

Teachers as Curriculum Planners: Narratives of Experience by E. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin
Toronto, ON: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and New York, NY: Teachers College Press

Reviewed by Denis Hlynka

This unusually readable and flowing textbook from two Canadian curriculum theorists provides a perspective on curriculum and curriculum materials which presents a healthy balance to the technical view with which educational technologists are most familiar.

The text is not directly about educational technology, but rather consists of 15 lucid chapters which take teachers through a model of action research still considered quite new and even controversial by many. Nevertheless, the text provides an invaluable context to contemporary inquiry which educational technology would do well to incorporate.

Rather than provide an overview of the entire text, this review will concentrate on those themes of particular relevance to educational technology.

Habermas has divided the world of inquiry into three domains: the technical, the practical, and the critical. Educational technology most comfortably falls into the former. *Teachers as Curriculum Planners* explores the paradigm shifts necessary to operate within the practical and critical domains, focusing mainly on the practical. In so doing, the authors open up exciting issues which properly belong within the realms of semiotics, post modernism, deconstruction, and reader response theory. Perhaps unfortunately, the authors do not refer to those terms as such, nor do they provide any reference within the otherwise excellent bibliography. This may be a weakness, or on the other hand it may simply reflect the fact that the authors are coming at similar issues from a different direction. Be that as it may, semiotic issues of narrative, text, and meaning are among the paramount themes handled by the authors. It is precisely this focus which provides the major strength of the text.

Narrative is defined by the authors as "the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future (page 24)." The definition is both useful and practical and it is tempting here to expand beyond the text to reflect on narrative dimensions of educational media software. Typically media are examined as an intervention which can be controlled cybernetically, and which in turn can exert a cybernetic control over the teaching learning process.

Instructional development requires that an instructional product.. .be it a video, a CAI program, or a textbook.. .be subject to a process of needs assessment, concept development, and educational evaluation. Ultimately, according to the instructional design model, we revise until we are satisfied with the final product.

But if an educational media product is viewed as a narrative, then the instructional design model of formative evaluation is no longer the appropriate one. Enter Connelly and Clandinin with the basis for a narrative focus on instructional products, based on the concept of “curriculum potential.”

The authors credit a 1975 Curriculum Theory Network paper by Ben Peretz as their starting point. Curriculum potential is “not only what may be ‘read out’ of curriculum materials, as implementors would insist, but also what may be ‘read into’ them (page 148).” Nearly every teacher has had the experience of finding a piece of ‘teaching material’ which seems to fit perfectly into a lesson, even though the material was not developed with that lesson in mind. Thus, curriculum potential becomes situational specific. Curriculum potential means that “different curricular situations pull different things out of a given set of curriculum materials.” (page 147.) Curriculum potential re-orientes the concept of evaluation, since a text no longer is that from which meaning is to be recovered. Rather, meaning resides more strongly in the user.

Connelly and Clandinin propose an exercise in which readers are invited to identify a particularly mundane set of curriculum materials, then to imagine all the things you might do with them. Among other consequences of this way of thinking, this undermines the search for quality media, since even bad or irrelevant materials have ‘curriculum potential’ in the skillful hands of a creative teacher.

Two other key terms follow both of which are explicated within Chapter 7 of *Teachers as Curriculum Planners*. The concepts are text and meaning. Text is described in contemporary literary theory to mean any coding of reality. Of course traditional printed text codes reality, but so does television, and so do the clothes we wear and the food we eat. In this broader view, these are also texts which require coding and decoding.

Meaning is another problematic term for theorists. Semiotically, meaning may reside in the author (the traditional view), but meaning may also reside in the reader (reader response theory), and/or in the text itself. Connelly and Clandinin’s chapter 7 title “Recovery of Curricular meaning” initially suggests the older theoretic position that indeed the meaning is there, waiting to be found, explained, and hence recovered. Connelly and Clandinin however immediately recognize the broader implications of the term, and they do suggest an alternative: reconstruction of meaning. Reconstruction as they define it involves “some remaking of the impulses and desires in the form in which they first show themselves” a quote which they attribute to John Dewey. There is a touch of Derridian deconstruction in this definition, not to mention Pinarian reconceptualization.

Educational technology today finds itself in a similar position as nuclear physics. Once there was the atom, the basic building block of all matter. Yet ever since Heisenberg enunciated his “Uncertainty Principle,” the atom has become less stable with each passing era. Educational technology, too, has its fundamental building blocks firmly set in a systematic development model which valorizes a technical view of how things work. Contemporary theory

such as that noted above is making us realize that those foundations may be shaky indeed. Connelly and Clandinin, with their re-analysis of the concepts of meaning, text, metaphor, narrative and curriculum potential provide practical ammunition which may topple those foundations.

A key question remains. How do we examine instructional materials and curriculum materials within these relatively new methodologies? The remainder of the text provide some guidelines in this regard. The techniques are still not quite straight forward to grasp, the techniques of analysis are not always readily obvious, and the acceptability of such methods by strict quantitativists is still in doubt.

Nonetheless, at the very least, we owe it to ourselves to consider critical and practical methodologies as potential complementary tools to inquiry in educational technology. This textbook by Connelly and Clandinin provides a first step. We eagerly anticipate the next.

REVIEWER

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