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# Deliberative Curriculum Theory: A call for action

## Abstract

*The paper argues that deliberative curriculum theorists have committed what Schwab has called the "flight upward from the field." In this they have conceptualized about curriculum deliberation rather than grounded their discussions in its practical aspects. This paper reviews both conceptual and empirical work in order to propose a research agenda grounded in the practical world of curriculum development.*

## Résumé

*L'auteur de cet article soutient que les théoriciens délibérants des programmes d'études ont commis ce que Schwab appelle "une fuite de bas en haut." Cela signifie qu'ils ont élaboré des concepts à partir de la délibération des programmes au lieu d'asseoir leurs débats sur ses aspects pratiques. L'auteur analyse à la fois les travaux conceptuels et empiriques pour proposer un programme de recherche qui a son assise dans le monde pratique de l'élaboration des programmes.*

When Schwab proclaimed the field of curriculum moribund in 1969, he was particularly concerned with the evident "flight upward" from the practical world of curriculum. He suggested that curriculum theorists were focusing on curriculum theory and neglecting the curriculum as practised in schools. Curriculum, according to Schwab, involved choice and action, not

just theoretical discussions. In subsequent papers, Schwab (1978a; 1978b; 1983) urged curriculum theorists to return to the practical by exploring deliberation as the means of making curricular choices and of serving the action required by the practical. He describes the deliberative process as one that

... treats both ends and means and must treat them as mutually determining one another. It must try to identify, with respect to both, what facts may be relevant. It must try to ascertain the relevant facts in the concrete case. It must generate alternative solutions. It must take every effort to trace the branching pathways of consequences which might flow from each alternative and affect the desiderate. It must then weigh alternatives and their costs and consequences against one another, and choose, not the right alternative, for there is no such thing, but the best one. (1969, p. 20)

Deliberative curriculum scholars reacted to Schwab's call for action by generating a great deal of conceptual work on the nature of deliberation. However, this literature has generally remained theoretical and has not been extensively employed in the curriculum work of schools described by Schwab. As Harris (1986) suggests:

The concepts formulated by Schwab, and others who have addressed similar themes, have appeared to hold great promise for productively redirecting curriculum work; they have intrigued us; they have been persuasive, particularly in light of the many documented failures of theory-based curriculum innovations. Why have they borne so little practical fruit? (p. 116)

This article attempts to return the discussion to the practical by reviewing the major tenets of deliberative theory, evident in the literature, as a means of delineating a research agenda grounded in curriculum practice.

### *The nature of problem identification*

A major focus of the deliberative process is to solve and take action on the practical problems that arise in the real world. A curriculum is developed, not to meet theoretical requirements, but rather as a response to practical problems. Reid (1978) suggests that the problem can be framed as a procedural problem or as an uncertain problem. Knitter (1985) describes the problem succinctly:

With procedural problems, the question of problem description and end is settled; the issue is the technical one of

how to achieve some limited end (What must I do?). With uncertain practical problems, there is no such limitation of description or end; the question is, 'What should I do?' (p. 388).

While Reid argues that curriculum problems are always uncertain problems, in practice curriculum problems are frequently viewed as procedural problems.

Practical problems are properly addressed through a process of deliberation which begins "with a concrete practical situation that disturbs us, such as distortion of subject matter, failure to achieve, boredom on the part of students or teachers, failure in the execution of tasks in society" (Fox, 1972). Problem identification, problem forming, and problem framing are starting points for deliberation. According to Fox (1972), "deliberation concerns itself with decisions and actions and is the means by which we develop and construct the curriculum" (p. 46). Fox suggests that curriculum development is an inherently deliberative process; but clearly whether or not curriculum developers deliberate depends on how they conceptualize their curriculum problem. If the curriculum problem is viewed as a procedural problem (Reid, 1978), then deliberation as described by Schwab is unlikely. When ends are not questioned, the scenario set out by Reid (1978) is more probable.

Theorists of a more technological bent have developed 'rational' curriculum planning to the point where the deliberative elements are relegated to insignificance, so that agreement on ends is treated as totally unproblematic and is separate from agreement on means which is to be arrived at through the application of sequence of predetermined moves. (p. 193)

Reid (1978) maintains there is an uncertain problem that asks, "What should I do?" An uncertain curriculum problem would focus on a question such as, "What should the curriculum include?" For deliberation to occur the problem must be conceptualized as an uncertain problem. The importance of questioning means as well as ends raises several issues that require further examination. First, what effect does scheduling the curriculum development process routinely into teachers' timetables have on their perception of the task? For the teachers involved the practical might mean the curriculum product and, therefore, the task becomes one of completing the design rather than posing questions and generating alternatives. Such a process lacks the critical reflection advocated by Roby (1985), and the resulting curriculum will reflect the developers' image without reflection upon that image. Consequently, the development process might focus on what "has been," not what "should be."

A second issue is whether the development process can be used as a means to reconceptualize the nature of the problem. If the problem was originally viewed as procedural, can the problem be reconceptualized, through involvement in the development process, as uncertain? If so, what strategies and group processes could facilitate this change?

### *The generation of alternatives*

The generation of alternative solutions to the posed curriculum problem is central to the deliberative process. Potential solutions are to be grounded in the four commonplaces of curriculum: milieu, teacher, student, and subject matter (Schwab, 1978a). Participants in the process are to formulate many alternative solutions without falling into such impeding habits as global mentality, pet formulations, either/or thinking, or "the lone ranger" approach described by Roby (1985). The generation of alternatives requires that participants go beyond their pet formulation to explore alternative solutions and, through this process, reformulate and modify the curriculum problem or problems. These solutions should be beyond "what is" to "what should be" (Knitter, 1985; Reid, 1978).

Whether or not the teachers involved perceive they can generate alternatives to existing practice and, therefore, make curriculum decisions is closely related to their perceived decision-making space, according to Smith (1983), who claims that:

Perceived curriculum decision-making operational space defines those decisions for which alternatives are still available for the teacher, and have not been made by other persons in the education system, as well as indicating the degree of flexibility there is available to the teacher in making those decisions for which he or she is responsible. (p. 29)

Teachers might not perceive that they have the jurisdiction or decision-making space to make the major curriculum decisions that might be required for uncertain problems. Additionally, do teachers perceive themselves as curriculum developers or do they perceive themselves as implementors of curricula developed by others? Decisions regarding teaching methodology might be considered within the decision-making space of teachers while decisions regarding the discipline of the subject matter or the curriculum rationale might be considered outside of the jurisdiction of teachers' decision-making space by the teachers involved. We need to understand, in greater depth, how teachers view the parameters of their curricular decision-making and how this perception influences the deliberative process.

### *Values*

The deliberative process as a rational and a value-based activity is particularly germane to framing problems and to generating alternatives. The word **rational** is not meant to suggest a linear, ends/means, systematic process as this is inherently contradictory to the intentions of deliberative theorists. Hannay, McCutcheon, Roth, and Weade (1983) clarify how rationality is interpreted in deliberative theory by suggesting that:

Perhaps by 'rational' and 'logical' Reid and others mean it is to be an intentional process and decision rather than haphazard; a reasoned, calculated judgment to proceed based upon warranted choices rather than an unreasoned, spontaneous move to action based upon habit or whim. (p. 9)

Reid (1979) further supports this contention by arguing that deliberation proceeds through practical reasoning:

A tradition of practical reasoning is built through extending, elaborating, and refining the criteria by which actions are to be justified, and showing how these criteria are to be weighted in practical situations. (p. 195)

Not only is the deliberation process to be rationally guided, but it must also be morally guided through people's well-intended commitment to solving problems. Scheffler (1973) maintains:

Practical thought attempts to answer such questions as 'How shall I act?' 'What should be done?' 'What course of action ought to be followed?' . . . it is clear that the aim of practical thought is not only the implementation, or even the expression, of specific decisions, but the formulation of more general intentions and prescriptions, embracing practical and moral principles. Such expressions and formulations guide decisions and, thereby, action. (p. 188)

Thinking about practical problems is to be rational and moral. Deliberative curriculum development is not value-free but it is rather a morally guided activity – the "should" advocated by Reid (1978) or the common good proposed by Donmoyer (1981).

The role of moral beliefs and values in effecting the deliberations might be extensive. Donmoyer (1983) documents the inability of the deliberators even to define their problem due to differences in the educational values they hold. He questions whether individuals can bracket their personal

beliefs sufficiently in order to reach a rational definition of the problem, let alone to find a commonly accepted solution. Walker (1978) notes the important role that individual and group platforms play in the development process. He defines platform as the system of beliefs and values brought to the process by individual curriculum developers. A platform includes a view of what the curriculum is and what it should be. Atkins (1986b) uses the five conceptions of curriculum developed by Eisner and Vallance (1974) to interpret the development sessions she observed. Through this analysis she is able to identify whether the individual curriculum developers advocated one of their five conceptions of curriculum: development of cognitive processes, academic rationalism, personal relevance, social adaptation and social reconstruction, and curriculum as technology. Atkins only describes how each of the participants evidenced beliefs rooted in one of these five conceptions. She does not analyze the impact of these different conceptions on the development process nor does she examine whether or not the conceptions changed through involvement in the process.

Individual values, conceptions, and perspectives might influence the deliberative process in several different ways. First, there is the obvious impact of individual curriculum orientations on problem-framing and alternative-generating. Second, there might be various orientations towards the curriculum development process itself. The participants in the Walker and Atkins studies volunteered to be members of a curriculum development committee and were not mandated through legal or administrative requirements to develop a curriculum. By volunteering, they demonstrated their willingness to be involved in the process. In public school situations, this curriculum membership might be mandated; therefore, differing orientations to the process might be evident. Further research is needed on how both the attitudes towards involvement in curriculum development and the curriculum orientations influence the process.

### *Personal practical knowledge*

Closely allied to the role of values and orientations in the deliberative process is the role of personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Elbaz, 1981). Reid (1978) refers to the stock of knowledge that each deliberator brings to the deliberative process while Walker (1978) emphasizes the importance of platform in the process. Inherent in these assertions is personal practical knowledge. Elbaz (1981) identifies three facets constituting personal practical knowledge: rules of practice, practical principles, and image. Rules of practice are recipes for what to do in certain situations while principles are broader views. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) suggest that:

By image we mean something within our experience, embodied in us as persons and expressed and enacted in our

practices and actions. Situations call forth our images from our narratives of experience, and these images are available to us as guides to future action. An image reaches into the past, gathering up experiential threads meaningfully connected to the present. And it reaches intentionally into the future and creates new meaningfully connected threads as situations are experienced and new situations anticipated from the perspective of the image. (p. 60)

As curriculum deliberation explores "what is" in order to examine "what should be," the personal practical knowledge of the individual becomes an integral component of the process. Personal practical knowledge will certainly influence individual problem framing, suggested alternatives, and habits. Further, the rules of practice, principles, and images of one participant will interact with those of the other participants. Further investigation is necessary on the impact that personal practical knowledge and interactions between the developers can have on curriculum deliberation. Ben Peretz and Tamir (1986) call for:

Further investigations in this line, preferably working as participant observers with curriculum developers, could conceivably uncover more about the expressions of personal practical knowledge in the curriculum development process and the extent to which differences in personal practical knowledge make a difference in the outcome of the developers' work. (p. 14)

### ***Growth through deliberation***

As the deliberative process is to be educative for participants (Pereira, 1984), growth should be a natural component of the process. Knitter (1985) suggests:

The occurrence of growth or education is probably as good a sign as any that deliberation truly honouring the practical character of an uncertain practical problem has taken place. (p. 390)

The growth is partially due to the reflection required in the deliberative process outlined by Roby (1985):

One aspect of it is self-criticism, which operates when deliberators take the time to perceive, criticize, and alter their own deeply felt preconceptions of the situations revealed in their pet or global formulations. (p. 30)

Involvement in a deliberative process presents opportunities for individuals to reflect upon their past practices and to formulate new conceptions of practice. Through reflection, individuals are involved in the act of appreciation which, according to Reid (1979),

...is educative in the way that deliberation is seen by Schwab as generally educative. People's minds are changed by the act of appreciation. They come to see things in new ways and therefore to change their views on what constitutes the facts relevant to judgment. Since appreciation is educative, it is a worthwhile activity in its own right, even if recommendations for action are ignored. (p. 200-201)

Deliberative curriculum development naturally addresses the two areas cited by Fullan and Park (1981) as potential barriers to change: teachers' beliefs and teaching methodology. Through deliberating on alternative approaches and solutions, those involved have the opportunity to engage in reflective professional dialogue about such issues. This discourse might raise consciousness regarding personal practical knowledge and foster individual growth. A focus warranting further research is whether deliberation can facilitate growth and change, and, if so, what strategies might encourage the process.

### *Spiral*

Deliberation is not a linear process, but it is rather "a spiral of meaning" (Roby, 1985). As Schwab (1983) suggests, "curriculum reflection must take place in a back-and-forth manner between ends and means. A linear movement from ends to means is absurd" (p. 241). Through reflection upon solutions, a problem is continually reformulated and reconstructed. Although the literature clearly establishes that deliberation is to be a spiral rather than a linear process, how the spiral functions in practice has not been fully explored or documented. Other accounts of actual deliberation would provide insight into how the different factors interact and interweave throughout the process, how the problem is reformulated, and what factors influence the process.

### *Contextually bound nature of deliberation*

As deliberative curriculum development responds to a practical problem, the process is contextually bound. Each setting contains individual actors who have their own preconceptions of what should be taught (Smyth, 1982); political realities that influence the process (Orpwood, 1985; Donmoyer, 1983); and the personal practical knowledge of the developers (Ben Peretz & Tamir, 1986). Curriculum development occurs in a specific



site, whether that site is a school department, a school, a school board, a province, or a nation. Deliberative curriculum development housed at any of these levels might have inherently different contextual factors operating. For instance, at the department or school level, it might be difficult for teachers to leave their typical state of isolation (Lortie, 1975) to interact collegially. In projects housed at the provincial or national level, it might be more reasonable to include subject matter or curriculum process expertise, but whether or not the deliberations can create a product applicable for classroom usage might be questionable. The poor success rate of the mass curriculum development projects suggests that these projects were unrelated to the practical as defined by teachers and schools. Generic curriculum development can facilitate deliberation but, perhaps, only school-based development can facilitate deliberation as the means of the practical. The influence of these contextual factors on the deliberative process has not been explored.

Both Schwab (1983) and Fox (1972) emphasize the importance of leadership in the process. According to Schwab, a curriculum chairman must skillfully employ the rhetorics of persuasion and elicitation; must be experienced in deliberation; must keep abreast of recent work as reported in learned journals; must assist the teachers involved in using these journals; must understand current and past curriculum practices within his country; and must possess knowledge about the behavioural sciences and the academic disciplines which constitute the subject matter of the school curriculum. Fox concentrates on the internal dynamics facilitated by the curriculum leader:

His first task is to maintain shifting emphases among subject matter, student, teacher, politics, and the limitations of money and time. He must decide when the introduction of further complexity will wreck the deliberation, and when the continuation of a line of argument will numb one or more members of staff. (p. 49)

The curriculum leader envisioned by Schwab and Fox would require highly sophisticated skills and knowledge in order to function in this capacity. This might curtail the possibility of deliberative curriculum development being widely adopted in public schools, as few teachers have had the opportunity to gain the necessary curriculum knowledge or to practise such skills in a collegial relationship. Further conceptual work and empirical research is necessary to determine the nature of the skills needed and the best way of helping practitioners learn to facilitate deliberation.

#### *The curriculum development committee*

According to Schwab (1983), the curriculum development committee is to include individuals representing the commonplaces: teachers, students,

the principal, school board or community member, subject matter specialist, and a curriculum process chairperson (Schwab, 1983). Through the process of deliberation:

All pool their ingenuities, insights, and perceptions in the interest of discovering the most promising possibilities for trial, rather than forming sides, each of which look only to the strengths of a selected one alternative, hence discarding any means of coming to a decision except eloquence and nose-counting. (p. 225)

Certainly, the committee composition advocated by Schwab (1983) would enhance the curriculum development process by ensuring the physical representation of the commonplaces. This would encourage the possibility of uncertain problem formation and of deliberation. However, if curriculum development is to be school-based rather than generic, it is questionable whether most school districts can form such committees, given the increasing amount of curriculum development required. Is this ideal committee to exist only in jurisdictions that can allocate significant funds to the development process? This suggests an elitist approach. In other jurisdictions isolated from major population centres, even if the funds were available, the human resources might not be. The commonplaces seem a natural way of conceptualizing and analyzing the development process. They represent such a powerful tool to assist in deliberation that they must be included formally in the development process even when it is not feasible to have each commonplace represented by an advocate. Deliberative theorists must explore other ways this could be accomplished.

### *The deliberative committee in action*

A related issue concerns the functioning of the curriculum development committee. The deliberative curriculum literature paints a picture of willing participation and a reasoned approach to decision-making. In the real world, many other tensions exist that might impede the process. Participatory decision-making could play a key role. The concern would be to reach a consensus without being ruled by the tyranny of the majority, and without damaging the integrity of the decisions as a result of compromise. Consensus, however, does not necessarily mean accepting the lowest common denominator, but it can represent a multitude of ideas coalescing together. In this sense, deliberation might be the process through which a creative consensus emerges (Hannay, McCutcheon, Roth, & Weade, 1983).

Whether or not coalescence occurs in practice is an interesting question to ponder. If deliberation groups hold multiple platforms, as advocated by Reid (1978), decision-making might prove difficult. Certainly, the findings of the previously discussed Donmoyer (1983) study lend

credence to this assertion. The role of power within the groups might be another detriment to participatory decision-making. Power could conceivably arise from many sources, for example, an individual's professional position, the cohesiveness of a subgroup, or the persuasive abilities of a participant. Such power could influence the group dynamics and, hence, the processes and outcomes of the development venture. Yet theorists writing about deliberation argue that while participants in the process may have differing and sometimes unequal roles, they are to be considered equal.

Although all members are to be treated equal in theory, whether this happens, or can happen in practice, is questionable. For instance, Orpwood (1983) maintains, in his study of a Canada-wide deliberative curriculum project, that there are distinctions between the roles of "internal" and "external" stakeholders. Internal stakeholders are held directly accountable, politically and educationally, for curriculum decisions. Whether these individuals are willing or able to share decision-making is a crucial issue. Further, Donmoyer's (1983) study documents that teachers and the administrators were not willing to share real decision-making with other participants, such as parents. If participatory decision-making is not the accepted manner of deliberations or if restraints exist that might hamper this manner of operation, it might be questionable whether consensus can be the *modus operandi*. This issue warrants further empirical research.

### *Empirical research*

Empirical research into deliberation as practised in various contexts is still in its infancy. The scarcity of such research is a major concern to those interested in exploring the possibilities deliberative theory might hold for improving curriculum practice (Atkins, 1986b; Harris, 1986; Orpwood, 1985; Pereira, 1984; Roby, 1985). Harris (1986) has raised several concerns regarding the accounts of deliberation that do exist. She is concerned that Roby (1978), Siegel (1975), and Schwab (1969) all report single-person deliberations when deliberation is ideally to occur in a group. The failure of Fox (1972) and Walker (1971) to demonstrate the spiral nature of deliberation is the second concern cited by Harris. Further, deliberation is to be concerned about the practical but, as Harris notes, Siegel and Schwab deliberate on hypothetical – not real – cases.

Even the studies that have been conducted do not always focus on curriculum development for public schools. Walker's (1971, 1975, 1978) seminal study investigated how Elliot Eisner and his graduate students went about developing curriculum for the Kettering Foundation. A more recent study conducted by Atkins (1986a, 1986b) examined how a group of college teachers developed an interdisciplinary curriculum and then how they

reflected upon the curriculum-in-use. The participants in both of these important studies are academics who might be naturally oriented to the levels of discourse required in a deliberative mode.

Kennedy, Sabar, and Shafri (1985) report on an Australian study and an Israeli study both of which were based on Walker's Naturalistic Model. The participating teachers were released from teaching duties to attend a course on deliberative curriculum development and were to develop the curriculum during this course. However, neither of these studies has reported the data on the practice of deliberation.

It seems that if deliberative theory is to be advocated for general curriculum use, then further research into how deliberation is practiced in schools is warranted. Pereira (1984) argues for:

... modest generalizations which are capable of modification and adaption to a variety of circumstances... They are more likely to come from theory which has been grounded in relatively detailed consideration of the full array of factors implicated in one or at most a few educational situations. (p. 364)

Harris (1986) also calls for more accounts of actual deliberation, not in order to design procedures, but so strategies can be developed to allow deliberation to "take on the features of a 'craft', characterized by established practice, modified by idiosyncratic techniques" (p. 130).

### *The call for action*

Research investigating deliberation as practised in school settings is needed to address some of the issues raised in this article. How do deliberators identify problems, generate alternatives, and reflect upon their existing practice? How are these factors enacted in different educational contexts, with different committee compositions, and different group dynamics? How does the participants' personal practical knowledge influence the curriculum development process (Ben Peretz & Tamir, 1986)? Can involvement in the deliberative process be educative for the participants? Research reports need to portray the dynamic nature of deliberation by documenting how the various factors interweave to form a spiral of meaning (Roby, 1985). Only by investigating these concerns can those interested in deliberative curriculum theory begin to develop the modest generalizations called for by Pereira (1984) and develop the aspects of craft advocated by Harris (1986). Unless these issues are further explored empirically, deliberative curriculum theory will remain firmly in the theoretic, and not grounded in the practical, as advocated by Schwab.

This literature review was conducted as part of a study funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Grant # 410-85-0531.

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