Review Article

A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum

William E. Doll, Jr. New York: Teachers College Press, 1993, pp. xvi + 232. ISBN 0-807-73217-6.

As an educator and fairly recent student of complexity, I was intrigued by the opportunity to review Doll's classic and thought-provoking treatise on curriculum in an era of changing paradigms. I am currently engaged in committee work to discover/ uncover what is emerging from curricular innovations within nursing education. In this context, Doll's book held a great deal of fascination for me and inspired me to reflect on and consider my own long held assumptions regarding the purpose and outcomes of both pre-professional and post-licensure curriculum within nursing.

Doll uses the term "post-modern" in referring to a paradigmatic shift in thinking from empiricism and rationalism to one in which "modern notions of truth, language, knowledge, and power" (Slattery 2006, p. 17) are subject to critical reappraisal and transformation. Deconstruction of accepted meaning is a hallmark of this social theory. Using the concepts of "self-organization, dissipative structures, ecological balance, punctuated evolution, and complexity theory" (p. 12), Doll suggests the major strength of post-modernism is the creation of new knowledge and the transformation of learning. To illustrate the post-modernist shift in focus from the discrete to the relational, and from stable, closed systems to open, interactive systems, Doll devotes an entire chapter to Ilya Prigogine's work on biological self-organization and dissipative structures.

Doll's purpose in writing this book is not to provide a foundation for post-modern curricular approaches or a how-to book on developing curriculum from a post-modern philosophical base, but rather to provoke thought and generate concerns about existing curricular practices and assumptions. In Doll's words, "I am setting forth these contemporary movements to help us, as individuals caught between paradigms, develop a new paradigmatic frame" (p. 62). Despite this self-proclaimed purpose, Doll consistently makes the connection between post-modernism and curriculum, instructional approaches, and teaching/learning philosophy in contemporary education. He also draws a clear connection between the scientific, predictive bases for modernity and the scientific, indeterminant bases for post-modernism. As Slattery notes in his 1994 review of this book, Doll is of the belief that "...just as physics led society into the modern age, physics (particularly chaos theory) will lead society out of modernity and into postmodernity" (p. 116).

Doll also draws a distinction between natural science and human science. While natural science is positivistic and concerned with issues of measurement, prediction, categorization, and regulation, human science represents living systems, chaotic order, and the construction of knowledge through "tool use, social interaction, and recursive thought" (p. 122). Human science is also hermeneutic and concerned with structuring meaning from the everyday lifeworld in which humans live and act (Hutchings, 2007). Doll's references to

Dewey in this context are revealing. Dewey (1938/1997) believed education to be a social process, with social control exerted within the context of the experience and not outside it. What one already knows or has learned is not the end result; rather, it becomes the means by which new learning and a broadened understanding is achieved (Dewey).

Curriculum which is linear in structure, sequential in nature, and interconnected to provide for a student's ordered progress through an educational system is ubiquitous throughout those systems—systems which have continued virtually unchanged since the late nineteenth century (de Marrais & LeCompte, 1999). Part of the Cartesian heritage in education is an emphasis on discovering that which already exists. However, an emergent and evolutionary world requires approaches in which new knowledge and new solutions to complex circumstances are created. In terms of education, Doll posits the purpose of curriculum in closed systems is to transmit and transfer knowledge while the purpose of curriculum in open systems is to transform knowledge. The intellectual vision of post-modernism is predicated “not on positivistic certainty but on pragmatic doubt, the doubt that comes from any decision based not on metanarrative themes but on human experiences and local history” (p. 61).

Doll acknowledges that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a scientific framework for curriculum “answered America's needs in a rapidly changing society and provided a methodology for the future” (p. 51) but he notes that a complex, diverse, and service-oriented society demands curricular frameworks which support knowledge creation and transformation rather than merely the transmission of information (p. 31). Doll suggests that “radical intellectual, social, and political change” is causing a shift in our thinking to that which is better described as “post-structural, post-philosophical, post-patriarchal, post-industrial, post-national” (p. 157). New frameworks and structures—if they are to exist at all—are built on what existed before. The relationship between the old and the new is complex; “the future is not so much a break with, or antithesis to, the past as it is a transformation of it” (p. 8). Transformative change can only occur by challenging the status quo and calling into question accepted knowledge and practices which can be disconcerting and destabilizing. However, it is these perturbations in the status quo which open systems require in order to achieve self-regulation and eventual transformation.

Scholars may find the juxtaposition of Newtonian and Cartesian thinking with that of Piaget and Prigogine somewhat discomfiting. If Doll left the discussion there, such discomfort might be justified. However, Doll notes that “no coherent theory has yet emerged to unite the disparate trends—constructive and deconstructive—inherent in the [post-modern] paradigm” (p. 128). In the context of education, Doll uses concepts set forth by Bruner, Dewey, and Whitehead to create a philosophical bridge between modernism and post-modernism but also observes that “Utilizing disparate trends—paradoxes, anomalies, indeterminacies—is one of the greatest hurdles traditional educators and curricularists have in accepting an eclectic and diverse post-modern pedagogical frame” (p. 128).

Critics cite the “elusive and contradictory” nature of post-modernism and argue that a post-modern philosophy “can be defined in multiple ways to suit the

needs of any author” (Slattery 2006, p. 18). Given the deeply entrenched worldview of modernity—characterized by linearity, scientific positivism, and technical rationality—it is easy to comprehend the underpinnings of such criticism. Resistance to post-modernism is not unexpected in light of educational philosophy soundly entrenched in modernism and Doll’s discussions in the context of curriculum are not likely to pacify critics of post-modernism. However, Doll’s rationale for the necessity of change and transformation is the world is changing and the generally accepted tenets of modernism can no longer be taken for granted nor are they even valid in some circumstances. Doll emphatically makes the point that post-modernism—as both a philosophical school of thought and a basis for curriculum—is in its early infancy and “is still too new to define” (p. 158).

In the last section of this book, Doll offers his own educational vision and describes a set of curriculum concepts derived from a post-modern perspective. Doll’s educational vision is based on his beliefs that “there does exist a fascinating, imaginative realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood” (p. 155) and that reality exists not to merely be discovered but to be interpreted using different approaches and from multiple perspectives. In this context, Doll advocates the development of a “dancing curriculum” in which curricular steps are patterned but inherently unique in terms of relational interactions between “teacher and text, teacher and student, student and text” (p. 103). Using a post-modernist frame of open systems and relational meaning, Doll takes the reader out of the comfort zone of the linear, step-based Tyler rationale for curriculum planning upon which educators have long depended to guide their efforts and the so-called three Rs: ‘readin, ‘ritin, and ‘rithmetic. In their place he proposes that richness, recursion, relations, and rigor form the basis for post-modern curriculum. Doll further proposes that curriculum be derived not from a structured, deterministic framework but rather from the defining characteristics of open, relational systems; perturbations and disequilibrium, self-organization, chaotic order, and lived experiences. The post-modern curricularist must also be open to recognizing the patterns emerging from such systems.

The post-modern curriculum perspective represents a shift in focus from the discrete to the complex, from the predictive to the relational, and from the linear and determinant to the self-generating and indeterminant. Empiricism and rationalism are giving way to a post-modern reappraisal of how we think and how we develop and create knowledge. In discussing his educational vision Doll acknowledges that transforming curriculum from its deep roots in modernism to a post-modern paradigm that requires new and different ways of thinking will happen quickly nor will it be an easy transition. The essence of Doll’s discussion of post-modernism is that, in societies characterized by advanced technology and complex social dynamics which did not exist at the time modernity was emerging, post-modernism will result from new ways of thinking and different perspectives indicative of a world that is changing before our eyes.

References

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