

ON THE VIRTUES OF *CURRERE*

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Every morning I read from a little book entitled, *I Love, Therefore I Am*. One of my favorite quotes from this book says, “Education will transform the world. Self-education will transform education” (Abundantlee, 2016, p. 3). I like it for many reasons, not the least of which is that its emphasis on self-education reminds me daily that *currere* matters. In the past year or so, I have been thinking a lot about *currere*, who gets it and who does not, what we say about it and what we do not. I think it is difficult to define *currere* in absolute terms—it is, after all, like any art, or science for that matter, subject to the idiosyncrasies of the subject. It would be, however, more than a shame for people to shy away or run away not because they disagree with the premise, but simply because they don’t know the premise. Since it has been my *modus operandi* for the last 20 years or so, I’d like to share what I have come to understand as the virtues of *currere*, particularly for those of us who see ourselves as social justice educators, activists, and advocates.

THE METHOD

Currere is a method of autobiographical/biographical inquiry that moves the “*currerian*” through and among four moments of critical self-reflection and contemplation, giving shape to an internal dialogue. *Currere* asks that I: 1) re-member (as in putting the pieces back together) and reflect (considering what these pieces mean in one’s life and for one’s life) on my past educational experiences; 2) contemplate my desires and fantasies of the future; 3) consider the significance of past experiences and future desires in terms of the historical, social, cultural, and political contexts through which they emerge; and 4) synthesize my thinking across these moments as a way to purposefully engage a process of learning and re-learning toward more just futures.

THE PREMISE

Although I was introduced to *currere* early in my graduate school experience, it was not until I read bell hooks’ (1994) *Teaching to Transgress* that I could make sense of why one might do *currere*. For someone who has always wanted to be an inspiring teacher, I was struck by the connections hooks draws between empowered teaching and self-wellbeing. She writes,

Progressive, holistic education, “engaged pedagogy” is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes wellbeing. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own wellbeing if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students (hooks, 1994, p. 15)

Thus, the teacher who is committed to practicing an engaged pedagogy must be invested in her own process of intellectual and spiritual growth through self-reflection and contemplation. This is the only way she might open up such spaces with and for students. While there are any number of ways that might support teachers, students, and other educators in this important self-work, *currere* is one possible praxis that plunges one into an ongoing process of self-actualization.

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WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT

Although many seem to think of *currere* as the business of writing one's own life story, there is much more to it than that. One certainly can write her autobiography without claiming *currere*. So, how might doing *currere* be distinguished from traditional life writing? *Currere* is a method of autobiographical/biographical inquiry that allows one to “sketch the relations among school knowledge, life-history, and intellectual development in ways that might function self-transformatively” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008, p. 515). It is a process through which one seeks to answer the questions: What has been and what will be my educational experience? How have and how will these experiences shape who I have been and who I hope to be as a student, educator, scholar, activist, advocate? and so on. Unlike traditional Eurocentric autobiography—where the point is to tell one's life story in heroic terms, the point of *currere* is to intervene in one's educational experiences and to consider how they have manifested and how they will manifest as one's private and public self. It also seems important to note that one might practice *currere* privately but never write publicly with an autobiographical “I”. And others who practice *currere* privately may choose to share their emergent understandings by publicly invoking an autobiographical “I”. In either case, *currere* is a kind of mindful inquiry through which one can harness the power of contemplation, reflection, introspection, and imagination toward the possibility of self-transformation/self-determination. Now that we have some sense of what it is and what it is not, let's consider how it works.

CURRERE AS SELF-PRACTICE

In *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) contend that, “Selves are socially constructed through the mediation of powerful discourses and their artifacts—tax forms, census categories, curriculum vitae, and the like” (p. 26). We might add curriculum to Holland et al.'s list as both discourse and artifact, as it not only represents identities, but also actively produces them. In this sense, the self is certainly determined by curriculum (and other discourses and artifacts) to some extent, but the self is also, to be sure, self-determining; that is, it can intervene in the productive process. I can resist, rearrange, or retort. It is possible, then, that I can engage with—rather than simply receive—the curriculum. *Currere*—as a kind of self praxis—is my opportunity to engage in a personal way with the curriculum in a co-productive process; it shapes me, and I shape it. Now, let's consider why *currere* as praxis is becoming increasingly important to individual, collective, and democratic wellbeing.

WHY CURRERE?

For one, we teach our students from pre-K to PhD that the primary purpose of education is not free intellectual pursuit, spiritual growth, or even critical consciousness. We teach them instead that the primary purpose of education is to get a job. If we are not saying it straight out, we are certainly implying it in almost every facet of the way we do school—standardization of knowledge, deintellectualization of teaching and learning, and the normalization of students. In this way, education gets reduced to schooling, and schooling gets reduced to best practices designed to control what and how we know. And without intervention in this process, we can easily become divorced, uninterested, mechanical, or alienated. *Currere* is an attempt to reclaim education as a journey toward self-understanding or an understanding of self as it is always in relation to other selves

and always positioned in the world at a particular historical moment. On this journey, then, we learn not only about ourselves as situated knowers, but also about others and the world around us.

Second, even more powerful than the discrete “education” we receive in schools is the curricula hidden and reinforced through other social and cultural institutions and practices that support pedagogies of empire—neoliberalism, imperialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and so on. These pedagogies teach us how to be raced and gendered consumers in ways that reinforce their disciplinary powers. Even more worrisome is that this learning is largely subconscious. About 95% of our brain capacity functions at the subconscious level, we are actively receiving and processing thoughts, which ultimately direct most of our actions. The question, then, is how we might become more aware of the dirge of thoughts flowing through our brains and directing our actions. Although there is no agreement among scientists on how much access we can have to the subconscious mind, there is a growing body of research that supports the use of mindfulness and other contemplative practices in helping us to be more aware of and attentive to our subconscious thoughts (Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott, & Bai, 2014). As a form of contemplative inquiry, then, *currere* can help us identify subconscious thoughts and patterns of thinking that explain our actions, and with this awareness, we can work to decolonize both our thinking and our actions.

Third, there is a powerful assumption that the way to do social justice work is to direct our efforts at or on behalf of the less fortunate, to be the voice of the voiceless, to be advocates for the poor or otherwise disenfranchised, to do for them what we assume they cannot do for themselves. Underlying this assumption is the idea that we should be selfless in our social justice endeavors. This is at best disingenuous and at worst dangerous. The only access we have to advocating with/for others is through the self. And an unexamined self is a dangerous self, because it does harm with no realization of that fact. *Currere*, I would argue, positions the self to examine the self. Some might consider this problematic, contending that the self cannot be objective about the self. While I would agree, I would also suggest that the point of such examination is not to render objective knowledge; it is to delve into the contours of the subjective in a way that is not possible for the objective researcher to do; to render knowledge and insights inaccessible to the objective researcher, who will undoubtedly offer—not an impartial or more truthful perspective, but simply—another partial perspective. And in fact, it is the dialectical tension between the two perspectives that brings about the troubling questions, which should be the impetus for critical self-examination. At any rate, *currere*—as a form of critical self-examination—affords us the kind of deep understanding that allows and encourages the self to transcend itself and to connect in more authentic ways with others. So instead of speaking for the voiceless, I work to open pathways such that the voiceless might speak for themselves.

Finally, while the virtues of *currere* for the practitioner of *currere* are many, there is also great virtue in reading the autobiographical artifacts that *currere* work can and does produce. In pondering the significance of *currere* for the reader, I turn to insights made by bell hooks (1992) in her chapter entitled “Revolutionary Black Women” and Maxine Green (1995) in her book, *Releasing the Imagination*. In speaking about the importance of fashioning a radical Black female subjectivity, hooks makes the point that reading the autobiographies of revolutionary Black women, who learned to not only advocate for themselves, but who were able to translate that into activism or advocacy for and with others, is necessary work for those of us who are intent on walking similar paths. hooks’ point, I think, is applicable to all of us who are trying to fashion lives against the under-democratizing status quo. We have to read more autobiographies of social justice

activists, because it not only allows us to see the personal and political nature of the challenges inherent in the work, but it also encourages us to challenge our own thinking about what is and is not possible. And, as Green so brilliantly illustrates in *Releasing the Imagination*, reading/hearing/witnessing others' stories affords us our only opportunity to see through the eyes of another and to wrestle with a vision of ourselves that comes from that perspective.

In closing, I would just remind you that there was a time when education was more a self-determined act than a compulsory one—a time when we learned by doing, by listening to the testimony of others, and by contemplating self in the world. And although we have moved on, for better or for worse, I would just point out that many of the struggles we continue to endure—issues that have been largely unresolved by our irrational commitment to the rational—which I read as a concerted effort to think in spite of one's self—require us to remember that unjust structures still hinge on unhealthy, opaque selves. *Currere* is an opportunity—in its many versions and virtues—to chart a different way forward.

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