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Introduction

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THE PRACTICAL, CURRICULUM, THEORY AND PRACTICE: AN INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE ON SCHWAB'S THE 'PRACTICAL 1'

Introduction

ZONGYI DENG

Over 40 years ago, in his seminal, ground-breaking paper 'The practical: a language for curriculum' or the 'Practical 1',¹ Joseph Schwab (2013 [1970]) identified six 'flights' from the subject of curriculum studies in America, pronouncing the field 'moribund'.² Today, many of those flights are alive and well, taking on new forms. Across the globe a *flight of the field* is evident in educational discourse and policy development concerning school reform, curriculum making and classroom teaching. There is a shift from a concern with the 'inner work of schooling' (Westbury 2007) to a preoccupation with academic standards, comparative achievement, and high-stakes testing (Hopmann 2008, 2013). The language of curriculum has been replaced by a language or discourse of academic standards, outcomes and accountability (Connelly 2013, Franklin and Johnson 2008). Accordingly, the work of curriculum scholars, curriculum specialists and school teachers—concerned with curriculum making and classroom enactment—has been ignored or bypassed in favour of the work of assessment specialists, learning scientists, educational technologists, etc.—centred on the development of standards, competency frameworks, learning sciences theories and evidence-based practices (see Hopmann 2008, Karseth and Sivesind 2010).

The changes in educational discourse and policy development have been accompanied by a loss of the 'primary object' in the contemporary curriculum field (Young 2013). Since the mid-1970s, there has been an *upward flight* to 'exotic' and 'fashionable' discourses such as gender and sexuality, postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and so forth (cf. Pinar 1978, Pinar *et al.* 1995, also Malewski 2010). In this regard, Schwab's paper did mark a turning point in the history of the curriculum field, if not in the way he would have hoped (Connelly 2013). With the pursuit of *understanding curriculum* (Pinar *et al.* 1995), curriculum theorists have turned away from the practice and actual world of schooling to discourse analysis and to theoretical sources in the arts, humanities and social sciences (Westbury 2007, also see Biesta 2013,

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Connelly 2013). Aligned with the upward flight is a *flight to the sidelines*; curriculum theorists take on the role of commentators and critical outsiders, increasingly distancing themselves from the inner work of schooling and curriculum-making. Consequently, contemporary curriculum theory has virtually little to contribute to the advancement of schooling in the current context of standards and accountability. These flights together signify that contemporary curriculum theory is in a state of crisis—even more severe than in the 1970s (Connelly 2009, 2013). Yet contemporary curriculum theory, largely developed in North America, has exerted a global impact on the international field of curriculum studies (cf. Pinar 2003, Trueit *et al.* 2003).

In the ‘Practical 1’ paper Schwab (2013: 591) provided a *diagnosis* of the crisis in curriculum studies of his day in terms of the *theoretic*, pointing out that ‘The field of curriculum has reached this unhappy state by inveterate, unexamined and mistaken reliance on *theory*’. To tackle the crisis, he developed a *prescription* for the field in terms of the *Practical*. A renaissance of the curriculum field would occur ‘only if curriculum energies are in large part diverted from theoretic pursuits ... to three other modes of operation ... the *practical*, the *quasi-practical* and the *eclectic*’ (592). The diagnosis, albeit formulated over 40 years ago, continues to hold true for the current state of affairs of curriculum studies (Connelly 2009, 2013, Wraga and Hlebowitsh 2003). And, the Practical remains as a promising way forward for tackling the current crisis and for revitalizing curriculum studies worldwide for the 21st-century (Connelly 2013, Künzli 2013, Westbury 2013).

The purpose of this symposium is to reflect on and explore the relevance and significance of the ‘Practical 1’ paper for the curriculum and related fields (e.g. pedagogics or didactics), educational practice (i.e. curriculum policy-making, curriculum development and classroom enactment), and the theory–practice relationship within the current global context of standards and accountability. More specifically, the symposium intends to make contributions to the following questions:

- What does the ‘Practical 1’ paper have to say about the current state of affairs of curriculum? What should/might be the significance and implications of the paper for curriculum studies and related fields, educational practice, and the theory–practice relationship?
- Why, after 40 years, should we be looking at the Practical 1 again? How should the paper be properly read given its theoretical (philosophical) complexity and language difficulties as well as the existence of diverse interpretations and ‘noises’ around the paper (Westbury 2013)?
- How has the Practical 1 been received in different cultural and educational contexts? How can/might it be applied to different cultural and educational contexts? Can the Practical provide a way forward to revitalize contemporary curriculum studies, and how?

In this issue of *JCS* we reprint Schwab’s (1970) paper and provide five commentary essays written by leading scholars in educational philosophy, curriculum studies, didactics (*Didaktik*), and educational

policy and reform from different parts of the world: Gert Biesta (Luxembourg), F. Michael Connelly (Canada), Zongyi Deng (Singapore), Rudolf Künzli (Switzerland), and Ian Westbury (USA). These five papers together form an international dialogue on the contemporary relevance and significance of the 'Practical 1' paper from cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary perspectives.

In the first commentary essay titled 'Joseph Schwab, curriculum, curriculum studies and educational reform', Connelly (2013) provides a retrospective account of the Practical in relation to curriculum, curriculum studies and educational reform in the American. In the 1950s curriculum, curriculum studies and educational reform 'were high on public, academic and professional discourse agendas' (622). However, today's the literature on educational policy and reform 'no longer focuses on the language of curriculum with comparative achievement and accountability taking curriculum's place' (623). Likewise, curriculum studies 'has taken a textual, theoretic turn' and becomes 'no longer relevant' to the real-world practice in schools and classrooms (623).

Connelly (2013: 629) contends that to appreciate the contemporary relevance and significance of the Practical 1, one needs to understand 'what Schwab was doing' relative to the thinking of Aristotle, Dewey, and Richard McKeon. What Schwab did in the paper entails re-conceptualizing the theory–practice relationship in terms of the *logistic*, the *problematic*, the *dialectic*, and the *operational*—coined by McKeon. Therefore, the paper can be seen as providing a critique of 'logistic methods of school reform', and in so doing, advancing 'the idea of deliberation as a practical method' (629). The Practical, he contends further, can be seen as a powerful critique of the current state of contemporary curriculum theory and theorizing, and a powerful argument for the curriculum field as a 'practical' endeavour. Because of an intentional 'severance' of theory from practice, contemporary curriculum theorists 'have reduced the scope of curriculum studies to a small, intellectually traditional, interesting but irrelevant set of concerns variously called by them "reconceptualism" and "curriculum theory"' (631). However, a curriculum studies compatible with Schwab's notion of the Practical is 'vibrantly alive' (631) as there is a vast body of 'in-between' literature on 'subject matter' (e.g. science and math), 'curriculum topics' (e.g. multiculturalism and ethics), 'curriculum preoccupations' (e.g. planning, implementation, and evaluation) (Connelly and Xu 2010: 326–327).

The second essay is 'Reading Schwab's "Practical" as an invitation to a curriculum enquiry' by Westbury. Like Connelly, Westbury (2013) argues that an adequate grasp of the paper needs to be informed by an understanding of what Schwab was doing vis-à-vis the works of Aristotle, McKeon and Dewey. He points out further that a proper reading of the Practical 1 needs to take cognizance of the experiences of Schwab with various curriculum reform projects (the University of Chicago's undergraduate curriculum reform, the Biological Science Curriculum Study, Camp Ramah and Jewish Biblical Curriculum, and so forth) from which he wrote the 'practical' series. In particular, a proper grasp of the paper, Westbury (2013: 643) argues further, needs to take account of what Schwab saw as the central issue facing the curriculum field of his day:

'how the curriculum field should/might think anew about its traditional work of setting out platforms for and methods of curriculum-making in American public schools'.

According to Westbury, two versions of the Practical are outlined in the 'Practical 1' paper, *the Practical 1.1* and *the Practical 1.2*. The former provides 'a comprehensive outline of the form of a field of curriculum as a theoretic and practical endeavour' encompassing purposes, subject matter, problem sources and methods (642). The latter outlines a 'deliberation/phronesis-centred' approach to curriculum practice (642). Although the Practical 1.2 has been extensively discussed in the literature in the forms of school-based curriculum development, reflective practice, the teachers-as-researchers movement, and so forth, the Practical 1.1 has received much less attention. Yet it is the Practical 1.1 that has the 'most exciting and far-reaching' implications for the curriculum studies in particular and education in general, and for the task of curriculum-making: (1) it 'offers a radical re-visioning of the educational and curriculum studies in the analytic and policy fields around schooling and teaching'; (2) it 'foreshadows radically different curricula and forms of research within the curriculum field'; (3) it 'reformulates the vexing thought-action problem within educational research and theory *and* within policy and practice'; and (4) it 'offers a framework for thinking about the place and nature of research within curriculum studies and curriculum making, and way of thinking about the range of ends-in-view of educational research' (642).

The broad implications of the Practical 1.1 identified by Westbury find instantiation in the third commentary essay, 'The Practical and reconstructing Chinese pedagogics', in which Deng (2013) explores the relevance and significance of the Practical for the development of pedagogics in China. He first employs the medical framework (in terms of symptoms, diagnosis and prescription) used by Schwab in the 'Practical 1' paper to analyse the crisis in the field of pedagogics in China, and afterwards discusses what is entailed in a 'practical' reconstruction of Chinese pedagogics congruent with the Practical 1.1 as a solution to the crisis. Next he moves to show how such a reconstruction can be made possible by examining the development of 'life-practice' pedagogics in China—an undertaking that, albeit not informed by the thinking of Schwab, in many respect instantiates the Practical 1.1.

As revealed in the examination, a construction of Chinese pedagogics compatible with the Practical 1.1 entails 'repositioning' pedagogics as a distinct discipline of and for educational practice within the family of educational studies, reconstructing the 'subject matter', formulating a new form of research methodology in the pedagogic field, and articulating a new conception of relating theory to practice as theory bears on intervention into the inner work of schools and classrooms. Furthermore, the reconstruction entails, as an essential starting point, an understanding of issues pertaining to practice in context, and eclectic uses of theory from various sources for inquiry and theory development. Linking these 'practical' features to the European *Pädagogik* tradition and to Chinese educational wisdom, Deng (2013: 664) contends that the Practical has

‘profound meaning and significance that transcend national boundaries and cultural traditions’.

The impact, relevance and significance of the Practical on the German-speaking world is discussed by Künzli (2013) in the fourth essay ‘Memorizing a memory: Schwab’s the Practical in a German context’. The essay provides a retrospective account of how the ‘Practical 1’ paper was received in German-speaking countries in the 1970s and 1980s—when the ‘then-nascent curriculum movement’ was underway as a result of the ‘empirical turn of education’ in the late 1960s. This ‘inconvenient’ circumstance, according to Künzli, determined the ‘destiny’ of Schwab’s paper: It ‘came too soon for Europe and its reception in Germany was too late to have a sustainable effect’ (670).

The Practical 1, Künzli claims, would have been better received had it come under a different circumstance. Schwab’s theory of curriculum development is highly compatible with the German *Didaktik* tradition—concerning the ‘logic’ and ‘dignity’ of practice, the practical and political nature of curriculum development, the notion of curriculum conferencing, and the concept of the structure of the disciplines. ‘[O]f all the American curriculum researchers’, he asserts, ‘it is Schwab who offers many productive starting points to curriculum research in German-speaking Europe’ (670). Furthermore, the paper has special relevance and significance today because it challenges us to ask important questions concerning the employment of standards and outcomes as the main criterion of curriculum construction, and the over-reliance on the formulation of competency models at the expense of formalized curriculum-making.

The fifth paper is ‘Knowledge, judgement and the curriculum: on the past, present and future of the idea of the Practical’, in which Biesta (2013) discusses the contribution of Schwab’s paper in relation to the past, present and future of the curriculum field. He argues that ‘the Practical in Schwab’s sense is still valid, relevant and important, but may be in need of some updating—theoretically, pragmatically, and politically’ (685). Recognizing that Schwab’s paper was inspired by the thinking of Aristotle, Biesta points out that ‘a more explicit engagement with Aristotle’s arguments could have helped Schwab to make a clearer distinction between two aspects that are at stake in the domain of the practical’ (687). These two aspects concerns ‘making’ (*poiesis*) and ‘doing’ (*phronesis*) which entail two different kinds of knowledge and judgement having to do with ‘how to make things’ (*techne*) and ‘what is to be done’ (*praxis*), respectively—both of which are important to the curriculum or education as a ‘practical’ field.³ Another Aristotelian idea that can strengthen Schwab’s argument is the distinction between the *eternal* and the *variable* domains, entailing two distinct kinds of knowledge respectively, scientific knowledge (*episteme*) on the one hand, and practical and normative knowledge/judgement (*techne* and *praxis*) on the other. Furthermore, Biesta challenges us to make an impactful case for the Practical in the current context of standards and accountability—characterized by the diminishing of opportunities for teachers to exercise professional judgements, the rise of scientific research into instructional effectiveness or

‘what works’, and the ‘cultural turn’ in curriculum theory and discourse. He concludes by pointing out that the Practical provides an ‘educational corrective’ to the theoretic inclination in contemporary curriculum theory and to the ‘learnification’ tendency in current educational discourse and policy development.

Taken together, the five commentary papers testify that Schwab’s the ‘Practical 1’ paper continues to have profound value and significance worldwide—whether in North America, German-speaking countries, or China. The paper provides the very antithesis to many of the tendencies associated with the ‘accountability turn’ in educational discourse and policy development, inviting us to rethink what is entailed in the advancement of schooling in the context of standards and accountability. From the perspective of the Practical, the advancement of schooling does not depend on the formulation of academic standards and competency frameworks *but* on real-world practice in schools or classrooms which is contextual, situated, and ‘practical’ in nature, having to do with ‘real things—real acts, real teachers, real children’ (Schwab 2013: 611, also see Hlebowitsh 2012). What really matters to practice is not so much issues of learning sciences and evidence-based practice as the interplays of the teacher, learners and subject matter embedded in the institutional context of schooling (cf. Hopmann 2007), which demands on the part of teachers a special kind of knowledge, wisdom and judgement (Biesta 2013, Künzli 2013). The language crucial to practice is quintessentially *curricular* and *educational* and cannot be replaced by a language of learning, standards and accountability (Biesta 2005, also see Connelly 2013, Westbury 2013).

Furthermore, the ‘Practical 1’ paper provides productive starting points for rethinking the current curriculum field in a way that allows it to make significant contributions to the advancement of schooling for today’s world (Westbury 2013, also see Künzli 2013). Curriculum studies, first and foremost, is a ‘practical’ field centrally concerned with doing the curriculum (e.g. curriculum policy-making, curriculum development, and curriculum enactment), with the end-in-view of the advancement of schooling (Connelly 2013, Westbury 2013). The ‘subject matter’ of curriculum studies thus needs to be centred around the inner work of schooling embedded in the social, cultural and institutional context in which schools and classrooms operate and function (Westbury 1972a, 2013). And curriculum is also a theoretical field where theory from various sources needs to be eclectically brought to bear on understanding and improving practice and on constructing theory (Connelly 2013, Westbury 2013). In this regard, the Practical can provide a basis for incorporating the perspectives and insights of ‘conventional’ curriculum scholars and specialists (concerned with curriculum practice), and re-conceptualist and critical curriculum theorists (concerned with broad political, social, cultural and historical issues of curriculum), among others, for the common undertaking of school advancement in today’s world. We believe a common ground for revivifying the curriculum field can be found in Schwab’s ‘practical’ series.

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Notes

1. The 'Practical 1' paper is the first one in the 'practical' series of essays by Schwab (Schwab 1978a, b, c, 1983). It was published by the National Education Association, Centre for the Study of Instruction (Schwab 1970). An earlier version of the paper appeared in *School Review*, 1969.
2. These six flights are, namely, 'flight of the field', 'flight upward', 'flight to the sidelines', flight into 'perseveration', and flight into 'eristic, contentious, and *ad hominem* debates' (Schwab 2013: 603–604).
3. For a discussion of the implication of *techne* for curriculum making, see Westbury (1972b).

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