More on “Generational Ideas”
(A Rejoinder to Ian Westbury and Handel Kashope Wright)

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The net outcome of a good discussion is the advancement of understanding. When Socrates asked his students far-reaching questions (such as What is virtue? or What is justice?), he knew what he was doing. He was basically finding a way to have a conversation about something meaningful. But the key to his conversations was not in identifying any certain answers (who could know what virtue is?), but in experiencing the varied responses being offered and challenged. To Socrates, the knowing was in doing the knowing. The trip, as it were, had a destination that could never be found, so it was the trip that really mattered. Christopher Phillip’s (2004) wonderful Six Questions of Socrates, which puts a modern face on the Socratic dialogue, is a reminder of the gains to be had from the Socratic conversation. For those who have not read it yet, I highly recommend it.

But good discussion is easier said than done, because traveling through a conversation can get bumpy and uncomfortable, and to extend the metaphor, even end in wreckage. Those of us in the curriculum field know this well because much of the curriculum dialogue over the past decade has left many of us wounded, walking away from a steaming pile of ruin.

Recently, however, something seems to have changed, maybe subtly or maybe even substantively. Notwithstanding the recent eristic essay by Morrison (2004), which was published against a piece that William Wraga and I (2003) wrote, I think that the curriculum studies community has something like a discussion going on now. Jim Sears, Dan Marshall, Jim Henderson, Kathleen Kesson, Louise Allen, and William Schubert have all shown leadership on this front by bringing together small gatherings of diverse groups of scholars to discuss common problems. And the reward for all of us is and will continue to be understanding—and I use this term deliberately, knowing that it has a wider connotation in our field. So, let me start my article by declaring my appreciation to Handel Wright and Ian

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Westbury for writing what I view as two skillful articles, each of which was honest to my argument and set a tone for conversation. Naturally, I have a few things to say in response.

I’ll highlight a few of the points raised by Wright first, the most tantalizing being the distinction he made between corrective and alternative histories. I have never done primary document history, and have no claim to being expert in the area. My “Generational Ideas” article is a modest attempt to demonstrate how Schwab, who was fixed on the idea of the practical and forceful in warning the field against a flight from the practical, was dimensionally consonant with the line of thinking emerging from Tyler and even Bobbitt. Wright is kind to say that he thinks I have an argument, but he also observes that my approach is corrective, which I think is an offhanded way of saying that my view carries with it some arrogance of certainty. Wright reminds the reader that other writers, such as Tierney, have been more careful to cast their work as alternatives, daring not to say, as I did, that the version they are challenging is not acceptable. The distinction that Wright makes can be helpful, but only in certain cases, and I do not count mine among them. My guess is that almost anyone who enters into an alternative view is moved by an impulse to not accept the view that he or she is arguing against, and is obviously hoping that the end result is corrective. That’s certainly how I feel about my argument, but in the Socratic conversation, the judgment on the point of the corrective is not with the author, but with the reader. But what makes Wright’s criticism especially interesting to me has to do with something he didn’t say, which is that we have some examples in our field that are indeed openly corrective in their orientation. The obvious one is the reconceptualization movement itself, which at it origins was manifestly dedicated to the idea of the corrective: declaring the work of curriculum development anachronistic and moving forward, with some ideological firmness, toward the embrace of a new project. So, I appreciate the point that Wright is pursuing here. I certainly feel that the reconceptualist claim to multiple perspectives and diverse or alternative viewpoints cannot be taken seriously when its very founding is an act of some hostility (a strongly worded corrective, or even dismissal) toward another point of view in the field. So, if I am charged (remember, I’m pleading not guilty), I’d expect Wright to contemplate the same charge across all ideological lines, and I hope that he will.

I am glad that Wright liked the use of the “generations” characterization. I found the idea of generations useful because fields are built by generations of thinking. But it is not an original variable for inquiry; others, such as James Sears and J. Dan Marshall (2000), have openly explored what they call “the genealogical and ideational” lines of the curriculum field, putting new focus on the next generation of curriculum workers. Together with Bill Schubert (Marshall, Sears, & Schubert, 2000), their project culminated in Turning Points in Curriculum, a book that looks at some of the
generational “vectors” that help define the field. Schubert has, in fact, been
at the forefront of this work for some time, exposing the mentor/student
connections among curriculum scholars and reminding us that we work
under one big tent, and that, like it or not, a varied interplay of difference
is at the core of our commonality (Schubert & Posner, 1980; Schubert et
al., 1988). Diversity without commonality is logically inconsistent. It means
that even those who loathe diversity make a contribution to diversity. And
commonality without diversity is simply impoverishing. So, our job is to
find the balance, and I think that looking at generational ideas might be
one way to do it. Because of his outsider status to the field and because his
set of essays represented a watershed event for the field, Schwab deserves
to be understood as more than a loner who had no generational alliances.
My position is that because Schwab belongs to the practical, he is in some
alignment with key ideas rooted all the way back to Bobbitt. Schwab was
undoubtedly a maverick, but he was not a revolutionary seeking a complete
overthrow; that status belongs to other more obvious choices.

Ian Westbury’s article was tougher on me than Wright’s. The basic point,
as I understand it, is that Schwab is too complex to categorize, that my
reading of Schwab is narrow, and that my inclination to find a transcen-
dent label (such as “generational ideas”) is an act of ahistoricism—an ide-
ialized construction in the library, as Westbury put it. But when Westbury
discusses Schwab’s place in what he refers to as the craft tradition of the
field, I think that he makes my argument: namely that Schwab was part of
a line of thinkers who made his case for a curriculum development cause,
but in a way that turned the argument toward a new and insightful direc-
tion. The argument is almost self-evident, given Schwab’s focus on nor-
mative and institutional concerns, and given the decidedly nonnormative
and anti-institutional nature of what Westbury calls “the expansive renewal
of the field.” There is clearly more schism between Schwab and those
breaking away from the historic field than between Schwab and the his-
torical line of thinking I described in my original article.

I also have to quibble with Westbury’s heavy-handed point that charac-
terized Schwab as a major innovator who finally put the university-based
education professoriate on a new path that ventured away from the narrow
craft tradition, which Westbury rhetorically represented in the work of
Grace Bibb. The movement away from the craft tradition was expressed
much earlier under the watch of early progressives who championed the
cause of educational studies in a way that brought disciplinary connections,
theoretical enlivenment, and research know-how to the scene. For
instance, few criticisms of the social efficiency tradition in the curriculum
field, which was indeed a narrow and atheoretical craft tradition, were
more forceful or persuasive than Boyd Bode’s, and he wrote it in 1927.
Tyler hired Schwab, we should remember, not someone like Bibb when he
was at the University of Chicago. The historic curriculum field is a carica-
ture if one builds it around Grace Bibb, as is Westbury’s wont. The move-
ment away from the narrowest craft tradition has a long trajectory based in the progressive past, and includes influences from the likes of Dewey, Childs, Rugg, Bode, and later, of course, Schwab.

Let me get to one final point. Nowhere in my article did I say that Schwab was not different from Tyler. I’ll say it again: Schwab was different, but he was different in a way that was still within the working traditions of the field. I firmly believe that there is gain to be had in my reading of Schwab. Westbury obviously disagrees, and eventually (and I believe incongruously) concludes that Schwab was not only different, but in effect rejected the center of tradition with which Tyler was affiliated. But if this is so, why didn’t Schwab name names? Why can’t we find anything specifically critical of Tyler or the historic field in Schwab’s work? And why did Westbury fail to address any of the signs of crisis I detailed, which clearly indicated that the crisis Schwab saw in the curriculum field had no warrant in the historic field?

I don’t want to make too much of Eisner’s metaphor about barking up the wrong tree, because metaphors are always imprecise. But because Westbury was keen on it, I should say that, as I take it, Eisner’s point is essentially wrong. I think that Schwab thought that we were barking up the right tree, but that we probably needed new clarity and insight in finding a way to understand and tackle whatever was up there.

The curriculum field might be an expansive project, but it is not a boundless one. The generations speak, as in conversation, to us, showing us our common project and reminding us that no person is an island.

REFERENCES