

Curriculum As Window and Mirror

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Consider how the curriculum functions, insisting with its disciplined structure that there are ways (plural) of seeing. Basic to a liberal arts education is the understanding that there is more than one way to see the world; hence, a balanced program insists that the student enter into the patterning of various disciplines, looking at reality through various “window” frames.

Years ago a Peanuts cartoon illustrated this vividly for me. Schultz’s dog Snoopy was pictured sitting at his typewriter, writing the cultural truth “Beauty is only skin deep.” When the dog looked in the mirror however, it made more sense (to the dog) to write “Beauty is only fur-deep.”

In the following day’s comic strip, the bird Woodstock had apparently made a protest; Snoopy responded by shifting the definition to “feather-deep.” Woodstock, too, had looked in the mirror and insisted on naming truth in a way that made the most sense to him.

Perhaps the only truth that remains, after such an exchange, is that “Beauty is,” still no small truth to expound upon.

For me, the beauty of the classroom gathering lies in its possibilities for seeing new varieties of Beauty. This multiplicity, in turn, enables both students and teachers to be engaged in conversation about an evolving definition of the beautiful. Such dialogue requires the practice of *both/and* thinking as participants acknowledge the varied experiences of reality which frame individual human perspective.

In considering how the curriculum functions, it is essential to note the connection between eyesight and insight. As the Peanuts cartoon illustrates, no student acquires knowledge in the abstract; learning is always personal. Furthermore, learning never takes place in a vacuum; it is always contextual.

This brief paper will explore the need for curriculum to function both as window and as mirror, in order to reflect and reveal most accurately both a multicultural world and the student herself or himself. If the student is understood as occupying a dwelling of self, education needs to enable the student to look through window frames in order to see the realities of others and into mirrors in order to see her/his own reality reflected. Knowledge of both types of framing is basic to a balanced education which is committed to affirming the essential dialectic between the self and the world. In other words, education engages us in “the great conversation” between various frames of reference.

Theologian Nelle Morton, who taught for years at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, has made a significant contribution to balancing the Western educational emphasis on the importance of the Word, the logos of communication. She suggests that the opening lines to the gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word,” are often understood as the whole truth — when, in fact, they probably more accurately render only half the picture. She illustrates the other half of the dialectic when she insists, “In the beginning is the Hearing.”

At this point, I would link hearing and seeing to emphasize a further aspect of shared framing. The delightful truth is that sometimes when we hear another out, glancing through the window of their humanity, we can see our own image reflected in the glass of their window. The window becomes a

mirror! And it is the shared humanity of our conversation that most impresses us even as we attend to our different frames of reference.

In her commitment to inclusive seeing, Eudora Welty wrote,

The frame through which I viewed the world changed too, with time. Greater than scene, I came to see, is situation. Greater than situation is implication. Greater than all of these is a single, entire human being who will never be confined in any frame.

In acknowledging the fluidity of framing, however, it is essential that dialogue about differences not get lost. Sidney Jourard, in his commitment to education as dialogue, once put it this way:

Another person's words are the windows to his or her world, through which I see what it is like to be that person. When another speaks to me in truth, he or she becomes a transparent self, and releases in me an imaginative experience of his or her existence. If he or she cannot speak, if I do not listen, or if I cannot understand then we must remain suspicious strangers to one another, uncognizant of our authentic similarities and differences.

Jourard's statement makes obvious that another person's words will not function as window — if no one hears them or if, for some reason, the words are not even voiced — which is exactly the case in the following narrative poem by New Jersey poet Lew Gardner.

*My mother's uncle had a horse.
The best time of a deadly relatives' Sunday
was to walk with him to the stable
and watch him feed the quiet animal,
to give it sugar from my own hand
and jump back away
from the big warm tongue,
to smell the hay and manure, to see
the white horse in the next stall,
with tail and mane like yellow silk.*

*If my mother and I ran into him
as he and the horse were making their rounds,
buying up the wonderful junk
they heaped and hauled in the wagon,
he'd lift me up to the seat
and let me hold the reins and yell "Giddy-up!"*

*In the spring of 4th grade,
one afternoon of silent division
we heard a clanking and looked outside.*

*My great-uncle! I could tell them all
how I had held those reins!
But everyone laughed at the hunched old man,
the obsolete wagon and horse,
the silly, clattering junk.
I did not tell them.*

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While everyone in that fourth grade classroom looks out the same window, they do not all see the same old man. For all but one, their knowledge is “detached” and “objective.” And all but one of them suffer (unaware) from the limitation of their detachment. The poem’s narrator, on the other hand, is aware of his suffering as he acquires another view of the old man to whom he is intimately connected. Prior to the classroom window experience, the narrator’s view had been purely provincial. Now he is forcefully educated during “one afternoon of silent division” to see more than he has before. He sees his great-uncle reduced to being a mere “Other” in the eyes of the others.

But there are more observations to be gleaned from this poetic incident. The child’s (understandable) silence means that the others in the classroom remain trapped in their limited, “objective” view of the old man. His otherness, his alien nature, is all they can see. This is a particular shame in the light of the insight of the painter Van Gogh who once asked in a letter to his sister-in-law,

*Could it not be that by loving a thing
one sees it better and more truly
than by not loving it?*

Recent scholarship (including Howard Gardner’s *Frames of Mind*, Edward De Bono’s *Six Thinking Hats*, and Belenky et al’s *Women’s Ways of Knowing*) distinguishes various kinds of knowing. Credit is due to Harvard scholar Carol Gilligan who pioneered attention to the gendered dimension of different ways of seeing in her 1982 book *In a Different Voice*.

Scholar Peter Elbow has also done important work in naming how the dominance of the “doubting game” in the Western educational tradition obscures the equal, but different, benefits of an empathic approach to something or someone which is seen initially as Other, alien to one’s own experience and frame of reference.

In *Women’s Ways of Knowing* and other feminist scholarship, the terms “connected-knowing” and “detached-knowing” are used to clarify the differences between kinds of knowing which have frequently been aligned with traditional gender socialization. Females have been taught the importance of feeling with another in the “care perspective,” while males have been taught the importance of thinking critically (against) another in order to protect their own “right(s)” perspective.

Recent scholarship not only increasingly delineates between kinds of knowing, however. It also returns again and again to the basic need for the whole spectrum of thinking/feeling competencies to be taught to all students, regardless of gender and other cultural variables.

To return to the central metaphor of this paper, the need for curriculum to function both as window and as mirror, we need to acknowledge that this perspective is in line with the ancient liberal arts tradition which pursues multiple perspectives (in insisting on a variety of disciplinary paradigms). Intrinsic to this classical perspective is the actuality and validity of differences.

Traditionally, American education has been more comfortable focusing on similarities. Despite our democratic rhetoric, differences have made us uncomfortable. In fact, there are still American educators who pride themselves on being “color-blind,” thinking that ignoring “accidental” differences of race or gender or region or class creates the best classroom climate. Promoting such partial seeing is highly problematic for the creation of curriculum which will serve all students adequately.

Perhaps noting the wording of the traditional Golden Rule will clarify the importance of building both windows and mirrors into the educational process. To “do unto others as you would have them

do unto you” takes one’s own sensibilities and projects them through the window onto the other. Granted, at times when similarities abound, this Rule can lead to ethical decision-making of the highest order. Its strength comes from the knowledge of one’s own humanity which we can liken to studying oneself closely in a mirror.

I would suggest, however, that there are times when to “do unto others as they would have you do unto them” is the more appropriate ethical guideline, one which frames a window into the humanity of another whose preference might be very different from one’s own. One who is blind to the existence of such difference might, for instance, purchase a gift for another which she herself would like but which, in fact, is highly inappropriate, unwanted, or even resented by the recipient of the gift.

Now, the common sense of needing to provide both windows and mirrors in the curriculum may seem unnecessary to emphasize, and yet recent scholarship on women and men of color attests abundantly to the copious blind spots of the traditional curriculum. White males find, in the house of curriculum, many mirrors to look in, and few windows which frame others’ lives. Women and men of color, on the other hand, find almost no mirrors of themselves in the house of curriculum; for them it is often all windows. White males are thereby encouraged to be solipsistic, and the rest of us to feel uncertain that we truly exist. In Western education, the gendered perspective of the white male has presented itself as “universal” for so long that the limitations of this curriculum are often still invisible.

Linda Nochlin asked, in a 1972 essay, this question, “Why have there been no great woman artists?” Think about how the understanding of women’s quilts as art has evolved in the last twenty years. Imagine the neglect of a curriculum which teaches a female student to look always through the window at the art done by others while ignoring the art of the quilt made by her own grandmother which is reflected in the mirror of her very own bedroom.

By now it should be obvious that some of the “missing” great women artists were making quilts. But, if what is close to home and reflected in your own mirror is excluded from the very definition of art, your gaze will only see “the windowed half” of art history. Such an education will be unbalanced, incomplete and inaccurate — though pretending to be otherwise.

Consider another example. In the summer of 1987, *Sports Illustrated* magazine published a photo essay in a special baseball issue which illustrated poet Donald Hall’s definition of the sport. In Hall’s words, “Baseball is fathers and sons playing catch,” and in twelve pages of father-son photos, the magazine pictured this relational (connected-knowing) definition of the sport by featuring some of the faces of the sixty-seven sons (and one grandson) of former major leaguers currently playing organized baseball in the United States.

Then, abruptly, but without any fanfare, the final page of the photo essay switched to the heading *Mother & Son*. The following words accompanied the essay’s last two photos:

The All-American Girls Baseball League was big in the ‘40s and one of its stars was 5’1” Helen Callaghan. One of Helen’s five kids, Casey, grew up to be the Montreal Expos’ 5’9” second baseman. If someone tells Casey he throws like a girl, he won’t mind.

Unless one’s life experience is other-wise, one might never notice that Hall’s poetic definition of the sport of baseball excludes half the population from participation by rendering them invisible at the basic definitional level. In other words, girls cannot see themselves mirrored in the line “Baseball is fathers and sons playing catch.” It is only a window for them, to others’ lives. Even the altered caption of *Mother & Son* still excludes girls’ experience as daughters, sidelining the female-female connection central to their development.

The challenge of integrating women and minority studies into the traditional school curriculum comes at this very basic level. More than half of our culture's population (all girls, and boys from minority groups) are trained and expected to look through windows at others who are viewed as the valid participants in a sport; an exclusionary curriculum, often perpetuated by the unaware, holds no mirrors for the majority of the students. Females are taught their "proper role" as spectators on life's playing field. But that is only half the damage.

At the same time those whose (white male) experience is repeatedly mirrored are narrowly and provincially educated to see themselves (and their own kind) as the only real players on life's stage. Like the disadvantaged fourth-graders who see the old man only as Other, they miss half of what a balanced education should be for all of us:

- knowledge of both self and others,
- clarification of the known and illumination of the unknown.

All students deserve a curriculum which mirrors their own experience back to them, upon occasion — thus validating it in the public world of the school. But curriculum must also insist upon the fresh air of windows into the experience of others — who also need and deserve the public validation of the school curriculum.

Differences as well as similarities exist. The mathematician and the linguist see the world in different ways. One is not superior to the other; a balanced education encompasses both.

Differences exist. They never melted down into "the melting pot" and, now, in a nuclear age we have no choice but to educate youngsters (and ourselves) to handle them more realistically so as to avoid, at all costs, a foolish nuclear melt-down of all of us. One "sandlot" of encounters with difference is located in classroom curriculum and dynamics. Imagine how students' sense of historical perspective (on sandlot encounters) would shift if the academic subject of history were taught using the definition suggested by South African playwright Athol Fugard at the Georgetown University commencement in June 1984:

I am talking about the living of life at the most mundane level, and what I am saying is that at that level — at the level of our daily lives — one man or woman meeting with another man or woman is finally the central arena of history.

Of course, students' educational diet is not balanced if they see themselves in the mirror all the time. Likewise, democracy's school curriculum is unbalanced if a black student sits in school, year after year, forced to look through the window upon the (validated) experiences of white others while seldom, if ever, having the central mirror held up to the particularities of her or his own experience. Such racial imbalance is harmful as well to white students whose seeing of humanity's different realities is also profoundly obscured.

Such inaccuracy and imbalance diminish the education of all our children. Some students, like the narrator in Gardner's poem, remain subordinated and silent, though their vision is actually wider, while others strut their stuff on the life stage insensitive to other points of view. All of us lose when education is framed this way.

It is limiting and inaccurate to only educate our children provincially when they must live their lives in a global context, facing vast differences and awesome similarities. They must learn early and often about the valid framing of both windows and mirrors for a balanced, ecological sense of their place(s) in the world.