

# PROGRESSING INTO *CURRERE*'S PROGRESSIVE: TAKING ACTION FOR AN UNKNOWN FUTURE

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## CONTEXT

It is not always easy to take action for an unknown future.

As I explore the visual imagery and words of the PDF manuscript presented by William Pinar at the 1975 annual meeting of the American Education Research Association (AERA) in Washington, D.C., the thick black marks tell a story of a time when words were laboriously placed on paper using typewriter keystrokes and when papers were archived in hard copies and retrieved through copies made, paid for, and physically picked up at libraries. The words near the top of the “Document Resume” cover page told the 1975 reader what to do. “EDRS price descriptors—MF-\$0.76, HC-\$1.58 plus postage” (Pinar, 1975).

The thick marks on the page are occasionally interrupted by handwritten strike-outs and edits that provide a glimpse into Pinar’s writing process. The font, bold and heavy on the cover page, is similar to an available retro electronic font appropriately called “Last Draft Font.” The rest of Pinar’s paper is a different font from a different typewriter. I wonder how many drafts Pinar prepared to get to this 1975 snapshot of the landscape he has explored so thoroughly over time and how he imagined it would be used.

Through this laborious and intentional process, Pinar was putting something out there. He was taking action for an unknown future, both in the future of his own thinking and in the future of *currere* as a conceptual framework. The edits suggest that this writing reflected a continuing process of thinking that extended until the point of submission and that it was likely tough to “land the plane”—the most vulnerable part of the writing process. At what point is a piece ready for review of others? I wonder how Pinar felt about the readiness of *currere* for its close-up.

During the 40-plus years since Pinar’s 1975 paper began the conversation, Pinar has continued in a stellar career, authoring or co-authoring many books and papers. The tenets of *currere* introduced in that first 1975 paper appear to have stood the test of time, providing resiliency and robustness for the previously unknown future that is now the present.

I am reminded of the similarly explicit thinking of Peggy McIntosh. She, too, presented many revisions of her seminal 1988 paper on white privilege, beginning in 1986 at AERA, before publishing it as a Working Paper at Wellesley in 1988 (McIntosh, 1988). The following year, it was excerpted and published as “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (McIntosh, 1989). Several years ago at a conference presentation, I heard her describe concerns about how the writing has been used and her wishes for its use in facilitating discussions of privilege, which she has also published in notes for facilitators (McIntosh, 2010).

As the work of Pinar, McIntosh, and countless other scholars who “put something out there” illustrate, powerful conceptual frameworks that extend conversation often reflect deeply personal perspectives that resonate with readers and allow readers to apply the work in new and expanding ways.

### THE REGRESSIVE, ANALYTICAL, AND SYNTHETICAL STEPS OF CURRERE

I easily identify with the regressive, analytical, and synthetical steps of the *currere* process for several reasons. I am drawn to conceptual frameworks and genres that include the importance of personal voice in reflection and analysis, such as personal narratives, story-telling, archival primary sources, autoethnography, and Scholarly Personal Narrative, among others, and use them in my own thinking and teaching. For me, the examination of past and current (regressive) and the related meaning-making (analytic) often occur simultaneously.

I see teaching and my work with students as more of a creative and intellectual endeavor than a technical one, and conceptual frameworks are both creative and intellectual. All of the courses I have taught in recent years have been undergraduate, writing-based, and conceptual-based seminars, including courses I developed on dominant privilege, the cultural context of integrity, and activism in education, and existing courses I have taught on educational issues and writing for educators.

Like many of my peers with careers in university teaching, there are identifiable events that have shaped my path. I can analyze and tie the regressive and analytic steps of *currere* explicitly to choices I have made and actions I have taken. For example, my career trajectory included transitioning to Miami University a few years after receiving tenure and promotion at a previous university and the dissolution of the original department that I entered at Miami. Upon reflection, I have learned that, when major changes occur, my responses center around developing or contributing to curricular and institutional initiatives in social justice, the strand that is woven throughout my academic expertise, experiences, and personal beliefs.

I interpret the *currere* synthetical stage as the analysis of past, present, and future to make connections to broader contexts, including political ones. Context is always on my mind. I was trained as a sociologist, and in academia, I see the impact of political and institutional culture on decision-making processes. I have learned that what is perplexing and opaque can become transparent with reflection and contextual grounding.

My brother is mechanical and likes to take things apart to see how they work and then put them back together. I like to do the same things with words, ideas, and actions, whether my own or someone else's. The more "parts," the better. Bring it on. I apply the *currere* method as a robust tool that can be used in a linear, systematic way (or not), as a philosophical instruction manual (or not), and as a method that can absorb and convert to energy whatever the user feeds it. Essentially, the user has permission to ask and answer "How does this work?" questions in whatever form those questions take.

Pinar's integration of philosophy and education and emphasis on holistic analysis illustrates how drawing broadly from what we know enhances understanding in ways that are less successful with more singular approaches. To see interpretation of education as including lived and felt experiences, as noted in the following quote, provides a counterpoint to the narrowness of politically-driven standards, corporatization, and external mandates that have engulfed educational policies and practices in recent years.

And if I chart these choices and circumstances on a time line, and then begin to describe (as I remember it now), the transitions from that situation to the one that followed, I see that there is a coherence. Not necessarily a logical one, but a lived one, a felt one. The point of coherence is the biography as it is lived. Lebenswelt. (Pinar, 1975, p. 1)

Pinar advocates for including humanity in the process of thinking about education—both the humanity of the thinker, through his or her personal voice, and the humanity

of all those impacted by education, which is everyone. Exploring educational issues fully, with everything we've got in our individual and collective intellectual arsenals, is enhanced by interdisciplinarity and explicit connections to our own life experiences. In his paper, Pinar incorporates not only *Lebenswelt* (a German word meaning the world of lived experiences), but also psychoanalysis, meditation, and philosophy. Without putting ourselves and our beliefs into the mix, how can we examine our own assumptions? And, without considering what is known by others across disciplines, how can we fully examine complex issues and choices?

### THE ELUSIVE PROGRESSIVE

It is the progressive step in the *currere* method that most captures my thoughts and curiosity. Where it is located in the process, between "regression" and "analytical," instead of as a last step and changing its core question from "What's next?" to "What can be?" is intriguing. Although Pinar qualifies that the steps are not necessarily linear, considering the progressive earlier allows for a greater consciousness and role of the progressive in future, more expansive thinking.

In Pinar's 1975 conference presentation paper, the progressive is differently developed than the other steps and appears to be the most rushed in the writing. For example, the abstract lists all four steps but includes descriptive sentences for all but the progressive. And, page 9 of the PDF is missing—a critical omission since it is the page where most of the description of the progressive step occurs. Page 10 begins somewhere in the middle of the progressive discussion, where Pinar describes a conscious process of thinking that blends emotional and intellectual free association.

While the brief narrative for the other three steps focused on descriptions of each step (regressive as past; analytical as interrelating past, future and present; syncretical as incorporating self into integration and holistic meaning of past, future, and present), the description of the progressive was more explicit about *how* to put oneself in the mindset to consider the future (e.g., free associations, details of physical place, avoiding challenges to brainstorming) than *what* to brainstorm. The emphasis was on stepping back and slowing down. Slowing down here, I want to focus on the "what" of my brainstorming.

As an educator, my unknown future—the *what* of my brainstorming—includes both individual (how students develop) and institutional (what the curriculum is) dimensions. For students, I consider what seeds will be planted in students and how my courses will impact them in their futures (and the futures of the students they teach). Albert Einstein reportedly said, "Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school." What remains in students from our work as educators is sometimes difficult to discern, particularly at the undergraduate level. Sometimes students tell us. They may write a thank you note at the end of the semester. They nominate us for awards. They show in other ways that their learning in our classes was meaningful and authentic.

I had two experiences in recent years that helped me see how early college experiences can guide matriculation and growth and how we, as educators, can contribute to that growth. The first was an entry to Miami University's "Great Seal" essay contest in 2013, where students wrote about their experiences at Miami. One of my colleagues, who had read the winning senior entry, suggested I take a look. He said, "I think she is writing about your course." Indeed, she was. In the essay, she framed her intellectual growth by using her first college experiences in her first class—a class that I taught—to discuss her developmental process to think more deeply and to explore her own beliefs about equity. It was humbling for me to read her essay; her description of the linkages and complexity of learning as she worked through college was eloquent and thoughtful.

The second experience was similar but highlighted the dissonance experienced by many of our students when exposed to social justice concepts. A current graduate student, who also graduated from a Miami undergraduate program, came into my office early in her graduate program. “I don’t know if you remember me,” she began. “I was in your dominant privilege course my first semester at Miami. I want you to know that it rocked my world and contributed enormously to everything I have done since.” And, after a slight pause, she continued, saying, “And I have to tell you that I didn’t like it much at the time.” She and I have had many conversations since then, and I have heard her discuss the impact of my course on her emergence as a social justice advocate in several public settings. She is generous with her praise, crediting my impact. However, that first semester she took two other courses that also emphasized social justice; the importance of fusion between courses (rather than an outlier course that could be dismissed) was likely significant.

Both of these students are deeply reflective. Without knowing it, they were using the *currere* method to tell their stories of the meaning of their college experiences regarding who they were, are, and hope to be in the future. My role was not extraordinary; it was to allow them the space within my classes to think, to nurture and guide their development, and to not narrow their possibilities and creativity.

The institutional curricular connection to the progressive is a second area of focus in my thinking. What does and doesn’t exist in the curriculum reflects social, political, economic, and historical contexts, often trumping theoretical and pedagogical needs. Students cannot benefit from courses that don’t exist.

The progressive step in *currere* is useful in curricular development, particularly in controversial content. What is privileged and what is not in the institutional culture can be a seemingly opaque barrier that can be made transparent through analysis. For example, the course approval process in two of the courses I developed included resistance. In the first course, a dominant privilege course developed for the Honors Program, written feedback from a faculty reviewer included the statement, “Universities are not political places.” Objections from three faculty members in approving a second course, an EDT course on activism, centered around the following perspectives—activism is too strong a concept and should be replaced by advocacy; activism puts our students at risk of being fired and should be avoided; and credentials for teaching such a course should include administrative experience as a principal or superintendent in public schools.

The core of the objections in each course was a belief that the content was not important. The lack of salience of social justice and equity was both masked and unmasked at the same time. The (typical) inclusion of “this is important, but...” was present, masking real feelings with inauthentic support. The nature of the comments made the real feelings transparent.

In both courses, each step in the *currere* method was used to develop strategies to dismantle the resistance. The history of the institution and individual resisters, as well as the stated present goals of the institution, were used to identify disconnects in what we *do* and what we *say*. The progressive step provided the grounding in the importance of the course. The rejoinders to resistance represented a syncretical response. Each course proposal was passed.

### USING CURRERE TO DISMANTLE CURRICULAR BARRIERS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Curricular barriers, such as those described in the previous section, that privilege content and skills, devalue context and equity, and remain unexamined are antithetical to the *currere* process. A full exploration of curricular barriers in teacher education is beyond the scope of this essay. While each of the included interrelated examples

could serve as a full case study for application of the *currere* method, the collective brief descriptions of several barriers illustrate a starting point and also a foundation for strategies described in later sections of this essay.

There are several assumptions inherent in this discussion. The first is that there is frequently a lack of will for change—what is dominant and traditional often remains, as well as being treated as normative and neutral, making change difficult. Second, changes in teacher education curricula often reflect tinkering rather than full examination. Solutions are often reactive to external factors and are short-sighted. Third, if a systemic, reflective approach (such as *currere*) were utilized, more effective strategies to dismantle curricular barriers would be possible.

Here are several barriers to consider.

#### *NARROWLY-DEFINED CURRICULA*

While many faculty and specific courses in teacher education provide rich and intellectually engaging experiences, collective curricula in teacher education are often uninspired and narrow. This is in part due to the standardization of curricula within state departments of education; a web-based comparison of undergraduate licensure programs at colleges and universities within Ohio, for example, shows cookie cutter similarities, often making them indistinguishable from each other.

Institutional factors also contribute indirectly to departmental decisions that narrow curricula. At Miami University, for example, because of the number of credits devoted to liberal education requirements and the number of credits mandated for licensure, liberal education courses, which at best are selected based on student interest, are instead mandated, leaving students in some licensure programs with few choices. Few electives mean that students cannot explore their interests and passions. This limits the kind of multidisciplinary linkages valued by Pinar in his thinking about *currere*. Although new courses that make those connections within teacher education can be developed, interested students cannot take them. We have seen this in at least three recently developed courses.

Another institutional example is the university mandate for a reduction in program credit hours. What are likely to be cut are courses deemed as more expendable, almost always courses outside of the department. In Fall 2014 in Miami's Department of Teacher Education (EDT), credit reductions resulted in a contentious elimination of a required educational leadership course from the Adolescent and Young Adult licensure programs. The debate and decision polarized the faculty and reflected the level of dichotomization of beliefs about theory and practice, particularly in social justice.

#### *EXTERNAL MANDATES AND CORPORATIZATION*

There are many examples of the for-profit influences in teacher education. Most notable is required testing for preservice teachers—from entry tests to tests taken prior to student teaching to tests taken during student teaching. There is considerable controversy about these tests. First, the tests “gatekeep” who gets in and proceeds through the teacher education program (and who doesn't). Second, the tests drive curricula; what is on the tests is what is taught. Third, the tests encourage rote approaches to learning, often void of critical thinking.

#### *EXCLUSION OF PERSONAL VOICE, EXPERIENCES, AND INTELLECTUALISM*

There is a continuum of the valuing (by both students and faculty) of personal voice, experiences, and intellectualism in teacher education. On one end of the continuum are the students who express gratitude that the curriculum is set and that they don't have

to make any choices and decisions; their preferred courses are more technical than intellectual, where students are told what to do to be “good teachers.” These students are in sharp contrast to students on the other end of the continuum, who recognize and are concerned about the structure of the curriculum and its impact on their learning and, in some cases, choose to change majors. Across the continuum, most students likely fall in the middle—they are open to making meaning of their experience and to fully develop intellectually.

### CONSIDERING THE PROGRESSIVE

#### QUESTIONS IN THE PROCESS

The answer to the question, “What propels and motivates exploration of the progressive?” is individual. Explicitly asking and answering the question has benefits in the progressive process, as it establishes context, motivations, and beliefs. For example, if the future view of curricular transformation is motivated by maintaining traditional practices, that view will be quite different than if it is motivated by educational equity. And, maintaining what exists likely involves less future-thinking than when change is desired; the greater the change, the more future-thinking is needed.

A related question is, “What are the moments that maximize progression into the progressive?” It may be one impactful event, a series of events, or any combination. The level of dissonance between perceptions of “what is” and “what should be” are connected to the moments of events.

My current personal thinking about the *currere* progressive provides an example of the process. Future-centeredness in thinking reflects snapshots from particular points in time. What I have considered recently reflects a history and present that are different at this point in time than they would have been in the past or will be in the future. So, current movement toward a syncretical point of view is guided by all the points of view I have had in the past; part of the process is to reflect on what has been unchanging over time.

During the 2015-16 academic year, I thought frequently about the imagery of a 1982 film entitled *Koyaanisqatsi* (a Hopi word for “life out of balance”), which blends fast paced images of modern life with a musical score by Philip Glass. My professional life was out of balance for the first time. Despite a new and highly rewarding teaching assignment, there was considerable dissonance in my satisfaction with other parts of my work life. My power to control my work was limited. What was most satisfying for me about academic life—positive impact through intellectual processes, tackling challenges, and working with students and colleagues—was diminished and thwarted. What I cared about in my work was externally threatened. I was demoralized.

Changes during the current academic year have provided a respite and sanctuary for me to regain perspective, reenergize, and reflect on my future—my progressing into the progressive. As I reflect on the past, I realize that the most satisfying and impactful parts of my professional life have been in teaching and curricular contributions—a melding of engagement with ideas, people, curiosity, and learning. The dense and impenetrable *Koyaanisqatsi* has been replaced by a continuing exploration of a series of paths I can create and choose from. I am figuratively in that place described by Pinar in 1975 to fully consider the future.

#### IDENTIFYING PARAMETERS AS PART OF THE PROGRESSIVE

The process of the *currere* progressive step sharpens the possibilities and their details. The progressive leads not only to what the future can be, but how to get there and what it will look like. As I work toward a syncretical point of view that will impact

my choices and details, I have identified the following parameters that are important to me. Each has identifiable roots in my history and present. While this list will likely be different for others, the process of developing parameters is a useful intermediate step in exploring the progressive.

*Choose what is impactful, sustainable, and permanent.* As I consider my future, I am reminded of the adage about when you put a hand in the water, the water moves, but when the hand is removed, the water goes back to stillness. Although my belief in potential impact is always an important factor in my choices, I have seen the water *moved* by my hand go back to stillness in many instances, exposing the lack of sustainability, particularly in service and administrative work, where there may be impact but not permanence. At present, I see the greatest potential for impact, sustainability, and permanence in my work through assisting students in the process of learning to be intellectual thinkers who understand the importance of self-knowledge and self-reflection, intellectual development, and questioning and challenging what is unjust and inequitable.

*Include authentically felt perspectives beyond education.* Pinar's emphasis on pulling from disciplinary and philosophical perspectives, and the absence of such perspectives in teacher education curricula, have led me to consider that a broader variety of ways of knowing can be infused into my classes. What can be learned about ourselves as educators can be amplified and enhanced by what we can learn/apply from life. Being an educator is part of our lives, not all of them; segmenting what educators know and do limits the ability to make complex connections, thus, shortchanging possibilities. Consciously moving outside of education models the range of opportunities for students to explore contexts in the interrelationships between education and everything else.

What perspectives can be authentically included by each person varies. Pinar's 1975 presentation powerfully showed the connections between his interdisciplinary lenses and their meaning to his work. *Lebenswelt*—world experiences—particularly resonated with me, as it speaks to the validity of one's own voice and perspective, as well as the importance of consciousness of knowing where one's views come from.

A second lens for me is the relationship between people and places. My academic background in the cultural context of place—the relationship between people and built and natural environments—is part of how I view the world and an important factor when I am exploring synthetical relationships, because the context of place is natural for me.

The following is a place-based, historical example I explored during work in Malta. It illustrates *currere* in its description of how a group of people took action through peace and resistance for an unknown future, and based on regressive, analytical, and synthetical factors, had life-saving impact.

*In Malta, a church in centrally located Mosta is visible from many parts of the island-country. It is famous for its large dome and the fact that, in World War II, a Luftwaffe bomb entered the church from the dome during a crowded service. It did not explode, likely saving hundreds of lives. While considered a miracle, another explanation emerged. Europeans who were conscripted involuntarily to bomb buildings in German-occupied countries resisted at great personal risk.*

*“Legend has it that upon opening the bomb to defuse it, it was found filled with sand. It also contained a note saying: Greetings from the workers at Škoda Works in Plzeň” (WEB029, 2011).*

A second example also illustrates *currere*—how the past, present, and future are linked to interpretation and decisions—and the place-based focus of my thinking when I was in the process of deciding whether or not to accept a position at Miami.

*One of my students recently wrote about her college search and how her family had told her that she would know the right place when she saw it. She felt an immediate connection to Miami and described the comfort and familiarity of the red brick Georgian Colonial buildings, the beautifully landscaped grounds, and the physical orderliness. As I read, I was reminded of my first visit to Miami, where my impression was the opposite. I saw the physical campus as representing homogeneity, traditionalism, and structure. Knowing the physical spaces often reflect culture of places, I was concerned.*

**Be aware of, but not driven by, systemic barriers.** While some faculty are in complete simpatico with their institutions and departments and others are completely outside, most of us occupy space somewhere on the continuum of “betwixt and between.” Responses to barriers vary—from managing areas of disconnect, building consensus, and maneuvering around barriers to completely scrapping ideas that would encounter barriers. In my history, I fall closer to the managing, building, and maneuvering end of the continuum. But, I have learned that the effort required and level of success are related to the extent of barriers, which varies at points in time. Deciding strategies is an ongoing process requiring individualized assessments of effort, risk, and potential impact.

#### **A PROGRESSIVE PATH FOR SYNTHETICAL ACTION: INCORPORATING CURRERE INTO UNDERGRADUATE WRITING**

As I have moved through the writing of this essay, my use of *currere* to explore and analyze the relationships between my past, present, and hopes for the future has provided me with an enhanced understanding of both myself as an educator and my students. For me, an important focus, derived from my past and present experiences, passion, and expertise will be a more explicit emphasis on the intellectual development of undergraduate students, who are capable and eager to engage and learn. I want them to identify as intellectuals and to not be fearful or dismissive of what they do not yet know or understand. I want them to have that identification as early in their academic careers as possible; I have seen the benefits of that early grounding in their continued learning.

I began this essay with the statement, “It is not always easy to take action for an uncertain future.” My intention for the near future is to explicitly use the *currere* framework in my undergraduate classes, using writing to develop ideas and provide a permanent record of individual processes and development. I want students to see their voices and experiences as valuable; to honor, seek out, and incorporate perspectives of the *Lebenswelt*; and to think about actions for their futures beyond the superficial.

Parenting is the ultimate act of taking action for an unknown future. I will end this essay with two short examples of writing that represent *currere* thinking related to parenting. The first example speaks to the worries shared by families and educators that children will be harmed by policies and practices in schools that reduce teacher autonomy, humanity, and the creativity, confidence, and self-worth of students. From the *currere* perspective, the powerful and heartfelt comment shared by my colleague reflected his knowledge of the past and present and his concerns for the future.

*"I am so sorry for what school is going to do to you." My colleague, sitting on my deck during an informal late summer party, was speaking to my six-day old granddaughter Fiyera. He leaned over her, whispering the words to the newborn in his arms with a sense of passion and intensity that drew my attention from my other guests.*

In the second example, which is not directly related to education, I describe a trip designed to expose my daughter to her heritage (regressive) in the hopes of helping her understand her identity (progressive). As parents, we provide experiences but cannot control interpretation. Her response reflected a powerfully felt intersection between past and present (analytic) and meaning of the complex nature of identity (synthetical) and is a testament to what young children understand.

*When my daughter was five, we travelled to Iowa, where I grew up. The trip was punctuated with rest stops at antique shops, which she knew from other road trips as "places for things from the old days." In rural northwest Iowa, as we left the paved secondary road to travel the mile of gravel road to my grandparent's homestead, she became uncharacteristically quiet, unconsciously sensing the span in time and distance. "Mommy, are we in the old days?" "Yes, Brenna." I replied. "This is part of who you are."*

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