Of curricular lacunae: A response to Provoking Curriculum

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In February 2003, Carl Leggo invited me to participate in the closing session of the Provoking Curriculum Conference scheduled to take place at the University of British Columbia on the 1st of March. He envisioned a panel comprised of seven academics representing a range of subject-area specialties and situated in cities from coast to coast. Each of us was to offer a short response to the conference, thereby providing an array of perspectives on the nature and significance of the event in the context of Canadian curriculum studies. On the day, individuals offered personal reflections, and yet there remained a common theme: several panelists, including myself, intimated that the conference represented a defining moment for Canadian curriculum studies, a moment in which the field was revealed as being distinct, with a remarkable history, an intriguing and richly layered present, and a strong future. Having recognized the significance of Provoking Curriculum as a landmark event, I should like now to offer one perspective on its implications in terms of future directions for the field.

Early in Provoking Curriculum, my broad focus with respect to the task of responding became clear: the conference had created a space for dialogue around curriculum, and the presenters, inhabiting this space, were themselves concerned with curricular spaces and with creating space for alternative curricula. This focus is understandable given the occasion of the conference as a venue wherein to celebrate, inter alia, the life work of Ted Aoki, who has called for an understanding of curriculum that takes into consideration both the richly variegated nature of human experience and how such diversity plays out in curricular settings (Aoki, 1980).

Taking up this theme, individual presenters spoke of the need to recognize and make space for difference. Springgay & Wilson (2003), for example, called for disturbance of the curricular garment, attendance to texture, and examination of the “play of difference in the fold.” We must, they stressed, make openings for difficult questions. Similarly, Fowler (2003) introduced the notion of curricular syncope, or interruption, and Luce-Kapler (2003) expanded this notion, speaking of the need to disrupt the conventional rhythms of education. Individual presenters in “Dis(e)rupting syntax: Curriculum as (dis)composure” pursued a similar line of reasoning, as the title of the symposium suggests, speaking of the need to disrupt the curriculum, to crack it, to find its linguistic fissions and fusions, and so on (i.e., Hasebe-Ludt, 2003; Leggo, 2003). In these spaces, various presenters intimated, particular discourses that have been silenced will find voice.
“curriculum in a new key” (Pinar and Irwin, in press).

At the time, hearing talk of syncope and disrupted musical or syntactical rhythms called to mind the title of a book I was then perusing in the context of researching the evolution of technologies for writing, *Space between words: The origins of silent reading* (Saenger, 1997). As the linguists among my readership may know, it was the scribal practice in antiquity among copyists of Greek and Latin manuscripts to write in a continuing script, or *scriptura continua*—that is, without any spacing between words or sentences.[1]

Reading such early manuscripts is a difficult art, generally requiring verbalization of the text in order to differentiate one lexical unit from the next. Observes Saenger, verbalization helped readers “hold in short-term memory the fraction of a word or phrase that already had been decoded” while proceeding “through the decoding of a subsequent section of text” (8). Saenger argues that the introduction of word separation beginning in the seventh century was likely the prerequisite for the development of rapid silent reading. The presence of spaces between words, he posits, eased the process of decoding text to the extent that verbalization was no longer necessary in aiding comprehension. The disruption of *scriptura continua* might thus be construed as having a curiously double-pronged effect: spaces, serving as reading “guideposts,” simplified the process of negotiating written language, but they also *silenced* that process and served to compartmentalize language in a way that is peculiar to societies with traditions of literacy. As Ong (1982) tells us, oral peoples do not have a word for *word*, for it is hard to find discreet units in the harmony of gesture and speech. In considering this paradox, I am reminded of Postman’s premise in regards to technological advancements: to summarize, innovation is invariably attended by both gains and losses (Postman, 1992). In the case of word separation, the introduction of spaces into the fabric of written language facilitates one movement (literacy) to the detriment of another (orality and the particular embodied way of knowing with which orality is associated).

Of what relevance is this discussion in the context of *Provoking Curriculum*? In responding to the conference, I wish first to applaud what I see as a necessary movement: finding space for alternative curricula and alternate ways of interpreting curricular moments. A student of language and literature, I will be the first to concede that some of the most meaningful literary moments occur in spaces that draw attention to themselves by interrupting flow: narrative discontinuities, pregnant pauses, and the like. In this understanding I concur with Iser (1980), who observes that such interruptions are essential, for they are the moments wherein readers are invited to interject their own understandings; a literary text, he surmises, should be construed as “something like an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination” (51).

This being said, it would be unwise, in attempting to convey an idea, to place all one’s hope in spaces. After all, imaginative moments such as those described by Iser exist in a context, as spaces always do, and it is this context that guides the ways in which they are read.
It is not enough, then, to call attention to the curricular lacunae wherein alternative perspectives are enacted and to propose the interjection of more such spaces. On the contrary, we must be bolder in our resolve: beyond making openings within the accepted curricular lexicon, we must work to change the lexicon itself. Otherwise, we are complicit in the suppression of alternative discourses; for, as evidenced in the disruption of *scriptura continua*, spaces do not always serve to give voice. In the final session at *Provoking Curriculum* I expressed my hope in terms of the conference’s potential effects within the Canadian curricular landscape, and I will express that sentiment again now: as Canadian curriculum scholars I hope we will make every effort to take conversations pertaining to alternative curricula, some of which are iterated in this issue of *Educational Insights*, outside the academic community to policy makers, parents, teachers, students, and so on. *Provoking Curriculum* has reminded us of the value of difference; it is our job now not only to make space for that difference, but to write it into our official curricula.

**References**


[1] A manuscript dating to the late 8th or early 9th century that gives a sense of scriptura continua is housed at the British Museum, and available via their digital collection. This copy of Theodore of Mopsuestia’s *Commentary on St Paul’s ten shorter epistles* demonstrates the running together of words; however, some spacing is evident and examination reveals punctuation, which is not a feature of *scriptura continua*. Nevertheless, the document certainly provides an example of the sort of dense writing early readers of alphabetic languages were required to negotiate. Available: http://prodigi.bl.uk/illcat/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=633

**About the Author**

**Teresa Dobson** recently completed an interdisciplinary doctorate in the Departments of English and Secondary Education at the University of Alberta. In her current position as Assistant Professor of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in secondary English language arts teaching methods and new media literacy. Her present research focuses on how evolving technologies for writing are modifying the production, dissemination, and reception of literary text.