

Curriculum as Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning by Arthur N. Applebee. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. viii + 149 pp.; bibliography, index. \$34.95 (cloth); \$12.95 (paper).

Peter Smagorinsky
University of Oklahoma

Exploring the themes of tradition and reform has driven Arthur Applebee's work since the publication of his first book (Applebee 1974). In *Curriculum as Conversation* he continues to examine these themes with a focus on changing the way educators think about curriculum. Applebee argues that curriculum, rather than stress knowledge as a body of information to be mastered, should conceive of knowledge as action, as activity in cultural practices.

Education, according to Applebee, is tied to the social and cultural traditions in which it is set. By traditions Applebee means "the knowledge-in-action out of which we construct our realities as we know and perceive them" (pp. 1-2). In defining tradition in this way Applebee distances himself from the pejorative sense that tradition often is granted in educational discourse, such as accounts of classrooms in which traditional teaching is regarded as anachronistic and ineffective. Traditions to Applebee "provide *culturally constituted tools* for understanding and reforming the world, tools of which we, Janus-like, are both heir and progenitor" (p. 2). Of particular concern to Applebee are the traditions of discourse through which students are enculturated to the values of academic disciplines. In order for curricula to enable students to make transformations through schoolwork, students need to enter and take part in disciplinary practices through appropriate activity, particularly the conversation through which disciplinary practices are developed.

Applebee thus sees schooling as a process that should take place through participation in genres of activity. Yet most schools conceive curriculum as the identification of what those in authority consider to be most worth knowing, an emphasis that Applebee argues results in the reduction of potentially vital and meaningful knowledge to

PETER SMAGORINSKY teaches English education at the University of Oklahoma. Through a grant from Office of Educational Research and Development, he is currently studying the transition teachers make when moving from preservice programs to the workforce.

“knowledge-out-of-context”: “In such a system, students are taught about the traditions of the past, and not how to enter into and participate in those of the present and future” (p. 3). Applebee’s curriculum would displace content-driven schooling with schooling that involves students in the “socially constituted traditions of meaning-making that are valued in the cultures of which they are a part” (p. 9). That is, they will learn content by making it a central topic of their conversations and participate in those conversations through their appropriation of the conventions that have traditionally structured speech in particular disciplines. These conventions are not imparted to students explicitly but become part of the tacit knowledge that students develop of the social rules that structure communication in academic disciplines. Students thus experience schooling as “a process of mastering new traditions of discourse” (p. 9). By learning to participate in these traditional disciplinary ways of talking, students acquire a dynamic set of tools for participating in and making sense of the world.

Applebee argues that a curriculum based on a decontextualized set of facts stifles the sort of conversation that he feels is necessary for students to grow. Teachers end up setting all goals and dominating the floor. Rote memorization replaces synthesis in students’ manipulation of material. Discourse traditions that treat knowledge as the subject of lectures are, to Applebee, “deadly” to students’ efforts to experience transformations through schooling.

Conversation, on the other hand, mediates between the broader traditions that students learn outside school and the discourse traditions that they must learn to succeed in it. Learning to “do school” is critical to students’ academic success. Applebee says that

the problem for curriculum and instruction is to ensure that [school] traditions are constituted as systems of knowledge-in-action, available as tools to guide present and future behavior, rather than systems of knowledge-out-of-context, stripped of their constructive and constitutive potential. That means, in turn, that the process of schooling must be a process of actually entering into particular traditions of knowing and doing. Students must discuss literature they have read, not simply be taught about its characteristics; they must do science, not simply be told its results; and they must engage in mathematically based problem solving, not simply memorize formulas. (P. 36)

A curriculum ought to provide domains for conversation, which in turn become the primary means of teaching and learning. Through these conversations, students can enter into culturally significant traditions of knowledge-in-action. Applebee stresses that when situated in

discipline-based conversations, the content knowledge that makes up the bulk of most curricula becomes more vital and useful to students and therefore more likely to become a part of their cultural tool kit.

In his move away from content as the driving force in curriculum, Applebee says that “the problem of curriculum planning, then, is the problem of establishing a conversational domain and fostering relevant conversations within it” (p. 44). This conversational domain should be culturally significant so that the curriculum is organized around living traditions, those that not only emerge from the past but can serve as tools for understanding the present and anticipating the future as well. Furthermore, the conversation envisioned by Applebee is not one that is confined to individual classes but one that extends through a student’s involvement in a discipline so that it encompasses and interrelates knowledge throughout the domain. The conversation, he says, should be both disciplinary so that students understand the unique vision available through a field of study and interdisciplinary so that students can learn to think across domains.

To Applebee a curriculum should be initiated by “a consideration of the conversations that matter—with traditions and the debates within them that enliven contemporary civilization” (p. 52). Applebee stresses that there needs to be a spirit of cooperation among students and teachers in order for these conversations to serve as the mediational tools he envisions. Such conversations have four key characteristics: they are built around language episodes of high quality, they have an appropriate breadth of materials to sustain conversation, they include a variety of parts that are interrelated, and they include instruction that is geared to promote students’ entry into the curricular conversation through such processes as instructional scaffolding.

The curriculum, says Applebee, is the vehicle that shapes the kinds of knowledge-in-action that students develop. A curriculum should attend to the kinds of experiences students have and the relationships that can be established among those experiences. Students’ entry into and increasing fluency with disciplinary conversations constitutes the primary experience afforded by a curriculum. In shifting the curricular focus from bodies of knowledge to be mastered to questions and themes that form the basis for conversation, Applebee establishes a new direction for curriculum planning. Typical curricula, he says, consist of catalogs of items, collections of information, sequences of events, and episodes of occurrences. Applebee argues that the wisest way to organize a curriculum is so that students are able to integrate knowledge through participation in an extended conversation: “The most comprehensive curricular conversations occur when students discover interrelationships across all of the elements in the curriculum, so

that the parallel but independent discussions of an episodic curriculum begin to echo back on one another. As new elements enter into the conversation, they provide not only new contexts for exploring or redefining the established topic, but new perspectives on other elements in the conversation, and on the topic itself. Here, the conversation involves a process of continuing reconstrual not only of what has just been introduced, but, in light of new ideas, everything that has come before" (p. 77). An integrated approach provides students and teachers an opportunity to shape the course of the conversation, allowing students to make it their own. With their subject an ongoing discourse, the knowledge students gain is dynamic and thus the knowledge-in-action that Applebee believes is necessary for a curriculum to work.

Applebee argues that in order for teachers to engender and sustain the disciplinary conversations that are essential to student development, they must be active participants in the disciplines they teach. He thus argues that secondary school teachers should complete a full-scale majors in the subjects they will teach, an argument that assumes that disciplinary conversations are actually taking place in college classrooms—interestingly enough, a point that Applebee himself questions elsewhere in this book. In addition, they should have pedagogical content knowledge, including an understanding of what students learn as they learn a new discipline, of how activities can be structured to support such learning, and of how curricular conversations can be initiated and sustained in classrooms.

Above all, the conversation that makes the curriculum should be genuine, dynamic, dialogic, cooperative, and extended. Teachers are the key mediators of this conversation, helping students move from traditions they bring to the classroom to those they must learn in the classroom. The teacher's role thus shifts from judging students' performances to helping students perform better. Assessment will then shift from knowledge of a subject to knowledge-in-action, focusing on students' ability to define interesting questions, express a clear point of view, gather evidence, and structure arguments according to disciplinary conventions. Assessment thus emphasizes students' developing abilities to enter disciplinary conversations.

In *Curriculum as Conversation* Applebee offers a view of curriculum and schooling predicated on the importance of students' participation in meaningful disciplinary activity. Curriculum planning, instead of consisting of an identification of the content students should be exposed to, becomes a process of identifying the themes students might fruitfully talk about and the activities they might engage in so that they may become active, informed members of communities of practice.

Book Reviews

Applebee provides some examples of what such a curriculum should look like through excerpts from his own research and that of others, thus illustrating his principles with vignettes from actual schooling. For those who are frustrated by the limited vision of typical curricula, who seek a way to organize schooling according to socially based principles, and who believe in the active role of students in developing the substance of their education, *Curriculum as Conversation* will make for wise and inspiring reading.

Reference

Applebee, Arthur N. *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History*. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974.