Traffic Jam: Curriculum as Dialogue, Recollection and Reflection

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As a child, I remember the time spent in the sandbox in our backyard. It held a huge, black tire filled with soft brown sand. Often, I spent hours simply filling an empty bucket with sand, adding water and turning the bucket over to create small, tower-like structures.

As I grew older, my constructions became more elaborate and deliberate, and my involvement was no longer solitary. Allen, Bob, my sister Joan, and her friend Mary Eva became regular partners in the creation of cities which would inhabit the center of the large tire.

As the town began to take shape, one of our greatest concerns was the building of roads that would connect the areas each of us were working on in the tire. The roads were an important part of our play. Once our town was finished, small cars, trucks and plastic figures would inhabit this newly created environment.

Road construction posed no problem in this group of accomplished builders. We began by paving the roads with a mixture of sand and water that was prepared in an empty pail. This compound served as our cement. It was carefully placed on the outlined areas by hand and smoothed out with the back of a shovel. Although our cement initially supported cars and trucks and kept the roads together, especially on a steep hill, it had to be watered frequently to maintain its strength. Our city now provided us with the roads and highways onto which we introduced our toy cars and trucks. After all, what good is a city without traffic?

Our play dealt with traffic and always involved real life experiences. Matchbox fire trucks were seen and heard racing through the streets of our sand city from the fire station to a burning house across town. Imaginary stoplights immediately came to life with the shout of "Red light" by someone who decided his or her car would stop. And, of course, there were the inevitable races through the streets in an attempt to evade the police who were never able to catch flagrant traffic offenders.

We continued to play like this for hours. Races, traffic jams, the police chases, all were essential elements of our city traffic. Eventually, we tired. Our play and actions became more violent

and our trucks and cars became the means to destroy our sand city.

Reading the following narrative by David Pariser (1981) while I was teaching art at an elementary school immediately brought to mind the recollection I just presented. Pariser wrote:

I gave the kids a special project which was to draw a traffic jam from life. I had eight toy cars, put them all on the floor and had the kids draw them. I stressed that all eight vehicles had to be shown in the picture. Several kids asked if they might not invent a traffic jam. I stood over the 'traffic jam' and allowed the children, one at a time, to look down on the traffic to see what it looked like 'from the top...' (p. 85).

Once again I could see myself, friends, sisters and brother playing with our toy trucks and cars in the sand cities we created over and over in the sandbox in our backyard.

I had no doubt that toy cars and trucks, miniature objects which mirrored the reality of the adult world, still played an important part and interest in the lives of young children. On the days I taught first grade art classes at Regina Elementary, I usually entered the individual classrooms before school started to set up the materials we would need for class. This preparation period also allowed for observation. During this time I became aware of the cars and trucks both boys and girls brought to school to play with whenever time allowed. These objects and the play that involved them were important to the children. The autobiographical implications resulting from these observations had to be explored, in this case, through drawing.

In the following art class, I asked students to push their desks to the edges of the room to create a circle and then bring their cars and trucks to the center of this open space. Once settled, I began to ask questions. What would cause a traffic jam? Have you ever been in a traffic jam? What was it like? What would a traffic jam look like if you were riding in an airplane above? What if you were in a car, stuck in traffic? The discussion was lively and informative.

The questions, as I had hoped, led to stories that showed how each child was directly involved with traffic. Indeed, responses brought forth delightful stories of personal experiences.

Renee shared a story about the time their school bus almost tipped over. "Our driver was yelling at someone like she always does and wasn't paying attention to where she was going." Brian started laughing as he told about the time his mother hit the back of a police car:

She said, "Oh my God!" and turned really red. My older sister was in the car and started to laugh, but my mom told her to "shut up." Boy, was there a traffic jam. All these cars had to go around us. My mom was really, really embarrassed.

The stories and discussion elicited an array of memories and experiences. The children remembered their lives in the context of movement and travel through the streets and highways they encountered. At this point, I encouraged the students to create a traffic jam by playing with their cars and trucks in the large open space we had created earlier.

After a time, the students left their traffic jam in the center of the circle, returned to their desks and were given 18 x 24 sheets of manila drawing paper. I simply asked them to draw a traffic jam. I toured the room while the children drew. As I observed them, I realized that their drawings evolved, not so much from the model in the center of the room, but from the experience of play and reflection that preceded the drawing activity. In retrospect, I cannot recall any student who looked out into the traffic jam for reference while he or she drew. Each environment was different, and so were the types and arrangements of cars and trucks found in each drawing:

Andy worked from the bottom of the paper. A variety of vehicle types and sizes filled the base line on this page. A little later, stores, traffic lights and a church appeared. The scene he depicted looked much like that from the bus stop in front of school. How many times had Andy waited for the bus, only to study, consciously or unconsciously, the scene he had described? (Figure 1)

Ben's approach was different. As he worked, I noticed he drew images that would be considered components of a traffic jam set in an environment. Blank areas were filled in with colorful circles and stars, without the necessity to "copy reality." (Figure 2)

Renee's cars were given human qualities. Planes, filled with toys and appropriately labeled, were seen "flying downtown to drop off toys to the toy store" according to Renee. (Figure 3)

Figure 1. Andy Persoon, "Traffic Jam."

Figure 2. Ben Osei-Mensah, "Traffic Jam"

Figure 3. Renee Bednarz, "Traffic Jam."

Figure 4. Kristen Krause, "Traffic Jam."

Just as Renee's interests were reflected in her drawing, Kristen's love of playgrounds was explicitly shown in her work. Traffic, sidewalks, a school and playground, key components of her drawing, are reflections of her world. (Figure 4)

Traffic Jam was an attempt to provide a place and process for students to attend to meanings they might draw from past experiences. For this to happen, I first turned to my own. I realized, after working and sharing with these children, the similarities in our childhoods, which made this possible. My intent was to provide a context which encouraged them to look (back) to lived experiences--to capture autobiography.

Autobiography is a process of reflection that reveals self-as-object through reflective self-representations. Grumet (1975) described autobiography as "a story that I tell about my experience" (p. 75).

She explained:

Self-as-agent, tells the story of self-as-place, the body-subject, its movement in the world, and in the process constructs and reveals self-as-object, or as a reflective self-representation. As such, autobiography is two steps removed from the prereflective events enacted by the body subject (Grumet, 1975, p. 73).

This interpretation considers autobiography as a two-step process. the first step requires the reflection of experiences once lived in order to grasp their meaning. The second step involves the presentation of the experiences and then interpretation--experiences as they now appear.

Thus, the autobiography barely recaptures the past--or even records it. It records the present understanding of the story teller and presents it in the context of that situation. Langer (1954) explained that "our sense of the past derives from memories mixed with extraneous elements, assumptions and speculations, that present life as a chain of events rather than as a single progressive action" (p. 265).

Grumet and Pinar (1975) see autobiography in terms of the research method--currere. Currere focuses on an individual biography, forsaking "general structures to discover the path of experience that has led a particular person to a specific choice or place" (Grumet, 1975, p. 84). Both acknowledged that currere addresses itself to the individual's own perception and understanding of this experience, maintaining that in the reflexive process reside both the energy and direction for continued growth. "Its truth is provided in its fiction" (Grumet, 1975, p. 73).

Dialogue and reflection are the essentials of autobiography. Experiences recognized in these terms can be considered educational. As a form of self-report, one accepts the paradoxical and ambiguous quality that is inherent in this sharing. Unfortunately, the educational system of today shies away from paradox, ambiguity and self-report; instead turning to a mechanistic and analytic description of the process of education.

True education is self-reflective; Burkhart and Neil (1968) contended that education begins when we "let go of the answers and get started with the question" (p. viii). However, when art is taught within a programmed system of instruction, the self-reflective experience is lost.

Art experiences developed, instituted and evaluated without an autobiographical footing in the lives of the students they are meant to reach cannot be meaningful. True education requires that as a teacher I look to my own experiences and assumptions "before designing and furnishing my neighbor's houses" (Grumet, 1975, p. 71).

Currere is a reply to the tradition of education. It is a return to the experience of the individual. It has allowed me to see and understand the students I work with as very unique and special individuals.

Finally, as with any information taken out of context, problems can occur when education based on biographic backgrounds is distanced from the very experiences and situations which made them meaningful in the first place. Although this activity may be used with children and teachers of similar backgrounds, one risks the problem of making it teacher-centered and directed. If this occurs, we have not moved any closer to currere. To even presuppose that any of these same situations could be used with another group of children, of the same age, could be a mistake. The individuality of each student must be respected and maintained.

Buber (1970) characterized this relationship in the following:

The teacher who wants to help the pupil to realize his best potentialities must intend him as this particular person, both in his potentiality and in his actuality. More precisely, he must know him not as a mere sum of qualities, aspirations and inhibitions; **he must apprehend him, and affirm him as a whole** (p. 178).

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