary reasons I use the italics is that the term is such a common one in the humanities, particularly in literature, and its use is so natural in those conversations that I have to be careful to draw new attention to it, to say “no, not just re-writing, but also re-writing; not just revision, but revision”—something bigger, wider, broader, more fundamental, more elemental. I would also like to distinguish my use of the term revision from the one that carries mostly negative associations, like “revisionist history,” or other such terms that mean something along the lines of “lies told to cover up the things we don’t want you to see or think about, and that make us look bad.” My idea of revision is in stark contrast to these negative uses: I want to start discussions, not stop them; I want to open things up, not close them down; I want to dis-cover, not cover; and I want to see things we haven’t seen, not close our eyes to them. And though Hillman’s work is closer to what I mean, in that it “moves widely through history, philosophy, and religion” (1975, p. ix) to see new connections, that’s still not enough for me, for us, for education and curriculum studies as I am discussing it. I mean revision as an iterative, recurrent way of seeing, of thinking, of reading and writing in a dynamic world; I mean revision as a positive and possibility-full way of life. It only makes sense to me that the term belongs most, and fits most naturally, in the fields devoted to exploring ways to live.

For example, let’s start, as I often like to, with a student complaint. My high school students, whenever we discuss myths or disappointments about education, seemingly always mention that their elementary teachers insisted that they would not only need to learn to write in cursive, but that one day it would be the only way they wrote. By ninth grade or so, they can see that this is obviously untrue, and I have to agree that outside of signing my name to contracts and credit card slips, I don’t really write anything in cursive. So, as they often are, my students are right.

But they are also wrong, though they should perhaps be forgiven for not understanding why. If by cursive we only mean that kind of parchment-scroll-y writing style for which I can never quite master the z, then I see their point; that’s the only cursive most of them know. But we should recognize, as my Webster’s New Ninth Collegiate Dictionary (1990) reports, that cursive also means “having a flowing, easy, impromptu character,” and comes from the same Latin word currere that gives us some of education’s most meaningful and important words and concepts, like course, current, and curriculum. So, taken in the fullest, most-
associated sense possible, I disagree with my students whole-heartedly, and rather argue that we need far more attention to all things *cursive*.

In fact, I think we should go beyond that to include all things *re-cursive*, *re-current*, and *re-curricular*; we should always go back again in education and curriculum studies (*recurrere*), to see what still works as is, to see what has changed about our work or our world, to see what needs to be changed, to see what looks different today than it did yesterday—we should *re-vise*. We need to “run our courses” and then run them again; after all, one of my favorite things about the school schedule is that it begins and ends each year. In some ways the school year is like one of Benoit Mandelbrot’s (1983) iterative equations, in which “there is both stability and change; the formula stays the same, the variables change (in an orderly but often nonpredictable manner)” (Doll, Jr., 1993, p. 177). This means that I do not simply *repeat* each year’s work; rather, it means that every year I get to *revise* my teaching, keeping things that still seem to work and changing things that need it and doing both as at least a slightly different person. The school schedule, then, is not made of loops but *feedback* loops, in which we take last year’s output and use it as this year’s input. Mandelbrot (1983) runs his mathematical feedback loops and gets things that look like islands and mountains; we run ours and hope we get something that looks like *America*. So, to teach, and especially to teach literature classes, we need both *vision* and *revision*.

* * *

I am certainly not the only person who still thinks literature is valuable to the curriculum and curriculum studies, a fact which makes me happy. Dennis J. Sumara (2002) also argues in *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters* that by reading literature in class and “learning to attend to its details, readers can improve the quality of their lived experiences” (p. xiv). Sumara notices, too, the value of re-reading certain works, claiming that “each reading experience has been differently situated, conducted for different purposes, and has yielded different interpretations and effects” (p. 5). Furthermore, Sumara points out, quite rightly, that language “functions to connect and interpret the experiences that constitute one’s experience of identity” (p. 85). He even goes so far as to say that literature “needs to be considered an integral feature of human experience” if we want it to matter, and says that we “need to reconsider what it means to include this work in schools” (p. 157).

I agree with the main points of both Doll (2000) and Sumara (2002), and find both of these works valuable to my understanding of what it means to teach literature, and what literature can mean to curriculum studies. However, my interests and work also differ from Doll’s and Sumara’s in a couple of important ways. For one, though both see and successfully argue the value of literature, I think that we must also *revise* what we mean by “literature” and “reading” today; we must not only broaden our selections of traditional literary works for study, and study them in new ways as well, but we should also broaden the range of what *kinds* of works we should study, in curriculum studies and in literature class, to
include other valuable texts like film, television, music, and the almost countless other word-based communications and expressions that are important parts of our lives and the lives of our students. In other words, the world is complex and dynamic, and so should our classes be; the more we do the same things in the same ways and hope for the same results, the less our classes will prepare our students to live in a world that doesn’t work that way. To play with words in a way I wish we did more often, the more we “stay the course,” the less current we will be.

Sumara can say that such non-traditional literary experiences “do not usually create the same depth of interpretive experience that can occur with repeated readings and interpretations of novels” (2002, p. 99), but I disagree from both a personal and professional perspective. I have been moved by and learned from revisiting countless listening, viewing, and reading experiences of the non-traditional type—and the same seems to be true of my students. The novel, I contend, is not the ultimate form of “literature,” but rather just one form among many today, and no more valuable than the others. And studied together, in the same course, these texts can sometimes provide experiences unavailable through isolated study; I have always found *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1921/1996) interesting, but I didn’t love it until I saw *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The Allman Brothers, too, were just a band my roommate listened to until I took a hybrid History/Southern Literature course that asked me if it was okay for a mixed-race Southern band to sing the blues, especially a song called “Whipping Post” (1969) in which the guitarists attempt to replicate the victim’s screams.

Part of my interest in revision of curriculum, particularly in secondary public education and especially in literature class, is that I also think that more voices ought to be part of the discussion, no matter the title on their name tags—and listening to, analyzing, and conversing with voices is what literature classes are supposed to do, right? The kind of “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2004, p. xiii) I want to have in my classes would be, well, more complicated than I have often found in my official academic studies, especially before graduate school. For example, in reading works like Sumara’s (2002), I often find myself wondering what a guy who hates to read might have to say about his argument—especially since that guy is never going to read Sumara’s book. Shouldn’t he get to speak as well? For this reason, I must confess that I actually found Henry Miller’s (1962) essay “To Read or Not to Read” much more interesting for my own work. A man who made his living and reputation as a writer but is willing to ask whether or not we should read—and do so with honest vulnerability, as if the question is not already answered in advance? That sounds like a place to start a “complicated conversation.” I want to let him ask me and my students, “of what use books if they lead us not back to life, if they fail to make us drink more avidly of life?” (p. 159); it would be hard to argue that he does not deserve the chance. And then I want to talk about that Pink Floyd song that says “we don’t need no education” (1979) and maybe also Donald Sutherland’s disillusioned English professor character in *Animal House* (1978), the one who insists “I’m not joking—this is my job!”
In fact, I have found that I am at my best, and my students are most engaged, when my “lesson planning” goes like this, when it is open, dynamic, and continually revised. Let’s say my state-prescribed list of authors includes John Donne. I am not a world-renowned expert in John Donne’s work, and I do not want to be, because that would mean ignoring too many other interesting things and people for too long. So, I take out my trusty A Glossary of Literary Terms by M. H. Abrams (1999), in which I discover that John Donne is called a “metaphysical poet,” meaning that he “employed a subtle and often deliberately outrageous logic” (p. 158) and also made “ingenious use of paradox, pun, and startling parallels in simile and metaphor” (p. 159). One of the other anthologies I’ve collected over the years (The Riverside Anthology of Literature, third edition) includes a passage from T.S. Eliot, who says in his admiration of Donne that “when a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience” (1997, p. 591). In other words, Donne tied together things that were not obviously connected, and explored that relationship—which is great news to me, because his “The Sun Rising” (2002), in which he cleverly tries to talk the sun out of disturbing him and his lover, makes me think of George Harrison’s “Here Comes the Sun” (1969) more than anything else. In fact, the more I look, the more I see two guys talking to lovers indirectly by talking about the sun, just with a different interest. One is a Renaissance poet, and the other is a Beatle, but that only makes the connection more interesting.

And then, when a good friend accidentally leaves behind a Jack Johnson album containing the song “Banana Pancakes” (2005), I notice in Johnson’s attempt to get his lover to “close the curtains” and “pretend like there’s no world outside” the same thing Donne tried to do. Does Jack Johnson read John Donne? Did George Harrison? Or, could it be that love hasn’t changed much (at least in terms of trying to make romantic moments last) in 400 years? Now I have a “lesson plan,” and we’re even studying John Donne the way he studied everything else. I guess I could limit our discussion to traditional literature, make our “conversation” less “complicated,” but why?

I do not tell these kinds of stories in this work because I think I am a model teacher, but rather as an example of how much is out there if we’ll open the doors a little in public education and curriculum studies in general, and to allay some fears about what will happen if we do. Another teacher’s friend might not leave behind a Jack Johnson album, and she may not have spent her junior year of college obsessed with Abbey Road (1969) like I did; or perhaps she might notice that the voices talking about love in this example are all men, and white men at that, and decide to move the conversation’s focal points along race or gender lines. In addition, some readers of this book will undoubtedly recognize that the personal and social lives of some of the thinkers whose works I discuss (Henry Miller, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger come to my mind) today often cause their ideas to come with controversial baggage attached; those readers may decide that some historical context should be included in any teaching of those ideas. And for that matter, I must also add that there is nothing magically effective about “The Sun Rising.” We are all different teachers with different students, and the
interactions of our lives and knowledge and interests are different, and differently “complicated” and dynamic, in every room. There are thousands of different ways to teach a text, and thousands of texts to teach and conversations to have. I don’t know how to have the conversation in your classroom, so don’t worry about trying to have the one in mine.

And anyway, another John Donne poem, “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” (2002), is an even better example of the poet’s “metaphysical” style and also the kind of work I want to do here. When I read this poem in high school, like every other high-schooler in America probably did, I felt nothing. I didn’t like it, and it didn’t speak to me. But today, this poem makes my head spin. Not only do I know what it’s like to have a love from which I could not bear to be separated, but Donne chooses, of all things, a compass as his primary metaphor for his relationship with his beloved. He says to her, the “fixed foot” in the metaphorical relationship, that “Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end, where I begun.” I had no idea, until I revised this poem years later, that geometry could be so romantic, or beautiful (I certainly don’t remember it that way). But why can’t geometry be beautiful? And why can’t a poet use whatever seems best for the expression of his ideas, even if it is a sharp metal math tool? After all, Percy Shelley (1840/1977) did say in his “A Defence of Poetry” that the language of the poet “marks the before unapprehended relations of things” (p. 482).

* * *

Besides, others have pointed out that the sciences and the arts need each other, and would be better served working together than apart. To oversimplify his point, Thomas S. Kuhn (1996) says in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions that paradigms hold in part because we get used to seeing the world a certain way. Eventually, though, through extensive application of the current paradigm, scientists become aware of an anomaly, or recognize that “nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science” (pp. 52-53). Scientists then explore and attempt to verify the anomaly, until eventually “the paradigm theory has been adjusted so that the anomalous has become the expected” (p. 53). To do this, a scientist must learn “to see nature in a different way” (p. 53). However, breaking with “normal science” is no small matter; Kuhn notes that once it has become a paradigm, “a scientific theory is declared invalid only if an alternate candidate is available to take its place” (p. 77), making the job of a scientific revolutionary who explores anomalies all the more difficult. For this reason, “creative scientists” must occasionally be like risk-taking, creative artists, “able to live in a world out of joint” (p. 79), working without a paradigm net. They have to be capable of revision.

Lucky for us, our brains actually have the ability to work pretty well “out of joint” when they have to, as Paul M. Churchland (1996) explains in The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul. When the world around us looks strange, or acts in a way that we do not expect, our brains apparently take these “partial or degraded inputs” and fill in the gaps through a process he calls “vector completion” (p. 114)
and illustrates with a series of seemingly heterogeneously-marked images that suddenly look like familiar pictures once the information is tweaked just slightly in just the right way (pp. 110-112). The brain accomplishes this impressive and underappreciated feat by using recurrent pathways, or cycling through “antecedently learned prototypes” (p. 115) until it happens upon something that helps the oddly-shaped blotches instead become a man on a horse, for example. Far more than a visual trick, Churchland outlines how the brain’s “neural network with recurrent pathways” (p. 115) has aided scientists in some of their most important discoveries, from the wave-behavior of light in the Two-Slit experiment (pp. 280-283) to the revised understanding of our solar system by some of science’s greatest minds (pp. 115-121).

Perhaps the greatest news from Churchland (1996) is that while much of science is out of reach for anyone without highly specialized training, the vector completion that is so vital to scientific advances is within reach to all of us; as he says, “any normal human can do this” (p. 279). In fact, it is not necessarily the most expertly trained scientific researcher who is best at vector completion; it is the one with the best imagination. In his words, the “unusually creative people among us are simply those who are unusually skilled at such recurrent manipulation” (p. 279). According to Churchland, those responsible for breakthroughs in science (or any other field, most likely) are broadly educated, discerning, self-motivated, and ready for the “novel deployment and extension of existing activation prototypes” (p. 279). In other words, they may have to work like “metaphysical” poets, and they certainly need to be able to do the work of revision, to look again, to see things new.

Mandlebrot provided another link between the arts and sciences in The Fractal Geometry of Nature (1983) by proving that geometry and natural beauty are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the only thing really shocking about Donne’s use of a compass to talk about love these days is that the poem is so old (did Mandlebrot read Donne too?). Once Mandlebrot showed us the mathematical, “fractal” properties behind coastline lengths (p. 25), ink clouds (p. 54), river paths (p. 68), galaxy distributions (p. 85), cloud shapes (p. 98), and even earthquake fault lines (p. 461), people started to see the beauty and mystery of fractals everywhere. In fact, a number of people have even explored the ways our newly-recognized complex, dynamic, feedback-laden world might change the way we think of curriculum, and some use literary terminology to do so, even if they do not actually apply such ideas to literature as I want to. Engaging Minds: Learning and Teaching in a Complex World (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000) is one text devoted to such matters, and examines how “new ways of talking about learning and teaching have arisen, ones that locate formal education in a complex ecology of unfolding events” (p. xi). Davis and Sumara also point out in Complexity and Education: Inquiries into Learning, Teaching, and Research (2006) that we should move away from “all-encompassing explanations” and toward “complexity thinking,” which requires a “poetic sensibility” and relies on “analogy, metaphor, and other associative … functions of language” (p. 7). They also note that “the field of education … sits at the intersections of many other areas of inquiry”
(p. 130), and so “complexity thinking” might be the best way to explore their dynamic relationships. *Chaos, Complexity, Curriculum, and Culture: A Conversation* (Doll, Jr., Fleener, Trueit, & St. Julien, 2005) even seems to want to sit at those “intersections” Davis and Sumara talk about, at least for mathematics educators, hoping to serve as a site for scholars to participate in “iterative patterns of ongoing conversation” (Fleener, p. 15) about complexity and education.

So, much of the work of curriculum and education today is dynamic and complex, eschews easy answers, needs lots of recursive conversation, relies on metaphor and association, and requires a “poetic sensibility” (Davis and Sumara, 2006, p. 7)! It seems, then, that we have returned to literature and the arts revised as a necessary companion for even the most specialized scientific or mathematical study, not to mention everything else. When Churchland (1996) looks at art and sees the “creative deployment and redeployment” (p. 297)—vision and revision—of prototypes, he is only telling us what we already know. We have seen the night sky through van Gogh’s eyes and heard the sounds of spring through Vivaldi’s ears, and so we know that perhaps no one is as good at revision, at taking our messy world from us and giving it back a little bit different, a little more beautiful, a little more than we gave it to him, as the artist. Vector completion is his job; anomaly is his calling.

According to both Kuhn (1996) and Churchland (1996), and inferred from the work of many others, it is the creative people, the ones with the most active, “poetic” imaginations attached to their extensive training, that push science and other fields in new directions, that direct the shift of paradigms, that can help us figure out how to live and learn in a complex world. And that brings us back to The Need for Revision, and the purpose and nature of this book. While Davis and Sumara (2006) point out that education can serve as an intersection for various fields, I say that is true of literature class more than any other place in secondary public education, and think that maybe studying poetry is the best way to develop a “poetic sensibility” (p. 7). And study poetry we must; as John A. Weaver (2010) puts it in *Educating the Posthuman*, “it is the poetic and literary worlds that provide us with the most hope to understand what it means to live in a posthuman world” (p. 2). After all, when Davis and Sumara say “complexity thinking” is “an umbrella notion that draws on and elaborates the irrepressible human tendency to notice similarities among seemingly disparate phenomena” (p. 7), or when William E. Doll, Jr. (1993) asks for “rigor” in curriculum that “means purposely looking for alternatives, relations, connections” (p. 182), it is hard not to hear echoes of Donne’s metaphysical poetry and Shelley’s “Defence” (1840/1977). In short, I agree a little more every day with poet Adrienne Rich (2001, p. 118):

> The longer I live, the more history I live through, the more poetries I read and hear aloud, the more I recognize the sheer difficulty and multiplicity of our art, the absolute necessity for it in this time, and the ethical and artistic responsibilities it demands.
Also, it seems to follow that if we need a “poetic sensibility” (Davis & Sumara, 2006) in order to find connections and relationships in a complex world, then our studies should also be as broad and inclusive as possible to allow sufficient room for those ties to form. Here again, the case can be made for a renewed curricular interest in literature and the humanities. Literature is, first and foremost, the study of everything, since no aspect of the world or its various messy inhabitants is out of play for its subject—and that is the way I teach it. Perhaps the only field bigger than literature is curriculum studies, and it is no surprise the two have much in common, or that I want to work in both. Having found, and loved, curriculum studies, where it seems that everything is truly on the table (even math and science), the biggest questions are asked, the smallest details matter in the biggest contexts, and the real work is begun in understanding the world I live in and trying to share that understanding with the young people learning to participate in that world, I want to bring it into my classroom. Lucky for me, I already teach the subject best suited to serve as an entry point for new discussions about why, and whom, and what, and how we teach and learn. Who speaks, and/or who is spoken to? What is said/not said, and how? These are the kinds of questions that drive curriculum studies—and also literature classes. They are cursive questions. And since both curriculum studies and literature can help us continually see the world with new eyes, I teach the perfect subject for revision.

In addition (math again!) to literature class’s freedom and power to study how anything is put into words, every time I read, write, listen to, watch, or talk about something, it is a little different and so am I—and this is true when I teach these things as well; many of the activities in an average literature class can already be treated like Mandlebrot’s (1983) iterative equations, if we will just let them. To teach in good faith, then, we need to revise our work every time we do it, and we need to be open to whatever enters into our “complicated conversation” tomorrow. I think we can begin by recognizing that the best part of our classes is the fact that we have a lot of different people with different lives all in one room at the same time, and listen to all those voices. I also think that we should approach our curricular work the same way, by listening to as many disparate voices as possible, contributing our own, and seeing what the feedback loops produce. Donne (2002) saw math in poetry, and Davis and Sumara (2006) see a “poetic sensibility” in math; if public education is the place where these things meet, why not let them talk to each other? Tom Stoppard (1993) brings complex math, landscape architecture, wildlife populations, laws of thermodynamics, literary criticism, romantic trysts, and Lord Byron under the same roof in Arcadia; I propose that we do the same kind of thing in our literature classrooms. I propose that we make them our great meeting places, the hubs of our secondary public academic world, where people of many walks of life and future fields of study can come together and talk and read and write their way into the world’s complexity. Let’s invite all of our academic fields, and politics, and pop culture, and anything else that seems relevant, and have that “complicated conversation.” Mine will meet every day in room 110.
And it will also happen in this book. I want to speak in a language at the
crossroads of academia, poetry, and casual conversation, as befits my subject. Doll,
Jr. (1993) says that our work should be “multifaceted, mixing the technological
with the human, the proven with the innovative, and the serious with the playful”
(p. 8), and I intend to take him up on that here. I want to advocate the need for
revision in this work and also do it at the same time; I want to focus on literature
but also bring in scientists and poets and philosophers and personal stories and
songs and films and anything else I can think of, and let them all talk to each other.
And, as befitting complex work in a complex world, this book will be full of
feedback and iterations, revisited quotations and references and ideas in new
contexts, and will hopefully start a discussion rather than end it. I may not get to
the irregular, iterative, dynamic beauty of Mandlebrot’s (1983) fractals, but that is
what I’m aiming for anyway, in structure, method, and content. I will try to be
cursive, current, and curricular, and then also recursive, recurrent, and re-
curricular. If all goes well, I’ll end where I began—though changed—and then
start again with revision.

EACH MORNING IS A GIFT: POETRY AND THE NEED FOR REVISION
IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Chapter 2 will be the idea of revision’s poetic opening statement, and as such will
look specifically at poetry’s relationship with revision and public education, both
in general and in my own life. It will be written partially in poetry and partially in
explication and discussion of that poetry, and will argue the benefits of having our
students do both. The poetry will be my own, and the discussion around and about
it will draw on the ideas of what it means to read and write by literary theorists like
Roland Barthes (1977) and Harold Bloom (1975/2003). This chapter will also look
at what William F. Pinar’s (1975/1994) ideas on “currere” have to do with writing,
as well as Block’s (1988/1999) notions of “reading” and “writing” in school. It will
also rely on James B. Macdonald’s (1964/1995) idea that school should “stimulate
the child’s creative encounter with reality” (p. 33), and Jacob Bronowski’s (1978)
argument that “every work of art is an experiment in living” (p. 143). Central, as
well, will be comments on the “interpreted” nature of the world from D. G. Smith
(1988/1999) and J. H. Miller (2001a). Since I will be working as both poet and
critic, this section will try to do what poetry tries to do—see big pictures through
small details, in words that leave plenty of room for the reader to move around in
and find his own way.

It will begin by explaining, very briefly, how I got here. I was always good at
math and science, growing up; they came pretty easy to me, and I appreciated the
attention to details, the neatness and order, the confidence with which they seemed
to be able to explain the world to me. But, as I got older, and consequently the
world got messier, math and science just did not seem big enough, anymore, to
hold it all in; and despite their smallness, they seemed to ignore a lot of details that
matter. I wanted to connect details, I could see what had to be sacrificed for
neatness and order, and I was no longer convinced by that confidence. I eventually
ended up studying the biggest subject I could find: literature. I think it was a return to an old love of mine, poetry, that finally did it; I could see now, looking back at old favorites (re-vising), how poetry wanted to make small things big, to show us through each new tiny detail a world that is always bigger than we thought. Poetry suddenly seemed like the appropriate language for the world around me, the language of possibility and of revision; suddenly, “everyday language” did indeed seem to me like “a forgotten and therefore used up poem,” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 205) and I found that “poetry is really what lets us dwell” (p. 213) here, live here, each day.

SINGING THE SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD: WALT WHITMAN AND CURRICULUM

Chapter 3 will argue that one of the ways literature and humanities classes can help us live and learn better in the 21st century is through constantly offering us a change in perspective, a way to revise our world, and it will use the work of Walt Whitman as an example; I will also rely on theorists like Pinar (1975/1994), Block (1997), Henry A. Giroux (2003), Macdonald (1971/1995), David W. Jardine (2003), and others who advocate more openness in education. When I look at the strategies, emphases, and requirements laid out in discussions of the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, I do not see, as many educators seem to these days, the root of many of our current problems in the classroom. What I see in all this focus on “accountability” is simply the next in a series of logical steps, a mere symptom of an illness that pervades all arenas of culture in the United States: a way of looking at the world that I call smallness. Disney and others have it right; it is a “small world,” and it does seem to be getting smaller all the time, at least in the way we currently think of it.

The great thing about a flawed perspective is that it can be changed. And literature, with its innumerable stories from innumerable perspectives about innumerable lives, as well as its reminder that there are still new stories to be told, is the perfect place to begin that change. Some authors, like nineteenth-century poet Walt Whitman, even speak directly to this issue, and his work is a perfect example of the way literature can serve as a site for such discussions. For example, his “Song of the Open Road” (1892/1993) begins with lines that could be taken as a motto for the openness and freedom I am advocating for teachers and students: “Healthy, free, the world before me, / The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose” (lines 2-3). “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” (1892/1993) is about a speaker who leaves an astronomy lecture early to look at the night sky himself, and it reminds us that despite our considerable scientific knowledge and rigid educational methods and structures, we still need “an unbounded place” in which we “can ‘wander’, can take personal measurements, and can ‘from time to time’ look up ‘in perfect silence at the stars’” (Gold, 2004, p. 225). “There Was a Child Went Forth” (1892/1993) is a long list of all the things that a child encounters and is affected by when he “goes forth,” and ends up being the kind of argument that Macdonald makes, that “the school is not the center of the child’s learning, but merely one of his environmental situations” (1971/1995,
p. 52) in which learning takes place. And perhaps Whitman’s most famous and important work, “Song of Myself” (1892/1993) is a sprawling, exploratory manifesto on life-long learning, in which Whitman ponders, wonders, appreciates, remembers, imagines, considers all the things that make him who he is at that moment—or to use Pinar’s (1975/1994) terms, he “regresses,” “progresses,” “analyzes,” and “synthesizes” (p. 19). Studying works like this can remind our students that it is, in fact, still a very big world, with plenty of room left for them to sing their own songs.

ASKING BIG QUESTIONS IN SMALL SPACES: ETHICS, LITERATURE, AND THE CLASSROOM

As students explore, play with, accept, reject, or otherwise deal with the world around them (and before them) in humanities and literature study, they will often encounter complex, difficult issues concerning the various ways individuals and groups of people interact with each other. Relying on work from scholars like Jo Anne Pagano (1981/1999), bell hooks (1994), Patrick Slattery and Kevin Daigle (1994), and Giroux (2006), chapter 4 will argue that literature class is a valuable site for revision of our relationships with the people around us, both near and far. It will begin with a discussion of a poem by Linda Pastan (1981) called “Ethics,” in which students in a school are asked each year to decide whether or not they would save an old woman or a priceless painting in the event of a museum fire. This section will also rely on Aristotle’s (1925/1998) Nicomachean Ethics and Nietzsche’s (1967) On the Genealogy of Morals. For examples of how literary works allow us to explore the ways we think of and treat others, I will look at Mary Shelley’s (1831/1994) Frankenstein, Joseph Conrad’s (1921/1996) Heart of Darkness, and Albert Camus’s (1942/1988) The Stranger.

Mary Shelley’s work allows us to think about the increasingly complex relationship between science and the body, and does so in a way that is accessible to high school students. It will be discussed along with Eugene Thacker’s (2003) “Data Made Flesh,” Catherine Waldby and Thomas Mitchell’s (2006) Tissue Economies, and Kaushik Sunder Rajan’s (2006) Biocapital. Frankenstein gives students a chance to discuss some of the most interesting and controversial issues that are already affecting our daily lives in ways seldom considered, and gives them a chance to explore positions on those issues before they become the adults who will be asked to make very difficult public and personal decisions in the future about what it means to be human.

Joseph Conrad’s (1921/1996) work is a rare chance in high school to explore and critique colonialism, and it offers at least some distance from the political censorship such a study might suffer from by being set in London and about people who are “not us.” Speaking of censorship, Chinua Achebe’s (1977) response to this work certainly raises interesting issues, as does J. H. Miller’s (2001a) defense of Conrad’s work against charges of racism. Because Heart of Darkness also asks us “capitalism at what price?,” Adam Smith’s (1904/2003) The Wealth of Nations and Max Weber’s (1958/2003) The Protestant Work Ethic will also be discussed.
Albert Camus’s troubling work *The Stranger* (1942/1988) will be discussed for its “destabilizing” qualities (Young, p. 12), since its first-person narrator acts, just once, in a way shockingly out of step with his community’s, and students’ own personal, values. He is condemned as a monster for a few minutes he cannot get back, and frustratingly won’t ask for, and readers are asked, among many other difficult questions, whether or not they can turn on a voice they have learned to trust. This work’s uneasiness and ability to make us squirm will be explored along with Art Spiegelman’s (1986) *Maus* and Peter Singer’s (2002) *One World*.

THE STORY IS THE SOUTH: LITERATURE AND THE EXPLORATION OF PLACE

Not only can literature and humanities classes help our students better understand their relationships with each other, but they can also help young people explore and revise their relationships with their own respective places, their historical, cultural, artistic, political contexts as they are situated in geography. Most importantly, young people can learn to better engage the stories told about the places in which we live, and about how we should live in them. Chapter 5 will explore the “mythical” nature of the United States, and the South particularly, arguing that our ideas of these entities are largely a matter of storytelling, and are therefore perfect subjects for literature classes.

Few people agree on much of anything when trying to characterize the South (even which states should be included is controversial), and part of the problem in trying to understand what the South was, is, and will be is perhaps due to the much-lauded Southern Renaissance in literature that began in the 1930s. This great intellectual flourishing was a *creative, imaginative, artistic* flourishing; it was not a *scholarly* one, and certainly not a *critical* one, at least in the traditional academic sense. One can hardly overestimate the importance of this difference; really long story short, most of what we call “Southern history” is really a lot of novels, some old legends, and a good dose of *Gone With the Wind* (1939).

The primary texts for this discussion of the blurry line between history and literature in the South will be David Goldfield’s (2002) *Still Fighting the Civil War*, C. Vann Woodward’s (1993) *The Burden of Southern History*, James C. Cobb’s (2005) *Away Down South*, Peter Applebome’s (1996) *Dixie Rising*, W. J. Cash’s (1941) *The Mind of the South*, and Joel Williamson’s (1984) *The Crucible of Race*. This discussion will also include ideas about place and identity in curriculum from Joe Kincheloe, Pinar, and Patrick Slattery (1994), Pinar (2004), David A. Grueneweld (2003), Reta Ugena Whitlock (2007), Brian Casemore (2008), and Madeleine R. Grumet (1980/1999). In addition, this chapter will also draw on numerous works of Southern literature and argue that a place whose regional identity is so intertwined with stories is also a place that can be, and should be, *revised*. 

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CHAPTER 1

THE USELESS STUDYING THE USELESS: AESTHETICS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN EDUCATION

To give art and literature such a prominent place in education, though, certainly opens up the possibilities for misunderstanding or misuse. In fact, use is part of the difficulty, and Chapter 6 will argue that our relationship with and conception of aesthetics in curriculum needs to be revised as well; we treat everything in education today as a tool, and if there is no clear “job” for that tool, it is often discarded. When Oscar Wilde says in his introduction to The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891/1998) that “all art is quite useless,” it is a joke on us, or at least all of us who would quickly join in with “Amen! What a waste of time.” Wilde, though, was an aesthete, and as such believed that art is not a tool for anything necessarily, or a means to accomplish some goal; rather, it is the goal. This perspective gives art, and all things beautiful in this same way, very little of what we might call “exchange value” today; unfortunately, we often say one cannot really do anything with art, or knowledge about the arts, and certainly not with a degree in the arts, and so we have no use for it, especially in our schools, or for Wilde’s argument that it does not need to be used.

And it is not just true that arts education is increasingly going under-funded, under-supported, and under-appreciated, but we are also practicing an education that is less aesthetic in every sense of the word in every field. The results of such an attitude and approach, however, are not surprisingly often ugly, and may keep us from ever really experiencing many of the very things we say are the most important things (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness come to mind). It would be hard to assess happiness or beauty on a spreadsheet, after all. When we cut art and aesthetics out of our schools, or any other kind of everyday experience, we often end up living lives that are not very beautiful, either.


LIVING BEYOND: ST. PAUL, ROMANTICISM, AND THE DOORS OF ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

Chapter 7 will argue that we are all of us, everywhere, always living beyond, or trying to. We are forever looking for something more, or at least something else, striving always to see, or feel, or live beyond ourselves, our lives, our now, even if we disagree about how to go about it. Whether we dream, write, watch, smoke,
swallow, paint, or pray to the thing that we hope will take us there, our goal is the same: profound improvement of the human condition—or at least our human condition, even if it is just for a little while. We have always sought it, and always will; we are, at heart, Romantics, “longing to transcend” (Huxley, 1954/2004, p. 62). In fact, we develop new ways to live beyond all the time, taking the words of those nineteenth-century British poets and writing them anew on our communities, our bodies, and our souls. This interest is old, too; perhaps the first Romantic—in this sense at least—was St. Paul, who lived beyond so successfully that he needed a new name (Acts 13). And since we are still in many ways Romantics, it is time to revise the works of that literary movement, and perhaps bestow on them the very “prophet” status they sought.

Partly inspired by works from scholars like Noel Gough (2002), M. E. M. Moore (2002), and Michael S. Littleford (1982/1999), this chapter will be divided into four sections, examining the ways we attempt to live beyond our societies, our words, our bodies, and our experiences, respectively. For the first section, I will discuss the utopian interests of the Romantic poets, especially Coleridge, and also Frederic Jameson’s (2007) Archaeology of the Future. For the second section I will look at William Wordsworth’s and Percy Shelley’s literary attempts at immortality and also W. J. T. Mitchell’s (2005) What Do Pictures Want? and Henry Jenkins’s (2006) Convergence Culture. For the third section, I will focus on Keats’s ever-imminent mortality and Lesley Sharp’s (2007) Bodies, Commodities, & Biotechnologies, Bill Hayes’s (2005) Five Quarts, Marcia Angell’s (2005) The Truth About Drug Companies, and Don Ihde’s (2005) Bodies in Technology. Finally, I will look at the Romantic interest in transcendent experience, other consciousness, and visionary states, focusing on Blake, Aldous Huxley’s (1954/2004) Doors of Perception, and a few Victorian novels that explore Romantic themes. The basic argument of this chapter will be that sometimes old texts can come alive in new ways, and should not be discarded for their age.

**TIME FOR SOME FEEDBACK: A CURRICULAR DEFENSE OF THE POP SONG**

Chapter 8 will argue that while some old texts need to be revised for their relevance today, we also need to revise our ideas of what can be studied in literature class to include some new, valuable texts that can help bridge the gap between us and our students. More emphasis on arts and humanities can certainly open up the ideas of what a good education is, what a good life can be, and what successful participation in school means; however, they could also stand to be opened up a little themselves. It is still true that “liberal education is education in culture or toward culture” (Strauss, 1968/1995, p. 3); however, it is no longer true that that culture can be studied through only the “great books” (p. 3). In other words, we narrow and flatten education when we only pay attention to math and science, and when we only care about quantifiable results, but to simply go back to the “classics” of humanities and literature study is not enough. Where are film, and television, and advertising to be studied, if not in the humanities? At their best, can we really say they carry less artistic merit than our classics in literature, or that
writing and rhetoric skills are not employed by them? At their worst, don’t our students need to be able to recognize the flaws? If we really want to help our students understand and explore the world they live in, then we must admit that the world contains far more texts to be studied than the dusty ones we have always used; this chapter will look at popular music as an example of one of those rich texts.

Besides, somewhere along the way we forgot, or ignored, that something like popular music shares its origins with our beloved classical literature anyway. People like Georgiades and Nietzsche remind us that what we think of separately as “music” and “literature” actually come from the same roots; “both prose language and poetry derive from the exactly, comprehensively musical complex of ‘musike’” in ancient Greece (Babich, 2006, p. 45). And even if we mostly keep popular music out of schools, that does not keep it out of our lives. As Lawrence Grossberg says in “Rock, Territorialization, and Power” (1991/1997), our “musical environments strongly influence the rhythms, tempos, and intensities of our lives” (p. 96) whether our school doors are largely shut against those environments or not. This chapter will be a defense of popular music as a text for study in literature classes, and will also explore it as an important illustration of Mandlebrot’s (1983) dynamic, iterative systems; popular music even has a much-used term for these kinds of loops: feedback. Some of the music texts discussed here will be works by Ryan Adams, Wilco, Leonard Cohen, James Brown, and M Ward. This chapter will also discuss the work of theorists like David Riesman (1950/1990), Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel (1964/1990), Greil Marcus (2008), Theodor W. Adorno (1965/2002, 1938/2002, 1941/2002), and a study of music and the brain by Oliver Sacks (2007). For my discussion of fractals and complexity, I will use John Briggs’s (1992) Fractals: The Patterns of Chaos, Yurij Baryshev and Pekka Teerkorpi’s (2002) Discovery of Cosmic Fractals, and William J. Jackson’s (2004) Heaven’s Fractal Net.

I'll COMMUNICATION

Chapter 9 will argue that once we open the curricular doors of our literature and humanities classrooms to texts like popular music, it will be hard to avoid dealing with the digital behemoth lurking outside of those classrooms that is the ever-increasing proliferation of communication technologies. This chapter will look at some of the most worrisome (for today’s school officials, at least) technologies, from smart phones to Facebook, and explore the ways in which those forms of communication and expression are both positive and negative forces in our lives and the lives of our students. I will argue that the work of revision is needed if we are to remain relevant as teachers of “communication skills” (that’s what my school-board-issue name tag says); however, I will also argue that revising these new word-based technologies can also help us see their benefits and flaws, and help our students do the same.

For this chapter, I will draw from my own rocky but rewarding personal experience as a graduate literature student working with new digital technologies in
For a literature classroom, which culminated in William Blake’s “The Everlasting Gospel”: A Hypertext Edition (2001), I saw, firsthand, the analog and digital worlds collide, and lived (and graduated) to tell about it. I will also use Heidegger’s (1977) “The Question Concerning Technology” as a way to examine our current relationship with our various digital devices today, both inside and outside the school. I will also explore texts by Lev Manovich (2001) and Samuel Weber (1996) for this part of the discussion.

Using work by J. H. Miller (1999), Julie A. Webber (2003), and various curriculum scholars as a foundation, I will argue that our students today need much greater “media literacy” than we are currently teaching them. They will need to be, at least metaphorically, like Stoppard’s “Player” in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1967), familiar enough with the conventions, rules, and subtleties of a variety of texts to be able to navigate successfully a world in which careers and relationships rise and fall on the turn of a phrase—digital or otherwise. Students with these skills will be the kind of filters of information our world increasingly needs.

The Word Is Dead; Long Live the Word: Literature in the Digital Age

Chapter 10 will focus more specifically on literature—really old and really new—and what place it might have in our curricular future. This chapter will also serve as a “conclusion” section, even though it will be my stated purpose in this book not to “conclude”; this section, though it is the last, will mostly think about what we in curriculum studies, as well as teachers and students of literature and the humanities, will all do next, once we see through revision where we are, who we are, and what we can do about those things through and with words. As the chapter title implies, the word may die a “print” death, only to be given a “digital” life. To put it another way, it may be true, as Wendy Atwell-Vasey (1998) says, that “words have always been nourishment” (p. 1), but it looks like the ways in which they “nourish” us in the future may change.

I will begin by looking at the current state of literature, in terms of publishing, reading, writing, and teaching. My primary text for this section of the argument will be Print is Dead by Jeff Gomez (2008), a veteran of the publishing industry who seems surprisingly and interestingly optimistic about that death. I will also look at an opposing position in The Gutenberg Elegies (Birkerts, 1994), which laments the passing of long, slow, deep reading of print fiction. Also part of this discussion will be works from the many people interested in what digital literature can do and be, like N. Katherine Hayles’s (2008) Electronic Literature, Loss Pequeno Glazier’s (2002) Digital Poetics, and George P. Landow’s (2006) Hypertext 3.0. In addition I will explore the ways various writers of traditional, print literature have worked with these ideas, focusing on works like William Gibson’s (1984) Neuromancer, Ray Bradbury’s (1953) Fahrenheit 451, and poets like William Blake and Percy Shelley.
Vital to this discussion as well will be Mandlebrot’s (1983) ideas about iterative loops, as well as the much discussed “butterfly effect” of weather patterns. I will argue that literature in its analog and/or digital future will look like, and perhaps move and change just as dynamically as, the fractal, iterative, feedback-laden weather patterns so fascinatingly hard to predict; such patterns, just like the weather, are in constant need of revision. And so, in short, if we are still going to figure out what it is, let alone teach it, we all need to become better weather forecasters. Will our houses hold? Are we dressed correctly? Do we have the latest news? And we will also need to go back to the beginning, before the digital, fractal storms approached, and see if the literature we always thought we knew and loved looks different now, with revision. This chapter will argue that the digitization of nearly everything may mean that we need to make an iterative loop, taking our 21st-century, digital-lit. output and using it as input for that class we’ve always taught—and the book that has just “finished”—and see what the feedback produces.
I would like to begin by explaining, very briefly, how I got here. I was always good at math and science, growing up; they came pretty easy to me, and I appreciated the attention to details, the neatness and order, the confidence with which they seemed to be able to explain the world to me. But, as I got older, and consequently the world got messier, math and science (or at least the ways we used them) just did not seem big enough, anymore, to hold it all in; and despite the smallness of our approach to these fields, we seemed to ignore a lot of details that matter in those studies. I wanted to connect details, I could see what had to be sacrificed for neatness and order, and I was no longer convinced by that confidence. I didn’t want to study spiders, for example; I wanted instead to be like Walt Whitman’s “Noiseless Patient Spider,” casting about “filament, filament, filament” (1892/1993, p. 556, line 4). I, too, wanted to be “ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the / spheres to connect” (p. 557, lines 8-9) the “oceans of space” (line 7) around me. In fact, I think it was this return to an old love of mine, poetry, that finally did it; I could see now, looking back at old favorites (re-vising), how poetry wanted to make small things big, to show us through each new tiny detail a world that is always bigger than we thought. Poetry suddenly seemed like the appropriate language for the world around me, the language of possibility and of revision; suddenly, “everyday language” did indeed seem to me like “a forgotten and therefore used up poem,” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 205) and I found that “poetry is really what lets us dwell” (p. 213) here, live here, each day. I began to feel, as Hegel says, that “poetry is the universal art of the mind which has become free in its own nature” (1886/1993, p. 96).

So, sometime during my sophomore year of college, I swapped to the humanities, and settled in the English department, attracted to literature primarily because it could be as big as I wanted it to be; as I often tell my students now, literature is the study of everything, and that is the way I teach it—like, I guess, a noisy, but still patient, spider. However, years later I discovered a field even bigger than literature, and therefore the place I was always headed: curriculum studies. Now, finally, it seems that everything is truly on the table (even science and math), the biggest questions are asked, the smallest details matter in the biggest contexts, and the real work is begun in understanding the world I live in and trying to share that understanding with the young people learning to participate in that world.

Having found, and loved, curriculum studies, I want to bring it into my classroom; lucky for me, I already teach the subject best suited to serve as an entry
point for new discussions about why, and whom, and what, and how we teach and learn. Who speaks, and/or who is spoken to? What is said/not said, and how? These are the kinds of questions that drive curriculum studies—and also literature classes. And since both curriculum studies and literature can help us continually see the world with new eyes, I teach the perfect subject for revision. I teach the class that can remind us that the world will always remain full of possibilities, full of things to learn and do. And though I cannot teach “curriculum studies” in my high school, I try to make my literature courses as much the same kind of eye- and mind-opening experiences as I can. I teach, I hope, a class of revision, in which I and my students try to read, and write, and talk ourselves into the world, reminded by bell hooks (1994) that “when the classroom is truly engaged, it’s dynamic … fluid … always changing” (p. 158, her italics). If I don’t continually re-vice myself and my work—see things again, new—how can I expect them to?

* * *

Each morning is a gift

Each morning is a gift,  
Whether it is wrapped  
In thin blues and greens,  
Covered in blankets of  
Whispering gray, or  
Bathed in showers of  
Blessed translucence.  
But the ones I like best  
Begin with deep color,  
With new hues so  
Full-blooded and rich  
I am surprised at their  
Boldness, the confidence  
Of their voices, as if  
The sky that is already  
So vast, mysterious, limitless,  
Is reminding me that it  
Can be even more,  
If it wants to,  
And at any moment.

Each morning is a gift, a chance to start over, at least a little bit, to be a better husband, wife, sibling, student, teacher, friend—even if yesterday was a pretty good day. Each day is a chance to do what should have been done, say what should have been said, see what should have been seen. It is a chance for the old to become new, and even the subtle changes in the sunrise, in the way the world is lit, remind us that we have not seen it all yet, that there are possibilities even in the
EACH MORNING IS A GIFT

places (and mindsets) we have lived in for years—that the sky over our heads is not the same sky we saw yesterday, or the day before, no matter how we take it for granted. In fact, it is never the same sky in the same way that it is never the same river we have stepped in before: countless, mostly invisible currents run through it, constantly interacting in ways not even the most brilliant scientists—or our local meteorologists—can accurately predict. And lest we forget, the world always turns in it, no matter how much we seem to want to stop just where we are sometimes. As Derrida tells us in answer to an interview question on James Joyce and iterability, each morning is a “‘yes,’” a start, an “inauguration,” and “if tomorrow you do not reinvent today’s inauguration, you will be dead. So the inauguration has to be reinvented everyday” (Caputo, 1997, p. 28). Each morning is a gift, a chance for revision as in re-vision—a chance to see our work, ourselves, and our world again, new.

However, all too often, if we ever really look at these things, what we tend to do is review, not revise, and this is especially true in our schools. To use Alan A. Block’s (1988/1999) way of talking about it, we re-read when we ought to be re-writing, and “to live is to read texts, but to be alive is to write them” (p. 177). What we go through with our students when we “look back” at our curricular experience together is too often not much of an active, critical, performative process, but rather a re-peating of steps we have taken before, which lead us not to something new but back to the same spot. We review each fall the things learned in the previous spring; we review at the end of each semester the things we did at the beginning; we even review at the end of each unit the lessons that began it, which were sometimes only weeks or even days before.

All of this would be wonderful if we were revising that past curriculum, in the sense of looking back in order to figure out where to go next, or making those old lessons new again—that would be growth, and the very kind of currere Pinar (1975/1994) says can allow us “to explore the complex relation between the temporal and the conceptual,” which “might disclose their relation to the Self and its evolution and education” (p. 19). This method is “regressive—progressive—analytical—synthetical” (p. 19); it is a careful, honest, thorough look at who we were, who we want to be, who we are, and how those things can come together. Unfortunately, what we have currently in education instead is “‘learning’ tied tightly, of course, to assessment and instruction. Even ‘curriculum’—presumably the content of learning—mutates to a means to the end that is assessment” (Pinar, 2006, p. 116). In other words, assessment today does not help us “run the course”; we run the course, memorize the “content” so that our memories of that “content” might be assessed. Our school work is simple where it should be complex, superficial when we ought to dig deep, faceless while our students look for individual identity, and closed in little marking bubbles when we ought to be opening up the world for them. We know what the all-important test will be like before we begin, so we simply prepare for the questions we know it will ask. As test time nears, we simply remind ourselves of how we have prepared; our nightmare is that something unexpected might happen, that we might be surprised at what tomorrow brings us. In the worst cases of such an approach to curriculum
(today often called the most “successful”), we pre-test, teach, review, post-test; we script, tighten, clamp down on our students, teachers, and the learning they are supposed to be sharing, until we are sure that nothing new, different, interesting, or otherwise “disruptive” might happen.

It is not too late, though. We can revise, looking at our old ways of learning, writing, speaking, living, and finding new ones. And if we are interested in pursuing revision, we should start with our highest hurdle, our most difficult stumbling block: ourselves. We will need new eyes to see a new world, but we open them each day if we want to. Each morning is a gift.

* * *

**Procrastination**

I don’t want to write
my autobiography,
turn myself into
something to be closed
between two great, stiff
covers and put on a shelf,
concluded and contained,
here today and hereafter.

I don’t want to be a ghost yet,
and only that when someone
wants to be haunted, otherwise
dead. Most of my life dead,
past, gone. *Was.*

I want to move, change,
contradict, be something
tomorrow I wouldn’t quite
recognize today: me, still,
but with a different look
in the eye, little more oak
in the voice, steadier hand.
Better somehow,
or at least more interesting,
so that if that second flap
of finality does swing around
to catch me, I’ll be someone
worth putting a period after.

Until then, I’ll be *out there,*
trying to live a life that
words can’t hold.
I never wanted to be doing this, to be this “teacher” guy, to have this life. This is not to say that I do not enjoy my work, or that I did not enjoy learning; rather, I loved to learn, and I love to teach. I just did not associate these experiences with school very much, and I liked it less as I got older. James B. Macdonald (1964/1995) says that “the function of the school is to challenge and stimulate the child’s creative encounter with reality” (p. 33), and I think he is right; however, if I had read Macdonald when I was sixteen, I would have thought he was crazy, or at least that he had not visited many schools. I was one of the students who counted the days until summer, who counted the minutes until the bell, who worked his imagination overtime to drown out the mind-numbing, routine smallness of it all.

School to me was worksheets and waiting for life to start. It was an institution of “military-style uniformity, discipline, and authority coupled with a powerful nationalism and a stifling patriotic correctness” (Giroux, 2006, p. 26). It was the place where I was told when to stand, sit, speak, be silent, think, listen, eat, sleep (at home), and even when I could go to the bathroom, for which I had to have a “pass,” like I was being given special permission to break a rule. It was the anchor that held down dreams, visions, and hopes until their strength faded and they died, their last gasps played out in scratches on desks as a warning to all who would follow.

What I wanted to do was to cut loose from the shackles of words like “expectations” and “potential,” from other people’s plans for me, to be something different and dynamic; I wanted to not “fit” in the school the way it kept trying to force me to, to not be the “next” anything, but the “first” me, and I still squirm whenever someone feels like they have me figured out. I do not want to be figured out. And since teachers were the people who had everything figured out, or so I was told in a million different ways, I could not get out of school fast enough. I had no idea what I wanted to “be,” but I knew I did not want to be a “teacher.” (yes, with a period)

But now I see, in an act of revision, that I was often my own worst enemy, that I gave up when I could have fought, that I was waiting for someone to teach me when I could have been learning, studying, seeking out what I wanted, even in school—and that I was doing to the idea of education what the school was doing to me, taking my own small experience of it and assuming it to be the only experience of education, universal and unchanging. I did not see, to use William F. Pinar’s (2004) words, that “education is an opportunity offered, not a service rendered” (p. 5). I also see that there were two serendipitous moments from my high school years—the worst of my public school experience—that were perhaps the seeds of the life I live now, little cracks that let some light shine through. One of these events was the discovery of Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass in The Portable Walt Whitman (1945) on a surplus cart at the local library. I was mostly a science/math student, but I bought it for a quarter, on a whim, and it is on my shelves today. What I found in Whitman was a man untethered but tied to everything, a spider casting filament upon filament in longing for a connection to the world around him, a child who went forth and a man who took the open road. I found a man whose work was his life, and his life was a life of revision. His last edition of
Leaves of Grass is fittingly called the “Deathbed Edition,” and I hear the lesson in that; I see, only now, why Whitman was the first poet I ever wanted to quote, and why I am still working with him.

The second event was an assignment to study William Blake in my senior British Literature class, the poet and artist chosen for me randomly from a list of “classic” authors. Everything I read about him confused me more, which is still true today. I went looking for all the things a proper “report” needs: dates of birth, marriage, and death, major publication dates, some little-known fact, etc. What I got instead was a man who rewrote (revised) the entire universe to create his own original, working mythology, deciding ultimately that what had been done (the Bible, for example) did not really work for him. When he did use the same text the rest of us did, he still claimed it was different; it seems that we read “black” where he reads “white” (“The Everlasting Gospel,” section e, line 14). Jacob Bronowski (1978) calls Blake, in a perfect description, “an idealist with a sense of reality much broader than I had allowed for” (p. 3). How do you write a “report” on a man like that? You cannot, and I love that about him, that he just will not stand still long enough to be caught. I returned to Blake for an undergraduate honors thesis, and then again for a Master’s thesis project, and each time I found that my vision of his vision changed, as I am sure he would want it to.

Following the models of Whitman and Blake, I set out to live my own life, my own way, even if I had no idea what that way was. I realized more each day that it was a new day, and a new world; that no one else had lived my life or could tell me how to do it. I realized I could—and should—revise my life as I lived it, changing whatever I needed to change to move and act the way I wanted to in the world I found each morning. I also realized in college that school is not immune from such change, since nothing is, and that there are more ways than we can count to learn and decide what should be learned, there being more lives to live than we can imagine. Arjun Appadurai (2005) reminds us that even the good old “liberal arts” were not meant to be as dusty as we have made them: “they were intended … to widen the horizons, broaden the mental experiences, expand the imagination, and stretch the moral worlds of those exposed to them” (p. 434). Bronowski (1978, p. 143) says as well that “every work of art is an experiment in living,” which means that every book, every film, every painting or piece of music is a chance to see the world differently—perhaps to start a new life, if the experiment goes well. And so I chose to go back to public school (regression, progression, analysis, synthesis) in order to go for|word, to do the work of revision in my own life and that of my students.

* * *

Forsythia

An explosion of ur-yellow
caught and held at the flashpoint,
nature glorious unruly asymmetric,
as untamed and untranslatable
as Whitman, growing
like jazz into the night.
And if I listen carefully
enough I swear I will
hear it sing in a rhythm
untaught a melody as yet unheard,
itself barbaric yawp,
sudden and free,
and one day I’ll sing with it
a harmony only God could love.

But make no mistake—
He will love it.

I have always loved forsythia, certainly before I knew its name. In fact, I still don’t
know much about it, and I even forget about it for most of every year. To me,
forsythia plants look like fireworks on pause; both, as well, are almost non-existent
to me until I am startled at the noisy color of their explosions, and the effect of
both is to make me feel as if I am looking at something I have never seen before.
And yet, if I look hard enough, I feel like I can almost see something underneath
the surface beauty of flowering chaos; I feel when I see the often-ignored stems of
forsythia or the drifting ghost-smoke-mist trails of fireworks that I am looking at,
well, blueprints of a sort.

I get much the same feeling reading the work of Whitman, especially the
sprawling, seemingly unpredictable and maybe un-premeditated verses of his
longer works, and I am not surprised to find out that he had this to say of structure
in poetry:

The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical
laws, and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs and roses on a
bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges, and
melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form. (1855/1995,
p. 266)

When I began to become a more experienced musician in college, I also came to
appreciate this kind of structure in certain types of jazz and other music; I
sometimes found in listening to John Coltrane or Miles Davis, for example, that the
musicians seemed to be playing to some underlying design of which I was not
aware. In fact, in those moments I would almost swear that any second the song
might unravel entirely, leaving only a cacophonous mess; of course, such songs
only appeared to have no structure, and this unraveling never actually happened. I
found myself immensely attracted to such a flirtation with chaos, and while my
band and I could not play jazz, we did work tirelessly on Cream’s (1968/1995)
version of “Crossroads,” in which the simple blues structure is only implied for
significant sections of the song, and the fuzzy, tumultuous near-crash of the instruments after the chorus is yanked suddenly back from the brink by the next verse. I think much of the excitement of music like this is due to the fact that the structure is occasionally hidden from the listener in such a way that it sounds new and fresh—revised—when it returns to the surface of the song. I know it was exciting to try and pull it off.

While I don’t know if Benoit Mandelbrot (1983) listened to jazz while he wrote *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*, or liked to watch fireworks or look at forsythia, I do know that his fractal computer creations give me much the same feeling. Mandelbrot claims that “many patterns of Nature are so irregular and fragmented, that, compared with … standard geometry … Nature exhibits not simply a higher degree but an altogether different level of complexity” (p. 1), and so he has devised a more dynamic mathematical way of understanding aspects of our messy world that have looked for so long like they cannot be understood. Such findings have led scholars like Yurij Baryshev and Pekka Teerikorpi (2002) to say that Mandelbrot “unexpectedly opened our eyes to hidden structures surrounding us everywhere” (p. 229) and showed us that “apparently chaotic phenomena may have deep structure” (p. 231).

Interestingly, William J. Jackson (2004) says in *Heaven’s Fractal Net* that “most people cannot see patterns in their fields of vision and experience,” like those studied by fractal geometry, unless they follow closely the work of “original thinkers, poets, seers” who “have a more direct experience of images as their source of knowledge” (p. 185). My own experience of teaching poetry to high school seniors has actually borne this out, time and again. When I teach a chapter of poems from our anthology, I make very few detailed plans about where to start or finish, and I scarcely have any specific ideas about what I or my students might say; as Pinar (1972/1994) would put it, “although I have a general notion of what I am up to, I make no preliminary sketches” (p. 7). Sometimes I simply open up the floor to whomever would like to begin our day’s discussions; sometimes I call on someone at random for a comment or question about one of the poems—but whatever I do to get things started, I have very little idea what we will be talking about when the bell rings to end the class. However, over the years, I have discovered that very few of these days end up being a “waste of time”; rather, literary themes, meanings of words, life experiences, personal stories, relationships between works and authors all swirl about the room in what is often a beautiful, stimulating, associative, connective, fractal mix far more useful and relevant to all of us than anything I could devise ahead of time and on my own.

Perhaps this is because “literature and the arts are like fractals (which exist between dimensions) in that they guide us into the dimensions between realms—between personal and social, between agony and ecstasy” (Jackson, 2004, p. 256). Sometimes these discussions, inspired by poetry rather than a “lesson plan” I have devised about poetry, help us to see the “deep structures” that exist between us, but we could not see before; they help us, like fractals, revise our world. In fact, I have found that the less I impose my own pre-determined structure on the day’s work, the more these “deep structures” become apparent and can be explored. Having
been a part of this kind of experience so many times now, I am not a bit surprised
to find that Pinar (1972/1994) approaches teaching “similar to the way Pollock
approached painting”—or that Pollock’s paintings have been studied by physicists
for the “fractal dimension of the patterns on the canvas” (Baryshev & Teerikorpi,
2002, p. 245). I bet Mandlebrot would not be surprised either. Or Whitman, for that
matter.

* * *

Love and Hate

I guess you can hate words
If you love them too,
Because when I can’t find
The right one I feel like
My eardrums might burst
At the sound of someone,
Anyone, speaking, and I
Can’t explain the grating,
The piercing the words cause
Because then I’d have to use
Them and just make it worse.

To Write: why? If it is just
Going to mean loss of
Soul to paper, minutes with
Loved ones, work in the yard,
Just for—what, exactly?
A snapshot in ink to
Hold in the face of time?

Sometimes I think I would
Stop if I could. But even
When I try, I can feel the
Pen in my pocket, see in
My mind the corner where
The notebooks are hidden.

My students almost invariably groan when I talk to them about revising their
papers, as if it causes them actual physical pain to re-examine their syntax or worry
over their word choice and tone. And while it must be done, groaning or no
groaning, I understand their dread of the task: I feel their pain, to try to reinvigorate
the cliché. Writing hurts, physically and emotionally, and I am not immune no
matter how much I write, nor do I think anyone really is. I ache, I sweat, I tense
when I write, as if I were trying to sculpt myself out of ink. I feel the pain of
Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) *Flesh*, of “a body that is integrated with the mind, and enmeshed within experience” (Springgay & Freedman, 2007, p. xx). I feel the pressure when Lacan tells me that “the ‘I’ … exists in/through language” (Roseboro, 2008, p. 63), worried that I somehow won’t get myself right. And since writing is painful enough, *revision* can be like torture for many of us. Something about writing seems so permanent, in the sense that what is said cannot then be unsaid, as if we are forced to wear our words like tattoos forever. This idea is somehow surviving even in this technological age, where letters typed with one key are just as easily erased with another, and most writing is ephemeral at best, often seeming to last far less time than it took to create. For example, the hours I take saying these things just the right way will likely dwarf the time anyone takes to read them. Writers also take their work so personally, and are often insulted when asked to revise it. Here they are intuiting, I think, that we are what we write, and that life is as we write it, that while “reading is the process by which a reality is consumed,” the act of “writing is the very production of that reality” (Block, 1988/1999, p. 177). The freedom to produce and act on reality is wonderful, but it is also scary, and full of pressure, especially when the students are teenagers who spend a lot of the day doubting themselves anyway.

And as for “freedom” itself, Michael W. Apple (2005) points out that “concepts such as freedom are sliding signifiers” that have “no fixed meaning” (p. 344), and this slippery property of words is another part of the pain of writing and revision. No matter how much time and effort are devoted to writing, somehow what is written is never exactly what we wanted to say, or all of it. Sometimes we are restricted by form, or rules, or an assignment, but even without these guidelines the words we use are never good enough. They are not *it*, but rather a *representation of it*, and that distance, that slipperiness sends our students again and again for the thesaurus, sure that *the right word* is out there somewhere, and they just have not found it yet. Eventually, due dates remind us all that we are forced to settle for something never-quite-right in the end, and we turn our work in anyway. But to be asked to *revise*, to have to return to this work, to do again what hurt the first time and turn it into something new—it is no wonder they groan.

Besides, looking back at the person we wrote into existence before, even if we are given the chance to understand him better or even change him to be the person we want him to be, can be an uncomfortable experience, like being asked to critique your middle school pictures for a grade:

**Phaethon**

The hum of daylight
when you’re not ready for it.
I rise, stumble, head full
and empty and heavy,
and the window shows me
that Saturday’s electric sun
EACH MORNING IS A GIFT

is really my father
working.

I am stronger than he is
(in the way that I know strength),
teenage athlete, capable.
Unasked.
And I know, but
cannot figure out how to express
it, or return it, despite that
medal the school gave me—
I know that I am loved.

I roll over and sleep until adulthood,
hoping to awake a man,
hoping that man will have the
answers this boy does not,
hoping I can learn to take
Hyperion’s reigns
and light the world for him.

If we are growing as we should, learning each day to improve on the person we
were the day before, we may not want to look back, to re-expose those sins and
weaknesses to the light which we have worked so hard to try and overcome. But
we cannot stop writing ourselves, lest we become mired in today’s sins and
weaknesses. Each morning is a gift, but it is also a responsibility to meet that
newness in good faith, to revise. Besides, the words are not permanent, and not
meant to be, and maybe the Myth of the Permanence of Words is something
technology will help us deconstruct; maybe it will remind us how malleable and
versatile they can be, freeing us to write like we are always writing on “scratch
paper.” We do not write in stone, after all, and cavemen would not have, either, if
they had had laptops. The computers simply make clearer what has always been
true: as J. H. Miller puts it in Black Holes (1999), “whatever is printed is always
just one stage in a potentially endless process of revision, deletion, addition, and
rearrangement” (p. 97). What is often seen as the weakness of language to say
things exactly and finally is perhaps actually one of its great advantages; “these
materials which are really signifiers are to be played with, torn apart, and
reconstituted” (Block, 1988/1999, p. 194). Writing is built for revision, and so are
we, which is to say that language is dynamic, and ready when we are to re-write
and re-see the world new.

* * *
A Short Interview about Poetry

Is your glass half-empty or half-full?

Great God! What does it matter?
What’s next? *Is that a prayer Or a curse?* In the dark they’re
Just two sides of the same coin,
Aren’t they? And then what?
*Rosencrantz or Guildenstern?
Heads or tails?*
Answers, answers. I think
You’re missing it there,
Horatio. After all,
Sagacity is just articulate
Guessing.

Ahem.

The glass:
Religion says God gave it to me,
Science says I made it myself.
Music wants to break it;
Philosophy doubts it’s really there.
And it holds:
Hemlock? Ambrosia? Vodka? Water?
If it’s not all four, I’m not
Interested.
You see, there are blanks—
Glorious, messy spaces to breathe, imagine—
That can’t be filled in any
Way that will stick.

What if I told you that
If I let go of my pen,
It might not fall,
Gravity being simply expressive
Of mankind’s tendency toward
Pessimism?

Today might be the day, you know.

One of the real tricks to helping our students see the need for revision is to teach them to love the very gaps and spaces current educational policy and attitudes are trying to eradicate, or at least ignore. The world is simply not as finite, as decided
as we often tell our students it is—but this is a great thing. We know that at the very roots, all that we do, and say we “know,” is a matter of theory, faith, and extremely educated guesses, and we can face what Mary Aswell Doll (2006) calls this “lostness” (Doll, Wear, & Whitaker, p. 173) with fear, apprehension, or denial, or we can see it as room for revision. Either way, those gaps are there, in every field, between the world and what we know about it, between ourselves and each other—or in the case of writing, between our ideas and the words on the page. If we choose, those gaps can be wonderful, “Glorious, messy spaces to breathe, imagine,” places to be and act in ways that are not yet determined. As Doll says, “In the gap, we can go to work. We can think. We can dwell” (p. 173). And a great way to explore the “gap” is through poetry.

Most works of literature mask these gaps with elaborate detail of plot or character, or in the case of visual forms like television and film, by telling us “this is what he looks like; this is what he does.” But even in these forms, we know, if we are paying attention, that the gaps are still there, that the film can be remade and recast, that every reader’s imagination of a text—no matter how detailed—varies according to desire, experience, etc. Literature liberates us by “refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text” (Barthes, 1977, p. 147)—by leaving gaps. Poetry, though, foregrounds the gap. The poem says to us “look how much you do not know about me,” and this is true every time we read it. And because the gaps are so obvious in a poem, so there on the page, we put so much of our own ideas, our own associations in it that each poem is a different poem to each person who reads it.

One way poetry foregrounds the gap and leaves itself open to our interpretation is by using words in a much “fuller” way than we do in normal speech; the editors (Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson) of Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense (8th edition), the anthology I use with my seniors, tell us that, for example, “the poet will often take advantage of the fact that the word has more than one meaning by using it to mean more than one thing at the same time” (2002, p. 759). In this way, poets do not cut off, limit, or nail down words or ideas to one meaning, but rather connect, expand, and set free words and ideas; they do not use “a fraction of the word and throw away the rest,” but rather “use as much of the word as possible” (p. 762), reminding us that words mean lots of things and can make us think of lots of things. Through metaphor, through a “full” use of words, poets ask us to constantly revise their work and what the words mean, seeing things each time that we missed before; as William E. Doll, Jr., puts it, “metaphors are open, heuristic, dialogue-engendering,” and we need to “encourage our students to explore with us the possibilities that can be generated from dialogue with the text” (1993, p. 169). Through poetry that is inexhaustible we see a world that is inexhaustible, and understand that both can change as our “readings” of them do. Harold Bloom (1975/2003) recognizes this characteristic of our relationship with literature and says that every act of “strong” reading is an act of “misreading or misprision”; his use of the “mis-” prefix simply foregrounds the distance always there between what the author meant and what we hear, since literary criticism is “always an act of deciding, and what it tries to decide is meaning” (p. 3). This
means that “reading is therefore miswriting” (p. 3). In other words, we not only read poems, but also write them, to echo Block’s (1988/1999) language.

What poetry points out to us is that “the books we read, the music we hear, the people we touch, and the technologies that we use are not external to, but intertwined with the body” (Gaudelius & Garoian, 2007, p. 13). We become part of it, and it becomes part of us. Because we are all different people reading the same poem differently, what can result in discussions about poetry is the very kind of multiplicity of perspectives that we need in the “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2004, p. 196) of education today. It will not be easy—just as it is not easy to teach poetry—to dive headlong into the gap, into Pinar’s “complicated conversation,” into Doll’s (2006) “con-fusion” and “dis-ease” (Doll et al., p. 16), especially as we live and work in a system of cut-and-dried answers Delese Wear says is developed from “insecurity and the need to control” (p. 43). But dive we must, if we want room for revision, even if we are not sure where we might end up. Roland Barthes (1977) says that “in the teaching space nobody should anywhere be in his place” (p. 206); perhaps to find our own personal way in life we need to get lost a little first.

**Humidity**

Awake in a cloud, or smoke,  
Or potato soup, for all I know.  
Locked in a downy cell,  
Or adrift, my own little pine-tree icemass  
Of suburbia exiled in the night  
From the comfort of the  
Nice Neighborhood Nation.

There is something disconcerting about fog,  
But especially on Sundays,  
Like rain on Easter,  
Or a late December heatwave.  
Frustration, confusion, fear  
Of things  
Not lining up as they should.  
I am normally thankful  
For any day of clarity, no matter  
When it visits me on the calendar  
(who’s to say when Sunday comes, after all?),  
but it’s easier to sing the song of the spheres  
if you can hear it with your own ears  
once in a while.
EACH MORNING IS A GIFT

But then,
I must admit the limits
Of my capacity for clarity.
Too much cloudless sky
Burns the earth, dries our souls,
Peels my layers in the heat,
Cracks me open in the cold,
Exposes me
Too much, too fast,
Sends me seeking the dark, the wet,
The shade, the saturation.

Maybe I need the moisture—
Maybe we all do.
Maybe in the fog, when I can’t see,
I see myself—
Maybe.

Besides, “con-fusion” and “dis-ease” are important parts of the intentions of curriculum, anyway. As Doll (2006) says, “curriculum workers should, at the very least, unseat the ready expectations” of our students; we should “take them for a ride. Unmoor the anchor. Set sail” (Doll et al., p. 27). Block (1997) also says the “process of education” ought to “make the familiar unfamiliar” (p. 92). This approach to education is appropriate in a world in which we “do not have definable meanings” (Caputo, 1997, p. 31) for so many things and our very identities are changing all the time. This changing identity is something else of which poetry reminds us; as we change, it changes, and a poem we read as a child is not the same one we read as a teenager, and it is certainly a different text again when we become adults. As Doll (2006) emphatically reports, “what I was like forty years ago has absolutely no meaning for what I am like today!” (Doll et al., p. 16). The work of revision, then, within the classroom and without, is vital to our efforts to live and work in a world that changes every day. Such dynamic, fluid identities in a dynamic, fluid world also mean that even if we wanted to “remain the same,” trying to hold on to the person we were and the world we knew, the weaknesses of memory would likely make our efforts futile:

**Smoke**

I worry I’m losing it—
the past I mean,
like I’m on fire and
have to watch yesterdays
twist and turn and
flutter away on the smoke,
straining to once more
catch them, re-enter
my own skin, see through
younger eyes, shift awkwardly
in the faux green leather
of that Applebee’s booth,
feel the air move from the
rustle of the hem of
her white hippie shirt,
try to bring myself to
look into those eyes,
until I have to remind
myself that what matters
is that those eyes are
still blue.

Memory

For me, it usually goes
something like this:
Open facing a street I know,
except swap that store for
the old one, the coffeeshop
for the one I haunted. Remove
various beautification efforts.

Insert me as I am, but
change the shirt, the hair,
the walk. Well, not the shirt.
Run me into faces with fuzzy
edges, listen to snippets, like
a conversation of only non sequiturs.

What is that, exactly? Convincing,
sure. Probable, even. I’d bet
there are people who, if they
saw it in a photograph, would
swear they remember that day.
The good times.

We don’t make it all up, do we?

What we have here is a gap as well, between who we are and who we were, today
and yesterday, that grows as time passes, and makes the edges of those poles grow
fuzzier as well. What we mean when we talk about “yesterday” is not some thing
but rather our memory of the thing; we are already swimming in the gap of the signifier/signified relationship even before we try and put these things in words—which in the case of memories only furthers the distance. As Madeleine R. Grumet (1980/1999) tells us, “the event-in-itself defies re-presentation, slipping away from our grasp like the landscape outside the window of a railway car” (p. 25). And even if we could conquer the time between, we would still find that the thing we are recalling is not all there; we are forever hindered by our “inability to totally absorb the experience of real life” (Weaver & Britt, 2007, p. 33). In other words, whether we embrace it or not, we are already lost, and any act of re-membering is really an act of re-visioning.

If we accept this necessity of revision when it comes to memory, though, and understand it as a performative process much like the interpretation of a text, which “transforms what it interprets,” we are empowered; interpretation “changes the world, in however small a way, by changing once and for all an element of that world that has power to make things happen” (J. H. Miller, 2001a, p. 108). And since “the world is an interpreted world” (D. G. Smith, 1988/1999, p. 117), we must interpret, we must revise, to act in it, and on it, anyway—and we must remember, in the case of history especially, that others revise as well, so that we do not mistake accounts of their memories for “fact.” If we do participate critically, responsibly, and thoughtfully in such processes of revision, we may find that the past revised carefully can be useful for the present and maybe future, enabling us to look back with the wisdom of today at the experience of yesterday, seeing connections and meanings and subtle revelations that were not available at the time. We can live better today, because of yesterday. Each morning is a gift.

What it Meant

I used to wonder why Mister Rogers always changed his shoes
When he came home, but now

I think it’s because he had
A job, and at work he was
Just that loser Fred, who

Can’t speak up in meetings and
Packs his own lunch every morning
To eat at his desk alone. So stick

That guy in the closet, because
Here in the neighborhood
He’s a god, a benevolent puppet
Master in comfortable shoes, or
At least a king, all cool calm
Command in a sweater-vest robe,
And it's all castles and blue skies
As far as the mind’s eye can see.
Funny how I used to think that
Was a kids’ show, before I knew
What it meant to be a man.

Vacation Bible School

I’ve read about manna from Heaven, sure,
but it was never real to me unless
I thought of homemade ice cream
churned by that funny machine that
almost works, watched over by the men
and their bags of ice
and served by the women in green
cafeteria mugs to be eaten
with the clanking of spoons
mingled with the sounds of horseshoes,
cracking screen doors, and weather-warped
ping-pong.

And in those brief moments between,
Where the quiet ushers in pine breezes
That mix with the vanilla trying to melt
Before you can eat it,

I understand.

* * *

My wife and I started restoring old furniture years ago. We did so at first out of
necessity; we were both in college when we were dating, and we married just
before going to graduate school, and though we were both pretty good at managing
money, there was very little money to manage. Rather than pile up credit card debt,
we decided to take what we could get and turn it into something more whenever we
could. So, we took whatever hand-me-down pieces of furniture our relatives
offered, and also combed through yard sales—and pieces left on the curb, quite
frankly—for things in which we could see little glimmers of possibility, no matter the work it would take to realize those possibilities. Eventually, though, the work of revision took hold of us, and we still get the vast majority of our furniture this way. There is something special about giving old things new life, taking what is worn, damaged, neglected, forgotten, or broken, and helping it become something beautiful. Now we only want to spend our lives surrounded by interesting difference, uniqueness, personality, weathered dignity—life as it could be, with revision.

Did I mention that we are both teachers?

**Resurrection**

I have heard of people
Frightened of furniture,
And I believe it,
Because wood is
Holy.
God is in there.
First in trees tall, stoic,
Then in altar, pew, instrument, cross;
But also in house, chair, table, bed.
Beauty cut down
But also reformed,
Made new.
Yes, that’s right:
Resurrected.
Look closely at the grain,
Brown and gold river of soul
Running just under glassy sheen.

No day can be the same
After this.