

## **“View Master”: Windows to Interpreting Curriculum**

**By Eric K. Bull**

What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives. (Heilbrun 1988, p.37, *Writing a Woman's Life*)

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Once upon a time in a city nearby, there existed a small brick building which housed such wonderments that could not be described in a slow, monotone voice. Rather, when attempting to share all that the place contained, boys and girls alike would begin to frantically wave their hands about and blend their voices in a gleeful chant as if to conjure up the image they wanted to express. After all, this was THE toy store in their neighborhood. It was a place to explore and marvel at all the new gadgets and gizmos that seemed to be begging to be plucked off their shelves and brought to life in the hands of a child.

I cupped my hands onto the window glass as I peered inside to get a better view. My eyes scanned

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the colorful displays of assortments of board games, stuffed animals, dolls of every description, boxes of model cars, and balls until they came to rest on an uncharacteristically nondescript poster which read "Bumped into any glass walls lately?" My curiosity guided me through the entrance doors which jingled a small bell as I pushed my way in. In no time at all I found myself standing in front of the sign I had viewed from my outside perspective. What exactly did the question mean? Perhaps a perusal of the items on the shelves nearby would give me a better indication as to exactly what the intended interpretation should or could be.

Gathering dust and providing homes for spiders long since gone was a seemingly antiquated collection of familiar devices. I cautiously picked up a tiny microscope made of metal and squinted to glimpse a view through the cloudy eyepiece. Nothing, save a reflection of an eyelash greeted my glance. Carefully I returned it to its dust out-lined spot, then allowed my hand to scan the space above each of the remaining items as if it were the claw of a coin-operated crane awaiting a cue to descend and grasp a particular article. My hand passed over finger-print stained fortune telling 8 balls, plastic cameras with cheap straps, hand magnifiers with scratched lenses, and neglected neon sunglasses. Next thing I knew, I held in my hand a decorated cardboard tube with a cat's-eye marble stuffed into one end.

As I drew the kaleidoscope close to my eye, a biblical phrase from my Sunday school days, jumped into my head:

When I was a child, my outlook, and my thoughts were all childish. When I grew up, I had finished with childish things. Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face. My knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me. (*The New English Bible*, 1 Corinthians 13:11&12, p.284-5)

I guessed it was the bit about "puzzling reflections" which brought the verse to mind, that image being confirmed as my one open eye took in the circular segment of life called into view. What I beheld was a splendidly colorful, yet distorted and multiplied view of the sights on the sidewalk outside the toy store. While I enjoyed this amusing exhibition, I was at the same time distressed as I found myself struggling to decipher exactly what it was that I was looking at. Feeling a bit queasy, I set the kaleidoscope back on the shelf, then closed my eyes for a bit of respite.

Opening my eyes once again, I surveyed the optical instruments one last time. In a far corner under a tumble of wheel-like cards rested a friendly, beige contraption. It was a "View Master"! I recalled the countless hours I had spent in my youth as I watched three-dimensional still-life frames of my favorite movies and cartoons click one by one in front of my eyes. I had had a whole library of those circular disks, ammo for the virtual reality simulator of the day. All you had to do was: (1) select a title; (2) slide the wheel into your View Master; (3) position your eyes just right; (4) point the contraption at a light source; and (5) click away! I soon found myself mindlessly sorting through the jumbled stack of slides, looking for a

familiar or tempting title. Pushing aside all the cartoonish sounding ones, I picked up the one that looked most out of place. To the best of my recollection, the View Masters of my youth hadn't had holograms emblazoned on their surfaces, but the one in my hand most certainly did. Upon closer scrutiny, in raised bold letters, the title was announced, "Curriculum: Days in the Life of a Teacher." Anxiously, I fumbled the disk into its special niche in the View Master carousel unaware of what I would soon be watching.



*Click!* The first vignette popped into view. Seemingly frozen into a minute transparency was the image of a towheaded boy slipping about on some rocks by the ocean's edge. Upon closer examination, I realized that that boy was me at about the age of seven. I recalled that quite often my father, a university professor in natural sciences, would invite me along on his field study excursions. Fond memories accompanied that view, for it was then that I truly began to appreciate learning about this thing called "science." It was a non-threatening environment where I was neither belittled by the tertiary students nor coddled by my father. I was treated as one of the learners, someone who was there to experience and share in the knowledge of others as well as revel in the thrill of self discovery. My father's enthusiasm and compassion for the subjects he taught compelled me to ask questions, then with a bit of encouragement, to seek out the answers for myself. This memory brought life to the anonymous Chinese proverb: "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand" which I have referred to constantly in my adult life as an educator.



*Click!* The next image I beheld was another episode of my life as a student. It was a fast forward treatment from the previous one, settling in with me as a 16-year-old in high school. The frame showed me gorging myself with Chinese noodles as a young boy of nine looked on. After school one day, there had been an opportunity to listen to a group from an organization called, Operation Share. Their purpose was to connect high school students to primary school kids who needed both a self-esteem boost, as well as a bit of academic prodding. I thought it might be a bit of fun, especially considering the fact that it granted me units toward graduation and it impressed the girls somewhat. My first match was with a Chinese boy whose parents spoke virtually no English and had very little time to devote to him since they were struggling with a newly-opened restaurant. We would take long walks and sit under a shady tree to go over the homework that he was battling with on that particular day. At the close of each of our sessions, he would invite me to his family's restaurant for a bit of a nibble, which was always on the house. My time

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with him was a short eight weeks, as their business failed and they all had to travel to Chicago to live with relatives.

My next assignment introduced me to Douglas Young. He was just three years my junior, but there was something decidedly different about him. Douglas had a particular type of autism reminiscent of the character portrayed by Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*. Each Wednesday afternoon, a new adventure with Douglas would begin. He had a very low tolerance for sitting still to concentrate on academics, so I took him to shopping malls to work on real life math skills, though most of our time was spent working on social skills. To this day, I still receive cards and letters from Douglas reminding me of things we did and places we visited.



**Click!** A slender man with greasy hair, pulled back into a pony tail, sporting granny glasses and high water bell bottoms appeared to be admonishing a bewildered university student. It didn't take bifocals to realize that once again it was me receiving the lecture. [A pattern seemed to be developing.] I remember that day as the one when I went to take a career placement exam to figure out exactly what I should concentrate my studies on. At the conclusion of the massive multiple choice, the latter day hippie told me I had but one choice...a male nurse! Visions of bedpans danced in my head as I strode out of his office, crumpling the survey into the trash as I went. The next day, I enrolled for a major in natural sciences with an emphasis in elementary education.



**Click!** There I was, sitting behind my teacher's desk surrounded by an angry football squad of eighth graders. It was my first year of teaching. I was full of ideals and enthusiasm as I began my career in a small rural school, teaching seven classes of mathematics and chemistry. The boys had decided to flaunt their dissatisfaction with the fact that I had given them failing marks on the last exam, making them ineligible to play in the next game. Apparently no educator had ever had the audacity to have done that to them before. The year didn't get much better, as my enthusiasm was often smothered by the disrespect and apathy of so many of my students. The administration didn't want to be bothered with discipline issues, so I started to have open-door sessions at lunch breaks to allow the kids a place to go to talk about the problems and concerns facing the average fifteen-year-old. At the years close, I felt as if 95 percent of the learning had been on my behalf, with the remaining 5 percent absorbed by the students. Obligated to go, I attended the graduation ceremonies with a cloud of depression hovering above my head. After the formalities, I was nearly tackled by a girl blubbering giant tears of gratitude. She told me that if it hadn't been for my encouragement and admonishing, she never

would have made it to graduation!



**Click!** The frame highlighted me in my role as a seasonal farm worker, as I burned dodder off fields of alfalfa in 45-degree-Celsius weather. After leaving my first teaching assignment, I applied for and was accepted to teach fifth grade in a neighboring farming community. I felt that by taking a job as a farm worker for the summer, I would have a better sense of empathy for the families and the students who were to make up 75 percent of my enrolment. I had never worked so hard, nor been accepted so heartily in my life. I carried that experience back to my students with whom I toiled in bringing new life to a small plot of land through the construction of a 6,000-square-foot organic garden. The vegetable plot became the focus of my classroom and was the locus for instilling a sense of continuity and pride of ownership and accomplishment in my ten-year-olds.



**Click!** The little View Master wheel continued it's orbital mission, providing views from my past which helped to form my present. The next slide to pop into view was one of me blowing soap bubbles, as I sat and waited for my name to be called at my Master's graduation ceremony. Instead of piling up meaningless, disjointed graduate-level units to add more dollars to my paycheck, I had decided to commit myself to the pursuit of Master's degree in school administration. I chose that particular area not because I wanted to become a principal, but rather for the sake of curiosity. I had always wondered what mystical force acted upon the former congeniality of peers when one of the flock opted to join the ranks of administrators. I found some of the answers I sought after and gained a bit of insight into the rules and regulations which some individuals chose to interpret as constraints and others gladly accepted as challenges.



**Click!** This click of the wheel provided the view of a plastic bag which contained a bit of aluminium foil, a "c"-cell battery, some paperclips, a rubber band, and a torch globe, all of which were tentatively tipped out onto a tabletop by an eager student. I had just finished instructing the fourth graders to get the globe to light up using only the materials provided. A discordant symphony of voices chimed in to request the great "how to" advice. All they received was a bit of encouragement to "give it a try." Thirty minutes into the exploration, frustrated grumbles could be heard over the din of aluminium foil being crumpled and tossed in the trash. I garnered their attention and told them that frustration was but one of the doorways

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to learning, not exactly the words they had hoped for. Soon, exclamations of "I got it! I got it!" resounded throughout the room, causing small stampedes of awkward bodies to stumble across the room in order to catch a glimpse of the miracle of light. They would then dive back to their work stations to attempt to replicate what they had just observed. The thrill of discovery had visited our room.



**Click!** Thirty teachers sat in groups of four as each one tentatively chewed a wad of bubble gum, occasionally stopping to blow a forbidden bubble. This time frame placed me at a workshop I was conducting in Ohio for the AIMS Education Foundation. Each summer found me flying about the United States to teach groups of teachers how to successfully, with the least amount of stress, integrate mathematics and science. The teachers were required to work through all the activities in the same manner they would be expecting their students to perform. The particular gum-chewing episode that the View Master chose to highlight posed the question, "What do you think will happen to the mass of a piece of bubble gum after it has been chewed for ten minutes"? It was that same experiment, conducted by myself five years earlier, which filled me with such wonderment that I chose to spend the 600+ hours required to become a trainer for that foundation.



**Click!** The image of a multinational colloquium of twelve graduate students leaning forward in their seats, as if to stress a point, filled the small frame captured before my eyes. This vista placed me as a doctoral student at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia. I was involved in a spirited class which was examining science and mathematics curricula by means of shared readings and discussions which centered on our weekly entries into personal journals containing insights, reflections, and observations. It was there that I began to construct my notion of curriculum. I had always thought that curriculum was simply the content of what we as teachers were expected to teach. The new idea began to mature into an understanding that stakeholders, materials, environment, the milieu, time for reflection, and narrative all shared in the meaning of the concept of curriculum.

I disengaged the two small portholes of the View Master from my eyes, and blinked in bewilderment at what I had witnessed. Why had I been drawn to this toy store and to this particular bit of my childhood past? Still a bit dazed from the experience, I purchased the slide and viewer, then made a hasty retreat for the outside world. Like a young child with a bag of candy, I peered at my bagged treasure instead of watching where I was going. BONK! I had crashed into the plate glass doors which guarded the entrance to the store. The meaning as to my visit to

the store began to make sense as I vaguely recalled a favored passage from a textbook used in a curriculum class at Curtin. I quickly gathered my wits and the small parcel, then hurried home to find the excerpt from that book that would hopefully paint a clearer picture of the days events.

The book with worn pages fell open to reveal these words,

Zerubavel (1979) has said that things that are so much a part of us that they remain unnoticed are like "invisible glass walls." They are noticed only when we walk into them. The picturing process may help make these ideas a little more visible.... When we bump into the obvious, it becomes a puzzle or a problem, and we think about it. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 10)

I had been thinking about the meaning of curriculum for some time after the conclusion of my course work and only then did the ideas and notions begin to gel and take on a reasonable and comprehensible appearance. The nine frames which I had been audience to were important building blocks in the construction of my interpretation of curriculum, though I was unaware of the creation process at the time. Each of the optical instruments and toys were metaphors for the windows through which educators look in the framing of their particular viewpoints of curriculum.

The initial glimpse I had of my building blocks was almost missed. It was the window of the toy store through which I first gazed. The element of child-like wonder and curiosity seems to be the recurring life blood which has allowed me to continue the educational journey I've travelled thus far. It was with the laying of this cornerstone that construction on my model of curriculum would begin. The microscope, fortune balls, cameras, magnifiers, and sunglasses represented windows through which others might view their pathways to understanding curriculum. The kaleidoscope proved to be an inappropriate vantage point for me as it tended to present distorted and continuously colorful depictions of previous experiences. I knew it wasn't the correct instrument the moment that Biblical verse came to mind, stating that "I had finished with childish things." All was not a loss, however, as the rest of the verse did seem to have implications I might come to understand later.

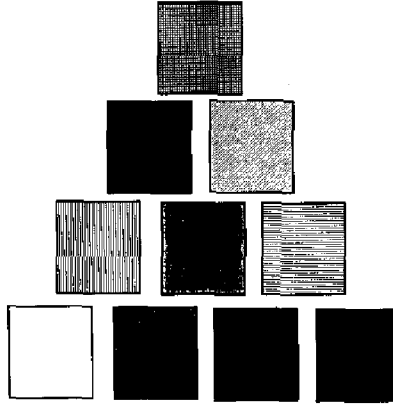
The View Master proved to be the most practical lens through which I would construct my picture of curriculum. Being a toy, it captured that element of my personality which likes to play with ideas and learn through experiences. By operating the trigger to manipulate the wheel, the dynamic interaction between myself and things and processes was given a fresh outlook. Each of the nine pictures captured me interacting with a variety of people, which added the important dimension of stakeholders in my curriculum.

I now have a good picture in my mind of exactly what is meant when it comes to interpreting the concept of curriculum. But like any building of worth, I must endeavour to maintain the soundness of its construction, adding new building

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components, floors, and a window or two to keep it up to date with all the other structures being erected in the educational community.



### **References**

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