High Noon for Curriculum Or This Town Ain't Big Enough for the Both of Us

Garth D. Benson
University of Calgary

Bryant E. Griffith
University of Calgary

Peltier's article adds to the debate about a suitable curriculum for schools and how we, as educators, use our past experiences. This paper is a response to Peltier and it is to be read as a critique for academic and intellectual dialogue in the spirit of Socratic thinking. We are not presenting a definite answer to Peltier's ideas but we do offer an alternate possibility for understanding curriculum change and the role of past ideas in that change.

L'article de M. Peltier apporte de nouveaux éléments au débat sur un programme scolaire convenable et sur la manière dont nous, éducateurs, utilisons nos expériences personnelles. Cet article est écrit en réponse à celui de M. Peltier et doit être considéré comme une critique qui a pour objectif un dialogue académique et intellectuel se rapprochant de la pensée socratique. Nous ne présentrons pas une réponse catégorique aux idées de M. Peltier mais nous offrons une autre possibilité pour mieux comprendre les changements qui ont été apportés aux programmes scolaires et leur influence par les idées du passé.

Peltier critiques the use of John Dewey's ideas in current school curricula and, as we understand the claims, he intends to characterize the state curriculum as chaotic. He notes that the recycling of John Dewey's ideas such as inquiry-based instruction, individualized instruction, or co-operative learning results in the "vehement criticism of public education" by the populace. A further intent of his paper, and perhaps this is the most important point, is to explain why educators *should not* recycle ideas of the past. For Peltier, recycling is the mere application of a past idea in a present context. We do not agree with this concept of recycling and, more importantly, we firmly believe that past ideas are central to knowing in the present. This belief is crucial for us because it requires asking particular questions about past ideas and placing those questions in present contexts that have relevance for the person posing the questions. The relationship between past ideas and present questions results in self-knowledge

for the individual and it then becomes possible to apply one's ideas to curriculum. Self-knowledge allows one to make connections with the past in a way that does not duplicate past ideas because the past and present are not joined in Peltier's sense of recycling. His version of recycling is the reuse of the identical object for the original purpose but it is done at a later time. For instance, a recycled newspaper, according to Peltier, would be used as a newspaper in the future. For us recycling means that the newspaper is reconstituted and may be used in a variety of ways in new contexts. The end result is not just a rearrangement of the pulp fibers; it has the potential of being combined with new thoughts and ideas to form a new product. In terms of the intellect, we call this reenactment, not recycling.

Peltier's conceptualization of recycling past ideas as necessarily leading to disappointment and cynicism on the part of the public is understandable if that is the way educational change take place. We argue against the necessity of Peltier's claim while agreeing with his analysis of curriculum change in the 20th century. The fault of today's curriculum is not with Dewey's thinking but with the misapplication of his ideas in present curricular contexts. The reason for the misapplication is that present day educators ask inappropriate questions of thinkers like Dewey.

Traditionally, educators ask such questions as: How is it possible to use Dewey's ideas in today's curriculum? How are Dewey's thoughts interpreted? How are Dewey's thoughts implemented in curriculum? Through such *how* questions, past ideas are recycled and those ideas are seen to stand alone. These ideas are distinct from the context in which Dewey formulated them and they are also separate from current curricular contexts. The asking of these *how* questions means that Dewey's 1916 writings about curriculum can and should be applied to curriculum concerns in the 1990s. Peltier is absolutely correct in recognizing that such a direct application is futile and that it is likely to produce educational mistakes which ultimately create public cynicism and distrust.

Although Peltier is correct in his account of people's thoughts about current curriculum, it is not necessary to reject Dewey's ideas. There is no necessity implied in this argument, if, as we argue, past ideas are capable of being contextualized in the present. Necessity is only applicable if *how* questions are regarded as setting up a sequential, logical order that results in an explanatory model based on entailment. To ask how Dewey's ideas should be interpreted, used, or implemented implies that it is possible to lift them out of context and apply them to different situations. In so doing there is an assumption that knowledge remains static and that situations are acontextual. Asking *how* questions locks one into a logical order which sets up an explanation of how those ideas work today. This way of thinking implies positivistic conceptions about knowledge and an analytic framework for explaining curriculum. Actually, the problem is not with Dewey's thoughts nor is it with Peltier's

account of those thoughts; it is with the paradigm that characterizes the way that past ideas may be applied.

Peltier and the educational reformers he criticizes do not see the connections between past and present ideas, as we characterize them, because we regard such educational reformers as belonging to a paradigm with specific presuppositions. For Peltier and many other educators some of these presuppositions are: there is a sequential order to questions; this order entails an explanation of events; these events are understood in their entirety; and these events are understood out of time. Peltier's criticisms of the entailed nature of recycling historical ideas is creditable to us because he recognizes the error of this paradigm; what he does not seem to recognize is the methodological implications of his observations. His paper is important for the area of curriculum change because it points out flaws in historical recycling.

A major flaw of the direct application of past ideas about Peltier's historical recycling occurs on two levels. The first is the use of formalistic reasoning and its inherent logical entailment when this form of reasoning is applied to the explanatory model of curriculum. The second is the assumption that formalistic reasoning mirrors curricular reality. Educators who ask *how to* questions of past ideas are caught in this explanatory model because the structure of their questions forces them into a pattern of thought which is logically consistent from a positivist frame. One of the intents of this frame is a rational demonstration of the application of past educational ideas to current situations. This is not a suitable objective for curriculum because the application of formalistic logic to curriculum results in technical knowing (i.e., teachers who understand curriculum as technicians and who apply internally consistent algorithms to educational situations). Such teachers' form of knowing is technical and concerns the ends rather than the means of education. The algorithms these teachers use can be interpreted as a set of defining presuppositions by which they comprehend educational events including curriculum.

What we propose are creative educators rather than technicians. These people do not seek an explanatory model; they are not looking for logical entailment in the study of past curriculum theories. Instead, they are concerned with ways of thinking; they ask *why* questions to develop self-knowledge and to build bridges between ideas of the past and present. Rather than recycling ideas they interpret them by taking past ideas and placing them in context with the self-knowledge they have gained in the present. The result of this way of thinking and acting on the past is understanding, not explanation. The understanding that develops is relational. It is not exclusive of context nor of time.

To illustrate this way of thinking the three previous *how* questions of Dewey's ideas may be rephrased as: Why should Dewey be read in terms of today's

curriculum? Based on one's specific *why* question, why does that reading of Dewey say substantive things of today's curriculum? What curriculum action does one take based on his or her specific, initial *why* question? Or, why should there be a curriculum or any particular form?

Such a rephrasing casts past ideas in a new light and removes education from an entailed, technical mold. The consequence of looking at past ideas as being contextually connected to the present is to demonstrate that thinking is an on-going process. It is not the abstraction of past ideas out of context and out of time, but rather is the rethinking of self-knowledge in varying contexts. Part of self-knowledge is the interpretation of past ideas filtered thorough one's present situation, one's past experience, and one's awareness of the world's history.

In order that creative educators may have opportunities for growth and development, we propose that education should focus on thinking as a process. When people come to know about the world it is because they have thought both reflexively and contextually. The thinking that has occurred is a process; it is where they become consciously aware of the development of their ideas and of their place in that process. What is crucial is the contextual element of the process of knowing. They must know why they have come to know; they must also place that knowing in the context of personal experience and the present context of the world. This means that they are aware of the cognitive moves that are made in developing an idea as well as how they comprehend new ideas in terms of past ones in the present moment. Knowing becomes a contextual reflection on their interactions with themselves and others. The others, in this instance, are contemporaries.

We come to know through this process by asking *why* questions which allow past ideas to be connected to present thoughts; thus an interpretation of a current situation is provided. The interpretation is contextually, socially, and historically bounded. It is not an interpretation that only resides in the present moment; it speaks to the past and the past speaks to it. There is a dialectical relationship that exists between ideas; it is this mutually informing process that makes knowing, in our sense, an essentially human characteristic. With the connection between ideas, our present way of knowing the world is directly tied to the ways past individuals have made sense of the world in their given times. This means knowledge is foundational, or founded in basic assumptions of peoples' world views; it is not relativistic. The consequence of a multi-threaded stand connecting ideas is a process of knowing which essentially says that humans, over time, have some commonality in their thought processes. The commonality is the process of knowing; it results in ways of thinking about the world, knowledge, and how humans make sense of their place in the world.

This way of conceptualizing the world and knowledge yields the discovery of thinking as an ongoing process. Thought is not static, nor is it localized. Thought

yields self-understanding in a historical context. For instance, what we mean by self-understanding is the ability to read Dewey for meaning rather than for explanation. Such a reading allows us to comprehend why and how individuals thought in the past and we make sense of those past thoughts in our present context. We do not develop a duplicate understanding of those individuals' thoughts because we are not those people. Our understanding is filtered through different experiences and different knowledge. What we have is *our* understanding of past ideas connected to the present. The importance of comprehending Dewey's thoughts is to understand his thoughts and how he came to his decisions rather than what those decisions were. One consequence of the process of knowing for curriculum is that is provides us with freedom to comprehend the past in order to address present concerns. We are not encumbered, as Peltier argues, by the past; we are liberated by it when it is contextually understood in the present.