Currere and Praxis
Volume 3, Number 3, 2026, 213-231
DOI: 10.70116/30654572139

SYMPHONY
ISSN: 3065-4572

Article

OPEN ACCESS

Currere and (Il)legibility: Refusing the synthetic moment

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Abstract

In this essay, I attempt to palpate both the possibilities and limits of *currere* as a method of autobiographical writing and curriculum theorizing. I am specifically interested in subversive and resistant expressions of *currere*. Structurally, the paper is divided into four sections. In the first, I describe the project of the essay in more detail and explicate its focus on the legibility of lived experience enabled through, and limited by, the *currere* method. In the second, I share a letter written to a university administrator about a non-credit program of which I was a part. Though ultimately aimed at showing *currere's* potential, that section also highlights the limitations of academic institutions, in which I include *currere*. In the third section, my particular focus is on the way *currere's* subversion of empirical research's tacit dominance in education is truncated by its pursuit of legitimacy. Finally, in a concluding section, I render a refusal of Pinar and Grumet's synthetic moment. This refusal, I suggest, is generative, and may even be redemptive to subversive and resistant expressions of *currere*. I end this paper with my own refusal to tie together the essay in a synthetic moment, preferring to keep things fractured, fragmentary, and underdetermined.

Article History
Received 26.12.2025
Accepted 25.06.2026

Keywords
Currere; refusal; curriculum studies; legibility

Currere and Legibility

The collective effect of the *currere* writing published over the last 50 years has been to render individual experiences of teaching and learning legible as curriculum. This is particularly significant in the case of those experiences obfuscated by quantitative and qualitative research, as well as those experiences of learning silenced by the workings of racism, ableism, heteropatriarchy, and other systems of oppression (Baszile, 2015). This is no small accomplishment. To render something legible is in some cases to make it seen for the first time; in others, it is to write something into existence, generating or preserving the possibility of an otherwise.

Here, I use the terms "legible" and "legibility" to refer to the ways texts and writing can be understood, but also to the ways experience can be acknowledged within certain systems of thought. The Oxford English Dictionary gives support for both these usages: definitions one and two of the word "legible" refer to writing and reading respectively, while definition three reads, "that [which] can be easily understood or interpreted; having a readily discernible nature or significance" (Oxford University Press, n.d., "legible" def. 3). To make something

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legible, then, is to make something knowable that might otherwise have been unknowable, often, though not always, through writing.[2]

In this paper, I am interested in palpating the limits of the legible in and through *currere*. I understand *currere* as a method of autobiographical curriculum theorizing. It was brought forward in 1975 by William Pinar "to emphasize the lived experience of curriculum, embodied potentially educational experience that is structured by the past while focusing on the future" (Pinar, 2019, p. 50). Pinar continues, "to study such experience—to expand the inner space of subjective non-coincidence with both past and future—I devised a method in four steps or phases" (Pinar, 2019, p. 50). Those phases are the regressive, the progressive, the analytic, and the synthetic moments. Pinar notes that they form something of a loop—synthesis is only ever for a moment and leads to yet another regression. Others have written about how the phases of *currere* seem to rhizomatically interconnect and overlap (McNulty, 2019), emphasizing the fluidity within the reflection process.

Pinar's (2023) recent writing expands the concept of *currere,* saying that, "praxis of presence is both an emphasis on and an extension of the *currere* method" (Pinar as quoted in Ma, 2025, p. 5). This link to a praxis of presence makes *currere* into a method of connection to the moment—a "being t/here in one's singularity and attunement" (Pinar, 2023, p. 19). While I engage with this extended notion of *currere* as praxis of presence throughout this essay, my primary concern is with *currere* as a method of autobiographical writing and curricular theorizing—and particularly the thinking in *Toward a Poor Curriculum* (Pinar & Grumet, 2015), the text this special issue aims to honor. On my view, *currere* as method of autobiographical thinking and writing is the dominant way in which the concept has been taken up, especially as evidenced by texts like those published in *The Currere Exchange Journal*.

Within the landscape of educational research, *currere* as an invitation to autobiographical curricular theorizing has written into existence the experience of the teacher as data. When I teach about *currere* in my graduate courses, that is inevitably the thing that strikes those practicing teachers as relevant to their own situations—that, in a world of data-based decision making where their experiences are routinely discounted in favor of more seemingly objective measures, *currere* validates and makes seen their experience and their insight developed over years of teaching. As Pinar put it, *currere* asks us to "take ourselves as data" (Pinar, 2015c, p. 23), and through that, the teacher's self, experience, and voice come to count as data.

That voice, the speaking teacher, remains profoundly counter-hegemonic in a system that devalues teachers at every turn (Giroux, 2025), and *currere*, as a bastion of the personal inside a system that moves toward depersonalization constantly, is a mode and method of subversive resistance. Here, I take "subversion" to refer to "subtle mechanism(s) of resisting abusive forms of power that create and/or maintain oppression and harm" (Portelli & Eizadirad, 2018, p. 53). My interest in this essay is in a subversive kind of *currere*. Some articulate this subversion through the personal as a sort of re/humanizing of education (Lyle, 2022). Through

[2] At times in this essay, my use of "legibility" as a concept may appear slippery (my thanks to the reviewer who inadvertently suggested that word). This is intentional. My intent here is to highlight those instances where legibility functions as a limit, and offering a precise, consistent, restrictive definition of the legible would go against that intent insofar as it would form its own limit. In other words, I intentionally keep my use of "legibility" underdetermined (i.e., illegible) within the essay to mirror my later refusal of legibility.

maintaining a human and individual frame for subjectivity (Pinar 2011, 2023), and the "humanist emphasis embedded in [Pinar's] reconceptualization of curriculum studies" (Ma, 2025, p. 4), there is also implicit support in *currere* for the notion that the personal is a pathway to re/humanization (see also Pinar & Grumet, 2015). Though I remain ambivalent about such humanism,[3] I agree that asserting the personal within the overly empirical landscape of educational research and thinking (Norris, 2024) —as well as reclaiming a human from the forces that have over-represented some version of "Man" as the entirety of humanity (Wynter, 1995)—remains a subversive act, and that is *currere*'s potential for the current moment.

In sum, *currere* has functioned to expand the range of what is possible in teaching, learning, and researching in curriculum studies—what is legible or discernable as research and as educational experience. That said, a persistent concern for me has been whether the institutions (e.g., the university, the school) and forms (e.g., the essay; the novel; the poem) of Western intellectual work have run their course. This includes *currere*. Now 50 years old, *currere* has become an institution within curriculum research through its longevity. Two journals—*Currere and Praxis* and *The Currere Exchange Journal*—are devoted to the study of and study through *currere*. A host of works expanding *currere* exist, from *currere* 2.0 (Paul & Beierling, 2017) to ubuntu-*currere* (Le Grange, 2019), ficto-*currere* (McNulty, 2019), and duo-*currere* (Wallace & Byers, 2018). There are numerous books on or making use of *currere* (e.g., Knox, 2021; Poetter, 2024; Steyn, 2024). There are even those who seek to reterritorialize the term "*currere*" with different meanings through an *anti-currere* (Wallin, 2025; see also Wallin, 2010). With each new iteration, *currere* becomes more established—more legitimate. Through its legitimacy and longevity, I now wonder if *currere*, as Pinar said of other works in education in the 1970s, "is caught in a vision of reality that while adequate in the past, and for many in the present, is not adequate to the future" (Pinar, 2015b, p. 5). That is, I wonder if *currere* has run its course.

There is possibility within this legitimacy and longevity, but there is also limitation. Indeed, in becoming an institution within curriculum research, *currere* moves closer to the norms of academic experience, and there Clelia O. Rodríguez (2018) notes that "my experience in academia as a decolonizing-in-progress woman is simultaneously one of limitations and possibilities" (p. 6). In this essay, I attempt to show both the possibilities of *currere* and the limitations emergent from its institutionalization within academia. Ultimately, I will argue that curriculum ought to be kept poor—echoing Pinar's 1976 call for a curriculum that is "stripped of its distractions…video tape, audio tape, fancy books, and buildings, values clarification and individualized instruction" (Pinar, 2015a, p. xiii). More precisely, I argue that *currere* ought to refuse institutionalization and recognition as a valid methodology within the social sciences, and that to do so, the synthetic moment might be refused. To make that argument, I will track some of my own experiences of limitation with/in academia.

The remainder of this essay comprises three sections. Each takes up the project of *currere* insofar as it attempts to render legible certain limitations felt within my own curricular experience—the course I have run as a scholar of curriculum studies. In the next section, I share a letter written to a university administrator about a program of which I was a part. That section highlights the limitations of academic institutions. In the subsequent section, I discuss the limitations of recognition and the way recognition can tacitly legitimatize the recognizer.

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[3] For a full discussion of *currere*'s humanism and my ambivalence about it see my paper "Autobiography Without an 'I'" (Downey, 2024).

This discussion is specifically located in the pursuit of recognized validity as research method/ology. Finally, in a concluding section, I render a refusal of Pinar and Grumet's synthetic moment. This refusal, I think, is generative, and may even be redemptive to a *currere* as such—particularly a subversive, resistant *currere*.

Universities: The Limitations of Institutions

Several universities of which I have been a part have, on occasion, offered non-credit Mi'kmaw[4] language courses. Often, they are run online, and they are sometimes free for participants. Usually led by a Mi'kmaw Elder, the classes can be informal, with significant time devoted to student questions. Frequently, there are very high enrollments for these courses, especially when they are free, but usually only a handful of people attend synchronously. Below, I share a segment of a letter requested by administration about one such course.[5]

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Value, Credit, and Debt (i.e., Lessons Learned and Barriers)

"Why does the University go to such lengths to avoid identifying students with study?" (Arsenjuk & Koerner, 2009, p. 8).

This statement may not make intuitive sense. Universities are, of course, places where a lot of "studying" takes place—students prepare for exams and professors conduct research, both of which can be thought of using variations of the term "study". Yet, these colloquial interpretations of the word fall short of its original meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary gives three meanings of the word "Study": to strive for something, to think or ponder on something, and "to devote time and effort to acquiring knowledge, esp. by means of written sources, observation, or experiment; to apply one's mind to learning" (Oxford University Press, n.d., "Study" def. III.12.b.). While this third meaning might be closest to the way it is used today, none perfectly renders the instrumental connotations of colloquial use. And so, the question posed by Arsenjuk and Koerner above comes to mean and to matter. I repeat: Why has the university, ours included, distanced students from study?

In a word, capitalism. In two words, neoliberal capitalism. In two other words, cognitive capitalism. Of course, as Mark Fisher is often quoted as saying, "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Fisher, 2009, p. 1). It is hard even to think an outside to capitalism at this point—hard even to envision what study might be in its absence. It is hard to remember a curriculum in the absence of Ralph Tyler's 1949 *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*—without predetermined objectives and outcomes, precise and measurable;

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[4] The Mi'kmaq are the Indigenous people in what is today known as Atlantic Canada. Because positionality is both an ethical and epistemologically imperative within many Indigenous knowledge systems (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008), I will share that I am descended from Mi'kmaw, French, and Irish Ancestors, and that my maternal family are all members of The Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation. For more on this, see my previous work (e.g., Downey, 2020, 2025). In this paper, I am not sharing anything beyond my own experience, and I am explicitly attempting not to speak for anyone (i.e., any community) other than myself.

[5] For ethical purposes, I include an edited version of the letter of which I was the sole author. Specifically, I have removed anything that may identify others involved.

without course evaluations; without job-ready skills; without, in a word, social efficiency. It is hard to remember when curriculum was not a noun but a verb—*currere*, Latin, "to run" a course (Pinar & Grumet, 2015). Study in the absence of these things might not be legible within our collective frame of reference—it might seem like something else entirely or it might seem like nothing at all.

Harney and Moten's (2013) text *The Undercommons*, particularly their essay "Debt and Study", gives some language to help in articulating both the problem and its otherwises. Using their language, I might say that students accumulate debt not so that they can study, but so that they can receive credit (see also Manning, 2019). Study is incidental to the process; in fact, it can often be counterproductive to receiving credit. Study is an intense, often obsessive, thing—a thing of passion. It can manifest as time "spent" or "wasted" outside the required readings, required attendance, and required assignments. This time outside receives no credit: It is temporally wasteful (Saul & Burkholder, 2020) according to the logics of the university, steeped as it has become (as everything has become) in neoliberalism's languages of personal accountability and efficiency.

Why would anyone study when they don't get credit? If we don't get credit, what is the value? Time is exchanged for credit through labor, but without credit, what remains? These questions haunt and unsettle the ideal neoliberal subject. Just as Fanon (1952) highlighted with respect to colonization and racism in *Black Skin, White Masks*, capitalism infiltrates the subject, defining how they see themselves and shaping the ways they interact with the world. Following the same analogy through Sylvia Wynter (2001), those social interactions act neurobiologically, adding a physical dimension to sociality that is hard to shake. The ideal subject of neoliberalism—compared to which we *all* represent degrees of pejorative difference, though not without internal strife—has no time to "waste" on study for which they do not receive credit.

Of course, not everyone (no one) is comfortable in such a restrictive subjectivity:

> Some still stay, committed to black study in the university's undercommon rooms. They study without an end… They study in the university and the university forces them under, relegates them to the state of those without interests, without credit, without debt that bears interest, that earns credits. They never graduate… They're building something in there, something down there. Mutual debt, debt unpayable … debt to each other in a study group, to others in a nurses' room, to others in a barber shop, to others in a squat, a dump, a woods, a bed, an embrace. (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 67)

Some see an intrinsic value in study, and they fight to keep it alive in the university, however obfuscated it may become by the bureaucratic mechanisms of cognitive capitalism and state power.

The study of the Mi'kmaw language, too, has an intrinsic value. Indeed, the value of such a task cannot be captured in one word nor a thousand. No poster could do it justice; no advertisement could name its politics. Only the poetry of Rita Joe seems sufficient: She lost her talk; it was taken away at residential school, and now she thinks like you. She wants her talk back so she can teach you about her (Joe, 1996). In short, it is the value of continuity in the face of genocide. How could anything be more valuable? To study Mi'kmaw language is "to strive" for what Gerald Vizenor (1994) called "survivance": survival and resistance. It is "to think and ponder" on the nature of two divergent, and sometimes mutually exclusive, worldviews. It is

"to devote time and effort to acquiring knowledge" (Oxford University Press, n.d., "Study" def. III.12.b.), though in many cases that time and effort are not rewarded with credit. And even though we may not ask for anything in exchange—we exact no debt save time and effort—that may be enough to keep all of us neoliberal subjects at a distance from anything that might shake our foundations.

That is the lesson I've learned throughout these first half of the course; it is also the main barrier we've faced. I think it is also, through no fault to individuals but rather to interlocking characteristics of the world system in which we live, what accounts for the discrepancy between registrations and attendees in the course.

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This was not the letter that was asked for; it was the letter I needed to write at the time. I do this often—over-write a simple administrative task because there is something complicated and interesting that I need to say about the topic. I feel these things that happen in the university very intensely, and sometimes it seems beyond my capacity to render my feelings in words. So, I palpate them through the writing, trying to give some voice to what I feel. It is, as Pinar (2023) has noted, a form a study—one I aim to preserve, even in the face of a menial, required administrative task.

Often, my over-written letters like the one above have the same effect: an invitation to a meeting several months later to "chat" about decolonization at the university. If I can afford to, I don't respond, but sometimes I relent. We have our "chat", and it is just like the many others had before. Nothing ever changes except the faces in the meeting. Obligatory introductions, a clear statement of immediate issues needing to be addressed, the naming of larger systemic forces at work: all met with seemingly-sincere head nods and enthusiastic contributions. Afterwards, there are promises to follow up that are routinely ignored or forgotten. Within a few years, there is someone new in the role, and I try to lay low until the invitation for another "chat" comes my way, and the process starts all over again.

Through writing the letter, I wanted to express my frustrations with the university in general and with the myopic apathy I had encountered around "Indigenizing" and "decolonizing" the university specifically. The latter—something I jokingly refer to "myopathy", knowing full well that the term refers to a disease of the muscles rather than a combination of the words "myopic" and "apathy" as I had initially assumed—is hard to name and harder still to talk about openly. In the various "chats" described above, it is never openly present. It is only after the fact, in the silence and inaction, that it becomes legible—and then only with the closest attention.

Of course, once you've seen it ten or twenty times, the pattern becomes discernible, as clear as day. There is a discrepancy of legibility in this: I see what is happening as systemic, as one more incident in a lifetime full of them; others see it as a simple moment of forgetfulness or being too busy. In the early 2000s, Varma-Joshi et al. (2004) saw this same thing play out with students and teachers when racist incidents happened in public schools in New Brunswick, Canada. One student would use a racial slur against another student, the second student would go to a teacher, and the teacher would treat it as an isolated incident. The school and teacher were incapable of seeing the event as part of a longer history of racist incidents for that student. They couldn't connect the dots—what the students saw clearly through the lens of

their lived experience, the institution failed to render legible. In a more recent study, Wozolek (2018) named the exhaustion from existing as queer within a heteropatriarchal institution as queer battle fatigue, and I think part of that exhaustion stems from the discrepancy of legibility. Those "chats" are exhausting, and their results are negligible. It is indeed a myopathy, as the muscles of the university never seem to be able to flex when the time comes to do any sort of heavy lifting.

The letter I wrote never names my feelings; it only tries to trace the contour of their effects and their causes within the university system. The letter also posits an alternative—the possibility of an education, a curriculum, or a study outside the university. It, thus, asks a version of my initial question: has the university run its course? Maybe in this instance it has. Maybe the way to learn Indigenous language is not in a university classroom. Surely it should be included there as much as is possible, but perhaps its inclusion in the university is another version of the consumption that happens all the time in education—where one thing, originally subversive, is eventually brought into the fold of the educational and capitalist mainstream (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; see also Wynter, 2006).

It's not that the teaching and learning of Indigenous language can't exist in the university, but maybe it is better when it doesn't. Leanne Simpsons writes, "I believe there must be a shift away from making Indigenous Knowledge knowable, legible and sharable by the state and its actors; instead, we must refocus this knowledge toward liberation" (Simpson, 2025, p. 144). Maybe Indigenous language ought not to be legible within the dominant systems of academia, and maybe that would save Indigenous language teaching from everything that comes along with it, including the conflicting interests of a student body and a professoriate concerned for their own economic survival rather than the inherent value of study.

The frustrations named here bespeak the limitations of a Western university system that has become increasingly run like a business (Brownlee, 2015). *Currere* is subversive in this setting. Indeed, as a method of autobiographical curriculum theorizing, *currere* validates the experiences I share in this section—it allows me to render legible a critique of the system of which it is a part emergent from lived experience of that system. *Currere* allows me to articulate "what it is like" (Wynter, 2001, p. 31) to seek study within an institution obsessed with credit—and what it is like to be constantly disappointed by the university's "myopathy". *Currere*, in these ways, has a counter-hegemonic potential well worth preserving. As discussed in the introductory section of this paper, however, *currere* is also in some ways complicit with the current academic order. The next section turns to that point more directly.

Methodology: The Limitations of Recognition

In this section, I want to suggest that seeking legibility as a methodology in the social sciences might undermine the subversive potential of *currere*. In the early days of *currere*, Pinar and Grumet seemed deeply concerned with articulating the validity of the approach—rendering it legible as scholarly inquiry. This is most evident in essays like "Self and Others", where Pinar (2015c) defended the autobiographical scope of a reconceptualized curriculum project and shared his method of inquiry focused on the individual. In order for something to be validated, however, it must be recognizable; it must be legible. As suggested below, the process of recognition, of validation, further legitimates the recognizer; it concedes to them the power to determine what is and what is not valid, tacitly disallowing challenges to their right to do so (Coulthard, 2014; see also Snaza, 2019). When *currere* seeks validity within the institution of social sciences research, then, it further legitimates that institution, and in so

doing loses some of its ability to subvert or challenge dominant forms of research. It also becomes populated by certain norms, discursive and otherwise, that make it impossible to render some experiences legible. To further make this argument and to show what I mean more broadly, I will share some of my own experiences working with graduate students using *currere* as their "method."

I've had a few graduate students ask if they can use *currere* as their research method, and I've been enthusiastic in encouraging them to pursue it. Indeed, I teach *currere* as a method of research in my introductory curriculum studies classes. When I do so, I always add a personal anecdote. I tell them that I went through the very curriculum studies program in which they are currently enrolled. At the end of that program, even after completing a thesis in curriculum studies, I still wasn't completely sure of what research in curriculum studies looked like. I had taken both qualitative and quantitative methodology courses, as well as a course on research literacy, but all of it seemed disconnected from curriculum studies in some way. My teachers in those research courses didn't know a lot about curriculum studies and didn't identify with it—mostly because of the specific history of our institution but also because those courses, like many others (Norris, 2024), all failed to engage humanities-based research. My thesis ended up going in the direction of arts-informed (Cole & Knowles, 2008) and Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008)—though it was all written autobiographically. Before I really knew the word, I was doing something like *currere*.

I tell the students in my introductory curriculum studies courses this story to emphasize that writing using *currere* is a legitimate intellectual contribution within the disciplinary scope of curriculum studies, and that it could even form the basis of their thesis work, should they wish. I hope in some small way that my story helps alleviate the tensions they might see between curriculum studies and their research courses, which enact a "tacit empiricism" (Gibson & Garside 2017, p. 117 as cited in Norris, 2024, p. 204) by assuming that all research in education is empirical.

Inevitably, when my graduate students reach the thesis defense, they are asked about how their autobiographical writing constitutes research. If someone on the committee doesn't ask it, I do. Some respond by retracing Pinar and Grumet's arguments for the validity of focusing on the individual and their lived experience in educational research, highlighting the historic dominance of empiricism in educational research to which the reconceptualization responded (Pinar & Grumet, 2015) and the continued dominance of empiricism today (Norris, 2024). Others talk about the value of personal storytelling in feminist (e.g., Lorde, 1984) and Indigenous (Reder, 2022) traditions. Others still respond with critiques of the way teachers' voices are sometimes silenced in research, especially the research used by governments to make decisions (Giroux, 2025; Lyle, 2022). *Currere* may represent only one person's experience, but that experience still matters, they say.

Lurking at the edges of the thesis defense are the conversations I've had with students about these questions. In those private conversations, we can be bolder with the critique. There, together, we offer something akin to a post-qualitative (St. Pierre, 2018, 2021) critique of conventional research.[6] Qualitative research, originally seeking to subvert the epistemological

[6] The post qualitative critique begins with the idea that conventional, humanist qualitative methodology doesn't align with poststructuralism (St. Pierre, 2021). A full discussion of *currere* and poststructuralism is beyond the scope of this paper.

dominance of quantitative research, has become an overcoding institution in the way it is thought and the way it is taught (St. Pierre, 2018, 2021; see also Deleuze & Guattari, 1977). As St. Pierre notes, "conventional humanist qualitative methodology provides a handy preexisting research process to follow, a container with well-identified categories into which researchers are expected to slot all aspects of their research projects so they are recognizable, clear, and accessible" (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 603). Qualitative research has become textbook-a-fied: there are a series of steps one must perform, and they are laid out clearly (St. Pierre, 2018; see also Norris, 2024; Weaver & Snaza, 2017). Moreover, when reported on, there are a series of required sections that must be addressed: introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion. These steps and sections become a limit on what can be said—a limit on legibility. Deviation from these forms comes with risk to the student or the author. They risk making their work illegible as research within the institutions to which they wish to gain entry: academia, PhD programs, and publication in certain journals.

When students ask how to move forward in this landscape, I tell them to write their "methodology" section on *currere*. I tell them to use the phrase "*currere* is an autobiographical method of curriculum theorizing." When, inevitably, someone asks whether *currere* is a method or a methodology, I tell them to explain the philosophies behind *currere*—feminism, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis and how they build toward an epistemic valuing of personal story, desire, and reflection (Pinar & Grumet, 2015). Functionally, students and examiners are both usually satisfied by this, but for me, there is something disingenuous in what we are doing.

Currere is a method in some sense but naming it as such feels reductive. Putting *currere* into the box of "method" or "methodology" seems to align it with a particular view of knowledge that makes inquiry appear neater and more organized than it is. My writing of *currere* is always messy; it is always recursive and rhizomatic. Never is the literature review discernable from the discussion, nor the method all that different from the results. For that matter, even the four phases of *currere* are rarely discrete in my work. The naming of *currere* as a method with students and in my own work feels like a performance of certain methodological knowledges and norms within social science research rather than an authentic and necessary part of the inquiry, and that is the origin of my feeling of disingenuousness.

Another moment in which I am faced with the pressure to perform methodological knowledge is when reviewers inevitably ask for a more robust discussion of methodology when reviewing my papers that make use of *currere*. Often the call has come for more explicit discussions of *currere* as a method or methodology, including descriptions of how it has been enacted. Sometimes reviewers have even requested more of specific moments from the *currere* process—most notably more of the synthetic moment: more resolution. I often experience this as a sort of methodological conservatism—an unwillingness to see how calls for robust descriptions of methodology might form a structure within which one's thinking must abide in order to be named legible and recognizable. Such a structure orchestrates thinking within preestablished parameters, limiting and preventing us from saying the unsayable (St. Pierre, 2018). It attempts to renders the illegible legible and, in so doing, robs the illegible of its potential to subvert the system of legibility. In being recognized by a dominant system or structure, the recognized legitimates the recognizer (Coulthard, 2014; see also Snaza, 2019).

Another example makes the situation clearer. In a recent article in a special issue on the future of academic writing, PhD student Nicholas Rickards (2024) makes a case for situating the open

letter as methodology. In so doing, he raises critiques of research and institutional discourses similar to those I have articulated in this paper. The open letter, he suggests, is one of several "alternative forms…writing can take that can empower minoritized and marginal groups" (p. 15). He goes on to show the way open letters have been used in the Black intellectual tradition by folks like James Baldwin (1993, as cited in Rickards, 2024), who wrote an open letter to his nephew warning of systemic racism and articulating the importance of the civil rights movement. Though unmentioned by Rickards, I would add Sylvia Wynter (1994) to his list of open letters in the Black intellectual tradition. Wynter's letter is noteworthy because it is addressed to academia specifically and traces the way academic institutions perpetuate and enable a dehumanization of certain, usually racialized, individuals, despite those institutions' democratic and enlightening aspirations. For Wynter, the academy fails to render the humanity of racialized folks as legible to its students. Though she was writing after the Rodney King incident, Wynter's critique of academia remains prescient.

Rickards (2024) also points out the way open letters have been used by Indigenous folks like Mitchell Moise and feminists like Chanel Miller, whose victim impact statement fueled the #metoo movement. Rickards (2024) argues that the fact these letters exist outside academia—except for those like Wynter's that are aimed at academia specifically (see also Graveline, 2003)—suggest there is something missing in the repertoire of academic research, where such forms of expression are rare (Rickards, 2024, p. 17). His aim in the article is to suggest that the open letter be taken up as methodology—that it be seen as a legitimate and rigorous form of expression.

Some might read Rickards' paper as imagining a problem where none exists. Some might point to arts-informed research (Cole & Knowles, 2008), research creation, or narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as implicitly suggesting that an open letter already could be considered methodology. Indeed, some might highlight the letters to her daughter that Christina Flemming (2020, 2022) has used to theorize the relationship between art and research. Those letters represent a rigorous manifestation of letter writing that takes on open form through publication while maintaining a privateness through being addressed to her daughter (not unlike Baldwin's letter described above). Such a reading of Rickards' article would, I think, emerge from a discrepancy of legibility. Rickards' paper highlights the frustration those entering the institution of research feel with its implicit and explicit discursive, psychic, and material limits—the limits of legibility.

In response to these limits, Rickards (2024) argues that open letters ought to be included in the institution of research because of the rigors of the form and the directness of its impact. On my view, that argument is correct in all ways but its orientation. Tuck and Yang (2014) write that "some narratives die a little when contained within the metanarrative of social science" (p. 235); some lose their potential to subvert when included within the institution, so I don't think inclusion in an institution is the right direction. Indeed, I don't think subversive forms of inquiry like the open letter and like *currere* ought to seek legitimation by the dominant voices they aim to subvert.[7] Rather, the response to the existential, discursive, and material

[7] I acknowledge here that I speak from a position of privilege, having completed my PhD and earned "recognition" by academia. It is easy, I think, to say we ought to refuse that to which we have already gained entry and found wanting. Indeed, taking Rickards' (2024) article as an example in this way leaves a sour taste in my mouth. Yet, I stand by the argument I've made, with perhaps the caveat that those of us in positions of

limitations on expression we experience as scholars is to question, challenge, and critique those limits—indeed, *to refuse them*. In the concluding section of this paper, I attempt to characterize this refusal and orient it specifically toward the synthetic moment of *currere.*

Conclusion: Toward a Refusal of *Currere*'s Synthetic Moment

I turned to *currere* in my academic work largely because I had become disillusioned with traditional qualitative forms of research. No small part of my disillusionment came from reading critical Indigenous scholars who questioned the ethics of research, particularly the ways in which non-Indigenous researchers extract stories from communities and give little back, reading those stories through damage-centered lenses (Kovach, 2021; Tuck, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Wilson, 2008). I took those critiques seriously, and even went so far as to ask whether it was ethical for me to gain advanced degrees through "taking" anyone else's story. Personal storytelling is an Indigenous intellectual tradition (Reder, 2022), so to me, at that time, qualitative research felt like something akin to plagiarism. I didn't want to earn my credentials by taking others' stories, so I instead focused on my own, and *currere* let me do that.

In my dissertation research, however, I moved away from *currere*. While I still believed in the value and intellectual rigor of autobiographical work and personal storytelling, I had become frustrated by the academy's obsession with pain (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Always it seemed that the stories we were expected to tell were those of damage (Tuck, 2009), and I was tired of inviting folks to stick their fingers into my wounds to prove their reality (Elliot, 2019). Instead of using *currere* in my dissertation, then, I made perfunctory methodological nods to the complicated conversation of curriculum studies (Pinar, 2019) and proceeded to do theoretical work.

Much of my decision making during that time—the period between finishing my MA and completing my PhD—was inspired by the notion of refusal. Initially, I saw myself as refusing the conventions of qualitative work on ethical grounds. Then, I saw myself as refusing to share my own trauma to satisfy the university's thirst for damage. As Tuck and Yang (2014) put it, "refusal understands the wisdom in a story, as well as the wisdom in not passing that story on" (p. 244). Characterizing refusal more broadly, Tuck and Yang note that,

> refusal, and stances of refusal in research, are attempts to place limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can't be known. (p. 225)

In both cases described above, I was setting limits around what I was willing to share in order to gain entry into the academy. Now that I am in the academy, I feel more and more that my refusal isn't only a setting of limits but is an attempt to make "…visible invisibilized limits, containments, and seizures that research already stakes out" (Tuck & Yang, p. 225). In other words, in setting my own limits through refusal, I feel I can better point out and subvert those that are enforced on me, hopefully making it easier for others to do likewise in the future. In this paper, I have tried to palpate some of those limits—some of the very subtle ways in which the university and the institution of research dictate what is and is not legible. What I want to do in this final section is propose that *currere* might both enact a refusal of those limits and itself be refused in order to do so.

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relative privilege ought to be the ones to lead the refusal, enabling others to follow our path should they choose. It is, after all, only after being granted tenure that I feel I could have written this paper.

First, to reiterate, the autobiographical inquiry enabled by *currere*—the reflection on the past, envisionment of the future, and analysis of the present—serves to render legible the lived experience of limitation. Indeed, beyond the act of personal storytelling, the reflective process can help individuals and groups name the limitations they feel with more precision and formulate alternatives. *Currere* might not just be a method of subjective reconstruction (Pinar, 2023), then, but a moment for strategizing—study of the institution from its undercommons (Harney & Moten, 2013) or from outside it entirely. This is a subversive vision for *currere*, one inspired by those who interpret Pinar and Grumet, for instance, through the lens of critical anti-racist, feminism (i.e., Baszile, 2015).

To keep this subversive vision of *currere* resistant, it cannot be allowed to be legitimated by that which it seeks to disrupt. Historically, Pinar and Grumet (2015) intended *currere* to be a response to the dominance of empiricism in educational research. Grumet recalls it this way:

> When I try to remember what I was up to in 1975 I think that I was literally trying to change the subject of educational research. Research in the early 70's was still dominated by quantitative studies. Analytic philosophy dominated foundation studies. (Grumet 2015, p. 225)

The dominance of empirical research in education continues today (Norris, 2024), and *currere* remains a meaningful response. Today, the institution of research toward which Pinar and Grumet aimed their resistance has other manifestations: the standardized and rigid norms of social sciences research (St. Pierre, 2018, 2021) and the colonial obsession with damage in qualitative work (Tuck, 2009). In seeking validity as method, *currere* becomes populated by some of those norms and obsessions, which function to restrict the ability to render some lived experiences of education legible—those that do not fit in the institutions' expectations. To keep/make *currere* subversive, then, legitimacy might[8] be refused.

Indeed, to enact this refusal of legitimacy, I propose that we who aim to practice *currere* in a subversive mode might refuse the synthetic moment, for it is synthesis that makes *currere* legitimate as research and as education. Pinar says in the synthetic moment,

> one gathers oneself, pulls oneself together (for the moment at least), becoming subjectively present, able to act in the private and public worlds in which one finds oneself embedded. Such synthesis or subjective coherence becomes the site from which one can again regress to the past. (Pinar, 2023, p. 2)

Two insights emerge from this quote. First, synthesis is the moment in which one acts—the moment at which the subject becomes fully present, however briefly, in order to intentionally affect the world around them. Second, synthesis is not an endpoint, *per se*, but a momentary impulse toward "subjective coherence" from which the reflective *currere* loop can begin again. The refusal I envision intervenes on each of these points. First, the refusal is of action. It is something akin to Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, where the titular character says "I would prefer not to" when prompted to do any task. This refusal of action within the institution is a strategy of survival as much as it is one of subversion. "No" is a complete sentence.[9]

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[8] I use "might" rather than "must" or "should" here to express possibility rather than prescription.

[9] Will you join our performative equity committee? No. Will you say what you want to say in more palatable,

In a second sense, the refusal of the synthesis is a refusal of the impulse toward "pulling oneself together", opting instead to stay underdetermined. In the reflective process, a person may wish to stay subjectively incoherent for many reasons, especially when the conditions under which coherence becomes possible are unacceptable. The limitation of the pull toward momentary coherence in *currere,* however, is most clearly evident in the writing. Specifically, the synthetic, "bringing together" can function to limit the legibility of some lived experiences as educational research. Following the *currere* method strictly, only those lived experiences that have a synthesis—that have had a moment of coming together, of subjective coherence—can be rendered. Indeed, even where one attempts to present an incoherent fragment, the method's synthetic moment, through its call to "make it all of a whole" (Pinar, 2015d, p. 79), pulls the narrative toward synthesis. Though Pinar (2019, 2023) acknowledges that the synthesis is fleeting, and that even within it there is non-coincidence between the internal and the external, the synthetic moment still creates a narrative pull, however subtle, toward a moment of coherence expressed as unity, insight, and/or resolution. As noted above, reviewers sometimes augment that pull by asking specifically for more resolution. Tuck and Yang (2014) highlight some of the issue here when, in describing the academy's obsession with pain narratives, they say, "logics of pain focus on events, sometimes hiding structures, always adhering to a teleological trajectory of pain, brokenness, repair… from unbroken, to broken, and then to unbroken again" (p. 231).[10] Though resolution and coherence are not necessarily synonymous with repair, the pull toward synthesis does function along these lines; it functions to shape the narrative in predetermined ways that are palatable to the imagined academic reader. In so doing, it leaves aside (renders illegible) all that is unpalatable—those lived experiences that remain fragmented, including those that do so intentionally. In the writing, then, a refusal of the synthetic moment is a refusal to become sucked into the narrative impulse toward resolution—it is keeping the story fragmented, avoiding the resolution that makes the story easily understood within, and thereby validated (and consumed) by, the university and the institution of research. It is a refusal to be rendered legible; it is to choose illegibility.

So, the refusal of *currere*'s legitimacy might be expressed in at least three ways: a refusal of action, a refusal of momentary coherence, and a closely-related refusal of narrative resolution. At the risk of going too far afield, I will take this one step further. In his initial discussions of *currere*, Pinar said "we must learn, from the point of view of the self, what cognitive and psychosocial development is, what the relation of teachers, artefacts, and schooling generally is to these developments, the synthesis of which is education" (Pinar, 2015c, p. 29). Here, I read the synthesis *as* education. Indeed, many articles that make use of *currere* write the synthetic moment as the one in which insights emerge from the reflective process (e.g., Griffiths, 2025; Saha, 2025). Toward refusing recognition and legitimacy, then, I think this too might be refused.

Jason Wallin's (2025) recent article "*Anti-Currere*" draws on François Laruelle's (2013) work on non-philosophy, which suggests that Western philosophy has been transfixed with the Real, to convincingly argue that curriculum theory, despite being an expansive and diverse field, is

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polite, or easily digestible terms? No. Will you compromise your ethics to fit within this institution? No. *Et cetera*.

[10] The excluded part of the quote refers to "irreparability", which I take as a sort of brokenness. I excluded it because it might muddy the point I am trying to make in the above sentence. That said, I do not think it undermines my point. The irreparability here is an enforced one; what I am advocating is a chosen form of fracture or brokenness. I maintain that the choosing preserves possibility whereas the discursively enforced irreparability functions as a foreclosure—a limit.

likewise "marked by a preoccupation with the Real" (Wallin, 2025, p. 57). Wallin forwards a sort of disengagement with the traditions of the field and enacts it by never directly addressing Pinar and Grumet's iteration of *currere*. Instead, Wallin uses the term *currere* disconnected from the method to refer broadly to the running of a course—a metaphor well known in curriculum theorizing—and he forwards his own *anti-currere* as being disconnected from the course entirely. Wallin is concerned with the possibility of original, radical thinking and escaping the "prevailing 'image of thought'" (p. 57) in curriculum theory.

Applying Wallin's thinking to the synthetic moment of the *currere* method—the moment *of education*—I argue that seeking synthesis in the autobiographical limits not only, as above, what experiences can be rendered legible and how they can be expressed, but also what can be thought in general. If the synthesis is the moment of education, the moment of insight, then it is the moment at which *currere* becomes valid as knowledge production—where its educative and research value become legible. That moment, then, might be refused—especially if *currere* is to be enacted in a subversive mode—and that refusal might redeem *currere* from institutional legitimacy.

More broadly, the refusal of educational synthesis enables a wider plurality of educational thought to emerge—particularly those lines of thinking that are fragmentary, uncertain, ambivalent, or otherwise usually illegible as education. In short, what I think this refusal of synthesis enables is a non-education—indeed, perhaps a refusal of education. This refusal is not a sort of re-enactment of Paul Willis' (1981) resistance theory, where students develop their own forms of social capital in resistance to those expected by the school. Nor is it reducible to Gert Biesta's (2005) rejection of the neoliberal instrumentalization of the language of learning—his refusal to equate education as such with the bureaucracy of education. Rather, it is an opening to think what might be thought in the absence of a pull toward education. This refusal of education might enable something yet unthought—an otherwise to what currently exists.

Pinar says of *currere* that "it must be dropped when it is no longer useful" (Pinar, 2015e, p. 136)—when it has run its course. I think it is still useful in the present, but certain aspects of it, namely the synthetic moment, might now function to limit the expression of some experiences as education. Moreover, the synthesis itself might function as a closure—even if momentary and open to further inquiry—on what can be thought. These limitations stifle *currere*'s utility for the future of educational inquiry. The synthesis then, or at least the willful pursuit of it, might reasonably be "dropped." Doing so might be redemptive for a *currere* in a subversive mode—it might save *currere* from the norms and limits it has become populated with through its institutionalization.

What I want to propose at the end of this essay is that refusal might be a mechanism through which curriculum is kept poor—that refusing what makes curriculum legitimate might be enacted in pursuit of something else. Specifically, I suggest a refusal to abandon the untended strands of who we are in order to render our experience legible. That means a refusal of the neoliberal university and the various ways it reduces the experience of study to one of acquiring credit. It means a refusal of the academic discourses that limit the way an experience can be expressed. It means refusing the pull toward legitimacy through naming methodology. It means a refusal of legibility—even a refusal of education so as to explore what might be thought in its absence. And, in *currere*, this means a refusal of the synthetic moment.

Here, I have shared several of my own regressive experiences in academia, and my desires for a future apart from the limitations I and others feel. I have also made clear my present attentions to the ways limitations might be inhabited and subverted through refusal. I will not, however, try to tie this all together in a synthetic moment. None of what I have written here is settled for me—not for even a moment; all of it remains open. It is fragmented, disjointed, and in tension, and as uncomfortable as it is to refuse resolution, I'd like to keep it that way.

Declarations

Acknowledgments: I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Michael Campbell, Tesni Ellis, and Renée McKinstry, all of whom generously reviewed drafts of this manuscript before it was submitted.

Authors' contributions: I wrote the paper myself.

Competing interests: The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Publisher's note: Currere and Praxis remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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