Letting Our Presuppositions Think for Us

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I began teaching a course on the Curriculum in the mid-1970s. One of the things that struck me while reading around the topic was how ineffectually people typically engaged others' arguments. It seemed more like a market-place in which people shouted their wares than like an arena where clearly agreed questions were debated. Part of the trouble seemed to be how little most writers seemed aware of their presuppositions. At first I tried to get students to see the problem by exposing presuppositions, particularly in cases where people were arguing for or against some particular curriculum innovation. I wanted to show that the overt arguments rarely engaged each other, and each side's had no impact at all on the other's, because they were failing to recognize the real source of their disagreements. I then prepared some notes on the role of presuppositions, elaborated them for the next time I taught the course, worked the notes into a lecture, and the lecture into this essay. It appeared in <u>The Journal of Curriculum Studies</u> *(vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 123-33, 1978), under the title "Some presuppositions that determine curriculum decisions." I have probably had more favorable feedback from colleagues on the usefulness of this piece in teaching than anything else I have written. It is a "slight" piece, overly simple perhaps, but does, I think, get at something important and still neglected.*

Introduction

If I argue that the store on the corner sells paint, I presuppose that there is a store on the corner. For my claim that the store on the corner sells paint to be true, or even meaningful, my presupposition must be true. If you believe that there is no store on the corner, you would be engaging in a weird strategy if you were to argue only that it does not sell paint. You would clearly be more sensible to argue, and present evidence if need be, that there is no store on the corner. If I argue on behalf of child-centered education, it is not altogether clear what set of presuppositions I am working from. For claims on behalf of child-centered education to be true, or even meaningful, the presuppositions on which they are based must be true. It would be an absurd strategy to deal only with the claims and ignore the presuppositions, because it may well be that our disagreements are at the level of presupposition.

I will try to show that disagreements about presuppositions are usually the case when it comes to arguments or decision-making about curriculum, and I will then go on to discuss the implications of this for the proper strategy we should pursue in dealing with decisions or arguments about curriculum.

My purpose in this essay is to excavate just a few presuppositions that have a determining force over a range of curriculum issues. I do not attempt anything like an exhaustive mapping of such presuppositions; I deal with the set chosen in no particular order; they are not a coherent set of presuppositions--they overlap, some are more influential than others, they are at different

levels of generality. I will deal with them in a very general way, simply noting their most significant features and roughly the range and kind of decisions they determine.

Human nature: good/bad?

(A few words first about this and the following sub-headings: I use the most simple, not to say crude, terms to indicate the presuppositions I want to characterize. Clearly, few people hold the simplistic notion that human nature is either absolutely good or bad, or even try to make a rational assessment of the trustworthiness of human nature in general. But I use these bald terms to suggest a continuum along which a range of presuppositions about human nature can be located.)

One of the most powerful influences on our curriculum decisions is our subtly and subconsciously formed presupposition about how good, reliable, trustworthy--or the opposite--human nature is. The presupposition that human nature is typically good, leads to the belief that people will incline to do good if unconstrained--'good' being used here for whatever one approves of, pro-human behavior generally or learning physics in particular. Thus people who hold this presupposition tend to blame environmental conditions, formal constraints, institutions for anything 'bad' that occurs--whether it be anti-human behavior, or not learning physics or how to read, or whatever. With regard to curriculum, this presupposition leads to the range of positions that favor lack of constraint on children, and trust in their instincts: if children will move naturally towards the good, and if learning physics and how to read are good, then, if not prevented by some external condition, they will choose to learn those things of most value to them.

Holding this presupposition leads to feeling no sense of risk or danger in removing constraints and providing greater freedom. Indeed, quite the reverse--change and innovation are favored, almost regardless of their nature, not just because they may involve the removal of constraints, but because they provide moments when the freedom for 'good' human nature to express itself is at a maximum. Even innovations designed to provide greater freedom tend to become formalized and rigid, so it is the freedom involved between the breaking up of one structure and the closing in of another that is valued--with the result that more or less constant change tends to be preferred. Rigid classroom formats, 'traditional' teaching methods, structures and formalities of all kinds are thus seen as barriers preventing natural goodness from being exercised. 'Free schools' and 'child-centeredness' will tend to be supported, and supported with confidence that education will naturally improve because of the reduction of constraints they involve. Student-initiated inquiry and 'open-ended' project work will be preferred to teacher domination and prescribed 'closed-ended' tasks.

The person who presupposes that human nature is bad is led to see traditional forms, institutions, and constraints as carefully built defences against the exercise of a naturally destructive, ignorance-preferring human nature. Consequently, periods of change and innovation are seen as times of high risk at which it is only too easy to lose far more than may be gained. With regard to curriculum, this presupposition leads to the desire to defend all institutions and forms that achieve however small a degree of success in teaching and

controlling children. This sense of the importance of institutional constraints leads to a particularly strong feeling that quite severe constraints and pressures are justified, and required, to ensure that children master those skills society needs for its continuance. It is obvious that these general feelings will lead to more or less the opposite kind of programmes to those favoured by persons believing in the goodness of human nature.

It may help to clarify this continuum if I sketch more radical positions at either end, and then the middle position. The radical 'left' presupposes that human nature is so good that all constraints and institutions should be immediately removed. Nothing can be lost in throwing out curriculum guides, classroom structures, formal courses and disciplines, because only in the absence of these constraints will the natural goodness of the child flower. And if this freedom fails to produce the basic skills necessary for the continuance of society, so much the worse for society: this only shows what an artificial, inhuman, and stifling set of institutions it is. The 'rightmost' radical position is led to see humans as untrustworthy animals, whose civilization is an incredibly frail structure holding in control the human bestiality that threatens to overwhelm civilized life at every turn. All change is resisted because no possible change could be worth what is put at risk. ("If it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change," as Lord Palmerston famously stated his basic policy position in the nineteenth century.)

The person in the middle of this continuum presupposes that human nature is neither good nor bad, or perhaps that human nature is in some circumstances likely to produce good, in others, bad. This leads to the desire to provide some structural defences against the latter, but to leave sufficient flexibility so that the good might have room for exercise. If at the far right no change is acceptable, and at the far left any change is desirable, in the middle readiness to accept changes will be qualified by the requirement that either evidence or good reasons be given that the changes will lead to improvements.

Well, these are very broad brush-strokes, and of course there are other continua of presuppositions about human nature that lead to equally diverse positions. People have, for example, differing presuppositions about the plasticity or flexibility of human nature, which leads to different positions on the extent to which teaching may be effective. This range of presuppositions underlies the nature/nurture or environmentalist/geneticist disputes. Let the above suffice, however, as an indication of how different presuppositions about human nature lead to different positions on some curriculum issues. I will consider a few more such presuppositions before dealing with the implications for curriculum decision-making.

Culture: within/without?

This second set of presuppositions is nearer the surface of typical conscious reflection than the first. Overt arguments about curriculum rarely try to locate where the arguers think culture lies. This location is important, however, because presupposition about where it is determine people's views of what culture is, and consequently what role it has in the curriculum.

If one presupposes that culture is 'without', one conceives of it as somehow contained in, or composed of, objects--the products of 'great minds', books, pictures, theatrical performances, music--and associated feelings and attitudes. These cultural objects and the appropriate

feelings and attitudes about them exist in a publicly determined hierarchy of value. Education thus becomes the process of making children familiar with the hierarchy of cultural objects and internalizing public standards of evaluation and appreciation of them. This leads to seeing the curriculum as largely a curriculum of content, and education as a process of acculturation 'up' the various hierarchies. The cultural objects are seen as being of permanent value and meaning, unaffected by any current situation. Indeed their value cannot change, because they are the fixed standards of value against which present experience, products, and events may be measured.

This presupposition leads to a curriculum in which authority is important--both the authority of 'culture' itself, which the child has to absorb to become as it were, fully human, and of the teacher as the representative or, better, the embodiment of the public standards which must be learned. The curriculum will be highly structured to ensure the child's proper development up the various hierarchies. As access to the best cultural products requires mastery of a considerable range of knowledge and skills, the curriculum will involve pressure for 'achievement', and will frequently contain tests to ensure that each step has been taken successfully. The value that will result from this mastery will be more important than any discomfort, distress, or even suffering that may result from pressure in the process.

(Authoritarian attitudes tend to follow from the presupposition that culture is without, but they need not. Similarly this presupposition tends to be associated with the presupposition that human nature is 'bad', but, again, it need not. It is, for example, possible for someone who presupposes that human nature is 'good' to presuppose that culture is 'without'--in which case that person would be led to believe that, if children are left largely to their own devices, they will naturally come to internalize the public hierarchy of values, and appropriately appreciate the "best" cultural objects. The more common combination, however, is for the person who presupposes human nature to be 'good', to presuppose culture to be 'within'.)

The person who presupposes that culture is within is led to see it as a set of experiences, not objects. The quality of a book, for example, is not measured in terms of any public standard, but simply by its effect on the individual reader. The hierarchy of cultural values is thus composed by each individual for him/herself, and each person's hierarchy is considered autonomous. Shakespeare, then, might move one person profoundly but be no part of the culture of someone else; and no value comparisons can be made between these cultures, and there can be no sense in which one should work to get from some object the same general kind of experience someone else gets. Public standards or claims about the cultural value of objects are considered largely meaningless, at best a kind of guide to things worth trying. Those who presuppose that culture is within will talk about many cultures; those who believe culture is without will talk of only one objective culture--there can be no such thing as a counter-culture or alternate-cultures or multi-cultures; there is simply culture and varying degrees of ignorance of it or participation in it.

The more radical positions on this continuum may be represented on the right by the person who is led to see culture as residing entirely in a strictly organized hierarchy of objects--so that one could, as it were, acquire culture by buying objects of publicly accepted cultural value and surrounding oneself with them; the higher up the hierarchy, the higher the price. To the left,

the radical presupposition leads to believing that what goes on 'inside one's head' both is the source and provides the standard of cultural value, regardless of its content--thus drugs or rock-videos can be considered equivalent to Beethoven's quartets if they produce intense feeling.

The central position on this continuum of presuppositions about the 'location' of culture, leads to the notion perhaps best expressed in Michael Oakeshott's metaphor of culture as a conversation: "we are the inheritors, neither of a inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, began in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves . . . Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation" (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 198). Culture, then, is presupposed to be both within and without; cultural objects can provide us with 'words' of the conversation, but our individual interpretation and use of them is crucial.

This continuum of presuppositions profoundly determines curriculum issues such as are summed up by the labels 'process versus product', or 'intrinsic versus instrumental'. If one presupposes that culture is within, it is the process one goes through in learning that is important--no future product is more important than present experience because the present experience is one's culture. The experience in classrooms must be of intrinsic value in the present. Towards the right of the continuum, because it is the achievement of internalizing the public standards that is important, the process is seen merely as the means to this end, of little importance by itself.

Consciousness: past/present/future?

Societies and individuals vary in the way they make sense of experience with regard to the flow of time. Three basic positions may be characterized, as indicated by this sub-heading. Obviously no one locates her or his consciousness exclusively in the past or present or future; we combine them in varying degrees, though we tend to accentuate one or two at the expense of the other(s). I will simply use van Groningen's characterizations here:

One person unsuspectingly gives all his attention to the direct present and tries to adapt himself to it with all its delights or sorrows. Another prefers to concentrate on the things which are expected to happen; as a man of the future he is wrapped up in expectations, hope and fear; to him the present, even in its broadest aspect, is above all an approach, a prelude to coming events. There is still a third attitude, the one of the man who is strongly tied down to the past, who finds there the real values of life and who sees the present mainly as a result of that past; recollections and experience are more to him than expectations, he draws his vital energy from the past, borrows his convictions from it, and finds his bearings there (1953, p.3).

Clearly this set of presuppositions overlaps, in various ways, with some of those previously discussed, but there is range of curriculum concerns that is particularly determined by the location of consciousness in time. One way of initially characterizing these is by showing how they influence attitudes towards history in the curriculum.

For the person who is predominantly past-conscious, history is important because knowledge of the past is responsible for securing our very identity; we are what we are and the world is what it is because of what happened in the past. To mix metaphors, it is both the anchor that provides security and the compass that guides us through times of rapid change--the more rapid the changes, the more important history is for stability and sound judgement. The past-conscious person will favour a curriculum that not only gives a central place to traditional 'academic' history, but also organizes all other subjects on a historical basis; physics, for example, should be taught by introducing the child to Greek ideas of physics, then Alexandrian, medieval, renaissance, enlightenment, nineteenth century and finally modern. This presupposition tends to lead to acceptance that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny in the mastery of knowledge and ideas.

To the present-conscious, history is of value in as far as it provides a direct enlightenment of current issues. Thus, most history that cannot be seen to have directly shaped current conditions tends to be considered simply 'irrelevant to the needs' of modern children. Our identity is not seen as formed by history, but is seen in terms of current social forms, institutions, ideologies. Teachers who are present-conscious collapse history to social studies, and seek to introduce children directly into the way the world is and works now. Thus, while the past-conscious would prefer to teach children about the Greeks, the present-conscious would prefer to introduce them to the idea of 'democracy', and take them out to see a local council working. It is presupposed by the present-conscious person that a better understanding of their world will come from, say, a project that studies the make-up of a local shopping centre, than a study of Greek or Roman history; urban or environmental studies are preferred to the study of history.

So in Western schools we look a little at early empires, and particularly the Greeks and Romans, then skip to the "birth of the modern world" in the renaissance and reformation, pause for the enlightenment and nineteenth century and finally, as someone put it, come up Main Street foot by foot.

To the future-conscious the study of history is largely irrelevant, except in so far as it can indicate some trend that may be extrapolated into the future. Identity is composed of expectations. Futurology would replace history in a future-conscious curriculum, because it is the future, whose shape can be more or less inferred from present trends, that gives meaning and guidance to the present. The future-conscious teacher is led to prefer a curriculum that will prepare children for what is likely to happen, and so concentrates not on content --who can know what content will be appropriate to the requirements of the future?--but on encouraging critical thinking rather than knowledge acquisition, problem-solving skills rather than familiarity with past problems, openness to change rather than commitment to a set of ideas and institutions.

Most readers are no doubt familiar with the more radical stances with regard to each of the above positions which I might caricature as the pedant hostile to anything that is not at least a few centuries old, the narrow and ignorant activist, and the mindless 'trendy'. And the presuppositions which are reflected in these locations of consciousness in time do not only affect history. I use history as an example simply because the effect of these differing

presuppositions on its role in the curriculum is quite clear. But all elements of the curriculum are equally affected.

Centre of value: body/mind/soul?

As with our previous presuppositions, we rarely find a person who exclusively values the body or mind or soul at the absolute expense of the others, but we do find a considerable variation in emphasis. Again, the sub-heading is very crude and presupposes a Western form of dividing up the self, so I will spend a few lines characterizing people who are imbalanced quite heavily towards each of these centres, and briefly note the curriculum positions influenced by each presupposition.

The person who presupposes that the body is of predominant value, sees it as the source of sensation and sees sensation as the predominant form of gratification. The body is not simply an instrument that carries the mind about and needs to be fed, clothed and locomoted; it is rather the source whereby great pleasure may be derived from food, from decorating it, from its ability to move well and powerfully in sports or risky adventures. Ideas are of small importance--it is the sensuousness of music, painting, sculpture that represents their central value. The mind-centred, on the other hand, values ideas above all else, and secures greatest gratification from the working of the mind. We are familiar with this attitude in education so need not dwell on it. The soul-centred value the mystical in any of its various forms; that is, that dimension of experience in which we locate our sense of awe, of mystery. For some it comes from contemplating the very fact of existence, for some it is in a set of beliefs about a world other than ours that guides them towards mystical experience, for some it is in the sense of the numinous behind appearances, for some it is in love.

With regard to the curriculum, the body-centered favors activities that lead to sensuous appreciation or physical activity or both; the mind-centered favors a curriculum that engages and leads to the valuing of, and skill in using, ideas; and the soul-centered strives for a curriculum that will constantly lead children beyond the prosaic world of factual knowledge, intellectual skills, and sensuous appreciation, to a sense of the mystery and wonder of things. Without going into more detail, it will be evident that people who presuppose one of these centres to be of greater value than the others will conflict with people who hold one of the alternative presuppositions on a range of curriculum issues.

'Make people like me!'

Underlying all the above presuppositions, or perhaps constituted by them, is a complex of presuppositions crudely summarized in this sub-heading. Underlying most curriculum decisions by any person, I am claiming, lies the usually subconscious calculation of what will more likely lead towards children being made like him or her. Put in such a crude way our immediate impulse is to reject such a claim, especially as it refers to ourselves--though it does seem to have some truth when referred to our opponents.

If one examines the stated aims of even the most sophisticated educational thinkers one will find a curriculum that is clearly designed to produce people like its proposer. Usually this is qualified by our desire to have a curriculum that will produce people like us, but without our 'defects'--those, that is, we feel able to acknowledge. It would perhaps be better to say that our decisions about curriculum are largely determined by the desire to produce people like our idealized image of ourselves.

Consider briefly some of the statements of aims or principles for a curriculum expressed by Dewey, Whitehead, Maritain, and Peters in Frankena's collection, Philosophy of Education (1965). Dewey wants a product marked by "executive competency . . . by sociability . . . by aesthetic taste . . .trained intellectual method . . . [sensitivity] to the rights of others." Whitehead wants the product of his curriculum "to experience the joy of discovery . . . see that general ideas give an understanding of the stream of events that pour through . . . life", to prove ideas, evoke curiosity, judgment and the "power of mastering a complicated tangle of circumstances, the use of theory in giving foresight in special cases," and to have, above all, "style". Maritain wants "the conquest of internal and spiritual freedom to be achieved by the individual person, or, in other words, his liberation through knowledge and wisdom, good will, and love". He thinks that "no one is freer, or more independent than the one who gives himself for a cause or a real being worthy of the gift". Peters' priorities include "sensitivity, a critical mind, respect for people and facts", and "a rationally held and intelligently applied moral code", so that children will "enter the Palace of Reason through the courtyard of Habit and Tradition".

Our philosophers are writing about themselves; stating aims or principles for curriculum construction that are a kind of covert autobiography, projecting outwards into a different form an idealized image of themselves. In a pluralistic society, of course, we acknowledge the desirability of variety, but the amount of variety we are willing to promote is always limited and the basic guide to our curriculum decisions is our calculation of what will most likely make children in our image. And, indeed, why not? What else do we have to go by? It is just important to be clear about it; important for understanding how best to go about dealing with curriculum issues.

Conclusion

It would be possible without much difficulty, to identify a variety of other presuppositions. Indeed, it should be possible to chart a fairly exhaustive set, though the few outlined above suggest that such a set would require organizing in a hierarchy of levels of generalization. No doubt some of those I have dealt with above could be, at least partially, collapsed together, or might be better formulated in different ways. For example, Center of value: society/individual might provide a better way of organizing some of the issues touched on above; Truth: relative/objective might lead to a more profound way of categorizing some of the content issues. But I will leave this task of elaboration for elsewhere, and go on now to consider the implications of these presuppositions for curriculum arguments and decisions.

If we argue about whether the store on the corner sells paint, and your ground for opposing my claim is your belief that there is no store on the corner, how should we resolve our conflict? It is

not an issue that is likely to be resolved by protracted debate, though such a debate might persuade one of the arguers that they had confused corners or something. If I agree that if there is no store on the corner then I will acknowledge my claim is false, then the resolution of this argument is a straightforward empirical matter. We go to the corner and see if there is a store there. If there is not, you win. If there is, we go in and see whether it sells paint.

If I argue on behalf of more child-centeredness, and your basic grounds for opposing my claims, whether you make them explicit or not, are that human nature is generally untrustworthy, that culture is external, and so on, how should we resolve our conflict? It is clearly not a straightforward empirical matter. An attempt at an empirical evaluation of the relative merits of a child-centered school and a 'traditional' school might well indicate that on social or 'humanistic' measures student freedom, happiness, comfort, feelings about teachers and fellow students the child-centered school scores higher, and that on academic achievement measure the traditional school scores higher. The obvious problem is that the presuppositions that lead to preferring one kind of school over the other also lead to valuing one kind of measure over the other, so that both sides can claim victory from the comparison. (In such a general comparison the 'traditional' school is more vulnerable; the child-centered school will tend to value its procedures above any product, and thus, as long as it practices child-centeredness in its procedures there is no way to undermine its confidence; if the child-centered school should show superior academic achievement, the rationale for the traditionalist is entirely undermined.) My point here is the simple one that no general empirical test can resolve our dispute, because our general objectives differ no less than our procedures.

Is the best procedure then to expose our presuppositions to an empirical test? How does one run an experiment to determine whether human nature is generally good or bad? Proponents of the latter position tend to argue that history is the experiment and the results are conclusive--but then the proponents of the 'good' human nature position tend to argue that history only proves that institutions dehumanize people and prevent their natural goodness finding an outlet. To the former, history is a charnel-house of slaughter and cruelty, with moments of relief; to the latter it is the story of the human spirit's increasingly successful struggle for freedom.

But this is not to say that argument about even so general a presupposition must be ineffective. Examples and reasons strongly articulated in debate may occasionally be effective in having someone reassess their position on, say, the likelihood of increased student choice leading to improvements in learning. Also, one could imagine that such debate might lead to agreement on some objective held in common by the proponents of 'child-centered' and 'traditional' education, and that agreement leading to an empirical test of which procedure was better able to bring about the common objective. For example, it might be agreed by both parties that mastery of basic reading and writing skills is a sufficiently important objective that, within limits, each side is willing to sacrifice some degree of either their rigor or openness for the better achievement of it. An empirical test could then be conducted to discover which procedure was generally more fruitful in achieving mastery of the specified skills. My point here is simply that it is possible to open up to empirical testing areas of dispute based on differing presuppositions--however restricted the likely result.

It seems to have become generally accepted that curriculum problems are "practical, not theoretical ones" (Walker, 19??, p. 5). An implication of the above argument is that this claim is false. Curriculum problems are theoretical, empirical, and practical. In this they are like the problems of that other common human activity--politics. Underlying political arguments and decisions are presuppositions not unlike some of those I have sketched above. The realm of practical maneuvre in politics is perhaps a little greater than in curriculum. Achieving practical results, like winning votes, is sought by various means of persuasion, and exuding of 'charisma'. Similarly, proponents of a particular curriculum position use various, usually more consciously rational, means of persuasion, and charisma is replaced with a kind of 'authority'--the authority and confidence the well-educated person carries in discussion about education. The area for empirical inquiry is somewhat larger in curriculum than politics. But in both, to differing degrees, the problems have a theoretical dimension that may lead to empirical inquiries, that may, in turn, lead to practical decisions or results.

If the basic grounds of disagreements about curriculum issues are differing presuppositions, then are we not reduced to complete relativism? Even though it may be that theoretical discussion and empirical inquiry and practical action may occasionally affect some change in someone's presuppositions, does it not simply boil down to a position where everyone is as right as everyone else?; where there are no grounds for saying one area of the continuum of a presupposition is better or worse than any other? No. Only people who require impossible absolutes and certainties will conclude that the impossibility of achieving them leaves us only with the alternative of absolute relativism. The range open to empirical testing and secure theoretical analysis about practical curriculum concerns may be quite small, but that does not mean it does not exist. It does, and it is important to focus a lot of our energy on enlarging it.

This analysis does not lead to relativism for the very good reason that the fact that we cannot show which presupposition about, say, human nature is right or wrong does not at all mean that, therefore, all positions are equally right or wrong. Some presuppositions are right and some are wrong. I have formulated the above set of presuppositions in a way that suggests the middle position is usually right and the further towards an extreme one gets the more wrong one is.

That, ultimately, these presuppositions are like general value positions means that much argument about curriculum problems is likely to be idle, unless the disputes recognize not just the surface content of their argument but also the basic differences in presuppositions from which their disagreement springs. Making these explicit, and trying to isolate components that can be opened to empirical testing or rigorous analysis, will lead to less vacuous idleness in our theoretical discussions, and lead towards greater rationality in both argument and decision-making. The fact that our basic values and presuppositions are greatly resistant to change, does not mean that they do not change or that they cannot change, or that we cannot change other people's. If curriculum is a kind of political venture whose purpose is to create a system that will tend to produce people like ourselves, let us be as sensible as possible in promoting such a system.

What other implications follow from this brief analysis? One seems to be that when we think about curriculum issues, and imagine that we are dealing with a particular issue on its merits,

our view of its merits is determined by the presuppositions with which we approach it. That is, it is an illusion to consider our everyday thinking about curriculum issues to be free. We are not so much thinking, as letting our presuppositions think themselves out. We sort the elements of the new problem into the categories prepared by our presuppositions. This metaphor overstates the case, perhaps. It suggests absolute rigidity at the level of presupposition and absolute fluidity at the level of 'content'. In fact, the latter can also, though more rarely and less profoundly, cause changes in the categories created by our presuppositions. We can think about the categories our presuppositions create and we can examine our presuppositions. They are not easy to think about, because they are the things we think with, but there is a sense in which we also think with the phenomena of the world, and it is by being sensitive to the world that we can create some reference system for our presuppositions.

It is disfunctional, then, to argue about or even think about curriculum problems while failing to recognize the source of our beliefs, arguments, and feelings. Ignorance of our presuppositions, and ignorance that our thinking is largely determined by these presuppositions, blinds us to the real nature of our disagreements about curriculum decisions, and leads us to believe that our opponents are wicked charlatans and idiots because they reach different conclusions based on the same premises. Recognition of our differing presuppositions, however, would show that our premises are in fact different. It would also allow us to focus much more precisely on those areas where we might work towards resolving disagreements, and help us to be more tolerant of persisting disagreements.

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