
Daniel Robert Conn

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri](http://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri)

Part of the [Education Commons](http://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri)

Recommended Citation
Available at: [http://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri/vol2/iss1/4](http://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri/vol2/iss1/4)
Petra Munro Hendry’s Engendering Curriculum History challenges preconceived notions of Western curriculum and its history. Although not a new idea (See for example, L.R. Wolfe, 1986, O Brave New Curriculum: Feminism And The Future Of Liberal Arts; M. Grumet & L. Stone, 2010, Feminism And Curriculum: Getting Our Act Together), Hendry presents a cogent argument to interpret curriculum history from a non-dominant point of view. By a non-dominant point of view, I refer to perspectives outside of the prevailing Western social and political culture. Hendry accuses the traditional narrative of curriculum history of ignoring non-dominant perspectives, particularly feminine perspectives, in favor of a neatly packaged version of curriculum’s progression. As a result, Hendry argues that the legacy of curriculum has become focused on mastering skills rather than constructing meanings.

Hendry provides a new narrative of curriculum and its history, as she includes the perspective of women and their roles in creating, or engendering, curriculum. This new narrative includes a spectrum of stories beginning before the Neolithic period all the way to more contemporary 20th century events. Through her new narrative, Hendry asks: Who defines knowledge and who is permitted to know? As curricular history, it becomes clear that many of the traditional heroes of curriculum have repressed and oppressed feminine perspectives. Even the so-called progressive periods of reform, pale in comparison to the actual reform engendered by the lesser-known feminine calls for actual reform. For example, John Dewey’s The Child and the Curriculum (1902), a progressive education icon, describes curriculum as a matter of facilitating mastery learning. Dewey’s model, while progressive in nature because of its hands-on approach to learning, prevents teachers (mostly women during the progressive period) from acting as the knowers. The narrative of Dewey’s impact on curriculum is still one that “situates individuation, separation, and control as central to education and, as a consequence, history as we know it functions to gender understandings of knowledge (pp. 18-19).” Dewey is one example, among many, in the book that points to the current curriculum narrative as highly masculine.

Hendry contrasts Dewey’s progressivism with Anna Julia Cooper, Jane Addams, and Ida B. Wells who took the idea of educational reform to a new level. Addams believed that, “democracy would not be realized until every human being’s experiences had full expression in society (p. 141).” Hendry contrasts different lines
of thought among some of the progressive women, as she does with every period throughout the book, but she also is able to reveal dominant themes. One dominant theme included the pattern of men rarely trusting women to inform curricular decisions, and when women were allowed to contribute, they were often denied recognition in the dominant narrative of curriculum. As explained by Hendry, “Although Dewey, (George Herbert) Mead, and (William) James took their examples from spheres traditionally assigned to women, none of the male pragmatists made women’s experiences central to their own discourse (p.176).” Particularly since Aristotle, women have been granted limited ownership rights of curricula across the world. Hendry makes it clear that these gender-based practices of exclusion have created a false sense of what is knowledge and who is allowed to know. Male members of the dominant culture define knowledge through curriculum and have historically monopolized the engenderment of curriculum that is the formation of the values and ideas that should be taught to future generations.

Although not specifically mentioned as her intent, Hendry takes what appears to be a Liberal Feminist Theory (LFT) approach to her analysis of curriculum history. J. Donovan’s Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism (1985) describes feminism by the following tenets: “faith in rationality, confidence in individual conscience, conviction in the similarity of male and female rationality, belief in education as a force to change society, independence and ultimate isolation of the individual, doctrine of natural rights” (Grumet & Stone, 2010, pp. 185). These LFT tenets were noticeable throughout the book, and were used to expose what K. Weiler (1988) calls, “sex-role stereotyping” (p. 27) in her work Women And Teaching For Change: Gender, Class, And Power.

Hendry uses a format similar to Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States (2003), in which several eras of time and space are reconstructed through a critical lens, hoping to reveal non-dominant perspectives. In the introduction, Hendry refutes what she considers myths within curriculum history: “The Line History Draws” (p. 16), “Disrupting the “Seminal” Plot and Other Ovarian Twists” (pg. 19), “Where’s the Progress of the Progressive Era?” (p. 23). After deconstructing what may have once been considered true about curriculum history, Hendry uses each of the remaining chapters to reconstruct various curricular eras. She highlights a small number of individuals in each chapter and provides substantial rationales for her selections. Often the characters Hendry choses to examine were actors within the same struggle but with contrasting motives or ideological nuances in order to provide a greater sense of context, perhaps a step further than Zinn took. Although the heroines in Hendry’s narrative heavily outnumber the heroes, she does credit men like W.E.B. Du Bois for their role in furthering a feminine perspective within curriculum. Unlike Zinn, Hendry generally used historically famous individuals as her subject matter, but she clarifies that these individuals, despite some notoriety, remain
overshadowed by a more dominant narrative.

Hendry’s curricular narrative begins in the second chapter, as she describes how early humans began to know and understand. Through the power of imagination, prehistoric humans used early forms of language to create truths and account for the unexplainable, such as the use of creation stories. Ancient religions and philosophies involved both a feminine and masculine perspective, often as a matter of balance. A greater sense of awareness developed among early humans, and from this awareness grew an abstraction of thought and self-conscious thinking. Humans began differentiating genders in their cosmologies. The Earth became Mother Earth, and she was feared and worshiped. As religions became monotheistic, Mother Earth morphed into God the Father. So too, the definition of knowing and who was allowed to know became grounded in patriarchal truths.

While periods of reform included revolutionary feminine voices, like Mary of Magdalene, the canons of what constituted truth or knowledge did not include feminine interpretations, like the Gospel of Mary. Points of view in which God was treated as part feminine, Eve was regarded as a heroine, and/or Jesus viewed Mary as an equal were branded as heretical, while St. Paul’s instruction that women not teach became doctrine. Women certainly reclaimed power, like influence over the divinity of Virgin Mary, but were generally disenfranchised from contributing educationally. Eventually women were given permission to learn how to better support their children and ultimately their husbands. To raise subservient daughters, women were finally permitted to teach girls how to sew, cook, and perform private, domestic tasks. Over time, women were permitted to learn to read and to instruct their children in how to read the Bible. As Hendry explains, women were limited to passive roles within curriculum. Women were not allowed to create their own curriculum; at best, they could facilitate the already existing curriculum of men. This determinism caused curricula to be controlled, individualistic, and based on mastery of reason and logic.

Hildegard of Bingin, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich and other heroines of the medieval period quietly contributed their own theological, even mystical, interpretations, but they did so within the constraining social infrastructure of a male dominated society. This dualism becomes especially evident during periods of colonization, when women were both the colonized and the colonizer. Women were asked to help enlighten the unenlightened by instructing them in the curriculum of dominant men. As Hendry’s narrative pushes through the ideals of democracy, the hope of romanticism, the rise of industrial values, the implications of Darwin, visions of progressivism, and the reality of globalism, the well-defined theme of men engendering knowledge for women to teach remained consistent. Although she does not spend very much time discussing the standards movement, Hendry’s argument frames itself around the realities of modern education being a matter of individual achievement, based
on mastering reason and logic.

Hendry’s new narrative of curriculum history is both engaging and refreshing. While its practical application is relative to the reality in which its readers live, Engendering Curriculum History is that socially conscious voice grounded curriculum experts must consider. Through critiquing the engendering process, Hendry calls into question tendencies to use curriculum as a matter of tracking students in order to perfect individual learners, a not-so-distant relative of experiments in eugenics and Darwinian social engineering.

As a veteran classroom social studies teacher, Hendry provoked me to reconsider my own approach to curriculum. I found men authored the majority of text books used in my classroom. The foundations of the curricular frameworks were based on praises for famous men, while the social contributions of women appeared supplementary as if they had been designed to achieve some degree of political correctness. As Hendry predicted, the learning goals were based on mastery rather than meaning. My curriculum perpetuated masculine curricular values, and it needed to change. To this realization, Hendry’s work deserves my gratitude. While I once considered myself to be a promoter of social justice in the classroom, Hendry revealed the “plank” in my own eye.

Daniel R. Conn is a social studies teacher in Frenchman RE-3 School District in Colorado. He is also completing his doctoral degree in Educational Studies at the University of Northern Colorado. He can be reached at conn0906@bears.unco.edu.

References


