

Core curriculum, nostalgia, and anomie

What follows is a speech given to a conference on core curriculum in late October 1981, at Concordia University in Montreal. Anyone who has read or heard Edgar Friedenberg will know that his language is a bobby-dazzler - to use the accolade of Scottish soccer fans. That is to say, there is a display of bewildering skill - full of feints, seductions, and sheer speed - that achieves its aim and your entertainment at the same time. While you look the other way, bedazzled, he scores a winning point. That point here is that schools have no option but to bow to the particular culture from which they spring, to teach that culture's ideology through an efficient core curriculum, and at least to do it well, without pretending that it is anything but cultural hegemony that they serve.

Ever since it was first proposed, core curriculum has seemed like a sound idea. I believe it has also been rather widely adopted. When I was a graduate student 40 years ago, core curriculum was really hot and, I would assume, has kept on trucking ever since. It seems such a sensible approach to curriculum building that one would expect it to prevail, gradually - except on the doubtless numerous occasions when it comes into serious conflict with established and entrenched curricular organization, along departmental lines, say; or with a bitter and vigilant "back to basics" movement. You'd have to be pretty devoutly sectarian to get excited about the adoption of core curriculum as if it were a fundamental heresy; though I am sure that on many occasions educational fundamentalists have.

I cannot, myself, seriously doubt that people learn best, if not only, by experience, and that the division of instructional resources along the lines of subject specialties fragments experience and reduces

its potential meaning; and that the organization of blocks of school time around meaningful aspects of living, which take account of as many relevant factors as may be useful in interpreting them, makes more sense than scheduling consecutive 45-minute periods allotted to English - or whatever the statutory language of a province may be - social studies, and so on; while the resources of the school may be judiciously enriched by incorporating events and materials derived from other institutions of the community. So what else is new? And, why, then, apart from the risk of re-iterating the obvious, should I feel queasy about addressing a Conference on "Core Curriculum: Issues, Perspectives, and Implications"?

I do, though; and the balance of this talk will be devoted to explaining why. At the outset, a metaphor might help. I feel rather like a South African, addressing a group of his fellow civil servants in the Department of Tourism, about how to improve tourist services so that the beauty of the nation's scenery, its marvelous beaches and fabulous wildlife preserves, its richly evocative mix of native cultures, its stirring sporting events, hospitable people, and truly unique social and political institutions might be made more accessible and enjoyable to a wider clientele. The Union of South Africa possesses all these attractions in full measure; and though its tourist accommodations and services are already regarded as of high quality, especially the railways, they could doubtless be improved still further. And, indeed, there are a great many people in the world who might - or might not - enjoy a visit to the U. of S.A., but who are deterred from making one because they fear they might not be comfortable there or perhaps could not afford it. They're probably missing a lot; and maybe we could reach more of them.

Valid propositions, all; and yet I'm awfully glad I don't have to address that problem. There are, after all, certain questions of emphasis, of prior assumption left unstated, of possibly relevant considerations (that must necessarily be omitted as lying beyond our terms of reference) which might well prove burdensome. Let me turn, gratefully, therefore, to the innocent and apolitical question of core curriculum, here in Montreal.

Authenticity - one cannot learn from someone else's experience

Core curriculum is first of all curriculum, and as such, is affected by the problems that beset all attempts at curriculum construction. To begin with, there is the inherent absurdity - of assuming that important learning is best fostered by requiring people to participate in or submit to organized, planned, and budgeted events or spectacles, intended to teach them something that other people have decided they ought to learn. Not only have the pupils made no such decision; their teachers usually haven't either. Basically, the decision is made in Quebec City or the equivalent. And in this

respect, at least, I do feel grateful for the opportunity to address an audience of anglophones who have recently been informed that their cultural hegemony can no longer be taken for granted. All my audiences have been anglophone, since I speak no other language fluently; but you may be the first to really grasp what I mean when I say that regardless of the instructor's intention, having somebody else's trip laid on you is no good. But curriculum is always somebody else's trip, although school teachers are pretty smug about this as long as they regard themselves as agents of a superior culture, superior on grounds of ethnicity, social class, age, education, or any combination of these.

The issue here is not freedom, but authenticity. One cannot learn from somebody else's experience; or, more precisely, one learns only from one's own experience, which can of course include the experience of being informed or persuaded or coerced by others. Experience keepeth a dear school - compared to what? Really, there is no other. This is not to deny that children and other people learn a lot in school (as they would out of school) but what they learn is the experience, continuously and sometimes under great stress, of submitting to instruction whether or not one feels it to be irrelevant or false. Another is the experience of gradually losing confidence in your own ability to decide what is valid and important and what is not, as one assimilates the appropriate set of social categories. (These categories are slightly different in French and English schools, so it looks like quite a few figure-and-ground relationships are going to get reversed.)

School is quite a poor place in which to learn about the rest of the world; just as a hospital is a poor place in which to become healthy. In both institutions, normal processes like learning and convalescence are subordinated to institutional demands and routines that have little to do with the patient's needs or condition; for the pupil, too, may properly be referred to as a **patient**, as distinct from an **agent**, the active source of his own agenda. Both schools and hospitals may perform a useful, indeed essential service for people who require skilled intervention or specialized techniques and equipment to help them through some critical juncture of their lives. But there is also a growing awareness that illness is as much a social as a physiological category; and that any diagnosis of people as chronically ill, mentally or physically, is likely to be less closely related to any pathology they may display than to the problems they create for other people. Children are sent to school in Canada, and everywhere else that I know of where they are sent to school, primarily because there is no place else in society that will tolerate them, let alone allow them to learn by active participation. It's that kind of society.

Precisely because going to school is normal, however, it is less devastating than a hospital or prison. It does not stigmatize its inmates - not grossly, at least, although schoolchildren are defined as

and often treated as persons of no dignity. But that is the way children are regarded in Canada - consider the cutesy-poo children on TV commercials: a child shown as competent would be perceived as brash. Simply being in school counts in your favour, though this depends on the credential you develop there, and that in turn depends on a lot of factors, mostly associated with social class. So it turns out that you do learn a great deal about life, politics, and society in school; though the less attention you pay to the official curriculum - **except as a social artefact**; that's very important - the more valuable your learning will be.

A creature of the culture

If you canvass people's memories of high school (including probably your own) in later life - as Ralph Keyes did in *Is There Life After High School?* and Michael Medved and David Wallenchinsky did in *What Really Happened to the Class of '65?* - you will find little reference to academics at all. Again, despite the great disparity in numbers, teachers recall especially interesting students more readily and vividly than students do teachers. Subject matter is just not what school is really about; it's really about making it - "winners and losers" as James Herndon so memorably said in *How to Survive in Your Native Land*. It's about status, friendship, rivalry, and just living. Even when it was published twenty years ago, James Coleman's *The Adolescent Society* seemed naive in its efforts to devise some means of nagging students into placing the same value on conventional scholarship that he found they did on athletic prowess and sexual attractiveness. Coleman, a good American if ever there was one, was quite willing to encourage students to go on playing the prestige game; he just wanted to switch the source of prestige from the peer culture to academic achievement, at least enough to balance things out more. But this kind of manipulation is probably impossible, and I think manifestly undesirable.

The whole point of the school is that it is a creature of the culture; and in North America that culture, while anti-intellectual and sexually exploitive, cherishes the illusion of choice. That illusion is especially cherished by captive clienteles. Our culture offers - especially to the young - far more choices that are banal than heroic; but within the range available, no school system is going to pre-empt their choice. The possibility isn't even in the myths. What film, novel, short story or TV drama with a school for its locale has a plot hinging on the **content** of what is taught there? Even *The Paper Chase* - the irony of its title abandoned for TV purposes - has nothing to say about the law. It's about making it in law school, and how a crusty old male WASP and a pillar of the establishment may have a heart as golden as any prostitute. As to high schools, the classroom and the teacher are, happily, no longer usually portrayed as sources of buffoonery; rather, they are treated as parts of a political scene,

albeit oversimply and sometimes dishonestly. But the premise is accurate enough.

In school, the curriculum serves a similar function to the plot of a porno film, though the emphasis is on quite different pursuits. It isn't supposed to be realistic; it serves as a pretext to get the action going. If you take it seriously, you're in deep trouble.

The unyielding core

A well-designed modern curriculum is light, strong, moderately flexible, but hollow - something you can climb on safely, with interchangeable parts to meet special demands. It should resist abrasion and the ravages of a hostile climate, and be easy to keep clean. Core? Don't be silly; how could such a structure have a core?

Well, there is a sense in which it can, and in which the components of that core are very important, even though very few people really learn them, and even though their validity cannot be verified - which is essentially the position in which we find ourselves. These important components may have highly undesirable consequences as well as more beneficial ones; and in any particular cultural situation they will be very difficult to change by acts of conscious policy, even if they can be identified and labeled. Usually, though, the vital core of the curriculum is simply taken for granted. It is hidden, though usually not deliberately; but what I am discussing now is not what is usually called the hidden curriculum. That is a very loose term for what the school teaches its pupils simply by being what it is (which is more readily apparent than we sometimes like to think). The core I am talking about now is an aspect of the academic program, of the course of study, as distinct from the total curricular experience.

The school, by its course of study, establishes the categories of thought and official limits of what John Kenneth Galbraith has called "conventional wisdom." This is a much more important matter than the specific content of that curriculum. The schools may - and demonstrably do - avoid raising or even dealing directly with the most crucial questions that trouble the society that supports them; and they avoid the most complete or revealing answers to the questions they do raise. But that does not make the curriculum merely banal. For, in the process, it nevertheless establishes the proper way of dealing with questions deemed important: how you tell which questions are more important than others; what kind of record, datum, document, or witness constitutes evidence and lends authority.

All of this is antecedent to and more fundamental than even the most fundamental question. In North America, as perhaps nowhere

else in the world, for example, most people are Marxists - that is, economic determinists, who believe that policies can best be justified or motives explained in economic terms. As a result, not only politicians and industrialists, but ordinary people whose lives are full of drudgery and who should therefore know better, are impressed by almost any proposal for economic development that will, as the saying goes, "create jobs" - even though the jobs created are not only not worth doing, but actually harmful to the general welfare.

There exists no corresponding mechanism for asking what needs to be done, and how to organize for getting it done even though there is no way to turn a profit by doing it. Unless, of course, national security is involved. Poisonous water, unbreathable air, and a people who have totally given up supposing that they have a right to expect to make a place for themselves doing anything useful (that's why they're so grateful if jobs are created) - factors like these do not affect national security. They are, however, problems, and if they affect enough people seriously - like by leaving them obviously homeless or dead - a Royal Commission will be established to study whether the problem really exists. It will report its findings to Cabinet, which will decide which of them, if any, to make public.

None of this is new - that's one reason why the condition has become disgraceful - and it never was funny, though the Royal Canadian Air Farce has been saying such things for years. My point here is that the schools play an important part in teaching people to look at procedures like these as reasonable - and in such a way that no alternatives can be found. They teach children that the government is the instrument to turn to for dealing with their problems (even when schools don't identify the problems correctly) thus helping to suppress the alternative perception of government as a device establishing and maintaining the very conditions from which relief is sought. The curriculum, in short, is an ideological instrument; and ideology functions most effectively neither by lying nor by suppressing or concealing the truth; but by keeping the most important questions off the agenda altogether.

If this fails, the instrument functions by making sure that what is considered an authoritative answer is defined in advance in innocuous terms: by providing an automatic cut-in to declare that "more evidence is needed" as a policy is about to be formed; by denying standing to witnesses who aren't qualified experts with the right credentials; or by directing the search for answers to hypotheses that are just in the wrong part of the ball park for catching any fouls. This is not, of course, a function peculiar to the schools; it is shared by all ideological instruments. Poor Terry Fox is probably the best friend industrial pollution ever had. By his martyrdom, he has provided millions of dollars and invaluable publicity to be used in defining cancer as a medical problem, rather than as a political and economic problem. But school children, too, are taught to admire

him, and to contribute their Pepsi money to the fund.

A core of entrenched attitudes and small coin

So it goes. Some of the ideological factors that mould the core of the curriculum are so deeply rooted that they hardly lend themselves to illustration by applications to specific social issues; they undergird the whole structure. Consider, for example, the fact that core curricula rather seldom seek to integrate natural science with the traditional English and social studies, though the arts are often included as aspects of history or offshoots of culture. When science is included, it is likely to be included in a rather remarkable way, which gives it a unique authority; in fact, it is treated as the ultimate authority. Biological concepts may, for example, be introduced into sophisticated units on population; or physics may be used to put the energy crisis in perspective. What is hardly ever done is to consider the edifice of science itself as a social artefact, with its ritualized methodology and ceremonial obeisance to objectively determined evidence - whatever that might be. Science cannot really be integrated into the core curriculum because it is the dubious beneficiary of a kind of separation-of-powers doctrine. It's the court of last resort, and is treated respectfully as if it were above the conflict - like the Supreme Court, only more so (since the whole nation now knows that Bora Laskin mumbles).

Thomas S. Kuhn's classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is 20 years old now, too; and most of its critics have argued that Kuhn did not go far enough in his modest claims for the ideological character of scientific doctrine. Yet students are still taught that science stands above and is detached from social conflict; that scientific theories, however well established, may be destroyed and must be abandoned if they fail a single truly crucial test; and that science advances by induction from facts on which all qualified observers, whatever their relationship to the means of scientific production, must agree. The charisma of scientific method has a powerfully corrosive effect. Social and economic propositions are subject to refutation - as they should be - by contradictory evidence; but scientific generalizations can seldom be called into question by equally strong evidence of their ideological function. This just isn't the right kind of question to raise about scientific statements, whose authority is enhanced and even reified by their privileged place in the curriculum - a question quite distinct from, though hardly unrelated to their content.

Curriculum, then, certainly can and does have a core, but that core is composed of entrenched attitudes and predispositions, certain institutionalized habits of thought and perception, and a great many definitions. It also includes a mass of inaccurate information, inaccurately recalled, which serves as the small coin of daily

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discourse, though its inappropriate use leads by default to large political and social bills. This is the stuff of conventional wisdom, though not, usually, of delusion, because it is not really believed. Its function is not to deceive, but to allay doubt and still the voice of inquiry, or, failing that, to direct it into innocuous channels. Success in school, like the enjoyment of any drama, merely requires the willing suspension of disbelief. But the habit tends to become addictive.

A solid and noble core

Does this seem too cynical, or too despairing, or both? Perhaps. Anyway, let us assume for the moment that the issue is worth raising seriously, at least in principle. (I would not advise you to challenge me on the **substance** of this issue; that is, by trying to argue that any considerable proportion of people believe what they are intentionally taught in school, and continue to turn to this - it was supposed to prepare them to take their place in society, wasn't it, on the assumption that they were somewhere else already? - to meet the challenges of everyday life. You don't believe that yourselves, surely; and, as for me, I never, never went to school, which was doubtless bad for my character but very good indeed for the mind.) Let us agree, provisionally, that what is intentionally taught in school might be of great and lasting value in helping large proportions of young people to lead richer and more productive as well as more satisfying lives (even though it seldom if ever has been), if the curriculum had a solid and noble core of content; and see where this leads us.

We're in trouble, really, before we can even begin. Schools are expected, and so far as possible required, to do a lot of other things first; things that are not very compatible with helping large proportions of young people to lead richer, more productive, and more satisfying lives. Like separating them into winners and losers, and conditioning them for assimilation into a society in which most men lead lives of quiet desperation. We don't need to go into all that again, surely.

Again, then, let us beg that question by the usual sophistry, and proceed. "Richer, more productive, and more satisfying lives, within the limits imposed by the real world as it actually is, okay?" No, sorry. Not okay. We've already lost the Puritans who believe that a rich life cannot be satisfying; and the Buddhists, who believe that a satisfying life need not be, in our sense, productive and certainly cannot be rich. More to the immediate point, we've lost the millions of North American parents who, as John Holt so eloquently observes again in the introduction to his new book *Teach Your Own*, insist that the schools give their kids a hard time just so they'll know better than to expect anything more when they grow up. In many Canadian communities, a rich, productive, and satisfying life would be regarded as an affront to decent society. You can read about these

communities in the novels of Margaret Laurence; but the people who live there won't let you bring those books into the schools if they can stop you.

Accepting cultural hegemony

The problem isn't that they can stop you. In most communities they can't, finally; and anyway, opposition and conflict are wonderfully instructive in themselves and they toughen you up for the future.

No, the problem in designing a solid and noble corecurriculum is cultural relativism. I don't mean to imply that I am, or that I think you should be, too timid to make and cultural judgments. As teachers, this is our responsibility, or one of them. Those people who would bar Laurence's books from the schools are her cultural inferiors; I know that and so do they - that's one reason they act that way. Those mullahs and demonstrators in Iran seem awful to me, too; really gross, but here I'm a little less certain of my ground. They're violent and they're boring; but they aren't that much worse than the rest of what you see on TV every night, though they seem to be having some trouble developing their plot. Anyway, I doubt that the CRTC will go on letting them appear next season unless they arrange to include more Canadians in their show. Anne Murray, perhaps, saving the children, and René Simard for cultural balance.

Oh, we have a lot to offer; there's no doubt of that from any point of view. There's no problem about claiming that. The problem is that any such cultural judgment, however valid, is still derived from a particular cultural framework, and reflects and transmits the ideological basis of that culture. And this involves not only understanding and moral judgment, but power and cultural hegemony. I have absolutely no doubt that Shakespeare is a greater playwright than Racine or Molière - indeed, than Racine **and** Molière - and that many, perhaps most French critics would agree, since French literary criticism tends on the whole to be more profound than British. (But they might not, because their grounds tend to be narrower as well as deeper, and are also different.) It doesn't matter, though; and neither does the anti-French stereotype in plays like *Henry V*, which is too silly to be a problem even for a chauvinist in the original sense. The problem is the expansionist joy, the scale and range of Shakespeare, the evocative quality of the language, for those who share his tradition. It isn't a matter of precision, of *le mot juste*. A culture with Shakespeare at its core is just not going to be French. No way.

If I designed a core curriculum, setting aside my doubts and just asking myself what knowledge is of most worth, what qualities of insight are most precious, what values should be made clearest, what kinds of explanations of the world we live in make sense; my curriculum would be an American curriculum, even if I used only

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Canadian examples as I have largely done in this paper. We see the same issues differently: public order - how to keep it from getting out of hand; the government - how to keep it off your back, state or federal, and make it tell you what the hell it's doing; violence - when and how to use it, and for what. Americans differ, violently, in the positions they would take on these issues; but they start with no presupposition in favour of peace and order, and regard good government as a bad joke. It isn't that I can't learn the Canadian answers; it's that I can't ask the Canadian questions. They seem funny to me.

The same thing happens when English Canadians try to set up a curriculum for francophones, or French Canadians for anglophones. Not entirely, because there really is a Canadian nation that comprehends, in one sense at least, its two solitudes; but enough. School curricula are instruments of cultural hegemony, whether you want them to be or not. Sometimes, the obstacles to good, liberal praxis are so blatant you don't know whether to laugh or cry.

Peter McLaren's recent book *Cries in the Corridor* has been widely hailed as a moving account of the heroic though unsuccessful effort of an unusually sympathetic schoolteacher to bridge such a cultural gap, though in this case occasioned by class rather than separate-but-almost-equal ethnicities. On the whole, it deserves the praise it has received. McLaren really puts out for his poor, ghetto kids. He visits them at home, and describes to the reader the plastic plaques on the kitchen wall with messages like "Old fishermen never die; they just smell that way", and lampshades from Niagara Falls that simulate a waterfall when the light bulb heats them up. He tells of bringing his daughter, about a year younger than his own students, to his class; which puts on a display of pubescent dirty talk for her until he takes her down to the office and leaves her there for refuge. He doesn't criticize his pupils for their defects, he just lets you know what he was up against. In the process he also, perhaps inadvertently, lets you know (as we say) where he was coming from, and what they were up against. He's a wall, that man; he doesn't seem to have any doubts that the reader will agree that at least he was trying to be helpful. But I didn't. And I'm not sure l'honorable Camille Laurin would, either.

A well-designed core curriculum is a more efficient instrument of cultural hegemony by far than a conventional curriculum. I'd still favour it. If you're going to teach school, you might as well do it as well as you can. Although it must in the nature of things ultimately be transitory, cultural hegemony has its uses. The word hegemony after all, is Greek. The important thing is to remember who you're really working for, and not to expect the natives to think it's them and be grateful. You'd understand that easily, if you were a native yourself.

Illustrations in this issue

The drawings are by **Gentile Tondino**, an associate professor with joint appointment in the School of Architecture and the Faculty of Education at McGill University.

The photographs, from a photographic essay entitled "Openings", are by **Claire Dupuis**, a student who is just graduating from the Department of Education in the Arts as an Arts major at McGill University.

In the next issue

"Decline and Protest"

Planned for September, the third issue of this year will deal with the issues arising, wherever schools appear to be headed for closure, between parents, communities, and administrators of education.

The articles are contributed from universities across Canada by academics having a special interest and experience in such conflicts:

Peter Coleman, Simon Fraser University

Barry Lucas, University of Saskatchewan

Charles and Evelyn Lusthaus, McGill University

Norman Robinson, Simon Fraser University

Verner Smitheram, University of Prince Edward Island

Richard Townsend, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

