

CURRERE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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Currere is a profound method of personal reflection, as well as a powerful means to explore literature and provoke written expression and self-exploration. In this article, I explain how, as a doctoral student, I came to know and appreciate the method of *currere*. I show that, in addition to providing a means for the reflective writer to open up oneself to one's self, *currere* can be used by the alert reader to open up works of literature to the contemplative eye. Then, I explain how, as a high school English teacher, I used the method of *currere* to structure a writing assignment and how that assignment impacted the self-understandings of the students. My goal is to explain how *currere* can be discerned lying just beneath the surface of many written texts and to show how introducing students to *currere* through a writing assignment can lead to intense personal reflection.

I first encountered the concept of *currere* in a seminar I was taking as a doctoral student. We were assigned Pinar's (1975/1994), "The Method of *Currere*." At around the same time, while reading William Schubert's (2009) *Love, Justice, and Education: John Dewey and the Utopians*, I came across Schubert's reading of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* as an illustration of *currere*. Schubert states, "The story of Scrooge is clearly a vivid illustration of *currere*. He revised his present by reflecting on his past and imagining his future" (p. 206).

Once the notion of *currere* took root, I began to see *currere* everywhere. I was hooked. For instance, *currere* undergirds the structure of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare (1610/1975). In Act One, after the opening scene in which the ship (bearing the king, his son, and various courtiers, including Prospero's brother Antonio, the architect of his betrayal, usurpation, and exile) is tempest-tossed, we meet Prospero and his daughter Miranda. The monologue that follows presents a challenge to every director: how can one keep the attention of the audience as Prospero explains the past to Miranda? It is not so much a scene as it is straightforward narrative exposition. Yet, the attentive theatregoer gleans the cause and motivation of Prospero's plans for revenge. Shakespeare uses this scene, and much of Act One, to present Prospero's past, from which we see flowing his plans for the future and his decisions in the present. Prospero reflects on his past and sees that he has been betrayed by his brother and wronged by his king. His vision for the future, therefore, is founded on suffering and humiliation. His plans for the present are to draw those who wronged him to his isle and, through his magic, seek revenge.

In Act One, Prospero is a force of vengeance, but as the play unfolds, he reconsiders his identity and his decisions in the present when he changes his vision for the future. In Acts Two through Four, Prospero recognizes his daughter's love for the prince, which causes him to imagine her future, and to bring about her happiness, he resolves to change his plans in the present. Rather than use his powers to isolate father from son and to separate the lovers, he uses his art for fostering love and reunion. Prospero decides to forgive his brother, Antonio, and his king, Alonso. He frees them from his spells and, in doing so, frees himself as well. In Act Five, the transformation is complete, and Prospero's identity shifts from that of a wronged brother and abused subject, plotting revenge, to that of a loving brother and loyal subject, forgiving past transgressions, and to a devoted father, ensuring his daughter's happiness and planning

her wedding day.

Reminiscent of *A Christmas Carol*, the shape and structure of *The Tempest* follows the movements of *currere*—the main character reflects on his past, envisions the future, and perceives the present moment, all of which determine his identity. Over the course of the play, we see him reevaluate his past, reimagine his future, reconsider the present moment, and, ultimately, redefine his identity.

Another example of following Schubert's (2009) lead and using the method of *currere* to dig beneath the surface of texts occurred as I was reading Kurt Vonnegut's (1969/1997) *Slaughterhouse Five*. Vonnegut presents the reader with a case study of someone whose inability to confront his past leads to an inability to envision his future, take action in the present, or have an understanding of his own identity. Billy Pilgrim, a soldier who witnessed the horrors of the firebombing of Dresden in the past, feels like "a bug stuck in amber"—impotent to act in the present—sees only his only death in the future, and cannot bear to look back on the past. Unable to comprehend his past or imagine his future, he cannot begin to understand who he is, and so he is unable to accept or act in the present. His schizophrenic time-travelling trips from the distant past to the far future testify to his inability to live in the present. Whereas Shakespeare presents us with a man made whole through the method of *currere*, Vonnegut shows us a man destroyed by his refusal or inability to engage in any phase of *currere*. Both writers show us that, although we may not need *currere* to merely exist, we do need *currere* to actualize our humanity.

Reflections of *currere* abound even in short passages, the consideration of which opens up the work as a whole to new levels of interpretation. For instance, consider how Fitzgerald (1925/2004) structures the syntax of this beautiful passage from *The Great Gatsby* to reinforce movement through time and space—and how it follows the method of *currere*. (Paragraphs and punctuation marks are reproduced as they appear in the original text.)

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (Fitzgerald, 1925/2004, p. 180)

The images in this passage, of course, evoke being pushed relentlessly into the past, striving heroically for the future, and struggling futilely in the present. However, in addition to the imagery of "the orgastic future" and of "being borne ceaselessly into the past," the grammar of these sentences, and the order of their arrangement, reflects the movement and method of *currere*: "It eluded us then" explores the past, "we will run faster" imagines the future, and "so we beat on" captures the present moment. Furthermore, the final words of the novel, "borne back ceaselessly into the past," reflect the fundamentally cyclical nature of *currere*. The power of this passage surely lies in the haunting imagery and stunning diction, but it also lies in the underlying grammatical structure that echoes the method of *currere*.

Another example of a short passage opening up the work as a whole to new levels of interpretation using *currere* is illustrated by this sentence from the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five* (before the novel shifts to third person narration and follows the exploits of Billy Pilgrim) in which Vonnegut (narrating in first-person as himself) describes a vacation he took with his grandchildren:

We went to the New York World's Fair, saw what the past had been like, according to the Ford Motor Car Company and Walt Disney, saw what the

future would be like, according to General Motors. And I asked myself about the present: how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep. (Vonnegut, 1969/1997, p. 23)

As mentioned above, Vonnegut goes on to consider the importance of seeing the past and future and asking about the present in subsequent chapters of the novel. He frequently employs the trope of “looking back” in *Slaughterhouse Five*; for instance, when describing the biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he tells us that, “Lot’s wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human” (p. 28).

Another example of the power of *currere* (and the importance of looking back) appeared before me as I read James Baldwin’s (1995) *Notes of a Native Son*. Baldwin explains that, “before one can look forward in any meaningful sense, he must first be allowed to take a long look back” (p. 6). And, of course, new ideas can impact how we consider our past and how we think about our future. Elliot Eisner (1991) expressed it this way: “New ideas can reconstruct our past.... Once a Darwinian idea emerges, for example, the past never appears the same. Nor does the future” (p. 207). Eisner goes on to say that John Dewey regarded the most powerful aspects of learning as those resulting in the reconstruction of experience. With the power of this kind of reflection in mind, I endeavored to create an experience for my students that would involve them in the act of reflection through the method of *currere*.

I constructed a writing assignment that involved the students in a two-week writing workshop. The first week, we devoted one day to each part of the method of *currere*. Students wrote journal-type entries to explore their pasts one day, their futures the next, and so on. We also read and discussed Pinar’s (1975/1994) “The Method of *Currere*.” I provided prompts to help the students generate ideas and open up their reflections, sometimes posing questions, sometimes offering sentence starters. Then, the students assembled all the parts of their reflections into holistic papers, transforming them from a series of reflections into a more integrated whole. The themes were personal, the structure organic, and the content meaningful. I felt that the paper added a level of relevance unmatched by any other assignment I had given in the course. The texts the students generated felt real, authentic, and important.

To put closure on the activity and to gather feedback, I asked the students to reflect on the method of *currere*, itself, as a means of reflection. Although one student wrote, “I already know enough about myself—I didn’t ‘discover’ anything as the assignment was supposed to lead you to do,” another said, “I never really looked back on my past to see how it is reflecting my present and how it is changing my future. I never thought about it before, so it was fun to see.” Some comments expressed therapeutic benefits: “Lately, I have had a lot on my mind, and this allowed me to put my thoughts on paper, which was good for me.” Others expressed a sense of self-discovery: “It was appealing to find out new things about myself.” Sometimes the self-discovery sounded painful: “It forced me to accept new realizations about myself I hadn’t faced before.” At other times, the self-discovery sounded positive: “I was able to really use my own voice, and I was able to learn a lot about myself during the process. I really enjoyed this assignment.” Others expressed a clearer picture of the future: “It really made me think about what I want for my future and why and if it was what I really wanted.” In terms of quantitative data, 79% of the students in 2014 and 83% in 2015 agreed that the assignment led to perceiving the past, present, or future in a new way, and 57% of the students in 2014 and 83% in 2015 agreed that the

assignment led to understanding themselves or their identities in a new way. These results made me feel good about the assignment and further demonstrated the power of the method of *currere* to prompt reflection and facilitate transformation.

I know that *currere* is not for everyone. As the student feedback reveals, not all students love it. And, of course, *currere* does not help everyone. As one realizes by comparing Prospero or Ebenezer Scrooge to Billy Pilgrim or Jay Gatsby, some characters grow and evolve, others stagnate or regress, despite encountering their past, future, present, and identities. And, *currere* does not necessarily make life easier. As I have experimented with it, I feel at times anxious, as though I am taking a bold risk. And, I feel doubt. The little voice, the one that so often inhibits trying something different, asks, “Is this really a good use of precious instructional time?” I can imagine many educators wrestling with similar skepticism.

My firm conviction that honoring the autobiographical is essential to both student and teacher gives me the strength to push against the prevailing educational tide. Teachers need to make space in the curriculum for nurturing student self-exploration, but they also need to be aware of their own identities relative to the past, future, and present situation. Although *currere*, itself, is enriching and empowering, as curriculum, it is nearly countercultural. *Currere* opens up inquiry. It probes and exposes. It is supple and plastic. And, since it easily takes every student in a different direction, its ends are largely indeterminate and unpredictable. Moreover, it embraces the personal connection of student to subject and eschews the pursuit of the creation of an author-evacuated text. All of this runs counter to the ideal that many educators endorse and many disciplines prize. But, over the years, I have learned to let go of many traditional conventions, embrace a degree of ambiguity, and get out of the way of the students and their learning as often as possible. Like Prospero, by breaking my staff and drowning my books, I exchanged control for freedom. *Currere* provides me with enough of a framework to provide students with guidance, but it leaves the process open enough to allow for the unique selves of students to get through, to emerge, and to flourish.

After looking back on the power of *currere* and its impact on me as a student and as a teacher, it is appropriate to look to the future and to survey the present and to evaluate my identity. Having recently earned an EdD by successfully defending my dissertation in December, 2016, I look forward to speaking and writing and sharing so that teachers adopt methods, such as *currere*, that challenge some of the values prevalent in education and offer something different from the usual routines and conventions. In an era of standardization and quantification and the elevation of a narrow set of skills in the curriculum, *currere* opens up the act of teaching. Defying easy categorization, *currere* is flexible and unpredictable—and exciting. After all, in my role as a doctor of education, I have a voice in the larger curricular conversation. And, in my role as a teacher, I have a duty to provide my students with meaningful learning experiences that promote growth and transformation. And, ultimately, as a person trying to be the best human I can be, I am obligated to pursue the kind of reflection that *currere* inspires.

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