

## **An Existential Perspective on Curricular Relevance**

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I aim to make the case for grounding curricular practices in our basic state of living. I do not mean to imply that students are not living in the classroom, however. I am suggesting that formal education has the potential to serve a negative or positive function. With the negative, students come to compartmentalize their experiences, i.e., those that happen inside school and those that happen outside. In this case, schooling is a fragmentary aspect of students' lives, and, as a result, it barely penetrates the wall of their existential lining. With the positive, students see formal education as mattering to them in their lives outside of school. This, to me, is the proper function of schooling. When children see this, they can then expand ever-more deeply their capacity to live, their ability to understand themselves, others, and the world. On the one hand, the schooling rhetoric normally does well in making claims of achieving such ends. Yet, when action is our gauge of efficacy, the bureaucratic arrangements of schooling clearly fall short. Furthermore, many educators, including myself, have used terms like relevance or integrated curriculum, which this positive function suggests. Nonetheless, I have seen or heard few educational theories that explicitly define and detail the need to have relevance or integration in accordance with our basic state of living. I will begin to address this need in the ensuing discussions. Martin Heidegger's (1962) *Being and Time*<sup>1</sup> will be the focal point of my current deliberations. To make my interpretations of his work concrete, I will use Ezra Jack Keats' book *Peter's Chair* (see Appendix). I have used this children's story to teach reading to my first

graders and writing to my fourth graders. I will present possible interpretations of the story, and will suggest curricular implications.

### **The Dasein<sup>2</sup> of Peter**

*Peter's Chair* (1967) is about a boy named Peter who is learning to adjust to life with a new baby sister. He does not like how his parents, without asking him, took his old crib and high chair, and painted them pink. He and his dog Willie run off with his favorite chair, before that is taken away and painted, too. He eventually discovers that his favorite chair is too small. He then learns that change is okay, and that being a good big brother is a nice new role for him.

#### ***Being-in-the-world***

The story begins with Peter building a structure with blocks of different sizes and shapes. He sits his stuffed bear on the middle-level floor, and caps off the structure with his toy alligator. Peter is not thinking about the properties of his blocks or toys. He is simply using them as equipment to build his structure. When Willie the dog suddenly barges through the structure, which then makes a big crashing sound, Peter's mother calls out, "Shhh! You'll have to play more quietly. Remember, we have a new baby in the house." These two scenes show Peter as living in the world with people and things. Heidegger calls this, *Being-in-the-world*. It is our basic state of existence. It is more primary than the relationship between subjects and objects. All knowing emanates from *Being-in-the-world*, which means that deliberation and reflection are derivative of this basic existential state. As Heidegger writes:

[A] 'commercium' of the subject with a world does not get created for the first time by knowing, nor does it arise from some way in which the world acts upon a subject. Knowing is a mode of Dasein [Being-there] founded upon *Being-in-the-world*. Thus, *Being-in-the-world*, as a basic state, must be Interpreted beforehand. (p.90)

The hyphens indicate that *Being* and *in-the-world* are unified. We can be intelligible only because we live in the meaningful world. The world is the source of our intelligibility, but we give the world its intelligibility. If no Dasein, then no world, and vice versa. *Being-in-the-world* is *holistic, not dichotomous*. This has important implications for the epistemology of teaching practices. When our starting point of investigation is the subject-object dichotomy, we run into the *unnecessary* problem of how the "knowing subject comes out of its inner 'sphere' into one which is 'other and external,' and of how knowing can have any object at all"

(p.87). Heidegger does not dispute that many natural phenomena do not need us to exist. He does say that without us, these natural phenomena are unintelligible. “When Dasein does not exist..., it cannot be said that entities are, nor can it be said that they are not” (p.255). Intelligibility, which is meaning itself, is therefore the characteristic solely of people, who *holistically* are living in-the-world.

Thus, the primary proposal, which I will explicate, is that the appropriate grounding of curricular practices must be Being-in-the-world. Only then can we keep knowing as a genuine living process and, as a result, support students as active learners. Otherwise, the knowing process easily breaks down. We may then easily misconstrue knowledge as some *thing* outside of us. Learning then becomes some distorted, unrealistic “process of returning with one’s booty to the ‘cabinet’ of consciousness after one has gone out and grasped it” (p.89). This is the unfortunate practice of much public schooling, where curriculum normally begins with the subject-object dichotomy rather than going one-step deeper to our basic existential state. This dichotomy as our normal starting point has a negative and yet expansive implication for students: first, the subject separates from the object; then, the knower from the known; finally, the school from the life outside of school. The result is fragmentation. Learning is diminished.

### **Worldhood**

The significance of the world, which is the worldhood of the world, is a very intriguing consideration for curricular practice. It builds on what has already been said. Peter is using equipment. His blocks are not just pieces of wood to him. They are full of meaning.<sup>4</sup> In our basic state, we never see or hear something purely in itself. As Heidegger writes, “It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to ‘hear’ a ‘pure noise.’ The fact that motor-cycles or wagons [or Peter’s mother calling him] are what we proximally hear is phenomenal evidence that in every case Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, already dwells [in-the-world with people or equipment]” (p.207). This suggests that pure looking or hearing, which is a very specialized form of knowing, always has its basis of intelligibility in our basic existential state: Being-in-the-world. Metaphorically, we can never separate the base of the mountain from its peak, or the crest of the wave from the ocean itself. The mountain’s base and the ocean itself are, figuratively, the existential background from which anything we notice can derive. It (the background of existence) is always already there. In philosophical analysis, we must not ignore this fact. Heidegger spends much time analyzing Descartes<sup>5</sup> on this very point. I parallel his critique with what I have thus far indicated

as an issue for school curriculum: not having the correct starting point to conceive curriculum.

The blocks are equipment for Peter. He simply uses them, and he uses them as blocks for building rather than as blocks to jack-up a car (to fix a flat), because that is what little children do. It is learned behavior and is part of his pre-reflective everyday practice. However, pre-reflective practices turn into an issue of our concern when disruptions occur. For example, when Willie the dog barges through the blocks and makes the big crashing noise, Peter's mother is disrupted from her activity with the baby. This triggers a series of actions from Peter that eventually lead him to seize his favorite chair before his parents take it from him and paint it pink. When Peter, sitting outside with Willie, tries to sit in his chair, he realizes that he has outgrown it. He did not previously consider that the chair would be too small. This comes as a surprise, and surprises can be a form of disruption. Some aspect of the world in which Peter is currently absorbed has announced itself to him. Heidegger uses the terms conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy to indicate types of disruption (pp.102/103). There is something now conspicuous about Peter's chair: it is too small. As Heidegger notes, "[T]he ready-to-hand is not thereby just *observed* and stared at as something present-at-hand; [however,] the presence-at-hand which makes itself known is still bound up in the readiness-to-hand" (italics in original) (p.104). For Peter, his chair—as equipment for sitting—shifts from being a chair for sitting to something that is unusable to him. The chair is still part of his everyday context. He is not observing properties such as small and large, hard wood and soft wood, or porous material. These are not part of his current concern. If they were, then he would have decontextualized the chair from its daily application and isolated its properties for thematic investigation. We then would have a de-worlded object, with someone who is making inquiry toward that object. This is what Heidegger means when he indicates "[staring] at something as present-at-hand." Furthermore, we should acknowledge that the chair's properties always already have been there, even while they were covered-up, i.e., unnoticed in Peter's everyday use of the chair. We now have what Heidegger means in indicating the presence-at-hand as still being "bound up in the readiness-to-hand."

What has been implied is that we have three levels of knowing, and their basis is always Being-in-the-world with people and things. The fact is that thematic knowing—in the de-worlded, scientific sense—is not our basis of intelligibility. To isolate students from their basic existential state of Being-in-the-world, which is what we often do in schools, leaves little room to wonder why they negatively compartmentalize their schooling

experience. Schooling does not matter to them for the clear reason that they are isolated from the worldly context in which their living always already matters to them. There is more to say about this worldly context, however, which is the worldhood of the world. For example, and most importantly, Heidegger indicates the relational totality that makes-up the significance of worldhood: “[T]he ‘for-the-sake-of-which’ signifies an ‘in-order-to’; this in turn, a ‘towards this’; the latter, an ‘in-which’ of letting something be involved; and that, in turn, the ‘with-which’ of an involvement” (p.120). To clarify this somewhat esoteric jargon, Peter is *with* his chair. He uses it *in order to* sit with Willie. He and Willie are *in* the front yard. He does this to move *toward* the goal of rescuing his chair from being usurped by his parents. He does this *for the sake of* rebelling against having his things taken away. He rebels, I assume, *for the sake of* preserving some identity perspective of himself as the only child in the household. He preserves his self-identity *for the sake of* coping with the uncertainty of change. This whole system of references is happening *holistically*, while Peter is living his life in the moment. It is pre-reflective, which is always the basis of any subsequent reflection.

Furthermore, an issue that arises for curriculum practices, whether teaching history, science, math, or English Language Arts, is how to help students to move back-and-forth along the continuum of knowing from pre-thematic, to thematic but still worldly, to de-worlded. Emerging could be an educational dialectic among these ways of knowing, such as an ongoing recursive process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction in students’ implicit and explicit understanding of the world. To briefly digress, my favorite educational theorists, John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky, had this particular dialectical process as the basis of their learning theories.<sup>6</sup> Using our imagination and reading between the lines, we can assume that Heidegger is *implying* this process when he defines Dasein: “[T]his entity which each of us is himself and which includes *inquiring*<sup>7</sup> as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term ‘*Dasein*’” (p.27). Why would he restrict his inquiries to people rather than to animals or other entities? My assumption is, people have the capacity to make inquiry, and we have the capacity to reconstruct or transform the world: its tools, signs, and symbols. We are meaning makers. We are intelligible, and, because of this, we can deliberately draw from and give to the world its intelligibility. No other living organism does this.

To summarize thus far, the example of Peter’s noticing something peculiar about his chair helped me to outline critical points. First, our everyday dealings in-the-world involve a *whole* context of significance for us. Second, we normally do not pay attention to this holistic context

unless something disrupts it. Third, and paradoxically, the properties themselves that underlie our everyday dealings with equipment are, in fact, the most removed from our basic state as meaning makers in-the-world. This whole series of analyses gave rise to the consideration that curriculum and instruction should help students to move back-and-forth among worldly and de-worlded ways of knowing. The implication, as I suggested, is that students can become involved in a dialectical process of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing their explicit and implicit understandings. The question that now emerges is, what specifically is happening inside of Peter even while he is always already outside of himself as Being-in-the-world with people and equipment? More plainly, what is Peter's understanding as he shifts from one aspect of the continuum to the other? What further issues can it raise for the contemplation of teaching practices? In the chapter on Being-in, Heidegger advances the concept of shifting from contextualized to decontextualized modes of knowing. To that, and with Peter's ongoing help, I now turn.

### ***Being-in***

Heidegger poses the critical question, "By what existential-ontological modifications does assertion arise from circumspective interpretation" (p.200)? The question builds on what I have already said. It inquires into how we shift from our pre-thematic absorption in everyday living to some thematic way of knowing. The term assertion indicates that we communicate aspects of the world that we notice. How do we pick out these aspects in the first place so that we can communicate them? The foundation of assertion must then be explored. This foundation is our understanding of the world. However, all understanding can never be unless we are first grounded in some situation. We have no choice but to find ourselves always already in some social-cultural-historical situation. "[O]nly in so far as Being-in as such has been determined existentially beforehand [can what gets] encountered within-the-world...'*matter*' to [us]....[This mattering] is grounded in [facticity]" (italics in original) (p.176). To clarify, Peter knows how to use his blocks, how to pal around with Willie, how to be upset with his mother and father, and how to play tricks on them, such as when he puts his sneakers behind the long window-curtain to make his mother think that he is hiding.<sup>8</sup> His actions are grounded in the fact that he is Being-in-the-world with people and things, and the world in which he exists has some social-cultural-historical situation as its basis. As a result, he is always already involved in some process of socialization and acculturation. Thus, the social-cultural-historical world in which Peter, or anyone of us, is situated is the basis on which any understanding can be made possible. This basis

is foundational to Heidegger's philosophy. Whereas Descartes says "I think, therefore I am," Heidegger says, only because I *am* can I think. This "am," or Being, is grounded in the fact that we are always already situated.

### ***Understanding***

Animals find themselves in some situation. What makes people unlike all other living organisms? These organisms do not find themselves in the world, if world is to be taken as something that is intelligible. People give the world intelligibility. We are the meaning makers, as was already mentioned. We can do this because we are not bound by who we are but have the capacity to see what we can become. "Dasein is in every case what it *can be*" (italics added) (p.183). We are primarily futural. We are our possibility. We can transcend our situation. This is all to say that we are our understanding. We must keep in mind that understanding is tied with the fact that we are situated. If the situation changes, our understanding of what is possible may change. However, understanding enables us to see possibilities that allow us to change or even transform our situation in the first place. The paradox is dizzying. As Heidegger says, Being-situated and understanding are "equiprimordial" (p.182). Identifying and analyzing this equiprimordality is the extremely daunting task that makes his work revolutionary. For my purposes, we can say that, existentially, we are primarily possibility, even though we are always tied to some circumstance. We have the primary capacity of "projection" (p.185), which means we press into one set of possibilities over others. Each of us is some pre-thematic understanding of the world, and this understanding always points ahead of where we currently are. This is our basic existential nature. This implicates the critical need in classroom practices to create situations that allow students to become more expansive—more existentially roomy—in what they see as possibilities for their Being-in-the-world.

### ***Interpretation and Meaning***

Still, Peter must somehow make his understanding explicit, albeit pre-thematically. For example, how does he know his chair *as* a chair, and not *as* something else? He does this through interpretation, which works-out "the possibilities [that are] projected in understanding" (p.189). It is important to note that understanding and interpretation are of the same cloth. Interpretation is grounded in understanding and is what allows understanding to work itself out. For example, while upset, Peter says to Willie, "Let's run away... We'll take my blue chair, my toy crocodile, and the picture of me when I was a baby." His com-

munication to Willie does not come from nowhere. It is the making tangible of something that is intangible. It is the making thematic of something that is pre-thematic. The basis of Peter's communication in that moment is his understanding as Being-in-the-world. He cannot jump from understanding to communication, however. He must work it through somehow. This is the function of interpretation.

Interpretation starts with seeing "*something as something*" (italics in original) (p.189). First, for Peter to see the chair *as* a chair, for example, he must first have the whole background situation in advance. This is his fore-having. The chair is situated holistically with other equipment in his bedroom, and the whole situation in which he finds himself is rife with meaning, because the world and any part of it is always meaningful in some way. Peter will take his first cut at interpreting some aspect of this public world of meaning. Meaning is "here" and "yonder" (p.142), because the world is here and yonder, for each of us. In other words, meaning is in-the-world, and because Peter is Being-in-the-world, he must be part of the public world of meaning, and therefore must be open to it from some perspective at all times. With that, we now have the narrowing of the fore-having: "[E]very... interpretation is grounded in *something we see in advance*—in a *fore-sight*" (italics in original) (p.191). From all the toys or other pieces of equipment from which he could have chosen, he pinpointed three things: his toy alligator, baby picture, and favorite chair. This is where the "as" structure comes in, since each of these items can now be seen *as* themselves. Peter sees his toy alligator, for example, *as* a toy alligator. Third, he must have some pre-thematic schema in which to grasp this narrowing of content. He does not see pure materials but has some pre-thematic sense that he is holding a toy alligator and that it can serve specific purposes, such as being used for a certain type of play. He will grasp the toy alligator in a way that is different from how he might grasp a toy racing car. This is his fore-conception.

Equiprimordial with the fore-structure is the worldhood of the world. Thus, the worldhood of the world is wrapped-up with interpretation. Interpretation and its fore-structure help us to work-through understanding. Understanding is a basic existential state, along with Being-situated in the world, although the former's function is transcendence while the latter's is limitation. The world is here and it is yonder, simultaneously. This means that while we are Being-in-the-world, we are, in effect, "world-in-the-Being." This, again, is the revolution of Heidegger: we cannot tear apart what is shown to be existentially holistic.

The curricular implication is a person-community perspective. The person is a meaning maker, but meaning making takes place in the



*pervasively* shared world of meanings. We can look to other disciplines, such as cultural anthropology, to find support for this claim. Geertz writes, “Culture is public because meaning is. You can’t wink without knowing what counts as winking or how, physically, to contract your eyelids, and you can’t conduct a sheep raid without knowing what it is to steal a sheep and how practically to go about it” (1973, p.12). Even with moods, which concretize our Being-thrown in a situation, Heidegger writes, “[A] mood is in each case already there, like an *atmosphere*” (italics added) (as cited in Dreyfus, 1991, p.171). Some psychological theorists have implicated this shared atmosphere, as well. Basch (1988, p.77), for example, observes how the baby will smile when an adult smiles at it, even though the baby does not yet explicitly realize it has a mouth, or other facial features.

Peter, at our story’s end, sits with his family while having lunch, and they all are smiling. He asks his father if they can paint the chair together for baby Susie. The story finishes with them painting and smiling. They are in this atmosphere of shared meanings, in which moods and understandings are equiprimordially able to be. That is not to say there are not anomalies. Peter does, in fact, get upset in the beginning when he feels that his parents have usurped his belongings. They are smiling while he frowns and mumbles to himself. Is Heidegger right, though? “Empathy [or any *intra*-psychological stance] does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of Being-with does ‘empathy’ [or another stance] become possible” (p.162). From the curriculum perspective, if psychology is solely in here, and then we attach ourselves to something out there, then perhaps the pervasively administrative focus on the isolated learner is justified. On the other hand, if our basic existential state is here *and* yonder, then we must seriously re-think curriculum from a relational perspective of Being-in as Being-with-Others and Being-alongside-equipment in-the-world of shared meanings.

### **Assertion**

Having outlined understanding and interpretation, and the pervasiveness of shared meaning, we still have the question of how the pre-thematic becomes thematic. More plainly, how we move from what Heidegger calls the shift from the “existential-*hermeneutic* ‘as’ [to the] *aphophantical* ‘as’ of the assertion” (p.201). Assertions have three levels of process. First, for Peter, he “has in view the [chair] itself and not a mere ‘representation’ of it” (p.196). He is pointing-out the chair *as* a chair, and not as a picture of a chair in his mind that corresponds with the physical chair itself. Second, once he points out the chair *as* a chair, he gives it a definite character. He gives it a predicate. For example, the

chair as a chair is meant for sitting, so he sits on it. However, he notices the chair is too small. The “too small” is the predicate: he gives the chair the character of smallness. Third, once he predicates, he is ready to communicate that the chair is too small. He does not say it outright, however. Instead, we see his facial expression of surprise and the turn-around in his behavior from rebellion to playfulness (when his mother calls him for lunch). He could say to Willie or to his parents, “The chair is too small.” In short, he could make the understanding-interpretation process explicit to others by communicating an assertion. Thus, what is the conclusion that can be drawn from this process? Heidegger writes:

When an assertion has given a definite character to something present-at-hand [i.e., decontextualized, de-worlded], it says something about it *as* a ‘what’; and this ‘what’ is drawn *from that* which is present-at-hand. The as-structure has undergone a modification.... This leveling-off of the primordial ‘as’ of circumspective interpretation to the ‘as’ with which presence-at-hand is given a definite character is the specialty of assertion. Only so does it obtain the possibility of exhibiting something in such a way that we just look at it. (pp. 200-201)

We now have a provisional answer to the question, “By what existential-ontological modifications does assertion arise from circumspective interpretation?” (p. 200). In the end, we are afforded an occasion to re-think curriculum in a way that does not so easily permit children to compartmentalize their schooling lives from their lives outside of school. Heidegger’s inspired analyses provide us a wellspring of possibilities. We can revisit this wellspring often to keep discovering the richness and complexity that it can offer our practice. What is clear to me, though, is that our place of departure for curriculum has been unjustified. Thematic investigation must derive from and find its way back to non-thematic living. What has been left unconsidered, however, are the problematics this one insight poses for curriculum practices. How do we operationalize its exploration? What are the action steps we can take? How will the long-standing spatial arrangements of the classroom as an isolated cubicle need to change? How might these efforts filter into, confront, and challenge the larger socio-political attitudes of administrative efficiency that are deeply embedded in education? Heidegger gives us a more profound way to think about what seems to be a peripheral concept in educational action, “relevance.” In unraveling the complexity of such a concept, new complexities are bound to surface. In the end, perhaps the unraveling of complexities and the creating of new inquiries is what we need to counter the binding simplicities of reductionism arrangements.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I will draw from Heidegger (1962), *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.).

<sup>2</sup> Sein means Being. In the current translation, Dasein means Being-there.

<sup>3</sup> I will use the English page numbers.

<sup>4</sup> This meaning has a history of cultural and social development. Cultural is meaning itself. Social is the relationships that mediate the meanings. Historical is that the first two happen over time. I borrow these definitions from the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) (Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978). Vygotsky's theory of cognition as social-cultural-historical development resonates for me in Heidegger's philosophy of Being-in-the-world. I use this language to suggest what I believe Heidegger is *implying* in his concepts of facticity and historicity, which form the basis for meanings in-the-world. I will briefly address the concepts of facticity and meaning in later sections.

<sup>5</sup> Sections 18b through 21.

<sup>6</sup> Dewey, 1938, p.88; Vygotsky in Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978, p.124.

<sup>7</sup> Italics added.

<sup>8</sup> This scene happens after Peter discovers that he is too big for the chair and, as a result, begins to sense his lightened mood as he reconsiders the whole matter of sharing with his baby sister.

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### Appendix

#### *Peter's Chair*

By Ezra Jack Keats

p. 1 - Peter stretched as high as he could. There! His tall building was finished.

p. 4 - CRASH! Down it came. "Shhhh!" called his mother. "You'll have to play more quietly. Remember, we have a new baby in the house."

p. 5 - Peter looked into his sister Susie's room. His mother was fussing around the cradle. "That's my cradle," he thought, "And they painted it pink!"

p. 7 - "Hi, Peter," said his father. "Would you like to help paint sister's high chair?" "It's my high chair," whispered Peter.

p. 9 - He saw his crib and muttered, "My crib. It's painted pink, too." Not far away stood his old chair. "They didn't paint that yet!" Peter shouted.

p. 10 - He picked it up and ran to his room.

p. 13 - "Let's run away, Willie," he said. Peter filled a shopping bag with cookies and dog biscuits. "We'll take my blue chair, my toy crocodile, and the picture of me when I was a baby." Willie got his bone.

p. 14 - They went outside and stood in front of his house. "This is a good place," said Peter. He arranged his things very nicely and decided to sit in his chair for a while.

p. 16 - But he couldn't fit in the chair. He was too big!

p. 18 - His mother came to the window and called, "Won't you come back to us, Peter dear? We have something very special for lunch." Peter and Willie made believe they didn't hear. But Peter got an idea.

p. 21 - Soon his mother saw signs that Peter was home. "That rascal is hiding behind the curtain," she said happily.

pp. 22/23 - She moved the curtain away. But he wasn't there! "Here I am," shouted Peter.

p. 24 - Peter sat in a grown-up chair. His father sat next to him. "Daddy," said Peter, "Let's paint the little chair pink for Susie."

p. 27 - And they did.