

NATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

Bowles begins autobiographically, recalling that when, “five years ago ... approached by a representative of the Canada Studies Foundation (CSF) and asked to be part of their team, I was quick to accept the offer.”¹ His motive was in part instrumental: “I too had always held the conviction that effective educational change had to begin in the classroom with the active partnership of classroom teachers.”² He continues: “So many other ways had been tried and had produced so few results.”³ In the previous research brief (#55), we saw Ben-Peretz underscore the centrality of teachers in the development of a Biology curriculum – “Man in Nature.” Here the knowledge of most worth concerns “national understanding in the minds of young Canadians,”⁴ one interdisciplinary in nature and one focused on an outcome, both of these points in contrast to Ben-Peretz, who was also working theoretically as well as instrumentally.

The CSF promised to provide “opportunities” for teachers “to work with other Canadian teachers ... help[ing] them develop teaching units that could be fitted into existing provincial guidelines.”⁵ However powerful Canadian regional differences might prove to be, Bowles emphasizes that “national understanding” was to be “the goal of all the units produced under the auspices of the Foundation,” meaning that “all these units were to deal with questions and issues arising out of the nature of Canadian society,” organized “under the general rubric of ‘Continuing Canadian Concerns’.”⁶ Perhaps the de-centrifugal force of regional differences might prove to be one of these.

“[A]ll the units developed by the teachers,” Bowles explains, “should stem from questions or issues arising from the basic nature of Canada,” defined as (1) “a large regionally divided and diverse country,” (2) a highly industrialized and technologically advanced country,” (3) “an urbanized country,” (4) a multi-ethnic country, with two predominant linguistic groups,” (5) an exposed country open to a multitude of external, cultural, and political influences,” (6) “a country with a unique northern geographic location,” (7) “a country with a democratic federal system,”⁷ a list on which Indigenous concerns are conspicuously absent.⁸

However expansive a conception, “national understanding,” Bowles continues, “is a valid but only partial approach to Canadian studies,” as “it presupposes a level of intellectual sophistication and emotional maturity which most youngsters do not have by age 12 and many do not have by age 14,”⁹ an assertion apparently made without empirical evidence to substantiate it. However unsubstantiated, the assertion was taken as rationale for excluding “elementary teachers, except those who were extremely determined or those who worked primarily in the western provinces, British and Atlantic Canada, where, for a variety of reasons, a more flexible approach was adopted.”¹⁰ It also “excluded the English, art, and music teacher,” that “despite the fact that many of the Foundation's brochures made the point that Canada had, at her peril,

neglected what her artists and writers had to say about the country's experience."¹¹ There was also disciplinary dissonance – although survey data is missing on this sweeping assertion too – as “most English, art, or music teachers, when faced with trying to implement a basically social science ‘problem solving’ approach, balked and refused.”¹² This sheer (if not entirely unreasonable) speculation continues:

Either they saw their discipline as an end in itself and hence refused to use it as a means to an end, or they felt that in working this way their discipline was made an adjunct to the social sciences. In either case, they felt that this was a violation of all reasons why they were teaching in that area of the curriculum in the first place.¹³

Heartening to hear humanities teachers pushed back against social science. Now social science has been marginalized too: STEM is all.

Bowles’ instrumentalism returns, as he sidesteps the arts and humanities, at least as essential – intrinsically worthwhile – subjects in themselves. It’s their utility for socialization that is for him the issue: “This was a real tragedy for the Foundation for, in the early years of schooling, songs, folklore, pictures, stories, and dances are the primary socializing agencies.”¹⁴ Bowles’ enthusiasm for speculation continues:

If these arts are neglected, I could advance an educated guess that, by the age of 14, a student's attitudes and values are such that the whole Continuing Canadian Concerns approach advocated by the Foundation would be, if not neutralized, at least much more difficult to implement.¹⁵

Then he remembers: “Knowledge may be gained for a variety of other reasons other than to achieve a measure of social cohesion.”¹⁶ While I too have been guilty of instrumentalism – arguing for curriculum in service to subjective and social reconstruction (reconceived, most recently, as preservation¹⁷) – it is surprising to see a scholar assume (until he remembers otherwise) that a curriculum is only a means to an end.¹⁸

Appearing to conflate curriculum expertise with curriculum development, Bowles complains that “many teachers did not understand how to develop units. They did not possess sufficient curriculum skills.”¹⁹ With “their training ... confined to methods courses” wherein they had been taught to “sugarcoat” content, making it into an “easily digested form for students to swallow and regurgitate on the final exam” - another unsubstantiated allegation - Bowles reports that teachers misunderstood the CSF’s expectations, imagining them too high, resulting “in what I used to call the photocopier syndrome: reams and reams of paper, all relating in some way to a topic such as Canadian-American relations, but with no other detectable order imposed on it except that it was presented to you in a file or pile.”²⁰

The Foundation distinguished between Canadian studies and Canada studies, the former defined as being “an investigation into any event or operation or phenomenon occurring in Canada,” the latter focused on the nation, its environment and its diversity of peoples.²¹ The Foundation felt Canadian studies ran the risk of intensifying “unwarranted regional and ethnocentric feelings,” and so such studies “must be supplemented” by Canada Studies curriculum, thereby creating a curriculum-development conflict: “Local teachers were being asked to develop national programs.”²²

Acknowledging that this is “not a very startling statement,” Bowles writes: “All the teachers, no matter from what part of Canada they came, shared one common characteristic: they began where they were - in their own locality.”²³ He explains: “It was our experience that most teachers who undertook the task of developing Canada studies units preferred to begin at the local level, in other words with the familiar and the known - a place where they felt most comfortable.”²⁴ Given the phrasing of this sentence and the one to follow,²⁵ I surmise Bowles and his colleagues were surprised and perhaps disappointed that teachers did not start from a national perspective – an idea of Canada²⁶ – but I should think any lived sense of the “national understanding” starts and ends locally, even inside oneself. Bowles references Northrop Frye’s suggestion that Canadian identity is a local or regional matter, that national unity is “political,” to which Bowles responds:

If this is true, the Canadian studies nature of many of the units produced by Foundation projects can be explained by the hypothesis that these units were developed by *truly Canadian* teachers. In developing these units, they were being Canadian since their identity depended not on an amorphous thing called Canada but on their being part of a locality. They were capable of intellectual gymnastics at the Canada studies level but did not want to engage in them if they were asked to develop units of work which meant something to them in their lives. It seems self-evident that the teachers had to start where they were and not where they were not.²⁷

Bowles summarizes these as “localism,” and suggests it is “amply documented” in *What Culture? What Heritage?*²⁸

How to proceed? One option was to insist that each “teacher-based” project was undertaken by “teachers drawn from at least three regions of Canada,” presumably “ensur[ing] at least three differing perspectives on whatever issue the project chose to examine,” a strategy that was “enormously expensive,” as “it touche[d] only a few teachers, and, since it is based on the concept of Continuing Canadian Concerns it remain[ed] a difficult approach for teachers in grades K-8.”²⁹ Another option was to

allow teachers in each region to develop a project, say, on the folklore of that region, and then bring them together in a national workshop in which a combined unit could be developed - combined in the sense that it would have the flavor of all the various regions of Canada and could be taught to students across the country in such a way as to give them a national perspective.³⁰

The CSF chose to “combine formative evaluation and dissemination in what became known as a ‘mini-conference,’ assembling “about 30-40 teachers from across Canada [who] were invited to participate in a 2-3-day workshop arranged by the developers of each project,” at which “participants were familiarized with the aims, methods, and evaluation techniques of the project.”³¹

Returning home with “materials,” teachers “tried them out in their classrooms, and returned an evaluation of the unit to the project developers,” a process that not only “familiarized a small group of Canadian teachers with the work of the project,” but also “enabled a group of Canadian teachers to share views and attitudes about a particular Canadian issue” while providing project developers with answers to questions about whether the curriculum product they had developed was transferable, that is, would appeal to other students and teachers across the country.”³²

“As I see it,” Bowles concludes, “the Canada Studies Foundation had two great strengths,” one “giving teachers the responsibility which they should have; the other was the insistence that a certain amount of social cohesion in the form of knowledge and attitudes is essential for the functioning of a civilized democratic nation,” this latter “strength” one that would not go unquestioned today but one evidently absent in 1970s Canada.³³ Bowles calls for a “national classroom for teachers of Canada studies,” a “place where teachers from all parts of Canada can come, meet with their colleagues, listen to experts in the various fields related to Canada studies, and develop units of work which will help give their students a better national understanding.”³⁴ Canada has a “National Defense College,” he reminds, “why not an institution dedicated to helping teachers to teach their students to have a better appreciation and understanding of the country which we are all privileged to inhabit?”³⁵

COMMENTARY

The research assistant - Anton Birioukov-Brant - who identified passages from the Bowles essay with which I have worked here – commented that “the debate about Canadian studies is still ongoing, and this article may be useful in tracing the historical aspects of this dilemma.” He also found I also “the involvement of teachers in the curricular development, implementation and evaluation processes to be worthy of

note.” Interesting that Anton used “Canadian” rather than “Canada” studies, a distinction important to Bowles; it may be the distinction is now blurred. I concur that the involvement of teachers is noteworthy but how seriously teachers’ “autonomy” was taken is unclear to me; it is affirmed at the end but maligned earlier. The curriculum question of “national understanding” is now conceived as plural, as Canada is a multi-national state. Surely this structural fact only becomes intelligible historically, culturally, linguistically, requiring a curriculum of “national understanding” to be mobile and multi-disciplinary, reactivating the past, attuned to the present. The future is not in front of us, but in the back.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Bowles 1977, 57.
- ² Bowles 1977, 57.
- ³ Bowles 1977, 57.
- ⁴ Bowles 1977, 58.
- ⁵ Bowles 1977, 58.
- ⁶ Bowles 1977, 58.
- ⁷ Bowles 1977, 58.
- ⁸ Not on this list is any acknowledgement of—referencing Fierlbeck (2006, 63)—the “onerous restrictions against Chinese immigrant labourers (including the notorious head tax), the lukewarm response to Jewish refugees, the internment of Japanese-Canada citizens, Quebec’s Padlock Act against communists, and various legislation vis-à-vis Aboriginal groups.” No doubt there are others to add, among them the notorious residential schools for Indigenous youth and the federal government purge of homosexuals (for which Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized): <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/28/world/canada/can-ada-apology-gay-purge-compensation.html> Indigenous peoples, Fierlbeck (2006, 37) notes, “became more politically active in the 1990s.” Evidently not before did the First Peoples become acknowledged as central to “national understanding.”
- ⁹ Bowles 1977, 58.
- ¹⁰ Bowles 1977, 58-59.
- ¹¹ Bowles 1977, 59.
- ¹² Bowles 1977, 59.
- ¹³ Bowles 1977, 59.
- ¹⁴ Bowles 1977, 59.
- ¹⁵ Bowles 1977, 59.
- ¹⁶ Bowles 1977, 59.
- ¹⁷ Pinar 2019.
- ¹⁸ Writing in 1963 and anticipating contemporary economism, Huebner (1999, 75) explained that “the instrumental use of man is legitimized by the myth of functional man, supported by a goal-oriented, need-directed psychology.... This kind of transaction between man and man is functional – goods are produced, services bought,” adding: “Man cannot live without economic activity, without his fellow man’s being used instrumentally. But neither does he live if his encounters with the other man are only economic or instrumental.” By 1974 Huebner’s close colleague James M. Macdonald (1995, 90) was focused on the relationship between instrumentalism and the question of the natural environment: “Ecological problem solutions call for the same value search and commitment growing from the inner knowledge of what we are and what we can be. There is a need to transcend the

linear and technical problem-solving approaches of the past if we are to survive our ecological crises,” critiquing “instrumental thinking which separates means from ends” (1995, 162). Bowles was either unaware of this scholarship or unpersuaded by it. Bowles’ Canadian and cosmopolitan colleague Ted Aoki (2005 [1983], 114) was both aware and persuaded, adding a cultural element to his critique: “What is damaging in this interpretation of reality is the fact that emphasis on it effectively submerges the ideology of sociocultural values, leaving in its wake the ‘neutral’ standards of purposive rational action and instrumental reason.”

¹⁹ Bowles 1977, 59.

²⁰ Bowles 1977, 59. Without empirical data to support these sweeping generalizations, they can be at best anecdotal, at worst, libelous.

²¹ Bowles 1977, 59-60.

²² Bowles 1977, 60.

²³ Bowles 1977, 61.

²⁴ Bowles 1977, 61.

²⁵ “Since we were asking teachers to stretch their capabilities to the fullest and to assume tasks which required curriculum skills and knowledge which they would have to acquire, it made sense to begin where they were, rather than not make a start at all” (Bowles 1977, 61). This seems obvious and patronizing.

²⁶ Armour 1981.

²⁷ Bowles 1977, 61-62.

²⁸ Bowles 1977, 62.

²⁹ Bowles 1977, 62. Why teachers from each locale should be imagined as having similar views is unclear. Nor is it obvious why elementary teachers would find the concept of “Continuing Canadian Concerns” difficult. One continuing Canadian concern is surely insufficient public respect for the nation’s educators, essential workers as the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic underscored.

³⁰ Bowles 1977, 62.

³¹ Bowles 1977, 62.

³² Bowles 1977, 62. Today the phrase “curriculum product” has an unsavory commercial connotation while “transferable” implies a mimetic model of implementation few serious curriculum studies scholars would today endorse.

³³ Bowles 1977, 62-63.

³⁴ Bowles 1977, 63.

³⁵ Bowles 1977, 63.