

The German Curriculum Movement – a failure of transatlantic exchange¹

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Abstract

The paper outlines the reception of Schwab's essay 'The Practical: A Language for Curriculum' in German-speaking countries in the 1970s and 1980s. The story is a good example to demonstrate how different circumstances and phases of development determine the transatlantic exchange and influence of concepts in the field of education and especially of Curriculum. The central ideas of Joseph J. Schwab's concept of curriculum theory and curriculum-making were related to the traditions of general Didaktik in the German-speaking world. It would have been well suited for a reception. Nevertheless the reception the essay received was at first not a story of success; on the contrary we have to diagnose a historical neglect. Circumstances today are much better for rethinking Schwab's analysis under the new conditions of standardizing and competence-oriented curriculum policies.

Keywords: curriculum theory; German Didaktik; Schwab, Joseph; transatlantic exchange; history of curriculum

1 Introduction

I like to add some further facts, reflections and arguments to a conversation initiated by Ian Westbury, Stefan Hopman and Kurt Riquarts (Westbury, Hopman & Riquarts 2000; Hopman & Riquarts 2000) in their project Curriculum meets Didaktik. They invited to a rather 'difficult' discourse about the 'fundamental cultural differences in understanding of teaching, schooling and the teaching professions' (2000, 4) represented by German Didaktik on the one side and Curriculum on the other. At first they pointed out the idea of *Bildung* and the central role of content as the core of German Didaktik. Tero Autio (2006) and William Pinar (2006) have continued the conversation focused on the concept of *Bildung*. My contribution is a case study about the transatlantic exchange.

I explore the reception of Schwab's famous essays on Practical in the context of the German curriculum movement. I focus the quite different circumstances as political as well as epistemological developmental states of the educational sciences and the administrative position of schools in the two cultures. My main thesis is: transatlantic as any other transcultural exchange of ideas is guided by socio-political interests and policy of sciences and disciplines. It's not about to understand each other in their own context, not a pure study of theoretical differences and familiarities. Even veiled our will to truth is every time also a will to power in the sense of Michel Foucault epistemological analysis. I will present three main factors hindering an appropriate reception of Schwab's essay: the time of publication, the focus of attentiveness and the phase and dynamic of changes in educational sciences and educational policy.

2 The context of the exchange

After the Second World War and during the restorative phase, human-science pedagogy, i.e. *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*, ruled the discipline. Basically, it was a philosophical/historical reflection science using hermeneutic and, to some extent, phenomenological rather than quantitative methods. There was hardly any research on learning and teaching worthy of the name as it was classified with the psychology of learning rather than with education. General and special didactics were organized normatively. Their models were theoretical and analytical constructs recovered from a more or less systematic reflection of education practice and the analysis of subjects (Westbury *et al.* 2000). Under the influence of a growing reception of US research on education and teaching, the German-speaking world of

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the late 1960s witnessed what was called the 'empirical turn of education'.

In 1968, a festschrift under the programmatic title *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik am Ausgang ihrer Epoche – Erich Weniger* was published dedicated to Erich Weniger, the leading German-speaking theoretician of the curriculum (Dahmer and Klafki 1968). 1967 a brief paper by Saul B. Robinsohn, 'Bildungsreform als Revision des Curriculum' (1971), had been published and may well have been the founding document for the then-nascent curriculum movement within the German-speaking area. 'Educational reform as curriculum revision' presented itself as the scientific counter-programme to the 'informed arbitrariness' of philosophizing and politicizing educational theoreticians and practitioners in whose hands lay the development of government curricula that determined what was supposed to 'be applied in class'. In contrast, curriculum planning should be rational, systematic, and innovative. 'Rational' signified that the planning should be the result of scientific research and analysis; 'systematic' meant the whole of the curriculum process from defining objectives to development, implementation, evaluation and, ultimately, to revision; 'innovative' characterized this new approach, specifying that the point of departure was not solely an existing stock of culture as regards knowledge and abilities but rather a definition of required qualifications for living situations that had to be coped with in the present as well as the predictable future. US curriculum concepts served as blueprints for the implementation of this new curriculum planning. In 1971, Karl Frey wrote *Theorien des Curriculums* as an outline of the US curriculum planning models and the international state of discussions. It was the beginning of the curriculum movement in the German-speaking world, and would define research and discussion within *Didaktik* for the next (roughly) 15 years.

Remarkably, the beginning of this era in German-language countries coincides with the publication of Schwab's essay 'The practical: A language for curriculum' in 1969. However, it is not a coincidence that Schwab's critical analysis, opened by the sensational statement 'The field of curriculum is moribund' (1978, 287) was not acknowledged in this part of the world at that point. It took more than a decade – the curriculum movement was already beginning to abate – for this essay to be received, albeit in a rather hesitant manner. The *Curriculum-Handbuch* (1975) merely notes Schwab's work on the structure of the disciplines. The *Handbuch Curriculumsforschung* refers twice to the discussion regarding Schwab's essay within the US (Knab 1983: 703) and states that 'Schwab was never truly received' (Oelkers 1983: 367).

Hence, a critical analysis, such as the one presented by Schwab in the 'Practical 1' paper had to be received as disturbing and irritating. And soon it was simply ignored in this context of curriculum-reception euphoria. Schwab's (1974) method-criticizing essay on legitimation problems was published in German and prominently positioned by Robinsohn (1974), but it did not receive positive response from many. Instead, papers emerging from Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* dominated the curricular field as well as the Mager's (1962) popular instructions for learning objectives. Schwab's critical approach in terms of process and methods was the very antithesis to everything the empirical turn of education and the curriculum movement had decided in their systematic and rational manners. Neither the moral nor the political dimensions of Schwab's the Practical were seen. Schwab's critique of the field of curriculum was hidden by the significant attention paid by German curriculum scholars to Schwab's epistemological analyses of the structure of disciplines.

3 Education and the structure of sciences

In 1972, eight years after its publication in the US, the German translation of the slim volume entitled *The Structure of Knowledge and the Curriculum* was published. It contained two contributions by Schwab (1964a, b), 'Structure of the disciplines: Meanings and significances' and 'The structure of the natural sciences'.⁴ For the field of Germany's developing scientific curriculum research, this volume became a special reference, together with Bruner's *The Process of Education* (1960). They were quickly adopted into the main curricular stock of reflections of the German-speaking discussions. The English works were swiftly translated. They proved to be connectable to the theoretical analyses as regards education, knowledge, and science of the German *Didaktik*. These analyses constituted a principal item of traditional curriculum theory and also were part of Robinsohn's concept of curriculum revision. The German editors considered the texts to be a correction, or at the very least a necessary supplement, to the mainstream within the German-American reception of the curriculum theory. They precisely connected with key models of *Didaktik* in the German-speaking countries in their basic principle: the educational competencies to be acquired had to be derived from the structure of sciences and knowledge (see Westbury *et al.* 2000). The leading German education expert, Wolfgang Klafki, followed the tradition of *Didaktik* in terms of educational theory and elaborated on the different forms and fields of experience and understanding in his book, *Das pädagogische Problem des Elementaren und die*

Theorie der kategorialen Bildung (1959). Hence, Klafki's categorical education theory stands in a European tradition as advanced and advocated in the UK and the US by the term of 'liberal education'. Thus we have Paul Hirst (1974) with his analyses of the 'Forms and fields of knowledge', Philip Phenix (1964) with *Realms of Meaning*, and, likewise, by Joseph Schwab.

4 The dignity and logic of practice

In 1971 Schwab summarized his analyses and consequences posed in *The Practical* in an eight-page outline (Schwab 1971), reprinted in 1972 in a discussion volume on curriculum development compiled and published by Robinsohn (1972). Robinsohn (1972: 11), the initiator of the curriculum movement in the German-speaking area, wrote in the editor's introduction both in an affirmative and distancing manner:

he [the editor S. B. Robinsohn] wishes to add that curriculum development as an 'art of the practical' and of 'eclecticism' ... cannot do without the direct reference to life situations.

However, these statements may only be understood in view of the fact that Robinsohn's model of curriculum revision refers to life situations for the scientific identification of educational objectives. At the same time he talks about the 'myth of teacher's autonomy within the curriculum', criticizing the English model of 'Teachers groups and centres' as the main bases of curriculum work. Robinsohn views the role of teachers and educational practice for the curriculum work merely in the sense of a participation promoting the readiness for reform and for its implementation (Robinsohn 1971: 94). He focuses entirely on a scientific rationalistic approach when it comes to curriculum development, strongly contrasting with the traditionally-practiced curriculum development in the German-language area by teachers and educational administrations. The empirical turn and reception of curriculum research changed these competences. The 'new' science became both leading and determining. This is why Robinsohn's '*Bildungsreform als Revision des Curriculum*' opens with an analysis of the 'boundaries of *Didaktik*' (Robinsohn 1971: 32). For him, it is a business of the educational sciences, i.e. psychology, scientific theory and epistemology, educational theory, sociology, and the expanding community of curriculum specialists. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the Schwab of the Practical was never genuinely received under these conditions.

The humanistic *Didaktik* had considered itself as '*Wissenschaft von und für die Praxis*', i.e. 'science by and for practice'. Schwab's the 'Practical 1' paper criticizes the scientific reasoning in matters of curriculum and instruction and thereby offers a fundamental criticism regarding the established models of scientific problem-solving in the area of education and classroom:

[There are] radical difference of the practical from the theoretic mode ... not in one aspect but in many: It differs from the theoretic in method. Its problems originate from a different source. Its subject matter is of a distinctly different character. Its outcome is of a different kind. (Schwab 1978, 288).

He argues that it is basically impossible to grasp the complexity of practical decisions and measures regarding education by means of theoretical analyses and technological planning. In its basic construction Schwab's view is nothing less than an implicit interpretation of the Aristotelian differentiation of *episteme*, which builds itself on *analysis*, and *deixis* on the one hand, and a *praxis* operating by means of mere probabilities and opinions as well as a *techne* performing with the help of experience and skill on the other hand. They are intrinsically autonomous and productive modes and spheres of problem solving. They each have their own right and their own validity.

Differentiation has a double meaning: on one side, it confines the authority of science; on the other side, it maintains the self-will and dignity of practice and the individual case with respect to science. Here, science is no longer the determining function between right and wrong statements and positions; it plays the part of moderation and of structuring and evaluating processes. This position corresponds to the traditional human-science education.

5 The struggle of mental powers and curriculum deliberation

The leading humanistic curriculum theoretician of the 20th century in Germany, Erich Weniger, described curriculum development as a political and practical business. Therein, he had detected a struggle of mental powers ('Kampf

geistiger Mächte'). Weniger sees this dispute as a clash of conflicting interests held by real societal groups and institutions: 'State and church, economy and society, arts and science, law and customs' (Weniger 1975: 201). Later, he added the unions to this list. It is neither science in general nor educational sciences in particular that have to take the responsibility for and develop the curriculum; it is society as a whole that has to come to an understanding regarding curricula and educational objectives. Overall, the development of a curriculum is not a process of establishing the truth and of lines of argument. Instead, it is an organized procedure to find the historic and – in view of pending challenges – adequate accommodation of competing interests. The end of this process is 'a decision, a selection and guide to possible action'—exactly the outcomes Schwab postulates for the Practical. Its quality criteria are not primarily truth and validity but situative and historic appropriateness. Its outcome is a consented educational ideal, minimizing and balancing the basic societal conflicts. This task must not be delegated to a group of experts. The convincing aspect of this conception is the distinct acknowledgement of power structures within the process of curriculum development and implementation and a double modesty in the ambition to be able to a) systematically organize and control the process, and b) to compare it solely with purpose-rational criteria. Therein, he agrees with Schwab's the Practical. The functional and technological solution to the problem of curriculum reform, as rightly criticized by Schwab, eventually failed in its German version exactly on this point.

To Schwab, curriculum development is a practical and a political business. The form of processing is the argument. It assumes that there are different views, aspects and interests in a matter that all have their proper justification. As different as they are, they cannot be sorted in terms of true or false. It is all about making decisions adequate for these different aspects and interests. The result of argumentation is neither truth nor the certainty of finding the one true solution to a problem; it is the understanding among the people involved that they have a common responsibility in the matter at hand and an obligation to reach the best possible result.

These qualities made Schwab both compatible with and familiar towards the curriculum movement in the German-speaking world. The movement had always considered itself a moral/political educational reform movement and not solely as a scientific rationalization of curriculum development. With this in mind, Schwab's the Practical was rather unexciting in these parts: it was believed that there was nothing new for Germany in Schwab's discussion. However, the failure to combine the political/moral dimension with the scientific methodological one along the lines of Schwab may well be named as one of the reasons for the ending of the German curriculum movement.

6 An Attempt to Adaptation

There have been attempts at an adaptation that may illustrate the relations and affinities between Schwab's concept and the tradition of the German Didaktik. Schwab entitled his contribution to Robinsohn's anthology 'Curriculumentwicklung in der Diskussion' a 'practical legitimation of curricula'. The political/ethical term 'legitimation' may well be interpreted as being programmatic. In 1975, I published an anthology with the title *Curriculumentwicklung – Begründung und Legitimation* [Argumentation and legitimation of curriculum development], arguing the extraordinary importance of the political aspects of curriculum development in Germany. Scientific argumentation alone does not necessarily offer moral/political legitimation for curricular decisions – in this case, this was one of the main problems for the transformation of informed arbitrariness of traditional curriculum development into rational curricular decision processes. But how to organize a procedure of curricular deliberation that fulfills the demands of political and rational decisions and guides? In Frey's (1975) contribution entitled 'Rechtfertigung von Bildungsinhalten im elementaren Diskurs: Ein Entwurf für den Bereich der didaktischen Rekonstruktion' to *Curriculumentwicklung*, he developed a model of Didaktik reconstruction and simplification of the available potential bodies of knowledge. In its essentials, it reads like the implementation of Schwab's 'arts of eclectic'.

In his later operational instantiation in the 'curriculum conference', the parallel to Schwab is expressed even more distinctly. The concept of the 'curriculum conference' (Frey 1982) closely follows Schwab's guidelines, and expands them by methods of reasonable argumentation and socio-technological instruments of social interaction. The elements of the model are in accord with Schwab's the Practical, for example in the representation of relevant curricular commonplaces such as teachers, subject matter, curriculum-making. The model itself remained unpublished, even though both projects were scientifically supervised and evaluated; the evaluations, however, were released as theses.

Nevertheless, this attempt at reception arrived too late. The curriculum movement had already started to wane. School practitioners as well as administrators had lost confidence in the movement's ability to solve the problems of the pending educational reforms. Science withdrew from the directly practical business of curriculum reform; they were driven back or renewed its ties with educational administration. The reception of Schwab's *The Practical* in Germany occurred when the curriculum movement in the German-speaking world showed signs, parallel to those in the US, of its inability to solve practical problems of curriculum-making.

Ten years later, an essay by Peter Pereira entitled 'Eine Einführung in Joseph J. Schwabs Theorie curricularer Erörterung' [An introduction to Joseph J. Schwab's theory of curriculum deliberation] (Pereira 1992) appeared. It did not lead to any renewals of the curricular discussion, either in terms of theoretical debates or in terms of practical implementation. Neither the curriculum conference as a practice nor Schwab's 'art of eclectic' were able to gain wider acceptance.

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