

Introduction¹

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Gathering, transforming, becoming: these canonical curriculum concepts² organize this collection. They are especially and specifically evident in the essay “Walking to Create an Aesthetic and Spiritual *Currere*.”³ In that essay – as in this collection – we learn that the concept of artist/researcher/teacher is not only a hyphenated abstraction we can contemplate but also an idea to be ethically enacted. Observing that educators are called to care for others, Irwin notes: “if they wish to truly care for others, it is vitally important for them to care for themselves first.”⁴ The self-self relation becomes the structural correlative of a relationality⁵ that is social and sensory, as the metaphor of “walking” makes plain. Moving through space and time, walking is also an “excursion” (as Irwin phrases it), an evocative concept implying educational intention, what she describes as “a walking pedagogy of self.”

Literal and metaphoric, “walking” becomes a form of pedagogy denoting the profound participation of the artist/researcher/teacher in what Irwin terms a “spiritual and aesthetic *currere*,” the last term emphasizing the experiential indeed sensory dimension of study.⁶ Such “walking” through text⁷ denotes openness to and learning from experience, “becoming pedagogical”⁸ as Irwin phrases it, provoking “freedom, transformation, and flow.” These interconnected consequences can be causes too, encouraging others “to become attentive to their personal spiritual and aesthetic learning needs,” needs revealed while “walking”.⁹ Those needs can be noticed – and addressed - in “those liminal moments and spaces in between.” In time and place, then, one can

“breathe” and “fresh air” can “clear” the “mind,” enabling one to refocus while walking in “silence.”

Such walking may be silent but it is often audible. “Today,” Irwin reports, “the crisp autumn air licks at my cheeks” as she listens to “the crunching of dried leaves underfoot.” The crunching sounds confirm her movement through space, liminal space in which aesthetic and spiritual experience can occur and be affirmed. Tactile and auditory, such experience is vibrantly visual: Irwin is “mesmerized by the bounty of color lying beneath my feet.” As Irwin turns a corner she comes upon a “spectacle” of “brilliant red leaves” that adorn “majestic maple trees.” Such “in-between moments of time and space,” Irwin notes, “almost seem limitless.”

Curriculum is lived experience from which one can learn, a complicated conversation with what is, has been, might be. Irwin records the moment with her camera, “compositions,” she tells us, “that excite my senses.” Irwin is “filled with expectation, joy, even laughter,” as she feels “such magic in the air.” A passerby distracts her, they exchange words, but he does not depart without Irwin hoping that he might too “stop and notice the extraordinary in the ordinary ... the opportunities ... for aesthetic revelation.” Care of self means care for the stranger, what educators enact every day.¹⁰

Watching what goes on around her – “attuned to the nuances of life” –allows “conversing with a painting.” No “domination over materials,” Irwin emphasizes, painting is dialogical encounter, replete with respect and receptivity. Entering her “studio ... I walk into a painting” wherein “I am in constant conversation.” Practically pillow talk, as “sometimes I leave the studio feeling the rush of intimacy with a loved one and sometimes I leave with feelings of inadequacy knowing the silent argument I am leaving

behind.” Those feelings linger¹¹, even over “a few days,” then she makes her next “excursion” into the studio, the painting, that “beautiful yet sometimes subversive space in my home.”

Photographs of maples morph into paintings, “each starting from a photograph but soon moving beyond into new images ... evocative, sacred, sublime, beautiful, relational, spiritual, and emotional,” each holding “different meanings for me though they represent the same day and time period.” Like the curriculum: “Each image teaches me something fresh and alive through every new encounter.” That pedagogic relationship is one of reciprocal revelation: “Each image was birthed as I was created.” “Each,” she remembers, “explores a blurred middle space between memory and experience, between knowing and unknowing, between reality and imagination.”

This “middle space” extends among the temporal moments of *currere* – the immediacy of now excavated by reactivating the past and imagining the future¹² – but among the original contributions¹³ to curriculum studies Irwin makes is her theorization of the spatial structure of *currere*. This structure she denotes in her concepts of “excursions” and “recursions.” As Irwin explains:

Excursions become those trips seeking understanding beyond the original course of action, while *recursions* circle back before venturing outward again. Implicit within the root word *currere* is the notion of running forward. Thus, *curriculum* is and needs to be a course of action that advances understanding. Returning to the original meaning of words gives us fresh insight into our taken-for-granted assumptions of those words and their conceptual intentions.

Now the movement of *currere* is no longer *allegro* but *adagio*,¹⁴ no longer “running” the course but “walking” it, enabling aesthetic spiritual – indeed educational – experience.

In Irwin’s “walking pedagogy,” walking becomes a “spiritual exercise,” in part because it is a form of “recursive” and “living inquiry,” returning to the experience in order to “recreate” it, in one essay depicted as “interweaving,” a “métissage.” A third or in-between space, then, “walking is a steady heuristic action offering spiritual, sensory, and perceptual awareness to everyday experiences.” Regardless of the direction taken, “a hermeneutic circle [is] enacted,” as “more and more movement embraces expanded understanding.” Going around in circles never sounded so right.

Among the elements of such understanding, Irwin suggests, are freedom, transformation, and flow. Walking can be freeing because it “can be alive with surprise, imagination, creativity, and a sense of the sacred.” While walking we can “contemplate” – “freely” – as we “look expectantly and with gratitude.” “Gratitude is formed in the openness of a moment,” Irwin continues, over time forming within that “aesthetic sensibility” encouraged by walking “slowly, walking gently and intentionally, noticing the particular.” Walking affords “the freedom to imagine, perceive, and be present in the moment.”

Transformation is the second element. Walking is “inherently transformative,” Irwin writes, as it “offers opportunities for self-creation.” Such labor of love may be silent and solitary but it is also shared: “In my mind, we transform ourselves continuously alongside others, as we explore what it means to become fully human.” That “excursion into the maples” – a vivid invocation of such exploration - provided “possibilities for aesthetic enjoyment and pleasure.” It was, she notes, “ordinary time, that time when days

seem to run together,” not punctuated by scheduled events. Within the “ordinary” the “extraordinary” can emerge, “a *currere* of transformation, of learning with enjoyment and pleasure,” evident in her painting. Painting becomes “a methodology of transformation” as well as “(re)presentations of transformative phenomena.” Interpreting the photographs through painting enabled Irwin to “linger in the aesthetic awareness I experienced.” Inhabiting that space of non-coincidence, in-between past and present, encourage educational experience: “Moving in and through these various experiences brought each painting to another place of knowing. They speak for me yet they do not speak for me. The paintings echo, yet transcend, my understanding.”

The third element of expanded understanding accents the in-between, those “liminal messy spaces between the roles, activities, and sites of who I am professionally and personally.” Living in-between, Irwin testifies, “opens up my imaginative potential to understand the complexity of curriculum and to care for myself aesthetically and spiritually as I fully engage my senses in experiencing the excursions and recursions of *currere*.” Irwin names those movements as “flow,” a “sense of being completely present.”

Even when walking in circles there can be a destination, for Irwin it seems the self. She describes “walking” as “an excursion into a pedagogy of self,” one that teaches through “recursive activities such as art-making and writing.” These are activities that “serve to create who we are.” Through these “rhythms of a walking *currere*, a walking pedagogy of self, that we are introduced to a sense of freedom, transformation and flow.” That multidimensional sense, however individuated and situation-specific it can be, seems at once sensory and spiritual. Indeed, Irwin affirms embodiment as she records

“breathing rhythmically and mindfully,” including” while walking,” which “in touch with our life rhythms.” She concludes: “Engaging our spiritual and aesthetic selves puts us in touch with our emotional vitality. May we all find walking paths that allow us to create a spiritual and aesthetic *currere*: a walking pedagogy of self.”

I join Rita Irwin and Mindy Carter and Valerie Triggs in inviting you to take the excursion this collection offers, a walk into the woods, the air crisp invigorating, the red maples ablaze, a scene simultaneously sensory, aesthetic and spiritual. Join us in walking into this “painting” and join the conversation it portrays. Like Irwin, like her students and colleagues, you too can come to know anew what these crucial concepts – gathering, transforming, flow – might mean in your own lived, indeed educational, experience of art, research, and teaching.

References

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Endnotes

¹ Pinar, William F. 2018. Introduction to *Arts Education and Curriculum Studies: The Contributions of Rita L. Irwin*, edited by Mindy R. Carter and Valerie Triggs (viii-xii). New York: Routledge.

² For an antecedent iteration: ASCD 1962.

³ There are now (2024) two journals and a conference dedicated to the concept: www.curreexchange.weebly.com and <https://currerepraxis.com/index.php/pub>

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted passages come from this collection. Embedding expectations of care – see Jung 2016 - into conceptions of teaching is also gendered, as Miller (2005) and Grumet (1988) have chronicled.

⁵ A feature of Irwin's work that Triggs and Carter emphasize in their introductions, evident throughout the collection, "relationality" is also conceptualized as "collaboration," discernible in the "shapes" of "artmaking," enactments of a "connective aesthetics" that is also gendered. Irwin emphasizes that "individuals create, and are created by, the community," a reciprocal relation evident in the co-authored essay on Richgate.

⁶ For the significance of study see Ruitenberg 2017.

⁷ Expansively understood, spanning sensory-intellectual as well as aesthetic-spiritual experience.

⁸ In the essay on relational art practices, in her introduction to the third section of this collection, featured too in the title of her 2012 *Studies in Art Education* invited lecture printed here. In the essay "Communities of A/R/Tographic Practice" this idea is expressed as "*becoming a practitioner of inquiry.*"

⁹ Irwin's choice of gerunds recreates Kliebard's (2000 [1975], 84-85) conception of curriculum as "travel" (and "growth" and "production") as embodied, subjectively situated, in time and place. As anybody who takes a daily walk (mine is after breakfast) knows, even the literal experience can be a portal to place and psyche.

¹⁰ It also means concern over how we take up each other's work, evident in Irwin's co-authored essay on the problem of "appropriation." Care also takes the conceptual form of "responsibility": see Irwin's co-authored essay on cultural translation.

¹¹ Ted's term: see Aoki 2005 (1992), 197 for an instance. Triggs acknowledges Aoki's influence on Irwin's work.

¹² "Our work with Aboriginal artists and communities," Irwin (and co-authors) write, "began a number of years ago when we worked with several communities as they immersed themselves in the work of reclaiming histories in order to reconstruct futures."

¹³ Triggs characterizes it as "initiating a diffractive wave." Carter suggests that Irwin's work "offers" nothing less than a "transformation" of the field. The accuracy of each claim becomes clear in this collection, specifically in the Irwin-Chalmers' summary of key curriculum concepts. In another essay, Irwin transforms the classic curriculum concepts of "supervision" and "leadership."

¹⁴ Walking supports not only aesthetic-spiritual attunement but also political intransigence: see Berg and Seeber 2016.