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Bringing Content Back In: Perspectives from German *Didaktik*, American Curriculum Theory and Chinese Education

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Abstract

Informed by, but going beyond, Michael Young and his colleagues' project of 'bringing knowledge back in', this chapter (re)introduces content – knowledge selected into the curriculum – into the conversation on curriculum policy and practice from the perspectives of American curriculum theory, German *Didaktik*, and Chinese education. Three propositions will be made, by invoking *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* and Schwab's curriculum thinking. First, the central purpose of schooling involves self-formation and the cultivation of human powers (understanding, ways of thinking, dispositions, capacities) – in addition to the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge. Second, a theory of content is needed that addresses how knowledge is selected and organized into curriculum content and how content can be analysed and unpacked for educational potential. Third, teaching entails an encounter of students with the essence of content that gives rise to opportunities for self-formation and cultivating human powers. The chapter concludes by showing that these three propositions find resonance in the Confucian tradition of educational thinking and in Ye Lan's 'New Basic Education' reform in China.

Keywords: Didaktik; Joseph Schwab; Curriculum theory; Knowledge; Content

No curriculum questions are more fundamental than knowledge questions such as 'what knowledge is of most worth?' and 'how is knowledge selected and organized into the curriculum?'. However, knowledge questions as such have all but disappeared in current global trends in curriculum policy and practice. There has been a shift in curriculum policy from a concern with knowledge to a preoccupation with competences and academic outcomes. Accompanying this shift is a move to bypass formalized curriculum planning – centring on knowledge selection and organization for teaching and learning in school – in favour of developing academic standards and competency frameworks (Karseth & Sivesind, 2010; Young, 2009a). Behind these developments is the pervasive rhetoric of the knowledge society that eschews knowledge in favour of generic competences needed for the twenty-first century. The development also has to do with what Biesta (2010) calls 'learnification' of educational discourse – the global shift towards talking about learning, rather than education – in which knowledge is something constructed by the student, with no educational value in itself.

Knowledge questions have also disappeared from the field of contemporary curriculum theory and discourse, which has been fundamentally shaped by neo-Marxist and postmodern paradigms (see Deng, 2018b). For neo-Marxist curriculum theorists, the fundamental curriculum question is not ‘what knowledge is of most worth?’ but ‘whose knowledge is of most worth?’—a socio-political question that needs to be addressed in terms of interest, ideology, politics, and power relation (Apple, 1990, 2004). They devote their energy to curriculum critique geared to exposing or unravelling the interest, ideology, and agenda of those in power, and unmasking the political mechanism through which dominant groups exercise power and control over weaker groups. For postmodern and post-structural curriculum theorists, knowledge – in particular school knowledge – is reducible to no more than the standpoints and perspectives of dominant groups (cf. Moore, 2009). Accordingly, they reject traditional subject-based curriculum and champion for a multicultural curriculum that affirms and validates ‘every voice in the school community’ (Slattery, 1995). As a result, there is a loss of what Michael Young calls the “primary object” of curriculum theory – the knowledge taught and learnt in school (Young, 2013). Contemporary curriculum theorists have been increasingly marginalized by policy makers and curriculum developers; they are left on the sidelines of any serious contemporary debate about what knowledge should be taught in school (Deng, 2015a; Young, 2013).

‘Bringing Knowledge Back In’: The Social Realist School

It is in this context that Michael Young and his colleagues’ project of ‘bringing knowledge back in’ becomes particularly pertinent and significant (e.g., Young, 2008; Young, 2013; Young et al., 2014; Young & Muller, 2015). Over the last two decades, they have endeavoured to reintroduce knowledge into the recent global discourse on curriculum policy and practice and into the field of curriculum theory. Associated with the project is the *social realist* school – a coalition of scholars in the UK, South Africa, Australia, and some European countries, with seminal writers such as Michael Young, Johan Muller, and the late Rob Moore.

Using realism and the sociological works of Durkheim and Bernstein as theoretical underpinnings, Young and his colleagues establish a social-realist theory of knowledge that serves to bring centre-stage disciplinary knowledge in curriculum discourse. In that theory, they distinguish between specialized, disciplinary knowledge and everyday knowledge, on the one hand, and between different types of disciplinary knowledge, on the other. While reflecting human interests and standpoints, disciplinary knowledge has its own properties, trustfulness, and explanatory power that can transcend the personal interests and standpoints of producers (see Young, 2008). Created by specialist communities of scholars, this knowledge is *powerful knowledge* because it provides the best understanding of the natural and social worlds. The acquisition of this knowledge facilitates the imagining of alternatives and enables people to move beyond their particular experience (Young & Muller, 2013). As such, disciplinary knowledge is worthy of being taught in its own right and to its own end.

With this theory of knowledge as the essential starting-point, they develop a knowledge-led curriculum theory which purports to inform curriculum planning and pedagogical practice. The central purpose of schooling is to help students gain access to disciplinary knowledge that they cannot acquire at home (Young, 2009b). Moreover, access to this knowledge is an entitlement of *all* students – and (thus) a social justice issue. Curriculum planning is essentially a process recontextualising an academic discipline into a school subject – which entails selecting,

sequencing, and pacing academic knowledge in view of the coherence of the discipline and the constraints created by the developmental stages of students (Young, 2013). Classroom teaching is a process of passing on a body of disciplinary knowledge to students (Young, 2009b, 2013). Furthermore, to overcome the ‘crisis’ in contemporary curriculum theory, Young argues, curriculum scholars must employ as the essential point of departure ‘what do students have an entitlement to learn’ for constructing curriculum principles that ‘maximize the chances that all pupils will have...access to the best knowledge’ (Young, 2013, p. 115).

Social realism has been effective in bringing knowledge back into the current global discourse on curriculum policy and practice and has provided a meaningful perspective for tackling the crisis in curriculum theory (see Deng, 2015a). However, there are several issues that require attention. A theory of knowledge – rather than a vision or teleology of education – is taken as the essential point of departure for developing curriculum theory. This theory of knowledge is in essence epistemological and sociological rather than *educational* and *curricular*. As a result, it disposes Young and his colleagues to see knowledge as an end in itself rather than as a means to some bigger purposes – e.g., citizenship and civic education, individual intellectual and moral development, self-actualisation and human flourishing. They are concerned primarily with the question of ‘what should they [students] know?’ rather than the question of ‘what should they [students] become?’ (Hamilton, 1999, p. 136). In this regard, the social realist school has been disconnected with long traditions of educational thinking across the world such as German *Didaktik*, American curriculum theory, and Chinese education, among others – traditions that are centrally concerned with the latter question. In these traditions, it is content or subject matter – a special kind of knowledge selected into the curriculum – that gives meaning and significance to teaching and learning in classroom. In other words, content or subject matter is inherently a *curriculum* concept. (see Deng & Luke, 2008). Yet the term ‘content’ or ‘subject matter’ is often conflated with or replaced by ‘knowledge’ in the discourse of social realists.

Beyond the Social Realist School

Informed by, but going beyond, the project of Young and his colleagues, in this chapter I reintroduce knowledge into the conversation from the perspectives of German *Didaktik*, American curriculum theory, and Chinese education. Among many schools or traditions of German *Didaktik* (e.g., *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik*, Berliner *Didaktik*, psychological *Didaktik*, experimental *Didaktik*), I select *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* for discussion because it is the main school or tradition and provides an elaborate, theoretical account of content in relation to education and the curriculum. Among many schools of American curriculum theory, I chose Schwab’s curriculum thinking because Schwab is one of the very few US theorists who has provided a sophisticated, elaborate account of the role of knowledge and content in relation to education and curriculum. His thinking is rooted in and developed out of the rich tradition of curriculum and educational thinking – represented by Dewey, McKeon, Schwab, and Tyler, among others – within the University of Chicago, arguably the birthplace of American curriculum studies.

As will be seen, the examination of *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* and Schwab’s curriculum thinking brings forth three propositions concerning (1) the role of knowledge in education, (2) a theory of content that serves to inform curriculum practice, and (3) an image of teaching as a student-

content encounter. I will show in the final section how these propositions find resonance in the Confucian tradition of educational thinking, and in the ‘New Basic Education’ reform in China.

Bildung-Centred Didaktik

Bildung-centred Didaktik provides a theory of teaching and learning that pertains to implementing the state curriculum in classrooms. Such a theory consists of three essential components: (1) a concept of *Bildung*, (2) a theory of ‘content’ that serves to inform curriculum planning and classroom teaching, and (3) an image of classroom teaching as a meaningful encounter between the learner and content.

Standing for the German ideal of (liberal) education, *Bildung* refers to the formation of the full individual, the cultivation of human powers, sensibility, self-awareness, liberty and freedom, responsibility and dignity (von Humboldt, 2000; see also Hopmann, 2007). The concept is later extended to include the development of self-determination (autonomy), co-determination (participation), and solidarity (Klafki, 1998). *Bildung* is achieved through linking the self to the world (social and natural) in ‘the most general, most animated and most unrestrained interplay’ (von Humboldt, 2000, p. 58). The world, independent from us, is processed by human thought represented by academic disciplines (Lüth, 2000).

With this concept of *Bildung* as a point of departure, German *Didaktik* scholars conceive of the role of disciplinary knowledge in relation to education and curriculum. Knowledge is to be ‘used in the service of intellectual and moral *Bildung*’ (Lüth, 2000, p. 77), rather than something that is to be gained for its own sake. Academic disciplines are an indispensable resource or vehicle for *Bildung* (Klafki, 2000). There are several forms of disciplinary knowledge – historical, social, linguistic, geographic, physical, chemical, and biological – each of which gives us access to a particular aspect of reality and each of which has potential to cultivate a particular type of human power and disposition. Furthermore, German *Didaktik* scholars establish a theory of educational content (*Theorie der Bildungsinhalte*) that serves to inform curriculum planning and classroom teaching for *Bildung*. It consists of four related concepts: *contents of education* (*Bildungsinhalt*), *educational substance* (*Bildungsgehalt*), *the elemental* (*das Elementare*) and *the fundamental* (*das Fundamentale*). Curriculum designers characteristically call the contents embodied in the state curriculum the ‘contents of education’, which result from a deliberative process of selection and organization of the wealth of the academic knowledge, experience, and wisdom for *Bildung*:

Curriculum designers assume that these contents, once the children or adolescents have internalized and thus acquired them, will enable the young people to ‘produce a certain order’ (Litt) in themselves and at the same time in their relation to the world, to ‘assume responsibility’ (Weniger), and to cope with the requirements of life. The contents of teaching and learning will represent such order, or possibilities for such order, such responsibilities, inevitable requirements and opportunities.... (Klafki, 2000, p.150)

In other words, once content is selected into the state curriculum framework or syllabus, it has been “curricularized”, so to speak (Doyle, 2011). As such, content is imbued with educational meaning or potential for *Bildung*,

The three other concepts serve to theorise the educational potential of content. The educational potential of content consists in the educational substance of content which is, in turn, comprised by the *elemental* – concentrated, *reduced* content, in the form of penetrating cases, concepts, principles, methods, and so on. The *fundamental* refers to the ‘primordial’ experience that the elemental can bring out or the potential impact it can have on the perspectives, modes of thinking, dispositions and ways of being-in-the-world of individuals (Krüger, 2008). Informed by this theory of educational content, the state curriculum framework only lays out school subjects and their contents to be covered in schools, but it does not specify the educational substance, meaning and significance of content – these are to be identified and interpreted by a teacher, in a specific classroom situation (Hopmann, 2007). Teachers are entrusted with a high level of professional autonomy to interpret the state curriculum framework. They are viewed as curriculum makers “working within, but not directed by” the state curriculum framework, informed by the idea of *Bildung* and the *Didaktik* way of thinking (Westbury, 2000, p. 26).

With reference to the above notion of Bildung and the theory of educational content, German Didaktik scholars articulate what teaching is and what responsibility a teacher needs to have. Classroom teaching is seen as a “fruitful encounter” between content and the learner for Bildung (Klafki, 2000), rather than as the mere transmission of academic content. Such an encounter leads to a deeper understanding of the world, modifications in perspectives, and the cultivation of human capacities or powers. Students are seen as unique individuals, with their own experiences, motivations and interests. Therefore, in instructional planning, the teacher must identify the elemental aspects of content (penetrating cases, basic ideas, concepts and methods) and ascertain the value and significance of content with reference to individual students “with a particular human context in mind, with its attendant past and its anticipated future” (Klafki, 2000, p. 148). Furthermore, he or she is to transform content into forms that are perceived as meaningful by students themselves. In other words, the teacher unlocks the educational potential of content by reducing content to ‘powerful’ elemental categories (cases, concepts, methods) and unpacking the educational meaning and significance.

Schwab’s Curriculum Thinking

Like *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik*, Schwab’s curriculum thinking can also be seen as consisting of three essential components: (1) a vision of a liberal education, (2) a theory of content that seeks to inform curriculum planning and pedagogical practice; and (3) a notion of teaching as an encounter between students and content.

For Schwab, the central purpose of a liberal education, which is akin to *Bildung*, is the development of an empowered, autonomous and active individual. Such an individual possesses an understanding of culture and the world, and a set of powers and dispositions that allows him or her to face the challenges and problems in the society of the times. The powers and dispositions of an educated person, further articulated by Schwab, include a ‘capacity for “syntactical communication”’, a disposition to ‘quest, beyond mere survival, for a state called ‘happiness’, an ability to ‘deliberate wisely about technologies based on science’ and ‘to choose thoughtfully among several technological methods’ (Levine, 2006, p.119). The powers also include ‘abilities and insights to face the new problems of our times and to use the new instrumentalities with wisdom and freedom’ (McKeon, 1953, p. 113) and ‘critical and organising power and deliberative command over choice and action’ (Schwab, 1978, p.125), among others.

The cultivation of such intellectual, social and civic powers and dispositions is achieved through the interaction of individual students with various forms of knowledge embodied in contemporary academic disciplines.

The primary concern of Schwab, like that of the German *Didaktik* scholars, is with the contribution of academic disciplines to human formation and the cultivation of human powers and dispositions, rather than the epistemological properties, structures, and explanatory powers of disciplinary knowledge *per se* (see Fenstermacher, 1980). Accordingly, Schwab articulates a theory of knowledge that conceives of the essence of academic disciplines in ways that are productive in cultivating those human powers and dispositions. Following McKeon, he identifies three types of academic disciplines – natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities – each of which has the potential to develop a particular type of human power and disposition. The significance of each discipline is determined by a distinct set of *arts* or *methods of inquiry* instead of content or subject matter. As Levine (2006) explains,

the place of the natural sciences in general education was determined by the arts required to analyse problems, validate knowledge, and communicate statements about natures and things. The place of social sciences in general education was determined by the arts required to deal with problems concerning associations set up by humans to achieve common values. The place of the humanities in general education was determined by the arts required to analyse the great achievements and products of human creativity when considered with respect to their formal structure. (p. 99)

Building on McKeon, Schwab argues that the contribution of an academic discipline to the cultivation of human powers lies in the methods or arts of inquiry embedded within the discipline. An academic discipline consists not only of statements and conclusions, but also ‘arts’ or ‘methods’ employed in disciplinary inquiry, an understanding of which enables the development of liberating human powers that are applicable in wide ranging situations and practices:

The ‘intellectual’ arts and skills with which the liberal education curriculum is concerned are not then intellectual as to subject matter, and thus exclusive of other subject matters, but intellectual as to quality. They are the arts and skills which confer cogency upon situations and actions whether these be scientific, social, or humanistic, general and abstract or particular and concrete. The liberal arts, however formulated, are to be understood as the best statement of our present knowledge of the human make, of various means – some special in their application to specific subject matters, some general – by which the understanding frees us from submission to impressions, beliefs, and impulses, to give us critical and organizing power and deliberative command over choice and action. A liberal curriculum is one concerned that its students develop such powers. (Schwab, 1978, p. 125)

Consistent with this theory of knowledge, Schwab formulated a theory of content that serves to inform curriculum planning and classroom teaching. This theory consists of a particular notion of content and a set of categories that could serve to reveal the educational potential of content for the cultivation of human powers. Identified from the fund of academic knowledge, it takes the

form of scholarly materials (histories, scientific reports, literacy works and so on) that reflect the revisionary character of knowledge (concerning how knowledge was developed), rather than just the “rhetoric of conclusion” (knowledge as a final product) (Schwab, 1962). The set of categories, called three faces, is explained as follows:

- The first face is the *purport* [educational meaning and significance] conveyed by the material, referring to, for instance, an account of a political event by a historical segment [an extract from a historical source], a way of classifying physical phenomena by a scientific report, a moral dilemma or an image of a person by a literary work. Having students encounter the purport as such can open up opportunities for widening their horizons, transforming their perspectives, and cultivating their moral sensitivity.
- The second face is the *originating discipline* from which scholarly material derives, referring to a coherent way of inquiry – a problem identified, an investigation executed, the data or argument sought and a conclusion reached. Having students understand and experience the problem, method, principle and conclusion of a disciplinary inquiry can give rise to the development of independent critical thinking, an ability to judge the validity and reliability of knowledge claims, and an understanding of the merits and limitations of a particular mode of inquiry.
- The third face refers to *access disciplines* that can be brought to bear on scholarly material to disclose its full complication and sophistication. When a piece of material is scrutinised by asking different types of questions, using different perspectives and different methods of inquiry, it can render diverse opportunities for cultivating critical thinking, freedom of thought, self-understanding and prudent thought and action. (Deng, 2018a, pp. 342–3; also see Schwab, 1973)

Informed by this theory of content, curriculum planning entails a deliberative and interpretive process of selecting the content from academic disciplines with a view to their educational potential, within a particular instructional context and with a particular group of learners in mind. The process entails identifying the educational potential of the scholarly material under consideration, by means of the three faces – purport, originating discipline, and access disciplines. The final decision to include a particular piece of scholarly content in the curriculum is made with reference to both its educational potential and the four curriculum commonplaces: subject matter, milieu, learner and teacher (Schwab, 1973).

What teaching is, and what responsibility teachers need to have, take on a special meaning in regard to the vision of a liberal education, the theory of knowledge, and the theory of content. As with *Didaktik*, classroom teaching is seen as an encounter between students and content to achieve the kind of education envisioned. A student is seen as a unique individual, with *eros* (‘the energy of wanting’), and as an instrument that the teacher needs to make use of (Schwab, 1978). In instructional planning, the teacher is to recover the significance in scholarly material through ‘arts of recovery’ – in terms of the meaning conveyed (the purport), the particular way of inquiry involved (the originating discipline) and multiple ways of inquiry brought forth (access disciplines) which could be brought to bear on the material (Schwab, 1969). By means of

these three categories, scholarly material or a curriculum text is made to open up manifold opportunities for challenging the understanding of students and cultivating their intellectual and moral powers and dispositions.

Convergence and Divergence

Despite being developed in different social, historical and cultural milieus, *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* and Schwabian curriculum thinking have significant similarities with respect to theorising teaching and teachers. Both employ, as a point of departure, a vision of education – centred on the cultivation of human powers and dispositions – for thinking about the role of knowledge in education and curriculum. Both treat disciplinary knowledge, not in and of itself, but as a resource or vehicle for that cultivation. Both view content – that which results from the deliberate selection of academic knowledge – as embodying educational potential. Both see classroom teaching as an educational encounter or meeting between students and content, and stress the necessity of unlocking the educational potential of content for cultivating human powers and dispositions.

There are, of course, differences between *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* and Schwab's curriculum thinking. The former views the cultivation of human powers and dispositions as resulting from interactions not only with academic knowledge but also with society and culture, whereas the latter conceives of it as resulting primarily from interactions with disciplinary knowledge. The former views academic disciplines as established bodies of knowledge, whereas the latter sees them in terms of achievements as well as, more importantly, arts or methods of inquiry.

Differences aside, both *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* and Schwab's curriculum thinking are markedly different from that of Young and his colleagues. The latter employs a sociological theory of knowledge – rather than a vision of education – as their point of departure for thinking about the purpose of education, curriculum planning and classroom teaching. Disciplinary knowledge is viewed as having its own powers, worthy of being taught for its own sake or to its own end. Classroom teaching is seen as a process of transmitting disciplinary knowledge to students.

Behind these similarities and differences are two rather different types of educational theorising that are associated, in turn, with two distinctive traditions of educational thinking. Both *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* and Schwab's curriculum thinking exemplify a way of theorising in the European *Pädagogik* tradition which is distinctively *educational*, *normative* and *hermeneutic*. (For an explanation on the convergence in educational theorising between Schwab and *Didaktikers*, see Künzli, 2013; Reid, 1980.) This way of theorising is educational because it is centrally concerned with questions pertaining to human formation and development. It is normative because the theorising is informed by a conception of what education ought to be. Furthermore, both *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* and Schwab's curriculum thinking have a strong hermeneutic and interpretive inclination, a proclivity towards interpreting and unpacking the meaning and significance of content by means of a set of categories. After all, the European tradition seeks to establish *Pädagogik* as a distinctive human science with 'its own terminology, its own points of departure, its own methods of investigation and verification' (Krüger, 2008, p. 216).

By contrast, the way of theorising used by Young and his colleagues reflects the Anglophone *disciplines of education* tradition in which the perspectives or theories that are used to think about education are derived or developed from theories of foundational disciplines (psychology, sociology, philosophy and history) (Furlong & Whitty, 2017). Such perspectives or theories are then used to establish theoretical principles concerning curriculum planning and classroom teaching. The tradition has a strong dependency on foundational disciplines for its language, theoretical perspectives and methods.

Resonance with Chinese Educational Thinking

The examination of *Bildung*-centred Didaktik and Schwab's curriculum thinking brings forth three propositions:

- 1) If education is centrally concerned with the cultivation of intellectual, moral, social and civic powers, then knowledge needs to be seen as an important resource for that cultivation, rather than as something taught for its own end. Furthermore, knowledge needs to be reconceived in ways that are productive for this cultivation.
- 2) A theory of content is needed that addresses how knowledge is selected and organized into curriculum content and how content can be analysed and unpacked for educational potential.
- 3) Teaching needs to be seen as an encounter of students with the essence of content that gives rise to opportunities for self-formation and the cultivation of human powers.

Now I show that these three propositions, in varying ways, find resonance in the Confucian tradition of educational thinking and in the 'New Basic Education' reform.

The first proposition is resonant with the Neo-Confucian notion of self-cultivation – the development of self-worth, self-respect, self-understanding, and individual powers in relation to fulfilling one's social responsibilities and functions. As de Bary (1996) observed,

The Four Books with Zhu Xi's commentary gave the individual a sense of self-worth and self-respect not to be sacrificed for any short-term utilitarian purpose; a sense of place in the world not to be surrendered to any state or party; a sense of how one could cultivate one's individual powers to meet the social responsibilities that the enjoyment of learning always brought with it—powers and responsibilities not to be defaulted on. (p. 33)

Self-cultivation is achieved through the interactions with the physical and cultural world, entailing the investigation of natural and social phenomena and the advancement of knowledge (Bai, 2013; de Bary, 1996).

The idea of teaching conveyed in the third proposition bears resemblance to what Confucius believed about the essence of teaching. As instantiated in *The Analects*, teaching in essence is a 'heart-to-heart' dialogue between the teacher and his disciples, necessitated by an in-depth engagement with the meaning of a classic text (Wu, 2011).

New Basic Education reform (2001-) is directed toward transforming elementary and secondary schools in Shanghai in the midst of the profound social, economic, and educational transition underway in China at the turn of the twenty-first century. Rooted in the Confucian tradition of

educational thinking and informed by European theories of pedagogics, the reform provide instantiations of the above three propositions. The central purpose of education, according to Ye Lan (the key architect of the reform), involves the development of students' abilities to self-regulate, judge and think reflectively, their self-confidence, and their courage to face challenges (Ye, 2009a, 2009b). It entails the cultivation of individuals with 'self-consciousness of life', the 'inner power' for realizing the value of life (Ye, 2009a). Individuals are to 'own their consciousness and have the ability to lead their own destinies' (Ye, 2009b, p. 562).

Content is held as an important 'resource' and 'means' for cultivating individual learners rather than a body of knowledge and skills for mere transmission or mastery (Ye, 2009a). A distinction is made between *explicit content* and *implicit content*. The former is embodied in instructional frameworks, syllabi and textbooks, consisting of the outcomes of human experience and practice selected and organized for the purposes of providing students with opportunities to understand and interact with the real world, developing their intellectual and moral abilities, and cultivating their self-consciousness of life. The latter is further differentiated between *implicit 'process' content*—pertaining to the process and practice through which knowledge was developed and formulated by human beings—and *implicit 'relational' content*—concerning knowledge relationships in and across school subjects. These three notions are essential for recognizing and appreciating the educational values and significance inherent in content—in terms of developing students' self-understanding, intellectual capacities, and social responsibilities (Ye, 2009a). They can be seen as constituting *a theory of educational content* in life-practice pedagogics.

Ye Lan (2009a) construes classroom teaching as a 'dynamic' and 'generative' process organised around content and directed toward cultivating the life-consciousness, intellectual and moral potential of the active individual. The act of teaching is seen as involving an active 'interplay' between learners and content which could bring about a profound impact on learners. To facilitate such an interplay, classroom teachers necessarily analyse and explore the educational value and significance inherent in content in terms of explicit content, implicit 'process' and 'relational' contents, with attention to who students are, their interests, knowledge backgrounds and experiences. Teachers are to reorganize, frame and transform content in a way that allows the educational value and significance to be realized in classrooms (Ye, 2002, 2009a).

Concluding Remarks

I have sought to (re)introduce knowledge into the conversation on curriculum policy and practice from the perspectives of American curriculum theory and German *Didaktik*, and Chinese education, respectively. The three key propositions which are at the heart of *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* and Schwab's curriculum thinking find resonance in the Neo-Confucian tradition of educational thinking. As such, they can be seen as representing cross-cultural, transnational wisdoms, and together call for a way of thinking about the purpose of schooling, knowledge and content, and classroom teaching which is markedly different from that of Young and his colleagues. As Deng (2015b) observes,

If we take such arguments seriously, then the essential point of departure for curriculum research and theorising should not be the knowledge that 'all students are entitled to have access to' (Young, 2013, p. 107) but the intellectual and moral powers or capacities all students need to develop through an encounter with content. In this regards, to bring

knowledge back in calls for a new theory of knowledge, and in particular, a new theory of content that support and facilitate such an encounter within the current context of a knowledge economy and globalization. The development of such theories requires curriculum theorists to have a well-informed understanding of the expectations and demands placed on the current generation of students in terms of understanding, capacities and dispositions of mind, and to take up the challenge of curriculum making in terms of selecting, organizing and transforming knowledge into curriculum content in a way that allows content to open up manifold opportunities for the cultivation of intellectual and moral powers deemed desirable in the twenty-first century. (Deng, 2015, p. 783)

To bring forth the three propositions, then, is to invite curriculum and educational scholars to participate in the search for new ways of thinking about knowledge and content in relation to curriculum planning and classroom teaching for the twenty-first century. This can be accomplished through reformulating or restating these three cross-cultural wisdoms in the light of expectations and challenges posed by the new century. The New Basic Education reform provides an instantiation of how such a task is carried out in China.

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