



# The ambivalence of subject-focused curriculum inquiry: the case of history education research in Australia

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This paper investigates the problem of ‘curriculum’ in subject-focused inquiry. It explores, what appears to be, the ambivalent relationship between curriculum inquiry as a distinct field of research, and the study of school subjects (Englund 2015). The paper will focus on studies into school History education as its case. If the existence of a special interest group (SIG) in the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE)—Australia’s peak ‘general’ body for educational research—represents a meaningful organisational unit for educational research in Australia, then the absence of a generic SIG for curriculum inquiry at AARE presents a clear justification for exploring curriculum scholarship within specific subject-area domains (which do exist as SIGs). It is acknowledged, of course, that the historical formation of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) may be the reason for there being no generic curriculum SIG in AARE.

The reason for selection here of the case of History education research specifically is mostly autobiographic, given that this is the academic subject domain in which I have pursued my own curriculum inquiries. Though one might also expect History educators to be sensitive to the historical development of their research field/s, and thus have something to say about the field of curriculum inquiry. Certainly, the concerns expressed in this paper, and the vignettes I share, are part of my autobiographical journey as a ‘curriculum scholar’ (including the ambivalences I have experienced) writing, supervising, and examining in the field of (History) curriculum studies. These autobiographical examples are deliberate, signalling my own sympathies for the reconceptualist agenda in curriculum inquiry, and its well-known ‘definition’ of curriculum as the course of one’s educational experience. I also express a sympathy for the argument put forward by du

Preez and Simmonds (2014), and Pinar (2007), that Curriculum Studies should not be a spectator sport, and requires participation in conversations about its disciplinarity for its intellectual advancement. I take up this provocation referencing some initial analysis I have made of publicly available Australian doctoral theses from the millennium to the present (2000–2016), that are concerned with History curriculum (or some aspect of it) as an object of study, to explore the ways in which curriculum inquiry is addressed within the subject-specific domain of History curriculum research. I will conclude by offering some thoughts on what appears to be challenges for scholars working within the enterprise called variously, curriculum studies, curriculum inquiry and curriculum theorising.

## Confessions of a curricularist

The first decade or more of my academic work probably always sat within the field of curriculum inquiry. However, this was not always clear to me. In fact, I remember struggling in the late 1990s to locate my Honours work on Vygotskian pedagogical discourse, unsure if it best fit the category of philosophy of education, critical psychology or something I understood as post-critical pedagogy (Green 2018; Lather 1995). The use of the term ‘curriculum’ was noted by its absence. I was much more comfortable with ‘pedagogy’ as a primary signifier. Perhaps because of my own trajectory as a martial arts instructor, I had always been committed to theory as something that should be embodied on the mat, and ‘pedagogy’ seemed to capture this best, despite what was an obvious focus in my work on what I would later understand, after Popkewitz (2001), as ‘curriculum discourse’ (Parkes 2011). At the time, ‘curriculum’ seemed to signify something more bureaucratic (specifically school-focused), and less dynamic than pedagogy. I later came to sense this as a problem of the way that curriculum was conceptualised in New South Wales, my home state, with its strong commitment to curriculum-as-

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institutional-text (Pinar et al. 1995); a position intensified by the emergence of the Australian Curriculum.

It really wasn't until a few years later, when completing my doctoral studies, that I came to identify as a curriculum scholar. The catalyst was a challenge from Bill Green (who had been reading a draft of my doctoral work as a 'critical friend'). Bill asked me to articulate why I thought it was okay to incorporate the use of speculative fiction in my curricula analyses, and in typical fashion provided me with a few key readings I might draw on to consider all the options. Gough's (2003) use of fiction as a 'diffractive lens' assisted me to answer this provocation, along with the rest of the body of reconceptualist curriculum scholarship Bill shared, allowing me to comfortably own the 'curriculum' word I had been avoiding—a discovery which, among other things, accelerated my doctoral progress. One of the insights that emerged for me from this reading was the idea that curriculum really represented the course of one's educational journey. On that journey, I came to see pedagogy as those encounters along the way that could be identified as significant 'pedagogical moments' on my curriculum trajectory (Diagram 1).

### Curriculum inquiry as a null topic in higher degree research training

One reason for my early ambivalence towards 'curriculum' can be explained by the absence of attention to curriculum inquiry in educational research textbooks, and most higher degree research (HDR) training. In commonly used textbooks, one finds a lot of general social science method and methodology applied to the education field. Curriculum (as 'official text') may be touched upon as an object of study, but curriculum inquiry is typically neglected as methodology, let alone as a 'discipline'. This could, of course, be said about policy analysis, educational philosophy and many other areas, unless you turn to specialised texts. Nonetheless, I think it is important to recognise that curriculum inquiry is often a null topic in HDR training, despite the 'central' position of curriculum to the enterprise of education; and this is not a unique problem for the Australian field. During 2013, as a visiting scholar at a university in Sweden, I encountered doctoral students interested in pursuing curriculum studies, who either comfortably utilised empirically oriented social science

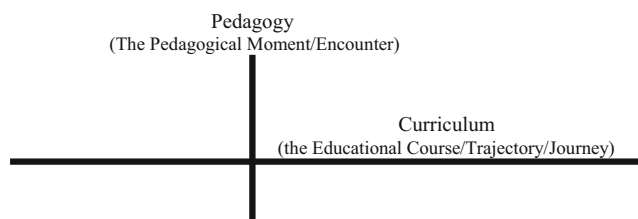


Diagram 1 Relationship between Curriculum and Pedagogy

methods and methodology, or were struggling. Typically, the only dissertation structure students are introduced to is the scientific report-style format of 'introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, conclusion,' despite the existence of alternative 'argumentative' structures typical of curriculum history, for example. This provoked an immediate interest in what curriculum inquiry looked like in subject-specific curriculum dissertations. I wondered whether the authors acknowledge the curriculum theories they adopt? Whether they conceive of the field of curriculum inquiry (if at all), and their place in it? Given postgraduate researchers are the largest group involved in educational research within Australia (Holbrook et al. 2000), the research they produce is significant in its formation of the research field. O'Connor and Yates (2010) agree that the dissertation literature is important because it often provides a 'significant linkage' between the academy and the field, given that many postgraduate researchers in education continue to work as teachers, and are therefore 'well placed to be the sources of new ideas and developments' (p. 130). However, they identify classification of curriculum scholarship as a methodological problem.

Studies of curriculum scholarship internationally have concluded that the practice of 'curriculum theorizing is not singular but . . . multiple, fractured and contested' (Wright 2000), composed of 'theoretical ambiguities' and lacking 'rigorous disciplinarity' (du Preez and Simmonds 2014, p. 1), with conceptions and cultures of curriculum varying, often dramatically (Joseph et al. 2000). While I am sympathetic to Pinar's (2004, p. 487) admonishment that '[c]urriculum discourse should be marked by richness, diversity, discordant voices, fecundity, multiple rationalities, and theories', this does raise questions about the selection criteria used for inclusion and exclusion of scholarship within the field. The researcher's own cognitive map of the field is likely to influence how the field is constructed in any scholarship on 'the field' itself. With this caveat articulated, I located 11 PhD, 1 EdD and 3 Masters theses available as fulltext manuscripts in the Australian National Library's TROVE database for the period 2000–2016, that I identified as some form of curriculum scholarship on History education. Topics ranged over studies of how teachers address specific curricular topics, textbook representations, historical thinking, curriculum change, curriculum enactment, history and postmodernism, historical fiction, historical knowledge and transnational influences.

Classifying each of these History education dissertations in relation to the curriculum theories they adopted proved more difficult than first thought. Over the decades, various attempts have been made to classify curriculum scholarship. Huebner (1966/1999) identified five value systems that defined the different varieties of curriculum scholarship: the *technical*, *political*, *scientific*, *aesthetic* and *ethical*. Kliebard (1987) identified curricularists as, respectively, *mental disciplinarians*, *social efficiency experts*, *developmentalists*

or *social meliorists*. More recently, Schiro (2013) identified the orientations of curricularists as *academic (disciplinary)*, *techno-rational*, *student-centred* or *social reconstructionist*. For the purpose of my comments here, I have adopted the scheme put forward by Ted Aoki (2005), which defines curriculum scholarship as *empirical-analytic*, *situational-interpretive* or *critical-theoretical* (Table 1).

The tendency of the situational-interpretive theses was to cite authors such as Colin Marsh, Lee Shulman and Joseph Schwab. The critical-theoretical theses were divided between: ‘critical’ orientations (3), mostly drawing on Michael Apple and Henry Giroux; and ‘reconceptualist’ orientations (2) typically with an over-arching poststructural orientation. The sole empirical-analytic thesis and all three Masters theses, as well as one doctoral thesis (from the situational-interpretive group), noticeably ignored the curriculum inquiry field altogether in favour of situating the scholarship exclusively within History Education, Asian Studies, Educational Leadership or Civics & Citizenship Education literature. Across the board, Ivor Goodson was the most frequently cited curriculum scholar, arguably because of his argument that ‘social histories of school subject[s] need to be undertaken in national and local milieux’ (Goodson 1992, p. 25). This was typically used to sanction the focus on case-studies of state (and national) curricula change. Only one thesis (from the situational-interpretive group) was located by its author in the German *Didaktik* tradition.

## Conclusion: disciplining curriculum inquiry

Engagement with curriculum studies, curriculum inquiry or curriculum theory, as a research field with its own history and disciplinarity was uneven in the theses examined. While the majority comfortably located themselves in the domain-specific literature of History education (or an allied field), the engagement with the curriculum inquiry field varied, and was absent at the Masters and Professional Doctorate level. If disciplinarity is important to the advancement of curriculum studies, as Pinar (2007) argues, then this is something to be addressed. As a snapshot of contemporary History curriculum studies in Australia, this study suggests an ambivalent relationship between the subject-discipline and curriculum inquiry, at least until the PhD level. In Pinar’s (2007) terms, this

**Table 1** Curriculum theory orientation of Australian History Education Theses (2000–2016)

	PhD	EdD	Masters	Total
Empirical-analytic	–	1	–	1
Situational-interpretive	6	–	2	8
Critical-theoretical	5	–	1	6

revealed an over-emphasis on ‘horizontality’ or the analysis of ‘present circumstances’ including ‘the social and political milieux’ (p. xiv), and a neglect of ‘verticality’ or the ‘intellectual history of the discipline’ through which its disciplinarity is/was formed (p. xiii). This raises the question about what we understand as curriculum inquiry or curriculum theorising. If pedagogy can be thought of as the process of knowledge production (Lusted 1986), and curriculum is concerned with problems of reproduction and representation (Green 2018), then a major function of curriculum inquiry is to theorise processes of knowledge production and organisation, or disciplinarity itself, and without this dimension, it might be better to be described by some other signifier.

The above are not the only noticeable issues in the curriculum scholarship in the subject-specific field of History education. In particular, there appears to be a general lack of engagement with the European (German-inspired) *Didaktik* tradition. This is not unique to the Australian context, and nor is it exclusively a problem for History education, but seems to be a more general issue in Anglophone curriculum scholarship, despite some attempts to bring the traditions together (Englund 2015; Hamilton and Gudmundsdottir 1994). The *Didaktik* tradition starts from the assumption that ‘curriculum content is always socially constructed and may be the result of struggling social forces that pave the way for different interpretations, resting on different political and ideological visions’ (Englund 2015, p. 52). These competing interpretations of the subject are understood to underpin unique formations or manifestations of school subjects within the classrooms of individual teachers. It is at this point that curriculum and pedagogy converge in a ‘complicated conversation’ (Pinar 2004) that involves both the formation of the subject and the students’ understanding of the same, and the self-formation of the teacher, which can only benefit from interactions between the Anglophone Curriculum and Germanic *Bildung*-inspired *Didaktik* traditions.

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