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CAN CURRICULUM RESPOND TO THE “CRISIS OF TECHNOLOGY”? CURRICULUM ORIENTED TOWARDS WORLD

Cameron Duncan and Matthew J. Kruger-Ross

A cursory look at current education policy suggests a transformation of education into something analogous to job training. The purpose of such policy is to orient education to fit the needs of a technologically oriented market system. The related demand to quantify all student progress is a manifestation of the instrumental reason that has troubled the thinkers of modernity and capitalism. It finds its common measure in technology. Instrumental reason can be thought of as the stripping down of reason into inputs and outputs. The embrace of technology and its dominant form of reason has led to a crisis in curriculum and learning in general. Each wave of technological innovation promises to be better than the previous, more responsive and adaptive, and is sure to cure the ills of a broken university or education system. Though the ways of addressing the form of reason characteristic of technology are many, the key problem is the reduction of all human activity to narrowly defined ends.

In what follows we explore one way that curriculum may be able to engage meaningfully with the seemingly never ending cycle of new technologies in education. We argue that curriculum cannot respond to any such crisis of technology without embracing the concrete characteristics of human action and experience. We elaborate on philosopher Martin Heidegger’s notion of “world” as it offers a greater ontologically sensitivity that can greatly benefit further curricular and educational inquiry.

To speak of curriculum *in general* is no easy task. It involves many places, people and histories and is constantly evolving. It is reasonable to presume a definition of curriculum that formally indicates the *what* of teaching and learning. Curriculum, then, is something laid out and planned by teachers or curriculum designers *for* learners. Educators speak of the curriculum for 21st century students, for example, and develop elaborate systems of objectives and outcomes that enumerate an abstract concept of curriculum. In a different tone curriculum theorists also try to create, implement and evaluate a curriculum that takes into account the needs of the students. However, in treating curriculum as an object, *both* forms of curriculum perpetuate the dominance of instrumental reason and action. Sadly, the embrace of technology has blurred the distinction between the needs of students and the needs of the market system it serves. How might an ontological sensitivity to human activity itself allow educators to overcome this divide? The following is an explication of an orientation that we hope will inspire curriculum theorists to begin to think ontologically about the crisis at hand.

Heidegger’s (1927) project in *Being and Time* is centered on the rejection of the Cartesian subject-object orientation. This position is usually attributed to Descartes (1637) in his work *Discourse on Method* where he explains how the sovereign subject

removes his or herself from participatory action in the world in order to treat it as *the* source of knowledge. The world becomes the object from which knowledge is derived. The relation is one where all knowledge rests on the knowing subject, who simultaneously imparts it onto and derives it from the world. In this way the world is represented as an objective thing that lends itself to technical manipulation. Ends, and not human action, become the structural basis.

The radical break from Cartesianism in Heidegger's early work is best described in his notion of *world*. In his understanding, *world* is revealed to human beings when they use things that occupy it. Here Heidegger is not describing the physical or natural world, but rather indicating the interconnected web of significance that always already exists regardless of our awareness. It is only in concrete activity that humans are able to trace the relations that comprise a world. The most basic characteristic of human beings is that they exist *in* a world. Again, one must not hear *in* as referencing spatial reality but rather as an "in-connection-to." The manner in which in everyday language we speak of the "world of sports" indicates Heidegger's meaning. In the introduction to *Being and Time*, Heidegger points out that human beings already and always find themselves in reference to a world because humans are involved (or, we cope) contextually with their surroundings.

Humanity's general set of coping skills potentially open us to everything. They allows us to mesh with and derive our being from the things we encounter. Humans encounter things as significant, and in doing so, reveal a world. We suggest that thinking through our practical relations offers the opportunity to orient curriculum towards world.

Heidegger explains:

Things at hand are encountered within the world... World is always already 'there' in all things at hand. World is already discovered beforehand together with everything encountered, although not thematically. However, it can also appear in certain ways of dealing with the surrounding world. World is that in terms of which things at hand are at hand for us. (2010, pp. 81-82)

Things that are ready for use are qualitatively different from other things and, thus, irreducible to quantitative understanding. By involving ourselves with the entities that occupy the world, specific things and other beings, we refer to other things and structures. On its own, a given tool is useless. Only when a tool is brought into concrete use does it enter into relations with things like materials, the workshop and the multitude of relations that went into constructing the tool and delivering it into the hand of the human. When all these relations are thought in connection the result is a whole where each part has a particular place and meaning.

Let us summarize Heidegger's thesis as follows: human involvement alerts us to the foreground and background of our world. These phenomena take one back to the world, which is behind everything as a structural basis: "totality of useful things

is always already discovered before the individual useful thing” (2010, p. 86). The underlying structure of world is what allows the concrete character of things at hand to be selected as appropriate for our involvement. World is something encompassing that we are practically involved and has meanings which stitch human beings to other beings and practical activities.

The practical activity upon which the world hangs can be seen as an opening. The ontological dispensation that Heidegger describes (that we are situated *in* a world) is one that can only be accessed through specifics. If we *think* through the implications of this ghostly presence of world, where meaning is pointed to in practical action with concrete things, we are better able to see the meaning of appropriateness of actions for dealing with certain situations. The human character of our relations is put into focus rather than conformity to outcomes of human planning. It gives new possibilities to see our relations through practical action and not mechanical pieces within a larger framework. In thinking the world in this matter, what were prescribed ends become openings. The embrace of qualitative difference is an essential step to orienting curriculum towards world.

What would it mean to have curriculum where action is oriented towards world? Such a curriculum would be loosely structured, taking into account the everyday involvements of its participants. It would point us to what is appropriate to deal with particular issues, challenges and needs. These selections would challenge teachers to think through the implications of their involvements with particular students in a manner that not only addresses their concrete lived situation but also brings the student back to the larger structural framework of meanings that they are involved in.

When we inquire into current curricular models and theories, we find a remarkable lack of attention to world. Learning objectives and skill sets are treated as neutral and interchangeable, rather than inherently and irrevocably connected webs of significance. Curriculum, whether designed by teachers or according to the needs of students, remains grounded in the assumption that knowledge is simply another (human) resource, a cog in a wheel of the factory. The later Heidegger will name this phenomenon *Gestell*, the positioning of any and everything as a resource for human mastery and control. The “crisis” of technology can be addressed by curriculum only once a greater ontological sensitivity to world is given. Following Heidegger’s thinking to its logical conclusion, if human beings are always already in a world, then the curricular worlds in which we live and conduct scholarship are drastically reduced from what could be possible within curriculum. For example, to begin we could explore how “crisis of technology” could be understood not as crisis but as one possible world

References

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Biographies

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Matthew J. Kruger-Ross recently completed his Doctorate at Simon Fraser University, where he explored how such Heideggerian distinctions as world, enframing and attunement could be used to explore what is possible in teaching and learning. His research interests include Philosophy of Education, in particular the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger. He can be reached at mkrugerr@sfu.ca