Choreographing a Life Reflections on Curriculum Design, Consciousness, and Possibility

By: Susan W. Stinson, Ed.D.

Stinson, S.W. (2001). Choreographing a life: Reflections on curriculum design, consciousness, and possibility. *Journal of Dance Education,* 1 (1), 26-33. DOI: 10.1080/15290824.2001.10387170

Made available courtesy of University of Illinois Press: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2001.10387170

Article:

Over a decade ago, Mary Catherine Bateson1 published a book titled *Composing a Life*, in which she reflected upon various life decisions she and several other women in her generation had made about work, relationships, and other aspects of their lives as women in changing times. Several of these women had experience in the arts, and spoke of art making as a metaphor for the creation of their lives. More recently, an 11-year-old I was interviewing in my research told me something similar. When asked if she thought what she was learning in dance would be important, even for people who would not be dancers. She thought a bit and replied, "Well, yeah, because all through life you're sort of choreographing, like I'm trying to choreograph what I'm going to live.... You're basically choreographing your life."

Indeed, choreography makes a good metaphor for the decision-making process that we use in other parts of our lives. While some decisions may get made on the basis of a balance sheet, weighing pros and cons, most are more complex than that, a mixture of rationality and intuition, conscious and subconscious choices. Whether selecting a vacation site or a life partner, aesthetic criteria are usually part of the equation.

The same is true of curricular decisions. A number of theorists, such as Elliot Eisner, Maxine Green, and Madeleine Grumet, have recognized the aesthetic dimensions of curriculum. In a 1991 book, *Reflections from the Heart of Educational Inquiry: Understanding Curriculum and Teaching through the Arts*, these individuals and other scholars wrote "personally about how they have come to understand curriculum and teaching through the influence of the arts in their own lives" (page 5).[2] The editors note that

> making decisions about curriculum...is no mere technical matter. Education at its best is the same as how to lead a life, and, therefore, decisions about curricula are microcosms of everything that goes into wise living.... Wise living, we believe, is not a matter of prudential calculation; it requires constantly extending ourselves through many acts of faith, and courage, and imagination. Hence, there are no simple answers about how or what to live, only opportunities continually to inquire reflectively into ourselves and the world around us as we continue to make decisions about how to act on what we believe (pages 5-6).[2]

I agree with the editors that, "this kind of inquiry, which is the heart of living and education, is the same kind of imaginative inquiry that is the heart of creative art" (page 6).[2]

Much curriculum planning, by contrast, is more pragmatic than reflective. For example, we as curriculum designers may specify what we want students to know (i.e., Martha Graham's contributions to modern dance) and be able to do (i.e., pliés). This generally means that we are working within what we ourselves already know and can do. As we evaluate the curriculum we have developed, we may ask if students are meeting the objectives we have established for them. Even though we may be incorporating our aesthetic values, looking for unity and variety and smooth transitions between parts of a whole, we focus on decisions about what to teach

and the most effective and efficient ways to do so; we rarely think outside the boundaries of what seems logical and possible.

Reflective thinking in the curriculum planning process takes us beyond these boundaries and leads us to different kinds of questions. Instead of asking what students should know and be able to do or whether they are learning, we pose much more difficult queries such as What do I believe in — and why? Am I living what I believe? Are these values embodied in the curriculum I teach? What kind of world am I creating/supporting in the decisions I have made? Whose interests are being served in this world — who gains and who loses?

My colleague Teija Loytonen[3] refers to this as "troubling our work," having borrowed the term "troubling" from Patti Lather.[4] I like this phrase because reflection indeed raises troublesome issues, ones which we often would prefer not to face. In my own experience, I have found that such difficult issues are not limited to my work; rather, they weave together the personal and professional dimensions of my life as I try to figure out what I believe and how to live it. As Willis and Schubert remind me, these dimensions come together when we "inquire reflectively *into ourselves* and the world around us , " (emphasis added) and this happens as "we continue to make decisions about how to act on what we believe" (page 6).[2]

One place that I teach about this reflective process is in a graduate course that I have taught for some years, "Issues in Planning the Dance Curriculum." In this article, I will share some experiences from this course as a way of illustrating the process. I must warn the reader that what follows is not a linear presentation; I have allowed it to meander through different, often contradictory, thoughts and experiences as I "trouble" my positions on curriculum. I hope that, by sharing in this process, readers will be encouraged to similarly reflect on their own curricular decisions.

We begin the course with a definition of "curriculum." To some, a curriculum is what appears in a university catalogue — a list of courses. To others it looks like a syllabus, outlining all the topics to be covered in a course and the assignments for each.

Our thinking about the topic may be expanded by the concept of the "hidden curriculum," which refers to what students are learning besides what the teacher is explicitly teaching. Certainly a variety of lessons may be learned in a dance class, in addition to movement, processes, and principles of dance. Students may learn lessons about authority, about relationships, about their bodies, about themselves. Frequently, when I am introduced to someone outside the profession and they learn of my line of work, they confess to me a past that has included a dance class, and I hear of some of these other lessons. Through their stories, these friends and acquaintances have related learning that they were "just not creative," or did not have the kind of body (or even the kind of hairstyle) needed to become a dancer. Some learned that they had "two left feet." Some learned that "dance is a lot of fun," others, that "dance is a lot of work." Children may learn how to stay in straight lines or how to form a circle, how to take turns, how to keep going even when no one notices (or when they notice too much). It is clear that there are many possibilities for learning more than pliés, improvisation, and ABA form, which often are part of the explicit curriculum. Lessons may be learned not just from directions, demonstrations, and images, but from a tone of voice, a look, or no look at all; from peers, as well as teachers. The environment is also important; students may learn about the value of dance, for example, by comparing the space and time given to it in comparison to that allotted to other subjects. So I define curriculum as not just the course content, but also anything contributing to student learning. Going back to my artistic metaphor, this is like thinking about a choreographic work as consisting of not just the movement, but all the theatrical accouterments involved as well as the performance of the dancers.

In my graduate course, following this introduction, we spend about two-thirds of the semester reading and exploring a number of diverse visions for dance and arts curriculum, and a variety of theoretical issues which I hope will extend my students' thinking. I choose the "juiciest" reading I can find, and we have rich discussions. During the last part of the course, students must write a philosophy and curriculum design for a dance program.

I insist that each articulate the values upon which their curriculum is based and the sources of these values, including personal as well as theoretical ones.

When I reflect on this course, I can identify two recurring themes that are not on the syllabus but have guided the way I have questioned my students and myself. The themes have to do with *consciousness* and *possibility*. I have borrowed words from Maxine Greene, who has served as a guide in my own journey, to title these themes in the discussion below.

"Towards Wide Awakeness "[5]

As a person who came of age in the 1960s, I have long been drawn to "consciousness-raising" as a goal for education. For some time, however, I thought of this process as rather like focusing a camera or cleaning my glasses. If only I could see more clearly, I thought, I could recognize the truth and follow it. There still are times in my life that what I pray for most is clarity — knowing for sure which path to take when two roads diverge.

As I see it now, however, consciousness is more about complexity than clarity. To become wide-awake is to move beyond yes/no and right/ wrong, to recognize that every choice has consequences, both positive and negative. I can perhaps best illustrate this complexity through my own reflections on education and training, a topic we also explore in my course.

There have long been tensions between dance education and dance training, between the arguments of "everyone can dance/dance is for everybody" and "it takes discipline and talent." Not surprisingly, this has been one of the continuing controversies in dance for decades, and my students and I struggle with it as well.

For more than half my life I have been an advocate for dance education. A latecomer to this art, compared to many readers of this journal, I began dancing as a teenager, with what I now think of as "closet dancing": moving back the furniture and closing the doors to the living room as I danced to music played on vinyl records that today's teens recognize only as antiques. A year or so later I began formal classes in modern dance, driven only by the sense that I felt so alive when dancing, and needed it to balance my otherwise heavily intellectual self. I discovered my creativity in dance, a sense of freedom, and my physicality. It is no wonder that I, along with many other dance educators, was a strong advocate for dance education for every child. We made claims based on our own experience, but without any rigorous scientific evidence, that dance was good for everybody, that it could help all children fulfill their human potential and develop incredible self esteem, and even, in our most passionate moments, that it could promote universal peace, love, and happiness. (I exaggerate only slightly.) Such claims, and the self-indulgence they promoted, were occasionally challenged by those who considered themselves "real" dancers, those who aspired to dance professionally or had already done so.

Nevertheless, dance education advocates have promoted the idea that dance education should be available to all children, meaning that it should be taught in public schools just like mathematics and social studies, and not limited to the wealthy or the talented. Further, this perspective holds that dance education should focus on needs of the individual, with creativity and self-expression as the primary goals, and that it should be a non-competitive, no-failure activity.

More recently, there has been a strong trend to incorporate education about dance — especially history, but also criticism and aesthetics — to more fully develop the mind as well as body and spirit. This perspective has its roots in what has been known as Discipline Based Arts Education, now referred to as comprehensive arts education.[6] The goal of this approach is "to develop students' abilities to understand and appreciate art. This involves a knowledge of the theories and contexts of art and abilities to respond to as well as create art."[7]

A vision of dance that includes creative work, some technique, and some dance history and appreciation is clear in the National Standards for Dance Education.[8] North Carolina, my home state, has been working to implement this vision for some time. By state mandate, every school in North Carolina is supposed to offer dance, along with the other arts, and schools are to require it of every child in the first six years of public education.

Although North Carolina's mandate is very far from being fully implemented, we can already see positive outcomes at the university level. An increasing number of students arrive at my institution having spent several years in public school dance programs. These dancers bring our program more physical and cultural diversity, which we value.

Most public school dance students have seen a fair amount of dance, at least on videotape; most of our studio-trained dancers, in contrast, have seen only dance recitals and perhaps a performance of *Nutcracker*. Dance students from public schools usually know some dance history and principles of choreography, and are not afraid of improvisation, unlike other students who often know only how to replicate what they have been taught.

At the same time these students bring some important strengths, they also bring limitations. The state-mandated dance program is about educating students in dance, not training them; most students have fairly minimal technical skills in dance technique and feel they are far behind their studio-trained peers. Except for those with an abundance of natural ability, or those who have attended one of the few arts magnet high schools in the state, they end up being placed at the lowest technique level; many become discouraged, decide that they are too far behind to catch up, and change their major before long. Those who do remain often feel marginalized as they watch their peers who are more skillful dancers receive the public acclaim on stage. They had loved dance classes in their high schools and felt successful there, but clearly their self-esteem takes a blow when they compare themselves to more highly trained dancers. Certainly not all those with studio training are excellent dancers by the age of 17 or 18, but it is clear that making dance education available for every child does not necessarily provide equal opportunity to become a skilled performer.

To develop the level of skill necessary for a successful performing career, one generally needs not only dance education but dance training. This includes drill and repetition to make certain actions habitual. The training must stress the muscles sufficiently to result in what is sometimes called a training effect. Dance educators are often fond of pointing out the limitations of training. Yet an experience in my own life as a mother reminds me of its appeal. My daughter, age 12 at the time of this incident, loved to run; in particular, she loved the pleasant sensations of running, which we now know come from endorphins. Her track coach told her that she had ideal natural form and the potential to be the best runner he had ever coached. But he also shared a basic principle of athletic training: in order to increase her speed enough to be a champion, she needed to push herself beyond the point where running felt comfortable or even pleasant. While this may not sound attractive to everyone, part of me wanted her to "go for it," to know the exhilaration of pushing those physical boundaries and the satisfaction of working harder than one thinks is possible.

Dance training, like athletic training, requires effort and discipline in order to achieve results. Those who are willing to make the sacrifices, which include discomfort and even pain, may earn a big payoff. For athletes, the payoff is going faster, farther, and higher. For dancers willing to invest in this level of training, the payoff is skill levels that earn awe from admiring audience members and the satisfaction of physical power and accomplishment. Those who have been willing to make these kinds of sacrifices may be critical of dance programs that do not involve significant time spent in rigorous technical training.

There are good reasons to be critical of traditional training practices in dance, which may be harmful physically or psychologically. And yet who, other than indulgent parents, wants to watch dancers who are not really skillful? There is little place in our society for those who love the art of dance but are not highly trained. Maybe they eventually become audience members, the supporters every dance company needs. Maybe they switch to social forms, or even yoga. There are not many other choices. My community, like many others, has community musical and theater groups for amateur performers, and many churches do as well, but no comparable place for dancers. My daughter happily chose the option of being a recreational runner, and runs in periodic events, even marathons, where the emphasis is on finishing, not winning. But where does the amateur dancer go — the one beyond adolescence who loves to perform concert dance, but is not single-minded enough to achieve and maintain a high level of technique?

I go back and forth in my own thinking about dance education and dance training, wondering how much of my criticism of the latter route has been a way to justify my own taking of the former. Are my own values really self serving? When we question our choices, we often lose the confidence that we have made the right ones.

Sometimes we may try to avoid making a choice at all. "Doing it all" — education *and* training — is the preferred position of most of my students. It is true that we can do some of everything, but not all of everything. To make this point more clearly to the young women in my class, I relate a lesson from my own life. In the early years of what we now know as women's liberation, many women of my generation thought that we could have it all. We did not want to choose between career and family, and many of us did not. What we failed to realize at the time is that there would be other things we would have to give up — sleep, for one thing, but also hobbies, keeping a journal, being with friends, and being there for every milestone in the lives of our children. Those of us who tried to do it all found that time was not an unlimited resource, and there was not time to do everything — no time for reading novels, for working in the garden, for doing all of those good-for-you activities that take "only a few minutes a day," according to popular women's magazines. Those same magazines, just like all the self help volumes lining aisles at the local bookstore, promise us the secret to having it all, doing it all, being it all. Busy and exhausted women have grabbed these books and articles, snatching a quick read while waiting at the dentist's office or on the telephone, desperate to find the timesaving techniques that will make it all possible. Only rarely do they tell us the real truth: it is not possible to do everything, not even everything that is really important.

This lesson is as hard to deal with in curriculum as it is in personal life. In my course, as we take up one article and author after another, each putting forth a different vision of dance education, my students say, "Yes!" They want it all in their dance curriculum. With some prodding, though, they reluctantly start to recognize that each approach has problems and limitations as well as benefits. They hold on to their optimism that they can find the perfect combination, the one way to teach dance that will allow themselves and their students to have all of the "plusses" and none of the "minuses." It is a painful moment when they realize that time is a finite resource, that the opposite side of every strength is a weakness, and a choice to do one thing is a choice not to do another. The best any of us can do is to become wide awake — conscious of our values, recognizing what we are giving up as well as what we are gaining with every choice that we make in composing a curriculum or a life.

Of course, this stance also has its limitations. Recognition that there is no perfect choice can sometimes lead to relativism ("it doesn't matter what you choose"), paralysis, or despair. We may appear indecisive, even weak, to others, and may become unable to participate effectively in advocacy. Even more important, focusing too much on limitations may keep us from recognizing possibilities that do exist. That is why understanding the possibilities is so important.

"Moving Towards Possibility"[9]

Embracing a range of possibilities may seem quite contradictory to the above argument, that one cannot have it all. That argument is grounded in pragmatic reality, or what we like to refer to as "the real world." In some ways the world is indeed fixed. A week has seven days, a day has 24 hours, and the human body can go only so long without sleep.

Drawing again on my heritage from the 1960s, however, I also recognize that the social world is a human construction and it can be changed. My generation was on the front lines of a number of initiatives — the women's movement, the civil rights movement, the movement against the Vietnam War — that changed the social landscape of our country. Until we examine what we consider to be fixed, we never know what might be changed, how much effort it might take, or how important it is to us.

So the second theme that I introduce to my students has to do not with what is, but with what *might be*. Is it possible to be a professional dancer without years of technique class? I remember when Alwin Nikolais told my department that he preferred to go to clubs, not auditions, to find new members of his company. He was looking not so much for trained dancers as an affinity for the kind of movement he wanted to use. Is it possible to be a

dancer without a "perfect" body? Look at the Bill T. Jones Company. Is it possible to be a professional dancer starting as a mature adult? Look at the Liz Lerman Company, "Dancers of the Third Age."

I look back at films of the early Martha Graham Company and realize that our undergraduate students today are more technically advanced than those early modern dancers. What have we lost by continually pushing the technical expectations of what it takes to be a dancer? Can we imagine something different? Can we imagine giving up some demand for technical expertise that we now know is possible, and gaining something that we might value even more in our art?

Similar imaginative visions are possible in education. I taught 20 years ago in a high school in which only narrative evaluations — no grades — were given. The students still got into college, and they still do today, with no grades to demonstrate their academic potential — just a portfolio of their work and extensive comments from their teachers. In North Carolina, a college once existed that gave no grades and awarded no degrees; the faculty and students made decisions through a democratic process. Founded in the height of the Depression as an "act of faith," Black Mountain College lasted only 24 years and only 1,300 students were ever enrolled, but "the college has exerted an impact on every area of American cultural life" (page 244).[10] Members of the faculty included Merce Cunningham and John Cage, who staged the first "happening" there. Cunningham first established his company at Black Mountain, and Paul Taylor and Ruth Currier were among the students. Doris Humphrey and Barbara Morgan spent a summer there.

Indeed, if anyone should understand this theme of possibility, it is artists, because art making requires that we be able to imagine what does not currently exist. It was a professor in education, however, who helped me recognize the connection between art making and world making. Dr. James Macdonald taught a course at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro that he called "Personal and Social Transcendence." During the first half of the course, students engaged in arts activities in a variety of media. The emphasis was on sensory awareness and imagination, at a level some would call "dabbling." This arts experience was used as a base for the second half of the course, when students were asked to imagine possibilities that went beyond paint or clay or sound or movement. They were asked to consider not just what is, but what might be, in the social world of education. I found participation in this course to be a very powerful experience. All too often, I think, arts students end up recognizing their compositional powers only in relation to artistic materials.

This connection — between art making and world making — is neither obvious nor automatic. While many of us in arts education like to claim that lessons learned in arts education will transfer to other aspects of life, there is little if any evidence to support this. If it is to happen at all, I think, teachers need to make the bridge, as Macdonald did, between what happens inside the studio and what happens outside.

Consciousness, Possibility, and Making Life Harder

In the case of my graduate curriculum course, thinking about "what might be" is not just creativity for the fun of it. My students are generally quite good at creative problem solving. When planning curriculum, it certainly is possible to imagine creative titles for technique classes, or different kinds of assignments to give for the sake of variety. But of course I want my students to go beyond this. In reflective thinking, "What might be?" raises the question "What should be?" Again, this requires that students be in touch with their values. As Macdonald advocated, we must "sound the depths of our inner selves" (page 79)11 to uncover them.

As a structure for identifying my students' values, I start with several basic questions:

- What is dance — meaning, what is the vision of dance that you wish to communicate to your students? Should it be the same for all students? How can this best be communicated?
- What does it mean to be educated? What is the purpose of education? Is this always its purpose? How can this best be accomplished?

These questions are challenging but not usually overwhelming. I also, however, ask students to ponder two questions posed by Macdonald, which he named as the most essential questions for all educators:

- What is the meaning of human life?
- How shall we live together? (page 146)[11]

I encourage students to probe their answers to these two difficult queries, and to consider to what degree their curriculum should educate students to be more fully human and to be in life-enhancing relationships with others. These are clearly not the kinds of questions students thought they would have to consider in a dance curriculum course. Next to them, most other curriculum questions — such as the most effective sequence for teaching triplets — start to sound a bit trivial.

Such questions are also terrifying at times. It certainly is possible to teach dance and to plan course after course without considering them, but we are teaching something about how to be human and how we should live together even when we are doing it unintentionally, as part of the hidden curriculum. If we live an unexamined life, it is possible to live in a way that directly contradicts the values we think we hold. My students become aware of this when they try to put together their philosophy and their curriculum design, and often realize that the two are in opposition.

I press my students as I press myself, to discover what lies underneath what we say and what we do. I ask, "What are you living for? What are you willing to give up to do this? Does this practice that does not seem to fit your philosophy indicate something that you value even more?"

Some values are easily incorporated into a dance curriculum. For example, many students come to identify values related to both individualism and community. Dance can be a way to teach students to recognize and value individual differences and to recognize their connectedness with others. I push them to consider the implications: "If these are your values, how does daily ballet class fit in?" "How does cherishing individual differences affect your system of assessment?"

Sometimes students may identify values that cannot so readily be taught through dance, or values that may be taught only by skewing the curriculum to such an extent that dance seems like an afterthought. Many of us have argued for a long time that dance should not be taught as just a means to an end, a way for children to learn science and social studies. But, again, we teach more than dance whether we intend to or not. Why should we not, as Maxine Greene suggests, "live deliberately"(page 161)[5] and make conscious choices about the hidden curriculum as well as the explicit one?

I do not think that everything can be taught through dance and many important lessons can be taught better elsewhere. But if we identify important values that just do not fit within a dance curriculum, where else might they be lived? How can we teach students that dance is not everything, that there are other important things in life too? Are we teaching this to our students by the way we live our own lives? I struggle with this issue, because I have let work and work-related activities take over such a big portion of my life, far larger than I think is warranted. With most of the faculty in our department doing the same thing, I think obsessiveness about work has become part of the hidden curriculum that we teach.

It is not that all such conflicts of values will ever be completely resolved. Like most people, I find that I live in contradiction with some of my own deep values. For example, grading students puts me in a relationship to them that is in violation of my own vision of how people ought to live together. Of course, I will lose my job if I do not turn in grades. Further, I admit that, since grades are recognized as standing for a certain level of achievement, I resist giving A's for effort alone. My awareness of the contradictions in all this, however, has led me to explore ways to give students more power over the grade they receive, by developing clear scoring rubrics so that they are not in a state of confusion about "what the teacher wants." This means that I spend more time talking about grades, which seems to give them greater importance than they warrant. I choose to live in

conscious awareness of the contradiction between my beliefs and my actions, even though it means I suffer more in grading than I would otherwise. This is not because I am a masochist, but because I believe that consciousness — the ability to think about our own thinking — is one of the answers to what it is to live a human life.

I admit that it is easier not to do this kind of thinking; decision-making would be far less painful if we were not so aware of what we were giving up. It is interesting that people committing acts of atrocity seem able to turn off consciousness of pain, their own and that of others. We wonder how people who have been tried for war crimes could go home and play with their children, listen to classical music, and enjoy a good dinner, just like the rest of us. Whether we choose to be wide awake to the consequences of our choices or anesthetized against feeling them, there is something to gain as well as something to lose.

The final part of the project that students must complete in my graduate course is to reflect on the process of developing their philosophy and curriculum design and their efforts at trying to make them compatible. Because reflecting on what and how we teach is a project that may continue throughout one's professional life — and usually winds up like the "Unfinished Symphony" — this is the paper in which they reveal which ideas they have considered but do not know what to do with and proceed to lay out issues that are still unresolved. I tell them that everything in their philosophy and their curriculum does not have to "fit," but I want them to be aware of the pieces that do not.

A number of times since I have taught this course, this process has resulted in students questioning their choice for a career in dance. I sympathize, because I have done the same throughout my career, and still do. I remember when my doctoral advisor asked me, only somewhat facetiously, if it was not pretty trivial to spend one's days (and nights) prancing around a dance studio when people were starving and suffering all over the world. I continually seek reasons why dance is so important, why I have stayed, why I continue to stay. Among others, I find compelling an argument that has to do with freedom: if the world were suddenly changed, so that people were free from all forms of oppression, what would they then be free to do? I also note that art has persisted even in the most awful of times and places. The human impulse to create — what Martin Buber[12] called the originative instinct — is so strong that children in a concentration camp still played and drew pictures and wrote poetry.[13] I suspect they also danced.

I still have days when I wonder, "What am I doing this for?" On most days, however, I end up concluding that the arts in general, and dance in particular, are important ways for me to make and find meaning in my life, and the impulse to seek meaning is another one of those qualities that define a human life. But I always must ask, am I teaching, am I living my life, in a way consistent with what I believe and value? What kind of a composition have I made, am I making?

I recognize that troubling one's work and one's life may make both more difficult. But, as Maxine Greene tells us, "To make things harder for people [means] awakening them to their freedom. It [means] communicating to them in such a way that they [will] become aware of ... their responsibility as individuals in a changing and problematic world" (page 162).5 Through such difficulty may we move, wide-awake to our choices and possibilities, as we choreograph the curricula we wish to teach and the lives we wish to live.

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Susan W. Stinson, Ed.D., is a professor in the Department of Dance at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
Correspondence: Susan W. Stinson, Ed.D., Department of Dance, UNCG, PO Box 26169, Greensboro, North Carolina 27402-6169
An earlier version of this paper was delivered as a keynote address at a conference at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, in July 1999: "Confluences 2: Articulating the Unspoken," and published in the proceedings under the title "Composing a Curriculum: Articulating Unspoken Values."