

The Standards Made Me Do It:

Reculturing Teacher Education to Redeem the Curriculum

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Abstract

This article discusses a common lament heard from education students: “But that’s what the standards say we have to do!” This paper will address the need to create teacher education pedagogies that help teachers disentangle standards from curriculum.

Our students exemplify a technical mindset, one that supposes teaching is primarily the selection and implementation of best practices, therefore reducing curriculum to a synonym for standards.

We believe that education pedagogies rooted in the spirit of the liberal arts are needed, instead of those rooted in professional studies. Teacher education must be reimagined, a movement away from training and toward education (Eisner, 2002). The Foundations of Education provide an alternative metaphor: An approach that, “understands education as other than a technical enterprise of means-ends reasoning capable of being packaged as a consumer product” (Quantz, 2013, p. 177). The Foundations provide a conceptual scaffold for teacher education curriculum across disparate courses.

Crime Scene: The classroom was silent; a pin drop could be heard. Not a word escaped the victim's mouths as they peered zombie-like at computer screens in front of them, mindlessly clicking buttons. Week in and week out, routine had become to sit in uncanny silence while completing practice test after practice test. Classroom teachers have become the surprising criminal in this setting, giving up precious class time for the sake of standardization—a sterile and drab environment. Teachable moments sacrificed for the sake of the extra point gain on standardized testing. Valuable resources and teaching time redirected, all for the sake of teaching to the test. Yellow crime scene tape had taken the form of generic computer print offs stating, “TESTING DO Not DISTURB!!” which consequently warned the unsuspecting passersby to leave the area undisturbed.

So many teachers, unaware, participate in this heinous and unmerited practice without even a hint of questioning. Scripted classroom curricula sold under the guise of being mapped to standards are placed in innocent teachers' hands. Standardized testing, used to rank and sort, are required administered once a year and results are used to score teacher performance. Teachers resort to drill and kill techniques to teach the content encountered on these tests. They replace real classroom teaching with memorized and paced scripts with the hope of better student performance on the tests. Teaching becomes dumified, minimized to generic statements crafted by others, often by folks who have not spent time in classroom settings.

Teachers – when called out on their decision to relinquish their critical thinking rights to scripted curricula and an overabundance of standardization – cry, “But, that's what the standards say we have to do!”

In our current roles as teacher educators, in response to our students' lament, we ask: Why is it this way? Why is forming a pedagogy of critique so difficult? What factors are needed

to catapult pre-service teachers into deep and critically thought provoking practice? How can we empower future teachers to resist committing educational crimes in the name of fulfilling standards? In what follows, we engage these questions further.

Effects and Causes

As teacher educators, we (the authors) hear the exasperated, “Standards made me do it” refrain regularly from our students. Our student teachers often exemplify what we believe is a common issue facing teachers in today’s standards-driven educational contexts: a technical mindset, one that supposes teaching is primarily, or what is more troubling, *merely* the selection and implementation of best practices, therefore, reducing curriculum to a synonym for standards. Indeed, this technical discourse is the governing discourse in education writ large, especially policy focused toward teacher education, in this era of accountability.

The result, in the lived reality of these interns’ classroom experience, is that their own education—including their preparation *as teachers*—has betrayed them. They often experience an existential dissonance when the techniques (classroom management, content strategies, or otherwise) they have been taught fail and when the standards they have attempted to directly teach are not met. The result is a sense of failure and a commensurate disempowerment. One can make a powerful argument that this is exactly the point of the current “reform” movement—to create a deskilled and deprofessionalized class of teachers, who are consequently inexpensive, interchangeable, and expendable. Current teachers worry about being fired and future teachers worry about never being hired if they dare to deviate from prescribed curricula. How might we teacher educators help our students (future teachers) to liberate the curriculum from standards, and in the process liberate teachers from the technicist discourse governing their teaching lives?

Teacher education programs are often complicit, unfortunately. Education theorist Richard Quantz argues,

At universities the *education* of teachers has been replaced by the *training* of teachers. Today, teachers are trained to take their place as educational engineers to monitor and modulate the progress of students from their given start to their given end.... [T]heir teachers have been trained as little more than technicians. (Quantz, 2013, p. 177)

In fact, our department even refers to student teachers as “interns,” evident of corporate professional discourse. Increasingly, licensure wags the dog. Nearly all the courses we offer in our education program—even at our liberal arts college—exist to fulfill state (and accreditor, i.e. “market”) mandates. And, we devote a great deal of time and energy as faculty to attending meetings to learn about policy projects for which we have neither input nor control. Even as we write this, our department faculty are engaged in hours of online “trainings” to certify our competence with the Danielson Framework for Evaluation, which of course detracts time we could devote to the actual observation and mentorship of student teachers. Frustratingly, we spend little of our time engaging questions about the true educational merits of our practices, never mind questions of ultimate significance (Purpel, 1989) one might expect a liberal arts college to engage.

David Purpel (1989) refers to the collapse of teaching into mere technique, along with neglect or evasion of sociocultural critique, as symbolic of the trivialization of education (p. 2-3). As Purpel argues, “it is techniques themselves that have come to be revered rather than that which has ultimate significance” (1989, p. 56). In our experience, teacher education students are rarely asked to consider issues of ultimate significance. On the contrary, teacher education typically demoralizes and depoliticizes—anesthetizes—its curriculum. Methods courses,

assessment courses, and educational psychology courses dominate the curriculum alongside “rigorous” content mandates. Few, if any, of these classes have as even a secondary purpose to consider moral dimensions of education. Few would allow for any conception of the “sacred,” to borrow Purpel’s metaphor. Curriculum has been reduced to a commodity, a package, a “thing” to be used and consumed, rather than as something to be contemplated and deliberated. This commodity is embodied in the narrative that opens this article. How do we undo that?

A reculturing (Joseph, 2011) of curriculum is necessary. “[C]urriculum must be conceptualized as an undertaking that encompasses inquiry and introspection” and to “reflect on our beliefs and actions and to engage in a vigorous discourse about moral and social visions for education” (Joseph, 2011, p. 3). Joseph (2011) continues:

Educators who understand the moral purposes of their work think about curriculum as dynamic. They do not refer to curriculum as an object or commodity but understand curriculum as a process of creating a rich and meaningful course of study that integrates their knowledge of pedagogy, scholarship in the academic disciplines, educational research, and learners’ and families’ needs and interests. (p. 37)

Consequently, teacher education pedagogies rooted in the spirit of the liberal arts rather than professional studies are needed. We must redeem teacher education! Redemption (following Purpel’s “sacred” metaphor) means moving away from training and toward education (Eisner, 2002; Quantz, 2011) to liberate curriculum by disentangling curriculum from standards and privileging curriculum inquiry.

Redeeming Curriculum: Foundations as a Guiding Metaphor

The Foundations of Education provide an alternative metaphor by which to conceive curriculum: An approach that “understands education as other than a technical enterprise of

means-ends reasoning capable of being packaged as a consumer product” (Quantz, 2013, p. 177). The Foundations provide a conceptual scaffold for teacher education that defies training. That is, it is not a class but an approach that privileges “reading the world” as a framing discourse—an ontology/epistemology for the teacher—and so a teacher education curriculum that embodies the Foundations across disparate courses. Additionally, Foundations as metaphor rejects an additive approach, which marginalizes foundational study to a mere class (or two). Rather, it privileges interpretive, normative, critical dispositions infused throughout (and foundation for) the teacher education curriculum (Council for Social Foundations of Education, 1996). In opposition to technical, skill-oriented teacher “training,” which focuses on narrow how-to and selection and application of best (most efficient) technique, foundations of education as metaphor requires a moral, political, critical orientation. To resist the hegemonic professional orthodoxy, “The education we offer our candidates should engage them in the best the liberal arts tradition has to offer: reflective self-discernment as well as critical cultural understanding” (Liston, Whitcomb, and Borko, 2009, p. 107).

Without the normative and critical imperative that Foundations provides, and which the liberal arts invigorates, we might merely be advocating a re-application of technical teaching. That is, there is the possibility that we simply replace one form of technical teaching—embodied by scripted curricula—with a slightly less constricted one that simply requires selecting from one technique over another. Even if the latter requires more “critical” thinking, in that it requires the discerning and selection from two possible alternatives, it does not inherently include the normative, that is, considerations of what *ought* to be. In short, what we advocate, and what foundations as metaphor requires, is *curriculum wisdom*. Henderson and Kesson describe *curriculum wisdom* as a “particular kind of educational decision making” that includes both this

second, more complex technical, or practical, reasoning, and a normative decision making: “At this deeper level, the problem solving becomes infused with critical and imaginative insights. The search for a practical resolution is transformed into the aspiration to advance a critically informed moral vision” (Henderson and Kesson, 2004, p. 8).

Teacher-students (future teachers as well as current) must devote themselves to inquiry into pedagogy as a moral and political practice and to casting visions of (democratic) public life—in short, become transformative public intellectuals. They must critically construct representations of their teacher-selves. And they must understand and advocate for physical, political-economic, and social ecologies that empower their students’ learning.

Education Department Conceptual Framework

How do we, the authors, empower our students within the contexts of our own settings, given the aforementioned convictions? One thought is to begin with a close examination of practice, which moves into careful consideration of mission, value, and practice and then a critical alignment of these elements. It is our hope that our values under the umbrella of our education department and our teaching actions truly exemplify who we are and the desired outcome of liberated teaching professionals who practice a pedagogy of critique. The examination begins with an exploration of our mission and values. These are taken directly from our departmental handbook, which grounds who we are in the classroom.

The Education Department at The College of Idaho strives to be an educative learning community. The conceptual framework of our programs is one based on John Dewey’s understanding of educative experiences that encourage personal and community growth (Dewey & Archambault, 1964). In our community students are provided with a reflective, caring environment so that the process of becoming a teacher can be explored. It is a community where

students are offered a vision of schooling that promotes and helps create to a more just and democratic society.

- ***Community of Learners:*** An educative learning community counters the image of the teacher as a “technician” with one of the teacher as an active participant in issues that affect the larger educational community (Apple & Beane, 2007). Rather than avoid a discussion of values, this perspective advocates the necessity of such discussions, because teaching is, at its core, a value-laden enterprise (Goodland, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990). The program, based upon students who learn and grow together, encourages ongoing conversations about meaningful issues central to a liberal arts education.
- ***Critical and Caring Pedagogy:*** An educative learning community takes the position that a hopeful, democratic future depends upon educators committed to emancipatory education (Giroux, 1997). It reflects Landon Beyers’ description of an emancipatory curriculum in teacher education as one designed to emphasize the following: equal access to knowledge, images of human equality, development of a “critical consciousness,” self-reflectivity, creativity, cultural acceptance, moral responsibility, democratic empowerment, and a pedagogy of caring (Beyer & Apple, 1998). It affirms Nel Noddings’ belief that, for schools to be true centers of learning, they must embrace caring in all its forms—care for self, for intimate others, for associates and acquaintances, for distant others, for nonhuman animals, for plants and the physical environment, for the human-made world of objects and instruments, and for ideas (Noddings, 2005).
- ***Constructivist Learning:*** An educative learning community takes a constructivist perspective toward classroom practice in which learning is seen as active, purposeful, and generated from within. This perspective, rooted in Piagetian principles of development

and drawing on Vygotsky (Tryphon & Voneche, 1996), extends the notion of the construction of knowledge from one that is primarily an individualized and internal process to one that more comprehensively encompasses social foundations of thinking (Bruner, 1986). In this view, knowledge is not only embedded in socio-historical and socio-cultural elements, but is actually generated through shared interactions and individual internalization (Wertsch, 1991). (College of Idaho Education Department Handbook, 2014, pp. 4-5)

Education Department Program Structure

Students enrolled in teacher preparation at the College of Idaho have the following programmatic options:

- Undergraduate Interdisciplinary Studies for Elementary Precertification Major.
- Undergraduate Secondary Education Precertification Minor.

(Note that both undergraduate programs are pre-licensure. Students must complete the 5th year student teaching placement and coursework, and pass Praxis exams in two licensure areas, to earn the department's Institutional Recommendation for Licensure).

- The 5th Year Internship Teacher Certification program (elementary or secondary)
 - With the option to add The Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT)
- Bilingual/ENL endorsement programs
 - With the option to add The Master of Education: Curriculum & Instruction

(The conceptual framework and additional program details are available in the Education Department Handbook online at <http://www.collegeofidaho.edu/education-handbook>).

This structure aligns with our conceptual framework, college-wide curricular requirements, and state mandates; though we are mindful about whether and how the program

meets the educational needs of our students as future teachers. The aforementioned mission, conceptual framework, and program offerings drive our process. Each member of our education department believes in these core values. We strive to live them out in our teaching practice. We believe that our programs, based in these elements, encourage teachers to think critically, to establish community, and teach using constructivist values. The conundrum we have encountered – despite such clarity in program and values – is that teachers, including us, fall prey to the devouring demise of *the standards made me do it....* We have what we think is a good program structure, yet we are faced with graduates who struggle to negotiate standardization through a pedagogy of critique. We, in the role of teacher educators, need to double back and see if this is true across our curriculum. We need to assess our own practices in light of this metaphor and work to redeem teacher education curriculum.

The stakes are high. Teacher educators must, as Paulo Freire claims, “come to see how the domesticating power of the dominant ideology causes teachers to become ambiguous and indecisive, even in the face of blatant injustice” (Darder, 2002, p. 38).

To this extent, we, the authors, desire to be part of the action in our own work. This marks the beginning of our critical exploration of our own practices – this makes the place in which we seek to establish, support, change, align, refine, our practices as we work to prepare and support teachers in the spirit of a liberal arts education – an outcome that does not produce the status quo or cookie cutter teacher replicas who are a mere reflection of what is the current face of education. Rather, we seek teacher education as a pedagogy of critique – unique, impactful, and true to our mission!

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