

THE INTEGRATED CURRICULUM AND THE PLACE(S) OF LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: NOTES FROM AN INDIAN UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

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Abstract

It has been often argued in New Literacy Studies (NLS) that beyond our ability to simply read and write in print, literacy broadly defined is no less than our ability to interpret and function in the world we live in, which includes everything from films, music, technology, food and sports to cultural practices and social mores. The places we inhabit in our social worlds and our everyday experiences in these places teach us to read our worlds and function according to our knowledge of our world. In the process we interpret and produce meanings through our actions. However, a principal criticism against schools at any level has been the failure to acknowledge and/or tap into students' learning in the world. Drawing on educationists and philosophers like Gruenewald, Jardine, Tagore, Dyson, and Bigelow, the paper argues that by neglecting students' everyday learning-in-the-world, schools perpetuate an epistemic violence on students by severing their school learning from their cultural life-world. As a result of which, schools often fail many students by turning formal education into something "unreal, heavy and abstract" (Tagore, 2009) for them.

As a corrective, then, the paper attempts to build a case for the need of a placed-based, integrated curriculum at all levels of schooling. Next, building on examples offered by India's eminent literati and educationist, Rabindranath Tagore's experimental model school in India and the widely emulated Foxfire program in U.S.A, both of which has much in common, the paper offers a vision for meaningfully integrating university education with students' lives in the most commonplaces of all places such as classrooms, canteens, hallways, cafeterias, homes, back yards and street-corners, among others. The paper supports its argument with two empirical examples from the author's academic life in an Indian university. The examples offer two real life incidents with great learning potentials that the author as a student had participated in, but only one of which being located on the curricular border-space of the mandated syllabus, could be integrated to the official curriculum by an enterprising teacher, while the other was restricted to the marginal spaces of school learning. The paper argues that while in the first case, the author and his peers' learning-in-the-world was successfully merged with his school learning, the latter was an opportunity lost to the tunnel-vision of academia. Not discounting its potential at the primary and secondary levels, the paper, therefore, argues that such integrations, when made possible, allows for university or *vishwa-vidyalay* (in Bengali it literally means a 'world school' or a 'universe school') education to become, true to its name, essentially universal by encompassing the students' social universe. In conclusion, the paper argues that it is important for educators and education researchers to pay attention to the local places of their students' lives in order to build bridges between the state mandated curricula and students' socio-cultural worlds, and also offers some ideas for attaining it.

Keywords: Integrated Curriculum, Places of Learning, Place-based Pedagogy, Informal Education, Indian University Education, Higher Education.