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The Accidental Curriculum

Cover Page Footnote

Terrance Riley teaches composition and British Literature in the English department at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. From 1990 to 2001 he directed the Writing Center at Bloomsburg.

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Terrance Riley

Professors of English experience the force of accident and misdirection in their lives in about the same measure as everyone else, but they experience it more vividly because the sprawling, irrational character of accident is at odds with intensity and replicability, the complementary values we use to bring continuity to ourselves and our projects. To be able to see life steadily and see it whole is the hope instilled by our deeply felt sense of the power of concentration and of the incorrigible greatness of some texts; but all of our hankering after “structure” contrasts poignantly with the frequently haphazard way we stumble into lifestyles, lovers, and career tracks. A failed relationship sends the high school teacher on for a Ph.D.; a gull in the sky over Ocean City convinces the poet to pack it in; a year in Nepal makes the Carlyle manuscript irrelevant, and one begins again. One might not regret having taken this road or that; but then we do not use the word “accident.” Happy moves are called “turning points.” Painful missteps rededicate us to planning, prediction, and caution.

Since we are not in most respects extraordinary individuals, it is not surprising that professors of English desire the ordinary comforts of reproducibility. People end up reproducing the culture with which they identify. Most of us now believe, to some degree, that what we used to call “civilization” is mere reproduction (as opposed to, say, “progress”). But professors of English are supposed to know this, to be critically aware of it and therefore immune to the syndrome. We are supposed to know that trying to hypostatize life structures only creates more opportunities for “turning points.” Our literary theories, after all, have adopted just this paradox as a principle of discourse: the harder the philosopher/novelist tries to systematize her universe, the more likely she is to drift into contradiction and discontinuity. The carnival now, and not the cathedral, is our metaphor for the novel; we should not be surprised that our lives too have their share of freak shows and funhouses. Nor should we be scared. But fear of madness is more powerful when one looks in the mirror than when one looks in a book, and most of us continue to relegate chance to the shadows, preferring to believe that life’s important business is conducted in the sunlight.

Predictably then, our university curriculum in English is a clean, well-lighted place, comprising as many aspects of English studies as we might hope to reproduce successfully from year to year. Thus, it includes, of course, the system of undergraduate and graduate majors, tests for admission and advancement, required and elective courses, credits, GPAs—the package of interchangeable parts

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standardized many years ago by the education industry. It also includes the reproducible course structures created or appropriated by individual teachers (and occasionally endorsed as department policy): the canon or canons which the teacher of, say, Victorian literature arranges to illustrate some portable generalizations; also themes; theories; syllabi; and marking and ranking systems.

But “curriculum” refers also to folklore and exemplary tales and structures, which we sometimes call the “hidden curriculum”: the invisible but powerful system of hierarchies and preferments, approved ideas, trains of thought, and professional conduct which guides us when we can’t make up our own minds what we should do. Some of these are obsolete and trivial—literature over composition, for instance, and ivy over public—but some retain an ineffable totemic power: schooling is more legitimate than learning on one’s own; intensity is more honorable than diffusion; the reproducible is more real than the ephemeral. This colloid of unarticulated beliefs is the real life blood of the curricular animal sketched in the college catalogue. We do want our students to read Dickens, but it is an attitude toward Dickens we want them to absorb. Likewise, as also recorded in descriptions of the English major, we want students to write thesis-driven essays using accepted terminology, methods, and approaches; but what we’re really looking for is the passionate expression of a set of values—of clarity, rationality, permanence—and not the external form.

One might say then that the curriculum comprises two domains. The formal curriculum—which is what we normally refer to when we use the word—is designed to work more or less automatically: if the English major follows all the steps and completes the required courses in the correct order, she will have learned what she needs to know. The informal or hidden curriculum is the domain of beliefs and desires, our beliefs and desires, which we hope will be reproduced in our students; but, as a domain of only-half-realized attitudes, it cannot be instilled directly, except by accident, or blunder. We might say further then (or admit, since it is our daily experience) that the informal curriculum undermines the formal: our elaborately programmed sequence of behaviors halts in disarray in the presence of an eager sophomore lit major.

That in practice the formal curriculum is commonly disabled by accidents in the informal (his writing is quirky, his interpretations tactless, his tests scores anomalous) does not apparently disturb our faith in the basic formal arrangements. This fragile confidence in the formal, replicable domain of the curriculum is mirrored in our trust of the learning theory which is supposed to underlie the curriculum. A general sort of cognitive psychology underlies most contemporary pedagogy. It is necessarily general: most English teachers are not experts in learning theory, and would not want to be. But when we are called on to produce expert rationales for our work, we are glad to have on hand such citable figures as Frank Smith. Learning, Smith writes, is

actively to seek, select, acquire, organize, store and, at appropriate times, retrieve and utilize information about the world. Human learning is rarely passive or accidental; rather it is always directed towards the purpose of increased understanding. [. . .] Children are conceptualized as “constructing theories” in order to make sense of

the world, and “conducting experiments” to test their theories. (*Comprehension and Learning* 2-3)

What Smith engagingly calls in his own work an information-processing “bias” can be found in many modern learning theorists. The appeal of such a bias to orderly, scholarly minds, or to minds that so fancy themselves, is obvious. But college professors rarely show much interest in the other half of the cognitive approach, its major functional principle: that learning emerges from past experience and that it does so in ways highly specific to the learner. “Individuals,” Smith writes a few lines after those cited above, “perceive the world and respond to events in the manner that makes the most sense to them personally at the particular time, in terms of their past experiences and current predilections” (3).

This principle, seen through to its conclusion, cannot be comforting to the professor who likes a controllable classroom. So instead we have developed the half-theory that fits our own “predilections” for intensity and replicability into a pocket paradigm of the life of the mind so neat that most of us don’t think about it at all. How to get someone to learn something? Isolate the desired objective (“human who understands literary heritage”), identify the usual means of attaining the objective (“take literature courses”), and impose the experiences (“Your required courses will include . . .”). Along the way, organize the experiences to increase the challenge gradually: move from easy to hard, short to long, simpler to more complicated; from appreciating to analyzing to theorizing. Focus. Test frequently. Nip mistakes. This little bundle of common sense, drawn out into a four-year program and supported with many numbered paragraphs of justification, validates our formal curriculum and informs our myths and folklore. Nearly the whole bag of teacher-wisdom is filled with nuggets from this vein, their uncomplicated cognitivism gleaming happily, like seams of iron pyrites.

And despite the patient assistance of such historians of curricular failure as Laurence Veysey and Frederick Rudolph, most of us maintain a panglossian optimism in traditional pedagogy. We say we believe that this is the way people learn, even as we sit through daily performances of evidence to the contrary, in which prejudice and superstition sweep aside organized learning experiences; in which reconstructing the experience to fit the theory (or prejudice) is much commoner than the reverse; and in which the effects of formal schooling are rarely predictable, profound, or lasting. People do learn a fair amount in classrooms; but they either don’t learn what we intended, or they don’t learn in the way we designed.

The cognitive psychologists themselves frequently acknowledge that the model of learning they offer can be upset by the cognitive whimsy of the individual human being. Carl Bereiter has been one of the most vigorous advocates of the cognitive model in literacy, and his particular version of learning theory is in wide use. But Bereiter himself (as opposed to those who “use” him, widely) is quite aware of the potentially massive forces which counter the organized learning experience. In a “stop-gap” response to skeptics who doubt that higher order conceptual learning can take place at all, he enjoins teachers “to assume that complex learning does occur, but [. . .] that it is genuinely problematic—chancy, susceptible to failure, in need of all the help it can get.” Bereiter’s decidedly non-curricular list of complex learning “resources” begins

with “chance” and includes “social supports for learning,” “biases,” and “a coherent self-concept” (604).

Likewise committed to the cognitive model in educational theory, Howard Gardner has, in a series of books and articles since 1988, identified eight or nine distinct human capacities, or intelligences, each of which may be educated, cultivated, in or out of school. But Gardner warns the would-be teacher against treating any intelligence as an isolable entity; human capacities should rather be considered as “processes and abilities that (like all of life) are continuous with one another” (*Frames* 70). Since all of our “intelligences” are operating all at the same time, there is no reason to expect that a student is developing linguistic ability in a writing class, even if she’s paying attention; she might be systematically developing her spiritual or interpersonal side (and *she* doesn’t have much more control over her particular cognitions than we do). Like most responsible learning theorists, Gardner acknowledges that the model he has created is not intended to account for learning completely: “such psychological factors as proper motivation, an affective state conducive to learning, a set of values that favors a particular kind of learning, and a supporting cultural context are indispensable (though often elusive) factors in the educational process” (*Frames* 373); and more recently: “Educators’ understandable focus on cognition has sometimes had the unfortunate consequence of minimizing awareness of other equally important factors. Probably the most crucial is motivation” (*Disciplined* 76).

Interestingly, Smith, something of a cognitive purist in the early 70s, has more recently come to focus increasingly on the impurities and unpredictabilities of classroom learning. In 1995, he included “curriculum design” in a charming list of educational “disasters” (“Let’s” 2). In 1998, a discussion of the “classic view” of learning (that one learns naturally and continually from the community one is affiliated with) versus the “official theory” (that learning is an unnatural act requiring discipline and effort) leads Smith to the following conclusion, among others: “The problem in school is not that many students aren’t learning, but *what* they are learning. They may not learn what their teachers teach them, but their teachers may not be teaching what they think they are teaching” (*Book* 10).

Such cautionary notes do not represent a recent refinement of cognitive theory, of course; that people learn according to their own agendas—and not the teachers’—was always part of Smith’s theory, as noted earlier. In 1974 Arthur Appleby (no educational heretic) also argued that attention to the design of formal curricula was misplaced: “the repeated observation that the teaching of literature [fails] to achieve [its intended] ends with any significant number of students has usually been mustered during the course of an attempt to substitute one body of content for another, rather than to suggest that it is the stress on content itself that is at fault” (246).

This minor round-up of famous names establishes something quite striking. Despite their general faith in the cognitive model, contemporary learning theorists have significant reservations regarding any confident deployment of the model in a classroom setting—reservations so significant, in fact, that if we look only at the skeptical passages (keeping them out of their larger, more optimistic contexts), they amount to compelling arguments against the effectiveness of any

formal curriculum conceived apart from those larger domains of the variable that Gardner calls “indispensable.” Their skepticism foregrounds everything the theory cannot predict and the classroom setting cannot compass. It is not simply that we do not attend to the personal or that students are not intrinsically motivated; this much we might be able to manage. Rather, our learning theory fails to generate a reliable pedagogy because, in the interest of making the classroom dynamic reproducible, it refuses to acknowledge the context of variables which swarms in the vicinity of each human being in every setting of his life, bordering him, though permeably, and making him who he is, though variably. Eliminating variables sounds intuitively right—why would we want accidents in our classrooms, after all?—till one starts enumerating the variables: motive; pleasure and pain; reward commensurate with effort; self-concept and group affiliation; sense of the ultimate ends of life; and a hundred others, each with a hundred ramifications in consciousness. To the partial degree that we are successful in shooing these out the door, we deprive our readers and writers of resources that give rise to the second kind of knowing, the kind we really want—the knowing that becomes part of consciousness and imagination, welcomed not because it can be deployed in the solution of this or that momentary problem, but because it makes life richer; *but* which also leads, kind of accidentally, to sophisticated reading and writing.

If one manages, through some sort of Herculean arm-waving, to sweep one set of variables out of the air—by creating a highly structured instructional unit, for instance—a new set will simply fly into the yard. People *will* have interior lives, and they will learn, something, but the process is not subject to much control. When we try to control it by striking the X-factors out of play, our students without effort call up a new set of unruly memories and “predilections”; they have an inexhaustible supply. So instead of learning the inner workings of dramatic monologue in some important and lasting way, they may simply learn, lastingly and powerfully, that they don’t like Browning.

This principle—systematically intransigent indirection or cognitive anarchy or whatever we might choose to call it—seems fairly easy to grasp, and as suggested above, most of us do accept some version of it. Indeed, our informal acceptance of the productive power of accident is the strangest part of this story. We know perfectly well and intimately how essential “tacit knowing” is, both to mundane business and to life projects: art or scholarship or government or love. None of these can be managed easily or managed well under clinical conditions. Artists and lovers and even clinicians know this. College professors ought to, for the scholarship and art they produce does indeed draw on their whole range of human capacities: in researching the text or composing the quartet, none of us would think to deny ourselves the leaping-forward intuition, the interdisciplinary borrowing, or the heretofore unsanctioned solution. No one doubts that intuition or life knowledge or expert knowledge exists. Nevertheless, college English teachers (if such a collective can be said to exist morally) seem to have agreed, as if by NCTE Position Statement, to ignore the stubborn bias and the unpredictable insight, and exaggerate the value of the planned curriculum and the clinical model of learning. In the realm of the classroom, we continually commit ourselves to clearing the air finally and altogether of personal variables—like my neighbor who leaves his bug light on twenty-four hours a day.

All the approved elements of the formal curriculum, I am arguing, in fact represent the least promising opportunities for the sorts of learning we might want for an English major; they are valuable primarily as occasions for accident. A formal, rational, replicable curriculum can only address short-term memory and skills created for the occasion of the course. Whereas “the sorts of learning we might want”—sophisticated reading and writing, say, or insight into culture—are features of character and not transmissible skills.

* * *

It’s a little scary to suspect that one stands upon nothing, that a century of effort to elaborate the professional model has been largely wasted. But, as noted at the outset, it is not surprising. English is a largely imaginary field. The philologists and rhetoricians and classicists who first imagined it knew this—knew that if they were to consolidate the advances they had made by getting modern languages and literatures into the course catalogue, they had to do something to fill the empty, rootless present of the classroom. In fact, it was they who made up most of the curriculum we still have, and they made it up, rather tragically, out of spontaneous, living, cross- and non-disciplinary inspirations, the kind of fortuitous intellectual accidents that happen to free, living minds. But unfortunately, like us, when our great-grandparents thought curricularly, their living ideas became mass-produced certainties, like the distinctions of the genres and the boundary dates of literary periods and the canon of great writers. Remarkable new ideas took fire from time to time, of course, but rarely from contemplation of the certainties. Fiery ideas normally emerge from accidents of intellectual history: idle talk at conferences, casual reading in another discipline’s journal, some crackpot systembuilder stumbling on the work of a long dead crackpot. We are deep in debt to the crackpots for such exciting and useful projects as the analysis of patriarchy and structural linguistics—and cognitive psychology. But when a living idea is subjected to curriculum, it dies.

It seems to me that English teachers who are sympathetic to the particular crackpot perspective developed here are under an obligation to begin acting out its implications for the way we conduct our professional lives. But Applebee’s weariness with the “time for a change” theme is surely the appropriate response to the reform movements which have comprised our academic politics for a hundred years, and which fail for the same obvious reason. Our entire history can be characterized as a protracted failure at institutionalizing ideas which are important only when they are in motion and which, when they are stopped, vanish, or mutate into ponderous oxymorons: “postmodern classroom,” “post-disciplinary theory,” “non-foundational knowledge,” “critical pedagogy,” “process-oriented curriculum.”

Several such attractively-named alternatives compete with the old and now much vilified passive learning. In fact, we had been hearing about new “active learning” pedagogies for twenty years before Ernest Boyer’s 1987 study of the classroom experience in the American university found that the same inert material was still being dumped upon the same passive undergraduates (141). But the conclusion we should reach is surely not that the hundreds of professors Boyer

observed had all devoted themselves to the principles of passive learning. No one believed in passive learning by 1987 (and I am not sure that anyone ever did). The reason Boyer discovered passivity is, once again, simple and unsurprising: any psychological or cognitive process which we program into a course becomes part of the course content and will be pursued as an objective rather than a process. It is another daily problem, the obvious sources of which most of us manage not to see: one recalls the composition student who is more concerned about the revision due dates than the recursiveness of her writing process; the one who feels unprepared for class because he's lost his critical thinking handout. Walker Percy (whom one ought to put among the learning theorists as a heretic) described the problem exactly in "The Loss of the Creature": "Everything the educator does only succeeds in becoming, for the student, part of the educational package" (407).

Redesigning the package, though perhaps useful as a heuristic, will not, cannot, produce results. Our first step in the desired direction is to cease trusting in the efficacy of reforming the curriculum at all: to stop trusting in the mechanisms of traditionally-conceived and -structured classes, grades, readings, assignments, and credit hours to issue the "well-rounded critical thinkers" we say we want. If we can recognize that "what we want" of and for our students is indeed a matter of character, the kind of learning that suffuses the intellect rather than just bothering it temporarily, then the simultaneous step is clear. We stop thinking of our students as platoons in need of drill in "seeking, selecting, acquiring, organizing, storing and retrieving"; and begin thinking of them as real human beings, unwilling to learn because learning means changing, but in any case learning powerfully only by "perceiving and responding in the manner that makes the most sense to them personally at the particular time, in terms of their past experiences and current predilections" (*Comprehension* 2-3).

Difficult, keeping such an idea in motion, not least because it entails giving up the professional/technocratic model of the English professor. But there are rewards. I know few people who would *not* be happy to give up the repetition of vacant curricular tasks which we have thought, incorrectly, to be the necessary correlate of responsible teaching. Working the formal curriculum is rarely a compelling part of our job, and, if our own work becomes drudgery, we can hardly expect enthusiasm from our students. But we need not restart at zero. We are already doing the right things; we just don't recognize that they *are* the right things because they seem to happen accidentally.

We already teach courses—first-year composition and general education literature—which have no comfortable, legitimized place in the curriculum ("preparatory" is what we call composition, when we need to give it a curricular address), and in which, therefore, one has the luxury of putting a premium on pleasure and exploration. Most of us, I suspect, find our conception of these courses evolving in strange ways from term to term, as we increasingly see how vague their goals are compared to the ruddy objectives marching about the more highly valued parts of the curriculum. The energy we invest in general ed courses is rarely conditioned by any well-worked-out plan or professional agenda, rather those of us who take pleasure in the investment are used to extemporizing, finding what we need at the last minute, tailoring the material to particular contexts

(class populations, resistant individuals), and relying on inspiration. The readings we offer to the students, and the theories, spring free from the trellises to which they are bent in more goal-oriented courses and sway in interesting directions. We sway in interesting directions in encouraging our readers to make the work into pleasure, as it presumably is for us. The specific content of the course becomes less important than the challenge of breaking out of the constraints imposed by the classroom setting.

We ought to be offering this very kind of liberation to our English majors instead of pursuing the sort of thoughtless credentializing that currently passes for responsible preparation. We all do want our favored books and periods and authors to form the bases of rich experiences for our students; we want this above all and desperately, I should think. But we need to recollect first that we cannot pre-package such experiences, nor ensure that a book will become part of a student's imagination; astonishments do not ignite reliably. Therefore, we need to abandon the assumption that because there are books that English majors should read and papers they should write (whether or not we could agree on which ones), we are under a moral obligation to ensure that they have written and read under approved professional conditions.

What more is required to satisfy our deepest and primary sense of what an English major should do than that she should read a book and absorb it, make something of it on her own? We justify examinations (and papers which are meant to accomplish the same ends as exams) by claiming that they provide closure for the student, an opportunity to synthesize and demonstrate what she knows. But there is no evidence of this; there is at least anecdotal evidence that students find examinations somewhat nerve-wracking, that faculty would not give exams if we didn't have to force our students into reading, and that we wouldn't grade papers if we didn't have to generate some rationale for the final grade report.

But even if we do see the need or the responsibility to coerce a student into reading some particular book, as we might from time to time, no corresponding responsibility follows to test him upon that reading. All of us could name fifty books which we were never tested on, but which have become part of our knowledge of the world. The knowledge of an uncredentialed sophomore can be as substantial and valid as ours; she can take a book to heart and make it work for her without our interference. And to repeat, our interference is not likely to alter her experience for the better in any case; certainly quizzes, journal entries, and oral reports will not ensure a rich experience, and may well have the opposite effect.

My point is not that quizzes and papers and coerced readings or even complexly sequenced syllabi ought necessarily to be eliminated; we do need, perhaps with regret, to give up our expectation that because we've organized an experience, the students will remember what we wanted them to remember a month after the semester is over. Some will—they will remember and be moved in years to come by something that happens in the context of one of our classes. One simply can't tell in advance who will be moved or by what. So we might as well muddle on hopefully—as we always have, really—laying before our students books and assignments that we think will be good for them.

Will our majors understand if we ask them to read and write, not to provide us with an opportunity for giving grades and not because they need the practice

for graduate school, but because we believe it will be good for them? At first they will suspect a trick—a reaction instructive of the current state of things. But most of them enjoy reading and writing (though they don't much like being graded), and if we can create a more worldly atmosphere in the classroom, we can all get used to operating on the principle that one writes because one needs to say something. That "something" will occasionally be esthetic; it might also be political, historical, psychological, or in some way personal. It doesn't matter, not if the project is pursued seriously.

And we can put our own consciences to the test when the time comes for giving grades. We are probably on the right ethical track if we feel like kicking ourselves for going into higher ed instead of some less morally ambiguous field, like tort law or tobacco advertising. But we can try to guess how far each student has come from where she was (knowing that the usual procedure of assigning points and weights is just a guess with an attitude); we can allow for alternative paths, so that the students can play to their own strengths and pleasures. And we can get on university committees and work to replace grades with descriptions of abilities.

But again, the reward is giving up those Sisyphean penances: controlling interpretation and monitoring learning (impossible anyway); prescribing traditionally literary topics for papers (of dubious value—does anyone write such papers anymore?); and measuring the value of a student's work against a professional standard of research or originality (categories long since deconstructed to death). If we feel some nervous compulsion to control, to monitor, to prescribe, or to measure, there is no reason not to, as long as we don't delude ourselves that this is part of the teacher's role. Punishing failure has nothing to do with teaching.

It may not look like teaching; it will probably look like we're making it all up as we go along, and to the degree that we try to attend to the needs of our transient little communities, we will in fact be making it up daily. But this is not tossing coins or avoiding preparation; it is recognizing that no amount of preparation will ever guarantee the bright moments we hope will happen and that we ought instead to take advantage of—rely on, trust in—a process that will take place anyway, whether we will or no: an interaction of time, place, and persons that will animate the material in some way or not, our preparation notwithstanding.

Does this mean that we must give up the notion of the integrity of the undergraduate curriculum? Yes—though I would note that the curriculum is usually integrated only in the minds of the curriculum planners; to the typical student, it looks a little haphazard. If we sense a danger here, I would propose that it comes not from any fear that our students will be instructionally disadvantaged, but that *we* will look frivolous to our colleagues around the campus. But no one will laugh if our students get good jobs right out of college or, for those who dream it, spots at top grad schools. They *do* need to prepare for steps like these, but for that very reason we need to get them out of the classroom and into professional internships, meaningful public research projects (both in and out of English), political organizations, responsible work-study jobs in other departments, semesters abroad, volunteer teaching and tutoring, editing, and writing of whatever kind they can get good at and find pleasure in, for publication of whatever sort. We offer such opportunities now, but as *accoutrements* to the curriculum or as awards reserved for the brightest. All of it ought to become commonplace for all, as common as courses.

Does the undergraduate course, then, become a little less important than it is at present? Yes—and that is another scary upsetting of priorities. I would only plead that what's really frightful is how little most of our students are changed by their courses, given the enormous investment of time and energy faculty put into them; and I would argue again that the organized undergraduate course, like the organized English curriculum at present, is primarily disposed to the faculty's professional and institutional needs. Courses may be worth preserving for the opportunity to work in communities, and classrooms are convenient places to meet, if a little uncomfortable. But since you never can predict how valuable courses will be, it's an up-front expense of spirit to expect too much of them.

Should we then try to eliminate everything that we are accustomed to think of as central to the English curriculum—the courses, the reading lists, and the lectures; the quizzes, the paper topics, and the grades; the honors, advancements, and graduations, and the failures and humiliations; the preferments and hierarchies? No—the dean would complain. But we can move such institutional decorations to the periphery of our attention and our programs (as we do now with such annoyances as outcomes assessments). We can recognize—we ought to recognize—that we do not need to organize our students' experiences, and that we are ill advised to try. When our students achieve, when they ignite, when they change, they either do it on their own; if with our help, it's help unsanctioned, off the record, accidental, or coincidental. Learning what's important is an extra-curricular activity. ☹

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