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Review: Poetter, Thomas S. Curriculum Fragments: A Currere Journey Through Life Processes.

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Poetter, Thomas S. *Curriculum Fragments: A Currere Journey Through Life Processes*. Routledge, 2025, 167 pages.

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My intention isn't to create answers but to surface stories that lead to further questions, and to understanding perhaps. Maybe the stories will lead to new possibilities. Maybe they will lead to growth, and love. Ultimately, I am convinced that we are taught the things that distance us and connect us, subtly and not so subtly by the world, by our families, by our communities, by our experiences, and by our non-experiences. We all have our own stories to tell and to interrogate. I would like to hear more of them, not fewer of them, even the ugly ones. (Poetter 122)

Poetter's book *Curriculum Fragments*—and the stories shared within—have changed the way I think about education. Redefined it. Recentered it on what matters most—the human experience, the life processes at the center of Poetter's book: losing, knowing, forgiving, relating, hoping, growing, loving. Each of Poetter's fragments—reflective narratives written following the Currere methodology (Pinar)—caused me to reevaluate my practice. Here is one example from my own classroom of how a fragment from Poetter's book inspired me to recenter my practice:

"Talk to me about if or how you used AI to write this paper?"

"What?! I didn't use AI," my student replied.

"Okay, but just explain to me how you used it."

"I swear I didn't use AI. I wrote the paper myself."

"..."

"Okay, well, I mean, I guess I just asked it for some ideas, and then it gave me back, you know, some ideas, and I just copied and pasted those, but I changed some words around, so I still wrote it."

It was the end of the year, and this was the second time I had talked with this student about inappropriate usage of AI to complete coursework. I teach high school juniors, and this year was particularly rough. I love teaching, and I love my students, but I was at the point where I was turning towards cynicism. Giving up hope on having authentic learning experiences co-constructed between student and teacher, both invested in the betterment of our ability to think, communicate, and navigate our way through this world.

Poetter's book made its way to me during this low stretch of the school year, a time filled with makeup tests, plagiarism, and last-minute grade grubbing. In low moments like this, it's easy to see how education can be reduced to a transactional Freirean banking model: Tell me what I need to know. Tell me what I need to do to pass the class. To earn the grade. To check off the next box. And it would be easy to sentence my change-some-words-around student with a summary judgement of what I read from their behavior. But I realize after reading Poetter's book that both of those impulses are mutually—and needlessly—oppressive, placing student and teacher at odds with one another.

I felt this tension reflected early on in *Curriculum Fragments* when Poetter explores an early memory: during a one-on-one basketball game, young Poetter wrestles with a friend over a ball (45-50). I was struck by the poignant treatment of what seemed to me at first a fairly mundane, common interaction between two competitive boys. The story got me thinking about what might be happening within the interiority of my students' experience in my classroom. I thought about how I might be metaphorically wrestling with my student over a loose ball. The story gave me pause. Helped me realize that whatever I said and did with my AI-plagiarizing-student in such a crucial moment of vulnerability could potentially reverberate through their memory in the same way a simple moment in time still lived inside Poetter's memory.

So, with my student, rather than focusing on the behavior (AI plagiarism), or discipline, my brain began searching for generative ways forward, toward hope, and growth, and learning and at least understanding and forgiveness—all repeated themes in Poetter's work. My student and I had a good talk where I listened more than I talked, where my heart moved from cynicism to empathy for the situation. We made a plan together that ultimately led to some good writing (for both of us). We were both educated through the experience.

That clarity of focus on the human experience is the intention of *Curriculum Fragments*. Poetter's book isn't about AI, and that basketball memory isn't even explored or analyzed in the way I took it, and yet, the story helped me with my student because that was the problem I brought to my experience reading.

Intentionally or unintentionally, Poetter presents a metaphor for the potential of this type of personal meaning-making. In Poetter's first curriculum fragment, he writes about driving around a corner on a road he has driven many times. But because of the circumstances of that exact moment—the slant of light, the way the cars were arranged on the road—he was able to see something new. Something that was mundane and static was suddenly bursting with new life and insight (4-5). When I read Poetter's stories, they cast new rays of light on my experience, helping illuminate my thinking in exciting, inspiring new ways.

For this co-construction of knowledge, Poetter offers another metaphor of a kilonova (30-31)—a cosmic event where two bodies of dense matter collide,

releasing new energy, elements (literally gold), and light. The metaphorical dense matter here being Poetter's Currere reflections colliding with the readers' questions, struggles and lived experience. The result, for me, was kilonova-explosive: rather than a static absorption of the author's ideas, I experienced a burst of insight and energy that reshaped how I think about education and life. That's a bold claim, I know, and not one I'd make lightly or universally. But for me—for my experience as a reader—that's exactly what this book did. Literally gold.

Structure of the Book

The book is organized into ten chapters, the first two devoted to establishing the conceptual framework necessary for making sense of the curriculum fragments that follow. Chapter One offers an overview of Louise Berman's life process—centered curriculum alongside Poetter's extensions and adaptations, particularly his integration of Pinar's Currere methodology: "the autobiographical, phenomenological, and psychoanalytic approach to curriculum studies" (8). Chapter Two offers the clearest and most thorough explanation of the Currere method I've read. Even though Poetter encourages readers to consult Pinar's original essay for a deeper understanding of Currere as a research tool, methodology, or reflective practice, I would actually recommend Poetter's Chapter Two as the most accessible resource. Poetter breaks down each step—regressive, progressive, synthetic—with more clarity and insight than Pinar's original essay.

And here comes a warning, the reader does need to invest in these initial chapters—into learning the rules of the game. The chapters are very readable, and Poetter does a good job weaving in some Currere reflections to model the process, as well as to start building the meaning for the work, but it is slightly akin to reading extensive rules before playing a new boardgame. But this is a game worth playing.

The next seven chapters provide the main organizing structure of Poetter's book, each centered on a core life process: losing, knowing, forgiving, relating, hoping, growing, loving. Each process is explored in its own chapter through stories accompanied by reflections, wonderings, possibilities, and implications. Reading these chapters feels a lot like settling into a warm dinner conversation: the kind you don't want to leave because of the comfort, the flow of ideas, and the ease of connection. And just as the feeling of an evening's conversation often lingers longer than the specific words exchanged, the same is true of this book.

Let's you think I am painting a rose-colored review, I must give a second warning or rather pass along and agree with Poetter's own warning: "I also want the reader to know that hoping to be understood, to understand myself, doesn't mean that everything here is tidy, neat, always well-packaged" (19). The stories read metaphorically, allegorically, and while that makes for powerful potential

take-aways for the reader, it can also leave the reader reaching for meaning, feeling slightly disconnected from the intended meaning. Again, like a good dinner conversation, I didn't feel the need to fully interrogate every idea before me.

Poetter spends the final, very brief chapter tidying ideas up a bit, drawing a few more conclusions, explaining a bit more about his conceptualization for the book. We learn that he drew inspiration from Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* which makes more sense in hindsight because the book does read closer to philosophical ponderings and introspection than a typical book on curriculum; however, Poetter is very clear that this isn't the book for a reader seeking a clearly defined curriculum; "instead, life processes constitute a valuable heuristic for getting at the nature and meaning, and possibly at the generative powers for thinking and practice that emerge from certain curriculum experiences . . ." (162).

Curriculum Fragments presents a challenge to review: it's not something easily explained or summarized. It needs to be experienced. I could tell you that this book inspired me. That it has illuminated anew the way I view myself as a teacher, the way I consider my students first as human beings, the way I think about my school and classroom and community and self, but that would be kind of like me trying to explain or describe the overwhelming feeling I experience witnessing the majesty of a perfect sunset. It would make more sense to invite you to come stand with me. To experience it—read it—for yourself.

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