Reconsidering Schwab’s “Practicals”: A Response to Peter Hlebowitsh’s “Generational Ideas in Curriculum: A Historical Triangulation”

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the place of Ralph Tyler and Joseph Schwab in the history of curriculum studies, and educational theory more broadly. I argue that most analyses of both Schwab’s and Tyler’s work are built not on their own life-projects and writings, but developed from blinkered readings of a narrow range of their writings selected to meet the needs of contemporary ideological debates. When we see the work of both Schwab and Tyler within their own terms, we see them seeking to redirect educational studies away from the “theoretical” project that had its origins in the 19th-century university and toward education’s “craft” tradition. In Schwab’s case, he sought to do this in a way that fully engaged educational research and scholarship with the practical and deliberative forms of thought associated with curriculum development, in a way that promised sustained effects on schooling.

Peter Hlebowitsh’s article “Generational Ideas in Curriculum: A Historical Triangulation” (2005) is, of course, framed by the debate within American curriculum studies about how the history of the field should be constructed. That debate is, in turn, embedded in the larger debate around the nature and scope of curriculum studies. Thus, we have the expansive view of the tasks of the field (i.e., as “understanding curriculum”) on the one hand, and the focus on “doing curriculum work” (i.e., the school-centered curriculum-making and implementation view of the proponents of the more traditional, “narrow” understanding of the field) on the other. But interestingly, despite such very different perspectives on the
immediate tasks of the contemporary curriculum field, the historical perspectives of the critical (i.e., expansive) position have been very widely accepted. Walter Doyle (1996), for example (and he is not a partisan in the debates that Hlebowitsh is part of), explicitly introduced two of the figures in Hlebowitsh’s article, John Franklin Bobbitt and Ralph Tyler, into his history of the curriculum field as exemplars of the themes of social efficiency and a “science of education”—and he spells out very clearly his reservations about both of these projects.

Hlebowitsh is, of course, well known as an ardent proponent both of the narrow understanding of the tasks of contemporary curriculum studies and of the unconventional view that the characterization of the traditional field in terms of technicism and/or scientism in the service of social efficiency is simply wrong. As he sees it, the major figures within the curriculum tradition, like Ralph Tyler, have been falsely accused. Rather than being agents of social efficiency, scientism, and technicism, Hlebowitsh sees them as in fact bringing well-developed, expansive educational and social philosophies to their projects. Those projects centered on the important task of advice-giving to real-world schools engaged with real-world problems, and on how others might best undertake that work. They were not proponents of “social efficiency” and “scientism”; rather, they were and are beacons for anyone who wants to engage seriously with the task of the improvement of schooling. This is a narrow reading of the history of American curriculum studies that has the effect of sustaining the traditional understanding of the object-of-work of the field.

In other words, most contemporary writings on the history of the curriculum field are reflections on the issues of the day. And in this article, Hlebowitsh develops such an account by explicating what he sees as a productive 50-year commitment on the part of three of curriculum’s major figures to a set of common educational and social ideals, albeit expressed with different emphases at different times. He sees John Franklin Bobbitt, Ralph Tyler, and Joseph Schwab, each one succeeding (in a sense) the other at the University of Chicago, building on their common commitment to assist schools and school people develop their schools’ experiences. They shared a belief in the local management of schools, they approached the curriculum “without a priori ideological commitments, [and they referred to the same] key sources for decision making (society, students, and subject matter)” (pp. 85–86).

As I have suggested, as he makes this argument, Hlebowitsh’s foil is the interpretation of the intellectual history of the curriculum field that sees the field’s traditional work as an epiphenomen of the ideologies of professionalization, technicism/scientism, and social efficiency—movements that, although always contested, are seen to have dominated the field, at least until the late 1960s. In such histories, it was Joseph Schwab who created the first fissure in the wall of the ideological world of Bobbitt and Tyler with his contention that their field, and their project, was “moribund.” Thus, Schwab, although their successor at Chicago, was a harbin-
ger of the “expansive” renewal of the field that was to follow, a renewal that repudiated the assumptions and the approaches of the Bobbitt/Tyler tradition.

Hlebowitsh, on the other hand, directly links Tyler’s project with Schwab’s “practical” project as reflections of a common “generational” commitment. However, as he makes this argument, Hlebowitsh does not explore the implications of the question posed by Elliott Eisner (1984), quoted but not explored: “What are we to make of a man who tells us, if we read him as I think he wishes to be read, that we have for eighty years been barking up the wrong tree?” (p. 208).

Eisner’s question hints at a problem with Hlebowitsh’s construction of Schwab’s place in the intellectual history of the curriculum field, and with the construction that he correctly attributes to his protagonists. But it also says something interesting about the status of Schwab’s series of “practical” papers in that they are claimed by so many of the different camps into which the curriculum field has divided itself. However, I contend here that the “practical” essays cannot be claimed by any of these camps, and that Eisner’s assessment of Schwab’s practical argument is the right one. To come to terms with what Schwab was seeking to do as he developed his “practical” thesis, we need an understanding of the history of curriculum studies as a subfield within educational theory and research radically broader than the one offered by either the narrow or the expansive versions of the field’s past and present. Furthermore, to come to terms with Schwab’s practical, we need to read more widely in his writing than we are wont to do.1 As Neil Wilkof and I have suggested (Westbury & Wilkof, 1978), Schwab was an essayist who developed his ideas across many papers; to read one essay or one set of essays out of the context of his others leads to inevitable misrepresentations of his life project. In what follows, I outline a different reading of Schwab’s work, and its relationship to that of Tyler, from the one offered by Hlebowitsh.

As I have noted, Elliott Eisner sees Schwab telling us that educational theory and research have been for 80 years “barking up the wrong tree.” I explore this theme more explicitly later because it bears on Schwab’s “practical” papers, but we must begin by noting that the distinction that Schwab draws between the practical and the theoretical is at the center of the issue that Eisner alluded to. And over the 30 years that have passed since Schwab made his case, we have come to see more clearly the issues that his distinction framed. We now see that the key questions confronting the history of educational research center on why library- and laboratory-centered theory and research have a privileged status within the university over the experience and understanding of those whose lives center on the practice of education. Within the theory-laden foundational perspective of educational theory and research, schooling becomes a body of activities seen and prescribed for on the basis of work outside classrooms and schools.2 We read Dewey, Habermas, Foucault, Freire, Bruner, Vygotsky, and so on—as well as a host of advocates of the
foundational facticity of cognition, intelligence(s), motivation, class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, culture, and so on—in order to prescribe for or direct how teachers should act in their worlds. This is Schwab’s “theoretical.”

Kate Cruikshank (1998; see also Lagemann, 2000, and from a different but related perspective, Schön, 1985) has sought to understand this 100-year-old character of the university’s work around education by pointing to the 19th-century institutional competition between the university and the normal school for central roles (“jurisdictions”) in the education of teachers (Abbott, 1988). In this political contest, university people made their claim for a central place and privilege in teacher education on the basis of the significance of their science of education, implying in the late 19th century a Wissenschaft—a discipline rather than science in the modern sense. Cruikshank quoted Grace Bibb, one of the first professors of pedagogy in the United States, asserting that it was the science of education that would give teachers “a grasp of all of the conditions of the problem of education” (p. 105). For Bibb, the art of teaching offered in normal schools was limited by its grounding in experience alone—and in her view, that was all that the normal school could offer! The university, on the other hand, offered something much more important, a foundation for any deep engagement with education and schooling.3 In other words, Bibb and her contemporaries in the university were asserting that the science of education gave the university the basis for a jurisdiction within teacher education because it offered an understanding that is foundational to the surface of experience. Indeed, it could be argued that the proponents of the expansive view of curriculum studies (i.e., understanding curriculum) are in fact working to bring the field into a firmer alignment with this larger tradition within university-based education studies.

In the last years of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th century, the connotation of the English word science was to narrow the older and broader disciplinary connotation of science as Wissenschaft, but the fundamental understanding of the middle years of the 19th century remained in intact. This view has continued to dominate the self-understanding of educational studies. The university offers a privileged perspective on the work of schools by virtue of its command of and development of theory in, for example, the psychologies of learning and cognition, cultural studies, philosophy of education, critical theory, and so on, that penetrate deep beneath the surface of unreflected experience. Furthermore, the significant advancement of schooling will come from the knowledge and forms of knowing offered by theory and research. Within this understanding, the knowing built in and on “art” or “craft” understandings of curriculum work—that is, the arts and crafts of improving craft—is delegitimated. For curriculum studies, the core task becomes one of modernizing, via “research,” the ancient tradition of imagining, constructing, and sketching
an ideal curriculum or mode of teaching on the basis of one or another foundational starting point, with this ideal then becoming a template that schools should mirror and against which they can be evaluated (Hopmann, 1999).

Schwab’s “practical” papers must, as Eisner suggested, be read against the legacy of this late-19th- and early-20th-century effort by a nascent faculty to define their jurisdiction in teacher education in a very particular way. Writing 80 or so years later, he invited us to reflect on and debate what this decision about the nature of the work of educational studies yielded in the way of the actual advancement of schooling. He put his conclusion in the first paragraph of the first of his “practical” essays.

The field of curriculum . . . is unable, by its present methods and principles, to contribute significantly to the advancement of education. It requires new principles which will generate a new view of the character and variety of its problems. It requires new methods appropriate to a new budget of problems. (Schwab, 1978b, p. 287)

As I have already observed, Schwab developed his themes and ideas across multiple essays. The language and framework of this summary of the “practical” argument had been developed earlier in one of his most important essays as a philosopher and historian of science, “What Do Scientists Do?” (1978a; originally published in 1960). This essay has not been considered alongside the practical papers, but it offers the essential background for any interpretation of those papers.

Thus, in “What Do Scientists Do?” Schwab discussed both the term principle (i.e., starting point) and the related notion of adequacy of a principle to consider why “certain debates among scientists perennially reflower in their literature” (p. 184). In order to explore his question, he invoked a supposition that “the alternative patterns of enquiry accessible to the man of science are few in number and capable of formulation” (p. 184). He then went on to consider why few alternative patterns of inquiry are found within communities of scientists, what these patterns do, why they are stable, and why they change. One internal factor fundamental to such stability and change in a pattern of enquiry is the “adequacy of [its] principle”:

... the connections it makes within the immediate subject matter, to the “completeness” or complexity with which it establishes components, factors, variables, and promises to establish satisfactorily complex connections among them. (p. 210; emphasis in original)

It is this criterion of adequacy of a principle that we see Schwab invoking in the sentences from the first practical paper cited above, but in that essay, he invoked the concept of principle at a “higher” level than in “What
Do Scientists Do?” Here he introduced the concept of a *form of principle*, and in the first practical paper, the forms that he invoked were not the working patterns of enquiry within the disciplines of science, but the ancient distinction, drawn from Aristotle, between the forms of knowing associated with the theoretical and the practical. In moving in this way, he is challenging the 19th-century decision to build the university’s role in education and teacher education on the principle of foundational knowing that is the hallmark of the theoretical (i.e., on the notion of a science of educational theory and research). He invited us to reconsider, in the light of experience, the *adequacy* of this decision by appraising the long-term outcomes (“to contribute significantly to the advancement of education”) of the patterns of work embedded in that starting point. He suggested that, in light of such an appraisal of the adequacy of the founding form of principle, we should be arguing about and likely opting for a new principled framework (“The field of curriculum . . . requires new principles which will generate a new view of the character and variety of its problems”).

In other words, Schwab made an epistemological and empirical case for the inadequacy of the theoretical form of principle that educational theory and research had adopted as it began its work—in terms of “the complexity with which it establishes components, factors, variables, and promises to establish satisfactorily complex connections among them.” He went on to make the case for an alternative starting point built around the forms of thought that address choice and action in the reality of ongoing experience—that is, the discipline of the practical.

The practical papers, with their emphasis on deliberation as the *method* of the practical, outlined one framework for a reconceived curriculum as one field within a larger education theory that must also be reconstructed. However, as Schwab (1978b) also made clear in the first practical paper, his criterion of the adequacy of a form of principle requires a more complex framework of starting points than the one suggested by method alone. Thus, as a preface to his discussion of method, he set out a more complete mapping of a reconstructed curriculum field in terms of the commonplaces of ends, subject matter, and problem source, again conceived as they bear on his overarching practical starting point.

In other words, the practical papers make a case for a fundamental rethinking of what educational theory and research privileges in the thought/action nexus. Elliott Eisner’s assessment of the practical papers is the right one, and Schwab must be seen as standing far outside the mainline of both educational and curriculum theory, at least in the United States. But does such an assessment of the argument of the practical papers make Schwab merely a historical curiosity, someone with no connection with any recognized mainstream of the larger education project? Such a judgment would seem puzzling given his biography. He spent much of his career as a core member of the Department of Education at the Univer-
sity of Chicago in the years of its greatest distinction. His immediate colleagues were among the preeminent figures of the time, whose work was formed by education’s theoretical project. And Ralph Tyler was in many ways Schwab’s mentor and close colleague throughout their years together at Chicago, and after.5

What should we make of this positioning of Schwab at one of the major centers of the tradition that he rejected, and what should we make of his relationship with Tyler? There are two issues here. Let me start by exploring the relationship between Tyler and Schwab, and then the relationship between Schwab’s practical and the mainstream of educational research.

The proximity between Tyler and Schwab has frequently served as a hook around which to debate their places in the larger American educational and curricular tradition. We have had Philip Jackson (1992) and Bill Reid (1993) debating whether Schwab improves on Tyler. We have Hlebowitsh contending that Tyler and Schwab both valorized, albeit in different ways, a set of common fundamental commitments about curriculum work. The problem with such questions and their answers is that there is not one practical but three practicals, and not one Tyler but three Tylers. Thus, we have the form of the practical, as outlined in “The Practical: A Language for Curriculum” (Schwab, 1978a). We have the deliberation-centered “practical” of the second part of that first practical essay and the other papers in the practical series (Schwab, 1978c, 1978d, 1983). And we have the practice- and practitioner-centered interpretations of the text of the second part of “The Practical: A Language for Curriculum” offered by, for example, Seymour Fox (1977) and Hlebowitsh (2004). And lurking in the background of all of this, we have the various criteria that Schwab himself offered as a basis for understanding what the practicals might be: the questions around the adequacy of the different practicals as proposals for working through the thought/action problem within education, and the questions about the utility of the practicals as starting points for concrete action toward the improvement of curriculum-making (i.e., materials development) or for action toward the improvement of school learning environments.

As I have suggested, we also have at least three Tylers. Thus, we have the Tyler of the text of the rationale: a set of notes he wrote (over a weekend, I was told) as a syllabus for his course at Chicago but never subsequently elaborated. We have the Tyler who, as a consultant working with the Eight-Year Study, developed a working framework to be used to engage teachers and communities in deliberative thinking about how the curricula of their schools might be developed. Finally, we have the shrewd and thoughtful Tyler who was at the center of much that was important in American education and educational research for a half-century, and who was Schwab’s friend and colleague. We can read the careful comments on one of the versions of the practical offered by this Ralph Tyler (1977), and in so doing, secure some direct insight into his understanding and criticism of one of
the practicals—and by implication, at least, into his understanding of the relationship between his considered way of thinking about the curriculum and the practicals.

Which of these practicals and which of these Tylers are we considering when we discuss the relationship between Tyler and Schwab, and which do we bring to the fore as we think about Hlebowitsh’s argument in “Generational Ideas in Curriculum”? I clearly cannot pursue all of the implications of this question within the limits of this commentary, but some of the issues must be raised.

I begin with an assumption: Ralph Tyler and Joe Schwab worked and wrote within their traditions and their worlds. They were real people working on real projects that derived from and were embedded in their immediate milieus. To understand their answers to their questions, the historian must always start his or her reading with their questions because these questions emerged within their worlds. It is only with such a reading in hand that we can reread their writing for the implications that they might have in our time.

Thus, Schwab’s thinking throughout his career in education was a sustained reflection of the work that he had done as a curriculum developer and teacher in the 1940s, as a major actor in the development of the reforming liberal arts curriculum at the University of Chicago. Tyler likewise had spent his career in practical endeavors. Neither Schwab’s nor Tyler’s work in curriculum and educational development was routine, but their work was firmly within education’s long-standing craft of curriculum development. Although the university has valorized the theoretical and the foundational, this craft tradition, with its emphasis on the local and the concrete, has always stood—and stands—as an alternative understanding of how to approach the real-world improvement of schooling. When all is said and done, much if not most of the working practices of real-world curriculum projects reflect such a style of work.6

The significance of this craft tradition has long been recognized. Dewey, for example, advocated a systematization of the craft tradition in the service of progressive reform (2001; see also Westbury, 2002). I would contend that Schwab’s practical should be read as a further attempt to reanimate and re legitimate this tradition within education’s project, but in a way that transformed the craft by fully marrying it with the disciplinary tradition and the vision of education that were central to his professional life. His radical proposal embraced craft, educational and social scientific research, and the disciplines—all within a profound vision of what education must be. Manifestly, he did not reject the insights of the theoretic, but embraced them, and then turned them in a new direction: to a quasi-theoretic framed by a different form of principle, with the hope that the theoretical might become something different than it had been. He asked us to consider whether the ends of the discipline of education were being
achieved within the starting point of knowing, and to consider whether they might be better achieved by way of a starting point of choice and action, but choice and action grounded in a disciplined practical thought that was animated by a vision of education. In short, Schwab’s practical papers outlined a 20th-century \textit{philosophical} response to the problems that are writ large around a still largely unexamined 19th-century legacy.

However, what Schwab offered at this philosophical level is only a sketch of a form of principle for a new kind of educational and curriculum study. As he wrote in “What Do Scientists Do?”:

Principles for enquiry are not, of course, accepted out of hand by the scientific community. Nor are they usually private inventions privately used. On the contrary, they are required to be presented to the community where they are scrutinized, debated, and then accepted or rejected for the more searching and expensive test which consists of use in enquiry. (p. 206)

Thus, Schwab’s practicals are not principles ready for “the more searching and expensive test which consists of use” but rather, outlines of the form of a principle, which must yield principles through scrutiny and debate before testing through use can be undertaken. His practical program cannot be taken as a concrete proposal for how to work with schools, but rather an attempt to (re)resolve the thought/action problem around education at a meta level. We can get some sense of what this assessment means when we turn to the third of the practicals.

Thus, when the practical is read “practically” as a ready-made prescription for the real-world practice of curriculum work—as Hlebowitsh (2004), Fox (1977), Jackson (1992), and, at times, Schwab himself read it—there are significant problems around the claims that might be made for its utility. Thus, we have to note that Schwab himself had no sustained experience of schools and only a limited sense of institutions other than the University of Chicago. Furthermore, his understanding of curriculum development was derived from experiences that had only the most marginal connection with schooling. He did not recognize that schools do not, for example, have the capacity to invent or reinvent their service, but are agencies for the delivery of known services. Finally, for all of his discussion of the local, Schwab’s own experience was in centers, and his work becomes most telling and most compelling at the level of practice, when he addresses what might happen as centers develop curricula for implementation in local places. Thus, while Schwab “sanctified the local ground of school decision-making” (Hlebowitsh, p. 79), this sanctification can be most usefully read as, on the one hand, a rhetorical hook to be used in debates with his colleagues in centers like Chicago, the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS), and the like, and on the other hand, as a reflection of his romantic attachment to a vision of community (see Schwab,
In this sense, he was very different from Ralph Tyler, who knew schools and whose experience and disposition were very much centered on problem-solving rather than vision-building.

In conclusion, Schwab wrote many, and certainly the best, of his essays in a spirit of active engagement with particular issues as they arose at particular times and places. The character and meaning of the practical papers can only be apprehended as threads in the weft and warp of the much larger tapestry that Schwab wove around the idea of education and its advancement. It does no service to his life project to pull out one thread, naturalize it, and then see it as the whole. But such a pattern of reading has been characteristic of the reception of the practicals on the part of those who have read them through both the expansive and the narrow views of the history of the curriculum field. Such readings have only served to evade the challenge that his work poses. They suggest that we can deal with his challenge to traditional educational theory by treating his philosophical analysis and polemic as merely grist for business as usual. In reading Schwab’s work in this way, we domesticate his diagnosis of the crisis within curriculum studies. We read his papers through our lenses, and in so doing, we ignore his contribution to our problem.

We must read Schwab as a philosopher who was a major innovator in the field rather than the “tool of continuity” that Hlebowitsh sees (pp. 73, 86). What Schwab sought to do was reanimate and redefine the craft tradition of curriculum work and make a case for its centrality to the advancement of education by bringing to it the full weight of research without changing its character as an art. He advanced his proposal carefully by showing us how Grace Bibb and the others who pioneered education in the 19th-century American university led us down a wrong road. He offered a compelling sketch of a different road, one that recognized the full complexity of both educating and the local.

Paradoxically, given his advocacy of the local, the audiences whom Schwab was addressing as he outlined his practicals were drawn from elites in foundations, universities, and Washington. There, as he had experienced it, the visions for schooling were more often than not “fatuous dream[s]” (Schwab, 1977, p. 22). In outlining his practicals, he was inviting the people in those centers to think in more complex ways than was their wont in terms of the local, of teachers, of people who knew children, and of people who knew their disciplines through and through and had thought about them as the bear of the work of education. It was his vision of education—of the nurturance of “competencies, attitudes, propensities, values” (p. 13), and of a form of principle that would support such nurturance—that undergirded his practicals. I don’t think that we see this in Peter Hlebowitsh’s “Generational Ideas in Curriculum.” And by virtue of its absence, his article does not invite us to reconsider, thirty years on, Schwab’s own compelling analysis of the problems that flow from our generational inheritance.
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I owe Michael Connelly a great debt. He read an early version of these comments, and his insightful comments (and severe criticisms) sharpened my thinking about Joe Schwab’s project. Connelly, of course, has made a major contribution to the practical with his empirically based development of the principles deriving from the form of principle outlined in the first of the practicals.

NOTES

1. We need to add the fifth practical paper (Schwab, 1977) to the commonly cited list of four (i.e., Schwab, 1978b, 1978c, 1978d, 1983).

2. It is this characteristic that leads to ahistorical notions like Hlebowitsh’s “generational lines”: idealizing constructions developed in the library and received as texts in the classroom, then analyzed in classrooms and academic papers. This ahistorical frame does not invite us to ask the central interpretative questions that must be asked about every historical figure: What problems and questions were they working on? What intellectual resources did they have as they worked on these problems and questions? How were their constructions answers to the particular problems and questions that they were confronting?

3. To reframe this 19th-century contention more sociologically, university-based educators claimed a “jurisdiction,” an arena of professional authority grounded in a legitimated expertise that would distinguish themselves from others who claimed a role in both teacher education and the management of schools (see Abbott, 1988). As many have noted, this claim of professionalism by university people also became the claim of the elite of organizational leaders of the schools in the early 20th century, as part of their search for a professional authority.

4. In his Melton Center paper, Schwab (1977) discussed the “bodies of educables” that curriculum inquiry must address—“competencies, attitudes, propensities, values”—noting that a starting point for curriculum thinking grounded in subject matter alone cannot address such educables because subject matters are “bodies of knowledge” (p. 13). This understanding pervades his College Curriculum and Student Protest (1969), which has also not been seen within the frame of the practicals.

5. As Hlebowitsh observes, this link has been symbolized by the footnote in the first practical paper, in which Schwab (1978b) pointed out that “the conception of curricular method proposed here is immanent in the Tyler rationale” (p. 320).

6. However, the intervention of the federal government in curriculum work, the scale of many federally sponsored projects, and the framing of these projects by the elites represented by foundations and the federal government rather than by immediate clients in school systems stripped curriculum development from the working social systems around local school systems.
7. Initially, in his work as a central actor in the curriculum development of the
1940s at the University of Chicago, an experience he returned to again and again
and summarized reflectively in College Curriculum and Student Protest, and later in
his experience with the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS) and with
the Camp Ramah Jewish summer camp movement.

rather than vision-building as the main end of curriculum development”
(p. 82).

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