Recovering Curriculum Practice: Continuing the Conversation
by William G. Wraga

After clarifying several misperceptions of my analysis of the theory–practice dualism manifest in reconceptualist curriculum theorizing, I reply to James Henderson’s inquiries about my perspective on curriculum practice by discussing the ideas of Ralph Tyler and Joseph Schwab and curriculum enactment. Recognizing that continued conversation holds the most promise for a mitigation of ideological conflict endemic to the curriculum field, I propose two topics for further deliberation among curriculum scholars.

James Henderson’s (2001) response to my critique of the reconceptualist propensity to distance—even divorce—curriculum theory from curriculum practice (Wraga, 1999a) represents a contribution to the recent problematic conversation about the intellectual and practical efficacy of reconceptualist curriculum theory. Several clarifications precede my responses to Henderson’s queries.

Henderson (2001, p. 18) suggests that I am “bothered” by the metaphor of curriculum as “an extraordinarily complicated conversation” and that I wonder, “how this multidimensional understanding of curriculum dialogue plays out in practice.” Curriculum certainly is “an extraordinarily complicated conversation” and the variegated theoretical perspectives extant in the contemporary field could possess the potential to make sense of it. But curriculum is more than a conversation; curriculum is a realm of action. My original (1999a) article examined only the conversation holds the most promise for a mitigation of ideological conflict endemic to the curriculum field. I propose two topics for further deliberation among curriculum scholars.

Henderson (2001), too, is silent, as other reconceptualists have been. Moreover, Henderson in his recapitulation not only ignores the rejoinder and Pinar’s failure to address the points I raised, but also reiterates Pinar’s misrepresentation of the original article as advocating that curriculum theory should “direct practice” (p. 18). In fact, the point was advanced that curriculum practice should inform curriculum theory—that the latter should be tested by the former (Wraga, 1999a, p. 11). This reality stands Pinar’s clever deconstruction of my text on its head.²

After outlining his latest proposal for a theory of curriculum practice, Henderson (2001) inquires generally about my interpretation of curriculum practice and poses three specific questions. The intent of these questions is to critique my perspective on curriculum practice from the perspective of Henderson’s idea of “inquiry artistry.” Although the purpose of the original article (Wraga, 1999a) was not to propose my vision of curriculum practice and although my views on the matter may be examined elsewhere (e.g., Wraga, 1993, 1996a, 1999c, 1999d), I welcome the opportunity to respond briefly to these inquiries.

First, I establish that by the term curriculum practice, I refer to the actions taken and experiences had by participants in conceiving and realizing educational purposes in pedagogical settings. Referring to the Tyler rationale, which Henderson (2001, pp. 19–20) inaccurately identifies exclusively with “system-wide” curriculum development efforts (see Tyler, 1949, pp. 127–128), as an “action inquiry cycle,” Henderson asks two questions: “What ensures that this action inquiry approach is ‘democratic’ in the Deweyan, moral sense of the term?” and “What ensures that this action inquiry approach will be ‘artistic’ as opposed to rigid and/or incoherent?” The obvious answer to both of these questions is, “Nothing.” Few assurances exist in practice. Tyler’s rationale can be implemented in a rigid, undemocratic manner—as can Schwab’s notion of deliberation and Pinar’s method of currere—or it can be implemented consistent with Henderson’s criteria. In this part of his discussion Henderson would have done well to acknowledge the considerable extent to which Tyler and Schwab were of like mind about curriculum development (see Schwab, 1969, p. 23; Tyler, 1984, p. 97). The tendency to contrast sharply Tyler and Schwab is inconsistent with the historic record and usually has the mischievous effect of promoting a false dichotomy between the thinking of the historic and contemporary fields.³

Henderson’s (2001, p. 20) third question to me inquires whether what I have in mind when I argue “for the centrality of ‘practice’ in curriculum arguments” resembles Schwab’s notions of “eclectic artistry.” By my thinking, the best available evidence in the curriculum field points to what Snyder, Bolin, and Zumwalt

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(1992) call “curriculum enactment” as the most promising prospect for improving the educational experiences of children and youth. Because curriculum enactment (in which teachers and students collaborate on the conception and realization of educational purposes) as an approach to curriculum implementation is consistent with democratic ideals and is the approach most strongly associated with the improvement of student learning, curriculum developers should strive toward its realization in educational settings. The degree of concurrence between curriculum enactment and Schwab’s proposals is a topic for another article. Snyder et al. (1992), however, identify the Eight-Year Study as a quintessential example of curriculum enactment. Significantly, the Eight-Year Study gave us not only curriculum enactment, but also the Tyler rationale. At odds with prevailing interpretations of the Tyler rationale is the fact that Tyler generated it during his work on the Eight-Year Study for the express purpose of enabling teachers in the participating schools to think unconventionally about—and to work democratically on—the improvement of curriculum (Tyler, Schubert, & Schubert, 1986, p. 95). The results were extraordinary (Aikin, 1942).

Because space limitations prevent an elaboration on his part and an extensive analysis on my part, suffice to say that, to the extent that Henderson’s idea of “inquiry artistry” is consistent with curriculum enactment, he and I concur. Yet, his theorizing also appears to reinvent ideas and practices generated by the historic curriculum field, and thus manifests a wider problem often encountered in reconceptualized curriculum theorizing that stems from a neglect of the work of the historic field in favor of imagining new theories (Wraga, 1996b). Whether Henderson’s new theory of democratic curriculum development contributes to the knowledge base of the curriculum field can be established only by determining the extent to which he has built upon and enhanced previous similar proposals (e.g., Bonser, 1920; Hopkins, 1941; Tyler, 1953; Zapf, 1959).

Henderson’s suggestion at the outset that “ideological conflict” is business-as-usual in the curriculum field is for the most part accurate. Henderson might also have mentioned efforts to resolve such conflict, such as the effort in the 1920s when curriculum professors representing the major theoretical perspectives of the day engaged in a conversation that resulted in a remarkable degree of consensus—as well as at least one changed mind (Whipple, 1926)—without a resulting lack of diversity of perspectives. At the 1994 American Educational Research Association meeting of the Professors of Curriculum, Peter Hlebowitsh, University of Iowa, broached the prospect of a late 20th-century version of the 1920s effort. His attempt to prompt discussion among contemporary curriculum scholars of even the prospect of such a conversation met with virtually no interest. Since that time the curriculum field has continued to divide itself into new conferences and associations.

Henderson’s suggestion that dualistic notions of curriculum theory and practice are detrimental to the refinement of curriculum theory and the improvement of curriculum practice is a point well taken. His call for synthesizing variegated social science and humanities perspectives and modes of inquiry in order to arrive at mutually informing curriculum research and practice—a call that echoes Dewey’s (1929) position—is also well taken. I would propose two additional items for the research agenda of the curriculum field: (a) that we construct a synthesis of work from the historic and contemporary fields and (b) that we test the numerous new theories in practice. These projects would provide opportunities for fruitful conversations between curriculum theorists and their pragmatic colleagues.

NOTES
1 For analyses of other aspects of reconceptualist theory, see Wraga (1996b, 1998). For something of a corroboration of aspects of my analyses, see Milburn (2000).
2 Indeed, such a deconstruction may be more applicable to Pinar’s arguments for the necessity of distancing theory from practice in the hope that theory may better inform practice.
3 Schwab apparently generated his notion of deliberation not so much in opposition to approved practice in the curriculum field (his stated concern was that the field had become preoccupied with theory), but to his experience with the fidelity approach to curriculum implementation during his work with the National Science Foundation discipline-centered reforms of the early 1960s. See Schwab (1969, p. 5; 1983, p. 245).

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