A Long Way to Go for a Short Drink of Water

Alberta's Competency-Based Curriculum Trans/Reformation, 2011–?

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The Alberta Ministry of Education's delivery of the promised curriculum transformation was about four years overdue. At this point, the only change had been in Alberta's governing party as the NDP took over after 44 years of PC rule. Then, in June 2016, Alberta's new education minister, David Eggen, announced a plan to speed up inherited curriculum initiatives from the old government and change the province's programs of study across all grades and subject areas within six years. Anchoring all K–12 programs of study by sometime in the 2020s would be pillars of "core competencies" such as critical thinking, numeracy, literacy and managing information, among others. As also planned by the previous government, Alberta was to join jurisdictions across the globe who, since the early 1990s, implemented competency-based curriculum (subsequently, many threw them out). Like a guest showing up the morning after the party, Alberta was now going to implement change according to a four-decade-old OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) recommendation for all students everywhere to learn from a competency-based education so as to meet the demands of the then imagined 21st-century economy.

Response to Eggen's plan got hot. On January 26, 2017, *Metro News* reported that Wildrose Party education critic Leela Aheer wanted to know who was involved in the province's curriculum redesign. She wanted transparency, to ensure that volunteer teacher and academic advisors working on program drafts do not all suffer from what she called the "NDP world view." Jason Kenney feared the curriculum would be "political." These criticisms are always either disingenuous or naive. All curricula, including one based in competencies, reflect both a world view and politics, not just when the government you oppose leads the process.

Despite Alberta's first change of government in 44 years, many were surprised that the Education ministry continued a top-down declarative relationship with the province's relevant expertise as to what should be renewed in the programs. Choosing to push complex issues aside that affect the curriculum-as-lived (Aoki 1993)—assessment, student mental health, teacher workloads or economic disparities between school communities—Alberta's leaders decided to join the "international competency order" (ICO) promulgated by the OECD-supported "global educational reform movement" (GERM) (see Sahlberg 2011). What follows are several concerns I have repeatedly expressed to ministry officials as a 10-year university representative on the Alberta Teachers' Association provincial curriculum committee, the Association's senior committee that interfaces with ministry officials regarding systemic needs and initiatives.

If there is nothing about which to disagree, we are likely being fed pabulum.

Despite vastly different locales, histories, national strengths, shortcomings and challenges, all must

submit to the ICO as the common sense regime (CSR) if you wish to discuss with the responsible officials how best we might meet the alleged imperatives of "21st-century learning." Within the ICO-CSR, "about what" or "for what" students should "think critically" and "manage information" (as two competencies) are never detailed. Rather, in faux-democratic fashion, ministers and their bureaucrats shunt those questions down the system to be answered later by local teachers. Yet, here in Alberta, key measures of students' achievement (and therefore that of teachers) remain centralized—Grade 12 diploma exams and the various other provincial learning assessments, along with international measures like TIMMS and PISA. Such a regime cannot but encourage teachers to stick to the safe and likely testable content regardless of what any system leader thinks needs to change.

Fraser Institute think-tankers, nervous-busy ministers and unqualified Fox-y newspaper commentators use these centralized rankings to publicly judge and often shame teachers and youth. That these measures, despite the public expense, do not provide any information to help particular students in particular places is irrelevant. Whether the economy should be better harnessed to serve education and not the other way around is now a nonsensical question. Whether we face 21st-century economic problems because our leaders insufficiently invest in research and economic diversification slides by. Teachers are soft and therefore so are our kids and thereby our future imperilled. I call it FRABIT (Frequently Repeated Assigned Blame = It's True). Thus, anyone asking necessary questions about the political nature of curriculum and questions about the present "what is" and future "what should be" asphyxiates. Instead, we must deal with bureaucrats who nod together about the glaringly obvious virtues of critical thinking and actively ignore the more complex issue of devising meaningful engagement plans or implementing the capital to support what we know matters for student success (eg, den Heyer and Pifel 2007; Berliner and Glass 2014).

We are left with competencies when we abdicate our adult responsibilities to tell good stories.

Since the early 1980s, we have witnessed a reshaping of the affective relationships between citizens, state and market—usually referred to as *globalization*. Many leaders in business, politics and education now prefer the general, comparable and exchangeable rather than the particular, singular and irreplaceable. Lost are questions about the stories that curriculum is, at core, about. Who do we think we are or wish to become? What diverse stories might we share with our youth so that we might live better together? What human do we have in mind when we educate our young? Schools, like any other community, are where we reconfigure ourselves together around stories, whether explicit or not. To have an actual curriculum conversation, we must engage in disagreements over curricula's what and why.

Competencies let adults off the hook to figure out what stories we should tell and what questions we should ask about mathematics, science, literature, history and so on. Rather, we follow 21st-century thought leaders who gather at great expense to agree with the obvious fact that numeracy and literacy are the essential bare bones of education. Innovative? When have these not been fundamental goals of schooling forever and everywhere? As we forget the necessity to argue over what stories we wish to become, it also appears we have lost the satirical necessity to make fun of what today passes as an "innovative vision" to guide "educating for the future."

We are all sophists now.

European scholar Gert Biesta (2010) distinguishes between three aims common to schools regardless of their location: qualification, socialization and the educational (see also Biesta and Säfström 2011). The public quite rightly expects schools to qualify students with skills believed necessary for their economic well-being, ranging from acquiring numeracy and literacy to specific skill training for a job. Qualification thus tends to link the schooling system to economic justifications for public funding. A second and overlapping function, socialization, involves initiating students into existing dominant orders of thought and comportment ranging from ways of speaking and behaving to disciplinary "ways of knowing" that some believe necessary for effective citizenship. Beyond but inclusive of these two expectations for schooling everywhere and through time, I think we here in Alberta need to ask, "What is educational about education?"

Like Biesta, I think this is a crucial but forgotten question as we journey further down into the present CSR. Over a decade, I have never heard questions asked at official discussion tables akin to "What do we assume in designing these programs that teachers and students lack to become better humans through their time together?" Rather, we engage in sophistic discussions in which everyone agrees that "personal well-being" is a good thing, draws up their organizational charts and convenes meetings of subject area experts to map out competencies required of the good citizen. In contrast to these contemporary sophistries

about competencies and citizenship, there are several ways to think about the educational. One is found in the Socratic example.

As Plato recounts, Socrates was an Athenian war hero without property who wandered about the city engaging all who sought understanding. Socrates charged nothing for what may be learned as, he claimed, he had no-thing to sell. This indeed confused many, for it was well known that the Oracle of Delphi had pronounced Socrates to be the wisest Greek alive.

Socrates premised his education on an axiom of equality: that both he and his interlocutors possessed equal capacity for "recollection" of what they already knew but had not adequately re-cognized (den Heyer 2015). Therefore, each needed the other to re-think presumptions in order to possibly encounter that gap between what one thinks, what one thought, and what one can and not claim to know. What might be learned from Socrates was how each of us might take up a wise relationship to knowing and knowledge and the impermanence of each. This disposition is essential to the doing of any science or art.

For the sophists, in contrast, what is most worth knowing is that which serves self-interest or reinforces desires to be productively useful in and to the State. Regardless of which sophist school of thought was momentarily fashionable, students were taught to become conversant with the master's version of right opinion so as to appear competent within the existing State's order of "what counts." What was unknown—that which could not, at the time, be counted by the sophist or state's system of accounting—was to be ignored or dispelled as unproductive nonsense. Bartlett (2011) offers a most succinct set of distinctions between sophistry and a Socratic form of education: "The sophist, concerning the truth, must be a man of perspective rather than conviction, of judgment rather than thought, of interest and not principle" (p 61).

Socrates enacted education as an inquiry consisting of what Alberta scholar David G Smith (2000) refers to as "truth seeking, truth dwelling, and truth sharing." As I have detailed elsewhere (den Heyer and Conrad 2011) using the work of Alain Badiou (2001), then as now, *truths* refer not to a property, thing or final answer, but to the material remainder of thought expressed in the realms of science, art, love or politics born from dealing with pressing social–political conundrums. These remainders of truth seeking constitute our most cherished fictions, art pieces, political achievements and scientific insights. Such gifts become possible to articulate or make when we take up a relational stance amongst the known–not yet known as we become the subjects through the subjects we study and experience in schools and beyond. Biesta (2010) refers to this process as *subjectification*. Borrowing from the French thinker Alain Badiou (2001), for me what is educational about education is the possibility of "becoming subject" to our learning and lives (den Heyer 2015).

Such concerns are but babble in the CSR of the ICO and for those bureaucratic functionaries who enact its logics. We all have become sophists now, as we can imagine nothing more for education than the acquiring of a set of competencies so as to be globally competitive in someone's dream or nightmare vision of the 21st-century economy.

Competencies are for poor kids; the wealthy never accept such tripe.

While research is never conclusive, we do have some evidence that does support anecdotal stories told by Alberta students and teachers working in schools with stressed student populations. Under the guise of creating more economic opportunities for students at economic risk while meeting external standards, some schools focus less on academic content and more on basic competencies as if the latter does not follow from the former in acts of truth or meaning making. This is not necessarily a deliberate attack on the teaching of subject content. Rather, as was the case of history taught in Great Britain, rich subject content suffered in lower-socioeconomic community schools during competency reforms from what Haydn and Harris (2009, 256) describe as "collateral damage."

A frequent result of this situation is that students who are the most in need of rich historical content to make sense of trying circumstances are instead force-fed drill practices in the structure of an argumentative sentence. It's hard to be against good sentence structure. But why has it become less relevant to question whether such content nurtures youth's attempts to understand their present circumstances or that of their community?

Yes, of course, each community is distinct and teachers require leeway to meet that particularity. But this is, to repeat myself, unlikely to be supported when funding and reputation require meeting distant and narrowly defined measures of success. Meanwhile, across town where funding and reputation are never at risk, parents, teachers and students delve into tradition-rich content as the basis to write sentences, perform plays, do art and organize food drives and, thus, further accrue the knowledge and social capital required to continue in the well-to-do life.

To summarize, citizens need to ask more questions about the historical and political rise of ICO CSR and

its role in reinforcing existing inequities in the education quality we provide students depending on their postal code (Berliner and Glass 2014). Whatever answers we find, we should note that this regime has evidently suffocated public conversations about curriculum as a question of what stories we and our youth need so as to make good sense of ourselves, our academic disciplines and our social futures. Such conversations become even less likely with parents' increasing, understandable and quietly desperate concern for the future well-being of their children, given the shrinking opportunities to earn a livable wage, decent medical plan and protected pension.

These issues are entwined with questions about public education regarding what is worth knowing and what is worth recognizing as pabulum being dispensed as an indispensable innovation for this 21st century, at this point 19 years old and many more to count before any "transformation" of programs of study comes to pass. Ignorant of the literature on curriculum change, we have been led by our ministers and ministry for a decade at great expense through the chimera of transformation. So far, what transformation, reform and change have really meant is "more of the same," but now with digital textbooks and provincial exams.

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