**Initial Teacher Education as a Dialogic Space for Agile Art Curriculum Design**

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**Abstract**

In this article we draw on our positionality as teacher educator and student teacher to reflect on initial art teacher education as a forum for novel disciplinary curriculum design. We describe how, without new system thinking, much taught school art curriculum may remain conceptually esoteric, or cumulatively dysfluent, and therefore increasingly vulnerable to new measures of accountability. We review the English context and consider the discrete challenges curriculum designers face in this national policy landscape. In response to our findings, we propose a locus for curricular development that might satisfy expectations of external auditors, but more excitingly, connect school art to authentic artistic practices. Here, student art teachers are promoted to key stakeholder in the development of new materials, rather than positioned as inheritors of habit. We defend this proposition by highlighting three potentially beneficial characteristics student teachers can contribute to curriculum design: disciplinary relevance, objective criticality, and latent interest.

**Introduction**

This article is a critical reflection on design processes for taught curriculum in England’s secondary art education. We share a concern that much current curricula cannot fulfil the potential of our discipline, and that recognition of this deficit through recently increased external scrutiny (Ofsted 2019a) may trigger systematic change; a change we would rather steered by agentic art educators than ascribed by policymaker. As student teacher and teacher educator, we reflect specifically on the role pre-service teacher education - known as initial teacher education (ITE) in England - plays in this space.

To theoretically frame these reflections we drew on the methodological tradition in teacher education of self-study research (Garbett and Ovens 2016; Hamilton and Pinnegar 2009), exercised in concert with a Freirean lens. Freire’s (2013) critical pedagogy highlights horizontal dialogue between teacher and learner as fertile ground for knowledge creation and recognises subjectivity as inevitable in academic inquiry concerned with the value-laden practices of education. Subsequently, we consider our interactivity as co-inquirers (with complementary perspectives) important to the authenticity of our claims (Loughran 2007), and view talk as a valid engine of insight.

We discussed and analysed each other’s professional perspective and compared experiences of designing and teaching art curriculum in English secondary schools. This was an informal, heuristic exercise and we do not present empirical findings. Instead, following Dewey’s (1910: 6) definition of reflective practice as ‘active, persistent, and careful consideration’, we dialogically constructed understanding that shaped our own attitudes, and that we felt compelled to share. We are hopeful that our personal insights might contribute to wider discourse on disciplinary curriculum design both in England, the context where our concern is focused, and perhaps elsewhere.

Further, we hope our joint authorship exemplifies the productive work on curriculum that can be achieved between diverse stakeholders in art education; not to provide a new model curriculum for others, nor claim a comprehensive working process, but to demonstrate that ITE is a serious space for actionable, democratic dialogue on the future of our discipline’s content.

The only portion of this article in one voice is the section focused on Amelia’s personal curriculum priorities. This section is included as extended illustration of the potential depth of student teachers’ curriculum fluency, but also as discrete argument for the primacy of visual literacy in the secondary school from a student teacher’s standpoint.

**Context**

Curriculum design is currently king in England’s school inspection agenda (Ofsted 2019a), and as such many art departments are being asked, by senior leaders, to reconstruct their courses. The expectation: evidence of a ‘knowledge-rich’ (Gibb 2021) curriculum – to ensure schools meet the objectives of ‘broadening minds, enriching communities and advancing civilisation’ (Spielman 2017) via a logically sequenced, ‘cumulatively sufficient’ model of rationalised content (Ofsted 2019a).

Our national auditor’s reorientation from assessment of educational outcomes might be welcomed among art educators who recognise the challenges of validating the efficacy of creative practice with reference to standardised criterion (Hickman 2007; Rayment 2007). However, we remain similarly circumspect about the imposition of a new expectation arguably in tension with the immanent (Atkinson 2011) nature of many artistic practices. While a knowledge-rich curriculum is difficult to dispute, the epistemological description of richness is, we believe, contentious. A seemingly institutional bias (Hordern and Brooks 2023) towards qualifying riches in quantitative terms, specifically the long-term memorisation of maximum substantive fact, could, without shrewd interpretation among art educators, represent a troubling new challenge to the place and nature of art in England’s secondary schools.

Significant manipulation of art’s disciplinary character has traditionally been required such that learning in art remain customary, if uncomfortable bedfellow to the prescriptive, measurable, and increasingly homogenised pedagogical requirements of institutional schooling (Eisner 2002a). Such dilution of arguably authentic artistic *processes* through mimetic activity and standardising objectives, for example, are perhaps unavoidable if one recognises the value of a seat at the scholastic table over demotion to extra-curricular entertainment (Harland et al. 2000). However, if similarly procrustean damage is done to artistic *content*, it might well exacerbate the schism of school art orthodoxies from both contemporary artistic practices, and pupils’ cultural context (Atkinson 2006; Gude 2013).

Problematically, time for comprehensive curriculum review is rarely available to the art teacher – and data would suggest such provision shrinking (APPG for Art, Craft and Design in Education 2022). We would argue that the lack of opportunity habitually afforded classroom teachers to focus on substantive curriculum planning, when the prosaic takes priority, as contributory to a paradigm of reproductive practice.

Reproduction is perhaps inevitable given the English National Curriculum (NC) (DfE 2013) entry for art is just two pages in length, leaving school-based curriculum designers confronted by a lacuna of specific centralised guidance. While for some this professional autonomy is celebrated as welcome creative opportunity, it has arguably provided occasion for others to deprioritise curriculum planning. For departments where curriculum appraisal has been neglected, we might imagine instead reliance on generationally reproduced content, obfuscated behind the mystic curtain of artistic subjectivity that encourages non-specialist senior school leaders to defer from assessing quality or sequencing. While we would not advocate for a detailed mandatory curriculum in art, there is clearly a systematic failing where teachers are not being afforded the space to build rich, relevant programmes of authentic artistic study from the foundations of succinct central expectations.

Given the lack of resource and guidance outlined above, changing accountability criteria concerns us not only because of the destabilising impact this may have for those delivering their current curricular offer, but perhaps more so the potential for existing curricula to be found legitimately deficient. Were this to occur, particularly at scale, it may have lasting implications for the wider esteem of our subject discipline in the secondary school, or equally invite unwelcome managerial or centralised intervention.

**The Student Teacher as Curriculum Designer**

Addison and Burgess (2005) suggested nearly twenty years ago that, given teacher workload, ITE may be an effective alternative space for discourse on curriculum design, a proposition increasingly pertinent as teachers’ professional commitments grow. The argument that we put forward extends this proposition; that this arrangement is not only solution to a pragmatic contextual problem, but conceptually and structurally preferable to static curricular customs.

Indeed, we believe the student art teacher potentially the *most* qualified stakeholder to design curricula for the following reasons:

(i) **Relevance**. In England, student art teachers are typically recently removed from personal artistic practice or creative industry and therefore can sustain contemporaneity. While we know of no empirical report on the artistic capacity of applicants to secondary art ITE, all have studied and achieved a minimum grade in a relevant creative discipline (DfE 2023) and will have submitted and discussed a portfolio of their own artwork at competitive interview. Unfortunately, as Downing and Watson (2004) and latterly Ofsted (2012) found, despite the continued efforts of organisations such as the National Society for Education in Art and Design (Galloway et al. 2006), and the Freelands Foundation, art teachers in England can latterly become worryingly disconnected from contemporary artistic practices. While not all new entrants to the profession have an established practice or demonstrate diverse cultural engagement, they are arguably more likely to sit within an expansive disciplinary network. This capital can be conceptualised as an invaluable asset in the ongoing revitalisation of an otherwise detached school curriculum.

(ii) **Criticality**. They have the scholastic resource and academic duty as graduate students to question standardised practices, focusing a critical etic perspective on orthodoxies. For teachers, avoiding damaging assumptions in practice should be a professional responsibility (Brookfield 2017), but in solipsistic art departments identifying redundant or ineffective curriculum content can be challenging. Similarly, the employment status of many classroom teachers requires that they abide by institutional policy directive without critical recourse. The student teacher holds converse duty, expected as they are to be academically inquisitive and critically reflective. These divergent priorities promise informal opportunity for novel dialogue on curricular customs. Furthermore, through leverage of their academic capital, student teachers can connect the classroom context to research and resource from across a wide community of disciplinary practice often hidden from the school practitioner. Through exercise of these additional lenses - a student teacher’s ‘new eyes’ (Dowler 2021) and access to research literature - a departmental curriculum might be shaped and sharpened beyond the expertise of native practitioners.

(iii) **Right**. They are the generation of teacher who will deliver new models, and therefore have both a moral entitlement, and a vested interest, in future curriculum construction. Student teachers might be imagined inheritors of their predecessors’ practices, priorities and habits, but acceptance of such a paradigm encourages reproductive routine. In these instances, teachers experience diminished agency and associated demotivation (Priestley et al. 2015), pupils encounter content of decreasing relevance to their lived experience, and society receives an educational system inclined to preservation of a status quo, including its inadequacies (Adams and Owen 2017). Instead, positioning student teachers at the heart of curriculum design decisions enacts a systematically progressive process, negotiated through productive dialogue between experienced practitioner and idealistic agent of change. In this model, student teachers are not asked to adapt their own hopes and priorities to that of current curriculum content but might creatively integrate with contemporary practice (Freire 2013).

Advocacy for the novice practitioner’s centrality in the fundamental task of selecting and organising materials of study disrupts conventional power dynamics, as it might be fair to imagine that curriculum architects in most English school contexts are the experienced middle leaders; heads of department or subject leads. We would not want to undervalue the contribution classroom experience makes to judicious curriculum design, but seek instead augmentation; where a ‘new eyes’ approach (Dowler 2021) might be borrowed from the design industry to ensure a curriculum rich in relevance, risk, and creative possibility.

**An Agile Curriculum Design Model**

In England, many school art departments have adopted the practice of illustrating a three or even five-year curriculum along a linear route map, presumably such that pupils and auditors can track cumulative sufficiency. We argue that a static conceptualisation of curriculum, while evidence of sequential coherence, not only ignores the unique interests of individual learners, but arrests content immediately half a decade outdated. In a discipline such as the visual arts such conscientious preparation could work against the spirit of the field. Instead, and to make best use of the advantageous involvement of student teachers, we propose an ‘agile’ curriculum design process.

In this model, intentional, incremental changes are made to a product (the art curriculum) reflexively, as context and users change. As Brown (2012) writes, such a process design offers opportunity for more diverse and ongoing dialogue than traditionalist, linear models. For example, if learners unexpectedly express interest in Frida Kahlo’s playful treatment of gender over intended focus on the artist’s employment of postcolonial Mexican symbolism, a student teacher might be employed to iteratively plan a subsequent project featuring the surreal photography of Claude Cahun or Sarah Lucas. If a local exhibition prioritises printmakers, or a student teacher with a celebrated ceramic practice enters a department, an agile curriculum co-constructed among stakeholders can profit from this augmented expertise.

 Integrating the student teacher into such live design processes allows meaningful contribution even if attached to an individual school for a short tenure. Here, no practitioner, or learner, becomes trapped in curricular decisions made months or years prior, and instead is liberated through a ‘concomitant’ relationship between dialogue and action (Freire 1970: 139). The democratic character of an agile process invites all stakeholders to exercise agency and involvement, where ‘decisions are made based on knowledge, not on hierarchical position’ (Pavlichenko and Ramos 2022: np); a means to share both the workload and reward of delivering the result to pupils.

To support our proposed amendments to curriculum design processes, we below include an excerpt from Amelia’s analysis of a potential curricula approach – one built on the premise of visual literacy. The hope in doing so, is to evidence the capacity of student teachers to read, think, and communicate about curriculum with a depth, rigour, and theoretical clarity for which school art departments may not have the time, perspective, or inclination. We ask you to imagine an agile curriculum wherein a student teacher’s own ideals – modelled by Amelia’s – might be embraced by a dialogic department, informing and reforming their teaching practice.

**Amelia’s Visual Culture Curriculum**

At first, I felt that a knowledge-rich curriculum rooted in powerful knowledge (Young and Muller 2016) might well be what is needed to reinvigorate art education. However, as I looked at models made available by advocates of curriculum reform (Ashbee 2019; Myatt and Tomsett 2021) I became cynical, partly due to the lack of disciplinary expertise within the wider discourse. Grant et al. (2022: 14) point out that ‘deep, specialised knowledge seems sorely lacking’ when it comes to Ashbee’s conceptualisation of ‘ambitious’ content for art, and I might suggest that described as: ‘it means students study the formal elements of art from day 1 in year 7’ (Ashbee 2019: n.pag.) does not encourage revolutionary relevance.

As an idealistic student art teacher, I felt obligated to offer a fresh perspective to an urgent conversation about what a ‘knowledge-rich’ curriculum rooted in powerful knowledge might look like for our subject and what art pupils should be entitled to gain *now*. I contend that curricula concentration on artmaking (at the expense of theoretical knowledge acquisition) may contribute to art education’s declining status in secondary schools (Parr 2020). The equivocality of the art NC in England should leave advantageous room for interpretation; freedom to reflect the complex, capricious nature of art learning. However, my observations suggest perfunctory pedagogic practices and canonised, repetitive content prevail in the classroom.

In an agile curriculum system I would be afforded the agency to advocate for and enact an alternative approach. Not new, but still unusual in England, I would argue a Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE) increasingly appropriate for our times; a means to reclaim or refresh the argument for art in English schools through a lens of social justice – something I and my peers find attractive. VCAE would expand the field of artistic study to include visual culture; or ‘mass-arts’ (Chapman 2003), and would recognise all images as ‘sites of ideological struggle’ (Duncum 2010: 7). The NC in England states that pupils should ‘know how art and design both reflect and shape our history, and contribute to the culture, creativity and wealth of our nation’ (DfE 2013). I would argue that it is not possible to meet this requirement if our visual culture is not critically appraised in the context of art theory - that VCAE might therefore be essential in a truly knowledge-rich, inclusive and culturally relevant art curriculum for today’s youth.

Entering the art classroom for the first time this year, I often heard pupils claim they were rubbish at art - by which I suspected they meant drawing - and had no desire to engage because they would not choose taking it in their national examinations. It is clear from the work of others (Burkitt et al. 2010; Burkitt and Lowry 2015; Cohn 2014) that such a phenomenon is commonplace. I became increasingly concerned that a narrow conception of art and a feeling of irrelevancy might be disengaging pupils while concurrently, I would contend, in Western cultures (for want of a better term) our increasingly visual world is dominated by mass-arts created in the service of profit. Studying the mass-arts might develop pupils’ understanding of artistic skills and techniques, while recognising their use and significance in a broader context (Chapman 2003). Not only could encouraging young people to perceive popular cultural forms as art engender a more positive attitude to the arts (Harland, Kinder, and Hartley 1995) it could also advance their understanding of how these forms might influence their worldview and shape societal attitudes.

I would argue that for pupils to be informed participants in democracy, they need the skills, understanding and confidence to inspect the visual world they inhabit. An art education which questions all imagery, delving beneath the picture plane to explore the context of construction and consumption, might help pupils better understand the personal, social and civic impact of imagery (Chapman 2003) they see, that they like, and ‘by means of which they are working out how to live’ (Duncum 2003: 46). VCAE might enable pupils to interrogate preconceptions, identify and confront social inequities and be empowered by ‘the tools for transformational thinking and action’ (Duncum 2005: 154).

For Eisner, VCAE ‘transforms the productive young artist into an analytical spectator’ (Eisner 2001: 8). As someone who has always been particularly motivated by the sociopolitical, critical and theoretical facets of creative practice, I must disagree. Yes, VCAE values understanding and empowerment above expression (Duncum 2002) but in my view, this prioritisation is educationally appropriate. Making remains central to VCAE as means to develop critical skills and give pupils ‘freedom to explore meaning for themselves’ (Duncum 2002: 6), but recognises that placing too much value on individual expression might underplay other artistic rationales and discourage pupils who lack technical confidence from engaging with art altogether. That is not to say learners should not be taught drawing and painting, rather a shift in attitude, from adulation of the image to an engaging and progressive contextualised scepticism, might be my priority when co-constructing an agile curriculum.

Eisner expressed discomfort with the ‘tacit and not so tacit political thread’ (2001: 8) running through VCAE because he felt that art education might become primarily a field of social and political analysis, diluting the joy and appeal. I find this incongruous next to his writings about the power of representation (Eisner 2002: 239). To me, it is short-sighted not to consider the implications of ‘aesthetic potency’ (Chapman 2003: 231) when instrumentalised ubiquitously and consumed uncritically. As Counsell (2018: n.pag.) writes: ‘curriculum is all about power ... what we choose to teach confers or denies power’.

 Today’s pupils are growing up in a post-truth political landscape, where they get more of their news from TikTok than traditional media organisations (Ofcom, 2022). Surreptitious use of advertising on social media results in a lack of transparency about corporate involvement in producing content (McRae 2021) and exploitation of youth and pop culture by extremist ideologues has left bored and lonely children vulnerable to radicalisation (Adams and Weale 2022).

If we understand the arts as forms of cultural production... then we cannot escape the ways that artistic practice is implicated in larger social, economic, and political systems. (Kuttner 2015: 86)

Tomorrow’s citizens should be equipped with a theoretical understanding of how images are constructed, designed to service an agenda, and how to appraise them. For Wheelahan (2010), entitlement to theoretical knowledge is a matter of distributional justice since it is the language used to shape society and imagine change. Leaving this aspect of our culture unexamined might compromise pupils’ art education (Chapman 2003) and have broad consequences for freedom, power and democracy in society (Adams 2013; Counsell 2018). As Chapman puts it, ‘who benefits most when artistic skills are widely deployed by a few, in ways not critically fathomed by the many?’ (2003: 243).

An art curriculum that gives credence to and ‘capitalis[es] on students’ early immersion in visual culture’ (Tornero and Kan 2017: 50) might be affirming and inspiring for pupils already expert in this area. I am not suggesting that there is a homogeneous ‘youth visual culture’ for teachers to tap into. This would be counter-productive, difficult for teachers to define and risks patronising pupils. Nor am I suggesting curricula should focus entirely on learners’ own experience at the expense of introducing new content, this would be a disservice given ‘much knowledge that it is important for pupils to acquire will be non-local and counter to their experience’ (Young and Muller 2016: 113). What I mean is that including critical interrogation of familiar imagery within a knowledge-rich art curriculum might afford pupils the opportunity to consume it in a different way; giving them access to powerful knowledge about their visual culture that they might not get elsewhere. Using familiar imagery and popular art forms as a ‘way in’ to exploring art might increase engagement and motivation by broadening conceptions of art, demystifying it and making the pertinence of artistic concepts tangible to pupils. Furthermore, making links between art and ‘their’ imagery might enhance pupils’ understanding of the ‘cyclical relationship between art and visual culture, and the society that creates it’ (Mernick 2021: 19). I would hope that through contributing to cultural conversations, young people might feel empowered as conscious participants and change-makers in society (Kuttner 2015).

I choose to interpret VCAE, where ‘a major goal is empowerment ... and ... the basic orientation is to understand, not celebrate’ (Duncum 2002: 8) as an approach in concord with the requirements of the English NC. In an image-dominated world, designing curriculum that equips all pupils to question images, subvert them and imagine alternatives must, to my mind, be a core objective of compulsory art education.

**The Space for Curriculum Innovation in English ITE**

Whether one accepts Amelia’s tenets of inclusion, accessibility and cultural relevance as central aims for art education, what might be agreed is the value of intellectual space for student teachers to critically inspect curricula conventions, and the capacity for their insight to interleave with existing provision in school art departments. We believe that within an agile curriculum design process, Amelia’s articulate priorities could move beyond hypothesis, be exploratorily operationalised, and in turn provide both timely plurality to developing school curricula and an enhanced sense of professional relevance for Amelia and student teachers like her.

We have seen that space for critical curriculum review is not readily available within a context where even seasoned teachers habitually recycle curricula content (Atkinson 2006), or increasingly, are mandated to deliver centralised schema designed by one senior colleague or manager from elsewhere in the national network of their multi-academy trust. Biesta writes convincingly of a recent reoccurrence of centralised ‘policing’ in educative practice – where an ‘authoritarian professionalism’, first fought in the 1960s, erodes individual practitioners’ capacity to exercise independent ‘judgement’ (Biesta 2015: 81). We now worry that even art curricula (previously policed, if at all, through a lassez faire lens by disinterested non-specialists) is, without action among advocates for plural, mutable, and local content, at risk of a centralised homogenisation in paradoxical response to expectations of improved disciplinary depth.

Where centralised or detached curriculum design models are seen, new teachers experience nothing of curriculum initiation, design and construction. In contrast, providing ITE students time and resource to consider curricula (as illustrated in Amelia’s critical and imaginative advocacy for visual literacy) represents an alternative. Their agentic tendencies, if embraced by the gatekeepers of curriculum design – senior practitioners and teacher educators – could encourage a renaissance of artistic practice in English secondary schools, and challenge models of curriculum design that relegate classroom teacher to technician, at the fringe of opaque and centralised schema. The Department for Education’s Core Content Framework (2019) for teacher education expects new teachers to engage with curriculum thinking; for example, how curriculum embodies institutional values, and prioritises disciplinary knowledge (2019: 14). This is promising, but in a context of authoritarian professionalism also problematic – when the novice is expected to understand these concepts but is disallowed active involvement in curriculum design – dissonance between statutory requirement and practical opportunity risks disillusionment or cynicism.

Critics may argue that the student teachers’ typical experience is challenging enough, a time of flux and self-doubt (Hetrick and Sutters 2014). To add the additional responsibility of live curriculum content contribution could be framed as unfair burden to place on the least experienced. However, to conceptualise improved student agency and professional participation as an inconvenience rather than educative opportunity arguably presents as an oppressive stance. We contend that many student art teachers enter ITE with enthusiasm and clear rationale for the disciplinary knowledge they feel important to share with pupils – ideals frequently shunned, as developmental and departmental expectations trend instead towards measures of conformity.

Some may also worry for the classroom teacher, tasked in a democratic, agile curriculum design process with tempering the over-ambitious, negotiating with the naïve, and weathering the critique of officious amateurs. Undoubtably, there will be singular student teachers who enjoy confrontational critique or lack the emotional intelligence for cohesive work. However, for the open-minded and collaborative classroom teacher, the potential to harness not just the new eyes of one passionate practitioner, but to plug a previously localised curriculum design into a wider rhizomatic network of student teachers should offer handsome compensation.

**Concluding remarks**

In this article we have presented our shared belief that student art teachers in England - recognised disciplinary specialists and the natural inheritors of our field and its contents - deserve active involvement in secondary school curriculum design.

Concurrently, given a contemporary context of increased curriculum scrutiny (Ofsted 2019a), within a wider narrative of underdevelopment in art education (Atkinson 2006; Gude 2007), the substance of art education is potentially vulnerable to (a not wholly unwelcome) systematic intervention. Taking ownership of change is important for those committed to authentic artistic activity in schools, to avoid managerial attempts to reform subject curricula through strategies of superficial sequentialisation and pedagogies of obedience (Adams and Owen 2016).

We propose that these concerns – democratising stakeholder involvement in curriculum design and improving the quality of content and rationale in school art education – can be symbiotically achieved through disruption of traditional curriculum design processes, and the adoption of an agile approach. Here, a curricular discourse within a collegiate profession provides agentic space to realise Gude’s claim that art education has ‘the potential to change the world’ (2007: 15), rather than just reproduce it. Atkinson’s ‘dubiously out of date curriculum models… held in place to some extent by the power of caricatures of past practices’ (2006: 21) might be replaced iteratively, progressively, through live dialogue cognisant of the disruptive, critical ‘common ground’ of art and democracy (Adams and Owen 2016: 12).

While we have directed our critique at English curricula conventions, we believe the principle of empowering student teachers to question educational orthodoxies holds universal value. There will be regions where progressive practices of agile curriculum design exists, and others with equally static, top-down convention. If we worked within a model of ITE which welcomed non-specialists to apply for the profession, we would perhaps be less inclined to advocate for their primacy in system decision-making (likely arguing for a new model of teacher education instead). Good comparisons to the English context can be seen, for example in Korea, where Paek (2006: 27) recognised too the need for student teachers with contemporary knowledge of practice to break the ‘pervasive curriculum patterns’ that constrain both their agency and the breadth of learners’ art experiences.

The depth of reason evidenced here by Amelia demonstrates, we hope, that student art teachers have the capacity to convincingly communicate an auditor-pleasing ratiocination, without abandoning a deeply valued disciplinary positionality. This under-recognised resource remains largely untapped in England, where traditional hierarchies and habits inculcate instead a pragmatic curricular stasis. Without a radical upending of design orthodoxies there remains a danger that art education will continue, and potentially consolidate, as Duncum wrote, a closer connection to the pervasive rationality of school that ‘the unpredictable and irrational elements of either art or children’s culture’ (2009: 235).

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