

Curriculum as Bioregional Text: Place, Experience, and Sustainability

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Abstract: In this article I articulate what it means to understand curriculum as bioregional text. I utilize a theoretical mode of inquiry to explicate the values of bioregional education while integrating the discussion into the reconceptualized field of Curriculum Studies. The discussion addresses the value of direct experience, in our bioregion, and explains the significant contribution that can be drawn from developing a clearer understanding of our bioregional autobiography.

Keywords: Bioregional education; place-based education; Curriculum Studies; experiential education

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[Reinhabitation] involves becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it. It means understanding activities and evolving social behavior that will enrich the life of that place. (Berg & Dasmann, in Smith & Williams, 1999, pp. 214-215)

Introduction

In an effort to integrate curriculum theory and place-sensitive reforms in education, this article seeks to embrace the learning potentialities situated within particular bioregions while addressing important questions. How can we advance the type of curriculum theory necessary to promote a sense of place? At a time when we face environmental disconnectedness, exponential human population growth, and the inextricable increase in greenhouse gas emissions, it is becoming even more crucial to purposefully integrate place-consciousness into education (Greenwood, 2013; Gruenewald, 2003, 2008a, 2008b; Hensley, 2011; Smith, 2013). In this article I will articulate what it means to understand curriculum as bioregional text. I focus on theorizing while drawing from existing bioregional literature. I believe these efforts build upon prior scholarship to inform new ways of approaching place-based curriculum theory.

Historical Context of Understanding Curriculum

Underlying most of the contemporary discourse pertaining to school “reform” and student achievement is the central theme of curriculum development (Pinar, 2004). Curriculum development thinking, as opposed to thinking framed as understanding curriculum, is manifested through instrumentalist and mechanistic practices such as lesson planning and the collection of curriculum binders. Curriculum development “grew out of an era in which school buildings and populations were growing exponentially, and when keeping the curriculum ordered and organized were the main motives for professional activity” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 2004, p. 6). Thus, curriculum development focuses on promulgating organization, efficiency, and control while addressing the needs affiliated with rapid expansion. Also, curriculum development is grounded in meeting the demands of curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation. Contemporary curriculum work necessitates a paradigmatic shift where educational theorists and practitioners are “no longer [viewed as] technicians, that is, people who accept unquestioningly others’ priorities” (p. 6). Instead of an overemphasis on developing curriculum, and to better accommodate the complexities associated with today’s rapidly changing socio-ecological, political, and economic landscape, understanding curriculum has gained currency. Understanding curriculum is a more adequate approach to face the challenges associated with today’s ecological crisis. Understanding curriculum embraces lived experience and embodies an approach to education that moves beyond the curriculum development orientation. In the 1970s, the urgency associated with repositioning lived experience into curriculum scholarship catalyzed a new conversation, shifting curriculum scholarship into an effort to better understand the variety of “texts” that make up educational experience.

In their synoptic text, *Understanding Curriculum*, Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman (2004) identify what it means to understand curriculum as a variety of “texts.” The forms of texts

described by the authors include, among others, historical text, political text, aesthetic text, phenomenological text, and autobiographical text. Their emphasis on understanding curriculum is embedded within the reconceptualization of curriculum studies catalyzed by William Pinar (Pinar, 2004). The concept and process of *understanding curriculum* is in contrast to the prevailing *curriculum development*-based paradigm viewed as a more mechanistic and efficiency-based endeavor (see Pinar et al, 2004). Understanding curriculum is less mechanistic and efficiency-based because there is an emphasis on lived experience rather than the instrumentalism associated with testing and generating uniform learning standards. In this section I set out to enter the current Curriculum Studies conversation and offer another layer of understanding. From the perspective of advancing sustainability within the field of Curriculum Studies, I build upon Nathan Hensley's (2011) premise heralded in *Curriculum Studies Gone Wild* by proposing that curriculum should also be understood as a form of bioregional text.

Hensley (2011) joins with a number of other educational theorists to outline the potential for educational theory and practice to help cultivate a sense of place within students, educators, and theorists. More particularly, he posits that students need to understand where they are within their biosphere by learning about their bioregion through direct experience. Thus, as many place-based theorists argue, it is primarily through direct interaction with our surrounding ecological and social communities that we can develop a meaningful sense of place (Greenwood, 2013; Gruenewald, 2003, 2008a, 2008b; Hensley, 2011, 2013; Smith, 2013). Hensley's theoretical framework adds to the existing literature pertaining to place-based education by drawing from the field of Curriculum Studies within the specific context of bioregionalism. Bioregionalism is a cultural, political, and ecological form of thought and action grounded in localization and learning to live well together in a place without doing damage to other humans and non-humans (Hensley, 2013). The process of gaining a deeper sense of place is at the root of bioregionalism.

Grounded in awareness of one's surrounding landscapes—including ecological, social, cultural, and autobiographical landscapes—bioregionalism is a framework that blends theory and practice towards the intent of living lastingly and lovingly on this planet. Etymologically, the word bioregionalism is from the Greek word *bios* (meaning life) and the French word *region* (more generally thought of as place). Understanding curriculum as bioregional text involves comprehending what it means to cultivate bioregional connectedness and rootedness within one's own life and being able to apply this knowledge to helping others develop a more experientially grounded sense of place. Within the scope of understanding curriculum as bioregional text, developing an experientially grounded sense of place serves as the cornerstone for curriculum and pedagogical scholarship and practice. When humans begin to viscerally "know" their surrounding bioregion, through direct interaction with it, they are more in tune with how they impact their place and thus they are more likely to participate in its stewardship (Litz, 2010; Smith, 2013; Hensley, 2011). This place-inspired ethic of stewardship can affect and permeate academic scholarship and the way that a teacher approaches his or her practice.

Within bioregional literature, the concept of developing a harmonious relationship with one's bioregion is referred to as reinhabitation. Berg & Dassmann tell us that reinhabitation "involves becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it. It means understanding activities and evolving social behavior

that will enrich the life of that place” (In Smith & Williams, 1999, pp. 214-215). The act of reinhabitation involves working to harmoniously co-exist with all forms of life in a bioregion and learning how to restore the mutual beneficial relationship associated with living sustainably (Welling, 2012; Smith, 2007; Hensley, 2013). The art of reinhabitation is well represented through traditional ecological knowledge and practice. Traditional ecological knowledge is defined as "a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission. [It concerns] the relationship of living beings (including human) with one another and with their environment" (Berkes, Colding, & Folke, 2000, p. 1252). By drawing on the framework of reinhabitation and traditional ecological knowledge, understanding curriculum as bioregional text is a holistic effort that values lived experiences within the bioregion complemented by reflection and integration. The experiential learning cycle which includes direct experience, focused reflection, and integration is embedded in the learning that takes place within one’s bioregion (Dewey, 1938). For example, in the *Sustainability and Community* course I teach at Auburn University, students participate in a relevant service-learning project, then reflect upon this experience and submit a written individual reflection that addresses how their experience ties into the course curriculum and how this learning can be applied in the future. Focused reflection allows one to process the experience and then develop ways to integrate the knowledge gained from the given experience (Dewey, 1938; Rodgers, 2002; Miettinen, 2000).

To understand curriculum as bioregional text is to value the complex interplay between the social and natural communities that make up various bioregions. The processes and factors associated with bioregional text include working to appreciate and investigate how to cultivate “a deeper understanding about our position as humans in the greater eco-social community which falls within our life place” (Hensley, 2013). Within the socially grounded viewpoint of understanding curriculum as a form of bioregional text, advancing diversity in the context of both how we think and what humans do within a bioregion is a priority. In working to understand curriculum as a form of bioregional text, the emphasis on diversity is intertwined with the eco-justice effort to end the “industrialized nations’ exploitation and cultural colonization of third-world nations” (Hensley, 2013). A person who is working to reinhabit her life-place is more likely to take steps to become familiar with the natural and cultural history of her bioregion. With historical knowledge of the exploitive and non-exploitive relationships that have occurred within a bioregion, one is better positioned to respond appropriately to current ecological and social challenges. In essence, understanding curriculum as bioregional text is a multidimensional process involving social, ecological, political, and economic modes of inquiry. These modes of inquiry are shaped epistemologically, pedagogically, and ethically. Epistemology is concerned with understanding “how we know what we know.” Thus, epistemologically speaking, it is important to recognize that bioregional inquiry embraces the knowledge that is gained through direct experiences in one’s bioregion. Appreciating that these direct experiences provide a solid framework for teaching and learning opens up a refreshing form of pedagogy. A bioregionally-influenced pedagogy accepts that students learn effectively in contexts that are embedded in their surrounding community in ways that are experiential and active. Ethically, bioregional inquiry emerges from the recognition that humans are destroying the very life base which makes the earth habitable.

Thus, the imperative to interact with this planet in a way that is mindful, intentional, and mutually beneficial (between humans and the biosphere) becomes a part of the moral fabric of day-to-day life. It is a form of text that pushes one to understand the localized relationships that make life within the bioregion possible while attending to others who are impacted by the decisions made within the bioregion—both downstream and upstream. Understanding curriculum as bioregional text is thus a complicated conversation that invokes both human and non-human perspectives, an eco-socially grounded sense of place, and an affinity for advancing the forms of knowledge that help us to live well within our places.

Understanding Curriculum as Bioregional Text

Instead of the predominant emphasis on curriculum development or focus on non-ecological modes of curriculum theorizing, understanding curriculum as bioregional text involves unpacking the significance of bioregional education, namely the relationships between people and environments and how these relationships affect where we place our epistemic assumptions in order to ensure a defensible quality of life for future generations of people. The emphasis on interrelationships and interdependence, associated with understanding curriculum as bioregional text, necessitates a more emergent design of coursework because systems thinking is inherently more dynamic and animated than object-based thinking.

The process of comprehending bioregional texts is part of the context of advancing a more harmonious human-earth relationship that tends to preserve socio-ecological integrity and overall ecological wellbeing (Hensley, 2011). As mentioned above, it is a form of curriculum scholarship that builds upon the reconceptualization movement, a movement that shifts the focus from developing curriculum to understanding curriculum, by adding an ecologically-oriented dimension to understanding one's lived experiences. Working to comprehend bioregional texts is holistic and emergent. Gregory Smith (2002) provides several examples of place-based education which exemplify the kind of learning aligned with cultivating bioregional inquiry. Water quality testing in nearby wetlands, field trips to a municipal wastewater treatment facility, and phonological studies in one's backyard or in the schoolyard offer great contexts for employing the form of bioregional inquiry discussed in this article. It is important to note that these experiences need to embrace the experiential learning cycle while pushing the student to connect the experience to previous experiences and apply the learning to future experiences.

From an autobiographical lens, our places provide the eco-social context of our lived experiences. Within the realm of Curriculum Studies, the process of understanding how our lived experiences, in various places, have shaped our attitudes and behaviors, enables us to deepen our ability to educate and theorize in ways that are more eco-socially congruent. Eco-social congruency is a concept that I have developed that has to do with promoting a stronger ethic of ecological stewardship while advancing a more mutually beneficial human-earth relationship. Because place-based education does not come "prepackaged," its "curriculum and activities arise from the individual qualities of specific communities and the creative impulses of particular teachers and students" (Smith, 2002, p. 31). Thus, place-based education cultivates a pragmatic and localized ethic of ecological stewardship that mobilizes an eco-social congruency.

A large component of understanding curriculum as bioregional text is grounded in understanding one's evolving autobiographical perspective. Understanding our autobiography involves reflecting on the experiences we have had within various bioregions and working to comprehend how these experiences have cultivated the paradigms and perspectives pertaining to our role within this biosphere. Our worldview is intertwined with our sense of place within our community, which involves an integrated and experientially-based connectedness with one's surrounding ecological and social contexts (Hensley, 2011). Perspective reflection pushes us to develop a stronger sense of place through the experiential process of directly encountering and being fully engaged in and with a bioregion.

Conclusion

When students are able to participate in a transformative form of bioregional education they are better positioned to practice the "art of living well in one's place" (Orr, 1992). These students encounter the concept and practice of "rehabitation," which involves learning to live well together in a place without doing damage to other humans and non-humans. Students situated in a bioregional educational model develop a more refined sense of place and understand their own bioregionally-influenced epistemology (Smith, 2013). This builds upon the student's abilities to comprehend how the larger ecosystems in the natural world are interconnected and interdependent with the cultural systems, which are commonly viewed as disconnected from one another—this comprehension is referred to as ecological literacy or ecojustice (Mueller, 2009).

Similarly, when curriculum theorists practice reflecting and building upon their bioregional influenced condition through an epistemology grounded in place, they are better situated to respond to the epidemic of ecological aversion, phobia, disconnectedness, crisis and so forth. Curriculum theorists are uniquely positioned to respond to the epistemological pitfalls associated with ecological aversion because Curriculum Theory is inherently linked to understanding lived experience from multiple perspectives. Since Curriculum Theory embraces pluralistic forms of inquiry, it is well situated to move beyond the contemporary educational discourse steeped in advancing more uniformity in standards and educational efficiency. Curriculum theorists are well situated to draw from many different disciplines, pose important sustainability questions, and formulate answers to these questions, which have to do with localizing our efforts and re-emphasizing the value of learning from direct experience (Hensley, 2012).

When the pedagogical and curricular possibilities for infusing place are better understood, it is likely that educational theorists and practitioners will be more intentional about infusing experientially-grounded bioregional education techniques into all aspects of the learning process. The importance of advancing place-based education dialogue is grounded in helping future generation to build the ecological and social resilience necessary to withstand the range of crises associated with the sustainability challenge.

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