

‘Who taught you?’: A currere exploration

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Introduction

The poem ‘Who taught you?’ is the product of the currere method of curriculum theorizing written during a Currere Cymru retreat. The accompanying commentary discusses the currere method and its value as a framework for reflection on curriculum. The four parts of the currere method offer an open-ended structure for reflection on individual experience and the commentary outlines the process using the poem as an example. In the course of developing the poem, the reflection also touches on other aspects of curriculum and pedagogy including funds of knowledge and reading for pleasure.

Who taught you?

Currere Cymru Retreat, Gregynog, January 2025

In answer to William Pinar’s question, ‘What is now and what has been the nature of my educational experience?’

My neighbour taught me to knit when I was five.
In – over – through – off.
Each loop linking to the next
with scarves and shawls and mohair jumpers for everyone and anyone.

My grandad taught me that walking was fun.
Paths and tracks and lanes connecting,
The destination ‘just round this corner’.

At junior school, they taught me to swim.
Wearing pyjamas and rescuing bricks

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We towed each other to the side
And collected badges like Smartie tops.
And that last summer term, we all taught each other –
So no-one left that school a non-swimmer.

Grammar school
There were teachers
There were lessons
I passed exams
I left.

And all the time, the books...
Living on top of a mountain with grandfather,
Swimming like a fish and flying like a falcon,
Catching a band of smugglers or jewel thieves,
Growing up in a Cotswold village,
Making a good suit of armour,
Travelling (accidentally) around the galaxy,
Encountering DEATH,
Living through the seasons and the ages...

Each loop of language linking the next.
Each path a gateway to another world.
The destination just round this corner.

I still knit.
I still walk.
I still read.
And I know what to do if you need rescuing.

Commentary

The poem 'Who taught you?' is the product of the currere method of curriculum theorizing (Pinar, 1994). The method is grounded in the individual's experience of curriculum and offers a four-part structure for reflection (Pinar, 1995). My participation in currere began at retreats for teachers and academics in Wales as

part of the Currere Cymru project (Smith, 2024). I attended a retreat in July 2023 where I worked collaboratively with teachers and teacher educators on the analysis of their reflective regressions on the theme of language (Chapman, Latham, McConnell, Peate and Tudor, 2024). Work on the poem 'Who taught you?' was started at the Currere Cymru retreat at Gregynog in January 2025 where I began to write an individual response to Pinar's question, 'What is now and what has been the nature of my educational experience?', using the four-part structure of currere: regression, progression, analysis and synthesis (Pinar, 1994; Smith, 2024). The retreats provided time and space to focus on the currere process, using writing as a reflective tool. The purpose of this commentary is to position the poem 'Who taught you?' in the context of currere, the wider context of reflective practice, the literature on funds of knowledge and volitional reading and on my priorities as an educator.

The first phase of currere, regression, is similar to the reflective practice, fundamental to the teaching profession and enshrined in the Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership and the use of the Professional Learning Passport (Welsh Government, 2017). That said, finding the time and space to reflect can be a challenge. Kelly (2023) presents a case for diary-keeping as a reflective tool but acknowledges that 'while diary keeping is undoubtedly beneficial when it comes to educator wellbeing, educators are time poor' (p. 11). Diaries and other models of reflection tend to focus on current or recent practice. The currere method, however, focuses on 'the biographic past' (Pinar, 1994, p. 22), which he suggests contributes to the present. In reflecting on past experiences, we come to a better understanding of the present.

'Who taught you?' arose from a session of free prose writing in response to Pinar's question, in the regressive phase of currere. The piece provided insights into my practice around the importance of links and connections that I had never fully articulated before. It began as a reflection on a particular book, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (Spisak ed., 1983) which played a fundamental role in my childhood and education. This may be an unexpected departure point so it is important to note the influence of context. The library at Gregynog includes the beautiful 1983 edition of Malory edited by James W. Spisak and, during the currere retreat, I spent quite some time poring over this text which had been so important to me as a student. It might have appeared that I was not focussing on professional reflection but Malory works in mysterious ways. I had no intention of writing a poem. However, the

writing and refining of a prose reflection became the drafting process for a poem. Revisiting the text in the progressive phase led me to reflect on the worlds of my childhood reading, and the connections I made between those worlds. But even I had to admit that there was more to my childhood than just reading stories, so I began to explore other learning and the people who had been instrumental in it.

What became apparent quickly was that much of the learning that was important to me then and that I carry with me now, did not take place in school. Learning to knit was fundamental for me and it happened outside school. At that time, knitting was on the curriculum of my primary school but there seemed to be an assumption that pupils could already knit and that the lessons were time to work on projects rather than time to learn to knit. It is difficult to imagine one teacher being able to teach 40-plus children to knit. Knitting then, can be understood, to some extent, in terms of funds of knowledge (Moll, 2019). For me knitting and other craft skills, such as mending and dressmaking, were not developed in school but rather by family and kind mentors or by reading patterns and books. The allied funds of identity concept (Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014) has grown out of funds of knowledge and the walks with my Grandad, around our local area and beyond, were instrumental in building funds of identity as I learned about place and family. The well-worn routes between the houses of cousins and aunties, the ginnels and cinder paths avoiding the main road, that led to the bowling greens and parks, were my mental map of home. School was on the map but played little part in creating it.

The most effective teaching I recall in primary school was swimming and life-saving. At the time, no-one thinks that their school is strange but looking back, I wonder how common it was to teach a whole year group of about 100 seven- and eight-year-olds to carry out what was then called 'artificial respiration' (CPR). We benefitted from the total commitment of our headteacher and his staff to ensuring that children learned to swim, to get out of trouble in the water and, if necessary, to help others out of trouble. This provision undoubtedly went beyond the standard curriculum of the time. The LEA provided one hour of swimming a week for 10–11 year olds. We swam at least once a week from the age of 8–9 as we had the use of a pool at a local boys' grammar school where we spent a lot of time swimming in pyjamas and diving for rubber bricks. More than lessons from teachers and coaches though, I remember the more able swimmers being paired with the less confident – pupils were supporting other pupils in their learning. The emphasis placed on swimming, and

especially on life-saving and personal survival, represented a view of what mattered in that school's curriculum: the development of a key skill; the conviction that everyone could succeed; and the role of pupils supporting each other.

Throughout my primary schooling and beyond, I was reading. Some of the time I was reading what my teachers recommended but this was always supplemented by a much wider diet than the curriculum offered. There is extensive research on the importance of reading for pleasure (volitional reading) during childhood and adolescence (Loh, Ed., 2024; Cremin, Mottram, Collins, Powell and Safford, 2014) and on its the impact on academic attainment. The poem represents only a fragment of my reading but its fruits were to enable me to make connections between places, people and ideas (Santi, Cebula and McGeown, 2024). Writing the poem enabled me to see some of those connections.

The disconnect in the poem is grammar school. My secondary education seemed to make little impression. It was not terrible but nor was it memorable. And crucially, it did not seem to connect to anything else.

In Pinar's model, the next phase of currere is analytical. In the process of working on the poem, I recognised that the central metaphor is one of connection and links. Knitting is a series of linked loops which can be developed in many ways to create an infinite variety of patterns. The paths and roads of my early walking all link to other paths, roads and places on my mental map. As children learning to swim, we paired up to support the less confident, children passing on their skills to other children. And the links between the books are infinite. The metaphor, however, is not mere decoration; it is fundamental to the expression of thought. Language choices are realizations of conceptual metaphors (Kövecses, 2021; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980); they reveal how we think not simply what we think. The metaphor in 'Who taught you?' reveals the importance of connection to me in the course of my own learning. The process of currere, allowing time to reflect and explore, enabled me to see that a fundamental part of my practice as a teacher was to support students in making connections.

The final phase of the currere method is synthesis. Pinar describes it bringing together the phases of the method to make meaning in the present. However, there are two levels of synthesis in this example of the method. The completion of the poem (insofar as any poem is ever complete) accomplished the synthesis for me as the writer, despite the absence of any intention to write a poem, much less share it. The poem made sense of a pattern of experience that I had never

seen so fully before, a process central to currere (Smith, 2024). There is a further step, however, in writing this commentary to present both the poem and the process of its creation to wider audience as a demonstration of the method of currere. As a general rule, I would argue that a poem should stand on its own two feet but in this case, the poem is presented an example of the way in which currere can enable 'deeper knowledge and understanding of one's field of study' (Pinar, p. 27).

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