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Article

Beyond skills, screens, and test scores: William Pinar and the preservation of the human subject in curriculum studies

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Abstract

This paper examines the scholarship of William F. Pinar, arguing that an ethical refusal to reduce people to instruments, data, or outcomes unifies his work across five decades. Through close analysis of *currere*, the reconceptualization of curriculum studies, *Understanding Curriculum*, curriculum as complicated conversation, *A Curriculum of Courage, Conviction, and Resolve*, and his recent critique of clickbait curriculum theory, the paper demonstrates that Pinar's central contribution is the preservation of the human subject within educational thought and practice. Drawing on Pinar's published scholarship and personal correspondence, the paper situates his work against the pressures of technologization, political constraint, and the degradation of academic discourse. The author grounds theoretical claims in thirty-two years of classroom experience in a public high school in Georgia, arguing that Pinar's framework remains urgently relevant to teachers and students navigating environments that reduce education to skills, screens, and test scores.

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Introduction

Few questions have proven more enduring within curriculum studies than the deceptively simple question: What knowledge is of most worth? That question predates William Pinar by more than a century, but it has never stopped being the organizing concern of his scholarly life. Pinar himself puts it plainly: "What knowledge is of most worth? That's the key curriculum question" (University of British Columbia, n.d.). My engagement with his scholarship for this paper included an email conversation with Dr. William Pinar himself (W. F. Pinar, personal communication, June 18, 2026). Curriculum decisions are never merely technical decisions. They reflect assumptions about what matters, what should be remembered, what should be forgotten, and ultimately what kind of society schools are willing to cultivate. Whether educators debate the teaching of slavery, citizenship, literature, climate change, or artificial intelligence, they are engaging questions of democracy, ethics, identity, and human flourishing. Those are not separate concerns. They never have been.

It was against the narrowing of curriculum to technical concerns that the reconceptualization of curriculum studies emerged during the 1970s. Reconceptualist scholars challenged the

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field's preoccupation with development, implementation, and evaluation, arguing that curriculum could not be reduced to questions of management and efficiency. As Pinar (1978) later explained, reconceptualization emerged as "a reaction to what the field has been, and what it is seen to be at the present time" (p. 205). Rather than asking only how curriculum should be organized and measured, reconceptualists asked what curriculum means, what it does to the persons who live it, and whose interests it ultimately serves.

Among the figures associated with this movement, no scholar did more to chronicle and theorize the shift than William F. Pinar. His work pushed the field far beyond questions of planning, implementation, and assessment. He redirected attention toward what actually matters: subjectivity, autobiography, history, culture, politics, ethics, and lived experience. This paper argues that what unifies Pinar's scholarship across five decades is a single ethical refusal: the refusal to allow people—whether students, teachers, or colleagues—to be reduced to instruments, data, performances, or outcomes. That refusal is not one theme among many. It is the ground from which every other contribution grows.

That refusal did not arrive fully formed. It developed. Reconceptualization recovered the human subject from a field organized around technical curriculum development. *Currere* gave that recovery a method. *Toward a Poor Curriculum* diagnosed the estrangement the method answers. *Understanding Curriculum* expanded subjective experience into its historical, political, cultural, racial, and gendered contexts. Complicated conversation moved the examined self into relationship with other people, with academic knowledge, and with democratic life. The critique of technologization identified the contemporary systems that again threaten to convert people into data. *A Curriculum of Courage, Conviction, and Resolve* extended concern for the self into ethical responsibility for others. The critique of clickbait curriculum theory carried the same ethic into scholarship itself. This paper traces that trajectory. It reads Pinar's works not as a sequence of publications but as a single argument gathering force across five decades. The analysis draws on his published scholarship and on personal correspondence with him conducted during the writing of this paper (W. F. Pinar, personal communication, June 18, 2026).

A Scholar Formed by Dissatisfaction

William F. Pinar was born in Huntington, West Virginia, in 1947. After earning a Bachelor of Science in Education from The Ohio State University in 1969, he taught high school English before returning to Ohio State to complete both a master's degree and a doctorate. Following appointments at the University of Rochester and Louisiana State University, Pinar accepted a Canada Research Chair at the University of British Columbia, where he later became the Tetsuo Aoki Professor in Curriculum Studies. Throughout a career spanning more than five decades, he chronicled and theorized a transformation of curriculum studies from a field primarily concerned with development and implementation into one concerned with questions of subjectivity, interpretation, and meaning that technical frameworks had left largely unexamined (University of British Columbia, n.d.).

Pinar entered a field dominated by technical approaches to educational planning, in which the prevailing tendency was to narrow curriculum to what could be specified and managed. The most influential expression of that tendency was Ralph Tyler's rationale, which organized curriculum around the specification of purposes, the selection and organization of learning

experiences, and the evaluation of outcomes (Tyler, 1949/2013). Tyler's questions were reasonable, and that was their power. They made curriculum legible as a program to be designed, delivered, and assessed, and in doing so they left the person living that program largely outside the frame of inquiry. Joseph Schwab (1970) declared that "the field of curriculum is moribund" (p. 1), and Pinar (1978) observed that the field had become dominated by a "technician's mentality" grounded in "technological rationality" (p. 206). Several intellectual traditions shaped his response. John Dewey (1938/2015) argued that "all genuine education comes about through experience" (p. 25), yet cautioned that "everything depends upon the quality of experience" (p. 27). Dwayne Huebner (1967) argued that focusing on learning merely as behavioral change had detracted the educator from the larger and more complicated phenomenon of "man's temporality" (p. 327). Paulo Freire's critique of the "banking" model complemented these concerns, and Pinar later acknowledged that his emphasis on "dialogical encounter" "comes from Freire" (Pinar, 2017, p. 9). Pinar did not simply absorb these inheritances. He extended them. Dewey located education in experience; Pinar would ask how that experience is remembered, interpreted, and understood by the one who lives it. Huebner named temporality; *currere* would become a method for studying it. Freire offered dialogue; complicated conversation would give dialogue a curricular form. Together, these influences prepared Pinar to ask not how curriculum could be better managed, but what curriculum does to the human beings who live it.

Reconceptualization and the Recovery of Curriculum Studies

William Pinar became one of the central figures responsible for articulating what curriculum studies might become. In his landmark analysis, Pinar (1978) observed that a series of conferences, publications, and scholarly conversations had begun functioning as a "socio-intellectual phenomenon" capable of transforming curriculum studies itself (p. 205). What united these diverse efforts was a shared conviction that curriculum could no longer be understood primarily as a technical enterprise. Reconceptualism reopened curriculum studies to questions concerning subjectivity, culture, history, politics, ethics, and educational experience. That reopening was an insistence that the human being at the center of curriculum had been systematically displaced by the machinery of planning and measurement, and that recovering curriculum meant recovering the person. This is the pivot point on which everything later in Pinar's scholarship turns. The reconceptualists did not argue that curriculum content was unimportant. They argued that the field had mistaken its object. Curriculum is not first a program, a plan, or a sequence of measurable outcomes. It is an educational experience lived by historically and culturally situated human beings, and a field that studies only the program will never understand the experience.

Pinar's contribution proved especially influential because he moved beyond critique and proposed a method for investigating subjectivity itself. This was the dimension of curriculum that managerial frameworks had systematically set aside. As Ropo (2024) observes, reconceptualization redirected curriculum inquiry away from managerial concerns and toward questions of meaning, experience, and interpretation (p. 24). Maxine Greene (1995), working from existentialism and aesthetic education, called for a curriculum attentive to imagination and collective responsibility, insisting on the need to "protest injustices" (p. 5) and to restore "the sense that something can be done in the name of what is decent and humane" (p. 35). Reconceptualization recovered subjectivity as a legitimate concern of curriculum theory, and *currere* provided a way to investigate that subjectivity systematically.

Currere and the Study of Educational Experience

Among Pinar's many contributions to curriculum studies, none has been more influential than his development of *currere*. Derived from the Latin infinitive meaning "to run the course," *currere* shifted attention away from curriculum as an object and toward the individual's experience of living through curriculum. Rather than asking what curriculum should contain or how it should be organized, *currere* asks how educational experiences are remembered, interpreted, and understood across time. This matters because, as Pinar (2019) argues, "subjectivity is an abstract noun for the verb that means being alive and living to tell about it" (p. 28).

Pinar has continued to sharpen this understanding. In a personal communication, he explained that he would "now" define subjectivity "as inner space, wherein the self resides, wherein we experience what we experience and reflect upon that experience (learn from it: educational experience), from where we can speak" (W. F. Pinar, personal communication, June 18, 2026). This formulation does more than refine his earlier claim. It shifts subjectivity from a narrative capacity, the ability to live and tell, toward the lived interiority from which narration itself becomes possible. Subjectivity is no longer primarily what we do with experience after the fact. It is the inner space we inhabit while experience is still unfolding. *Currere*, understood this way, is the deliberate cultivation of that inner space: the discipline of dwelling there long enough to learn something worth telling. This matters for how we understand autobiography itself. *Currere* does not begin with the story. It begins before the story, in the quality of attention a person brings to her own experience. The retrospective narration is possible only because the inner space was cultivated first.

At its core, *currere* is a method for understanding the relationship between biography and education. Pinar proposed four moments of inquiry: the regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical. During the regressive phase, individuals revisit significant educational experiences from the past (Pinar, 2019, p. 24). The progressive phase invites them to imagine possible futures. In the analytical phase, past and future are examined critically in relation to the present. Finally, the synthetical phase seeks a renewed understanding of one's current educational situation. "Through the subjective preservation of academic knowledge and lived experience, we enable understanding of the public world, as we discern our private path within it" (Pinar, 2019, p. 25).

What distinguished *currere* from traditional curriculum models was its refusal to accept that education could be adequately understood through objectives and outcomes alone. Where the Tyler rationale asked how an educational program should be built and evaluated, *currere* asked what happens inside the person moving through it. The question changed the object of study. Students and teachers do not arrive at curriculum as blank recipients. Their educational experiences, "informed by academic knowledge and lived experience, become 'transitional objects' they accord meaning, both private, and when explained, public meaning" (Pinar, 2019, p. 115). Pinar's concern here resonates with Martha Nussbaum's (2010) claim that "the political struggle for freedom and equality must first of all be a struggle within each person" (p. 29). The continuing relevance of *currere* is evident in contemporary schools increasingly shaped by standardization, accountability, and technologization. This is not merely theoretical for me. As a classroom teacher, I encounter this reality every day. Through *currere*, curriculum becomes not simply a plan for learning but a process of understanding oneself and one's

world. That reconception matters precisely because it refuses to let the person, the actual living person, disappear inside the procedure.

Toward a Poor Curriculum and the Recovery of Educational Experience

Among Pinar's early contributions to curriculum theory, *Toward a Poor Curriculum* remains one of his most influential and provocative works. Originally published in 1976 and coauthored with Madeleine Grumet, the text emerged during the height of the reconceptualization movement. Reflecting on the book fifty years later, Pinar and Grumet (1976/2026) explained that they sought to theorize "a 'poor curriculum': poor in props (specifically technology) but a curriculum replete with actual, not artificial intelligence; a curriculum of lived, not simulated, experience" (pp. x–xi). In an era when students increasingly use artificial intelligence not as an assistant to thinking but as a means of avoiding it, Pinar and Grumet's distinction between lived and simulated experience takes on renewed significance.

If *currere* supplied the method, *Toward a Poor Curriculum* named the condition the method answers. At the heart of the book is a diagnosis that moves in three connected steps: estrangement, reflection, and return. Pinar argued that modern schooling had produced a particular human condition: "We have become lost from ourselves" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976/2026, p. 3). That loss is the starting point, not an incidental observation. From it follows the only possible recovery: educators must "look inside ourselves as well as outside ourselves and begin to describe, as honestly and personally as we can, what our internal experience is" (p. 3), returning always to that "continual referring back to reality underneath words, to our immediate experience" (p. 3). These are not three separate ideas. Estrangement, reflection, and return form a single movement. What *currere* ultimately asks of students and teachers is precisely this sequence: to name the loss, to sit honestly inside it, and to find a way back to the self that schooling has displaced.

Missing from conventional definitions of curriculum were the student's point of view and, increasingly, the teacher's perspective as well. Pinar and Grumet's answer was clear: the individual becomes the center of educational experience, the "nucleus" of a genuinely student-centered curriculum (p. 17). Without that centering, schools risk producing individuals who are "self-estranged" and therefore "estranged from others" (p. 17). "Within his responses to the curriculum, the student is continually experiencing himself, and it is that experience of self that *currere* turns" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976/2026, p. 59). The self-estrangement Pinar names here is not a personal failure. It is the predictable outcome of a curriculum that never asks students to locate themselves within what they are being asked to learn. Restoring that location is what *Toward a Poor Curriculum* sets out to do.

Understanding Curriculum and the Mapping of a Field

Understanding Curriculum occupies a unique place within Pinar's body of scholarship. Coauthored with William Reynolds, Patrick Slattery, and Peter Taubman and published in 1995, the work undertook a comprehensive examination of curriculum studies across its historical and contemporary discourses. As Ropo (2024) observes, it introduced curriculum from "14 different perspectives, from historical discourses to developments in gender, poststructuralist, and racial theory" (p. 25). From the opening pages, Pinar and his colleagues make clear that curriculum theory is profoundly human, concerned with "what it means to

educate, what it means to be educated, questions that might literally alter how you proceed, not only as a teacher, but perhaps as a person" (Pinar et al., 2008, p. 8). The expansion matters conceptually. *Currere* recovered the subjective. *Understanding Curriculum* insisted that the subjective is never formed in private. The self that *Currere* studies takes shape within history, politics, culture, race, and gender, and the book maps the discourses through which that shaping becomes visible. What began as a method for examining one life became a framework for understanding how every life is curricular.

One of the enduring contributions of *Understanding Curriculum* is its willingness to confront the political dimensions of schooling directly. In their discussion of George Counts, Pinar and his coauthors note that Counts found American schools primarily served "the monied classes at public expense," allowing both fortune and "misfortune" to pass "from generation to generation" (Pinar et al., 2008, p. 120), and that schools were controlled by the privileged as well (Pinar et al., 2008, p. 120). The chapter devoted to reconceptualization deepens this diagnosis. Quoting Charles Silberman, the authors observe that "it is not possible to spend any prolonged period visiting a public school classroom without being appalled by the mutilation everywhere—mutilation of spontaneity, of the joy of learning, of pleasure in creating, of sense of self" (Silberman, 1970, as cited in Pinar et al., 2008, p. 187). The authors describe the resulting condition as a "crisis of meaning" (Pinar et al., 2008, p. 188). Together, these examples illustrate why *Understanding Curriculum* functions not simply as a history of curriculum theory but as a diagnosis of recurring educational crises—crises that are never merely pedagogical but always also political, always rooted in the same refusal to let the human being at the center of schooling remain fully human.

While the year is now 2026, that crisis remains recognizable. The technologies have changed, but the pressure on teachers and students to perform rather than understand has not. *Understanding Curriculum* challenged teachers with the recognition that "traditional teaching assumes that the student's understanding is misguided and inadequate…it is the lived experience of students…that is missing from the contemporary classroom" (Pinar et al., 2008, p. 379). That recognition remains as true now as ever.

Curriculum as Complicated Conversation

Currere provided a method for understanding individual experience, and *Understanding Curriculum* mapped the intellectual terrain of the field. Curriculum as a complicated conversation offered a way to understand how those experiences and traditions encounter one another. In my own classroom, my students are tasked with connecting the texts they study to their individual life experiences, to current events, and to discuss them all with each other. These discussions, connections, and relations all directly come back to William Pinar and his scholarship. As his scholarship developed, Pinar increasingly described curriculum as a "complicated conversation" (Pinar, 2019, p. 10), a dialogue "with oneself (as a 'private person') and with others threaded through academic knowledge, an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes educated for engagement with the world" (Pinar, 2019, p. 26).

Pinar's own intellectual life offers a fitting illustration of what such conversation looks like in practice. He and William Doll were close colleagues at Louisiana State University, sharing students, co-sponsoring conferences, and co-directing the LSU Curriculum Theory Project (W.

F. Pinar, personal communication, June 18, 2026). Yet their conversation was complicated in the truest sense. As Pinar recalled, "Bill's sources were (during the time we worked together) scientific and my [sic] were the humanities, so we had differences in vocabulary, although both of us shared a background in Dewey and the pragmatists" (W. F. Pinar, personal communication, June 18, 2026). Doll was "much more interested than I in classroom practices," while Pinar himself "favored improvisation as the watchword of teaching" (W. F. Pinar, personal communication, June 18, 2026). Doll (1993) himself described learning as something "[made] (not transmitted) as we dialogue with others and reflect on what we and they have said—as we 'negotiate passages' between ourselves and others, between ourselves and texts" (p. 156). What matters here is not simply that Pinar and Doll disagreed. It is that their disagreement was itself an enactment of complicated conversation. Two scholars, grounded in the same Deweyan inheritance, produced two distinct theoretical idioms by remaining in genuine dialogue with each other's differences rather than collapsing them. The conversation was productive precisely because it was never resolved. That irresolution is not a flaw in the concept. It is the concept.

Complicated conversation also carries important democratic implications. "In such a temporally structured, subjectively, and socially animated curriculum, the classroom becomes, simultaneously, a civic square and a room of one's own" (Pinar, 2019, p. 27). The phrase holds the whole development in miniature. The room of one's own is *currere*. The civic square is what *currere* becomes when the examined self turns toward others. Complicated conversation is not a new commitment. It is the earlier commitment, extended. The concept also reflects Pinar's resistance to the technologization of education. He recognizes the simple fact that "devices cannot substitute for the protracted labor of understanding and study!" (Pinar, 2019, p. 32). I feel this urgency in my own classroom. I watch students reach for artificial intelligence the way earlier generations reached for an encyclopedia, and the habit troubles me for the same reason Pinar's work troubles me in the best sense: it forces the question of what we are actually asking them to do. Asked directly what *currere* offers students and educators now confronted with thinking machines, Pinar answered that "AI can be helpful in summarizing information, but as an educator working with students as children, as human beings, the lived aspects of the 'complicated conversation' that is the curriculum seems especially appropriate now, faced as we are with thinking machines. We (educators and students) aspire to become thinking human beings. Curriculum conceived as *currere* forefront [sic] our existential experience of learning from each other" (W. F. Pinar, personal communication, June 18, 2026). A machine can summarize. It cannot run the course.

A Curriculum of Courage, Conviction, and Resolve

In *A Curriculum of Courage, Conviction, and Resolve: The Subjective Necessity of Nonviolence* (2026a), Pinar turns his attention to how individuals might live ethically with one another in a world increasingly marked by division, violence, and dehumanization. This text extends the concerns of *currere* outward: the subjective becomes the foundation for ethical responsibility to others, and self-understanding becomes inseparable from the refusal to let others be reduced. His emphasis on courage echoes Paulo Freire's insistence that "education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage" (Freire, 2018, p. 4). For both scholars, courage is the willingness to act ethically on behalf of others despite opposition, uncertainty, or personal risk.

Pinar illustrates these qualities through historical figures whose lives demonstrate the difficult work of ethical action. Jane Addams worked to make democratic promises more tangible

through Hull House, even resisting "demands for segregation" (Pinar, 2026a, p. 24), and when her pacifist commitments damaged her public reputation, she remained steadfast rather than abandoning her principles (Pinar, 2026a, p. 25). From Addams, Pinar moves to Mahatma Gandhi, who rejected the notion that nonviolence required passivity or submission. As Pinar notes, Gandhi argued that nonviolence

> does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means [the] pitting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire. (Pinar, 2026a, p. 42)

The text culminates in a vision of human coexistence grounded in shared moral commitments. Drawing upon Václav Havel, Pinar highlights the need for "a unifying starting point for that new code of human coexistence that would be firmly anchored in the great diversity of human traditions" (Pinar, 2026a, p. 52) and Havel's insistence that "We must recollect our original spiritual and moral substance, which grew out of the same essential experience of humanity" (Pinar, 2026a, p. 52). Moving from Addams to Gandhi to Havel, Pinar traces a path from individual subjectivity to democratic community—each figure advancing the same claim that the preservation of humanity requires more than good intentions. It requires courage practiced as a daily discipline.

What the Work Preserves

The enduring significance of William Pinar's scholarship lies in his insistence that curriculum is fundamentally concerned with human experience rather than technical procedure. This is what I believe. Through *currere*, he argued that the meaning of educational encounters cannot be fully understood apart from the individuals who live them. Students and teachers do not encounter curriculum as abstract recipients of information or directors of state objectives and multiple-choice assessments. They encounter it as historical beings whose understandings are shaped by memory, culture, relationships, hopes, fears, and the accumulated weight of their own histories. After more than thirty-two years in the classroom, I have discovered that Pinar names what I have always known but could not always articulate: that the most important work of teaching is not the transmission of content but the recognition of the person in front of you.

A second contribution lies in his defense of intellectual complexity. As Pinar argues in *What Is Curriculum Theory?*, "Our pedagogical challenge is the cultivation of independence of mind, self-reflexivity, and interdisciplinary erudition" (Pinar, 2019, p. 17). That challenge does not diminish in an age of algorithmic learning platforms. It intensifies. His work reconnects education to democratic life, reminding educators that schools are not merely institutions for workforce preparation but spaces in which individuals learn how to participate in a shared public world.

This is what it means to say that people, not curriculum, are the proper center of curriculum studies. The claim does not demote content. Content is the medium of the conversation. The claim relocates the object of inquiry: from the program delivered to the experience lived, from the outcome measured to the person formed. Theoretically, that relocation changes what counts as understanding curriculum at all, because a field that studies programs can be

satisfied by better design, while a field that studies experience must reckon with history, culture, politics, and the interior lives of the people involved. Practically, it changes what teachers watch for. A teacher who studies the program asks whether it was covered. A teacher who studies experience asks what it meant, and to whom.

Pinar in the Age of Technologization

During the Spring 2026 Georgia End-of-Course assessments, my classroom ceased to resemble the space it had been throughout the school year. Desks that had been put together in small islands that supported discussion, collaborative inquiry, and the exchange of ideas were separated into evenly spaced rows. Bulletin boards were covered. Conversations stopped. Students entered silently, logged into testing software, and spent hours staring at a screen where they were tasked with converting months of educational experience into a series of individual clicks. The process was orderly. It was also difficult to ignore the contrast between the complexity of the students I knew and the data that would ultimately represent them. Their humor, creativity, fears, aspirations, friendships, and unique identities would not appear in any score report. What remained was information that could be aggregated, compared, and analyzed. Pinar (2023) names what that process does to the human subject: technologization "recodes" the person "as datum, appropriated for not only assessment but also for surveillance and profiteering," a practice he calls "data colonialism" (p. 139). His critique felt less like abstract theory and more like a description of a reality I had recently watched unfold.

In Georgia, the passage of HB 1084 has compounded this narrowing by restricting how teachers engage questions of race, identity, and historical injustice in public school classrooms. Texts disappear from reading lists, discussions are curtailed before they begin, and teachers make cautious choices about what to say and what to leave unsaid. When Pinar (2019) writes that the school curriculum risks being reduced to "skills, screens, and test scores" (p. 9) under the weight of technologization and political pressure, he is describing not an abstract future but a present reality. A curriculum of courage is not a metaphor under these conditions. It is a job description.

Here the endurance of Pinar's framework becomes explainable rather than merely assertable. Reconceptualization formed in response to twentieth-century technological rationality, the managerial confidence that education could be specified, delivered, and measured. Twenty-first-century technologization is not a different problem. It is the same problem with better machinery. The instruments have changed, from behavioral objectives to testing platforms, adaptive software, and artificial intelligence, but the reduction is identical: the human being rendered as an abstraction that systems can process. A theory built to name that reduction does not age out when the technology upgrades. It grows more precise. That is why Pinar's ideas have not merely survived technologization. They have gained their sharpest referent from it.

Critiques and Limitations

Pinar's scholarship is not without limitations. Critics within and adjacent to the reconceptualist tradition have argued that *currere*'s emphasis on autobiography risks centering individual consciousness at the expense of structural analysis. That is a fair concern. What prevents self-examination from becoming the form of educational privatism that Greene (1995) warns against when she insists on the need to "break out of the confinements of privatism and self-regard" (p. 31)?

Pinar's answer, developed most fully in *Understanding Curriculum*, is that the analytical phase of *currere* is where autobiography becomes politically legible. The method asks the individual to examine how personal history has been shaped by social structures, cultural forces, and historical conditions that exceed any single life. *Currere*, practiced rigorously, is not a retreat from structural critique. It is a route into it. The tension does not disappear, though. A method that begins in the self can end there, and Greene's warning stands as a permanent check on the practice rather than a problem the theory has solved. The inaccessibility critique is also worth taking seriously. The language of reconceptualization can be formidable, and there is a real question about whether the theoretical richness of Pinar's work reaches the teachers who most need it. Pinar is aware of this tension, and his insistence on theoretical depth is itself a position: a refusal to let curriculum studies be absorbed into the same operational logic he elsewhere names as technologization's threat.

The work has also been extended rather than merely defended. The existence of a journal devoted to *currere*, in which teachers and scholars practice the method on their own educational lives, marks the concept's movement from Pinar's biography into a shared scholarly practice (Pinar, 2017). Ropo (2024) reads reconceptualization historically, as a turn whose consequences the field is still absorbing. Doll (1993) carried the Deweyan inheritance he shared with Pinar toward a post-modern account of learning as negotiated rather than transmitted. And the fiftieth-anniversary republication of *Toward a Poor Curriculum*, reframed by its authors as an argument for actual rather than artificial intelligence, shows the work being reinterpreted for conditions its first readers could not have imagined (Pinar & Grumet, 1976/2026). A body of scholarship that can be practiced, historicized, diverged from, and reissued is not a closed system. It is a living conversation, which is what its author said curriculum was all along.

Clickbait Curriculum Theory and the Manufacture of Reaction

Pinar's most recent concern, voiced in his chapter "Clickbait Curriculum Theory" and echoed in our private exchange, is that curriculum studies itself has begun to suffer a version of the very technologization it should be diagnosing. He locates the danger not chiefly in classroom screens but in the scholarship of the field, observing that "understanding curriculum politically" has "triumphed, turning the field into constant critique that seems to create competition as to who can be the most extreme, in part a subspecies of 'clickbait'" (W. F. Pinar, personal communication, June 18, 2026). In "Clickbait Curriculum Theory," he names this further: a critique of "the further degradation of an already corporatized university and one academic field it houses into subsets of clickbait culture," scholarship designed, as he puts it, "to attract attention, not to clarify concerns, certainly not to advance the field intellectually" (Pinar, 2026b, p. 1). The concern completes the arc. *Currere* protected the student from reduction to outcome. The critique of technologization protected the person from reduction to datum. The critique of clickbait scholarship protects colleagues and readers from reduction to audience. The object changes. The ethic does not.

Pinar opens "Clickbait Curriculum Theory" with a text I have taught for years: Jonathan Edwards's 1741 sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." He notes it is still assigned in undergraduate American literature courses because its strategy of "self-righteous outrage, threats of damnation" has proven so durable (Pinar, 2026b, p. 1). His point is not about

Edwards or even about religion. It is about rhetorical strategy. Edwards did not argue his congregation into belief. He bypassed argument entirely, using fear, spectacle, and emotional triggers to overwhelm and short-circuit reflection. The congregation did not analyze the sermon. They reacted to it. That is the mechanism Pinar sees at work in clickbait curriculum scholarship: the same manufacture of reaction, the same suppression of the slower work of understanding. Scholarship "designed to attract attention, not to clarify concerns, certainly not to advance the field intellectually" (Pinar, 2026b, p. 1) operates on the same logic as a sermon engineered to alarm rather than persuade. I recognized the move immediately, because I have stood in front of sixteen and seventeen-year-olds and watched Edwards do exactly what he was built to do: provoke, alarm, and mesmerize the room. The rhetorical fallacies we analyze in AP Language, the loaded appeals, the manipulated audience, the manufactured urgency, are the same tools Pinar finds metastasizing inside academic culture. That a sermon written to frighten eighteenth-century congregations into salvation now doubles as Pinar's diagnosis of twenty-first-century academic culture says something important about how attention has always worked. It also says something troubling about how easily the desire to be heard can crowd out the slower work of trying to understand something.

The connection is not incidental. Technologization, in Pinar's account, recodes the person "as datum, appropriated for not only assessment but also for surveillance and profiteering" (Pinar, 2023, p. 139). Clickbait scholarship performs a quieter version of the same reduction. It converts colleagues and students alike into audiences to be provoked rather than persons to be understood. Both, in their own register, refuse the other's humanity. It is the same refusal Addams resisted at Hull House, that Gandhi refused to answer with submission, and that Havel asked humanity to recollect through a shared moral substance.

The Preservation of the Human Subject

In a system that presses teachers toward compliance, monitoring, measuring, and managing their practice at every turn, the cultivation of intellectual independence becomes both a professional and democratic necessity. This concern resonates with Foucault's description of parrhesia as an ethical commitment to truth-telling and self-formation. As Foucault (2011) argues, the goal is not the production of role-defined professionals but the formation of coherent subjects capable of speaking and acting with integrity. The connection to Pinar is not incidental. Both theorists insist on the integrity of the self: its capacity to speak honestly, to resist institutional reduction, to remain recognizably human within systems designed to render it legible only as role or output, is not a given. It is an achievement, and one that requires cultivation. For Pinar, that cultivation is *currere* itself: the patient, deliberate work of examining one's own experience from the inside rather than submitting to definitions imposed from without. That thread connects *currere* to complicated conversation to nonviolence, and it is what makes Pinar's work generative rather than merely critical.

Nearly five decades after the emergence of reconceptualization, the questions that animated Pinar's scholarship remain unresolved. What knowledge is of most worth? What purposes should schools serve? How should individuals understand themselves in relation to history, culture, and democratic life? These questions will not be settled. But Pinar's answer to what threatens them has only grown clearer. Across *currere*, complicated conversation, technologization, nonviolence, and now the critique of clickbait scholarship, the same ethical demand recurs: do not reduce the human being. Not to datum. Not to outcome. Not to performance. Not to audience. That ethical demand is not incidental to his work. It is its center.

Nor is it static. Each work widens its reach: from the student's lived experience, to the field that studies it, to the systems that threaten it, to the scholars responsible for it. Curriculum studies is not a technical field that sometimes touches on human experience. It is a field whose fundamental task is the preservation of the people within it—in classrooms, in scholarship, in democratic life, against every form of reduction that would render them visible only as instruments or data. That thread has run through fifty years of Pinar's scholarship without breaking. It is what makes his work matter now.

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