

# Coryphaeus

(from Greek *koryphe*: summit; leader of a school of thought or of a chorus)  
New title for the old Curriculum Update

October, 2006

*As educators, one of the best things we can do for our students is to not force them into holding theories and solid concepts but rather to actually encourage the process, the inquiry involved, and the times of not knowing—with all the uncertainties that go along with that. This is really what supports going deep.*

Judith Simmer-Brown, Naropa Institute

*Healing the shadow of a culture may require the formation of a subculture of credible people who value that which has been devalued by the dominant culture. This subculture confers on its participants permission for a greater wholeness . . .*

Rachel Naomi Remen, Assoc. Clinical Professor of Family and Community Medicine at UCSF School of Medicine

*The road is what matters, not the destination.*

Willa Cather

# The Journey is Everything

## Part I

### *What is a Curriculum For?*

by John Shackelton

The basic structure of an academic curriculum takes the form of a “scope and sequence.” This is a map of sorts, a sequential list of information and skills meant to place foundational matters first and then build carefully so that certain pieces of knowledge prepare for certain others and early skills make possible the acquisition of more sophisticated skills. In principle, the overall concept is not far removed from what is necessary in constructing a house. One does not begin with the roof.

That aspect of curriculum seems obvious and rarely creates disagreement among educators. However, when we look at lists of academic objectives generated in the design of a scope and sequence and consider what they mean and precisely how to use them, differing views emerge. One view is that a list of academic objectives is a list of academic objectives; that is, the list should be followed very closely with a view to meeting all the objectives, much as one would consult a shopping list and check off the items as they are purchased. Okay, that one’s done; let’s move on to the next.

In the case of a shopping list, it is true that when all items are checked off, you have accomplished the task, but some educators do not think that principle applies to academic objectives. We can all recall times in our schooling when we “knew” the right answers on a test but soon lost most of that stuff, having let it drop into that dark pit we all keep for the boring or meaningless. Maybe the teacher happily checked off several items on the scope and sequence, but those check marks didn’t signify what they do on a shopping list. Not much had been accomplished.

A curriculum with a scope and sequence can be very useful. Knowledge and skills do build on one another. The map of the structure and flow of that building process is helpful for several very good reasons, but perhaps not for the purposes we are often told.

For many elements of education, the common view (for example, that “the spiritual” is the province of religion and should be kept out of schools) is not our RMCS view. Along with a number of other holistic educators, we also see the function of curriculum a bit differently.

### **The Map is not the Territory**

If a curriculum is not merely a check list, what is it? It is a far-from-exhaustive list of possibilities; it is many of the relatively definable elements of a journey; it holds the characteristics of a map.

As with all maps, it is wise and instructive to recall the differences between the map and the territory mapped. Forgetting this gets us into deep trouble. The power to create a map can make us feel we have more power or control over the territory than we actually have. We have only to look at a weather map for a mundane example of how wrong that can be.

Yet with a curriculum map in hand, educators often feel quite powerful and think they can control outcomes. In my nearly three decades as an educator, I have not found that to be so. In fact, the repeated failure to control this process, to create desired outcomes on the school level or state or national level contributed significantly to our educational systems passing through so many fads over the last half century—open classrooms, the “new” math, back-to-basics and others up to the current “no child left behind.”

Perhaps we need to look at curriculum, and the useful map of it, a little differently.

### **Open to Possibilities**

The many individual variations of the on-going learning experience cannot be captured on a map. Curriculum lists are a framework, a statement of things that warrant attention. These objectives can be helpful in several ways, but they can never be the Final Word. One of the best things that can happen to a curriculum is for it to run into surprises. This happens all the time, of course, but the unanticipated challenge is often seen as an offense or aberration rather than the blessing it usually is.

Academic objectives are stepping stones on a journey, and not everyone steps on them the same way or in the same order or, in some cases, at all. Therefore, a vitally important characteristic for a good curriculum is its adaptability—its service in *supporting the journey of a great variety of learners*.

But what sort of journey is this?

### **A Circle of Friends**

Five years ago, in the RMCS January in-service, I asked our staff to sit in a circle on the floor, positioning ourselves in sequence of classrooms, from preschool to middle school. From our visceral sense of that circle and our connection with one another, I sent the teachers off in groups (by classroom) to consider a series of questions about curriculum, about how we engaged a few specific objectives on the different levels of the school.

When we returned to the circle, each classroom staff shared the developmental issues, challenges, and approaches they used to carry out the RMCS curriculum in relation to those questions. What unfolded that day lifted us beyond the linear, limited dimensions of a map. We experienced collectively a participatory perception of the journey our students take when they are with us from preschool to eighth grade.

We received two gifts from that experience. First, teachers expressed a fresh appreciation for the grade-specific challenges and wonders of teaching, that is, a deeper respect for each other’s work. The second gift is more difficult to verbalize, but it has everything to do with what a school curriculum should really be about.

### **A Journey Together**

As we looked around the circle after the sharing, some of us felt invisible children moving along the circumference, from one of us to another, and we were deeply touched by the human depth and breadth of the learning journey. We began to see that *we* were, in truth, a major part of the curriculum our children experience. Without us and the kids together, the list of academic objectives is lifeless. The curriculum is *at least* three elements: the students, the teachers, and the navigational map. Schooling is the complex interaction among these three and creates a journey *greater than the sum of the three*.

In the end, it is our presence to the children, our responses to each child’s unfolding identity, that dances with them to create the journey; they help us create the living curriculum that actually happens in the territory we educators think we have mapped.

It feels appropriately humbling to keep this in mind.

### **Landscapes of Possibility**

Along several lengthy stretches of the west coast of Ireland stand majestic, sheer rock cliffs in constant communion with the tides of the vast Atlantic. If one waits long enough, if one can sit nearly as still as the rock and make no demands, it is possible to listen in on an ancient conversation between the soft whoosh or loud roar of the ocean and the silence of the stone.

Poets work and breath in the threshold where sound and silence dance together, where words emerge from wordlessness. A page of prose is dense with words, but a page of poetry presents fewer words and more “empty” space. The white expanse is a place of silence and possibility through which the song of the words invites our participation in the rhythms and echoes of what is said as well as what is *not* said. One never exhausts the “content” of a great poem because it remains fluid to fresh encounters. Poetry is a language of possibility; who could write a curriculum to “cover” even one poem?

Imagine a curriculum with poetic possibilities. Imagine a learning journey of quiet, venerable foundations in constant communion with the turbulent sacrament of human variations. Imagine the conversation of stone and storms.

Ever since that day, I have carried with me the consciousness of the cross-generational, humanly present nature of learning as the essence and predominate feature of every classroom day. This is the territory that resists mapping and invites a perception of schooling that emphasizes the journey, holds that what is most important is presence to the gestalt—to the other people (teachers, peers), to the classroom environment (materials, etc.), and to the learning at hand. So the journey consists of multiple elements interacting with each other—much the same as life. And these interactions often bring surprises, much the same as life. What we seem to value at RMCS is making space for the interactions and looking forward to the surprises.

**The Joy of the Journey.**

How often does a parent ask a child, “What excited you at school today?” or “Did anything happen this week that you will always remember?” A more typical question might be, “What was your grade on the math exam?” This is because, when people think of school, they generally think of one interaction—that between student and subjects—and the main interest is how “good” the kid is doing. This makes schooling almost entirely a means to an end, when actually it should be only partly that. Good grades, most parents seem to believe, equal good colleges, equal good jobs with good money, equal a good life.

To whatever extent those equations reflect how our society operates, they still amount to an impoverishing denial of the real value of the journey and often steal from children the richness of enjoying the journey for all the wonders along the way.

This can have the effect of preparing our children to not enjoy anything along the way—including life. If learning is mostly a means to an end and not worthwhile in its own right, then perhaps life itself is about never being satisfied, always replacing each goal reached with a new goal to be reached later. If everything is a means to an end, then nothing is worthwhile in itself.

If we accept that or something close to that, how can we enjoy anything for its innate value and present blessing?

**The Value of Not Knowing**

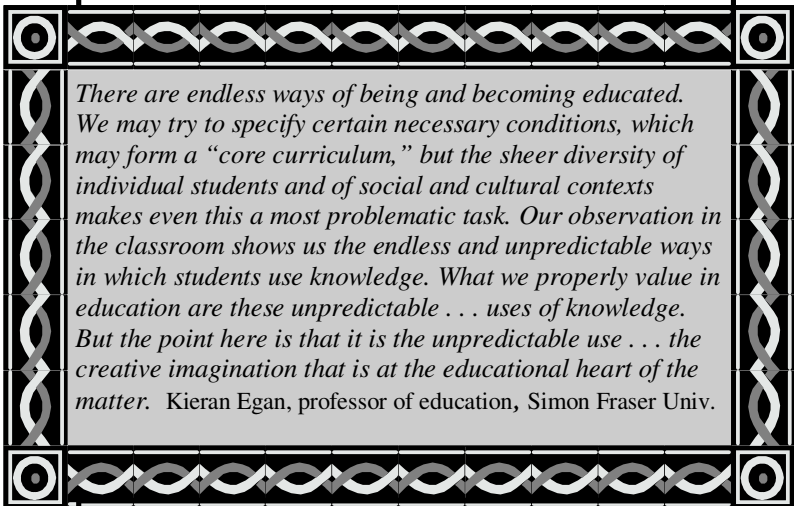
There seem to be three basic ways to respond to not knowing. One is not to care, in which case the journey never begins. The more common way is to set one’s focus on the goal, the end result—knowing—and to set out with determination, holding every step of the journey in thrall to the desired end. Unwavering focus on “progressing” to end-point goals has had a lot to do with how we got nuclear weapons and devastated rain forests and

a poisoned planet with an increasing fever.

A third way to approach not knowing is to set out on a journey of discovery with no hard-held notions of what the results might be or how they should be used. This approach holds the potential to transfigure the steps of the journey, to make those steps wonderful experiences in their own right, to usher in a thousand unimagined moments and a hundred wonders and the deep satisfaction of connections unanticipated and paths not foreseen.

Would not such experience far outshine a goal successfully reached at the cost of banality and angst and self-conscious effort that holds the end point as the sole honorific and only satisfaction? End-point-focused journeys can eventually take on the addictive aspect of a drug so that each goal reached provides less and less personal satisfaction and must be replaced ever more quickly by a new goal holding out yet another promise of satisfaction. Students who fall into this pattern (and surely comparative grading contributes to this) often become intensely competitive and compulsive.

I believe the school journey teaches children how to make the life journey and all the sub-journeys of which life is composed. How our kids are treated in school will deeply color how they will expect to be treated in life. What we teach them in school about what is important will affect their view of what is important in life; so the written curriculum is not all that matters. Whether aware of it or not, we teach our children how to make a journey and what our human connection and approach to a journey should be. Most of all, we teach them what a journey is.



**The Essence of Journeying**

Exploration is more fundamental to human nature than conclusion. The tools of exploration and processing—gathering data, organizing information, sharing results—are largely the tools of conclusion, and this may help us understand that conclusions are not really stopping places. They are essentially tentative; they are interesting way-stations along the journey of exploration and inquiry. This is well illustrated in the history of science, which is the story of an amazing journey that keeps correcting itself through new surprises—continually reminding us that the journey remains open-ended.

The educational journey should be of the nature of tugging on the web of connections, not cutting off threads of it for inspection and disposal. When we forget the intimate connections among things, we easily forget who we are. The result can be a tendency to focus on isolated curriculum objectives and on techniques for “teaching” them, which is then followed by a focus on “success” measured by objective tests. Thus we dismember ourselves and many children are left behind.

Related to all of this is the central pedagogical question: What is a curriculum, formal schooling, actually *for*? The standard answer is, “It is to prepare students for success in the world.” Please notice the unspoken premise behind that answer, which is that we should prepare them for the world that *is* rather than offer them tools to evaluate that world and the freedom to perhaps decide to change it. The notion of curriculum as a means to an end with focus on the end, is twofold: 1) that the end is more important than the journey and 2) that this is so because the end is ultimately worthy. Many educators disagree with that, I among them.

An alternative view, which I hold and encourage RMCS to always hold in the future, is this:

a) that the journey is of immeasurable value in and of itself and b) that if we let children pay attention to the journey and be present to its moments, then they may be more likely to grow up with the independence of mind and intention to evaluate the world they enter into and to feel empowered to challenge its assumptions and inequities. If schooling lets a child uncover her/his own real self, embrace that true identity, and act on who that is, then we have the seeds of real democracy. The concept of a democratic society as being largely about votes has outlived its service to us; democracy must be about the freedom that derives from having the tools to evaluate one’s surroundings, the freedom to be who one is. It must become rooted in education that serves children as people and attends reflectively and personally to the learning journey.

Of course, we must educate in a way that allows those who are technical/scientific people to thrive and eventually contribute in their important way to the well-being of our society; we are already good at this and mustn’t lose our gains there. The other piece is much more of a challenge to us and requires special effort: we must educate in a way that allows those who are artists or global thinkers or who have profound empathetic and spiritual intelligence to bring these invaluable gifts to us for the benefit of our collective social soul and the survival of the planet.

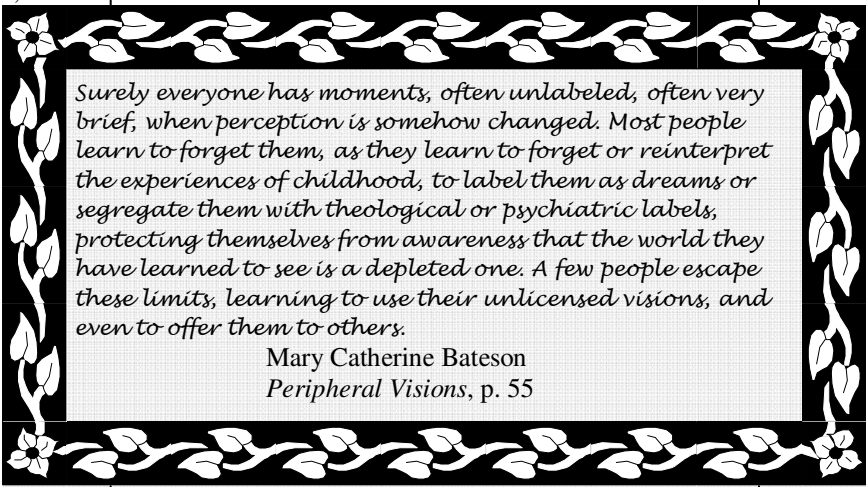
We need both of these, but our current system of education pays attention only to the former.

### Unlicensed Visions

In schooling, the journey is everything because it is during the school journey that our children learn what a life journey is about. They learn how to take a journey and what is important in it. They could learn perhaps that no journey is valuable in itself but always serves a utilitarian purpose, that all journeys are only a means to some consciously determined end. When learned deeply, that lesson steals from them the wonder of that which escaped calculation, the pleasant surprise of the unexpected, the mystery of silence in the presence of the unknown. It takes away much of what gives our days meaning and makes life worth living.

On the other hand, students could learn that a journey is an adventure, exciting and rewarding in itself. They could enter into adulthood with the expectation that life is meaningful and their life, in particular, is well worth living. For them, the journey could be a matter of wonder, in part because the end of the journey could be as much a surprise as any bend along the way.

Especially significant, they could learn that their personal visions might be the missing piece of the puzzle, that what is authentically true inside them may be what is authentically needed around them. They could learn to stand up and offer a different resonance.



*Surely everyone has moments, often unlabeled, often very brief, when perception is somehow changed. Most people learn to forget them, as they learn to forget or reinterpret the experiences of childhood, to label them as dreams or segregate them with theological or psychiatric labels, protecting themselves from awareness that the world they have learned to see is a depleted one. A few people escape these limits, learning to use their unlicensed visions, and even to offer them to others.*

Mary Catherine Bateson  
*Peripheral Visions*, p. 55

The written curriculum is not the only curriculum. It certainly does not represent all that students learn at school. We teach crucial lessons by the way we approach curriculum. We do, in fact, need our “objective” map, and your new parent handbook will have grade-by-grade summaries of the mental domain curriculum (sometimes called the academic curriculum). However, if we focus only on specific objectives, our children will see those as the dominant reality, not themselves nor their personal connection to their larger learning journey.

If a map is the preeminent reality, that carries quite a different message than if the reality is the student’s learning experiences—his or her personal journey.

Effective democracy requires more than the basic arithmetic of one person one vote. It calls out for authentic journeys and engaging the collective journey authentically.

I believe children can and should learn this in school.