Content in American educational discourse

The missing link(s)

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Introduction: contemporary discourses on learning, curriculum, and knowledge

In American educational discourses ranging from instructional planning to educational psychology, education, teaching, and pedagogy are all understood predominantly in terms of *learning*. Learning, in turn, is seen as “a process . . . that takes place in the mind” (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 3), one occurring via “the functions of the human brain” (Eyler, 2018, p. 12). (Note that here and later, I am citing popular summaries of the learning process because they bring into relatively sharp relief points that are often implicit or only partially articulated in more formal scholarship, e.g. Bransford et al., 2006; Sawyer, 2014.) It is regarded as a natural process determined by evolution – one that instructors today “can maximize . . . by employing evidence-based strategies in the classroom” (Eyler, 2018, p. 4). The principles of the mind’s or brain’s operation are further characterised as “experience-independent” and “cross-culturally relevant”. They are seen as applicable to all “educational levels and pedagogical situations” as well as to various cultures and cultural environments. They are further described as “domain-independent”, working the same “across all subject areas” – meaning that particular differences in content types and structures are effectively rendered moot (Ambrose et al., 2010, pp. 7–8; see also Eyler, 2018, pp. 5–9). Learning is seen as independent of all of these factors because it is said to be based on a common ‘cognitive architecture’ of the mind or a common set of biological characteristics of the brain. Learning, by further implication, is configured in a way that is monolithic, of one kind, and unchanging. It is not seen to occur on various levels, as Bateson (1987) has proposed, nor is it viewed as changing historically or biographically with the development of literacy and similar skills (e.g. Olson, 2016). Moreover, the learning of an infant in the crib is regarded as not fundamentally different from that of a graduate student in the science lab, and the learning of both does not differ in essence from the learning of a Neolithic hunter-gatherer (Eyler, 2018, p. 9). This emphasis on learning as a universal human process leaves little room for consideration (outside of historico-political examinations; see e.g. Popkewitz,

1987; Rudolph, 2002; Gustafson, 2009) of particularities of content that might be developed specially for teaching or educational purposes and of the varied pre-existing or potential connections that this content might (or might not) have with teachers and students.

The neglect of questions of content from the more specialised area of American *curriculum theory* and research, on the other hand, is rather different in kind but equal in degree. Early in the twentieth century, conceptions of curriculum content were influenced by both Edward Thorndike's behaviourism and John Dewey's philosophy of experience. Each of these emphasised possible connections between curricular content and life outside of the classroom (Dewey, 1897; Thorndike, 1912; Tyler, 1981) – although neither went into depth regarding what this might mean for the nature of pedagogical content *per se*. Ralph Tyler's famous 1949 rationale for curriculum development can be seen to combine a Deweyan stress on educational experience (Hlebowitsh, 2010, p. 203) together with the then-emerging paradigm of systems theory. As readers likely know, Tyler's rationale

begins with identifying four fundamental questions which must be answered in developing any curriculum and plan of instruction[:] What educational purposes should the school seek to attain? What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes? How can these educational experiences be effectively organized? How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

(Tyler, 1949)

Through its emphasis on educational purposes and their attainment, Tyler's rationale already anticipates systems conceptions of instruction as a closed process or feedback-loop. This is a process that begins with the definition of purposes or objectives, proceeding through questions of effective means or organisation, and ending with the feedback represented by measures of the attainment of these purposes or objectives (see Figure 3.1). Of course, to conceive of curriculum and instruction primarily as a systematic *process* – “as a series of actions or operations conducing to an end” (Merriam-Webster) – means to focus precisely on this purpose or end and on the most efficient way to reach it. This means that curriculum is placed in an instrumentalist or ‘technicist’ frame, often to the neglect of its stakeholders – including student, teacher, and community – and to the practices and material that can be seen to constitute it. In addition, content in this context is seen neither as being differentiated in its types nor as having a specifically pedagogical form or nature. It serves simply as one of so many ‘inputs’ into a system to be optimised for the production of outcomes or outputs.

Starting in the 1970s, this technicist reduction of education was critiqued within curriculum studies itself, most prominently by William Pinar (1975), to form a movement known as reconceptualist curriculum studies (e.g. Pinar,

Figure 3.1 The component phases of an instructional system. Represents a conception of the development of instruction reflecting the influence of systems theory.

Source: Adapted from Glaser (1962)

2014). By concentrating on experience as ‘lived’ (a notion somewhat different from Dewey’s ‘experience’),¹ the reconceptualists have sought above all to rescue the subjectivity of the individual – of both the student and teacher – from the machinery of curricular efficiency. Unsurprisingly, the role and characteristics of curricular content are overlooked in this critical approach. Such content is dismissed simply as representing so much ‘busy work’ (e.g. Pinar, 2014) or as yet another part of a larger regime of indoctrination, testing, and control imposed by political interests.

In the face of this broad and consistent avoidance of questions of curricular content in American approaches to instruction – whether in theories of learning or those of curriculum – this chapter develops an account of curricular content as material that is *inherently* pedagogical. It sees such content as having intrinsic and distinctly pedagogical or didactical qualities and as also presenting multiple potential connections with both student and teacher. This chapter does this first by examining a few contemporary exceptions to the rule of the general *avoidance* of this topic – namely, Lee Shulman’s concept of “content knowledge” and Michael Young’s “powerful knowledge”. It argues, however, that both of these approaches pay insufficient attention to students as active recipients of such knowledge and content. After offering Wolfgang Klafki’s understanding of didactic preparation as a possible solution to this problem, this chapter concludes by suggesting a general “hermeneutic” theory of knowledge transmission as broadly commensurate with this understanding.²

Lee Shulman – as the first exception to the rule of the neglect of content – understands pedagogical content knowledge as “that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, [forming] their own special form of professional understanding” (Shulman, 1986, p. 8). Shulman further characterises this “content knowledge” as including “the most regularly taught topics in one’s subject area” – and as centring on “the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations” (p. 8). “In a word”, Shulman continues, this type of knowledge consists of “ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others”

(p. 9). Schulman's original conception has since served as the basis for a relatively small body of research into teacher content knowledge, particularly in the natural sciences and mathematics. As one survey of this research shows, this type of knowledge is thus far rather underconceptualised (Depape, Verschaffel and Kelchtermans, 2013). The question of 'content knowledge', it appears, has been defined largely in terms of a range of empirically accessible particularities of teacher knowledge and practice. Specifically, it has been understood either as 'situated' directly in this practice, or as more 'cognitive' propositional knowledge that can be retrieved by the teacher and then put to pedagogical use. Depape, Verschaffel, and Kelchtermans conclude their research synthesis by asking for greater clarity and specificity in researchers' "conceptualization and operationalization" of pedagogical content knowledge, recommending that they "conscientiously align them with their intended research goals" (p. 23). Although obviously helping to clarify current conceptions of content in relation to teacher knowledge and action, this work cannot truly be said to articulate a 'theory' or 'account' of content that focuses on its relation to pedagogy, to practices of teaching. It also cannot be said to unambiguously identify any potentially pedagogical characteristics of such content. In addition, although it might help clarify teachers' relation to the knowledge they teach – and the way it is embodied in pedagogical content – it does little to shed light on the connection of such knowledge to the student or learner.

A second recent attempt to bring questions of content or more specifically, of content *knowledge*, back to the centre of concern is represented by UK scholar Michael Young. Young's conception of knowledge in education was championed by Michael Gove of the ill-fated David Cameron government (Wilby, 2018), and Young himself has garnered attention internationally. He advocates for a "knowledge-based approach to the curriculum", saying that above all, what "curriculum theory needs" is "a theory of knowledge" (2013, p. 107). He then takes it upon himself to provide the outlines of such a theory. The key question for education for Young is specifically about its content – namely, "*what* do students have an entitlement to learn?" (p. 101; emphasis added). Much of Young's theory of educational content is consistent with this question, and in particular with the word "entitlement": education, he believes, is undergirded by knowledge, above all, by what he calls "powerful knowledge" – "knowledge [that] is worthwhile *in itself*", (2013, p. 117; emphasis added). And it is this that makes exposure to it as a matter of entitlement. Students need to be told, Young says, that they should "never apologize that they need to learn" such intrinsically valuable knowledge (p. 117). Young also explains the general character of this knowledge, saying that it is specialised and disciplinary in nature: it is "*specialized*", Young explains, "in how it is produced (in workshops, seminars and labs) and in how it is transmitted (in schools, colleges and universities) and this specialization is expressed in the boundaries between disciplines and subjects" (Young and Muller, 2015, p. 142; original emphasis). As a result, Young continues, powerful knowledge is "not *general* knowledge"; it is thus to

be “*differentiated* from the experiences that pupils bring to school or older learners bring to college or university” (2013, p. 142; original emphasis).

Young brings his conception of the knowledge that underlies educational content into positive relation to the student by implying that the point of such powerful knowledge is not simply to “replace a pupil’s everyday experience”. Instead (and despite its differentiation from everyday knowledge), Young says that powerful knowledge builds on and “extends that experience”, giving the student the possibility “to generalize about” what he or she experiences every day. At the same time, though, Young sees powerful knowledge as ultimately indifferent to students’ interests: “[A]lthough knowledge can be experienced as oppressive and alienating”, Young admits, “this is not a property of knowledge itself. An appropriate pedagogy”, he continues, “can have the opposite consequences – it can free the learner to have new thoughts and even think the ‘not yet thought’” (2013, p. 107). But in the final analysis, what is important for Young, it seems, is not how this knowledge is taught, but rather, “the commitment” of the learner “to a relationship to” powerful knowledge (Young and Muller, 2015, p. 141). The student has the entitlement to acquire knowledge that has been deemed “powerful”; but it is ultimately up to the him or her to realise this entitlement.

Young is right, I believe, in emphasising the need for new and differentiated ways of understanding knowledge in the light of its centrality to curricular questions. This knowledge is indeed to be differentiated from other forms of knowledge, and (as I also argue later), from both everyday knowledge and from strictly specialised, disciplinary knowledge. However, there remain a number of apparent unresolved tensions or contradictions in Young’s account. For example, Young asserts at once that powerful knowledge builds on and “extends [students’] experience”, but he simultaneously claims that it is also “*differentiated* from the experiences that pupils bring to school” (as quoted earlier). Young further insists that this knowledge requires “an appropriate pedagogy” in order to *not* “be experienced as oppressive and alienating”; but at the same time, he insists that this knowledge is valuable, powerful and worthwhile “in itself” (2013, p. 117). These rather different characteristics of educational content raise questions about the precise nature of its relation to the student as well as the teacher.

Didactics: cultural content and its exemplarity

Both Young’s conception of powerful knowledge and Schulman’s notion of “pedagogical content knowledge” challenge us to think about how such knowledge is ‘situated’ – how it is embodied and enacted in the curriculum, in acts of teaching – and in students’ relationships to it. Young, in particular, also challenges us to think of this embodied and enacted knowledge not in isolation but as something that has a potency that is realised specifically *in relation*. However, he leaves us uncertain as to the precise nature of these relations. Such relations are at the centre of a rather different approach to curricular forms of

knowledge, action, and situation. These are ones that have developed gradually in Europe over the course of the modern era (often seen as starting with Comenius, 1657), and that, as John Dewey noted over a century ago, were most “highly elaborated . . . in Germany” (1911, p. 327). This approach or tradition lives on to this day, and is known in German as *Didaktik*, in French as *didactique*, in Spanish as *didáctica*, and in Finnish as *didaktiikka* (to give just a few examples). It refers, as Dewey notes, simply to “the science or art of teaching” broadly understood (1911, p. 327). The primary representative of *Didaktik* in Germany and perhaps in all of Europe from the post-war era to the present is Wolfgang Klafki, whose “*Didaktik Analysis as the Core of Preparation of Instruction*” serves as the key text in the discussion that follows. (A second is Martin Wagenschein’s “On the Concept of Exemplarity in Teaching”. Both Klafki’s and Wagenschein’s texts are available in English translation in *Teaching as a Reflective Practice: The German Didaktik Tradition* (2000), edited by Westbury, Hopmann and Riquarts.)

In general, didactics are based on a set of presuppositions that are in many ways diametrically opposed to those underpinning contemporary discourses of both curriculum studies and of ‘learning’ as a natural process happening in the mind or brain. Klafki’s *Didaktik* can be seen, in effect, as an answer to the questions, “What it is to be human and what it is to educate?” As an aside, although one might think that such broad, philosophical questions are not considered in theories of learning or of curriculum, they actually are given very determinate (albeit tacit) responses in these discourses. If learning is something that happens in the mind or brain, something determined by eons of biological evolution, then to be human – to know what we know and act as we do – is to be a creature largely determined by our biology or our cognitive architecture. It follows that to educate then is indeed to use “evidence-based strategies” in order to leverage this biology and architecture for the sake of more efficient learning. In the case of reconceptualist curriculum studies, on the other hand, to be fully human is to have “reconstructed” both oneself and one’s world politically and psychologically – with education then taking the form of a “complicated conversation” among those engaged in such reconstruction (Pinar, 2014, pp. 1–11).

Unlike theories of learning – but similar to reconceptualist understandings – Klafki and the European didactic tradition generally do not take *nature* as their focus. Instead, they begin with *culture*. At the same time, they do not ignore the reality of our natural biological conditions; rather, they see this condition *not* as something to be affirmed and leveraged but as something to be *overcome*. This overcoming, moreover, is not to occur through standard or evidence-based strategies or techniques but through the induction of the human individual into what is *not* natural – human history, society, and culture. Through education, according to this view, people are liberated from their ‘natural’ habits, passions, and dispositions to eventually become autonomous and responsible, both in their everyday lives and in the exercise of the knowledge and abilities gained through their education. The ultimate goal of

education, then, is not efficient learning but a kind of overall “maturation”; the student’s attainment of “the state in which one can assume responsibility” as Klafki puts it (2000, p. 147).

In keeping with its distinctive understandings of both what it is to be human and what it is to educate, the didactic tradition also conceptualises the meaning and development of curriculum and content in ways radically different from those dominant in America today. Instead of emphasising sequences and procedures to attain measured “instructional objectives” – or the critique of such processes and sequences – didactical thinking occurs in *relational* terms. These relations link the three elements just mentioned – teacher, student, and content – to form a triangle, and this triangle, in turn, has come to be known as the ‘Didaktik triangle’ (Figures 3.2 and 3.3). The didactic triangle links student, teacher, and content in multiple senses and via multilayered affinities, tensions, and their negotiation. Each of the three solid lines or connections delimiting this triangle brings with it a different emphasis: student and teacher are connected through the much-studied student–teacher relationship (e.g. Pianta, 2001), or what is known in the German context as the ‘pedagogical relation’ (e.g. Friesen, 2017a). Student and content, on the other hand, are linked through learning, study, and work. Teacher and content, finally, are linked both through preparation and instruction. A further, indirect linkage is illustrated in the dotted vertical line and arrow in the middle of the triangle, which indicates the focus of the teacher specifically on affecting the relationship of student to *content* – to *mediate*, in a sense, the *student’s relation to it*. In the pedagogical situation, the teacher intends to change the relation of student to content from indifference to personal interest, and from unnecessary uncertainty or confusion to clarity and confidence – without any of these relations and tensions between them being minimised or resolved. In its most elementary form, the didactic triangle can be readily identified in the widest range of pedagogical situations, including in snapshots of everyday pedagogical interactions (Figure 3.3).

In keeping with its emphasis on cultural and social possibilities rather than on biological determinations, didactics sees curriculum and content as above all *human and cultural*. This content is seen not so much as exemplifying ideological-charged busywork or as embodying indifferent but ultimately powerful knowledge. It is also not seen primarily as something that needs to be arranged for human cognitive architecture, for easy assimilation by the brain. Curriculum is instead understood as historical and cultural ‘human content’, which is itself multidimensional and dynamic, and which is handed down and transformed from one generation to another. It is precisely because this material is human and cultural (with natural science being included in the latter) that it possesses qualities which can be said to be intrinsically educational. It has, in other words a “formative power”, as Klafki puts it (*eine bildende Kraft* – with *Bildung* referring to the formation of oneself through the world and in relation to oneself). Quoting Willmann, Klafki further describes this as “an organic power contained

Figure 3.2 The didactic triangle

Source: From Friesen and Osguthorpe (2018)

Figure 3.3 The didactic triangle in a concrete teaching and learning situation, illustrating all of its essential elements and relations. The teacher, by leaning in and literally intervening between the student and the content with her hands, can be seen as mediating the student's relation to this content, or to be relating to the student *via* the content.

Source: Photo courtesy of the US Department of Education

in the content itself, which has a determining influence on the conceptions and thoughts during assimilation by the mind” (as quoted in Klafki, 2000, p. 147). This does not mean that this content is necessarily viewed as fun or easy by the student, but rather that it requires of the student a change – a change in perspective, in ways of thinking, in expressing themselves or relating to themselves.

Quoting Martin Wagenschein, Klafki explains that such content also reflects “the existential concentration in which the human, historical world is given to us in our life context, *from the perspective of the tasks* that arise in our specific and individual situation” (Klafki, 2000, p. 147; emphasis in original). It “is *not*” simply “an externally given matter”, Klafki emphasises (p. 147), but, rather, it is the stuff of human culture and human being – not to be confused with ‘canonized’ culture, reading lists, or scientific discoveries – but substance that mediates, informs, and enriches our everyday life and work.

This dynamism of educational material, for Klafki and for the didactic tradition as a whole, is underpinned by two dimensions intrinsic to any content that can be called ‘educational’: the first is its *Bildungsinhalt*, simply its educational content, its own everyday meaning and function, or as Klafki says, its intrinsic “inner meaning” (p. 153). The second its *Bildungsgehalt*, or educational substance. Anything taken from culture for the curriculum – whether it is a famous scientific experiment or a short story – represents an object which can be given a specifically educational purpose. A scientific experiment can exemplify the force of gravity, the nature of the scientific method, or the formation of a historical scientific paradigm, just as a short story can exemplify elements of the author’s life and times, or aspects of character or narrative. “The same item of content can” as Klafki explains, “exemplify a variety of general subjects”. All of these possibilities reflect the educational substance, or *Bildungsgehalt*, of that resource (p. 146).

The dynamism of educational material is further underscored by the unifying principle of Klafki’s *Didaktik*. This is Klafki’s notion of the *example*, of exemplarity or *Exemplarität*. Whatever the object or content selected for a class or lesson, Klafki emphasises, it is always something in particular, it always “*represent[s] a larger set of cultural contents*” (p. 150; original emphasis). The example connects the particular and the universal. It is also the example that leads the student inductively from what is concrete and specific in the world around them to the general and theoretical. Finally, it is also the “logic” of the example, through which a particular perception or experience can be named and connected to a broader social reality. The red fire truck or stop sign are examples of ‘redness’ for the young child learning about colours. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that the logic of instruction, the logic of *Didaktik*, is the logic of the *example*. The ideal example, Wagenschein emphasises, is not simply an illustration of a single concept or principle. It is not simply a part of a whole, but instead provides “a mirror of the whole” (2000, p. 165). “The individual [object] is a focal point, admittedly only *one*, but one in which the whole is borne”, Wagenschein continues. “In this sense, the individual does not accumulate, but bears and illuminates the whole; it does not lead away from the whole but enlightens it. Through resonance it excites further, related knowledge” (p. 165). “Words that are repeatedly used” to describe examples of this kind, Wagenschein goes on to say, “include *illustrative, representative, pregnant, model case, ideal, exemplary, paradigmatic*” (p. 165; original emphasis). Klafki and Wagenschein thus see the question of content from a hermeneutical, ontological, and, in some senses, even

an aesthetic or literary way. The exemplary possesses an aesthetic, poetic reality and depth; the best examples have the appearance of a rich literary or aesthetic symbol, such as the whale in *Moby Dick* or the German Romantics' *blaue Blume* (blue flower). It also certainly has both metaphorical and metonymic functions: the example resembles many aspects of the things it exemplifies, in the same way that we can say "my love is a rose". But at the same time, Wagenschein has made clear, it is a *part* that stands in for the *whole* (i.e. a synecdoche), as in references to 'the crown' or the 'White House'. And it is symbolic, finally, also in that it ultimately points to something transcendent, to the structure and unity of a rich idea or even an entire discipline.

Klafki: four questions of exemplarity

Klafki explores the pedagogical significance of any given example of educational content for his Didaktik through four questions. These are questions that help teachers differentiate between content generally and its educational potential or educational *substance*. These questions constitute Klafki's 'didactic analysis', with the first question or, rather, set of questions, asking:

What wider or general sense or reality does this content exemplify and open up to the learner? What basic phenomenon or fundamental principle, what law, criterion, problem, method, technique, or attitude can be grasped by dealing with this content as an 'example'?

(2000, p. 151)

What Klafki is asking here is about what the *Bildungsgehalt*, the educational substance or significance that is present in the material will manifest. Klafki is also emphasising that this significance can be found in the widest range of things – from an attitude or skill to a phenomenon or physical object.

Klafki's second question asks about the significance of the material or topic *not* for what is *to be taught or learned* but for students *in their current situation*: "What significance does the content in question, or the experience, knowledge, ability, or skill to be acquired through this topic already possess in the minds of the children in my class?" (p. 151). Klafki understands this question as being practical, empirical, and normative in nature. He is asking about what might already *be* significant for the child, what knowledge might be accessible to the child, as well as what *should be* significant and accessible for the student.

[It] is a matter of whether the content in question, that is, the substance to be investigated in it, *can* and *should* be an element in the present education of the young people, that is, in their lives, in their conception of themselves and the world, in their areas of competence.

(p. 152; emphasis added)

An obvious example would be a lesson in safe adult sexual activity, which would certainly neither be accessible to nor desirable for grade one students, but which would meet all three of Klafki's criteria in the case of those who are older. Then there is the descriptive or practical sense of Klafki's question, which has to do with the way that the example can be approached in instruction. Klafki characterises this through the following questions:

From which angles do the students already have access to the topic? Which angles are still unfamiliar? . . . Must the children first be acquainted with the questions from which this topic is to develop – perhaps by shattering certain conceptions they take for granted – or can the familiarity be presupposed?

(p. 152)

Thus, in the familiar example of teaching younger students about the earth rotating on its axis and circling the sun, it is likely first useful to ask them about their experiences of night and day, of the sun rising and setting, of seasons and their gradual progression. It would then be important to have something like a globe and flashlight on hand to provide concrete illustration for a scientifically accurate explanation.

Klafki's third main question asks: "What constitutes the topic's significance for the children's future?" Klafki again clarifies this through further questions: "Does this content play a vital role in the intellectual life of the adolescents and adults the children will become, or is there justification to assume that it will, or should, play such a role?" (p. 152). Klafki here is echoing a theme familiar from German pedagogy – one that goes as far back as the hermeneutician Friedrich Schleiermacher. This is the dual focus of pedagogy on the children's well-being in the present and on their future, and the tension that often exists between the two (Friesen, 2017a). It is captured in Schleiermacher's discussion of education's need to often "sacrifice" of "the present for the sake of the future" of the child (Schleiermacher, 1826/forthcoming).

Given that the present, according to Schleiermacher, should not be unnecessarily sacrificed for the sake of the future, it is not the knowledge of the expert that is necessarily seen as the ideal for the curriculum by Didaktik. The student is not to approximate an expert, as some contemporary theories of learning insist (e.g. Bransford et al., 2006; Sawyer, 2014). That would require a rather complete sacrifice of the present for the future. Instead, the student, as Klafki says, is to become an "educated layperson" (*gebildeter Laie*). By this, he means a

democratic citizen who is to be aware of his or her responsibility for our society and our state [. . . a] 'consumer' who should be able to choose critically and with taste from among the wide range of opportunities for experiencing and forming culture.

(2000, p. 145)

Klafki's fourth question is based on the answers provided to the previous three. It reads: "How is the content structured (which has been placed in a specifically pedagogical perspective by Questions I, II, and III)?" (p. 153). Its sub-questions are about "the individual elements of the content [when seen] as a meaningful whole", about "the relationship of the individual elements" of the content, and about "layers of meaning and significance" that might inhere in the content as a whole (p. 152). The relevance of these last few questions is related to the kind of subject matter in question. A text or an image in a class on arts and literature will often be the object of an ever-deeper exploration of significance, starting with surface meanings going on to more profound themes and patterns. "Relationships of individual elements", on the other hand, are particularly important in subjects like mathematics, engineering, and other sciences. Finally, the relations of parts and wholes are of particular importance when considering systems or cases: politics and organisations, the environment, and biological systems. Such typologies of knowledge explication have been outlined in greater detail, for example, by Chambliss and Calfee in their 1998 book, *Textbooks for Learning* – a rare recent treatment in the English language that touches on what makes content specifically educational or pedagogical in nature.

Klafki's many questions about the exemplarity of a given resource or piece of content suggest that such content is *not* simply neutral when it comes to its relation to the student. They instead suggest that knowledge brings inherent pedagogical value and meaning in some situations but not in others – and that such value and meaning is inseparable from its multifarious relations both to student and teacher. His questions show us that any given piece of content (or any example) has a range of aspects that need to be considered and mediated by the teacher – that require "an appropriate pedagogy" as Young rather elusively noted earlier. Educational materials must be evaluated from the perspective of the teacher's instructional intentions, of the student's present and future, and in terms of what these materials afford in terms of instructional pragmatics.

Conclusion: moving beyond what comes naturally

By examining the way it both conceptualises and analyses educational content, I have shown how Didaktik invokes a picture of education and of the human being that takes culture, society, and history – rather than nature, biology, and neurology – as its starting point. Didaktik sees education as a process always necessarily involving all three components of the didactic triangle, as an induction into powerful cultural or historical *understandings*, and as 'elevating' the human from the physical, emotional, and mental limitations of biology to the freedom and responsibility that is possible in a democratic culture and society. Now, in my conclusion, I consider some of the further implications of Didaktik for understanding content by considering one further linkage within continental theorising.

I consider the connection of the didactic conception of content to a particular way of understanding knowledge and its generation and reproduction over time.

Scientific and scholarly work, whether in medicine or gender studies, is generally expected to take the form and appearance of dispassionate inquiry. It answers to criteria that are, of course, very different from simplified knowledge that is highlighted in a health brochure or an advocacy pamphlet. This makes the results of scientific and scholarly work something that children on their own are rather unlikely to be drawn to or find intrinsically powerful. Take the very simple examples of the inequalities found in gender histories or the knowledge of how seasons arise through the earth's rotation on its axis. Such knowledge is complex and likely counter-intuitive to those not yet exposed to it. And it certainly does *not* provide the kind of comfort derived from believing, say, that the earth is the centre of the universe, or that history is the march of universal progress. As a result, I believe that Michael Young's assertion that powerful or curricular knowledge is not "oppressive or alienating [. . . in] itself" needs to be rethought. Disciplinary knowledge – from histories of genocide and exploitation through physics to modern astronomy – tends not to be comforting or already familiar. "The truth", as the saying goes, "sometimes hurts". This is recognised, for example, in understandings of *Bildung* that underpin Klafki's *Didaktik*.

Alienation and self-alienation are seen as indispensable components of *Bildung* as the process or experience of formation and self-formation. Wilhelm von Humboldt famously emphasised that alienation is inherent in human striving to "reach beyond [one]self to the external objects" that through *Bildung* are "integrated" into the self (von Humboldt, 2000, p. 59). Others have more recently characterised the moment-by-moment experience of learning as occurring at the uncertain threshold between "no longer and not yet" – between moments in which the familiar is lost, but in which it is not yet replaced by anything clearly known (Meyer Drawe, as quoted in Friesen, 2017b). Also, as adult educator Jack Mezirow has shown, periods of significant adult learning often have as their antecedent a major life crisis or "disorienting dilemma" that leads an individual to change his or her way of life (e.g. Mezirow, 2009). Finally, even John Dewey spoke of the "self-alienation" that is a part of "the mind giv[ing] up its immediate interests and go[ing] on [a] far journey" of higher learning (1890/1962, p. 52).

The alienation involved both in education and in one's personal development brings this concluding discussion to a second point: namely, the undeniable reality of the (sometimes uncomfortable) subjective experience of the student in educational contexts. It is worth noting that in the more recent accounts of educational content from both Schulman and Young, the backgrounds and experiences of the generations of students who are to acquire knowledge or develop intellectually and morally are given little attention. In Young's case, student subjectivity appears important only insofar as it might contribute to or detract

from the student's "commitment . . . to a relationship to" powerful knowledge (Young and Muller, 2015, p. 141). Contemporary accounts of 'learning', moreover, can be seen as underpinned by the impersonality of learning (and thus also of teaching) as an individually, culturally, and domain-independent process. In fact, it is only in the politically charged reconceptualist curriculum theory where issues of experience and subjectivity arise – but unfortunately, they are conceptualised in a way that is very distinct from questions of content, teaching, and the curriculum itself. In this light, it seems important to reference an approach to knowledge and content that sees the learner and learning itself as having an active, dynamic relation to this educational material or its 'substance'. What would be valuable, I suggest, is a conception of knowledge, of its development, circulation, and potential 'power' that would grant a significant place for the active involvement of students and their subjectivity.

One possible example of such an approach to knowledge and its intergenerational dynamism, I believe, can be found in a source that, strictly speaking, lies outside of the bounds of educational discourse. This is the 'theory' of knowledge represented by hermeneutics. It was familiar to Wolfgang Klafki and has been articulated in various ways by thinkers including Friedrich Schleiermacher (referenced earlier), Wilhelm Dilthey, and Paul Ricoeur. But for the purposes of illustration, I focus on H. G. Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, particularly the section titled "Language as the Medium of Hermeneutic Experience". Here, Gadamer underscores the "detachment" specifically of *written language* – its detachment "both from the writer or author and from a specifically addressed recipient or reader" (2004, p. 394). Adding that this situation gives writing "a life of its own" that is of particular importance for hermeneutics, Gadamer continues:

In writing . . . the meaning . . . exists purely for itself, completely detached from all emotional elements of expression and communication. . . . Hence the meaning of something written is fundamentally identifiable and repeatable. What is identical in the repetition is *only* what was actually deposited in the written record.

(2004, p. 394; original emphasis)

Something written, elements of knowledge or content – for example, those included in the day's lesson plan – are on their own self-identical and self-sufficient. They are in this sense alien to us and even to possibilities for their own interpretation. The content of my copy of the periodic table or of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is identical to yours. Somewhat like Klafki's manifest content (*Bildungsinhalt*), this content can be said to exist in some senses independently of questions of its potential pedagogical value or application. However, in being performed, enacted, and situated – in being *read* (ideally aloud) – the status of these texts, this content, according to Gadamer, is utterly transformed. What was earlier self-sufficient and self-contained is brought into greater proximity

and familiarity. Gadamer explains this by referring to the written tradition as a whole:

Writing is self-alienation. Overcoming it, reading the text, is thus the highest task of Understanding [*sic*]. . . . Through it[,] tradition becomes part of our own world, and thus what it communicates can be stated immediately. Where we have a written tradition, we are not just told a particular thing; a past humanity itself becomes present to us in its general relation to the world. . . . It does not present us with only a stock of memorials and signs. Rather, literature has acquired its own contemporaneity with every present. To understand it does not mean primarily to reason one's way back into the past, but to have a present involvement in what is said.
(2004, pp. 392, 393)

Gadamer adds to this the following sententious claim:

The understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning.
(p. 394)

When something is read aloud, when it is understood, it loses at least some of its (sometimes alienating) self-sufficiency and self-identity. Instead, it becomes part of “our own world” – “our” world, both in the sense of individual and shared experience. It acquires “its own contemporaneity” with the present, as Gadamer says. To learn, for example, how a bean seed can be caused to sprout, or to ‘understand’ the periodic table, is to connect it with what is relevant in one’s present, to have “a present involvement” with content or knowledge that might otherwise remain self-sufficient. Teachers, of course, play a key role in influencing what this involvement might be like – for example, by highlighting particular aspects of its educational substance (*Bildungsgehalt*), or its relevance to students’ present and future. However, a significant part of this present involvement depends on the subjectivity of the students, the contingencies of their “contemporaneity”, their historically conditioned sense of themselves and their future. Simply speaking and discussing aloud words like ‘democracy’ or ‘totalitarianism’ after Brexit and Trump, for example, invoke a notably different significance and resonance – whether for students or teachers – than they possessed beforehand. ‘Social media’, ‘deadly virus’, or ‘climate change’, as further examples, may possess a rather different ‘contemporaneity’ for young students than they might for their teachers or parents. In grappling with these and other perhaps more mundane topics, students and children bring their own value to the sharing of a present meaning and can be said to understand such meanings in their own way.

By bringing content back into discussion of education, teaching, and learning – and by considering its manifold and intimate interconnections with student

and teacher – can help, I believe, to bring back some balance into discussions of student subjectivity, teacher agency, and of the knowledge that is encountered in classrooms. It can help us to see education, moreover, not merely as a task of “maximizing learning happening in the classroom” (as it is so often seen in America) or as realising students’ “entitlement to powerful knowledge” (as it has been recently rationalised in the UK). In place of such views, it offers an opportunity to see education as empowering the student to the exercise of his or her own autonomy and responsibility. Finally, teaching itself – particularly in its relationship to content – needs no longer be seen as something to be directed by scientific prescriptions. Instead, it can be regarded as something that unfolds in the vital interrelationship between the student and teacher, and through the dynamic interpretative connections of both to educational content.

Notes

- 1 It is different in that it critically opposes lived curriculum with traditional curriculum and sees the former as constituted by personal biography and political categories, including race, gender, and ethnicity.
- 2 This chapter adapts some content published in Friesen (2018), “Continuing the Dialogue: Curriculum, Didaktik and Theories of Knowledge”.

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