

From Text to Pretext: An Ethical Turn in Curriculum Work

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the violence of theory, which reduces the other when it leads the other
Jacques Derrida

From the ethical perspective developed in the work of French Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, ethics is “responsibility for the other” (Levinas, 1998) and more precisely: for the very otherness of the other. Thinking curriculum, the other is, of course, always present, with the urging need of finding ways to conceptualizations and practices of curriculum in which the otherness could be truly taken on. Indeed, one can easily get a sense of how ethical concerns immediately arise when curriculum conceptualizations and practices of curriculum seek to unambiguously define and prescribe what and how teachers should teach, and students must learn. Something even more salient in the context of international curriculum work, where the other (teachers and students) is of another country, another language, another culture, and so on. In Levinas’ words, imposing the other with “knowledge” of what and how things must be done proceeds from the reduction of otherness to sameness (Levinas, 1987): doing so, we act as if we knew what is best for the other, which requires to know *who* this other is, hence reducing his or her otherness to something we already know. And, Todd (2003) reminds us when quoting Derrida (1978), it is also the case with the theory we build as scholars:

As Derrida warn us: “rhetoric may amount to the violence of theory, which *reduces* the other when it *leads* the other, whether through psychology, demagogy, or even pedagogy which is not instruction.” If pedagogy is not instruction, Derrida intimates, then it is a rhetoric which does violence because it seeks to shape, influence, and 'lead' the other in a particular direction without consideration for persons as distinct subjects of difference (Todd, 2003, p. 7)

How can we, as researchers, curriculum designers, and even teachers and students, engage in curriculum work so that we encounter the difficult gift of the strange that the

presence of an Other presents? Especially in a time when these problematic conceptualizations and practices are compounded by contemporary international trends within the New Knowledge Economy which, despite an aim at taking into account the systemic nature and national particularities of knowledge and its creation (OECD, 2000), tends to construct authoritative discourses of knowledge as commodity, and teachers and students as clients or consumers, hence calling for important educational and curricular changes (Bacchus, 2006). Silenced and/or sidelined are debates about what matters in education within a paradigm driven increasingly so by neoliberal economic globalization. For example, it is little surprising see how mathematics education has become a tool of cultural imperialism by means of emphasize on “prescriptions”, “skills”, “outcomes” and “accountabilities” draining curriculum designers, teachers and students actions of their ethical significance (Neyland, 2007). In these terms, education’s purpose has become standardized and foreclosed in ways where nuance, ambiguity, controversy, and difference have no critically debatable place (Swanson, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, in press).

The challenge of appreciating individual, contextual and cultural differences in themselves, and not merely in how they relate to the unitary of universals in which human beings are ‘all the same’, is particularly important in the case of international curriculum work. From an ethical perspective, when curriculum is conceived of merely as a text prescribing a course of work for a class of students (in other words, curriculum as development rather than understanding [Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995]), it becomes obvious that those involved with the educational process, both teachers and students, tend to be less present to the differences of one to another. In fact, as a result of the scientific management of education organized on the assembly-line model (Neyland, 2010), this is a primary source of emotional and psychological disengagement in educational contexts. Expected to behave and think in terms of some authority’s idea of what is ‘right’ for their nation’s economy (often disguised under rhetoric of ‘student wellbeing’) and in ways that attempt to constitute their identities as ‘ideal students’ for the nation state, these students are consequently judged in terms of ‘success’ or ‘failure’ according to these curricular-driven criteria.

In this sense, *knowledge* is constituted as ‘content’ rather than that which is

negotiated and constantly reconstituted between learners. It is viewed as assimilatory, preauthored and as fixed understandings of the way the world 'is' and works. That is, we tend to neglect turning ourselves to come face-to-face with "the Other" in recognition of their being fully worthy human beings, and find meaning in the very act of knowing with and for one another as contingently mutualistic and in a condition of "humble togetherness" (Swanson, 2007). In this chapter, we recall those ideas and, with the example provided by an excerpt of a grade 7 mathematics lesson, articulate the need and the meaning of an important turn in/for our field: a turn from curriculum as "text" to curriculum as "pretext." Drawing on literature from the field leading to such a view, our intention is to address the question of international curriculum work from the perspective of what *we* can offer on the basis of how the making of curriculum can be ethically conceive. That is, we discuss the ethical significance of such a turn, and conclude by drawing to attention what it proposes for curriculum work in a global world.

Ethics and curriculum

Still dominant are the traditionally views in which curriculum is defined as a course of study "designed to ensure [...] uniformity of content and standards in education" (Oxford Reference Online). From such a perspective, curriculum somehow leads one to think in terms of generic, disembodied teachers working with similarly faceless, feelingless, uniformized students. This is particularly salient in the case of large scale and international implementations, often driven by international mathematics curricula and initiatives such as the TIMS-R study. Mathematics, despite centuries of development in various societies, is generally thought of as culturally free in nature and, for that reason, is well known for its contribution in deliberate strategies of acculturation at local, national, and international level (e.g. Bishop, 1995; Swanson, 2010; Willinsky, 1998). Despite obvious contextual, cultural, and historical discrepancies between teachers', students' or curriculum designers' everyday realities, mathematical concepts are most often perceived as universal and distinct from cultural bias, nuance or situatedness. This gives rise to pedagogic implementation that reifies 'skills-based' learning in ways that internationally universalizes student learning in mathematics and

ignores appropriateness of context, culture and way of life. In this sense it is dehumanizing. And when such a perspective serves as a guideline, curriculum practices tends to homogenize students and teachers through an increasing strive for standardization. Even pluralistic orientations taking into account slightly differing needs, social-cultural background, or learning processes, end up reducing students to what is “known” about them and their cognition in terms of set psychological and cultural criteria. In other words, students are objectified, psychologized and even pathologized as learners when thought of as differing from “the norm” (see Swanson, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2006).

From the ethical perspective developed in the work of French Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, such situations pose important ethical questions. Levinas' ethics is one of “responsibility for the other” (Levinas, 1998) which emphasizes *alterity*: a positive view of the very otherness of the other. For Levinas, we are, as human beings, in a primordial relationship with others and these relations summon us to be present and responsive to the uniqueness and unknowability of others. In contrast with traditional versions of ethics aiming at formulating universal principles, this ethics of alterity focuses on situated encounters, ones full of surprises, contradictions and ambiguities. Indeed, it conceptualizes the ethical impossibility of essentializing human beings. In this sense, it opposes the idea of directing one's conduct by mean of a moral code. In any attempt to direct actions on the basis of some essentialized knowledge about the other, we reduce him/her to such understandings, and thereby *suspend* his/her alterity (Levinas, 1987) by collapsing the difference of the Other into the “sameness” with oneself. This is particularly poignant, but often goes unnoticed, when acting in the interests of the Other or claiming to speak for or on the Other's behalf. Similarly, any effort to “pass on” or transmit knowledge, which we hear in the language of Knowledge Transfer or Knowledge Mobilization discourses, also positions the Other (a student, a teacher, a “developing nation” curriculum developer, or a learner or teacher constructed in terms of gender, race, class, caste, ethnicity, disability, or another realization of social difference discourse) as known entities toward which we have instrumental intentions. It could be argued that this “claiming to know” about and on behalf of the Other is a form of conquering, another form of psychological, symbolic and pedagogic colonization. In

contrast, Levinas presents the need for knowledge to be something in and which we find ourselves right next to the other, in true proximity: Knowledge not as something that comes between self and Other, as a filter or an object to be passed on, but something ever negotiated and created in the in between. Knowing can, in these terms, be conceived as the sustenance in which we realize (as in produce) our fundamental sociality: the togetherness constitutive of, and constituted by, our relation to the other and his/her alterity. Ethical responsibility then means engaging with the other otherwise than on the basis of some essence which would, even before the encounter, define me and him/her as beings in relation as a pre-discourse, a foreclosed reality about our objectified identities. Instead, what becomes possible is a form of action and relation between, say, teacher and student, that embraces knowing as always already knowing-with (Maheux, 2010). This is not to dismiss the possibility of a differential between student and teacher forming a hierarchy of authority structured within the social domain, but to more deeply consider this in the encounter as one of “humbly together” knowing-with, rather than a form of pre-authored knowing-against or on behalf of the Other. That is to say, when can only agree with Smith (2006) when he writes that “the most important challenge for curriculum work in the new millennium may be to develop the ability to deconstruct precisely *as* theory the unquestioned assumptions underwriting regnant forms of global economic procedure.” (p.82). Caught up in the ideological tenets of neoliberalism, curriculum as an intended course of study is designed to ensure standardization, and in this is at the opposite of Levinas' ethics.

Hopefully, new conceptualizations of curriculum are more akin with the recent ethical turn in educational research (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) in which the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is gradually increasing its reach in the educational research arena. To illustrate the range of interest in Levinas's work, we can mention a collection of articles published under the title *Levinas and Education* (Eg a-Kuehne, 2008), in which several scholars explain how the philosopher invokes for them a re-think of educational issues. Some question the brutal struggle of justice as framed by American education, the desirability of trying to resolve educational paradox once and for all, the very possibility of learning from another as a conscious subject, or the neoliberal requirement of social and pedagogical goals by means of which the value of teachers (and

students) is to be measured. For other researchers, Levinas' ideas inspire reflection upon the erosion of the teacher's ethical responsibility for the students in our technocratic educational systems (Neyland, 2005), lay the foundations for social justice and critical mathematics education (Atwey, 2007), reminds of the violence that sometimes come with teaching (Todd, 2003b; Khan, 2009; Swanson, 2010b) or draw attention to the need to celebrate alterity in education as a mean to break with traditional epistemologies (Radford, 2008). It is also "making the unknowable a priority" over what is or can be known (Abunuwara, 1998; Zembylas, 2005). That is, Levinas' work encourages a desire to rethink education starting from our own practices. It is a matter of engaging with and responding to Levinas rather than (in an instrumental fashion that would miss the ethical point of the philosopher's message) trying to *apply* his work (Todd, 2003a). What are the consequences of this in terms of international curriculum work?

In line with Derrida's warning about "the violence of theory, which reduces the other", engaging Levinas means to us asking ourselves how *our thinking and knowing* about curriculum in times when educators around the world often turn to us as experts, and consider our curriculum and educational practices as models they wish to adopt, or adapt. What does it ask us as curriculum workers? Indeed, when Levinas examines the composition of responsibility and the relational nature of knowing, he turns our attention to the fact that we are always "hostage" to our ethical relations with others. Whether we are aware of it or not, whether we accept or deny it, our very possibility for knowing arises from sociality. We know because there are others to know-with and to know-for, and although knowledge is always, Levinas says, *a solitude*, when receptive to Levinas's ethic, we necessarily find ourselves thinking or acting with another in concrete moments of knowing. As a result, despite a cognizing orientation which places us in ethical negation of alterity, there is always a *surplus* of humanity forcing us to adapt and reconstitute our thinking and orientation to the Other and enact responsiveness to individuals and situations. What are the possibilities for our actions as we carry on curriculum work to truly embody an ethics of alterity?

At this point, we could review numerous curriculum theorists' perspectives and discuss how each one helps us think with Levinas the question of ethics in international curriculum work. It might be useful to evoke Madeleine Grumet (1988), for instance,

when she conceives curriculum “as an aspiration, the object and hope of our intentionality” (p. 131) rather than a set of expected outcomes. Or William Pinar’s (e.g. Pinar & Reynolds, 1992) notion of *currere* shifting from curriculum as a noun to curriculum as a verb, if not Ted Aoki’s “lived curriculum” as opposed to “curriculum-as-plan” (Aoki, 1993, p. 201). We want, however, to be able to ground such discussion in some actual, concrete experiences of curriculum so that the reader can engage with us in the kind of curriculum work we are doing, that is what McDonald (1975) called “reconceptualization”: a creative intellectual task to develop new ways of talk about curriculum, here grounded in observation although neither to be used as a basis for prescription or as an empirically testable set of principles. Hence, to examine possibilities of curriculum work in light of Levinas’ ethics, and what could be seen as concrete, observable consequences of not doing so, we introduce, in the next section, an episode from a North American mathematics classroom. We will then examine this episode in relation with the official state curriculum it “implement” (from Latin *implere* “to fill up” which became *implementum* “a fulfillment”). With this in mind, we will then move to discussing how Levinas take us to think about curriculum not in terms of text, but as *pretext*, and see what it could mean when conceptualizing international curriculum work.

Curriculum In Practice

A classroom episode

The following an episode is taken from a North American mathematics classroom. It features Karen, a 7th grade teacher, and her students in a lesson about the concept of slope. We don’t know Karen or her students, but found this piece of video publicly available on the Internet, introduced as exemplar of how a teacher may “guide her class through a lively algebra lesson.” Indeed, Karen’s classroom runs smoothly, but with great intensity. In the writing of this chapter, we debated whether or not we would offer the reader a link to the episode, and decided not too as the lesson was not produced in the course of research. Our interest here is simply to provide the reader of a snippet of what curriculum *can* look like in practice, and rise so questions about what can or cannot be seen from such a perspective, and then reflect on how engage with such material in our own curriculum work.

The five minutes video begins with Karen gesturing with a hand-made poster entitled “Algebra: Meet Joe. Joe teaches us about four types of lines”:

Karen: Class,

Students: Yes.

K: Today we are gonna learn about the slopes of lines. Now there is four types of line...

Student: Shh!

K: We have lines that go up, lines that go down, horizontal lines and vertical lines ((moving her left hand as in figure 1)).

Karen continues by asking the student to “mirror” the explanation she repeats (speech and gestures), and next have the students explain it to one another. The whole classroom engages in a lively fashion as students turn to their assigned partner. Regaining the class’s attention, Karen checks off a “point” on the board as reward for their ‘correct’ answers, and then goes back to the topic. She tells the story of Joe who walks from right to left along those “lines” in the plane. She once again involves the students in her talk and gesture, explaining that “when Joe is standing on the line that goes up, he walks up the line, then the slope is positive,” where it is negative when Joe goes down, and zero when he walks horizontally. In the case of vertical lines, as Joe walks to the right, Karen continues, he “falls off the line and breaks in so many pieces that he is ‘un-de-fined’. We cannot define him as Joe anymore.” Karen again requires that the students mimic her gestures and re-explain to one another Joe’s story.

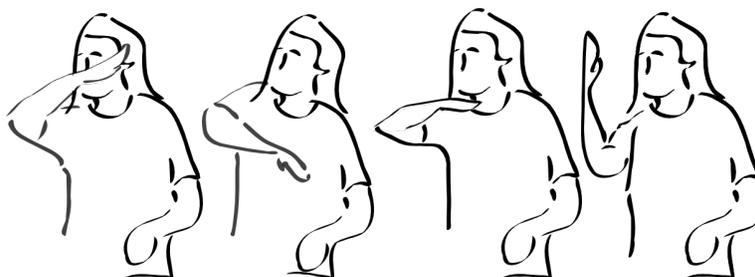


Figure 1: “We have lines that go up, lines that go down, horizontal lines and vertical lines”

After one more time repeating her entire explanation, mimicked by the students, in almost the same terms, rhythm, and gestures, Karen finally arrives at the “quiz.” While

she points at various graphs displayed on a whiteboard, the students identify whether the slope is positive, negative, zero or undefined. We can see, when watching closely, moments of hesitation in the students' responses. But all together, it seems that they "get it right" in the end. The class then obtains another "point" and Karen positively concludes:

K: So it looks like you guys are understanding how to figure out what slope is, hum, nice job today.

Looking Into What is Taking Place

Many North American mathematic educators, researchers or curriculum designers would strongly react to Karen's lesson. It would be easy to denigrate her teaching for not being 'conceptual' or 'student-centered' enough, and so on. With Levinas in mind, however, and in the idea of thinking international curriculum work in the balance of the local and the global, in the awareness of the fact that what we think and do *here* contribute to the larger picture which affect what is taking place *there*, what would a more open, ethically oriented attitude begin with? We started by asking ourselves: On what basis do we believe there are objectively better ways to introduce line slopes? Could not Karen be responding to particular needs or expectations, a vision a pedagogy? In what ways might we be able to dialogue with her and those with a similar approach, and explore the various possibilities, divers forms of response, enabled by such, and others, teaching practices?

Ethics quickly comes in because we are not privy to Karen's thinking, we do not and cannot know what she has in mind, why she decided to teach her lesson that way, nor can we assess what the students actually got out of it. To compensate this kind of limitations, research often uses follow-up interviews or discussions to explore the thinking behind the actions. But doing so we would assume that Karen "rationally" conceptualized each one of her actions, performed her teaching accordingly, and is able to verbalize her thinking in action in the form of a thinking about her action. We are then forced into taking those two moments in thinking as one and the same (hence completely neglecting the students' input in that thinking), or conducted to impose our own

interpretation of what would be Karen's thinking about her actions as what was guiding her in the action itself (once again neglecting the part of the students). When it comes to appreciate "what" a teacher or a student might be thinking in the making of curriculum "in practice", we can't avoid speculation, and in this reduce the others (the teacher and her student) and their otherness to *our* understanding of them. That is, Levinas explains, to ourselves, to something we know and know already: to sameness. An ethical orientation to curriculum in practice, and to local practices as ways of knowing that can contribute to "creating transnational 'spaces' in which local knowledge traditions in curriculum inquiry can be performed together" rather than a translation of local representations of curriculum into a universal discourse (Gough, 1998) demands accepting not to know what students or teachers might be thinking.

The 'internationalisation' of curriculum studies might then be understood not so much in terms of translating local representations of curriculum into a universal discourse but, rather, as creating transnational 'spaces' in which local knowledge traditions in curriculum inquiry can be performed together.

What we can do, on the other hand, is first of all to examine what Karen and her students are offering us to see. In this short episode, we observe the teacher using narrative anecdotes, and those seem to provide a good basis for (short-term at the least) memory-work. She uses gestures, rhythm and intonation which give her talk intensity, and have the students repeat her action for themselves and for one another. As a result, the students manage to correctly identify the terms 'positive,' 'negative,' 'zero' and 'undefined' with something that resembles graphs of linear functions. Whereas some might critique Karen for not enabling a mathematical comprehension of the concept, other could argue that this is actually 'good practice,' because asking for deep conceptual understanding is not necessary in such circumstances, or may be too difficult for the student to reach, or undermine their mathematical confidence: little do we know. Do not students themselves often come up with and use such techniques? Certainly, one might point to some capricious aspects of Karen's story. For example, while Joe's *change in position* 'up' and 'down' leads to characterizing the slope as 'positive' and 'negative', it is *his state* of being broken 'in so many pieces' that explains why the slope is undefined rather than negative, despite the fact that Joe clearly moves down when he 'falls'. These

could have been avoided by an algebraic interpretation to support Karen's explanation, but on the other hand there are, too, many conventional aspects to Cartesian graphs (e.g. positive and negative directions, the intersection at zero, etc.). Graphs are very complex historically constituted cultural mathematical entities that only slowly become part of students' mathematical life. In this short episode, what the teacher *does* is to provoke an encounter between the students and that complex object, talk and gesture about it with the students, present the graph and the idea of slope as somehow friendly mathematical objects they can engage with –should it only be in a superficial manner.

Ethically speaking, this is not to say that no question can be asked regarding teachers' and students' activity, but quite importantly, it means that all-knowing answers *cannot* be provided. A key idea running through Levinas' ethics is the impossibility to know the Other, to understand him or her, to have answers as to what is the best for him/her. Trying to grasp the other, to comprehend him or her, and then assert whether she was doing right or wrong negates otherness and turns the other into a known entity toward which we have instrumental intentions. However, observing what takes place in the interaction between teachers and students as curriculum comes to life shows that questions *should* actually be asked. Obviously, there is no discussion, in those 5 minutes, about conventions and where they might be coming from. No considerations as to why lines might be considered to have slope, no evocation of what representations in a plane mean and why we use them. Further, we observed many times how thinking of slope in terms of a displacement along lines in a graph often leads students to make literal interpretations. Conceptual difficulties increase when other types of values are represented on the graph (acceleration, percentage, money, and so on), when non-linear functions are introduced (e.g. parabolas), or even more simply, obstacles arise when dealing with situations such as the following (Figure 2), in which many students tend to describe slopes as hills instead of noticing how they correspond to speed (ratio between time and distance):

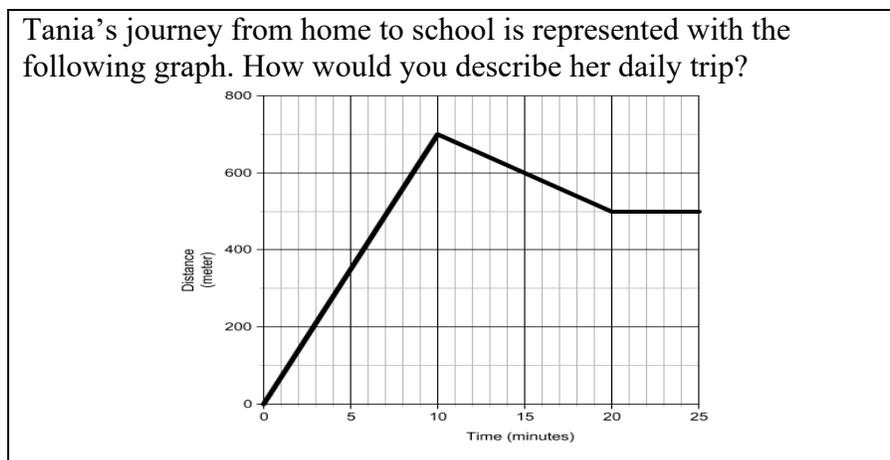


Figure 2: A graph in which a positive slope means going faster, not going up.

We say that questions should be asked in regard what was is taking place, but questions that will enable us to embrace our responsibility for the other and his/her otherness by experiencing it rather than looking for ways to shut it down in conformity. That is, questions should be asked which can enable *dialogue*, an encounter developing not on the basis that there might be an objectively better way to introduce line slopes, or with the intention to capture the particular needs or the a vision a pedagogy Karen might be responding to. But a conversation to explore the various possibilities, divers forms of response, imaginable teaching practices, and in dialogue enabled them, and others. From such a perspective, we can discuss with Karen the importance of learning about slope as the ability to understand given situations, or other mathematical phenomena (like the concept of ratio). We can dialogue on the sustainability of forms of engagement that has short-term benefits for the students, but might be problematic for mathematical development in the long term. In other words, we can *respond* to Karen by engaging with her and not merely on the basis of what we (think we) *know* about her, about students, about mathematics or about teaching and learning, but mostly by offering ourselves to her (and her students) presence and actions.

In between local renderings of curriculum in practice and the global issues implicated in international curriculum development, Levinas' ethics may open to a productive tension. As Pinar (2003) puts it:

The accelerating and expanding complexity of our work as curriculum scholars [...] calls upon us to continue to make scholarly efforts toward the self-

conscious understanding of our work and the work of teachers and students in the schools, all of us situated culturally, historically, and now, we are acutely clear, globally. (p. 25)

In this global awareness, Levinas' ethics asks us to think our actions in the encounter with the everyday, the local, which in turn can inform us on how, globally, we want to address the question of curriculum in and as international development. Karen and her students' speaks to us, in a very concrete and immediate manner, of the ethical impossibility to *know* what teachers are students might know or intend to do, let alone to *control* it by mean of a curriculum. And at the same time, it tell us something very valuable about the ethical possibility to *work around* this situation by engaging with them, and promoting such engagement between them. What if curriculum was thought of as an ostensible purpose, an occasion for curriculum developers, teachers and students to engage with one another, and with ideas and diverse ways of being and doing? For local as it seems, such a proposition also applies when we globally think on how we conceive and realize curriculum work, a process in which we globalize the local without imposing it in a colonialist manner *because* it is at the service of complexity, cultural diversity, recognition of particular histories, and so on.

A state document

Before making any more observations about Karen and her lesson, let us have a look at the California state curriculum (Lundin, 2006): the one within which Karen works. What we want to do here is simply to bring into question, together with what we observe in Karen's classroom, some of the elements that other curriculum workers –the designers of “framework for California public schools”– perform when they, too, put curriculum into practice, here in the form of a state document. We do this again to help us think about how we (can) conceive of our own contributions in the perspective of international curriculum work, and in the light of Levinas' ethics.

The current California state curriculum was prepared by experienced developers (the editor is involved in curriculum design since at least 1993, assisted by similarly experienced consultants), involved an impressive number of commissions and its members (listed in the document) and was finally approved by a state commission.

Emphasizing a balance of procedural skills and conceptual understanding, it insists on engaging students in active, in-depth mathematical activity. The program then presents “key standards” broken down into “focus statements” indicating “discrete skills and concepts” to be mastered by the students. The document states that “one of the first tasks required of a school district is to determine its students’ current achievement levels [for the] attainment of all the content standards” (p. 229) in good part by “establishing clear goals that are focused on students’ learning of the mathematical content standards” (p. 241). About the level of Grade 7 algebra, according to the state curriculum “it is expected that” students will “graph linear functions and understand the idea of slope and its relation to ratio” (p. 68) so that they “understand that the slope of the line equals the ratio of the [represented] quantities” (p. 73). There are no special requirements regarding signs of slopes, or the concept of undefined ratio. But the document is not very rich either in relation with the considerable amount of research around graphing (e.g. Haimes, 1996), classroom communication (e.g. Chronaki & Christiansen, 2005), the role of emotions (e.g. Byrd, 1982), or even the practice of relational understanding (Skemp, 1976).

To give but a glimpse of some of the views one might read in mathematics educational research about such aspects mentioned above, especially in the North American context where “progressive education” has such a foothold in curricular development, a number of publications stress the importance of having students articulate various forms of representation for themselves when they study graphs (Duval, 1999; Acuna, 2002). The emphasis is a move away from dependency education and transmission-based learning. Research on mathematical communication often attests to how “math-talk” might *ask* students to produce questions, explanations, elaborations, and justifications (Webb, 1991; Hufferd-Ackles et al., 2004). While stressing the importance of multimodality in classroom mathematical communication, researchers also insist that gestures, for example, need to be considered for *reflexive* mathematical activity (e.g. Radford, 2009). Similarly, many studies highlight the importance of emotion to support students’ *engagement in high-level* cognitive actions (Debellis & Goldin, 1991; Roth, 2007).

Reading between the lines

State curricula, as we know, are often quite controversial as well, should it be among scholars, teachers, or within the population. Whereas some critique, on various bases, excessive student-centredness, others, on the contrary, find most curricula to strongly depend on a dependency-model of engagement where students are still mostly expected to follow their teachers to get where we want them to go. To take the perspective of research, one could argue that looking at students achievement levels presupposes that these instruments of assessment are valid in the sense that what they measure about the student correspond to something “real”. This, however, would be strongly challenged by scholars (including many in the field of curriculum studies) who reject such realist epistemology. Many voices can be heard in favor of ensuring standardization in the achievement, while critical perspectives strongly reject such a model for pathologizing and colonizing students, thus coercively reproducing social inequities. And similarly, it can be argued by some that the progressive model for education also relies on a fixed, non-negotiated conception of what is right for students, therefore somewhat authoritarian and coercive in orientation (where are the diverse student voices in the construction of such conceptions?).

On the other hand, the curriculum developers who produced this document can also feel misunderstood. After all, they do not merely repeat researchers observations, but somehow translate them for specific mean and specific audience, negotiating their way within a context that as little to do with that of many scholars. A state curriculum certainly presents a legitimate curriculum work, an attempt at making things “work.” But on the other hand, we also notice significant differences between what the curriculum demands and, for example, Karen’s lesson. Is this another instance of misunderstanding, where a teacher make sense of what is expected from her in a way that does not coincide with that of the curriculum designers? Or even better, can this difference be understood in the observation that curriculum can never be enacted “by the book,” that pedagogy cannot be restricted from the outside, because this would require an impossible isolation of oneself from others, a denial of the inbetween spaces in which what we do is always with and for others?

As it seem, taking an authoritarian perspective as to what is said by researchers or

curriculum designers is always extremely problematic. There is an obvious need to “read” what other have written, to adapt it, to be responsive to other voices in the room and not do them violence by the mean of abstract documents (should they be research papers or a state curriculum, a textbook). Thinking curriculum work in one or another forms of telling the other what to do naturally leads to leaching the other (the curriculum designer, the teacher, and, ultimately, the student) from their capacity to critically think through and determine what is best for themselves and with one another.

Despite years of research and billions of dollars invested in the ‘improvement’ of teaching and learning, practices of curriculum development or implementation have a strongly authoritative bent. There is a visible lack of responsiveness between research, curriculum development, and classroom renderings. This situation easily forms conditions in which curriculum designers, teachers and students do not engage with one another on the basis of their alterity. They somehow, Levinas might say, “miss” one another by giving most of their attention to dehumanized knowledge to be passed on, bit by bit. This, we argue in the next section, comes with an orientation to curriculum as “text,” as opposed to the ethical notion of curriculum as “pretext” for the encounter with the other in his/hers alterity.

From text to pretext

Mathematics educators are well aware that books and Journals are full of texts presenting observations, developing ideas, constructing frameworks, and so on, mostly aimed at the improvement of (mathematics) education. This search for improvement, we may come to realize, is also ideologically-informed, and often make invisible important questions in relation to curriculum work, especially in the context of international development. Seldom do we ask why improvement is required and what we mean by that, rarely do we discuss if there might be more important thing for students than studying, say, mathematics, hardly do we ever wonder if there other ways of being in the world that don’t necessitate (usually coercively) that students “improve”. As an example, Gutstein (2003) is a critical mathematics educator who promotes the right to *hate mathematics*, not

to have to study it, hence challenging the assumptions that are made about mathematics education, our often-hidden ideological assumptions about how one ought to be in the world.

On the other hand, we are also familiar with the distinction between the written curriculum and teachers' and students' actual, lived experiences: "This lived curriculum [...is not] laid out in a plan, but a plan more or less lived out [and] deserves the label 'curriculum' as much as the plan deserves the label 'curriculum-as-plan'" (Aoki, 1993, p. 201). When we understand that teaching is dealing with an open dynamic environment, we know that any task prescribed by a curriculum is redefined by the teachers and their students (e.g. Robert & Rogalski, 2005). We also realize this means that what is actually learned by the students cannot simply be placed in terms of a body of knowledge to be transmitted. In other words, a "recontextualization" process occurs (Bernstein, 2000). As a result, new ways of conceiving the curriculum begin to emerge. Rather than merely defining "what should children learn, in what sequence, and by what methods" (Egan, 2003, p. 15), educational communities might start thinking of curriculum as the possible role it might play to which purposes in education (in other words, what values and ideals are important, as opposed to which abstract concepts are to be transmitted (see Swanson, 2010b). In other terms, we might think of curriculum in schools in terms of guiding teachers, by means of principles and features of the educational encounter, to "encourage conversations between, and with, people in the situation" (Smith, 2000).

One way to characterize this turn is to think of curriculum in terms of the difference between the words "text" and "pretext." Curricula are traditionally considered on the basis of their content, of the written words and the specific ideas they index. Many curriculum developer, like Pinar et al. (1995), critique this outmoded conception, but in dominant practices (as the state document we briefly examined illustrated), curricula are still often like the Tables of the Law: prescriptions with set expectations of teachers to teach in a particular way (valued as best practice) and of students to learn in what is deemed the right or most effective way also. The prescriptive nature of curricular documents is easily evident in the state curriculum document discussed above (e.g. see pages 283-286), typifying in its most static form the idea of curriculum as "text".

In the recent years, curriculum as text began to take a very different meaning. From

a hermeneutical perspective, text is to be taken not as it is in itself, but as appropriated by those who use it. That is, curriculum is then understood as having diverse meanings, whereas *interpretation* is key. Starting from Pinar's et al. (1995) proposition to understand the curriculum field as "discourse, as text ... a form of articulation that follows certain rules and which constructs the very object it studies" (p.7), emphasize is given to the language that characterize curriculum and, in return, shapes it. From this perspective, different kinds of curriculum texts are identified: curriculum as *aesthetic* text (where curriculum is art and artistic experience, and teachers, as curriculum workers, are artists), curriculum as *institutionalized* text (concerned with the structure of schools, curriculum planning and design, supervision and evaluation), or in terms of racial, gender, or politically based issues, and so on. In this, we realize however that despite Pinar's intention to contrast the "unethical and epistemologically unsound" effort, in dominant curriculum work, to "quantify the immeasurable" (Pinar and Reynolds, 1992), curriculum as text is still highly problematic from the perspective of Levinas' ethics. Although curriculum is understood as deconstructed and deconstructing text, it remains a series of narratives "in which the listener, the 'narratee,' may become a character, or indeed the narrator" (p.7). Doing so, curriculum is still essentializing the other, teachers or students, because it impose on them a story in which they are to play certain roles, and on the basis of what seems to be the most important issues for them *in the eyes of the curriculum designers*. Even if interpretation is central, with curriculum as text, in a noble endeavor, from a hermeneutical point of view, to center education on meaning making (Soumlhng and van Niekerk, 2005), focus is not on the other and his/her otherness. With Van Manen's (1988) proposition, curriculum as text has to be oriented, strong, rich and deep in order to bring the student to historically defined "meaning structures" embedded in the curriculum language. If not prescriptive, curriculum is still what Kieren (1995) describe as *envaluative*: it engages a teacher to try and ascribe value to whatever the students are doing, listen to them to find an intellectual model for their actions, and accept the particular value in their work... but only as long as she can make sense of their divergence.

Caricatural of course, the idea of curriculum as text, however, well pictures the

difficulties that come with a focus on objects (like a document, but also an object of knowledge) rather than people, the other. At one extremity, we find positivist, managerialist mindset within which perfectible explicit curricular statements should lead to ‘effective management’ of teaching and learning. At the other, a hermeneutical perspective which still requires to oversee other and ‘guide’ him/her to one’s ways of thinking and doing (an iron hand in a velvet glove). Alternatively, we suggest that the picture is quite different when curriculum is rather seen as *pretext* in the sense of an ostensible purpose, an excuse, an occasion for teachers and students to engage with ideas and diverse ways of being and doing; ways that reflect an ethical concern in how we might be in relationship with each other. In curriculum as pretext, the written document does not present itself as a cookbook, or novel. Often lengthily discussing rationales, the text develops philosophical ideas as to what can be done, why it might be done in a particular way, it indicates possible ideals, resources, processes, potential contexts, and suggests that students play with the relations between ideas (rather than just focus on the concepts or ‘skills’ themselves as something only to ‘acquire’). Recognizing that curriculum as ‘text’ can never exactly prescribe what teachers and students should actually do and that there is no surety in what they may learn from a particular approach,, curriculum should never be conceived of as an action plan, but as a resource that teachers might use to think through pedagogical approaches in preparing lessons with their students. Whereas concepts, processes, or facts might be offered, pretext in this sense provides more room for students to explore areas of knowledge themselves based on what happens in the classroom and in their lives. Such perspectives aim at overcoming the problem of divergent individual curricula. For example, in Kieren's (1995) proposition for mathematics curricula:

the teacher holds open possibilities, expects students to act on their own structures but explain their thinking for the community and because the teacher uses proscriptive logic, the curriculum as lived in the classroom is large. Each student participates in the curriculum in a way which co-verges with his colleagues. The teacher shares responsibility with the students for the world of mathematical significance they bring forth (p.22)

In such a view, curriculum acknowledges the circularity of experience “casting education not merely as an interpretive process but as one which plays an active role in

the continual re-configuring of individual and collective identities” (Davis, Sumara & Kieren, 1996, p. 167), where students are given occasions to genuinely generate knowledge with their teachers instead of merely reproducing or reporting on what is ‘accepted’ preauthored knowledge. Concerned with allowing for the unexpected, curriculum as pretext permits a view of teaching and learning as truly conversational. In other words, it has less to do with the Socratic dialogue in which questions, (as exemplified in earlier textbooks), seems to aim at provoking predefined and narrow answers, but in an authentic reciprocity of perspectives, offering a multiplicity of possible answers or ways of viewing the question, so that curriculum does not impose itself as a ‘violence of the universal’, but helps teachers situate searches for and constructions of meaning *with* the students (Greene, 1975).

What of Karen’s 7th grade mathematics classroom then? On the one hand, we clearly see how the official curriculum still embodies a “textual” orientation, presenting itself as a structure of prescribed knowledge. We can perhaps understand Karen’s lesson as presenting mathematics as “text,” not as a “pretext” for discussions, for genuine meaning-making in the back and forth of engaging with ideas, with another, or with some concrete observations. Beside that, its relation to the state document illustrates the limits of thinking in terms of curriculum as historical and contemporary discourses (Pinar et al. 2003). The document itself necessarily reflects a certain (standard based) perspective in which *some* of the relevant research literature is interpreted. But even that discourse hardly resonates with our observations in Karen’s lesson. When she performs curriculum with her students, she is *all* in between the lines, nevertheless oriented toward an object of knowledge she manages (by all means) to make ostensible: “So it looks like you guys are understanding how to figure out what slope is, hum, nice job today.” Curriculum as pretext is about challenging this violence that seeks to shape, influence, and lead the other (the teacher, the student), and placing education at the service of encountering the other.

Curriculum as text is thus a mean of thinking in terms of international curriculum work to the violence of theory that reduces the other. We have in mind the necessity to recognized, in a global world, the systemic nature and local particularities of knowledge and its creation as performed by teachers and students. From an ethical perspective, we

conceptualize the importance of turning ourselves, and all curriculum workers (teachers, students, academics, researchers, designers) to one another and to what we *do* (and do not do) in regards to engaging with the otherness of the other. The challenges of culture and context, we argue, is one of encountering the other through curriculum work, both locally and globally, as we engage with one another.

One might ask why is it that curriculum-as-pretext still hardly finds its way to our state departments and to our classroom? What more are we missing so that curriculum development could actually move us beyond the temptation of seeing education through objectively defined knowledge to be attended to, appropriated, and measured in a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ fashion, objectifying, essentializing, categorizing and pathologizing learners and teachers along the way? Answers to those questions are plentiful. It could be argued that the current state of economic neoliberal globalization is to blame (Swanson, 2010b, in press). In this sense, some accuse the political establishment that supports an economic utopia of the scientific management of education (Neylan, 2005). Each of these would testify to the importance of considering the idea of curriculum as pretext rather than the authoritarian text it is usually conceived of.

In recent years, there appears to be an increasing understanding of curriculum as pretext. The reorientation undertaken by scholars in curriculum theory, although (as we discussed) sometimes still caught into a reducing orientation in which we *miss* the encounter with the other (Levinas, 1998), important headways have been made. It is now largely accepted (despite of dominant practices) that curriculum not only concerns what happens between teachers and students, but between teachers and curriculum developers (and other stakeholders) as well. Curriculum work is not merely about producing text, but is in the opening up of dialogue with policy makers, parents, teachers, students, and so on (Dobson, 2003). Calling upon us to “join them right in the middle of their conversation” (Aoki, 1993 p. 215), such an orientation to curriculum more than ever needs to be heard as contributions in the “constant processes of engaging, questioning, choosing, taking action and becoming in relation, not only to primordial landscapes but also to multiple and different others” (Miller, 2010, p. 138). In this way, we can realize move forward the re-conceptualization of curriculum through considering how it is created (Grimmett &

Halvorson, 2010) and openly construct it as extended conversations, yet truly historical, cultural, ever-evolving discursive structures (Bleakley, 2009).

In the remainder of this chapter, we consider curriculum as pretext in both its pedagogic implications in the classroom as well as curriculum as design, and engage in a conversation about why the shift has crucial ethical importance for educational communities and curriculum work in a global context.

The Ethics of Pretext

From an ethical perspective, the shift in thinking and practices from curriculum-as-text to curriculum-as-pretext is an important one for educational communities. Levinas' perspective on "text" not only make this salient, but also help us better understand what this move demands of curricular documents and the way we might use them.

In 2008, a number of specialists of Levinas' writing gathered at a conference around the theme "Emmanuel Levinas: The question of the book" (Abensour & Kupiec, 2008) in which they highlighted the philosopher's perspective on written text and its relation to ethics. For Levinas, texts (such as his own philosophical essays, but also discursive concepts) are not mere receptacles of thought or ideas, but speak to conditions of humanity. Texts, in all their media forms, can be recognized as "unfinished conversations," inherently calling for *continuation*, and not only interpretation. Texts speak to conditions of humanity because they are "made" of us, and "making" us at the same time: like a *textile*, it weaves in and is wove by our humanity; a continuous plait of ourselves. That is, for Levinas, whereas a text most certainly "says" something, what matters most is not what is said, but the "saying" itself. In Levinasian terms, the "said" is closed and authoritative, whereas the "saying" offers an openness, a dialogue, and an avenue towards constant reinscription and reinterpretation. Texts are utterances just as a person's expression in a conversation (Levinas, 1998). The true power of text then is not to inform, but to inspire, to call upon dialogue, whereas its actual meaning is never detached from the personal history of whoever reads or engages with it, constantly renewed in and through the process of "reading" that finds it relevant to the current activity or thinking. But this interpretative process is *not* merely a matter of reading the text, the situation, or the other. As in curriculum-as-text, including the work of Pinard and

others we previously referred to, this would mean, for Levinas, reducing the text to the said, and leading the other on the basis of sameness (what *I* interpret) rather than welcoming otherness. Levinas suggest seeing texts as manifestation of alterity, as coordination with another, as reminders of our ethical responsibility for the other who is central in any meaning one could make of the text, of the act of reading, of oneself..

If we think about Karen's lesson for a moment, we may realize that her lesson in mathematics presents, indeed, a certain understanding of the curriculum she has to work with. There is necessarily a conversation between the text and her, meaning-making on the basis of her own personal experiences. We are not privy to her thinking. She might have made choices based on the coercive nature of the curriculum document, or the expectations from educational administrators or parents. We have no access to the struggles she might be experiencing as ethical dilemmas between 'curriculum as expectation' and 'curriculum as personal'. Who knows, she may feel compelled to provide immediate results and short-term satisfaction from students or parents so that she can keep her teaching position. Greatly underestimated is 'curriculum as coercion' that lies in the "said" of text. We also might recognize how Karen recontextualizes (Bernstein, *ibid.*) her understandings of a curriculum document and its expectations into concrete choices that, from her perspective, reference the ideals or expected outcomes of the former. In other words, in semiotic terms, the signified becomes something else. And similarly, the document itself is but a reified experience of curriculum developers with other texts. In the most open representation of it as "saying", it is the result of a dialogue of written and spoken utterances (with all the agonistic processes of negotiation and influence behind the scenes) in which humans realize themselves as languaging beings. Text inherently produces interpretations and conversations, even those, preachers and lawyers know, like sacred text or a code of Laws, which present themselves in a monological, prescriptive, indisputable fashion. The 'said' is always, necessarily transformed, open to reinscription and reinterpretation, but viewing curriculum as "saying", it might be considered utterances to which Karen and her students perpetually respond... and with their own lives.

What then might an ethical curricular orientation to the Other look like, whether that Other be a student, a teacher, a school administrator, a curriculum developer from

another country, or otherwise? The question is, indeed, rooted in how the text presents itself as something to be responded to, in how it offers affordances, and in whether it is a closed “said” or an open, continuous “saying”. That is, when curriculum does not merely impose itself as text, but overtly appears as a pretext for conversations and interpretations in dialogues by means of which students, teachers and all those involved, engage with one another in dynamic social relations. . Such relations are *not* to be ones obsessed by knowledge as ‘content’, but knowledge as constantly reconstituted in the interstices between discourses, in the ‘inbetween’. They are oriented toward the expression of the relationality of being, the very fact that knowing is more mindfully a knowing-with taking place in actual, culturally-enabled practices and in a particular setting: a *knowing-with-in* (Maheux, 2010). Levinas hence speaks of an artistic appreciation of culture and of one another in an un-thematized wisdom that *conserves* (from Latin *con-* ‘together’ + *servare* ‘to keep’) alterity in condition “otherwise than knowing” (Levinas, 1988, p. 90). Texts, then, orient to their saying (rather than to what is said) so that they are fully *for* the other, serving the reader to respond to the alterity he/she encounters (Levinas, 1998). The “text” of curriculum as pretext is one that opens and maintains capabilities and possibilities to always go beyond anything expected, anything already known, provoking (from *pro-* ‘forth’ + *vocare* ‘to call’) sensitivities, appreciations and responses, which in return also invite the other to further join in the sociocultural world of knowing.

It can be argued that curriculum as pretext is ethically oriented because it aims at producing the encounter with the otherness of the other so that we come to know with and for that other. We want a curriculum that does not merely state expectations, but enables multiple interpretations that are ever dialogical and open. Such a pretext escapes the tyranny of preauthored discourses and a curriculum of closure, elements of which, it can be argued, can be found in events such as those we saw in Karen's classroom, where there seems to be no true conversation. We therefore propose a curriculum that desists from teaching and learning taking place in the absence of a real celebration of the encounter with others and otherness, a curriculum that recurrently challenges the fiction of knowledge and intelligibility in which students are little more than the teacher's foil, and teachers themselves act like well-programmed automata. We propose a curriculum as a true invitation to *dialogue*, hence developing itself *as* those conversations that try to

make sense of these things (Grumet, 1996). In this sense, it is perhaps a pedagogy that tries to make sense of the unintelligible, and make unintelligible that which seems to make so much ‘universally-accepted’ sense.

In this, we find correspondence with other researchers’ work articulating Levinas’ idea with that of curriculum. We hear the urgent need for an “ethical orientation” to curriculum because “instrumentalism” is debasing education of its true spirit (Neyland, 2005b). We hear the desire to see curriculum enabling students and teachers to celebrate their otherness and togetherness in how they relate to the socio-material world (Blades, 2006). We recall the spirit of the ethical philosophy of Levinas, in curricular texts that would invite teachers and students to go beyond what can be planned, appreciate the limitless of any subject, and offer a conception of knowledge as something that neither belongs to the teacher nor is a construct to be ‘acquired’ by the student. It may be, instead, the realization of the relation of self to Other (see Standish in Egéa-Kuehne, 2008). This is a curriculum that “lends the substance of learning to become” (Todd, 1993b, p.39) in social proximity with others by engaging teachers and students with alterity.

But as text remains text no matter how much it tends to overcome its condition, curriculum as pretext also means, for us as developers or theorists, to advance toward those others and also meet them in a true encounter of their otherness. Curriculum is pretext for the self as well: ever changing, ever evolving, it is a means by which we go beyond content and becomes involved (from *in-* ‘into’ + *volvere* ‘to roll’) in its articulatory practices, contributing (from *con-* ‘with’ + *tribuere* ‘bestow’) to its interpretations so that curriculum as pretext is also positively realized as a form of knowing-with-in. That is, we do not want another form of text distantly handed to teachers, undermining the ethical responsiveness of being open to others’ otherness. Rather than an abandonment of the charge of an ethical reading and writing of the curriculum of the classroom, we might encourage instead an reflexive interrogation of our own practices of “curriculum work” so that this work becomes an ethical response to one another’s otherness, and in the service of the otherness teachers and students encounter with each other and with the ideas they explore together.

Coda: Curriculum Work in An International Context

Neoliberal economic globalization is unlikely to have its day anytime soon. It is most often marked by dehumanized political and economic alliances, and thus affects education in a number of ideologically-underwritten ways. Nevertheless, globalization has permitted greater complex interconnections and pathways never made possible before. In this condition, the upside is the possibility of new forms of relationship that develop between people from all around the world. More and more, officials and educators at the antipodes meet (physically or virtually) to try and work together in inventing new ways to conceive of curriculum and its articulatory practices. In those encounters, as in any, knowledge of the other naturally comes into play, affecting the ethicality of the relationship. We see one another as representative of ‘developed’ versus ‘developing’ countries, for example, or emerging versus well-established democracies, privileged “knowers” of what they consider works and ‘ought to be done’, and “learners” eager to find solutions to what they identify as their problems and situation. As a result, we often fall into patterns typical of what we call cultural imperialism. We often tend not only to promote the imposition of dominant western ideas and ideals, but also tend to remove curriculum work from the space where teachers, administrators, politicians and citizens are able to dialogue and debate. That is, curriculum work most often frames itself in terms of text rather than pretext, and thereby sets up ethical impossibilities for curriculum workers, including teachers and students.

Advocating curriculum as pretext and embodying such a perspective, however, has the unsettling effect of always opening oneself to the other, and produces conversations by means of which we make sense of our realities. In such encounters with others, all contributors learn with, for and from one another. Each and every one reflexively revisits his/her own practices or perceptions, but also the means by which challenges and solutions are identified. When curriculum is pretext, conversations are the true work of curricular innovations in the etymological sense of the term, (from *in-* ‘into’ + *novare* ‘make new.’) From an ethical perspective such as the one developed by Levinas, curriculum as pretext would suggest that knowledge never appears to precede the relation with the other, the ones we meet in face-to-face encounters or in distant relationships.

On the one hand, it tells us that “talking slope” with 7th graders is not merely about

getting the students to “figure out what slope is” and get it right. In its local, classroom, teacher-students rendering, curriculum work is placing mathematical activity at the service of teachers’ and students’ encounter, and alterity. On the other hand, we learn about ourselves, in terms of international work, from Karen’s and her students’ story, together with the (ethical, pedagogical, etc.) impossibilities we saw in relation with then curriculum text intended to guide them. In its global, international dimension, curriculum work *is still* a matter of encountering the other: the curriculum designer, the teacher, the student, and so on. Curriculum, as we conceptualize it with the ethical philosophy of Levinas, is not, and never will be, the main objective, the subject of these encounters. It is *pretext* for them, and us, to meet.

From this perspective, the challenges of culture and context in international curriculum work are then truly ethical ones. When examined from the perspective of concrete, actual encounters with the other, it is in one's sense of responsibility to the other (in his/her very otherness), in curriculum as pretext for the appreciation of alterity, that the ethical dimension of curriculum work realizes itself. In this sense, the turn from text to pretext in curriculum work, it can be argued, is always and already *a turn in conversation...*

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