

# Family traditions and cultural



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What is curriculum theory? New York A Complicated Conversation with William Pinar: A Reader Response to “ From Autobiography to Allegory”  
Published: November 5, 2011 Posted in: Curriculum Theory Projects William Pinar (2011): “ To understand curriculum as complicated conversation, I invoke the concept of ‘ allegory. ’ It is, in my usage, interrelated with ‘ reconstruction,’ as each reactivates the past in order to find the future.

To reconstruct means to ‘ establish or assemble again...” (49). Alyssa: Establish or assemble again.... k, I am in Grammy’s house, she is in her chair, we are drinking tea, or playing cards, yes, if I am going to establish or assemble again, I may as well go back to when she could see, we are sitting, drinking tea and playing cards. Then I’m in Nova Scotia, in Grandmere and Grandpere’s kitchen, and Grandpere is sitting in his rocking chair by the fire, telling me a story about when he was a teacher, about his students, about when the twins were born, asking me about my school, my life, remembering my name, remembering my last visit and eating chocolate-coated digestive cookies because that is what we always did.

William Pinar (2011): “ It is important to note that my conception of ‘ reconstruction’ contrasts with its usages in historiography, that is, aiming to reconstruct the past ‘ as it was’... (50). Alyssa: What?!?! But, reconstructing the past is reconstructing the past! I want to reconstruct the past! I want to be in Grammy’s living room, or talking to Grandpere when he remembered my name! You said I could reconstruct the past, you told me I could, and now you are telling me that I can’t... Almost word for word, this was my experience reading Chapter 2, “ From Autobiography to Allegory”, in William Pinar’s What is Curriculum Theory?

After reading the first part of the chapter, outlining the concept of autobiography and its significance to curriculum theory and to the self, I found myself daydreaming about the past. In no time, I was in my recently deceased Grandmother's presence again, or imagining the lucid state of my Grandfather, now suffering from dementia and residing in a nursing home. I was happy in these memories. Then William Pinar continued talking and ruined my state of happiness. So, I complained. I told him how angry I was at him, how happy I had been that I found validation for living within these past memories and how he ruined it for me.

It was at this moment that I recognized that somehow without even realizing it, I had entered into a complicated conversation with William Pinar. Pinar (2011) describes a complicated conversation as a ...conversation in which interlocutors are speaking not only among themselves but to those not present, not only to historical figures and unnamed peoples and places they may be studying, but to politicians and parents dead and alive, not to mention to the selves they have been, are in the process of becoming, and someday may become (43).

My conversation included myself, past and present, William Pinar, my deceased Grandmother, and the past version of my Grandfather. Furthermore, the simple act of writing this paper brings you, the readers into the conversation as well. According to these terms, I would classify it as a ' complicated conversation. ' The more I delved into this thought, the more I realized how often I find myself entering into this kind of dialogue.

Whether I am sitting on the bus, playing out a conversation with the person next to me based on the book they are reading, or sitting in the classroom

discussing the response to a question based on the views of many a theorist, former teacher, or famous celebrity, or planning and imagining lessons plans for my future students based on something I am experiencing in the present day, or something I have experienced in the past, these are the voices, both real and imagined, continuously flowing through my thoughts.

For the most part, these would be deemed daydreams, unwanted and unwelcomed imaginings in a classroom, or any setting where productive work is expected. But, according to Pinar, they are, instead, complicated conversations of curriculum. In following with the method of *currere*, the running of the course, they are a necessary part of understanding the curriculum through the understanding oneself (Pinar, 2011, pp. 44). By allowing these sorts of complicated conversations in the classroom, by allowing the students to discuss, to converse, to question, the things they are learning, the texts they are reading, by allowing the students to actively engage in the curriculum presented to them, to bring their own narratives into the classroom, rather than merely sitting and listening; the responsibility of learning falls upon not only the teacher, but also the students. Furthermore, Pinar (2011) notes that a complicated conversations also serves as a “ conversation with oneself [as a ‘ private person’] and with others threaded through academic knowledge, an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engagement in the world” (47).

Although anchored in academic thought, these conversations are not meant to remain solely in the academic realm. They are meant to delve into personal narratives and emotional stories; they are meant to delve into

autobiography. Thus, by allowing complicated conversations in the classrooms, we are not only giving students an opportunity to take responsibility of their own learning, but to connect to their learning and to the curriculum through their own autobiographical narratives. Yet, complete understanding requires more than autobiography; it requires allegory.

Pinar (2011) cites allegory as more than the mere exchange of information and stories, but the ability to reflect on the information and finding meaning in the present from the stories of the past (50). In terms of allegory's connection to autobiography, Pinar (2011) furthers the conversation by adding that “[h]istorical facts are primary, but it is facts’ capacity to invoke our imagination that marks them as allegorical, Their meaning is not confined to the past where they occurred; they spill into our existence of the present...history becomes accessible through allegory” (54).

Thus, historical facts and autobiographical narratives, although interesting, carry little significance without the use of allegory. Historians are continuously pleading with the world to heed to lessons of history, but these requests often go unanswered until the moment when something occurs in the present day which recalls the experiences of the past. At this point, history is explored in relation to the present reality, invoking allegory as it brings meaning to the present.

Through the concept of complicated conversation, autobiography and allegory exist as a circular movement as the process repeats itself with each new piece of information. Through this dialogue with theory, ourselves, and others, we explore autobiographical narratives, which connect to our present selves through allegory, which in turn enlighten our experience of the

present, rounding up our complicated conversation. In terms of my own complicated conversation, the concept of entering into curriculum theory through the concept of autobiography remains easy.

As a history student, researching historical narratives are my forte. This interest in the past led me into a search of my family history. Consequently, I have visited places, and read notices, and held objects owned by my ancestors. Thus, reading Pinar's (2011) suggestion that " we find the future not in the present, but in the past" (49) was an exciting moment during my dialogue with the text. At this point, I began thinking about my grandparents, about my childhood, and all those happy moments from my past, thinking that these moments, exactly as they were would lead me to the future.

For a split second, Pinar had convinced me I held the key to my future because I knew my past. But, as previously discussed, this illusion was shattered instantaneously. The concept of allegory was a bit more complicated. As previously mentioned, through allegory, the stories reactivated from the past lead to significance, to a greater understanding and answer the question: " what might this knowledge signify for us as actually existing individuals in this time, in this place? " (Pinar, 2011, pp. 50-51). Thinking through autobiographical narratives, from my point of view, is easy.

Thinking allegorically, is not. Yet, in terms of the contents of the chapter, the introduction of the Weimer Republic, a story from the past, as an allegory to better understand the present reality, I was reasonably able to understand the relationship and the significance. I could understand and reactivate the historical events of Weimer Germany, and place them in juxtaposition with

today's world, adequately using this allegory to further inform my understanding of the present and shape my view of the future. But, I did not feel like I could end my conversation there.

The text led me to my dead Grandmother, my lucid Grandpere, I could not simply leave them in the middle of a conversation. This chapter meant more to me than a simple explanation of theories in order to set up for the remainder of the book. As Pinar (2011) himself notes, “[t]he curricular question is a call to individuality...[as]...academic knowledge is also a question of self-knowledge” (57). In other words, I was not content leaving the conversation solely as a discussion of the past Weimer and its meaning for today.

It affected me at a personal level, as I weaved parts of my own autobiographical narrative into the words and theories on paper. I did more than just read the words on the paper; I entered into a complicated conversation and was committed to following through this process to the end, from autobiography to allegory. But, as I mentioned, I had a hard time working through the concept of allegory. How could I turn my memories of my Grandmother, or my Grandpere, into something meaningful for my present, to lead me into my future?

Something meaningful to inform my experience with currere, with the running the course? How do these experiences affect me as a student, as a teacher, or as an individual? How can they be something more than sometimes pleasant, sometimes not so pleasant, memories? Just as I begin to panic, realizing that this conversation is drawing to a close as the remaining pages of the chapter become fewer and fewer, Pinar (2011) opens

up and speaks directly to me again: “...educators are engaged in an ongoing conversation.

As in any conversation, one discerns misunderstanding, can supplement incomplete comprehension, and support questioning” (55). A sigh of relief emerges as I am comforted with the fact that this conversation is ongoing and does not end with the last sentence in the chapter. I am further comforted knowing that I do not have to immediately come to a complete understanding, can continue to question, and even leave a little room to make mistakes and revisit the original discussion.

This entire experience reinforces for me, the notion that curriculum is not just the textbooks we read and the tests we take, but everything we experience, both in and outside the classroom. I am convinced that these memories are part of my curriculum, my autobiography, and that I will take them with me on my running of the course, and one day, maybe, I will find an allegory and move them beyond the past and into the present.