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I. Kerr

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BOOK REVIEW

by I. Kerr

Qualitative Evaluation Concepts and Cases in Curriculum Criticism

Willis, G., ed., McCutchan, Berkely, 1978

In the introduction to the book *Qualitative Evaluation* the editor, George Willis, provides a careful analysis of the nature, potential and limitations of qualitative evaluation. The format of the book is such that the initial readings elaborate on aspects of his analysis. Then follows the case studies which chronicle a large variety of educational situations, the reports of which further elucidate one's understanding of qualitative techniques. The final chapters of the book are designed to synthesize the facets of qualitative evaluation presented in the case studies and to give some perspective to the functions of criticism in the field of study we know as "curriculum". It is the intention of the writer of this review to record some impressions, reactions and thoughts stimulated by a reading of *Qualitative Evaluation*.

I reject as a false dichotomy, the separation between quantitative and qualitative studies or between statistical and non statistical approaches. For too long the protagonists of quantitative methods of evaluation have monopolized research endeavors to the point where qualitative and descriptive techniques were regarded as scarcely respectable. Clearly, as Willis and Travers argue, both qualitative and quantitative evaluations are essential since each methodology serves a different purpose. In quantitative studies the logic of inference is "tied to the logic of mathematics": in qualitative studies the observational skills of the evaluator in focusing and reporting on specific events in the process, is crucial. As Willis writes in relation to curriculum criticism, the "task is to disclose meaning inherent in the curriculum". This process requires the three phases of description, disclosure of meaning and judgment. The best of the case studies are admirable examples of this process.

The introductory chapter presents a balanced view of the function of quantitative and qualitative evaluation. My reaction was positive and I looked forward to further explication of qualitative techniques. Regrettably the subsequent "Concept" chapters were rather mixed fare. Travers' article was interesting. He drew on the philosophy of Kant and more latterly the work of De Charms to argue that agreement about knowledge depends on "commonalities" within the "phenomenal experience" of different individuals. Travers presents a balanced view of quantitative and qualitative studies, arguing that the latter are essential if the "logic of direct comparison or characteristics" is sought.

Willis and Allen, intrigued by the fact that, "how we perceive the world is influenced by how we have previously constituted meaning" used qualitative methods to test their hypothesis that "patterns of

phenomenological response" occur normally within educational situations not contrived to directly modify them. The table of "involvement and elation" that they posited is interesting although the protracted discussion of the findings, culminating in their admission that they were unsure of what was actually measured, detracted from the article. Another contribution by Willis, entitled "Curriculum Criticism and Literary Criticism", argued that the "focal point" of "work, author, world and audience" in literacy criticism may be compared in curriculum criticism with the curriculum itself, the curriculum originator, the social context and the learners respectively. This analogy provides a useful nexus between the two forms of criticism. Furthermore an understanding of this article is essential since Willis used the concepts in the prefatory comments on a number of case studies.

Kelly elaborates on the analogy between curriculum evaluation and literary criticism, arguing that the literary devices of "metaphor, point of view, plot and theme" may be used in curricula. In my view, the interdependence of the four concepts is the important contribution together with the emphasis that he places on judgments. He identifies three aspects of judgement: "the statement, reasons and norms." In his opinion the techniques of literary criticism can help evaluators judge curricula impartially. The combined effect of the initial six chapters might be described as 'weighty'. It may have been preferable to intersperse the contributions with case studies. This strategy would have given the reader practical examples of the concepts presented in the book.

The first of the case studies, "Scanning Horizons and Looking at Needs" (Ely Vallance), was an excellent example of the art critic's technique of description, applied to curriculum. Vallance, with splendid command of language, recaptures the mood and momentum of the "Great Plains Experience" curriculum materials. This is a most perceptive study in which the unique qualities of the materials are vividly conveyed to the reader. Out of context, a description of television segments as, "the flashiest, slickest, most enticing and most dramatic of the components," smacks of verbosity. However, within the context of the entire description, such language serves the author's aim of focusing on the aesthetic qualities of the Great Plains curriculum.

"Songs and Situations" (Madeleine Grumet) and "Currere: A Case Study" (William Pinar) are two papers that address and illustrate the concept of "currere". Pinar coined the word, which he defines as the individual student's "lived experience of curricula". Indeed, one wonders why the order of the articles was not reversed in the book since Pinar was the originator of the concept. Nevertheless, considered together, the articles are an excellent exposition of the concept of 'currere'. Pinar, in a very personal, at times moving style, describes the effect that Jean-Paul Sartre's "Search For A Method" had on his (Pinar's) "public personage" and his "private self". In distinctive and descriptive style Pinar relates the impact of Sartre's work. The power of Sartre's prose is likened by Pinar to a swift current in which he had to "immerse" himself to be cast on the "beach" of uncertainty before "the vibrations" became his own. The

intensity of what was a very private and personal experience is conveyed to the reader. Pinar challenges us to similarly record our experiences of reading this book : the personal response we make to it is the catalyst to new understandings. This reality, he argues, is the substance of curriculum criticism.

Madeleine Grumet also draws inspiration from Sartre in her endeavor to use the familiar figure/group concept of perception as a framework in which to examine curriculum. The analogy is argued convincingly. Most students and educators are well acquainted with the figures, so common in psychology textbooks, that wax and wane between wine glass and human profile, between old crone and young girl, depending on whether one concentrates on the figure or the ground. Grumet argues that curriculum criticism demands a third dimension, an amalgam, in which curriculum is the world of meaning that we have devised through our experiences. Conceived in this way, curriculum provides the bridge between theory and practice since it integrates the two within the scope of individual experience. If Sartre provided the inspiration, Dewey and Pinar complete for the author, a triumvirate that led her to new insights. The existentialism of Sartre and the Deweyan theory of inquiry are synthesized for Grumet in the concept of "currere". In a detailed case study she describes her analysis of the unique curriculum; the University of Rochester Theatre Festival, deriving much of her material from students' experiences with the Festival. The qualitative data that she collected came largely from students' journals in which reactions to the various performances and workshops were recorded. This naturalistic method of inquiry has distinct advantages in that considerable descriptive data of the interactions can be amassed. From an analysis of the data significant questions and insights, inaccessible by traditional quantitative techniques, may be identified. Grumet's work is illustrative of this point. The perceptive quality of student reactions, the inner feelings that they revealed and the link between internal and external experience are phenomena that quantitative instruments could not measure or interpret. In this sense, "Songs and Situations" together with Greer's "Model for the Art of Teaching", was both an excellent example of, and justification for, qualitative evaluation of curriculum.

"Business as Usual," an account of a skills bargaining simulation course conducted by the London Business School was written by David Jenkins. The author, posing as a participant in the exercise, is a most astute observer of the interpersonal relationships that occur between the instructors and the participants. For command of language : "... on this merry occasion Andrew, who had somehow contrived to drink just enough to enhance rather than hazard his performance ...", subtle humor and vivid description, Jenkins is outstanding. His pen sketches of Philip, "young, watchful, nerve-racked and angular as a hairpin but quite exceptionally bright" and of Andrew whose distinctive corduroy jacket and sunflower yellow tie stamped him as "one untouched by the sartorial anonymity of mid career," are superb.

In more serious vein, Jenkin's observation and evaluation of the events is penetrating. The anecdotal record of the competition between

Philip and Andrew, the banter between combatants in the management, trade union role play (... "the managers finding their colleagues aping union petulance even more irritating than the real thing ...") were important dimensions of the Skills of Bargaining course that would not have been identified by the customary post course evaluation questionnaire. I enjoyed the article and I feel that it makes a significant contribution to the field of qualitative evaluation.

McKinney's evaluation of governance in an alternative school lacks the literary flair of Jenkin's work. However, McKinney does make the point, somewhat repetitively, that governance in schools is a means to an end, not an end in itself. McKinney's observations and interviews at The Other School led him to the same conclusion that numerous evaluators of alternative schools have stated : that staff and students did not have a clear conception of the alternative they were allegedly providing. As the author succinctly states, "they knew what they were escaping from but not where they were headed."

It is interesting that the one issue that sparked genuine interest and participation in school governance was the curriculum issue of a basic skills course for black students. In an atypical display of flexibility and decisiveness the school governing body revamped existing curriculum policies and approved the proposal. In comparison with other contributions in this text, I feel that McKinney's case study lacked originality. A number of writers have commented previously on the moribund tendencies of participatory governance in schools. McKinney's work was interesting but in my view he does not advance my understanding or appreciation of qualitative evaluation in a way comparable to that of Jenkins, Vallance or Grumet.

The naturalistic mode of inquiry pursued by Davidman in his evaluation of a unified mathematics and science curriculum was thought provoking. Guided by orienting questions, Davidman sought to explicate the unanticipated outcomes of the USMES curriculum and to identify any discrepancies between the expressed goals of the project and the actual outcomes. Viewed in context this article was interesting in that the author articulates the purpose, methods and findings of what was a fledgling research design. Most readers would share Davidman's concern that the circumstances that culminated in a severe reduction in the number of participating teachers and students were "design shattering." Nevertheless the paper has merit as one of the few examples of curriculum criticism stemming from naturalistic inquiry. The author is frank about the problems and limitations, yet he is cautiously optimistic about the potential of the design.

The case study with which I identified most strongly was "A Model for the Art of Teaching and a Critique of Teaching". the insights that Greer brings to the supervisor/student teacher relationship are quite outstanding. The sensitivity to, and descriptions of the problems encountered by the intern provide a model which is the antithesis of the competency based teacher education procedures currently in vogue. For me, Greer's article is the epitome of qualitative evaluation. By what

other methods could critical moments in teaching so fundamental to Miss M's professional development, be recorded? Take for example the issue of classroom management; an issue that student teachers perceive as a primary challenge. Greer encapsulates the mood and feeling of interns with such observations as:

... for a fleeting moment she had the startled expression of an animal interrupted when drinking. As she turned back into the class activity and found nothing amiss she looked relieved.

The author has the capacity to identify the human relationships operative in the classroom and to focus on the affective dimensions of the teaching task. Thus he obtained data, quite fundamental to the professional development of novice teachers, that quantitative techniques could not provide.

Of the contributions in the "Comments" section that by Jenkins and O'Toole had the strongest impact. This is not to say that the articles by Kallos and Apple are unimportant. The former author explains his position on the relationship between social class and educational opportunity. The article is both interesting and provocative, but it sits rather awkwardly with the tone of other contributions in the volume. Apple's article is a perceptive comment on many of the case studies. However, it is Jenkins and O'Toole who, in my view draw together the threads of literary and curriculum criticism. They argue that not only is there an obvious parallel between the two, but more importantly, there is great potential in the literary critical stance. The authors pose the rhetorical question : Will literary criticism techniques misconstrue curriculum as social anthropology? Their answer is that literary criticism has long referred to the "social context" of works of art. They argue that curriculum evaluators need to be cognizant of the social forces that influence curriculum.

What overall impression does one have of "Qualitative Evaluation?" I would have thought that reference to the work of Weber would have been made in the concept chapters of the book. Weber's perspective is phenomenological. He, in common with contributors in the Willis volume, is concerned with understanding behaviour from the author's own experience and frame of reference. Some of the case studies (The Amphibious Musician and On the Child's Acquisition of Aesthetic Meaning) could have been culled from the volume without loss of theme. However, as a totality, the book has had an impact on my thinking. The naturalistic, ethnographic or qualitative methods of inquiry have much to commend them. Instead of approaching the inquiry armed with hypotheses to be tested by various instruments, many of which are insensitive to the nuances of classroom behaviour, the qualitative evaluator is able to observe and record impressions, feelings and incidents in a literary, impressionistic even emotive way and thus can identify the true character of the interactions that transpire. Furthermore, the qualitative approach, instead of starting with preconceived notions, requires the researcher to amass details of the process, to analyse the material so gained and then generate a series of

questions and conclusions about the phenomenon observed. This method of inquiry has a logic that appeals, especially in classroom situations where accurate interpretation of interactions of a sizable group of people are crucial to an understanding of what has occurred. It is to be hoped that more books follow the Willis volume so that qualitative evaluation, at present a shy reality, may develop into a robust method of inquiry, sharing equal prestige with quantitative techniques.