

# The Australian curriculum: Continuing the national conversation

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The purpose of this article is to identify some key areas of the Australian curriculum that remain sites of struggle and contestation. We propose that there remain a number of contentious points in relation to the national curriculum. These points relate variously to the content and form of the curricular documents; assumptions about knowledge, learning, teaching and assessment; questions about the aims and rationale of these documents; and whether the documents deal with wider economic, cultural and technological changes. These points set the scene for a continuation of the conversation about the national curriculum and provide a framework for considering the issues raised in the remaining five articles in this Special Issue on the Australian curriculum.

Bernstein (1975, p. 85) argued that the stakes are high in the struggle over the selection, organisation and assessment of what a society counts as valid knowledge. This is because what knowledge is selected, how it is taught and how it is evaluated in schools go to the very heart of issues of individual and social identity. As Moore (2007, p. 3) argued, 'what we know affects who we are (or are perceived to be). Issues of knowledge entail issues of identity'. Questions around the Australian curriculum have focused on issues of content (the question of what is selected as valuable knowledge) and form (the question of how the selected knowledge is organised within and across stages of schooling). This type of questioning inevitably leads to particular types of discussions around knowledge, teaching, learning and assessment.

The release of the Australian curriculum in March 2011 was the culmination of a period of wide consultation. Public and professional debate around the latest endeavour to develop a national curriculum has tended to focus on issues of form and content rather than on the need for a national curriculum. The official political rationale given for a national standardisation of the curriculum has remained largely uncontested in the media, and in several consultation responses. There appeared to be a sense of inevitability in the consultation phase and the parameters for debate and discussion seemed to be clearly demarcated or confined. The consultation opportunities that were generated included public website surveys, forums at state and territory level with key stakeholders, national panel meetings with a range of

'experts', meetings with professional associations and state and territory authorities, participation in trial schools and teachers, and critical readers and reviewers across the country (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011). But some commentators (for example, Allum, 2009) suggested that the time frame for consultation was restrictive and prohibited the generation of meaningful and substantive conversations. In addition, concerns were raised about equitable state and regional access and participation in the national curriculum conversation (Atweh & Clarkson, 2010).

Our task in writing this article is to identify some areas of the national curriculum that remain sites of struggle and should be the subject of further debate and discussion, as identified by the contributions to this Special Issue. We identify the following aspects of the Australian curriculum that are still contested.

### **Why an Australian curriculum?**

At least four contributors in this Special Issue (Aubusson; Atweh & Goos; Gilbert; Brennan) question whether the rationale(s) given for an Australian curriculum (for example, the efficient use of resources, achieving world standard curriculum, ensuring curriculum consistency) were based on political rather than an educational agendas. Moreover, Brennan questions whether these goals are actually achievable through a national curriculum initiative. Some contributors suggest that there already is considerable curricular consistency or standardisation, particularly in the disciplinary fields of science and mathematics (Aubusson; Atweh & Goos). In addition, Aubusson and Brennan argue that current curriculum models in Australia have served the nation well in terms of international benchmarking data. These data indicate that Australia has a high-quality education system, although it performs less well in terms of dealing with issues of educational inequality (McGaw, 2007). Research has clearly shown that issues of educational inequality are best tackled at the local level of the school and classroom by teachers actively engaged in diagnosing learning difficulties and adapting curriculum to suit the needs of specific cohorts of students (see, for example, Glasswell, Singh, McNaughton & Davis, 2008). The question of how a national curriculum might add value in dealing with issues of educational inequality and student engagement remains unresolved. Indeed, Brennan proposes that a federated system of education may have benefits over a unitary model, and points to countries such as the USA, Canada and Germany that have chosen not to go down the national curriculum path.

### **What role(s) should the curriculum play?**

All five contributions to this collection question the framing of the disciplinary curriculum documents. On the one hand, Aubusson reports on interviews with leading science educators who suggest that the science curriculum does not constitute a syllabus because it does not contain a lot of detail. Rather, the document provides broad guidelines and directions. From this perspective it is a 'bold' document that is focused on trying to engage learners in scientific knowledge and enquiry. But Aubusson questions whether a national science curriculum is the best

strategy for achieving the goal of learner engagement in science. Rather, research shows that learner engagement is best achieved through ‘pedagogy, school science environments, teacher preparation and professional learning’. On the other hand, Brennan suggests that the national curriculum with its emphasis on ‘specifying content and sequence of content by year level of schooling’ is a syllabus rather than a curriculum document. Gilbert also picks up on this theme, arguing that the essential requirements of successful curriculum include, firstly, clarity of purpose and intended outcomes; secondly, an effective rationale and framework for selecting knowledge content; and, finally, a central explanatory framework that gives the curriculum its intellectual power. His article questions the adequacy of the Australian history curriculum against these criteria.

So, within the set of articles, there is contestation around the terms syllabus and curriculum and around the criteria by which to judge the adequacy of specific curriculum documents.

### **What is the rationale guiding the different subject areas?**

The debate on the curriculum is as strong within each discipline area as it is among subject areas. Debates within each disciplinary area include views on the nature of the discipline and on its role in the overall aims of student learning. Several authors in this collection have expressed concerns about the conceptualisations of their respective disciplinary areas.

In discussing the science curriculum, Aubusson indicates that the focus placed on ‘Science as a Human Endeavour’ is considered to be a huge improvement to previous science curriculum initiatives. But many of the respondents interviewed by Aubusson lamented the absence of the term ‘scientific literacy’ (see Christensen, 2007), an international trend in the field of science education, which seems at odds with the stated purposes of the curriculum. In the mathematics curriculum, Atweh and Goos argue that the development of an appreciation of mathematics for its beauty and elegance, and developing mathematics that is useful for careers and jobs and further study (goals identified in the mathematics curriculum) need to be seen as secondary to the development of mathematics that has the capacity to understand and transform aspects of the lives of students, both as current and future citizens.

In discussing the history curriculum, Gilbert argues that it fails to present a justification for its role as a compulsory school subject. The current justification appears to have emerged from political and popular media pressures, rather than on the basis of sound educational rationales. Moreover, Gilbert argues that the debate about the history curriculum has focused on ‘which history to teach’ rather than on ‘why teach history’. Consequently, the conversations about history curriculum have been narrowly delineated. This means that there has been a deafening silence around some crucial issues. One such crucial issue is which approach to the history curriculum, out of all possible approaches, is best suited for Australia right now. In addition, Gilbert suggests that the final history curriculum document generates an illusion of consensus and smooths over the controversies within the history education community. This, he argues, sheds some doubt on its ability to provide quality learning-outcomes for students.

The relationship between disciplinary and school knowledge is also considered by Macken-Horarik who argues that the principles underpinning the national English curriculum—coherency, cumulative knowledge and portability—are flawed, as they fail to acknowledge that subject English has ‘very different orientations to disciplinarity’, is ‘an unstable epistemological mix’ and is ‘a heterogeneous subject’. She proposes an alternative way of conceptualising subject English that takes into account the different curriculum modes that have informed the discipline over time: namely, growth models, skills models, cultural heritage models and cultural analysis models.

## What constitutes valid knowledge?

Knowledge is socially constructed, and therefore all knowledge ‘bears traces of the social’ (Moore, 2007, p. 18), but the various authors, perhaps as a result of their disciplinary orientation, differ in their relative positioning in terms of weak or strong versions of social constructionism (Schwandt, 2000). Weak versions of social construction or social realist perspectives advise that:

knowledge is socially produced, but at the same time has the capacity to *transcend* the social conditions under which it is produced ... The emergent property of knowledge is itself intrinsically *social*—it is something that *people* do in a particular, socially organized, way. It depends upon a distinctive ‘configuration’ ... of values, principles and social procedures that became institutionalized and achieved sufficient autonomy from traditional sites of power (the state, religion) to constitute itself as a culture and model of social organisation in its own right. (Moore, 2007, p. 18)

Each of the articles in this Special Issue questions the epistemological principles of its respective discipline: not only which version of knowledge is legitimate, but also whose version of knowledge is legitimated in the official state discourse of the Australian curriculum. This raises further questions about which groups are granted access to privileged and privileging forms of knowledge, and thereby reap the benefits of schooling in terms of life choices and trajectories.

In addition, many of the contributors point to the heavy emphasis on content knowledge as opposed to process knowledge in the national curriculum documents (see, for example, Macken-Horarik and Gilbert). Theorists such as Bernstein (2000) have argued that a process curricular orientation prioritises the inherent competencies of the learner, constructs the teacher as facilitator, and tends to be used in early years schooling or with students at risk of educational failure. In this model of curriculum, teachers and students have greater autonomy and control over what is taught and learnt, when, where and how.

Moreover, effective implementation of this type of curricular model requires significant initial and ongoing professional development of teachers. Aubusson, along with Atweh and Goos, argues that a content-based curriculum based on disciplinary divisions within mathematics and science could fail to provide students with the opportunity to participate in real-world authentic situations that require interdisciplinary approaches. Gilbert argues that a content-based curriculum may

lead to overcrowding and a focus on learning historical facts rather than historical modes of enquiry. Macken-Horarik suggests that the focus on content in the English curriculum is the main source of mounting concern by professional organisations representing the concerns of many English teachers.

The crucial question remains unanswered: what is signalled by this shift in curriculum orientation? Bernstein (2000, p. 66) argued 'Curricula reform today arises out of the requirements to engage with ... contemporary cultural, economic and technological change'. Does the current form of the national curriculum effectively engage with these contemporary social changes?

### **What are the implicit models of pedagogy?**

Aubusson proposes two scenarios for how the national science curriculum might be implemented by teachers. The first scenario is built on trust in teacher professionalism and knowledge exchange and the second scenario is built on standardisation, compliance and control. The first scenario is likely to treat teachers as professionals capable of interpreting curriculum documents in relation to the learning needs of cohorts of students, and planning learning and teaching resources to ensure effective learning outcomes. The second scenario potentially leads to increasing regulation of the work of teachers and increasing disengagement of the profession. Aligning the national curriculum to national testing regimes is likely to take the Australian schooling sector down the path of high-stakes testing as in the USA, which, many have argued, 'regulates pedagogy in poor schools, and stops teachers from generative transformative pedagogies that could make a difference' (Au, 2008, p. vii). From this perspective, it is important to question the implicit models of pedagogy (teaching, learning and the knowledge generated in this encounter) in the Australian national curriculum (see Lusted, 1986).

Of crucial concern to Macken-Horarik is the knowledge base that teachers need to implement this type of national curriculum. She argues that teachers need to develop a common meta-language for talking about the subject English, but this requires significant investment in pre-service and ongoing teacher professional development. Similarly, Gilbert identifies the need for a common language to talk about the history curriculum, one founded on 'meta-historical concepts'.

### **What does a 'future orientation' mean?**

A major principle behind the development of the Australian curriculum, highlighted in much of the political and media rhetoric, is its future orientation. Two contributions in this collection have raised questions as to whether this version of the curriculum is indeed future oriented. Brennan argues that a Tylerian construction of the curriculum based on separate disciplinary subjects might be contrary to the needs of a future-oriented curriculum. Atweh and Goos reflect on the mathematics curriculum using the lens of future orientation. They argue that future orientation is best achieved by concentrating on new basics and generic capabilities, rather than on disciplinary content knowledge, and by a deeper conceptualisation of the role of technologies that may change the nature of knowledge (Australian Council of

Deans of Education, 2001). In addition, Gilbert suggests that the focus on facts of the history curriculum harks back to a bygone era. And Macken-Horarik points to the potential 'present tense' of learning given that the principles underpinning the literacy tasks and processes included in the English curriculum are invisible ~~to~~, or not explicit to learners. 

A number of the contributors thus point to past and present temporal orientations in the current form of the Australian curriculum. The debate about the role of disciplinary, process and generic knowledge remains open, in particular in the light of the work of sociologists such as Bernstein, who wrote about the national curriculum reforms in the UK. Bernstein (2000) suggested that the disciplinary (singular) mode of the curriculum code, although 'based on a past narrative of the dominance and significance of the disciplines' (p. 61), is more likely to exhibit a future orientation for the learner than curriculum codes that prioritise process learning. By contrast, process-oriented modes of curriculum (for example, liberal progressive, popular and radical) emphasise where the learner is at, and the inherent competencies of learners, rather than performance-oriented learning outcomes. He ~~proposed~~ that primary and secondary schooling ~~should continue~~ to be dominated by singular disciplinary knowledge, while universities were ~~to be~~ increasingly dominated by regional disciplines, and technical and further education institutes by competency-based models of generic knowledge.

Again there is contestation about whether the national curriculum is past, present or future oriented, and the extent to which particular modes of curriculum organisation give students access to valued and valuable knowledge.

## Concluding comments

Curriculum development and implementation is always a contested activity. Unanimous agreement is simply not achievable given the diversity of stakeholder groups vying for input in the formation of 'official knowledge'. Official knowledge 'refers to the educational knowledge which the state constructs and distributes in educational institutions' and

changes in the bias and focus of this official knowledge brought about by contemporary curricula reform emerges out of a struggle between groups to make their bias (and focus) state policy and practice. Thus the bias and focus of this 'official knowledge' are expected to construct in teachers and students a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration embedded in particular performances and practices. (Bernstein, 2000, p. 65)

The articles in this Special Issue raise significant issues about the national curriculum. Given that the Australian curriculum is a project still in the making, it is timely to add to the national conversation. We see this issue as an opportunity to ask confronting questions. What is being imagined for Australia and Australian young people in these curricular documents? The Australian curriculum is an endeavour worthy of much more curricular conversation.

## Keywords

national curriculum          curriculum development    curriculum implementation  
curriculum theories          curriculum policy            politics of education

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