In this article, we explore some current conceptions of curriculum integration and propose alternatives to the conceptual violence often done in the name of integration.

INTRODUCTION: "SOUNDS LIKE AN INTERESTING UNIT"

The following is a portion of a recent e-mail exchange:

Forgive the cross posting; I’m looking for a variety of points of view. I’m looking for lesson plans (or ideas that I can make into lessons) for teaching art in math (or math in art). Specifically, what math can I see in any work of Van Gogh? This will be a workshop for 5/6th graders.

One response to this request was:

How about the spirals in Starry, Starry Night [sic] and the sunflowers [sic] in picture of same name? Both can be connected to math and/or science. Spiralling procedures can be written in Logo teaching the concept of stepping. Estimations of number of sunflowers in head as well as patterns created by seeds while still in head are other ideas. You could sprout sunflower seeds and collect data: How many days average to sprout? What percentage of seeds sprouted? Does size of seeds affect sprouting speed? etc., etc. Sounds like an interesting unit. (Lugone, 1996)

Our interest in curriculum integration is, in part, a response to a deep and unsettling sense of fragmentation that can be found not only in this example, but in much of our work with teachers, student teachers, and schools. We believe the above-cited example is typical of what counts as thinking about curriculum...
integration in elementary schools. It betrays an almost random surface skittering over topics that casts the oddest things together. The brilliant sunflowers in Arles in the south of France and how they bore Van Gogh’s agonized attention in his final years are linked, in the imagination of those who frequent early elementary classrooms, to rows of white styrofoam cups with masking-taped names and dried soils and neglected, dying sunflower seedlings drooped on hot Grade 1 classroom sills. Reading this e-mail exchange produced in us a strange sense of restlessness, displacement, and homelessness, a sense of no longer knowing where we are or what is required as a proper, generous, but honest response to this well-meant pursuit of “curriculum integration.”

Curriculum integration poses hard questions to those involved in education. What does it mean to teach with integrity? What does it mean to treat one’s topic of study with integrity? How might school classroom and university teachers alike teach to respect the character and integrity of the lives and experiences of children and the work undertaken with them?

We suggest that part of the answer to these far-too-large questions is ecological in character. Curriculum integration has to do with keeping things in place, nested in the deep communities of relations that make them whole, healthy, and sane. We are intrigued by Berry’s (1977) reminder that an orientation toward integrity and wholeness has something to do with health, healing, and the mending of relations, and, therefore, that pursuing curriculum integration in our classrooms has something to do with “choosing to be healers” (Clifford & Friesen, 1994) in relation to ourselves, the Earth, the topics taught in our schools, and the children invited into those topographies. We are intrigued as well by how such difficult, disciplined work is much more deeply pleasurable (Berry, 1988) (for adults and children alike) than the panic of “activities” that consumes so much of educational practice.

We must be generous enough to hope that the clashing together of Van Gogh and mathematics in this e-mail exchange was done in good faith, and that real, substantial, integrated, heartening work has resulted. Even if these teachers did not find their way into such work, we cannot deny that the oddness of this example is not precisely their problem. School teachers and university teachers all, in their own ways, are living out a deep cultural logic of fragmentation, and they (and we) have all participated, directly or indirectly, in the strange efforts at curriculum integration that sometimes result.

This exchange nonetheless stands, however, as a sign or a warning that issues of curriculum integration still need attention. This continuing need for attention is almost too obvious: in a living system, health and wholeness and the cultivation of good relations are never simply givens, because the young are always still arriving again, ready to call what has been taken as given to account in their own lives. The Earth, too, is beginning to have its say about human character and human conduct and the consequences of ignoring its ways.
"ONE AFTER THE OTHER"

A teacher recently mentioned on an Internet server called Kidsphere that she was thinking of doing "shoes" as a "theme" or a "unit" in her classroom. Over the course of nearly two weeks, the net was inundated with dozens of responses from all across North America—different types of shoes, different styles and preferences, different materials that shoes are made of, "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe," indoor and outdoor shoes, Hans Brinker's skates, shoes and boots, cloggers and elves, different professions and their footwear, snowshoes, skis, and such, plus different countries and their shoes, different ways to secure them (laces, Velcro, buckles, slip ons—leading to numbers of eye-holes and lengths of laces and the idea of "pairs"), Puss and his boots, sizes of shoes, graphs of shoe sizes, graphs of shoe colours, graphs of shoelace colours, dismissing children by shoe colour as a management technique, shoeprints and footprints in paint, tracks and animals in science, and perhaps a detective game that has children tracking something by its prints.

And so on.

The giddy rush of such exchanges is understandable, and it is easy to take some pleasure in them. However, despite their earnestness and good will, and the conviviality with which they occur, such exchanges seem to treat each moment, each particular, with haste and a lack of careful attention. Of course, such a "continuity of attention and devotion" (Berry, 1977, p. 14) to particulars is not what such brainstorming sessions and subsequent "webbings," "mappings," or "themings" are for. They are intended to give a broad and quick picture of surface similarities, surface connections, surface relations under the name of "shoes."

However, because none of the nodes in the web is deeply read for its rich textures and patterns and hidden discourses, none of the connections seems especially strong or robust or deeply rooted (Pivnick, 1996). What result are connections that sometimes seem forced and trivial, betraying a rushed, ultimately unsatisfying lack of attention and care to anything in particular. Rather than providing a picture of some integrated patterns of the world or serving as a prelude to the work of settling oneself somewhere, it is as if these themes or webs of ideas concede, aggravate, or even sometimes create the very situation of fragmentation and alienation that they are meant to remedy.

Consider these words of a Grade 6 teacher:

When you mention an idea, it's so typical of teachers to graciously share everything they can. And they start throwing ideas at you, all meant to help out. You really don't have time to think about anything. Nothing gets a chance to soak in. You get so overwhelmed by all the bits, and, after all, you don't want to leave any out now that people have offered them, so that all you can do is just present them one after the other. (Research note, December 1996)
In their own way (and this situation may be especially aggravated by the existence of the Internet and the possibility of hundreds of comparatively instantaneous responses), such brainstorming flurries seem to work against, or at least make more difficult, settling down somewhere, doing something well, treating something with the integrity it warrants.

It is as if these flurries start out as emulations of the giddy rush of life, of newness, freshness, and ebullience that is so pleasing in children. However, in many elementary school classrooms (and so much of the work done in faculties of education), there are often let loose rushes of thin, restless activities no one of which warrants much attention or work (Jardine, 1995). Teachers then end up producing, in turn, fading attention-spans both in their children and in themselves. And such a loss of attention is most frequently then blamed on children. Their shortness or lack of attention is called “a characteristic of young children” and teachers (in schools and universities) excuse their own lack of attention to the work at hand by citing the attention each individual student needs.

After witnessing the activity of her cooperating teacher for a semester, one student teacher recently said something we found quite telling regarding the tempo, attention, and activity level in elementary school classrooms: “My teacher is busy all the time but she never seems to do any work” (research note, December 1996).

CURRICULUM INTEGRATION AND CONCEPTUAL VIOLENCE

What is lost in many efforts in curriculum integration is precisely the topography—the ecos, the place—of any particular thing. Many webs or themes proceed in a “heady” fashion: each particular gains “wholeness”/integration only through the concerted intervention of a concept (e.g., the concept of “shoes”). It is the concept that brings the particulars together.

Pursued in this way, curriculum integration can become a sort of conceptual violence that tears particulars out of their intimate, particular places and re-sorts them “away from home” under general, abstract, anonymous categories. These categories are not sensuous, bodily, indigenous, and immediate, but oddly cold, ideational, fleshless, and alien. The very act meant to heal and restore communities of real, integral relations and patterns thus becomes complicit in their unwitting destruction and replacement with conceptual structures cleaner, clearer, and less Earthy and alluring than those living communities. The very act meant to help teachers and children attend to the integrities of human experience in a whole and healthy way becomes a form of interpretive deafness, an inability to hear what words and worlds of implication might be already at work in the stubborn particulars (Jardine, 1995; Wallace, 1987) of experience that are present in experience before conceptualizations take hold. As one teacher put it so poignantly, “the water of chemical composition and the water in which my child
has drowned *don't belong together* (research note, December 1996), in spite of their conceptual affinities. The *world* of hydrogen, oxygen, and their combinations is not the same world as that of the agonies of the loss of a child, or the mysteries of the water that washes away sins, or a tall cool glass stippled with condensation on a hot summer's day. Each of these bears *its own* memories, relations, obligations, its own tales and topographies that make it whole, healthy, and livable.

The intervention of a *concept* of "water" into these worlds in order to "integrate" them is simply tactless and unbecoming—disintegrative, in fact, of the integrities of experience already at work without such intervention.

**NARRATIVE INTEGRATION AND THE RECOVERY OF THE PARTICULAR**

Our growing concerns over this portrayal of the situation of curriculum integration as a sort of thin, conceptual surface picture and the ensuing loss of topographies of the particular, led us to recall a passage in Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1971), in which he meditates on a Van Gogh painting of a peasant woman’s shoes. This meditation, in all its convoluted twists and turns (and despite its tone of high German Romanticism), provided us with a way to begin reconceptualizing the nature of curriculum integration:

As long as we only imagine a pair of shoes in general, or simply look at the empty, unused shoes as they merely stand there in the picture, we shall never discover [them]. . . . A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet—

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the . . . furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbirth and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. [These shoes belong] . . . to the *earth* and [are] . . . protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. (Heidegger, 1971, pp. 33–34)

There is a profound familiarity in these words, one that recalls all the years of early childhood. Stopping, with a sort of interpretive mindfulness, over *this* pair of shoes (and not skittering past it in a brainstorming session) might itself reveal a way that our course (*currere/curriculum*) is whole/integrated in some deep, ecologically sane, and sustainable way.

We can recall moments of passing by our father's or mother's or grandfather's shoes tucked by the front door or left tumbled on balconies or verandas, seeing the deep imprint of their tracks inside, the places of shiny imprint, traces of the
lives they have lived and the work they have done, and how, in slipping these on our own small feet, it was not just these particular things that we engaged but a whole world, their world and its deep familial intersection with our own. We can recall, too, how we may have warily avoided those shoes and the life they stamped on us or others.

Somehow, these shoes cannot be captured with any integrity and wholeness on a curriculum web under, say, “different types of shoes,” or “shoes and types of work.” Rather, these shoes gain an integrity and place in a world full of rich memory and familiarity and use, a world full of the intractable particularities of experience, whether for good or ill or some troubling mixture of the two.

These shoes—the black boots a neighbour, Harry, wore in our trudging work of installing furnaces in people’s basements—are not understandable in an integrated way by simply placing them alongside others in a list of different types of shoes from around the world. They do not belong alongside others, except perhaps those of his wife when he arrives home, or mine as we rested at lunch, and then how those age-old boots fit with the thermos and the lunchpail worn thin from use, like his tools, bearing the marks of his hands and the marks of age and work and craft. The world in which one might produce a web of different types of shoes is a different world than the world evoked by dark stains and smells of oil and coal dust, or the knotted pieces of broken shoelace as signs of Harry’s odd frugality.

Understood conceptually and in general, “shoes” bear no history, no memory, no continuity, no dependencies, no place, no communities of relations. They are not someone’s, here, in this place, and, in this sense, they are simply an idea of shoes, not fleshy and warm and curved just so. Despite all its calls to integration, categorizations or thematizations such as “different types of shoes” break apart the very small, intimate threads of familiarity, obligation, and relation that actually hold these shoes in a real, integrated place. Such small, intimate threads and the worlds they evoke get replaced with a concept that cannot provide any of the comforts, the common strengths, of the place the particular has left behind in such severances.

Sticking with such particularity has an interesting effect. Rather than simply bogging down integration efforts with the burden of specificity (Smith, 1994), the particular takes on a certain buoyancy and lightness. It becomes a node on a web of real sustenance and import.

Taking these particular shoes seriously in their wholeness makes it clear how things have places. Things themselves, in their very particularity, issue a sense of belonging somehow, in intractable relations of materiality, obligation, community, history, memory, and so on. The integration or wholeness that ensues, therefore, is not just about these particular shoes. Rather, the phenomenon of integration or wholeness itself, as involving an attention to place and memory and relations and community, starts to come forward.
What starts to come forward is not a bluster of activities for the classroom, but a way of taking up the world that breaks the spell of the consumptivism, exhaustion, and panic of activities in which so much of our lives is inscribed.

What is left, here, is not a “great idea” that can now be directly “applied.” In its stead is a serious, immediate, ecological obligation, to treat things that come to meet us with integrity, to heal the ways that things have become fragmented and displaced and unsettled and dispersed into the ethers of good-hearted but ecologically suspect Internet exchanges.

ENDBIT: PARTICULARITY AND DE-ROMANTICIZING “PLACE”

As we circulated the idea of this article to colleagues and students and friends, an odd thing began to emerge, something typical as a response to interpretive work (Jardine, 1992). What arrived were particular tales of particular shoes wedged deeply, in each case, in the flesh and breath of the teller. As this paper proceeded, it became clear—although still somewhat mysterious—why shoes are so frequently a topic in early childhood education. It seems they always already bear a fleshy familial intimacy that is readily recognized at some deep, gut level and that belies and resists efforts at conceptual thematization. Perhaps our initial attraction to shoes as a topic of this paper reveals some mute recognition of an integrity of children’s experiences then unwittingly betrayed in subsequent conceptualizations.

Consider one particular response we received as we wrote and spoke of shoes and curriculum integration, a poem that brings particular shoes to life:

David is talking about shoes, about some paper he is writing about shoes, & I am thinking about Dad’s rubbers, the black rubber oversoles/overshoes that he always wears in the rain & the snow. old man’s shoes. things that he must wear. the stamp of him. the mark that he makes in the snow, in our lives, in my own life. his father wears them too

& I think that i cannot really find the shoe that fits my mother; perhaps it could be the high heels that are in the dressup box, the things that are left over from some other life that we as children never knew, can never know. but she does not wear these now & i must imagine her long legs sliding into white silk stockings. the garter belt that she throws on her wedding day
all of these scenes i must imagine, as now
most often i remember her in sneakers, but
this is not the right word to describe my
mother’s footwear. keds? tennis shoes? sensible
flats? the glass slipper?

my father wears rubbers, overshoes, like he
has always done because he has always been
old, but my mother i cannot define so simply.
nor can i explain her passion for shoes, stored
in her closet. winter shoes: oxfords, smooth
soled, vibram soled, patent leather, navy, black,
brown, dark green, khaki. summer shoes:
red, white, yellow, orange, stored in boxes

I hear the water running for her bath. imagine
the dressing gown folded. her blue
nightie. the large white towel. a new bar
of soap. her legs. still slender, she
steps into the bubbles. her feet, narrow,
bumpy. her voice is soft.
i cannot hear her step
on the stair.

Beth Everest (1996)

We wish to end with a plea for forgiveness that we ourselves require. Educa-
tion is living out a deep cultural logic of fragmentation that distracts attention,
that is cynical about devotion or depth, and that mocks any talk of good work,
that identifies settling and quiet and meditation with passivity, and that cannot
imagine how one could want anything but business in our classrooms.

What we allude to here is not simply another great idea for the classroom. It
is not merely an issue of teacher knowledge or adequate information about a
topic or a child:

One thing... we dare not forget is that better solutions than ours have at times been
made by people with much less information than we have. We know too, from the study
of agriculture, that the same information, tools and techniques that in one farmer’s hands
will ruin land, in another’s will save and improve it.

This is not a recommendation of ignorance. To know nothing, after all, is no more pos-
sible than to know enough. I am only proposing that knowledge, like everything else, has
its place, and that we need urgently now to put it in its place. (Berry, 1983, pp. 65–66)

This place into which knowledge must find its way, Berry suggests, has to do
with care, character, and love—surprisingly antiquated words in the current
educational milieu. Integration and wholeness have more to do with the way one
knows, the way one is, the way one hopes children will become and how we and
they will carry ourselves, and how light and careful our footfalls will be on this Earth.

The examples we have cited are from the good-hearted work of teachers who are bearing an old logic of fragmentation and distraction on our behalf. The authors cannot pretend that the teachers' distraction is simply their problem, as if our own lives were somehow precious and exempt from questions of how to proceed with integrity, as if we might pretend to have somehow solved this problem in our own lives. Each new topic we take up in our work with colleagues, with children, and with student teachers requires that we raise these questions of integration all over again. Although it might initially result in frustration, we have deliberately resisted the false promises of "yet another model" of curriculum integration sold to the highest textbook bidders.

One thing, however, is certain. Those in education find themselves at an especially difficult juncture in this cultural logic that is being lived out, facing the possibility, but not the necessity, of passing it on to their children.

NOTE

Heidegger's now-certain affiliations with National Socialism, and the affiliations of this meditation on Van Gogh with the romantic images of "homeland" that Nazism co-opted, are undeniable. However, Heidegger can help keep alive the dangers of romanticizing such meditations, the dangers, too, of allowing questions of place and home and land and topography to be taken so literally that they become calcified and hardened into fixed rules of exclusion and inclusion. As Heidegger's (1962) own work attests, living one's life well requires a type of restlessness, an interpretive alertness to the possibility that things could be understood otherwise than we have come safely to assume.

REFERENCES


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