Poetics of Curriculum, Poetics of Life
An Exploration of Poetry in the Context of Selves, Schools, and Society
Mary-Elizabeth Vaquer
Georgia Southern University, USA

Through multiple lenses of curriculum studies, the author explores how poetry is situated in the pedagogical world. Her work aims to illuminate how poetry is studied in schools and how these practices of studying poetry give poetry its cultural identity. Each chapter is guided by insight from John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* which promotes explorations of opportunities for students to have profound experiences with poetry and art in schools. The purpose of this book is not to offer a prescription for teachers to use in their classrooms. This is not an outline regarding how someone should include poetry in a lesson plan. Rather, the author explores why poetry is important in our lives and how poetry can contribute to opening avenues for new possibilities through imagination and transformation based on phenomenological experience and scholarship. She explores poetry through Dewey’s notion of aesthetics across diverse aspects of meaning making through poetry in a contemporary context. She also explores the influences that poetry has on the curriculum of our lives, and the influence that our lived curriculum has on the future of poetry.
Poetics of Curriculum, Poetics of Life
SCOPE

Current educational reform rhetoric around the globe repeatedly invokes the language of 21st century learning and innovative thinking while contrarily reinforcing, through government policy, high stakes testing and international competition, standardization of education that is exceedingly reminiscent of 19th century Taylorism and scientific management. Yet, as the steam engines of educational “progress” continue down an increasingly narrow, linear, and unified track, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the students in our classrooms are inheriting real world problems of economic instability, ecological damage, social inequality, and human suffering. If young people are to address these social problems, they will need to activate complex, interconnected, empathetic and multiple ways of thinking about the ways in which peoples of the world are interconnected as a global community in the living ecosystem of the world. Seeing the world as simultaneously local, global, political, economic, ecological, cultural and interconnected is far removed from the Enlightenment’s objectivist and mechanistic legacy that presently saturates the status quo of contemporary schooling. If we are to derail this positivist educational train and teach our students to see and be in the world differently, the educational community needs a serious dose of imagination. The goal of this book series is to assist students, practitioners, leaders, and researchers in looking beyond what they take for granted, questioning the normal, and amplifying our multiplicities of knowing, seeing, being and feeling to, ultimately, envision and create possibilities for positive social and educational change. The books featured in this series will explore ways of seeing, knowing, being, and learning that are frequently excluded in this global climate of standardized practices in the field of education. In particular, they will illuminate the ways in which imagination permeates every aspect of life and helps develop personal and political awareness. Featured works will be written in forms that range from academic to artistic, including original research in traditional scholarly format that addresses unconventional topics (e.g., play, gaming, ecopedagogy, aesthetics), as well as works that approach traditional and unconventional topics in unconventional formats (e.g., graphic novels, fiction, narrative forms, and multi-genre texts). Inspired by the work of Maxine Greene, this series will showcase works that “break through the limits of the conventional” and provoke readers to continue arousing themselves and their students to “begin again” (Greene, Releasing the Imagination, 1995, p. 109).

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An Exploration of Poetry in the Context of Selves, Schools, and Society

Mary-Elizabeth Vaquer

Georgia Southern University, USA
This book is dedicated to Dr. Patsy Griffin, my English poetry professor at Georgia Southern University, who revealed to me my own passion for poetry through her deep joy and devotion to the written word. Dr. Griffin passed away April 23, 2015 before I was able to tell her about my work and my dedication to her inspiration.
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PRELUDE

A SONNET: WHEN NIGHT HANGS LOW

When night hangs low and day has passed away
When lights glow dim but still my eyes can see
I rest my head and think about the day
The teacher, student, guide that I must be,
My pen, my sword, I pull it from its sheath
And let these moments pull me into verse.
The joys, the fears that linger underneath
Are brought to light for better or for worse.

Yet as I find release in poetry
I know my students rarely do the same.
Instead of helping make their lives carefree,
It makes them want to set their books aflame.
O Student find the wisdom in the word
That sets you free and lets your voice be heard!

A SESTINA: O MUSES, MAY YOU COME

Gentle muses, far and wide, be my guide –
A fair hand to illuminate my words.
Fair Erato, muse of lyric poetry, envelop me
In your gossamer robes, lead me through the poem
In a passage towards erudition, help
Me walk with wisdom and the weight of the wind.

Clio, muse of history, enlisting time to wind
Its way behind our days that climb into mountains, guide
Me through the foundations of Pinar and Klohr, help
Me balance any bias through the stalwart word
Of Schubert who makes curriculum prose a poem,
Interlacing ideas and laying them down before me.

Melpomene, muse of tragedy, infuse the inspiration within me
Of our foundational fathers Plato and Aristotle, blow the wind
Twisting through Terpsichore, muse of dance, to spin a poem
Of flight and fancy through the imagination of Maxine Greene. Guide
Me, Calliope, muse of epic poetry, to write like Eisner the words
Of a tale told of the arts, through the arts, no hand to offer help.
Prelude

Bold Euterpe, muse of music and song, send your help
In the tune of my efforts, channel form and flow through me,
Through the words of Gioia and Hall, to know the way is the word.
The words of Gioia and Hall, to know the way is the word.
Gather close, Polyhymnia, muse of hymns, sweet gasp of wind
Gaining strength, sending Leggo and Sumara to be my guides.
Invigorate through your hymns, your music and song, my earnest poem.

Blithe Thalia, muse of comedy, infuse my poem
With humility and reverence, grant me levity through your help
To see that Derrida and Barthes have not answers, they merely guide
Me to answer both yes and no – to cut the ruse of certainty, to lead me
To paradox of play – creating my own clock to wind
Forward and behind, remembering always to wonder at the word.

Fair muses, ennoble my work, embolden my word.
Accompany me through the design of John Dewey, his work a poem
Rife with the reason of art and experience, his words a wind
Blowing through every chapter of my study, crafted with his help.
Grant me clarity to lead my reader to understand through me
The phenomenon of art, experience, and poetry as a priceless guide.

At my back, the wind – the philosopher’s help –
The strength of the word, an imperfect poem
Directed towards me, with muses as my guide.

FREE VERSE WITH PRE-COMMENTARY: THE I/EYE OF BEGINNING:
THE IMPORTANCE OF A RENEWED FOCUS ON WRITING

Classrooms have historically been teacher-focused with an audience of students receiving whatever lesson the teacher meant for them to have. When today’s teachers were students themselves, they were recipients of this outdated way of teaching. This method persisted for years even though thinkers like John Dewey wrote new philosophies of thinking and expressed innovative ideas long ago. Unfortunately, over the years their ideas have consistently been either ignored or implemented poorly.

Current trends in education lead one to recognize how important it is for students to participate in their own education through active engagement. One particularly effective way of teaching involves finding something that interests a student and allowing the student to incorporate that interest into the lesson. This leads to students acquiring higher levels of self-knowledge, rather than only acquiring knowledge in specific disciplines and subject matter.

Many students come from disadvantaged backgrounds with dysfunctional families who do not encourage a push towards the student’s achieving self-actualization and forming a strong identity. A greater emphasis on writing can help alleviate some of
the disconnect that affects these students. Self-expression through writing is one way that a student can explore his or her own interests and style and come to know him or herself better in the process.

There are many examples throughout history and literature of people whose lives were positively affected by writing. Holden Caulfield from The Catcher in the Rye; the poet, Anne Sexton; the pupil in Tobias Wolff’s novel, Old School; Newton Arvin, literary critic and academic; and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man are all figures whose lives were affected by language. These stories serve as a testimony to the influence and power that writing can have in a student’s life. We must be careful as a culture not to inflate the necessity of math and science to the exclusion of the humanities as current trends threaten to do. Our students must nurture their own identities, and they can successfully reach this goal through an increased focus on creative writing and poetry.

The following poem is an assignment that I did for my professor, John Weaver, as part of a doctoral core class on ethics in education. I wrote the poem with a fragmented tone, and I inserted textual evidence from multiple resources. The poem serves as an example of arts based research through poetry. My poem focuses on current trends in education told through the lives of Holden Caulfield, Anne Sexton, the pupil from Old School by Tobias Wolff, Newton Arvin, and Ralph Ellison.

We answered, but did we ask?  
We were seen and seen and (not) heard,  
As students ourselves, we filled and filed the tests,  
Darkened bubbles, woman teacher X – double X chromo –  
Some led us to the leaden answers, the blood-lead of a sun –  
Yellow pencil, some let us draw outside the lines,  
But all within the same white halls.

We answered like the quiet  
In the tone of the X, with all the inflection of a mime.  
We did as we were to do, but with what question?  
What eye between the line  
What synthesis evaluation analytic way into  
The backs of our brains…  
What presence of the I/eye?  

“The learning takes place through the active  
Behavior of the student,” the action in the eye  
The seeking of the I, yes “it is what  
He” (she) “does that he” (she) “learns  
Not what the teacher does.”

We remember that we, that us, in rows  
In desks, attention turned to the almighty X  
With chalk in tapered fingers,
(Absent the male, the XY complement
Still then in fire hat and dusty boots, still making pay,
Still home at 6 for dinner made,
Unfit for school, a woman’s day)

We were meant to follow her task, the one that set us forth
“To deal effectively with the critical problems
Of contemporary life.”

And were we, the faithfully prepared, equipped
En masse for the acute and the crisis, the skills to look
Away from a pencil-yellow sun drawn corner page
Towards a blank sheet of paper, our own decisions?

The obsolete education, the paper and pen,
The memory rote, back and forth in give and take
With teacher X’s wisdom – and Tyler nineteen-forty-nine
Ignored until the time began to listen.
Who would we be with older voices
With the eye and I in total acquaintance with itself?

“One who recognizes the importance of interest”
( interest) “Will not assume that all minds
Work in the same way” only just simply
“Because they happen to have the same teacher” (X)
“And textbook”5 (class set) open on a desk.
Dewey knew he told us that

“The giving of problems,
The putting of questions,
The assigning of tasks,
The magnifying of difficulties”

For the end, the purpose essential
Through part “parceling out of instruction” to meet
“acquisition of skill”
(“reading, spelling, writing,” (writing) “drawing, reciting”)
“acquiring information”
(“history and geography”),
“training of thinking” these

Are all “a measure of the
Ineffective way
In which we accomplish all three.”5
Would that it were true the filling of the mind
Like plugging in – teacher X to hold/possess/give
And the child to take knowledge like tablets,
Like Pharmakon, “remedy and poison” – the lesson
From without to satisfy to create within
“Submerged in identities conceived by others”
Where “cultivation of intelligence” diminishes dies
“Restricted and undermined.”

And so we as students answered and did not ask –

And now we are the X – children of the way we were taught
“Fac(ing) the challenge to become more
Than (we) have been conceived and conditioned to be”
To make the gesture seated as a “participant
In an ongoing multi-referenced conversation.”

The teacher must be guide, not dealer of data proffered
Like Prufrock’s head on a platter to
Squeeze “the universe into a ball,” worlds “narrated,”
“Lifeless and petrified,” “suffering from narration sickness”
Prostrate from its weight,

Nor giver of the narrative ill hanging around collars dragging
Heads to sleep. And narrative – criminal in all direction?
The question (we question) is the source of such –
An X narrative given, a story defined –
Or the I, me, (mined) the narrative that I own –
“The transcendentalist condition
Of the possibility of all self-knowledge.”

The owned narrative allows “the only and exclusive way
For achieving self-knowledge” – to belong
Beside humanity, “not a preconceived ideal,”
But the place “where self and other meet” – it aligns
The subject with the self to gesso

Out the crags and bumps in the frescoes of identity,
Still wet, still forming, the way to know
The self and scaffold a way up the hierarchy of needs
Towards wisdom. The way, it seems, is writing.

The interest of, concern for, attention to
The need of the self within to know to knead
PRELUDE

The possibilities out of the folds of detritus left
By the peripheral, left by the things
Which we do not need, is necessary.
Necessary to sift through the litter of days that crowds
What makes us real

Because such we do not need, such that rests
Upon the heads of the burdened, that steals
Away, obfuscates, buries the tapers of progress
And stays the lights at a crepuscular dusk –
The dim light of the margins,

The place of the marginalized Other, the stuff of the lost,
The marginalized they, the damaged in between,
The they of the Other, in truth, all find solace in writing.

In language, in words of “reflection and action,” the human existence cannot be silent,
Nor can it be nourished by false words, but only
By true words, with which men and women
Transform the world,” transform the self, become

The self through the personal langue,
The parole of the individual where
“The beginning word is understood,
In the intimacy of self-presence, as the voice of the other
And as commandment.”

We are the sum of all parts, all trace that forms
The word, the I/eye me mine(d)
The teacher X as the self the variable signifier of all signified or
World as X the teacher of all things

Through the word of the individual.

And who merits from writing? The select the blessed in phrase
With ease to express? – the abundant in thought,
Ego dense and lush – the gifted and the talented
Labeled for funds? – Who grinds their mark on the parchment
Or declares through companion of speech that to be said?

It is here that the Cynic can be found
As he finds for himself.
He is the young man softened by the prick of the pen
The purging through print –
He discovers that he cannot
Catch the children in the thick of the rye,
The way they dart sudden and slipshod, the tops
Of their heads bobbing above the grain.

“To catch everybody if they started going over the cliff,” he says,
Which triggers an inner link to writing,
The urge to call the X(Y), the English teacher
Who gathered “the boy that jumped out of the window”
The way that our Cynic wants to be taken in saved released
Through the writing the thing that he does best.

The rescue and writing is the same –
The rescue through the release from pen in hand
Where the Cynic wants to save through his writing
Wants to save not just himself but
Even the bastards who gripe
About “baseball glove” catcher’s mitt essays,
Wants to help to save them all despite ingratitude,
To save with the pen with the image
Of the catcher who is waiting in the rye.

The Cynic knows the liberation, the Poet knows the chance
Of finding some way out in the flick of the wrist
And the stretch of the imagination. The Poet writes
“Personal memories of madness and loss…not personal…
Conventionally…private, interior, a” (my) “mine to hoard,
Remember or forget.”

The Poet writes “in order to approach a more ‘authentic’ existence,
Striving at every turn to listen more attentively
To what remains inaudible or half-spoken in the interstices
Of the personal and the social”

And yet through the autobiography, the unraveling of the self
In the catharsis of disclosure, the Poet uses
“Writing as a means of concealment as well as revelation;”
She uses the donning of masks, the use of “writing and teaching
As a means to hide difficult truths about ourselves” –

Yet the truths not known to a present public with eye
Trained to the text still are told to the present Poet
Investing in herself “the protective sheath of a mask”
That brings her “to the limits of conventional autobiography
And illuminate(s) what such narratives often obscure,”
The self that she is “inclined to ignore or disavow.”
Throughout, the writing held and maintained the spill of illness
Clinging to the Poet, the unforgiving and chiding voice
That scorned queues for order and each structured step –
The Poet knew she had a “particular purchase on the image
Of the suicidal female poet who failed as mother and wife.”
The Poet knew the end of the story, but still believed
“In the curative properties of writing,”
“Believed that writing saved her life”
Despite the inverted deus ex machina, the power
Of her own hand to release herself into the rye
And subvert her own salvation.
The Poet is the pupil and the professor
Who guides by way of learning, who guides
The path pushing through the scratch of briers
That hold us back, who pushes by
Preparing the promotion of the pupil Other
Through modeled dismemberment
And auto-necrophagy (the feeding on our own composition,
The living and dead parts of experience)
And all the while, despite what else, the Pupil, the young man
Knows that he cannot tell the story of himself.
He knows that “writing should give (him) pleasure,
And generally it” does. But still he wears
the “masks” of the Poet.
He cannot write “too close to home”
Or see himself in the black on the page,
And so he stays in his poems, the poet in himself,
“Abstract and void of narrative,” and writes through the face
Of imitation, “owe(s) someone” for influence,
And knows that the writer, the teacher, the teacher
Of text of word of literature “kn(ows) exactly what (is) most
Worth knowing,” and this he wants for himself.
The Pupil knows that the self can be found
Can be formed in the face of writing,
But the Pupil forgets the self that he seeks –
Not the self of construct, or the self he wants to be,
But the self that hurts that hides in the guise
Of a pilfered manner, the self that pretends to be.

After the “stories that were designed to make
(Him) appear as (he) was not,” the Pupil maintains
That the way to be saved through the pen,
The metonymic link to life, is through the words
Of any writer with style alluring enough to be tried,

Sized, formed by the Pupil’s own pen,
The same metonymic link to loss and the lifting
Of what was said best. In the “simple relief
Of putting words to paper,” the Pupil hands
Himself to Hemingway, steals the hand of another,
Handles the way to shame

Before guiding the hand back,
Before hemming the way through writing to the purpose
From the start – the final book in hand, the story of the search,
The Pupil as guide in his own autobiography,
Own graph, own -ology of the lost and found of writing.

And it was “well understood that Hemingway…
Had killed himself because he could
No longer write” – so the scholar asks, the writer asks,
The Professor asks himself the same question –

Where is the worth? Can one stay grounded when
“Literature and life” become “blended so seamlessly”
That the Professor “seems a kind of literary character
Himself”? Is there danger of becoming
“So narcissistically involved in books”
That there is “no other reflection”? 

There is danger with each borrowed breath
Even when cautious behind shaded windows –
So to risk the drop of oneself through the words
Is a mean stake indeed,
Indeed as the Professor shows the ways
That writing delivered –

How he “was more comfortable writing about his feelings
Than speaking about them”
How he “found new pieces of himself” and found
That “life was teaching him who he was”
How he kept his feet stable on the beam
With hands around the rod the pen for balance.

And when he fell (he did fall) a fall
Away from the rest of us, a rest
For a falling mind in restive agitation
Was the way he returned to the fold.
And Yaddo too was the best of these rests
“The only place where…he felt he could remain
Without fear” of collapse.

The writer’s retreat, “Yaddo’s protective shell,” Encouraged his purpose,
Not love of money or fame or the coarse trappings
Of capitalist decline, but the uselessness of the written Word, of “humanities’ being for “their own”
And refusing “to regard itself as instrumental
To some larger good” outside of the desire within.

But even then, “it is not the business
Of the humanities to save us,” and save us
They cannot. The Poet knows, the children leaping
Through the rye, the Professor even in the way
“He wrote to give shape to his life,” “because it was Painful for him to leave anything
In an inchoate state,”

“Because he craved affirmation.”

Affirmation – there- affirmed in dignity
No regret in belles lettres and dissertation,
No debt to the rest for what you did not give
That was yours. It is important to write
For oneself if none other. And if “the self does not exist,”
If “it is not present to itself before that which engages In this way”…if the self is “given by the writing,
By the Other…born by being given, delivered,
Offered, and betrayed all at once,”
Then it is even more important that the affirmation Is found on the page through the pen.

In the hand of the Professor, this
Comfort all in “writing about his feelings”
Was more than the comfort found in “speaking” –
And there is the kinship, speech and writing, 
The natural progression from one to the next, 
“A science of language must recover the natural” — 
“The simple and original…relationships between 
Speech and writing…between an inside and an outside.”

Here is found the Invisible, who “only wanted 
To make a speech,” only wanted to find the way 
Through his search to settle in some small space 
“Full of light” yet with the living not the dead, 
The hibernating — 
And like them all, like the writers, 
“Looking for something, and everywhere 
Someone tr(ying) to tell (him) what it was.”

Like the writers in speech, in Brotherhood, 
The word was the way, the text was the self, 
And without the way he “lay fretting over (his) identity” 
Unable to maintain a thought through factory 
Manipulation turned into whole manipulation by the men 
Who saw his worth. The “effective speech” 

Of the Invisible was his way away from 
The way of the past. Not to be “mistaken 
And sentimental,” not to be “like them,” perhaps 
Before but “not any longer,” no more like the men 
That he knew, the brothers, father, the grandfather 
That played in his dreams, the “laughter ringing” 
In his ears. The speech was pure, it was owned, 

It was of the Invisible, when he had a name 
And a face and the darkness (not the purgatorial light) 
That could take him aside 
And let him forget the force that moved 
Him to that perennial blaze of the underground. 

And so the Invisible, the invisibles 
Of all minorities, of collective alterity, 
Of anyone whose name is in the margins 
Must struggle to maintain the voice 
That is natural within. Labor for ascension, 
The very idea of ascension is possible 
Through the voice of the individual,
PRELUDE

Through the word, the *logos*, the voice of
Speech and the voice of writing. The individual
Can move towards liberation, towards
The stretching of limbs and straightening
Of spine to step into the gathering of like of same
While embracing difference –

But even then, the aporia is that the rise
Of the voice can deafen, can chafe
The ears accustomed to the hum
Of the same, the constant drum of formation.
The cloistered ear will fear the voice
The unfamiliar, or the Other setting sail.

And so as the Invisible discovered
A voice too loud, the voice, the pen,
The same metonymic expression
Of self through creation, through the arts,
The voice upsets the structure of the business
Through development of what is human,
What is real, to feel and to bleed –

“For a cultivated and developed sympathy
Is a particularly dangerous enemy
Of obtuseness, and moral obtuseness
Is necessary to carry out programs of economic
Development that ignore inequality”[59] –

The sympathy, the core, and pith learned
Through embracing the humanities,
Enveloping the arts, they disable
That part of the heart that cannot recognize
Oppression and they annul the sightless vision
In the eyes of the indoctrinated, for

“The mere imparting of information is not education.”

“The effort must result in making a man
Think and do for himself,”
As the Invisible, the Other “have done in spite
Of universal persecution.”[60]
In spite of derision – the education of the other,

Of the collective is not complete
Without the pulse of the curriculum, the art,
The marrow in the bones, in the structure that shines
Red and pools in the deepest pockets
Of spirit. Without art, without the blood

Of education, the deepest pockets are depressions,
Deep ravines that branch away bleak and barren.
Without the humanities,
“The world will soon be producing generations
Of useful machines,” the blood-less –
No “complete citizens who can think for themselves,
Criticize tradition, and understand the significance
Of another person’s sufferings and achievements.”

The pursuit of “pecuniary gain,” of “proficiency
And single-mindedness in the pursuit of
Private gain is something that can readily
Be appreciated by all men” and women
“Who have had the usual training given by the
Modern system of competitive gain and competitive spending” –

The modern purpose of education,
The math and science, the hard not soft,
Moves us towards utility, “given over
To the single-minded pursuit of science
And scholarship,” (real scholarship?) “without afterthought
And without a view to interests
Subsidiary or extraneous to the higher learning.”

Or that which is measurable in money
Or global progress, not the higher learning
Of intrinsic gain. The real promise, the real worth
Is found in the measure of

“Those items of human intelligence and initiative
That go to make up the pursuit of knowledge,
And that are embodied in systematic form in its
Conclusions,” those that “do not lend themselves to
Quantitative statement, and can not be made
To appear on a balance-sheet,”

Those items where the real worth is found
Not centered on results, education not counted
In scores, not calculated in mean and median
Or fixed aside the countywide
Assessment eyed by the man at the head
Of some table – no, it is the real knowledge
That makes us who we are.
And yet, beware the new instruction, 
The new focus on writing that seems, 
That avows, to be absorbed 
In student writing, in student growth by way 
Of reflection in ink.

Yet there is no change, 
There is no sudden respect, sudden introspect, 
Only writing in formula – the recipe a dash 
Here and bits of that, the serum to solve 
A state writing puzzle, to feed 
A student to safety in scores, even though 
“It is difficult to measure Socratic ability 
Through standardized tests.”

Even though “only a much more nuanced 
Qualitative assessment 
Of classroom interactions and student writing 
Could tell us to what extent students have learned 
Skills of critical argument.” Skills of the way 
To write not based on maps of design.

And still the writing, the necessary, ferments in neglect. 
And through it all, no denial, none at all 
That “science is good… 
One thousand times better than a thousand 
Other things that are also good, 
But if it claims that it is the only good 
And the whole good, and if it behaves 
As if this were the case, then it enters into a 
Dynamic of madness.”

The “whole good” rests not in a battle between 
Binary opposites, 
Not in competition, 
Not in a bipartisan breakdown 
Or liberative conserveral showdown 
Where two events are mutually exclusive.

The “whole good” relies on emergence from the shadows, 
The taking of place from the “substitution 
Of businessmen and politicians,” the taking 
Of place from the edging out of the blood 
Of education and “facing the fact
That the historical present is an educational nightmare
Haunted by right-wing reactionaries and
Business-enamored politicians."

The writer knows, the Cynic, the Poet,
The Pupil understands, the Professor, the Invisible
And all of his shadows – that “the inmates should be
Caught up in a power situation of which they
Are themselves the bearers,” the inmates,
The invisible have the power to make their own,
To make the word and take the sign
Regardless of direction, in spite of the directives
Of men at tables, and women at the heels of men.
“To make history, the agent must create the future,
Remake herself, and help others to do so,
Where the criteria of successful remaking are seen
To be universal.

Old universes must be subverted
And a new universe created.

And it is through the writing
Of our own stories, of our own histories,
That which is in our power and through this power
That we become,
That we return,
Nous revenons
To the I/eye of the beginning.

NOTES

2. Tyler 5.
5. Dewey 84.
PRELUDE

15 Freire 87.
16 Freire 88.
19 Salinger 174.
20 Salinger 41.
22 Salvio 54.
23 Salvio 63.
24 Salvio 64.
26 Salvio 65.
27 Salvio 81.
28 Salvio 119.
30 Salvio 63.
31 Wolff 36.
32 Wolff 32.
33 Wolff 14.
34 Wolff 5.
35 Wolff 110.
36 Wolff 110.
38 Werth 293.
39 Werth 293.
40 Werth 58.
41 Werth 69.
42 Werth 118.
43 Werth 91.
44 Werth 99.
46 Fish.
47 Werth 81.
49 Werth 58.
50 Derrida, Of Grammatology 35.
52 Ellison 6.
53 Ellison 6.
54 Ellison 15.
55 Ellison 242.
56 Ellison 291.
57 Ellison 291.
58 Ellison 33.
61 Nussbaum 2.
63 Veblen 39.
PRELUDE

64 Veblen 57.
65 Nussbaum 48.
67 Veblen 42.
68 Pinar, William, What is Curriculum Theory, 22.
I’ve hung the books out in the back
As their leaves are brown and
Falling from their spines.

I’ve walked shoeless through the pages
Getting words on my feet and
Feeling letters between my toes.

I’ve lived on a diet of nouns and verbs,
Choking on M’s and P’s and the
Vowels that stick in the throat,
Nothing cool to wash them down.

I’m ready now, to sit in this paper garden
In a twilight rain,
Lush with scent and song and
Buds rising through words that have
Wakened the ground.

I will ride on the backs of bees
Drinking nectar from a capital Y.

I will dance in the real country
Away from the pages in books,
In a chapter of my own.
CHAPTER 1

POETRY AND CURRICULUM ALIGN

In setting out to explore understandings, bridge connections, and create meanings, it is necessary to initially provide essential definitions of words and concepts that are at the heart of the specific inquiry. My work, in some ways, is centered around the phenomenon that providing a simple definition of either poetry or curriculum can be a challenge. Certainly, it is easy to assign a superficial definition for both poetry and curriculum; it is also just as easy to assign meanings that are outdated at best and blatantly incorrect at worst.

Is it truly possible to successfully provide a definition of poetry that encompasses all parameters? In my poem, “Paper Garden,” I write about walking through the words and getting letters on my feet, but could I even give a good definition of what this poetry actually is that I write? I asked my high school students if any of them would be able to tell me what poetry actually is. 90% of the students raised their hands affirmatively and looked surprised that I would ask a question that assumes the possibility that they would not be up for such a basic task. When my students tried to present their definitions, they inevitably found how problematic such a seemingly simple task actually is. They told me that poetry rhymes. Poetry is words with rhythm. Poetry expresses strong feelings in a nebulously “artistic way.” The only thing that we can usually agree upon as basic truth is that we know poetry when we see it.

Even the masters themselves remain undecided on a concise definition for something that is, for the most part, universally recognized. Wordsworth (1800) famously declared that “poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” that “takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility.” Dylan Thomas (as cited in Maud, 2008) believed that

A good poem is a contribution to reality. The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it. A good poem helps to change the shape of the universe, helps to extend everyone’s knowledge of himself and the world around him. (p. 61)

Thomas may have been on the right track with his ideas about “good” poetry, but bad poetry is still poetry nonetheless. Additionally, ideas about “good” poetry are so subjective, that one specimen of “good poetry” may excite one and at the same time have a soporific effect on another.

A difficult task also lies in defining the poet. Many have attempted to present a concise definition, and many have fallen short. Heidegger (1971) describes a poet as “singing earnestly of the wine-god” and one who can “trace for their kindred
mortal's the way towards the turning” towards the gods (p. 92). Emerson’s (1844) idea of the poet involves the idea that “Beauty is the creator of the universe,” and that the poet is “the man of Beauty” which logically leads to the conclusion of the poet as creator of the universe. Hughes Mearns (1929), with less grandiosity, believes that “poetry is when you talk to yourself (p. 106), while Coleridge (1817) famously said that the poet “brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity.” Like poetry, most have an idea of who the poet is; they only lack the poetry to successfully say who the poet is. No perfect definition of what poetry is exists, and it is a testament to the ephemeral and abstract nature of poetry that this is the case. We can, however, explore different meanings and understandings of poetry and situate these in relation to a broadened understanding of curriculum where a curriculum of poetry and a curriculum of life have meaning beyond the context of traditional understandings.

In his book *Art as Experience*, John Dewey (1934) begins by explaining that once art “attains classic status,” it then becomes “isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience” (p. 1). Art becomes put on a pedestal and separated from the real blood, sweat, and tears of the individual who produced the art and the life experiences that influenced its production. Dewey continues to say:

A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience. (p. 2)

In writing about the fine arts, or poetry specifically, it is my task – as Dewey says- to bring back this connection between art and common life experiences. It is my self-imposed task to link how poetry, in all of its esoteric, pedestalled glory, connects to anything that affects humanity under its lived conditions. The relationship between poetry and curriculum forms this bridge.

Understanding the word “curriculum” is probably more problematic for most people than the task of assigning a true meaning for poetry. Most can recognize poetry when they see it, however, truly understanding curriculum requires travelling across so many levels and areas of thought, that being able to provide a succinct definition is a near impossibility. When anyone asks about my field and I briefly tell them about curriculum studies, I am most often met with slightly unsure nods of understanding and requests for me to validate their tenuous understanding of what curriculum is. Usually people believe that curriculum involves deciding what students are going to learn in school, creating course descriptions, and identifying and outlining maps of instruction. Some understand curriculum as simply the novels and poems that I choose to teach my students. Colleagues who have completed programs
in Curriculum and Instruction are usually the most misguided in understanding my field of study because they still adhere to pre-reconceptualized understandings of curriculum. For William Pinar (1995),

Curriculum ceases to be a thing, and it is more than a process. It becomes a verb, an action, a social practice, a private meaning, and a public hope. Curriculum is not just the site of our labor; it becomes the product of our labor, changing as we are changed by it. (p. 848)

Pinar would agree that it is a futile exercise to try and understand curriculum as an object or a thing that has boundaries and a static meaning that can be explained in a few sentences, or even a few pages. Curriculum is a process and a living organism concurrently. It is at one and the same time product and process.

As Janet Miller (2005) says, “…a very strict, standard, narrow definition of curriculum studies prohibits people from exploring. Loosening this previously narrow definition has incredibly enriched the field and provided numerous avenues for curriculum inquiry” (p. 264). Broadening definitions and understandings of both poetry and curriculum opens the way for new relationships and new approaches to the way we interact with the world around us.

CURRICULUM AND POETRY MEET

Most popular understandings of curriculum center around an outdated focus on curriculum development rather than an understanding of curriculum. Pinar et al. (1995) claim that

The American curriculum field has undergone a profound shift during the past twenty years, a fundamental reconceptualization of its primary concepts, its research methods, its status, and its function in the larger field of education. (p. 12)

The current field of Curriculum Studies is based upon this paradigm shift that occurred in the 1970’s when Schwab’s (1978) declaration that the curriculum field had become “moribund” caused attention to focus on the direction of the field. (p. 287)

While the reconceptualists should not be considered a collective group sharing identical identifying features, the reconceptualists, as most curriculum theorists are called, do share many of the same philosophies of thinking that guide their inquiry. William Schubert (1986) comments on the reconceptualists and says that

A strong theme in the work of these writers is their drawing to consciousness the taken-for-grantedness of one dominant epistemological paradigm (the theoretic, to use Schwab’s language; the conceptual empiricist, to use Pinar’s designation; the social behaviorist, to use Schubert’s characterization; and the neopositivist, to use conventional philosophic discourse). Moreover, critical praxis seeks liberations from ideological constraints as well. It is argued that
special attention needs to be given to the impact of race, socioeconomic class, and gender on education, quality of life, outlook on life, and capacity to grow and become more fully liberated. (p. 177)

Reconceptualists are aligned in their philosophies along the same thematic trajectory, but the territories of race, class, gender, and the countless other influences that act upon us in our lived spaces are too broad to pull each scholar into the same, snug envelope. As Schubert says, the field remains broad enough to allow scholars to “grow and become more fully liberated.”

In 1980, Paul Klohr pointed out nine areas where the reconceptualists find common ground “within this highly divergent paradigm of reconceptualized curriculum thought” (Schubert, 1986, p. 178). In his book *Curriculum: Perspective, Paradigm, and Possibility*, William Schubert briefly presents each area in an attempt to provide understandings of curriculum, curriculum theory, and the field of Curriculum Studies. Each of these nine spaces of philosophy also possesses a commonality with poetry. In an attempt to further understand poetry as well as curriculum, it helps to regard poetry through the lens of curriculum thought. It becomes evident through this exercise that poetry is curriculum and curriculum, for all of its multiple meanings and iterations, is poetry as well.

**NATURE**

Schubert first paraphrases Klohr by pointing out that the reconceptualists view nature as an “interdependent, holistic, dynamic, ecological unit” (p. 178). Human beings are not separate from nature, nor are human beings central to plants and animals and the ecosphere. Human beings are classically guilty of anthropocentrism, and current curriculum thought aims to highlight this flaw and promote a shift in that line of thinking. Roland Barthes (1957) recognizes the human tendency to center themselves in the natural world and comments that “the myth of the human ‘condition’ rests on a very old mystification, which always consists in placing Nature at the bottom of History” (p. 108). Nature has historically been considered secondary to the human condition, while all along the truth is that nature and the human condition are inextricable. Dominic Pettman (2011) says

Thus species-being has largely become a matter of specious-being. Yes, we are exceptional, but we are not alone in this. *Every* animal, indeed *every* machine, is exceptional in its own way. To trumpet our own form of exceptionalism is to be trapped like Narcissus. Indeed, this is the danger of all centric thinking: imagining identity radiating out from a core (e.g., the heart or the soul) rather than as being distributed, overlapping, intertwined, *between*. The actual situation on the ground is much more akin to human *becoming* than human *being*. So in case it isn’t clear yet, we are the anthro-machine, and our error is to disavow the machinic part of ourselves as well as the animal aspect. (p. 199)