In The Left-handed Curriculum, McDermott challenges readers to reevaluate their viewpoint on traditional curriculum development and instructional practices. Using a critical post-modernist lens, she questions the traditional (modernist) movement that dominates today’s educational landscape. McDermott (2013 no reference list) contends that by utilizing a left-handed curriculum, educators can take ownership of their curriculum and “bring creative and critical thinking back to the craft of their profession (p. 4).

McDermott divides the book into two sections. The first section saliently outlines the author’s viewpoint on standards-based curriculum, defines key terms that are used throughout the book, and concludes with an analysis of contrasting theoretical viewpoints on education. The second section of the book provides exercises that assist the reader in better understanding how to integrate “critical post-avant-garde arts-based teaching and learning” (left-handed curriculum) into their curriculum, classroom and school (p. 52). McDermott utilized 10 years of data and work samples from her course, “Curriculum, Theory, Design and Assessment (through the arts),” to develop an easy to understand “how to” approach.
McDermott argues that since the early 1990s, there has been a paradigm shift in education that is focused on standardizing teaching practices and depleting teachers’ autonomy in the classroom. She describes this as “teacher proofing” the curriculum, where “teachers cannot (or are afraid to) modify instructional strategies or assessments in order to meet the needs of their unique students or classroom community” (p. 4). Her proposed solution is the utilization of a left-handed curriculum, where educators work together and support the creative efforts of each other. McDermott believes that educators must incite their own creativity before they can inspire arts-based, creative practices in their classrooms. These transformational experiences empower educators to approach the curriculum in new, innovative ways and create learning environments that acknowledge the economic, cultural, and historical diversity of their students. They are able to design classrooms “where children can create the world they wish to see, rather than simply be tested on the world as it is” (p. 9).

In the book, McDermott seeks to inspire creative experiences that are built upon emergence, collaboration, and transformation. People emerge when they are able to act spontaneously and break free from preconceived notions and expectations. Emergence can often be ushered in through the use of collaborative activities. By working together, educators create a safe, supportive environment where they can learn from others’ perspectives and interests. Through emergence and collaboration, transformation often occurs; teachers begin to redefine their role as an educator and the purpose of the curriculum in the classroom.

In addition to these themes, aesthetics, art, creativity, and curriculum, play a vital role in classroom construction. Whether consciously or unconsciously, educators design their classroom using aesthetic properties. They structure their classrooms based on lighting, noise level, physical arrangement, and movement. Much can be derived from their choices. McDermott challenges educators to reflect on their current practices and experiment with these characteristics in an effort to improve teacher and student interaction.

McDermott believes art and creativity also serve a fundamental purpose in the classroom. In many districts, art has been reserved for schools that serve students from high socio-economic backgrounds and creative exercises are often reserved for gifted classrooms. McDermott believes that when “creativity and art are seen from a more critical and collaborative perspective, they represent the creation of
socially constructed knowledge and meaning making, where art can help transform schools and society” (p. 17). By embedding art and creativity in the classroom, teachers can begin to better understand their students’ needs and develop a critical lens through which they can adjust their teaching practices.

Of the four themes McDermott focuses on in the book, curriculum seems the most expected; however, her narrative challenges the reader to revisit the traditional definition and purpose of a curriculum. To better illustrate her point, she juxtaposes modern and post-modern viewpoints on education. McDermott contends that the modernist viewpoint serves as a framework for our current educational system. Students are viewed as workers, their time is micro-managed to the minute, and they are all expected to learn and repeat back information in the same way. McDermott seeks to shatter this existing framework and proposes that curriculum instead focus on “how we move, what we know, whom we interact with, where we learn, what we learn” (p. 21) and reflect the individual and shared contexts of teachers and students. Curriculum must be designed to encourage a reciprocal relationship, where teachers determine what and how students learn based on feedback garnered directly from the students.

Understanding the drawbacks of a modernists approach to education is the first step in breaking the cycle of established practices. In the second section of the book, McDermott inspires readers to implement a left-handed curriculum approach in their schools. She presents five distinct exercises that transform critical post-modern education theory into practice. Each exercise provides detailed instructions, pictures of sample work, participant narratives, and reflection questions. These experiences are intended to be performed by the teachers, not the students, with the intention that emergence, collaboration, and transformation will re-empower educators to ignite creative practices in their classrooms.

The first exercise challenges the traditional viewpoint of space. McDermott contends that “curriculum is not only what we teach but how, and where, we teach” (p. 39). Participants are able to reimagine their classroom spaces and gain experience participating in inquiry-based activities. The goal is to identify existing power relationships and better understand their own style of teaching. When these exercises are facilitated in group settings, educators will “reawaken their own capacities for risk-taking and exploration, to feel again what it’s like to trust their intuition, to work creatively with
one’s peers, to have fun, and to have faith” (p. 47).

In the second and third exercises, McDermott delves more deeply into critical reflection. Participants are aided in identifying their frustrations with the education system and given a voice so they can reimagine the many ways to transform the structure of their curriculum, classroom, and school. She encourages participants to view their curriculum and classrooms as compositions, focusing on the student’s experience. In these exercises, teachers “deconstruct the ‘unnecessary’ actions and assumptions about how learning is enacted, and reconstruct, through aesthetic viewpoints, how curriculum might be enacted more creatively” (p. 68). Through reflexive practice, educators can begin to create learning environments that are engaging and reciprocal in nature.

In the fourth and fifth exercises, participants develop arts-based narratives that define their personal beliefs and pedagogical practices. These narratives provide a base from which participants can begin to develop a public voice on education issues. McDermott attributes high-stakes testing and one-size-fits-all curriculums to teachers losing their ability to challenge the system and stand up for their profession. These exercises are meant to connect “various layers of their own identities within larger world contexts” so that they can “transform their own future classrooms into sites of democracy and social empowerment” (p. 89). These narratives serve as a non-threatening representation of their views on classroom practices and the education system as a whole.

Together the exercises in this book take readers on a transformational journey, outlining the elements of a left-handed curriculum: “creativity for democracy, freedom, voice, empowerment, and ongoing hope for change when change is needed” (p. 121). Through emergence, collaboration, and transformation educators learn how to creatively reimagine the curriculum and classroom environment and develop meaningful ways to advocate for the public school system.

McDermott’s writing adeptly reaches multiple audiences. Academics and researchers will appreciate the insightful review of literature on arts-based curriculum and epistemological stances on education provided in the first section of the book. Educators, instructors, and administrators will appreciate the practical “how to” approach to a left-handed curriculum provided in second section of the book. McDermott’s message serves a beacon to educators who are seeking innovative ways to tackle this newest shift in educational policy. With the recent implementation of the
National Common Core State Standards, it is now more important than ever for the education community to find ways to work creatively and collaboratively in order to break down the barriers to student learning.

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