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Reimagining the world, reimagining the self: Ethics, aesthetics, play and curriculum in the work of Margaret Latta – a review of Latta, M. M. (2013). *Curriculum Conversations: Play is the (Missing) Thing*. New York & London: Routledge.

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Margaret Latta has written an important new book on the place of play, hermeneutics, and aesthetics in relation to curriculum. I hope to demonstrate, in this review, many reasons to see her book as important.

In her book Latta provides a detailed and well-examined exploration of the relationship between these perhaps seemingly non-curriculum-entities (play, hermeneutics, and aesthetics) and curriculum itself. She does so in a complex image of “thinking curricularly” (to be discussed later in this review). In so doing she adeptly shows how play, hermeneutics, and aesthetics are crucial to the everyday life of classrooms. I think we must see a background context for her work: I would argue that learners, especially young learners, are consistently introducing playful responses to curricular prompts and offering interpretations of curricular experiences that are clearly hermeneutic in character. Learners, again especially young learners, readily think aesthetically even when not given the opportunity. Latta is arguing that teachers can take these offers, or not, but in not taking them up they truncate the learning

opportunities that transcend the immediate curricular content. In taking those up teachers expand that curriculum into larger worlds of life and experience. Sadly, as Latta notes, teachers too often quash the “creative” responses of learners in favor of a more linear and boxed-in view of the curriculum that ignores the efforts the learner is making to explore her/his humanness and human potential. This book contributes to the possibility of shifting how curriculum is enacted.

Latta states at the outset that her intention is to “reconnect teaching and curriculum” (p. 3). She continues that the book is “written for anyone wishing to pursue play seriously in their curricular practices, drawing on aesthetic traditions and engagement, including experimentation, multisensory attentiveness, and non-linear as well as linear ways of thinking and acting.” (p. 3) She organizes the book in such a way as to not only do this work intellectually but to, also, provide her experiences of this connection between teaching and curriculum, thus providing the reader with a vicarious embodiment of the connection. More specifically she organizes each chapter as a mixture of 1) her explorations of and experience with particular artworks, connecting them to particular dimensions of the play-hermeneutics-aesthetics intersection, 2) discussions of Deweyan thought, and 3) reflections on both classroom practice and her experiences educating students in the ways of curriculum thinking and teaching. Through these modalities she not only delivers adept theoretical discussions but, equally importantly, engages in active personal renderings that “foreground the lived consequences of aesthetic play that are all too often resisted, dismissed, distrusted and feared by many educators, their students and others.” (p. 3)

In addition to this agenda, Latta states a “primary task” of her book: “to interrupt the seductive acceptance of . . . ‘maimed versions’ (Alexander, 1998) of curricular experiences” (p. 3). She goes on to quote Alexander, “To inhabit the world is not to dominate or renounce it, but to play in it, learn from it, care for it, and realize the beauty of its meanings.” (p.3). It is these notions of play, care and beauty that she wishes to install in our educational thinking and practices, especially play (given the subtitle of the book – *(Play) is the Missing Thing* – note her playful use of the parentheses, a graphic display of play’s absence) and care. She cites Hans-Georg Gadamer as seeing play, which for she and Gadamer is “fundamental to being human”, as “reciprocal interactions and modifications” leading to “ontological reciprocity.” It is within this context that care will be thematized.

It is worthwhile unpacking the above ideas to better understand how curriculum, aesthetics and care are connected. “[M]aimed versions’ of curricular experiences” references the fact that, for the most part, learners (and teachers) are not allowed to play, to be free to experiment with ideas, experiences, actions, to try on various modes of living. They are bound by rigid, narrowly construed evaluation systems that disallow “going off on tangents” or taking up

ideas that are outgrowths of activity. Such excursions are made to have no place in the educational setting but they are central to a strong “message” of the book. That “message” can be understood through making clear an undercurrent of the book that might seem to have no direct connection to curriculum. This undercurrent is most often explicitly surfaced in the art work she chooses to introduce each chapter. Most, if not all of the art work deals with loss of place, loss, taking care of those who have lost something, and the like. She emphasizes the ways in which the various artists care not for their artwork (although of course the artists take great care with their art) but care for those who have lost something that these artists “represent” in the works or whose lives are the basis for making of art. Curricularly this ethical work is accomplished through the uses of imagination, aesthetics and hermeneutics. Just as the artists work through these, so, too, must the curriculum leverage these modalities in order to move us toward that world of care. Throughout the book Latta elaborates this issue, first in the art, then through John Dewey’s ideas and finally with images of classrooms. In multiple ways she reveals the various dimensions of play and thinking/living aesthetically.

The overarching idea that animates the work of the artist, the work of the teacher and the work of the curricularist is, I would assert, the notion of “reimagining.” The artist reimagines the world; teachers and learners, through the agency of the curriculum, reimagine the world; curricularists reimagine the world as they craft curricula designed to turn the teachers and learners attention in particular directions. What is the purpose of such reimagining? It is twofold. First, there is the reimagining that the artists, who Latta features, perform: a reimagining for bringing greater care and justice to the world, as briefly described above. Latta mentions care frequently and it is clearly a very central theme in her writing and her teaching. Second, and of equal significance for an overall project of realizing such a world: a reimagining of the self that can better connect with the larger world around us through aesthetic embodiment. This is curriculum work. In order to have the curriculum help lay a path toward the ethical ground out of which Latta works, both the viewer of the art and the learner must be able to engage in “ontological reciprocity.”

What is “ontological reciprocity,” how is it accomplished, and how does it function? It is at this point that “play” becomes the central figure of Latta’s thinking. Hans-Georg Gadamer pointed out in *Truth and Method* (2000) that play, both the play of a child and the production of plays for theaters, hold images of processes we all use to make sense of our experiences. The overall “purpose” of this play (which he sees as central to hermeneutics or the act of interpreting our world and in which we all engage, whether or not we are aware of this fact) is to craft and recraft a self through acts of “pretending” to be other than oneself. “Ontological reciprocity” is that temporary exchange of one reality for another. In the vibratory action of moving between the world of pretend and the world of “reality” (and back again, many times) something is learned about oneself and one’s relationship to the world that is available in no

other way. For Gadamer, selves are always in flux as we perform interpretations of the experiences we are undergoing. All of this constitutes “play” in that the child and the actor both recognize that he or she is not, in reality, the person being played; there is a necessary psychic distance as well as a full immersion in the play. This hermeneutic process of reimagining and playing as described and the crafting of an ever-evolving self coordinates with reimagining for the purpose of bringing about a world of greater care and justice, so that the curriculum isn’t only about play, etc. but play with a direction that is under the direction of the learner as s/he develops the capacity to dream, to imagine, to consider through emotion and body as well as the cognitive. “Through emotion and body” references living aesthetically as a ground for understanding the world around her/him and considering how beauty connects to goodness and, so, confronting the materiality of the conditions under which we all live, play, suffer, love, learn.

How is such “play” (in all its complex manifestations) practiced? How are these ends achieved? Latta writes (and, for me, this is at the heart of her book), “Through multisensory engagement, room for deliberation, intuition, anticipation . . . and enlarged realizations, opens, allowing for the formation of suggestions.” (p. 71) That is, multisensory engagements make room for deliberation (consciously, I believe, referencing the Schwabian/Reid tradition of curriculum deliberative practice). This, in turn, leads to enlarging what we can know (realize) that allows for us to see suggested futures. Curriculum can, potentially, open the world to us in ever larger circles of meaning. Notice her use of the words “intuition” and “anticipation”. These are, in my estimation, aesthetic words as artists always work through intuiting forms and what fills those forms, anticipating the effects of those choices, rather than mapping the art according to formulae. She goes on to note that “. . . most educative settings and teacher education programs . . . lack [the] room to live within and practice embodying curriculum as a perceiving movement of thinking within educative settings.” (p. 71) This has, in turn, “contributed to these capacities becoming increasingly foreign to teachers, students, and the greater community.” (p. 71) She connects these thoughts to Dewey who wrote, “Without external embodiment an experience remains incomplete.” In short, we must do something, not only think something.

As already noted Latta, over and over in this book takes us on journeys through various artworks, installations, the words of artists and her own aesthetic experiences. As she does so she exemplifies her moments of embodiment that make her experience of curriculum (too frequently thought of in purely cognitive and/or intellectual terms) expand into the world in unforeseen ways that provide the possibility of new possibilities not previously considered when the explicit curriculum was constructed. As she notes, in her description of her own experience as a child supposedly practicing cursive writing but needing to write about her experience on the way to school through fog,

I started on the task [of practicing cursive writing] but the letters quickly became words, and the words images; and the pea soup foggy morning meandered into a marvelous story. I was completely absorbed in the creation of my story when Miss Moore happened upon me. . . . she glared down at my writing. She abruptly interrupted: “Margaret, this is atrocious writing! Start again!” Bewildered and startled I quickly responded, “But Miss Moore, the ideas come out of my head so fast, I cannot possibly write them down fast enough.” She curtly responded with “Stop being so cheeky. On task now!” (p. 103)

Latta goes on to assert,

“I am cognizant that teachers can incite learning, teachers can impede learning, teachers can grow learning, and teachers can halt learning. . . . I was learning . . . yet [Miss Moore} redirected me to the task at hand. . . . Miss Moore did not see me – a student who rarely said a thing and was almost always obedient. . . . Miss Moore did not really hear my response nor read my story . . . I confidently knew I was doing important thinking. (p. 103)

I quote this at some length to provide the flavor of Latta’s experiential writing but also to point to what I think the book is dedicated. Her embodied experience pours out of her in a flow that leads to “important thinking.” Such thinking could not happen except that Latta is connected to the play of words and images and the concrete experience of her foggy environment, all coming together to provide her with the opportunity to “think.” Thinking, in this case, is not only “in the head” but is in the wholeness of Latta as she occupies the world through body, play with words, and imagination/imagined worlds. It is within this concatenation of play, aesthetics and hermeneutics that her “learning” occurs; in fact one might say only through this concatenation does learning occur. It is her openness to her experience and its intersection with further thinking that brings about the learning.

All of the above is meant to give you a sense of the book as an experience of reading. I hope you will take this brief portrait as an invitation to the book and, for that reason, I don’t intend to rehearse the details of the layered analysis Latta provides. At this point I want to turn to the curricular dimension of the book, one that is not as featured in the book as I intend to do in this review.

To say that the curricular dimension is not as featured as one might expect, I must immediately offer a correction. Clearly this book has to do with curriculum. The question is, to what dimension does it attend? Using John Goodlad’s typology of simultaneous curricula (the *explicit or formal curriculum*, the *operationalized curriculum* in which the teacher interprets the one common formal curriculum in order to tailor it to her learners and her vision of the future into which these learners are moving, the *experienced curriculum* as each learner in the teacher’s room takes up the offered operationalized curriculum, adding to them Philip

Jackson's notion of the *hidden curriculum* and Eliot Eisner's notion of the *null curriculum*), Latta is primarily concerned with the *operationalized or enacted curriculum* and the *experienced curriculum* as she examines how teachers operationalize the curriculum and learners experience the offered operationalization. She does so through her classroom discussions on what teachers and learners do together. Recalling that she asserts the principle purpose of her book is to "reconnect teaching and curriculum" this is not surprising. But I want to discuss the implications of her work for other dimensions of the curriculum as I believe that her book has more to offer than is explicitly stated in the book.

Of those dimensions described already I will focus on two: curriculum making/designing/developing and "thinking curricularly." To discuss these ideas I must begin with my hermeneutic appropriation of Latta's text. Recall that Latta's fundamental plea is for teachers to understand what it means to play with ideas that exist both in the curriculum itself and in the learners who offer alternatives to the curriculum. She desires for the teaching/learning nexus to be one of trying on ideas, pretending and experiencing that pretending in full good faith (as if the pretending were absolutely real and, for the moment, not pretend). When I began this book I hermeneutically brought to bear my own expectations upon the text that were not connected with the ideas of enactment or the experienced curriculum. When I see the word curriculum I tend to think in terms of making curriculum and/or seeing all social phenomena as having, behind them, latently curricular processes (even if those processes are not known by the people engaged with the processes). Therefore I tend to look for discussions of curriculum making and theorizing about curriculum structures. When I consistently encountered discussions of classroom life (curriculum enactment and experience) rather than these other topics, I needed to readjust my approach to her text. I needed to reinterpret my own relation to the text. Only through such reassessment (because the book was not meeting some of my initial expectations) and playing with her ideas did I come to realize that by strong implication, sometimes made almost explicit, Latta *was* speaking to curriculum making and curriculum theorizing.

For instance, Latta writes of her experience of an art exhibit through Dewey's words. As she does so, we can see that what she writes of this experience can be as easily said of curriculum:

. . . the experience of the exhibit is 'not a combination of mind and world, subject and object, method and subject matter, but is a single continuous interaction of a great diversity (literally countless in number) of energies.' (p. 89)

The curriculum, in like fashion, can be understood as never certain and finished, tied up neatly into a package. Rather, its value can be found in its gaps and omissions, its great diversity of possibilities, literally countless in number, in the unresolved tensions rather than in its "positive" structures and outcomes. It is through living within these tensions that the learner grows. Latta's tremendous contribution to curriculum thinking is her ability to demonstrate

this through her examples from both found and missed opportunities in the classroom, such as the one cited above. As she liberates the curriculum from its narrowly construed, stick to the standards, stay on task, as she wanders “off-task” into a new world filled with both wonder and interest, so she offers us, through the various chapters of this book, a journey into our own moments of surprise and openness within the midst of what seemed, but seconds ago, a clear path toward the “outcome.”

In performing this wandering and in pleading for a classroom situation in which play and aesthetics are featured dimensions of the curricular experience she is, by extension, suggesting that we need curriculum designs that offer these opportunities. We need curriculum that is less directive, less bound by strict outcomes and more suggestive. When I teach curriculum development I always insist that curriculum is not a set of lesson plans connected to particular content but, rather, a plan for making plans. Curriculum is the “document” out of which thousands and, indeed, hundreds of thousands of specific plans might be generated. It is a loose set of directional arrows. But beyond this, and in keeping with Latta’s work, I must rethink this since the resulting lesson plans and unit plans might continue to be as constraining as what Latta witnessed in the classrooms which she observed and experienced. I want my students, when they have the opportunity to make curriculum, to both play with the curriculum structure upon which they can hang teaching but now, more explicitly thanks to Latta’s book, I want them to have in that structure play as a central feature of the structure.

Writing of play, I want to note, here, that I see Latta’s intentions here as being too modest. She presents “play” as an option among other options, one she hopes teachers will adopt. However, I would argue (and I think Latta might agree) play is not something we can perform, or not perform. We are always in a state of play, even if it is highly circumscribed and transformed into a practice that barely is recognizable as “play” as happens more than frequently in classrooms but in work settings as well. We are also always engaged multisensorially, even if, for the most part, we lock ourselves away from what we are doing. That is, the “bloomin’, buzzin’” reality around us (to cite William James) demands a multi-sensory response even though we usually, given our long-standing cultural logic, favor an immediate translation into more purely cognitive renditions of that reality. We engage in as much non-linear thinking as linear, even if the non-linear is seemingly mostly shunned by both society in general and schools in specific. Latta appears to me too modest about the implications of her thinking and in her willingness to engage consciously in such practices. In the words of the American psychotherapist, Alexander Lowen, we should lose our minds and come to our senses. We should recognize how these modalities that Latta so carefully lays out in the opening of her book and, then, plays out in detail throughout her presentation of play, aesthetics and curriculum from within an hermeneutic frame, are the central themes of

our lived experiences, not something adjunct to which we might refer but can as easily, ignore. We can ignore but not cease from living in these ways.

I mentioned, early in this review, the idea of “thinking curricularly.” While this notion is not explicitly mentioned in the book, I would say another major contribution of Latta’s is to demonstrate what it means to “think curricularly”. What do I mean by this phrase? In Latta’s case I mean that she presents every curricular idea in relation to aesthetic experiences she has had *outside* of educational settings, *and* the place of the art with which she has these experiences in the lives of those who stand *as the reason for the art-making by the artist*. These, too, are curricular moments. To this mix she adds theoretical explorations through leveraging John Dewey’s notions of the aesthetic experience, and the rendering of aesthetic objects for understanding the meaning of the aesthetic experiences she is undergoing. But it is not just for the purpose of having aesthetic moments. She brings all this to bear upon classrooms, on teachers and learners and their interactions in regard to the world around them which moves their work back into the world. The world itself becomes a site for curriculum thinking. She argues for the ways in which playful hermeneutical and aesthetic thinking and responses to curricular phenomenon might make a huge difference in the lives of the learners. By implied connection with the art, she is showing us that a world of caring concern might begin to flow from such curriculum work. To be sure, she does not present an unrealistic image of classrooms. She allows us to see how these opportunities are missed by the teachers but she also presents ways of changing those practices so that the classroom life might be fruitfully changed for the betterment of the learners and the teachers. Thus she remains within the halls of curriculum.

Why do I think this underlying theme and giving us a glimpse into the practice of “thinking curricularly” is so significant? My answer is twofold. First, too often curriculum is viewed as a technical exercise for laying out educational programs to deliver to teachers who deliver it to learners. The place of the whole life of the person in this milieu is rarely considered, especially the ways in which teachers are taught to enact curriculum. This book is powerfully focused on curriculum enactment and, as already mentioned, Latta does more than “talk about” enactment; she shows and provides images of experiences of enactment. However, this book is, as already discussed, tacitly a tale of curriculum designing although she does not position her writing to address curriculum designing. Taking the whole of Latta’s thinking seriously, we can see how “thinking curricularly” is a complex affair for all involved: teachers, learners, curriculum specialists, parents, the rest of the social world. Its complexity is not something with which we can deal or not. We live within an hermeneutic stew, constantly interpreting and playing with lives we are trying to craft even as we live those lives. Latta’s book reveals all of this as she shares with us the ways in which she crafts her life in relation to curriculum and classrooms. In so doing, she tacitly encourages us to consider

new ways of thinking about curriculum making as well as curriculum enactment. If we take the ideas of play, hermeneutics, and aesthetics seriously then we will see, as Latta shows us, that our whole lives are constantly in the business of playing aesthetically with the contents of our lives. If educational events can help us develop our capacity to live more authentically in relation to these facts, then we are on our way to creating a world that is, in fact, more realistic and “practical” than the one usually projected by curriculum and its enactments. It is the practicality of, as van Manen(1977) would have it, living in “practical wisdom”, a world of ethical consideration.

I have tried, in this review, to give you a sense of Latta’s book and also to offer some ways of situating her book within the large frame of curriculum. I want to finish with an historical note of some importance. Although Latta does not reference his work, her book can be seen as an extension of ideas forwarded many years ago by one of our most important curriculum theorists, James Macdonald. In his “The Transcendental Developmental Ideology of Curriculum” (1974/1995) Macdonald forwarded Latta’s concerns as well as mine. In this piece he called for play and transcendence to be strong, central features of curriculum thinking. He felt it was time to move into a more embodied, free-flowing curriculum of imagination that leveraged much more than the cognitive or logical, that these thin dimensions were no longer sufficient or alone appropriate to our humanness. Additionally Macdonald introduced hermeneutics to the field of curriculum theory and practice in another essay “Theory, Practice, and the Hermeneutic Circle” (1981/1995). In “Curriculum Planning: Visions and Metaphors” (1987) he and David Purpel proposed notions of transcendence, playfulness, awe and reverence, hope, a recognition of the dark side of our humanness (evil and guilt) coupled with the possibility of repentance and redemption, a focus on human potential, a belief in order and creativity and more as the basis for thinking about and practicing curriculum planning. I am concerned that these contributions are being lost to the field, contributions that I take to be beyond us, that we have not yet caught up with Macdonald and Purpel, and especially Macdonald. Through Latta’s work, I feel hope rekindled as yet another curriculum theorist has begun, once again, to speak of these fundamental values of our humanness, attempting to move us away from our all too technical-rational world toward a world of greater realization of the wholeness and multi-dimensionality of ourselves and, perhaps, greater good.

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