

## Strange Bedfellows?: Critical Curriculum Theory and the Analysis of Concepts in Education

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The field of curriculum study, like many fields nominally attached to the social sciences, is quite remarkable among research-oriented academic fields in that it shares a common object of study rather than a common methodological orientation (unlike the sciences, for example). There are an ever-growing number of theoretical and practical approaches to the study of the curriculum.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, curriculum researchers and theoreticians have imported approaches from sociology, philosophy, psychology, and other disciplines, often revising or re-interpreting the approaches for special application in curriculum research. It would be difficult to say that there is any methodological approach that is “curricular” in nature, though this may not always have been the case and is certainly an open question.

There is, however, a viewpoint that unifies many curriculum researchers and is attributable, at least in part, to the surge of “neo-Marxist” curriculum scholarship. The viewpoint (which I shall refer to hereafter as critical curriculum theory) holds that to study curriculum is not only to study the product and process of overt sociopolitical struggles but also covert or hidden sociopolitical struggles. As the theoretical plausibility of the “neutral” field researcher has diminished across the social sciences, this viewpoint has grown to include the position that to do curriculum research is to enter into this sociopolitical fray.

Theorists who not only look for but assume (and often initiate) political conflicts in the schools may benefit most from conceptual approaches. They may also be those most in tension with the traditional aims of conceptual approaches in the philosophy of education. I hope to show that a mutually beneficial relationship can be fostered, however, between the two avenues of education research. In particular, I shall argue that traditional analytic philosophy of education must “politicize” itself to enter into a more meaningful and constructive dialogue with current, critical trends in curriculum research and critique. In describing both “traditions” I shall paint in rather broad strokes, but I hope to capture enough of each to represent both the tensions between the two and the possibilities for constructive dialogue.

### THE ROOTS OF CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Though philosophy of education extends its roots as far back as Plato, conceptual analysis in the philosophy of education is a rather recent methodological and theoretical approach. Nicholas Burbules writes:

[B]orrowing the methods of analytic philosophy, a clan of new scholars burst aggressively into the universities and professional organizations of philosophy of education in the 1960s and early 1970s...these new philosophers promoted a much narrower and more value-free conception of the philosophical enterprise: the elucidation of educational concepts and the adjudication of logical or linguistic errors.<sup>2</sup>

These philosophers changed the typical role of the philosopher of education from historian of “great” education ideas to that of conceptual critic in education discourse — although not all “conceptual” philosophers of education contained themselves exclusively to the logical analysis of educational concepts. What is of concern to the analytic philosopher of education is largely, if not exclusively, the meaning of concepts in educational discourse and the use of concepts in claim-making.

Israel Scheffler, in his landmark work, *The Language of Education*, made the agenda for analytic philosophers of education clear. He wrote:

Philosophical analysis, in substantially its current forms, got under way — interested fundamentally in the clarification of basic notions and modes of argument rather than in synthesizing available beliefs into some total outlook, in thoroughly appraising root ideas rather than in painting suggestive but vague portraits of the universe.<sup>3</sup>

Scheffler emphasized the limited, contained, and rigorous approach of analytic philosophy. His project in *The Language of Education* was more a methodological tutorial rather than a vision of the perfect school or education in the tradition of Plato or Rousseau. “Through an analysis of selected statements in educational and social contexts,” he wrote, “Certain strategies are presented for the critical evaluation of statements of the same and related sorts.”<sup>4</sup> Later, Jonas Soltis commented with a degree of self-reflective humor on the banality of the analytic enterprise. “To examine ideas which are in such common currency in one’s life that they are seldom if ever reflected on can be a most puzzling and yet gratifying intellectual venture.”<sup>5</sup>

While analytic philosophy enjoyed prominence in the philosophy of education during the 1960s and 1970s, it may have been this perceived banality, in combination with the limited linguistic stance taken by many conceptual analysts, that pushed the tradition to the “old school” section of the discipline.<sup>6</sup> According to some historically minded critics, the logical rigor of conceptual writers sometimes seemed to walk hand-in-hand with a dryness of style and toothlessness of content.<sup>7</sup> Critics within philosophy of education began to yearn for a more active and engaged role for the discipline. The principal self-reflective issue for recent philosophers of education has been relevance — and the movement has been outward toward interdisciplinarity and topics of immediate importance to schoolteachers.<sup>8</sup>

#### CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS AND CURRICULUM STUDY

Some of the areas in which philosophers of education have attempted to carve out new disciplinary niches include terrain that overlaps or abuts the study of curriculum, and the same can be said of many curriculum theorists in respect to “philosophy.” Conceptual philosophers of education have found footholds in concept-heavy curricular topics such as critical thinking, moral or character education, creativity and imagination, and issues of race or gender discrimination or bias.

Yet the relationship between philosophy of education and curriculum study is hardly an equal, two-way dialogue. Analytic philosophers of education have largely been bystanders to the recent surge in curriculum studies. Conceptual analysts, however, have always felt that they have something to offer to those focusing on curricular questions. Jerrold Coombs and Le Roi Daniels’s explanation of the relationship is worth quoting at length:

Analytic philosophical inquiry cannot be identified with any specifiable methodology. Rather it comprises a diverse set of analytic questions, techniques, and procedures. What distinguishes it from other kinds of inquiry is its purpose or point. Basically, analytic philosophical inquiry aims at understanding and improving the sets of concepts or conceptual structures in terms of which we interpret experience, express purposes, frame problems, and conduct inquiries. It is an important part of all curriculum research because the conceptual structures we possess determine the kinds of curriculum policies we entertain and the kinds of empirical and normative research questions we regard as significant. If our conceptual structures lack logical coherence, blur important distinctions, or create useless dichotomies, or if we understand them so poorly that we are unable to translate them adequately into research instruments and policy prescriptions, curricular policies and research studies will fail to be fruitful.<sup>9</sup>

Coombs and Daniels's characterization of the methodological approach and aim of conceptual analysis is an excellent example of both the strengths and weaknesses of analytic philosophy. On a basic level, careful attention to the way words are used and concepts constructed in curriculum talk and writing is essential for educators and teacher-educators. We need to ask and know what is meant by "development," or "proficiency," for example.

The scrutiny that Coombs and Daniels recommend goes beyond the memorization, reference, and application of definitions, however. It is through language that educators are directed to do things, and through language that educators explain, defend, and justify what they have done. If educators and education policymakers are responsible for what, why, and how they teach, they must be responsible for their language. Being responsible for language would seem to require thoughtfulness about, and caution with, the often technicalized and specialized terminology of education. In particular, definitions which specify education policies and "goods" need careful unpacking by those involved in education.<sup>10</sup>

Yet Coombs and Daniels, in the above statement, make a number of assumptions that are essential to the internal stability of an analytic approach. First, they assume that we, in some way, "possess" our "conceptual structures," and not the other way around. Conceptual inquiry must take the position that we employ our concepts, that we have control over them. The tradition is extremely reluctant to acknowledge Marxist and neo-Marxist positions that our conceptual structures are determined or, at least, heavily influenced by sociomaterial relations. If such were the case, then clarifying, critiquing, or revising our concepts simply to strengthen their coherence would be a rather pointless enterprise. Second is a related, prescriptive assumption: Because we have control over our concepts and conceptual structure, we must work to ensure that they are rational. Irrationally held concepts are faulty and lead to practical problems. This leads to a third assumption: that "incoherent" (read irrational or even illogical) conceptual structures will cause policies and studies to "fail to be fruitful."

One may rightly turn the criteria of clarity back upon the authors for the final phrase: "fail to be fruitful." What does this actually mean? It is very difficult to tell. I suggest that, as presented here, there is no strongly defensible reason beyond the criteria of clarity itself for requiring the logical coherence of conceptual structures. "Failing to be fruitful" is, as stated, an empirical claim (as I am sure the authors

would recognize). We would have to leave the tight closure of conceptual argument to find out whether or not conceptual incoherence in fact leads to disastrous practical results. Obviously, it does not in all cases. Most education policy decisions are based on unclear, poorly developed conceptual structures, and not all of them, by any means, are disastrous. Individual educators often must interpret unclear or imprecise wording of curriculum policy to decide what they should do. One might even make the slightly cynical suggestion that unclear policy is, at least in part, good on the grounds that it grants educators some desperately needed latitude in their classrooms.

The quest for clarity is a potential murmur in the heart of analytic approaches to education and is also a stumbling block in the relationship between critical curriculum theorists and conceptual analysts. The stumbling block is not simply one of different aims, however. It is not just clarity that is the issue, but differing views of language and social contexts. Conceptual analysts have tended to gloss over the theoretical focus of much recent critical curriculum scholarship — power. Curriculum theorist Cleo Cherryholmes writes of the disjunction between the two traditions, focusing on analytic philosophers J.L. Austin and John Searle and influential social theorist Michel Foucault:

Austin and Searle demonstrated that an utterance was an act in the context of social rules, institutions, and conventions, but paid almost no attention to those contextual factors. Although Foucault did not work in the tradition of speech act theory or pragmatics, he made far-reaching additions to this previous work, effectively reversing its focus by looking at the enabling and facilitating discursive practices instead of the discrete speech act. Power precedes speech because utterances are located within existing institutions whose rules, power configurations, norms, commitments, and interests determine what can and cannot be said and what utterances count as.<sup>11</sup>

Analytic or conceptual philosophy of education is not confined to Austin and Searle, nor is critical curriculum study confined to Foucault. The difference between Austin and Searle and Foucault is, however, paradigmatic of the different approaches in the two traditions. Where the analyst looks at how words are used in particular contexts and how the use of words determines what the words mean, the critical curriculum theorist is likely to look at the structure of institutions and social relationships and how power within those structures determines what words mean.

The critical curriculum theorist and researcher will, in many cases, frame the use and meaning of concepts against the backdrop of the *hegemonic* structures of the school. The neo-Marxist concept of hegemony is crucial to the critical study of curriculum. Hegemony, argues Michael Apple (working from the writings of Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci) “acts to ‘saturate’ our very consciousness, so that the educational, economic and social world we see and interact with, and the commonsense interpretations we put on it, becomes the world *tout court*, the only world.”<sup>12</sup> This hegemonic permeation or “penetration” of people’s lived world rises from the material relations of society.

To curriculum theorists who are concerned about issues of power and hegemonic control, the analytic philosopher may appear imperialistic in insistence on standards of rationality and logical coherency, and blind to the empowered position over

language that he himself holds. To the “traditional” analytic philosopher, the neo-Marxism of critical curriculum study appears over-deterministic or self-contradictory, and the neo-Neitzcheanism of Foucault appears incoherently relativistic. Literally and figuratively, current curriculum researchers and analytic philosophers of education are likely to talk, if not shout or growl, past each other.

As is the case with most disputes of this nature, both sides are probably right and wrong in more or less equal degrees. I am not presently interested in resolving these theoretical disputes. It is only important to note the reluctance of analytic philosophy to acknowledge the influence of institutional power over language. We might attribute this reluctance to professional anxiety. If power determines language-use, why should we analyze language with the goal of clarifying it? The institution, to put it figuratively, does not care how clear its language is, only that ends are achieved. “Clear” language becomes good language only so far as it is hegemonic language — that is, language that dominates and silences, or so far as it is counter-hegemonic, language that revolutionizes. Either kind of language is only effective if it sways. Conceptual philosophers might just as well become sociologists or retire.

#### CHANGING DIRECTIONS FOR CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS IN CURRICULUM STUDY

Analytic philosophers of education need not do anything so drastic or frightening (as become sociologists, that is). They ought to own up, however, to the agenda of all conceptual work. It is not enough to say that the point of analytic work is to improve or better understand conceptual structures. This is self-deceptive, or at least deceptive. The point, whether acknowledged or not, is to *change* concepts and conceptual structures. When the philosopher of education condemns an argument or claim as “nonsense” or “incoherent” he or she is, to use the colloquial, pulling a power trip with standards of rationality on his or her side. In this respect, analytic philosophy of education needs to acknowledge the criticism that it can be blind to issues of power. It is on the persuasive power of the standards of rationality (and, to some extents, logic), and the acceptability of the philosopher’s generalizations about word-use, that analytic arguments rise and fall.

This reliance has certain consequences. Conceptual analysis certainly does not have to be politically conservative, but it is, in a sense, intellectually and socially conservative. When investigating or attacking the use of certain concepts, the analyst must fall back upon past use of language (or “ordinary” language) and past standards for rational discourse, since it is against the past, rational, use of language that new uses are judged as sense or nonsense. The “traditional” analytic philosopher of education is often portrayed as conceptual critic, preventing abuses of ordinary language within the peculiar language of education while maintaining a politically neutral front.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in a wonderful irony, analytic philosophers have recently been forced into the political position that they may have so abhorred. For it is safe to say that now, at least among the younger generation of academics, to ask someone to “be rational” is more appropriately categorized with “be politically x.” Standards of rationality are seen or mis-seen to threaten positions on both ends of the political spectrum. Conceptual clarification and systematic analysis pose direct challenges, moral and political in nature, to all those interested in indoctrination, coercion, and

dogma. While analytic philosophers of education recognize this, they may rarely *write* with this in mind.

Owning up to conceptual change as the goal of conceptual analysis also means taking a look at style and rhetoric. The pursuit of conceptual clarity and rigor may have led conceptual philosophers to miss or forget an important and relatively obvious fact. Clarity and rigor do not necessarily *convince* anyone of anything. This is especially the case when people seem to be talking past each other, with different value premises, as is often the case in education. While it may sometimes help for a conceptual analyst to point out what the competing value premises are (and that they are value premises), the parties-in-dispute are just as likely to then ask, “So what side are *you* on?”

I am not suggesting that the analytic philosopher must become a sophist. What I am suggesting for the analytic philosopher of education is a re-appraisal of his or her basic assumptions and a rephrasing of the basic questions-of-inquiry. The analytic philosopher of education needs to 1) recognize that language cannot be absolutely pulled free from those who, through status and authority, have the power to affect its meaning, and 2) recognize conceptual analysis as a means, rather than solely as an end, in the study and critique of the curriculum. In discussing Herbert Spencer’s core curricular question, “What knowledge is of most worth?” Michael Apple writes:

Whether we recognize it or not, curriculum and more general educational issues have always been caught up in the history of class, race, gender, and religious conflicts in the United States and elsewhere. Because of this, a better way of phrasing the [Spencer’s] question, a way that highlights the profoundly political nature of educational debate, is “Whose knowledge is of most worth?”<sup>14</sup>

In conceptual inquiry, I wish to substitute “what is objectionable about the beliefs and values here?” for the core question “what is the problem with the language here?” We must look to the language and attack or defend it, when necessary, in order to attack or defend the political or moral positions of the authors. Instead of “*what* is being said here?” we must ask “*who* is saying what here and for what purposes?”

The tools and strategies of conceptual analysis are important and powerful weapons for both philosophers of education and critical curriculum theorists. We do not need to unlearn analytic techniques, only to recognize them as possible weapons in a larger arsenal. Conceptual philosophy of education needs to become a little nasty, with a sly grin and rabid bite. It may do well to pick up some of the tricks of critical curriculum theorists. An acquaintance of neo-Marxist theoretical orientation once advised me, speaking as a curricularist to a philosopher, to name the enemy. This is not just to write in favor of principled teaching and fair educational practices, but to directly encounter those who work against our ideals of education.

In turn, the critical curriculum scholar would probably benefit from closer scrutiny of the logic of “hot” words in education discourse. Language may be permeated and saturated by power, but it also has meaning that has been established through common use. It may be impossible to tell which changes first and which is

in the control of the relationship (and to what extent), but disputes about political power and hegemonic control are often more difficult to initiate in the realm of public policy than disputes about meaning. This is perhaps the most important contribution that conceptual study has to give to current critical curriculum inquiry. While critical curriculum theorists may currently be struggling with finding a “language of possibility” that reaches past Marxist determinism, analytic philosophy of education has always provided a critical, alternative discourse in the study of education.<sup>15</sup> Analytic philosophers, through careful scrutiny of concepts used in education talk, have often criticized the concepts juggled by mainstream movements in public education. Whereas arguments about capitalist ideology may not take one very far in a room full of school administrators and governmental policy-makers, conceptual arguments with some Socratic touches just might.

The possibility of beneficial exchange between analytic philosophy of education and critical curriculum study boils down to a trading of “awarenesses.” Through familiarity with analytic reasoning, the curriculum theorist may become more aware of argumentation and, consequently, become more reasoned. In turn, the analytic philosopher may learn from the critical curricularist a heightened awareness of socioeconomic conditions, aspects of power, and gain a constructive (or appropriately destructive) political voice.

#### SPEAKING CONCEPTUALLY TO TEACHERS

Politicizing the style and content of analytic philosophy of education may help solve another problem that has plagued the tradition in respect to curriculum inquiry and critique. Concerns about the relevancy of philosophy of education usually stem from the relatively low weight that philosophers of education (compared to their arch-nemeses, behavioral psychologists, or even sociologists) pull in the world of public education. We would hear Kohlberg or Piaget’s stages or Bloom’s Taxonomy before we would hear conceptual analysis in the typical teacher education classroom. Teachers and teachers-to-be simply do not do much philosophy of education or conceptual analysis.

I believe this is due to the distance between the language of conceptual analysis and the language of school educators. The problem, put in different terms, is that educators are not only unlikely to see the point of conceptual analysis, but that they are likely to see conceptual work as a threat to their usual way of approaching issues in education. It does not seem to me to be simply a matter of convincing unknowing non-philosophers that conceptual work is worthwhile. Rather, conceptual philosophers are faced with the task of selling their goods to hostile consumers.

Why is this so? The dominant discourse in education is saturated with cost-benefit analysis, behavioral and developmental psychology, and statistical validity and reliability. The few philosophical concepts that enter into mainstream debate about education are dummed to avoid anything that smacks of intellectualism.<sup>16</sup> Thus many philosophers of education seem to be pecking away, from the whole spectrum of ideological affiliation, at the mass of current, privileged education-speak. Yet they are, as far as I can tell, talking mostly, if not exclusively, amongst themselves — or, at least, few others are paying any serious attention. In my



experience as a teacher-educator and as a philosopher of education, I have time and again heard the now familiar complaints that philosophical study is irrelevant or impractical. The student teachers with whom I have worked fight vigorously against anything that they feel does not have immediate, instrumental application. How does this help me manage my classroom? How does this help me deal with my administrative superiors? I don't have the time to think about these things! These are among the most common refrains.

I can answer that it is important to reflect on philosophical issues and that this reflection will make them, in the end, better teachers. I would hazard to say that this is a typical, philosopher-of-education answer that clearly has its merits. I would argue, however, that it also has its drawbacks. It levels a finger at the students and says, "you'd better study." It also fails to answer any of the students' legitimate questions. How will philosophy of education, and conceptual analysis in particular, help teachers with pressing practical matters?

I can also answer that philosophy of education, and conceptual analysis in particular, will help them to combat the pressures they feel — the same pressures that motivated them to ask for justification for philosophy in the first place. Part of my approach, in working with teachers or student teachers, has been to characterize conceptual philosophical inquiry as ammunition in both the defensive and offensive political, professional, and moral struggles with which school educators are faced. Although I cannot guarantee that having conceptual clarity on one's side will protect one from all of the accusations leveled at teachers or justify all arguments, I can make the case that it feels better to know that the other argument (even if it comes with the authority of the institution) does not make sense.

Giving teachers and student teachers analytic tools with which they can better come to understand and defend their own classroom policies and curricular choices is something conceptual philosophers of education should be able to do better than anyone else. This practice of institutional self-defense training is what I believe critical curriculum theorists Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux have in mind when they speak of the "transformative intellectual." They write: "[Transformative intellectuals] define their political terrain by offering to students forms of alternative discourse and critical social practices whose interests are often at odds with the overall hegemonic role of the school and the society it supports."<sup>17</sup> Understanding one's role as both a conceptual philosopher of education and a transformative intellectual does not necessarily mean changing how one does philosophy of education or curriculum work. Rather it means seeing the point of the work as policy critique, action, and change, and keeping this in mind when one teaches. It means taking time to ask questions about institutional power and control, including questions about ethnic, gender, class, or sexual discrimination and domination, and taking time to equip students to fight against such domination with conceptual tools.

There is great potential for such critical *and* conceptual work in curriculum study and many present and relevant issues. Hugh Sockett, writing in the 1970s, criticized the silence of philosophers on the issue of teacher accountability: "Perhaps they have felt that they had nothing to say, but their deafening silence is more likely



attributable to a reluctance to get involved in political debate — for, surely, that is not a philosopher's business."<sup>18</sup>

Philosophers of education, and analytic philosophers of education in particular, can no longer afford to keep out of the sociopolitical power struggles over the content, form, and standards of schooling. Perhaps at one time there was something to be gained from holding one's philosophic head above political debate. But now such distance is more likely to be seen as a failure to turn up to fight. If for nothing else, all philosophers of education can, and should, turn up to fight against curricular policies that serve to undermine the celebration of ideas and *philo-sophia* itself.

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1. See Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman, *Understanding Curriculum* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995) for a comprehensive overview of the field.
  2. Nicholas C. Burbules, "Issues and Trends in the Philosophy of Education," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1989): 234.
  3. Israel Scheffler, *The Language of Education* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1960), 7.
  4. *Ibid.*, 3.
  5. Jonas F. Soltis, *An Introduction to the Analysis of Educational Concepts*, 3d ed. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978), 6.
  6. James Kaminsky, *A New History of Educational Philosophy* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 88-90.
  7. D.C. Phillips, "Philosophy of Education: In Extremis?" *Educational Studies* 14, no. 1 (1983).
  8. Burbules, "Issues and Trends."
  9. Jerrold R. Coombs and Le Roi B. Daniels, "Philosophical Inquiry: Conceptual Analysis," in *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry*, ed. Edmund Short (New York: SUNY Press, 1991).
  10. Scheffler calls such definitions *programmatically* definitions.
  11. Cleo Cherryholmes, *Power and Criticism: Poststructural Investigations in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 58-59.
  12. Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 1990), 5.
  13. See Burbules, *op cit*e.
  14. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, vii.
  15. A "language of possibility" is a term that figures prominently in the recent work of neo-Marxist critical curricularists Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux. See Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, *Education Still Under Siege*, 2d ed. (Westport, Conn.: Bergin and Garvey, 1993).
  16. Such is the case with former United States Secretary of Education William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*. Bennett makes so little of the concept of moral education that it is quite amazing he can devote an entire book to it.
  17. Aronowitz and Giroux, *Education*, 49.
  18. Hugh Sockett, in *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain*, ed. R.S. Peters (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), 34.