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An English Teacher's *Currere* from Cocksureness to Critical Self-Awareness

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Abstract

In this paper, I narrate my transformative journey as an English language teacher in relation to my understanding of curriculum theory and practice in higher education. Using the currere *approach, I reflect on my evolution from initial overconfidence to critical curriculum awareness at Kathmandu University since August 2000. The paper addresses a common phenomenon in higher education, where students receive superficial exposure to curricular processes during their academic journey, subsequently developing unwarranted confidence in the curriculum upon graduation. Through systematic reflection and critique, this* currere *aligns my personal curricular experiences with established theoretical frameworks, particularly drawing upon Schwab's curriculum commonplaces, Schubert's curricular images, and Baptist's conceptualization of curriculum as a garden. The study contributes to curriculum discourse by presenting a customizable framework for understanding and implementing curriculum as a developing educational guideline. The reflections demonstrate how theoretical grounding in foundational curriculum concepts helps transform practitioners from unreflective implementers to critically aware developers and implementers of curriculum.*

Keywords: *Transformative journey of a teacher, currere, curricular process, theory of curriculum in practice*

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Introduction

The following narrative is organized through the four dimensions of *currere*–the regressive, progressive, analytic, and synthetic phases of one's educational journey (Pinar, 2020, p. 50). I also draw insights from Reiff (2017) the idea of *currere* as being "a profound method of personal reflection" (p. 12), from Baszile (2017) the notion of it being "a kind of mindful inquiry" to "harness the power of contemplation, reflection, introspection, and imagination" (p. vii); and from Mahjani (2018) the aspect of "trying to make connections between past, present, and future" and "identifying and unpacking my biases" (Mahjani,

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2018, p. 56). I largely utilise the ideas that have emerged from retrospection. Notes from personal journals and posts from my weblog substantiate the reflections.

The Cocksure Beginner

I begin my argument with a brief account of the regressive phase of my *currere*. I joined Kathmandu University (KU) in August 2000 as a Teaching Assistant in English under the School of Science. My primary assignment was then to teach general English and Communication Skills courses. I had entered the university while in a state of utter confusion about my career path. As a "fresh MA with a not-so-bad Nepalese percentage in English [meaning final marks in percentage]," I thought KU was not a great choice. The Kathmandu market, in fact, was much more attractive with "half a dozen vacancy announcements per day" (Kafle, 2016, p. 55). And I was certain that I would ultimately shift to Tribhuvan University (TU), a public institution. The journal I maintained during those days reveals this: "It [KU] is no doubt a private institution, but far better than any other private ones. … I shall therefore work there as long as I like and until I pass the TU Service Commission examination for a permanent position. KU is far better than boarding schools and higher secondary schools, popularly localized as plus twos." I wonder how I chose to join an institution without learning about its nature and type. It was sheer cocksureness, indeed.

In the early months at KU, I was tasked with teaching courses in language, literature, and communication skills. The key textbooks for language included *"Meanings into Words"* and *"Reading between the Lines,"* and those for literary readings were *"The Magic of Words" (a compilation of brief texts), "Shakespeare's Macbeth," "Herman Hesse's Siddhartha," and "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein."* The primary components of communication included oral presentations, routine correspondence, proposals, reports, and academic essays. I thought these were not much of a challenge for me. Compared to the volumes of fiction, prose, poetry, drama, and critical theories that I had studied in the curricula of Bachelor and Master programs and the amount of engagement with the Master level thesis, the syllabi of the Intermediate (now grade 11 and 12) and undergraduate levels at KU looked to me very limited and easy to cover. The reason was simple. TU was a principal point of reference. Since I was considered qualified to teach at the Master's level courses at TU, and was already invited to a public campus of Kathmandu to teach a course in literature in the third year of the Bachelor level, what was the meagre amount of compulsory English at the intermediate and undergraduate levels of KU? I thought so and was cocksure about being more qualified for the KU courses.

A year passed, and I got a promotion to the position of lecturer. To the Dean's question, "How do you evaluate your last year of teaching?" During my brief interview, I explained, "Since no one has so far directly complained about my weaknesses, I must be doing fine." My response carried a tinge of discontent that no one had monitored my work, nor had anyone ever seriously mentored me. It also involved the sarcasm that I was being offered a promotion without being told how well I had performed in the formative year.

At that time, I had a somewhat vague understanding of the concept of curriculum. In fact, I believed that the courses I taught formed my entire curriculum. I did not plan to grow with the curriculum at the outset because I thought it was too little to exploit my potential. I did not want to grow with the given curricular responsibility because I had a wild fancy, shifting to another university with a permanent position. Did I, after all, have to understand curriculum development? Was I educating youngsters, or was I doing my job that paid for my family's subsistence and my aspirations? No doubt, I was humble and modest in my

demeanor as a person, and honest in my teaching performance. But deep within my conscious self, I hid the conviction that I deserved more and higher, and I had great faith in myself and my potential. If there was any problem, I did not blame it on my being new and inexperienced at the university. I believed that the students were indifferent, uncooperative, and spoiled. Many of my colleagues who experienced indifferent responses from the students expressed similar beliefs that 'this generation' of youngsters was not serious, disciplined, and studious.

The Confident Seer

I now move to the progressive phase of my *currere*. It has already been more than twenty-five years now. I landed at the KU School of Education, based in the Kathmandu Valley, after serving twenty-one years and seven months at the university's main campus in Dhulikhel. I am now in the academic environment I coveted in August 2000. This shift constitutes the dream classes of the graduate and postgraduate programs in English Language teaching, English language education, English studies, and writing and literacy studies. From this ambience, I can comfortably envision several plans. I see several opportunities ahead. I believe they are achievable. Such confidence underlies the vibrancy of the team at the School, in general, and at my department, in particular. My plans are stated in the message I crafted as the former Head. These include such promises as helping the department to grow as a prominent center of English studies in Nepal, forging innovative and sustainable programs, continuing the legacy of mentorship, institutionalizing the writing and communication center, extending services to other KU Schools and affiliated institutions, and increasing the graduation rate, among others ("Message from the HoD"). Even though these plans might have sounded ambitious when I wrote them, I am reasonably sure now that my working conditions are favorable towards meeting those aims. The team has grown with the induction of our own dedicated graduates. I am an associate dean capable of supporting growth through greater authority and mentorship potential. Additionally, I hold a Master's degree in Higher Education, which has enhanced my competence in higher education leadership. I am wary of my intellectual limitations, but I am confident about my institutional scope. This awareness has resulted from over twenty-four years of active teaching, administrative service, and leadership roles.

I joined as an English language teacher, with almost no awareness of the need to take on challenges as time passed. However, in 2001, I began to partake in program development initiatives. Later, I was engaged in a partly conflicting and largely challenging leadership role for two years (from 2011 to 2013) as one of the two Associate Directors of Student Welfare. With the inception of the Humanities and Management Unit in 2013, the launch of the BBIS program in 2014, the establishment of the Department of Management Informatics and Communication in 2019, and the launch of the MPhil program on the main campus, I began to see myself more as a manager than a leader. Now that I am completing twenty-five years, the passion for mentoring defines my identity and ethos. Mentorship is about creating learning and transformation spaces for those seeking intellectual guidance from me. It transcends teaching and management. I am trying to make an even more profound sense of it in the days ahead (Kafle, 2021).

Critical Self-Awareness

The analytic phase of my *currere* features multiple understandings of the present situation. Despite evolving into a successful faculty member and participating in curriculum teams multiple times, I confess that I have not been formally trained in curriculum development. I was smug in my understanding that a curriculum was a program with one or two specializations. Exposures made me overconfident in having achieved competence, to

such an extent that I hardly ever volunteered to study the basic theories and practices of curriculum. I could indeed have noted some of these even during the unfinished one-year B.Ed. My journey at TU began around the same time I joined KU (Kafle, 2016). I could have bothered to internalise at least a few of the curriculum theories every time I took up membership on curriculum committees.

My formal orientation to curriculum began only with the classes for the Master's in Higher Education, which I joined in August 2022 and completed in December 2024. This fresh exposure to theories and practices of curriculum has helped me make sense of my past work and offered me some directions for my present and future curriculum design initiatives. Primarily, three readings have been instrumental in expanding my understanding of curriculum. These include Schwab's (1973) five commonplaces of curriculum, Schubert's (1986) curriculum images, and Baptist's (2002) metaphor of curriculum as a garden.

The Commonplaces

The five commonplaces suggested by Schwab and extensively discussed by Null (2011) are subject matter, teacher, learner (or student), milieu (or context), and curriculum making. Although I may have attempted to strike a fair balance of these factors earlier without knowing the terms, familiarity now prompts me to seek their alignment with my curricular practices. To begin with, 'subject matter' has been a perennial interest of mine. While I was teaching in the Intermediate program at KU, the subject matter was something handed to me with no opportunity for modification or improvement. In those days, I thought the 'teacher' did everything and the 'student' had no role except to respond to the former's questions and do homework as assigned. Since the curriculum and inherent syllabi were teacher-led, there was no consideration of the 'context' except that the temperature, hygiene and noise of large classes impacted us. 'Curriculum making' did not feature in my everyday work for quite a while until I became a part of an informal curriculum development initiative in 2001.

I see my present faculty role in new dimensions. Through continuous engagement in curriculum and syllabus development and teaching, I have come to perceive these commonplaces as having been fully internalized in my practices. Now, as a 'teacher,' I tend to assert my authority as someone who wishes to replace a rigidly bulleted traditional syllabus with one with a more contextual, progressive set of contents, with the prospect of being updated regularly. Now, I even ask learners to challenge a particular syllabus and comment on the curriculum in general. To me, a student is as much a learner as a co-creator of curriculum, learning environment, and knowledge.

After I initiated the launch of an MPhil in English Language Education (ELE) cohort at the university's main campus in 2019, the need for contextual adjustment became apparent. As the immediate coordinator of the cohort, I had to reshuffle the courses, find a new team of faculty members, and allow them to prepare the syllabi as they saw fit to deliver. So, the cohort experienced the curriculum slightly differently from the regular spring group. Moreover, when the COVID-19 outbreak pushed everything online, nothing could be more revealing about the 'context' (milieu) than the need to cope with the circumstances through timely (re)adjustments.

As a faculty member at the graduate and postgraduate levels, I currently experience 'curriculum making' in two dimensions. First, it is a continuous process in that you tend to allow the syllabi to evolve with every batch of students. At the same time, the fundamentals, such as curricular objectives, learning outcomes, and assessment rationales, remain constant. Second, it is a scheduled task designed to create an entirely new program or revamp an

existing one. Although a seemingly structured process, we allow ideas and concepts to unfold as we design or implement a curriculum. Moreover, the curriculum is the result of a dedicated team's work. They might conceptualize a very representative structure and outline, but the process of arriving at a consensus structure works best.

The Dominant Image

Several crucial factors unfold now when I observe the existing curricula of KU, especially the MPhil program, in the light of Schubert's (1986) 'curriculum images' (which include subject matter, planned activities, intended learning outcomes, cultural reproduction, experience, discrete tasks and concepts, agenda for social reconstruction, and *currere*. The MPhil curriculum features 'subject matter' as the area of specialization (e.g., English Language Education) or the degree offered, which integrates subjects in English, English Language Teaching, and Applied Linguistics. The planned activities are tailored to the individual courses, set according to the objectives and expected learning outcomes of each subject. Nevertheless, activities are conducted with minimum common pedagogical approaches, assessment systems, and personal assistance and institutional services. The intended learning outcomes have been stated in each course. We emphasize these, but have not frequently measured and monitored actual achievements.

Our curriculum is partly a 'cultural reproduction' in the sense that we frequently tailor it to meet the expectations of prospective applicants who wish to succeed in the competitive academic environment. Additionally, our work is partly influenced by changes in governmental policies and the evolving aspirations of society at large. What becomes acceptable in a particular era significantly influences the development of the curriculum. Furthermore, for a faculty of my stature, experience is foundational to curriculum development. Naturally, when the system matures, curriculum development becomes a regular and comfortable affair. When faculty members mature into authorities in certain disciplines, they engage in curriculum development with the understanding, competence, and resources necessary to determine what truly functions best.

I now believe that a university curriculum should be able to cross-pollinate diversity. I may have developed such a preoccupation because I am a product of the humanities, having extensively studied programs in science, engineering, the arts, management, education, and medicine. Thus, the image of 'discrete tasks and concepts' implies the absence of a transdisciplinary orientation in a curriculum. Even though prioritizing specialized, disciplinary contents and pedagogies may make the program time-friendly and easy to run, with course delivery and assessments being comfortable, the prospects of holistic training remain minimized if the curriculum is designed as 'discrete tasks and concepts.'

In its history spanning more than three decades, the 'agenda for social reconstruction' has been one of KU's recent priorities. The thrust of taking the classroom from the campus to the community, along with the diverse curricular integration of community outreach initiatives in undergraduate and graduate programs, best represents (if not implements) the agenda of 'social reconstruction'. We have tried to enhance broader community ownership and emphasized gradual transformation in the lives of the people we work with. Should universities inculcate universal, all-applicable knowledge, skills, and competencies in their own premises, or go out to (re)build the society? This question continues to haunt the KU fraternity at the leadership level. But with the launching of the Integrated Rural Development Program in 2017, the establishment of the Community Engagement Division in 2019, and the operationalization of the Continuing and Professional Education Centre (CPEC) in 2022, serving the community in specific thematic areas has become a dictum inspiring gradual alignment of the programs to community needs. In the wake of widespread awareness that

KU is a public university, I have personally feared the increasing influence of political and ideological interests by the power elites of the communities in recent years. But we have maintained relative autonomy in defining and implementing the scope of our social engagement so far.

Now I come to '*currere*,' the most intriguing image of curriculum. I was almost ready to dismiss this concept after discussing the seven perceptible images above. A little curiosity led me to learn the connotations of it as a verb form. I happened to delve into a vast philosophical terrain drawn towards and drawing from humanistic thinking. Several questions and propositions began to surge in my mind. How does one experience curriculum? How did I live through it? How does any program of ours allow the students to experience it? Pinar (2020) helped me appease my curiosity. He elucidates that curriculum operates as much through "conversation, ongoing dialogical encounter among students and teachers in classrooms" as "within oneself in solitude" (p. 51). Curriculum, thus, is not only the program you join in an academic institution, but also what comes into your life the moment you are a part of the program and the institution. This has provided me with a new thesis for further ruminations: Everyone has their own curriculum and is allowed to experience and internalize it in their own ways. Thus, people who undergo the same courses and adopt the same pedagogical orientations are likely to develop different competencies and sensibilities. Despite appearing to be one system, the curriculum provides separate tracks for every student to run their own races.

Does the curriculum run itself? Curriculum now appears like the earth to me, like nature with all potential to live itself and nurture those who come around. However, the nurture manifests best through what Pinar (2020) calls "intensified engagement with classroom life, supported by the cultivation of a consciousness that remembers the past with an eye on the future while focused on the present" (p. 52). I understand this as the potential for infinity. However, without regular engagement from people and the utilization of its nourishing supplies, the curriculum may become a barely tilled piece of land.

The Garden

Baptist's (2002) garden as a metaphor for curriculum has further enriched my understanding of curriculum at large. The idea of a garden as a place and manifestation of life in totality resonates with me as a complement to the notion of curriculum as currere, in relation to the lived experiences of both educators and students. To allude to curriculum as gardening is to acknowledge "the lived experiences of the person within" as the "synthesis of orchestrated and phenomenological experiences," and in the light of one's enrichment through "physical movement, intellectual engagement, and creative imagination" (p. 20). The six views of the garden metaphor—faith, power, order, cultural expression, personal expression, and healing—are of perennial intellectual value to me as a participant and implementer of curriculum.

The notion of 'faith' reflects a pious convergence between curriculum implementers, educators, and learners. In this sense, curriculum embodies the "human need for connectivity" to nurture "mutual understanding through caring thought and action" (p. 27). 'Power' as the "symbol of individual or political prowess" (p. 27) represents to me a natural condition in which educators and learners are placed in a vertical relationship, while also being conditioned to comply with the dictates of a hegemonic institutional mechanism. But 'order,' in contrast, denotes the coherence and cohesion maintained in and by the curriculum. Baptist (2002) elucidates it as "the implicit meaning system," which constitutes "aesthetic, phenomenological, normative, critical, action-based, religious, and hierarchical framing

modes" (p. 29). This, to me, represents the unity in diversity of subjects and symmetry in seemingly loose aspects of implementation and practice.

Baptist's meaning for both curriculum and garden as 'cultural expression' in terms of the "reflections of their place and their time" (p. 29) echoes Schubert's image of curriculum as cultural reproduction. In other words, like a garden, curriculum can also be place- and culture-specific. However, since each place is different, the curriculum is influenced by and tends to accommodate factors such as cultural diversity, demographic requirements, and popular expectations. I, therefore, acknowledge the fact that "place downplays the isolation of overspecialization" as it promotes "interdisciplinary diversity and connectivity in thought and action" (p. 30). Next, to associate curriculum with 'personal expression' is to acknowledge the "opportunity for personal creativity and expression" (p. 31) for both educators and learners. In this line, curriculum matures in "an evolving process of self-knowledge," which allows the learner to go through "spiralling progressions of self-understanding and informed meaningful action" (p. 32). Finally, the dimension of 'healing' in the Baptist's garden metaphor attributes a therapeutic character to the curriculum, enabling it to "promote healing and growth" by reestablishing a sense of "personal meaning and balance" (p. 34). Like Baptist, I adhere to the postulation that curriculum should "reinvigorate new forms of knowledge" (p. 34), thereby liberating practitioners and learners from the confines of conservatism and unidisciplinary indoctrination.

Conclusion: The Synthesis

Through attempts to internalize Schwab's five commonplaces, Schubert's eight images, and Baptist's six views on curriculum, I have come to realize that my team and I can and must revisit the existing programs in English and work cautiously to conceive any future programs. No doubt, through project-based experiential learning, group work, research orientation, and community engagement opportunities, the programs have performed quite satisfactorily, regardless of the size of their intake. The recently revised MPhil ELE program certainly promises to 'reinvigorate' itself and our approach as implementers. The Master's program(s) in English language teaching demand transferring this new promise in and from the upcoming intake.

The idea of specialization in graduate and postgraduate programs sounds somewhat oxymoronic to the vision of holistic learning. We must, therefore, seek transdisciplinary potential in the given constraints of place and time, integrating dynamic contents, productive activities, and engaging assignments. My curricular premise (read it as a promise as well) is to attract and train students through the transdisciplinary integration of English studies, applied linguistics, language teaching, and research orientation. I would continue to advocate the commonplaces of contextual subject matter and dynamic curriculum making, the images of learning outcomes and *currere*, and the views of healing and personal expression as foundational to curriculum development at Kathmandu University.

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