Writing ourselves out west: Curriculum leakages, creative endeavours & pedagogical encounters

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This paper rereads a service learning / community engagement pedagogy for pre-service secondary teachers in western Sydney, Australia, as a 'leaky' curriculum that allows for slippages beyond conventional curriculum silos, and that provokes productive and unpredictable pedagogical encounters. The leaky or 'holey' curriculum is a concept I have borrowed from new approaches to curriculum theory inspired by the work of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze and his collaborator, Felix Guattari, were keen to provoke new ways of thinking and advocated the creation of concepts as the central role of philosophy. New concepts create new connections and in so doing, they actively create new worlds and new ways of thinking the world. In a recent book Jason Wallin turns to the etymology of curriculum ‑ from the Latin 'currere' meaning 'to run'- and refigures currere as a concept that opens a new way of thinking about curriculum, that is, despite its lineage, more open to a future where teaching and learning are envisaged as creative rather than reproductive endeavours.

In this paper, I consider the productive capacity of the more open ended curriculum of service learning to 'run', in the sense opened up by the concept of 'currere', and I consider how this might create 'new flows, offshoots and multiplicitous moments' (Wallin, 2010, p. 2). 'Currere' – as opposed to curriculum - implies 'a line of *becoming* that expands difference and implying experimentation, movement and creation' (Wallin, 2010, p. 2). However, etymologically,

Paper presented at IARSLCE (International Association of Research into Service Learning & Community Engagement) Conference, Chicago, USA, Nov 4, 2011.

'currere' also refers to an ancient Greek chariot track, literally, a course or a circuit that is to be run in a repetitive and reproductive loop, analogous to the closed circuit of contemporary curriculum where students are kept 'on track' by teachers and the pedagogical apparatus of timetables, uniforms, mandated syllabus outcomes, assessment rubrics, grading, standardized testing and external examinations that ensure conformity and assume homogeneity. In this paper, I want to try to think through curriculum in the active sense of 'currere' – as a 'line of becoming' rather than the reactive sense of a more rigid notion of curriculum, that might enable encounters 'of another kind or logic altogether' (Wallin, 2010, p. x). But I also want to signal that habituated ways of thinking, and the regulatory requirements, are always also already pushing up against the possibilities of the new. This approach to curriculum scholarship focuses attention on the 'micropolitical', that is, on the intricacies of embodied encounters between teachers and young people. Case studies are the ideal methodology for developing thick descriptions that might be responsive to the minutiae of teaching and learning. This approach also draws attention to relations between people and place.

A Deleuzian philosophy allows us to think of human and non-human elements of pedagogical encounters together as active agents in an always moving pedagogical assemblage that enables certain possibilities for teaching and learning whilst it closes down others. Non-human pedagogical agents include documents, institutional routines and practices, equipment, and the physical, architectural and environmental features of learning spaces – which are not all in schools and not all with children. A Deleuzian approach also recognises the particular affordances of the creative arts, in which I include creative and literary writing, as, in Deleuze's words, 'language is a painting or a piece of music, but a music of words, a painting with words, a silence in words' (1998, p. 113). This paper documents two instances of at least momentary 'productive escape' from institutional constraints - a creative writing camp

and an after school art class – each run by pre-service teacher volunteers in a service learning unit with young people from western Sydney secondary schools.

Writing western Sydney - Creative writing camp

The 'curriculum leakages' in my title disrupt the territorialising practices of conventional curriculum that aim to fix in advance what can be known. But leakage signifies much more than this. In the creative writing camp, where 7 of my English teacher students worked with 30 year 11 and 12 students, six teachers, and two writers in residence for three days in the middle of the Royal National Park south of Sydney, we were caught in a deluge of apocalyptic proportions. Water flooded through the bungalows and the causeway over the river was closed so the writers had to drive the long way round. There was a leakage of hierarchies where teachers and students and pre-service teachers wrote together and hung out together over meals and in front of an open fireplace with hot chocolate in the evenings. The pre-service teachers, my students, had each devised an activity that would get students writing in the coloured notebooks we had given and they wrote themselves almost non-stop for three days. It was hard work and it was fun. In the sense of 'currere' as a 'running', this was a running away from school, from university, and from the constraints of regular timetables and conventional pedagogies for writing as they are framed by the prescriptive NSW Higher School Certificate and its assessment regimes.

The poet and the novelist did not mention the HSC in their sessions but rather they ran workshops that aimed to loosen the imagination and promote divergent thinking and writing. The poet Carol Jenkins, also a scientist and author of the collection *Fishing in the Devonian* (2008), called her sessions ' An experiment with 26 variables' and 'A state of flow and twist

persist'. The novelist Margo Lanagan, an award winning gothic and fantasy novelist for young adults, presented 'Getting out of your own way' and 'Impossible things'. We were surprised into writing poetically as Carol gave out random slips of paper with poetic lines, sent us on a silent writing walk in the soggy outdoors, had us write about taste and the shock on the tongue of an aniseed, put poetry stickers in our notebooks and had us invent new definitions for old words. Margo gave out a series of seven little envelopes, one after the other, with tiny images or phrases like 'secret agent' inside them, and has us write seven narrative fragments from these that we then graphed along an axis of suspense. She had us write the detail of ourselves transforming into the body of some other animal – all the stretching and bursting of flesh and bone and psyche of such a transformation. Then she had us write a body falling from the sky and then a body walking through a wall, inch by inch documenting how the substance of the wall gives way as the body pushes into its matter – each of these paralleled by scenes in her grim and gripping novel *Tender Morsels* (2009).She shared the huge scrapbooks of images that she uses for inspiration.

It was the intensity and the surprise of each of these workshops, the ways that they ran their own course according to a logic of the aesthetic and invention that was not emergent from or tied to a particular syllabus outcome that made them lean towards the active sense of 'currere' than the more familiar constraints of curriculum that students know from school. The poet and the novelist were each explicit about how students might carry these strategies into their own writing. However, although feedback rated the camp high on almost all factors (apart from food) they also framed what might be changed in terms of the closed circuit of the HSC curriculum, for example, wanting 'an experienced English HSC teacher to advise us' – although six of these had come on the camp with them – and wanting 'one-on-one help so it's useful for our own work' and wanting the workshops to be 'more HSC Syllabus based '.

Could this exemplify Block suggestion that our 'students have been taught to desire only to be told what to do' (2003, p. 37, cited in Wallin, 2010, p. 81)?

The service learning component of the creative writing camp was intended to continue into the schools with two of the UWS students allocated to each of the three schools as 'creative writing mentors' to work for another 40 hrs with students – which could be one-on-one focusing on student drafts or could be devising further skills workshops for other groups in the school. However, back at school after the camp, none of the UWS students were able to work in the way that had been envisaged. Although each school had praised their skills and enthusiasm on the camp, this did not mean they were all welcome back at home. One school kept them apart from the students by having them develop units of work on creative writing that other teachers could use in English, another used them more like teacher aides inside regular classes and one school did not use them at all so I devised alternative activities for them. Of the thirty eight students – from schools and UWS -who were invited to submit a piece of writing they had started at the camp for an anthology, only five texts were submitted.

What does a Deleuzian frame bring to my understanding of this event? I might argue that the dominant assessment regimes of schooling, inevitably and rapidly reterritorialise any divergences from that frame. Perhaps my expectations that we could, in that embodied intensive creative space, make a 'line of flight' away from conventional curriculum was naive. Perhaps my assumption that I might recognise this desire in others who loved to write was misplaced. Perhaps, when it came to the crunch back in school, the panoptic gaze that Foucault (1979) theorised, which suggests that we internalise a disciplinary gaze to monitor ourselves and others in the service of dominant institutional discourses and practices, overwhelmed other possibilities and modes of thinking. Thus, as Wallin puts it, 'all 'lines out'

are governed by the territorialising powers of the centre' (2010, p. 77) which domesticate anomalies and differences.

However a Deleuzian philosophy frame opens another way of thinking about these discrepancies. In our book *Pedagogical Encounters* (2009), Davies and I argued that 'relationality and sensitivity to the other (including non-human others) can sometimes transcend the constraints and dictates of curriculum' (p. 29) however curriculum was not our interest in the book. Even in my chapter set in secondary schools, my focus was on relational and ethical encounters across difference in classrooms that are 'heterogeneous and constantly shifting configurations', and where pedagogical subjects - teachers and students – emerge as the 'locus of effects of [their]surroundings' (Bell, 2007: p. 11, in Gannon 2009, p. 69). From this position each individual in any pedagogical encounter is understood as unique and different from one another, and as simultaneously embedded in complex networks of relationality (Davies & Gannon, 2009). These networks include non-human elements of space and place that constrain and enable particular modes of engagement (Davies, Gannon, Power & Somerville, 2011; Gannon, 2009a). In pedagogical encounters, each subject is potentially immersed in moments of becoming that enable creative unfolding towards the not yet known. This works against end-driven rationalities that (pre)determine what is possible, and that limit outcomes to the auditable and measurable (Taubman, 2009). Hierarchies are destabilised and the role of the teacher becomes to design learning experiences and spaces that open possibilities that are oriented towards the not-yet-known, that enable 'lines of flight' (Deleuze, 1995, p. 19) in unpredictable, creative and life-affirming directions. Movements of affect, the mobilisation of 'desiring flows' that animate pedagogical bodies and that can reorganize 'conventional flows of knowledge, meaning, and significance' (Wallin, 2010, xi) are crucial.

Re-visioning place in western Sydney - Visual arts workshops

The second service learning site that I look at is visual arts workshop program that two UWS pre-service teachers ran after school on Mondays with year 10 students in a western Sydney secondary school. Across a ten-week term, they designed and implemented a curriculum that, although it ultimately could be neatly matched to cross curriculum priorities such as literacy, and specific outcomes in the Visual Arts Syllabus, was open to affect and surprise. The project began well before they went into the school with a collective biography workshop on place pedagogies that I co-convened in the university break where we generated childhood memories of place – focusing on early memories of backyards and of going outside backyards (Davies & Gannon, 2009; Somerville et al., 2011).

In the school site, rather than beginning with curriculum in its reductive and reactive sense, where knowledge is segmented into predetermined outcomes, the pre-service teachers mobilised something more akin to 'currere', a running towards memory and to what the body knows with all its senses. They sent the children into the world with digital cameras with instructions to move away from literal and realist images, and instead to record signs and symbols, to use the macro setting to amplify the subject, create abstract images and interesting compositions. They took photos focusing on the use of text in their environment including street signs, number plates and letter boxes. In combination, these instructions to students as to how they might see their worlds differently through the lenses of their cameras, enabled representation to become 'no longer a process of fixing, but an element in a continuous production; a part of it all, and constantly becoming' (Massey, 2005, p. 28).

In line with new work on the spatiality of human life and of learning, the pre-service teachers moved beyond taken-for-granted discourses, to work with students to unpick how we are 'of the landscape, we are the landscape' (Somerville et al., 2011, p. 1), even when that landscape is the over-coded suburban space of western Sydney (Gannon, 2009, 2010). The Year 10 students told and wrote their narratives of childhood, and created a collaborative assemblage for an exhibition at the university art gallery. They screen printed their zip code on the wall and twisted wire to create words and sentences. Their texts of memory were mounted in one line along one wall and their photographs along another but their collaborative artworks sprayed out across the largest wall. There were no names on any of the pieces though the catalogue listed all participants. In this case the project outcome – the exhibition – 'ran' beyond the individuals. It foregrounded the collective pedagogical assemblage that the group had become so that what they created was greater together that it could have been separately. In this conception, pedagogy was an 'inherently relational, emergent, and non-linear process', it was 'unpredictable and therefore unknowable in advance' (Sellar, 2009, p. 351). In their mapping of the workshop activities against the Visual Arts Syllabus the pre-service teachers moved back and forth between what in Deleuzian terms is 'striated' space (bound, organised curricular spaces and logics, that legitimise their practice in the context of the processes of 'becoming-teachers') and the 'smooth' spaces that open learning to the not-yet-known (Davies & Gannon, 2009).

Rather than making truth claims that might be abstracted and generalised to other sites of practice, these case studies I have sketched out aim in the first instance to generate what might be called 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of service learning practice situated in particular sites, that is responsive to the subjects and concerns arising in those sites. This sort of analysis preserves specificity and detail, rather than erasing detail and location, thus

striving for deeper understanding of what is going on in this place at this time with these participants. It recognises each site as a unique 'assemblage' of human and non-human actors, materials, constraints and opportunities (Davies & Gannon, 2009).

The pre-service teachers involved in the creative arts and creative writing projects experienced powerful learning about themselves about young people and about how curriculum might be repositioned through an opening to the future rather than replication of the already known. It also finds that particular constraints on what was possible arose from other agendas and anxieties in schools about assessment and examinations, timetabling and other issues relating to compliance and regulation.

Both the service learning projects explored in this paper were underpinned by a critical engagement with place in western Sydney, an area that is frequently disparaged in the media and other public arenas (Gannon, 2009b). The study found that pre-service teachers and the young people with whom they worked began to find ways to creatively intervene and contest more usual representations of the area and of the potential of those people who make this area their home. Clear evidence was also apparent of the incoherence and instability of the notion of 'western Sydney', as people's experiences of and allegiances to 'place' are far more precise and localised. Students The paper develops a methodology that aims to maintain detail and specificity whilst remaining mindful of the need to move beyond mere description of disparate cases to more robust theorising about the subjects and sites of service learning. Thus, on a theoretical level, the paper finds that new philosophical concepts can be productively put to work in thinking about curriculum and service learning in new ways.

Service learning opportunities enabled pre-service secondary teachers to generate open-ended and creative approaches to understanding learning, learners (including themselves) and curriculum. Despite creeping prescriptivism and pressure to narrow and regulate teacher education, service learning opportunities should be central to this training. This paper concludes with a methodological challenge to other researchers working with case study data in service learning to employ new conceptual and theoretical apparatus to enable us to think in new directions about the powerful learning that takes place in these sites.

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[i] Participation in the IARSLCE Conference was assisted by an Australian National ALTC Award in 2010 for Programs that Enhance Student Learning (Power, Gannon, Naidoo for 'Beyond Institutional Walls: Service Learning in Secondary Pre-service Teacher Education' see http://www.altc.edu.au/award-enhance-learning-recipient-2010 or http://tdu.uws.edu.au/qilt/teaching/awards_2010.html

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