Blurring the Lines Between Content and Pedagogy

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One rarely engages in a conversation about education without the terms “content” and “pedagogy” finding their way into it. Indeed, the two are inherent to almost everything we do in education. While we know what content and pedagogy mean, questions remain regarding their properties as well as the relationship between them: Are content and pedagogy separate and separable entities or are they always already implicated in each other? Where does one begin and the other end? Who is responsible for each? And what might answers to these questions mean for how we think about education and engage students in classrooms?

We know that pedagogy is what teachers do to engage students with subject matter. But are classroom teachers the only ones engaged in pedagogy? Consider, for example, the following: Todd and Curti’s The American Nation, a commonly-used social studies textbook, provides this boxed-in paragraph titled “Multicultural Perspectives” on the left margin of its chapter, “American Expansionism.”

Native American women who worked in the fur trade often married non-Indian fur traders and played important roles in their societies as a result. For example, Hunkah-itawin, a Sioux woman, married trader James Bordeaux. She helped Bordeaux cement his trading ties with the Sioux, and her access to trade goods helped her brother rise to the position of chief.

Or another box in the same chapter, this time from a section about the California Gold Rush:

For African Americans the lure of the gold rush and the opportunity for jobs overshadowed the prejudice against them. One African American working in the mines in California wrote home to his wife in Missouri: “This is the best place for black folks on the globe. All a man has to do is to work, and he will make money.”

Both excerpts provide students with information about their particular topics. But is this all they do? Or are there also inherent, in the information provided (and that withheld), in its language, images, format, and location, various pedagogical invitations that require—indeed position—students to know some things and know them in specific ways? As they inform students about a Native American woman or an African American miner, these excerpts also, both explicitly and implicitly, convey knowledge about broader societal issues—e.g., race, gender, and class—as well as prompt students to assume particular cultural, social, economic, and gendered positions with which to engage the information. How, for example, if not through the lens of capitalism is one invited to view the world when it is reported not only that earnings by a member of an oppressed minority are associated with freedom but that enduring manual labor in an economy driven by profit can overcome, if not eradicate, discrimination? And how are students positioned to engage gender when, in the first excerpt, the contributions of Native American women, intended to be celebrated in this excerpt, are not significant in and of themselves but are significant only through marriage, in this case to a white man, and where that “contribution,” as wives and sisters, is only counted when it contributes to the success of men?

What these two texts do, then, is provide students with more than subject area content; they teach students not only something but also ways through which to consider that something. In other words, these texts act pedagogically by offering students specific locations from which to know and be in the world as they engage information about it.

What might it mean to think about texts as having pedagogical aspects? And how might it trouble existing divisions between content and pedagogy whereby teachers do pedagogy and subject area specialists, like the author of the above-mentioned textbook, provide mere content? While this division pervades most current educational thought, I suggest that texts brought into the classroom are not finished works of content by scholars, now awaiting pedagogical transformation by teachers. Rather, such texts are, in and of themselves, pedagogical invitations for learning. Working with or against those invitations, teachers’ pedagogies do not initiate the pedagogical act but add further pedagogical layers to those already present in such texts.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge

The idea that content and pedagogy must come together for a meaningful education is not new in education. Almost two decades ago, Lee Shulman, while criticizing accreditation and certification procedures for teachers, ones that required them to know either content or pedagogy (but not both), called for the integration of content and pedagogy through what he termed “pedagogical content knowledge.” The term, by now ubiquitous in most educational contexts, is the one to which educators refer most often when thinking about how content and pedagogy come together to educate. Pedagogical content knowledge stands at the intersection of content and pedagogy, in the transformation of content into forms that are pedagogically powerful. Teachers with good pedagogical content knowledge not only know more about their subject matter and are familiar with effective teaching techniques, they also...
have a deep understanding of how knowledge in their discipline is constructed and how to present that process to students. This allows teachers to select the most useful forms of representation of [the subject area’s] ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others.

The concept of pedagogical content knowledge and its engagement in the research literature over the years have, no doubt, contributed significantly to our understanding of the relationship between what teachers know, how they come to know it, and how they go about teaching it. Much of that knowledge was generated by those taking part in the “Knowledge Growth in Teaching Project” at Stanford University in the mid-1980s and thereafter. As Barton and Levesk point out, however, the premise that teachers should be exposed to the work of scholars in their discipline and to the best pedagogical approaches to make that knowledge instructional for students—a notion university courses in disciplinary knowledge and education as well as professional development programs have long advocated—does not always result in much of either filtering into classrooms.

Reasons for this are multifaceted and complex. Some researchers point to issues of teachers’ assumptions, expectations, and purpose; others have noted curricular, structural, and institutional impediments. The intent of this article is to highlight another aspect of this failure, one that pertains to existing understandings regarding the relationship between content and pedagogy, much of them exemplified in how the two are made to come together within the prevailing notion of pedagogical content knowledge. For while pedagogical content knowledge has focused on the importance of teachers knowing their subject area and making it instructional (pedagogical), it has not addressed the need for teachers to examine the inherently instructional aspects of content and what that examination might entail for their practice as classroom teachers. In addressing the latter, my intent is not to criticize or dismiss what has thus far been accomplished in the name of pedagogical content knowledge. Rather, it is to open new possibilities regarding how we think about content and pedagogy, ones that better address what actually counts in the educative process.

Rethinking Pedagogy
How pedagogy is defined, how, when, and by whom it is enacted, determines not only how pedagogy itself is to be understood but also how knowledge (content) is understood in relation to it. Underlying the notion of pedagogical content knowledge are several assumptions regarding the substance, place, and role of pedagogy and its relation to content. First, pedagogy is separable from content; content is the domain of scholars, pedagogy the domain of teachers. Second, pedagogy equates with school learning—restricted to the work of classroom teachers. Consequently, it seems that the blending of content and pedagogy that pedagogical content knowledge speaks of is more the carrying out of one on the other, whereby scholars in the discipline provide content while teachers provide pedagogy. Prior to entering the classroom, it is assumed, content floats free of, and pre-exists, any pedagogical dimensions (I will return to this issue in the next section).

To be sure, no one can deny that, as teachers, we engage in pedagogy, and that our work is inherently pedagogical. Nor would anyone question that good teachers need to know their disciplines and identify the best examples and explanations that allow students to engage disciplinary content in meaningful ways. This, however, does not preclude the possibility of exploring pedagogy in broader terms, ones that extend the boundaries of teachers’ work in classrooms.

Scholars in the area of critical pedagogy and cultural studies have for some time now considered pedagogy along these broader lines. For example, according to Roger Simon, pedagogy entails any process that encourages us to know and order the world as we both give and find meaning in it. Regardless of whether it takes place in or out of schools, the practice of pedagogy, according to Simon, is an attempt to influence experience.

As Giroux and Simon explain, pedagogy is more than “the integration of curriculum content, classroom strategies and techniques, a time and space for the practice of those strategies and techniques, and evaluation purposes and methods.” Rather, pedagogy—whether that enacted by a teacher, a textbook writer, or a filmmaker—“organizes a view of, and specifies particular versions of what knowledge is of most worth, in what direction we should desire, what it means to know something, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and the world.”

As a mode of organizing and regulating knowledge and knowing, Simon adds, “pedagogy attempts to influence the way meanings are absorbed, recognized, understood, accepted, confirmed, and connected as well as challenged, distorted, taken further, or dismissed.” Broadly conceived, then, pedagogy is inherent in any message, action, structure, or text, inside or outside of schools. Pedagogy organizes someone’s experience as well as organizes that someone to experience.

As such, pedagogy cannot be considered simply a method, an afterthought applied to content. Rather, pedagogy and content become one. Conceiving of them as such opens the possibility for examining not only how people and issues are represented in subject-area texts but also how audiences are constructed as they are invited, pedagogically, to interact with those texts.

Rethinking Content
According to Grossman, Wilson and Shulman, “some of what teachers need to know about their subjects overlaps with the knowledge of scholars of the discipline.” They add, “teachers also need to understand their subject matter in ways that promote learning…. Scholars create new knowledge in the discipline. Teachers help students acquire knowledge within a subject area.”

McEwan and Bull challenge that separation of content from pedagogy, whereby “teachers need to be concerned about whether their representations of subject matter are teachable to others; scholars, by implication, do not.” All subject area content, McEwan and Bull claim, is pedagogical. “[T]here is no such thing as pure scholarship, devoid of pedagogy. The scholar is no scholar who does not engage an audience for the purpose of edifying its members.” Any scholarship, they propose, is inherently pedagogical since “explanations are not only of something; they are also always for someone.” As such, scholars need to be concerned with the teachability of their ideas. In other words, “the justification of scholarly knowledge is inherently a pedagogical task.” Scholarship, McEwan and Bull conclude, “is no less pedagogic in its aims than teaching.”

Indeed, scholars are first and foremost storytellers. They reconstruct, represent, package, and shape the world in ways that tell students, pedagogically, what knowledge is of most worth and, consequently, what and how to inquire. Because an author might be able to hide a text’s underlying ideology and make it appear natural (often neutral), we must explore a text not only for what it says, even for how it says it, but also for what that ‘saying’ does—that is, for how it invites readers to know, think, and imagine. To consider curriculum texts as mere content, devoid of pedagogy, is to view texts as...
neutral conveyors of meaning. Yet as we have seen from the two examples opening this paper, content area texts encourage students to feel, value, and know in certain ways.

Without claiming that texts have one singular authorized meaning or that authors ultimately control meaning-making through their authorial invitations, what a text utters and how it utters, as Hall claims, “limits, and influences the links that can be made between it and its readers.”6 Any authorial decision “to show this rather than that, to show this in relation to that, to say this about that is a choice about representation. And each choice has consequences both for what meanings are produced and for how meaning is produced.”7 Texts provide students with particular spaces—physical and social—with (and from) which to make meaning in and of the world.8 As such, a text seeks to engage readers not only in the activity of knowledge construction, but in the construction of knowledge from particular social, political, and cultural locations.

Consequently, what a teacher says and does or what a text utters are all invitations to, and structures for, inquiry. As pedagogical devices, texts, as do teachers, regulate the relationship between the possible, the potential, and the actual in the educative process. Even though there is a difference of kind and degree between a teacher’s pedagogy and a text’s pedagogy—most obviously, a teacher stands within the classroom, the author of the text does not—both are nonetheless pedagogical. Drawing attention not only to what a text says but to how it is organized to make its particular claims to knowledge and how the latter influences readers’ production of meaning is a significant pedagogical move we, as teachers, need to take. For it shifts the focus of learning from explaining or interpreting texts in order to determine what they really mean, to questioning how texts come to be what they are and do what they do.

**Implications**

The process of examining texts requires moving from questions such as “What does a text mean?” or even “How does it come to have a meaning?” to the question “What meanings does a text make possible (and impossible) through the invitations for learning that it offers students?”

One place to begin is by examining the introductory chapter of a history textbook and how it invites students to consider what history is and how to learn it. Does it portray history as a coherent, true story depicting the past as it really was, an agreed-upon story students ought to accept, believe, and memorize? Or does it invite students to consider history as an investigation, which uses multiple sources to construct the past and make meaning of it? Does it suggest that the stories appearing in textbooks are not there necessarily because they are the “best” histories but, rather, because they reflect the values of those who have the power to put them there? Each of these approaches, and the degree to which the textbook follows suit with them, prepares students to consider history and make meaning from it in very different ways.9 Understanding how textbooks prepare students helps teachers determine whether and how they should work either with or against what the textbook offers as they plan their own pedagogies in classrooms.

As a teacher delves further into history textbooks, other pedagogical issues arise. One of those is the invitation to learning made by chapter titles. While we might not pay much attention to titles, they play an important (often implicit) role in directing students’ engagement with the material to follow. Take, for example, the title of a chapter depicting the encounter between European Americans and Native Americans as the former moved west. How might one commonly used title, “Opening the West,” encourage students to consider that encounter? To what degree does its wording—especially the combination of “opening” and an assumed closure (after all, there’s no need to open something that is not closed to you)—presuppose an initial deliberate refusal by Native Americans to accommodate settlers? How might it invite students to expect, if not accept, the use of force in the process of that “opening” and of occupying lands once inhabited by others? And how might implying that Native Americans actively closed the West to European Americans, depriving them entry at the outset, then legitimate the closing of Native Americans in reservations as a result of that “opening”? How, on the other hand, might another common title for such a chapter, “Westward Expansion”—with “expansion” implying an infringement on someone else’s space—invite students to consider that encounter differently, as it ascribes different motives and values to the two groups involved? My point here is not to evaluate the correctness of each of these titles, but rather to illustrate that titles matter. They actively position students to engage the content of the chapter in a particular way, even before students have actually started to read it.

The same is the case with descriptions of individuals, groups, ideas, and issues. The kind of adjectives attributed to them, the perspective from which they are portrayed, where they are portrayed (following all other perspectives that have been presented?) and how (in neutral, negative, or positive terms?) all send powerful messages that encourage students to explore the world and its people in particular ways. Pedagogical issues in subject area texts, however, go further as they help determine students’ understandings of agency and their own role as citizens in a democracy. Comparing the portrayal of the civil rights movement in the U.S. in two textbooks, Terrie Epstein explains that where a textbook locates the impetus for change it describes the period determines the sense of empowerment students, as citizens, feel as a result of their learning.10 When students encountered the textbook depicting the movement as the result of the actions of prominent individual leaders, Epstein points out, the students, even African American students, felt disconnected from those events, as if they happened to their community rather than by it. On the other hand, the textbook depicting the topic as the result of individual lay persons acting in communities as part of those communities to effect change had a very different pedagogical impact. Students increasingly saw the potential of their own actions, as citizens, to make a difference. In other words, the textbook positioned students to see themselves as agents in history rather than simply as spectators of it.

Similarly, who gets to speak about, for, with, or to whom has important pedagogical implications as to what and how students come to know. Textbooks often tend to speak about those described. This is why teachers often supplement textbooks with literature that allows subjects to speak for themselves, encouraging students to get closer to the beliefs, thoughts, and actions of those being depicted. Considerations, then, ought to be applied when presenting students with, for example, a newspaper article on a labor dispute. From which side of the picket line is the reporter doing his or her reporting? (Is the issue portrayed from the perspective of those picketing or from the perspective of those being picketed against?) Teachers ought to examine whether the reporter is speaking about, at, with, or for those being portrayed? Each of these prepositions determines and reflects not only how perspectives are represented but also the degree to which, and how, those will be appropriated by students.

While it is important to consider what a text says and how it says it, it is as important to consider what it chooses not to say. This is not
only in order to incorporate other texts that do state what a particular text ignores. It is also to examine what such absences and silences imply and how these position students to know (and to not know). This means examining not only whose perspectives are missing but also why they might be missing and how that very fact conditions readers to learn in particular ways. As John Willinsky points out, when a social studies textbook ends its exploration of China in the sixteenth century (to be resumed only in light of Mao’s take-over), it not only ignores several centuries of Chinese history, it discourages students from critically engaging the West’s colonial project in China during that period. More, such an avoidance often presents itself simply as an oversight, merely missing information (after all, we can’t be expected to teach everything about everyone) rather than a feature of how the West went about dividing the world.44 Similar questions should be explored in light of the absence of, for example, a labor curriculum while industry is well represented in the curriculum, or of a peace curriculum when textbooks are filled with detailed accounts of wars.

End-of-chapter questions and activities may also condition students to learn in particular ways. What teachers ought to consider is not only what those questions and activities ask but also what such asking does, and what kind of understandings it promotes and discourages. We tend to think of the end-of-chapter activities as ones that invite students to review, think, use, and apply knowledge. That, however, is not always the case. In fact, those activities often prevent students from thinking in the guise of having them do so. Take, for example, The American Journey, a popular history textbook.45 Its “skills builder” activity, concluding the World War II chapter section, “War in the Pacific,” engages students with the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While this was an immensely important moment in human history, and while it involved significant ethical and military issues on the part of Harry Truman, this activity, the only one in the review section to address the issue, chooses only to ask students to order six pre-given statements about the event in order to construct a paragraph.46 While organizing a series of statements, even ones that describe the destruction caused by that bombing, into a paragraph may be considered important by some, one ought to question how this particular activity (rather than, say, having students write their own essay) in fact prevents them from dealing with the myriad of issues involved in dropping the world’s first atomic bombs on civilian populations. Such an activity, like many others presented in the concluding sections of textbook chapters, invites students to avoid knowing by not asking them to implicate themselves in knowledge.

We tend to think of teachers as those initiating the pedagogical act, but what teachers “pedagogue” is already pre-inscribed in the content teachers use, for teachers to tell it in ways that engender some kinds of knowledge and knowing rather than others. Texts brought into the classroom are not finished works of content awaiting pedagogical transformation, they are, in themselves, pedagogical invitations for learning. Working with or against those invitations, teachers’ pedagogies add further layers to those already present in the text. The relationship between content and pedagogy is more complex than is often thought, and knowing this helps open new possibilities for educators. Whether we recognize it or not, the pedagogies we design as teachers are not isolated from the pedagogical invitations for learning embedded in the materials we bring into our classrooms.

Notes
2. Ibid., 316.
11. Simon, Teaching Against the Grain, 59.
15. Ibid., 331.
19. For an elaboration on these three approaches, see, e.g., Peter Seixas, “Schweigen! Die Kinder! Or, Does Postmodern History Have a Place in the Schools?” in Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History, ed. P. N. Stearns, P. Seixas, and S. Wineburg (New York: University Press, 2000).
23. The six statements are: 1) Three days later an American plane dropped another bomb on Nagasaki; 2) The bomb killed between 70,000 and 100,000 people; 3) This second bomb killed nearly 40,000 people instantly and many more later; 4) On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan; 5) About 100,000 others died later from the effects of radiation; 6) When the bomb exploded, a sheet of flame spread over the city. (The American Journey, New York: Routledge, 1994), 765.

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