

Zacharias, M.E. (December 2004). Moving Beyond with Maxine Greene: Integrating Curriculum with Consciousness *Educational Insights*, 9(1).  
[Available: <http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v09n01/articles/zacharias.html>]

## **Moving Beyond with Maxine Greene: Integrating Curriculum with Consciousness**

**Martha E. Zacharias**  
University of Alberta, Edmonton

In the closing of a lecture she delivered on June 27, 1996, Maxine Greene issued a provocative exchange: “Who am I?” she asked, and looked around, then answered herself: “I am who I am not yet.” (Pinar 1998, 1). This statement by Greene is the substance, I believe, of her philosophical concept of education as portrayed in an article titled “Curriculum and Consciousness” (1997). Greene demonstrates that the integration of curriculum and consciousness in education can involve continuous growth and rediscovery for us. Green’s conceptions of curriculum and consciousness interconnect, I feel, with the works of Madeleine Grumet, Paulo Freire, and Fritjof Capra, and a visit with their communities of thought invites further interpretation for Greene’s educational philosophy.

In “Curriculum and Consciousness” (1997) Greene transports the reader to primordial consciousness in early childhood, when awareness begins to develop, and consciousness becomes an automatic response as a result of basic authoritarian or environmental influences. Precognitive realities develop early too, as “...the world is constituted prior to the ‘construction of cognitive structures.’” (1997, 140).

Consciousness is “always consciousness of something” (140), something in relation to the world, a reflecting of past, present, and hopefully, future experiences. It is comprised of a manner of awareness in which the world seems to reveal itself to a person and to remind her of the need for continuous rediscovery of herself. The learner “...may realize that he is projecting beyond his present horizons each time he shifts his attention and takes another perspective on his world.” (147). Greene presents visions of the learner developing through concentrated observation, intense reflection, and a willingness to break from traditional subjectivities in order to *move beyond what she has been* (139).

The process of learning, of moving beyond, calls for an inherent focus for the learner: “ordering the materials of his own life-world when dislocations occur, what was once familiar abruptly appears strange” (1997, 142). The contemporary person deals continuously with the transience of her life-world, of the manner in which she relates to people, ideas, art, and values.

Greene’s postmodern observations acknowledge that a human being may feel strange,

disengaged, frustrated, and/or helpless in the face of ever-changing realities; and that a willingness to acknowledge the strangeness, the uncertainty, is part of learning. An individual may be aware that her sense of reality will depend on, and vary with, perspectives taken (143), and this may bring increased fragility to attempts at creating order and harmony in the life-world.

Learning demands our attention when we encounter new professional, academic, or personal territory in our education as human beings. Whatever, or whoever, we meet begs for us to initiate a focus on even a minor element or aspect to begin the process of constructing an order, and reaching towards, subsequent meaning and understanding.

Paradoxically, this developing of a new order for understanding from fearful or enigmatic engagements may also require deconstruction of the apparent elements, again by beginning with a focus on a single aspect, and the results can be unpredictable in our lives. I feel that all too often many of us remain unaware or indifferent to the pains, injustices, and inequities suffered by beings around us, as well as to the possibilities of potential findings and insights. In addition to struggling to make sense out of frightening or strange scenes, we also need to intensify our consciousness in the everyday drone of life activities and situations; we need to make continuous earnest efforts to be intensely conscious and aware, so that a focus for new perspectives, insights, and learning can emerge.

Maxine Greene's concept of learning relates closely to Madeleine Grumet's understanding of curriculum. Curriculum, says Grumet, is not a set of facts, or a program of studies, but "the process of making sense with a group of people, of the systems that shape and organize the world" (1995, 19). In describing the process of learning, Grumet says, "When we say that we are educating someone, we are introducing that person, young or old, to ways of being and acting in the world that are new to his or her experience" (17).

Working with the concept of curriculum as making sense of the world presupposes a strong interest on the teacher's part to learn to make sense, to create harmony and order of her world. Thus, the teacher's own curriculum is necessarily in place as her very own, yet in a complex integration with all life-worlds, including the curricula and life-worlds of her students and her colleagues. Grumet's own efforts to make sense of her life, via this understanding of curriculum, comprise her curriculum.

Grumet's curriculum—the making sense of her world—demands what Greene also develops in "Curriculum and Consciousness" (1997) as the process of learning: The learner needs to be intensely conscious of the elements of curriculum; he/she needs to bracket out fears from early or other experiences in order to focus on an object or situation. This focus can then begin the process of reconstructing meanings and re-ordering perceptions for the life of this education curriculum, so to speak. Grumet's curriculum of making meaning in life requires focused consciousness; Greene's learning proceeds with focused consciousness.

The concept of consciousness in education is addressed by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1971). Freire asserts that the major goal in education is to develop *conscientizacao*, a critical consciousness in the understanding of social, political, and economic problems, and then to take action for change (Freire, 1971, 19-20). A development of this critical consciousness makes it possible, says Freire, for people to become responsible, beginning their own search for self-affirmation, and their fight of injustices. Freire, who is committed to human liberation, states that the radical enters fully into reality, so that with knowing it better, he can transform it into a world in which it will be easier to love.

Greene, without overt political assertions in her work, emphasizes that the necessary intense focus in consciousness of the learner creates the need to make a new order and so to bring harmony in the learner's life-world. Freire urges a mode of critical consciousness that necessitates a critical focus on the reality of our world, on what we face and hear and feel

each day. He declares that the radical must act on emerging perceptions, thereby helping to create necessary and desirable changes for human beings, and, as with Greene, then to *move beyond what has already been*. Freire's passionate commitment to conscientizacáo strengthens the curriculum and consciousness philosophy of Maxine Greene.

*The Santiago Theory of Cognition* identifies the interrelationships of cognition, knowing, living, and adapting. This theory initially originated from questions addressed by Humberto Maturana (1970) in his biological research. In conjunction with Francisco Varela, Maturana's theory of cognition was further developed in *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living* (1980). Fritjof Capra popularized it as the Santiago Theory of Cognition. Although Capra takes this theory into his own work, *the hidden connections: integrating the biological, cognitive and social dimensions of life into a science of sustainability* (2002), it is without adequate acknowledgement of the arduous history of its development by the scholars before him. However, his work makes this complex theory more easily accessible than other documents. Thus, we walk with Capra into the Santiago Theory of Cognition.

For Capra, cognition becomes the interactive ecological process of knowing which is also the process of living. "The interactions of a living organism—plant, animal or human—with its environment are cognitive interactions. Thus life and cognition are inseparably connected." (34). Cognition as conceptualized in the Santiago Theory takes in the whole process of life—perception, emotion, and behaviour. Cognition is the organizing mental activity of all living systems. (34). Mental activity or mind, and life are inseparably interconnected. Cognition is the very process of life itself.

The Santiago Theory, as described by Capra, closely relates autopoiesis to cognition. Autopoiesis is the self-generation of all living networks. An autopoietic system undergoes continuous structural changes from internal or environmental influences, while preserving its organizational web. The components within this system continuously produce and transform one another in two ways: by self-renewal, and by creating new structures. The new structures can be new connections and interconnections within the autopoietic network.

The theory of autopoiesis suggests that a living system couples with its environment structurally, that is, through interactions which trigger changes in the structural components of the system. Non-living systems react with cause and effect. If I kick my office door, some bolts might loosen and cause the door to hang to one side, depending on the degree of force with the kick and the resultant looseness of the bolts. The door does not have the ability for structural coupling in its response.

Living systems respond with structural changes according to their own nature and their own patterns of organization so that the resulting behaviour from a friendly form of a "kick", e.g. slapping another person on the shoulders with congratulatory intentions can be unpredictable at times. The result of the slap depends on the force (physical pain in the shoulder?), the personality and relationship of the shoulder-slapper and the slapped one, and the history of experiential contexts these people have with responses to congratulations or slaps.

As a living organism autopoietically responds to environmental influences with structural changes, these will alter its future behaviour. A structurally coupled system is a learning system. Continual structural changes in response to the environment, in response to the world around us, and in consequent adaptation, learning and development, are key characteristics of the behaviour of all living things. Cognition becomes the process of living, adapting, changing, and creating.

This theory of cognition further develops the educational philosophy of Greene by showing the complex integration of biological, cognitive, and social factors for our ever-transforming life-worlds. Greene's insistence that teachers and learners need to be in a state of intense consciousness to focus on components of their curricular life-worlds in order to

begin the process of learning and going beyond where they have been, brings to mind Capra's theory of cognition as the organizing mental activity of all living systems as interconnected with all matters of life. For Greene, the teacher and learner need to develop a focused response to new educational demands within what Capra would call the networks of living systems to re-construct and re-order meaning and understanding.

The teacher/learner in Greene's philosophy begins a relationship with the new prestructured curriculum by responding in some form or other. Whatever action is taken by the teacher or learner, such as focusing on a single element (which Greene suggests as a beginning), structural coupling begins to re-create the living teacher/learner. For example, with interactions among groups of teachers with prestructured curricula, a network is developed in which structural coupling among internal, environmental, professional, personal, academic factors brings changes and adaptations in their own professional development, new perceptions in response to the curricula and to their life-worlds.

Greene points out that we, as educators, and our students are the networks of these relationships (1997, 148), that curriculum can be a potential tool for students to create these networks, and that we can and need to assist our students in creating many more learning networks. Greene believes that we need to keep growing, changing. Students and teachers are the living systems that create networks of interactions, of autopoietic structural coupling triggering changes. The structural coupling among teachers, students and life networks with Maxine Greene's emphasis on focused consciousness can bring an evolution of regeneration and rediscovery for all living systems.

Greene celebrates questioning, imagining, evolving continuously...as a teacher and as a student. She welcomes her own development of perceptions brought on by Capra's structural coupling, by triggering changes in the complex components of her being, her life-world. She seems eager to welcome structural changes that may alter her future behaviour and that of the environmental influences around her. She shows that education for her, like Grumet, is making sense and meaning of the world, and like Freire, to work towards a transformation of their world with new perceptions. With the substance of her thought supported by that of educational philosophers including Grumet, Freire, and Capra, the work of Maxine Greene regarding the integration of consciousness with curriculum through an intense focus and an eternal goal to move beyond, constitutes the essence of a philosophy of education that is demanding yet inviting. Greene's concluding statements in William Pinar's (1998) anthology of writings regarding her education theories, show her personal dedication: "I relish my sense of incompleteness. I can only live, it seems to me, with a conscious sense of possibility, of what might be..." (256). Greene draws us into a celebration of learning with the uncertain and the possible, and with her work, *we move beyond where we have been*.

## References

Capra, F. (2002). *The hidden connections: Integrating the biological, cognitive and social dimensions of life into a science of sustainability*. New York: Doubleday. Chapter 2: Mind and consciousness.

Freire, P. (1971). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos.

Greene, M. (1997). Curriculum and consciousness. In Flinders, D.J. & Thornton, S.J. (Eds.) *The curriculum studies reader*. New York, London: Routledge. Pp.137-149.

Greene, M. (1998). An autobiographical remembrance. In W.Pinar (Ed.). *The passionate mind of Maxine Greene: I am...not yet*. (pp. 9-11). London: Falmer Press.

Greene, M. (1998). Towards beginnings. . In W.Pinar (Ed.). *The passionate mind of Maxine Greene: I am...not yet*. (pp. 256-257). London: Falmer Press.

Grumet, M. (1995). The curriculum: What are the basics and are we teaching them? In

J.L.Kinchoe & S.R.Steinberg, Thirteen questions: Reframing education's Conversation. 2nd. Edition. New York: Peter Lang. (pp,15-21).

Maturana, Humberto R. (1970). Biology of cognition. Biological Computer Laboratory Research Report BCL 9.0. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois. Retrieved As reprinted in: Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living. Dordrecht: D.Reidel Publishing Co., 1980, pp 5-58. September 5, 2003 from <http://www.enolagaia.com/M70-80BoC.html>

Maturana, Humberto & Varela, Francisco. (1980). Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living. Dordrecht, Holland; Boston: D.Reidel Publishing Co.

Pinar, W. (1998). The passionate mind of Maxine Greene: I am...not yet. London: Falmer Press.

### **About the Author**

**Martha E. Zacharias**, doctoral candidate in the Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta, is currently researching interrelationships of sentience, imagination and consciousness with creative writing. She is a lecturer in Language Arts/English Education at the University of Saskatchewan College of Education.

**Email:** [mez128@mail.usask.ca](mailto:mez128@mail.usask.ca)

ISSN 1488-333  
© Educational Insights  
Centre for Cross-Faculty Inquiry  
Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, B.C., CANADA V6T 1Z4