

---

# **Implication of Dr. Thornton's Paper for Theory and Research on Social Studies in Japan: Does Subject Matter Precede Educational Aim? Additionally, Is De-contextual Talk about Social Studies Classes Possible?**

Tatsuya Watanabe  
*Tokyo Gakugei University*

This paper is the English version of my reply to Dr. Thornton's essay in *Syakaika Kenkyu* (Vol. 77, 2013), which is the journal of JERASS (Japan Educational Research Association for the Social Studies). The aim of this paper is to introduce Dr. Thornton's gatekeeping theory to journal readers and to clarify the originality of his theory by comparing it with Dr. Shulman's PCK theory<sup>1</sup> in USA and Dr. Kusahara's curricular-instructional decision-making theory<sup>2</sup> in Japan. Gatekeeping theory provides Japanese social studies educators with many suggestions and opposing viewpoints.

## **1 Gatekeeping Theory**

Dr. Thornton was born in Australia. After spending a few years as a high school social studies teacher in Australia, he traveled to the US for his graduate student at Stanford University. Drs. Nel Noddings and Elliot Eisner were his professors at Stanford. He learned much from them, particularly Dewey's educational theory. After graduating, he worked at the University of Delaware and then became assistant professor at Teachers College of Columbia University. Now, he is a full professor at the University of South Florida. While at Columbia University, Dr. Thornton published *Teaching Social Studies That Matters* (2005). This book proposed his ideas about "Gatekeeping" in detail. The main points of his theory are explained in (1) to (4) below.

- (1) Previous research in the field has focused on what the formal social studies curriculum should contain and how this curriculum should be organized. However, these efforts to define the curriculum, while far from trivial, may not always be as significant as has been widely assumed. Too few changes have been made to the enacted curriculum in social studies classes.
- (2) The reason that the enacted curriculum in social studies classrooms has

not changed is that teachers, who are responsible for implementing the curriculum in specific classrooms, must adjust and transform the formal curriculum into concrete curriculum that can adapt to particular school students or conditions along with their own interests, their educational ideas, and their social understandings. These teacher's' performances represent what he calls "gatekeeping". This type of gatekeeping is unavoidable and teachers perform it consciously or unconsciously as they implement curriculum materials and determine the educational goals that they believe are significant, even if they never engaged in formal curriculum development. Through their gatekeeping, sometimes teachers are good practitioner of bad formal curriculums, and sometimes they are bad practitioner of ideal formal curriculums. We must spend more time and energy on talking about how curriculums are enacted.

- (3) Gatekeeping by teachers is the "linchpin" in school social studies reform. Effective school social studies reform needs effective teacher's' gatekeeping. Needless to say, teachers are neither passive curriculum enactors nor simple conduits of social sciences knowledge, but rather critical and reflective designers of the enacted curriculum in terms of three educational aims and sources. — the student, society and scholarship. Given these educational aims, teachers as curriculum designers have to determine their own educational objectives, subject matters, content materials, and educational methods to enact curriculum and instruction in the classroom. These decisions are contextually based — and called gatekeeping by Dr. Thornton. Teacher education must emphasize this curricular-instructional gatekeeping to enact the real change in the social studies classroom.
- (4) Whatever form curriculum development takes, method and curriculum development are clearly interdependent activities. Curriculum development is often described as "the what" of teaching, and method described as "the how". This dichotomy is neat but imprecise, because how we teach becomes part of what we teach, and in turn, what we teach influences methods we select.

Dr. Thornton argues that the contents and methods of the enacted curriculum are not the same as those of the formal curriculum. He regards the formal curriculum as a series of activities intended to engage students in educational experiences. However, he thinks these activities are necessarily cast in general terms, because instructional settings where the curriculum is enacted vary and cannot be entirely foreseen. Thus the formal curriculum presents teachers with images and aspirations, not with a detailed script.

Additionally, he thinks that curriculums are different from the structure

of the social sciences discipline, because educational aims shape the purposes, subject matters, and educational methods. Moreover, these educational aims of this curriculum are not the same as the goal of social sciences research. He writes as follows.

Although academicians periodically decry such modifications, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such an approach. Indeed, it is unavoidable: There is nothing within the social sciences that says which parts of them young people ought to study. There are educational rather than disciplinary questions, and educational criteria must be brought to bear to select what out of the universe of material in the social sciences should be included in school curricula, as the Committee on American History's report during World War Second well illustrates.

(S. Thornton, *Teaching Social Studies That Matter*, pp.60-61)

He rejects the following three tendencies that nowadays permeate teacher education in US universities.

First: The tendency to exclude field teachers from aim talk (discussing about educational goal and curriculum design). Some conservative administrators regard teachers as technicians whose work only focused on the technique of instruction. They think curriculum design is not teacher's' work, but administrator's' work.

Second: The isolation of subject matter and methods from each other. In other words, educators, including teachers, are regarded as only educational methods experts and not subject specialist, to whom the task of determining subject matter is given. Some administrators or social scientists believe that social science specialists, rather than educators, are more appropriate for determining subject matter, and that educators should only talk about educational methods. In this case, methods are being confused with instructional techniques, which are completely divorced from the subject matter.

Third: Identification of social studies education with simple social sciences education. Some administrators and many social scientists believe the nature of social studies is similar to isolated forms of social sciences and is not interdisciplinary. Dr. Thornton disagrees and argues it is important to distinguish educational method from instructional technique. He defines the latter as teachers' behaviors or speech techniques that foster effective classroom practices, and the former as efforts to arrange subject matters in terms of criteria for the three educational aims. In other words, he suggests that educational methods foster an indispensable thinking process that makes salient the aims

of social studies. In this case, educational method is meaningful for students to master because how they teach is part of what they teach. Additionally, Dr. Thornton suggests that we distinguish subject matter from content because he defines the latter as thematic (e.g. East Asia, Queen Elizabeth, and The Second World War) and detailed, while the former represents the analytical process, knowledge, theory, attitude, disposition, and other meaningful aspects of students' lives. Moreover, content is selected on the basis of the criteria for the educational aims.

## 2. Shulman's PCK Theory and Gatekeeping Theory

There are two new topics discussed in his essay in *Syakaika Kenkyu*. First, he clarified his perspective on Dr. Shulman's pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) theory. He had not previously discussed PCK in public before this essay. Dr. Thornton wrote about his perspective on PCK at this time because I had asked some questions about his impression of Shulman's PCK theory before he came to Japan. My main question was "Is your gatekeeping theory the same as Dr. Shulman's PCK theory and his idea of transformation?" Simply put, his answer in his essay is that the theory are not the same.

— It is important to provide some information about Dr. Shulman's PCK theory here. PCK refers to special and independent knowledge that all teachers have. The other kinds of knowledge teachers have are content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, and contextual knowledge (i.e., knowledge of curriculum and learners). The function of PCK is to integrate these other knowledge types and to transform subject content and methods into a specified unit and lesson plan (i.e., an enacted curriculum). Dr. Shulman suggested that PCK functions as a linchpin for teacher's decision-making, and the quality of the enacted curriculum depends heavily on the quality of PCK. Along with his colleagues, he has often conducted clinical-and-comparative-based research with veteran teachers and inexperienced teachers to clarify that knowledge. For example, Dr. Shulman and his group of graduate students tried to research the tendency of some history teachers, and made clear that veteran history teachers often focus on long-term classroom practice (at the unit or curriculum level) and emphasize continuity; however, inexperienced teachers only focus on today's lesson. This difference greatly influences the quality of instructional design. This is one example of PCK functions<sup>3</sup> — .

Dr. Thornton agrees that teachers have a body of special and professional knowledge, and he called this knowledge a frame of reference. When he previously explained this frame, he often referred to Dr. Shulman (cf. S. Thornton, *Teacher as curricular-instructional Gatekeeper in Social Studies*, J.P.

Shaver, ed., *Handbook of research on social studies teaching and learning*, p.238). In this essay, however, he criticized Dr. Shulman's PCK theory in the following way.

These days the idea of pedagogical content knowledge is routinely used in many social studies research studies and methods course syllabi. In these practices it seems taken for granted that pedagogical content knowledge explains a great deal about how teachers tend the curricular-instructional gate.

As with other paths to greater understanding and enhancement of gatekeeping, however, pedagogical content knowledge may not account for how classroom events unfold as much as some researchers expect. It turns out that even teachers who possess extraordinary pedagogical content knowledge do not necessarily use it to guide their teaching. What does guide their gatekeeping is not knowledge of subject matter, or anything else, alone. As Keith Barton and Linda Levstik (2004) found in a comprehensive review of studies of history teachers, only one variable consistently predicts which teachers will teach in exemplary ways: "Studies have consistently shown that some teachers do apply what they have learned about historical evidence and interpretation.... Why are they so different? Because their purposes are different. (p. 255)" (S. Thornton, *Enhancing Curricular-Instructional Gatekeeping in Social Studies, Syakaika Kenkyu*, vol.77, 2013)

Why does he write this? I cannot completely explain the reason, but I will try to answer this problem as best as I can. I have some assumptions.

### Aim precedes content?

Dr. Thornton places at the center teacher's own beliefs about educational aims and purposes (i.e., their frames of reference), and aim talk is crucially important because it influences their decisions regarding the subject matter and methods in the classroom. This idea is very different from that of Dr. Shulman's transformation circle model (Figure 1). Dr. Thornton may disagree about this distinction.

Dr. Shulman represented teacher's learning processes with the circle model in Figure 1, which consists of six sequential aspects (comprehension, transformation, instruction, evaluation, reflection, and new comprehension). According to Dr. Shulman, educational practice must start with comprehension of the subject content. History teachers must comprehend the American Revolution and English teachers must comprehend and analyze the themes and characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After comprehension, teachers must

interpret the subject content in his critical perspective (critical interpretation), to clarify the educational objectives and to draw out the repertoire of representation, which includes the questions, metaphors, and samples to instruct in the classroom (representation). Then, teachers must tailor the lesson to the classroom student's characters and adaptations (adaptation and tailoring). These four steps (critical interpretation, representation, adaptation and tailoring) together represent the transformation aspect. After these steps, the instruction begins. Dr. Shulman suggested that content knowledge mainly supports the critical interpretation and representation steps, and general pedagogical knowledge supports the adaptation and tailoring steps. PCK functions during this transformation.

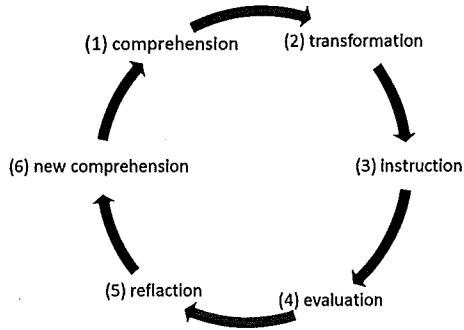


Figure 1 Shulman's transformation circle model

This transformation circle model has one assumption that subject content and material precede educational aim and purpose. It is possible that Dr. Thornton disagrees with this assumption. Dr. Shulman's model (Figure 1) cannot explain why all students study the American Revolution and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This model cannot explain why we all study US history courses (or Japanese history courses) or classical English (or Japanese) reading courses. These questions remain unasked and seem to represent self-evident truths.

This model also assumes that subject content precedes educational method. It is possible that Dr. Thornton does not agree about this assumption either. This assumption seems to suggest that method is an instructional technique that presents subject content to students that is separate from educational aims or the nature of the subject content.

### Curriculum decision-making is technical problem?

— The second assumption I have to address has to do with whether Dr.

Thornton regards PCK as a kind of technical knowledge, and whether, placing emphasis on PCK, as Dr. Shulman does, regards curricular-instructional decision (gatekeeping) as mainly technique-centered problems. Dr. Thornton emphasizes the discussion of educational aims, and cannot agree with this perspective because he regards this decision as a complex and philosophical problem. Dr. Thornton is worried that PCK theory makes teachers mindless.

Does subject content precede educational aim? Is method the same as instructional technique? Is curricular-instructional decision-making (gatekeeping) is technique-centered problem? These are controversial, and very important issues in not only the US but also Japan. I think that Dr. Shulman's PCK theory has some limitations because this theory cannot overcome the problem of mindlessness among many teachers. Thus, we Japanese educators should place more emphasis on researching Dr. Thornton's gatekeeping theory.

### **3. Lesson Study and Gatekeeping Theory**

The other new perspective Dr. Thornton present in *Syakaika Kenkyu* is a clarification on his views of Japanese lesson study, especially the JERASS style. I provided him with some information about the lesson study (JERASS style) by my translating seminal papers by Dr. Kusahara, and some theorists in Japan into English before his visit to Japan. In addition, he read many reviews and reports about Japanese lesson study. I asked him for his opinion on Japanese lesson study (JERASS style) before his visit to Japan, and he replied in his essay in *Syakaika Kenkyu*. The JERASS style includes de-contextual talk about educational aims, methods and subject matter, because JERASS emphasizes looking for more generic and universal designs of ideal (or not ideal) curriculum and instruction. Dr. Thornton argued against this idea, suggesting that JERASS lesson study methodology made same mistakes the same as the New Social Studies movement did in 1960'-s. He emphasizes the case study method because it will not yield effective results if the goal is generic and universal discussion about curricular-instructional design. It is possible that Dr. Thornton believe that ideal curricular-instructional design is flexible in terms of social contexts, student aptitude, and student relevance. He argues that some contexts need lecture-centered approach.

Is de-contextual talk possible? This is the big question about social studies education, and the answer reveals a large gap between Japan and the US.

---

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Gudmundsdottir, S. & Shulman L., (1987). Pedagogical content knowledge in social studies, *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, vol.31, No.2. Shulman, L. S., (1987). Knowledge and Teaching: Foundation of the New Reform, *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 57, No.1.
- <sup>2</sup> Kusahara, K., (2006). A Research Methodology of Educational Practice in Subject Area "A Construction of Academic discipline that research into Educational Practice" *The Joint Graduate School in Science of School Education*, Hyogo University of Teacher Education (ed)
- <sup>3</sup> Gudmundsdottir and Shulman, *ibid.*, 1987.