“Conversations About Civics”
Creating Contexts For Teachers To Talk About Their Experiences With And Aspirations For Civic Education

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Introduction

“Conversations about Civics” is the third phase of an Australian Research Council funded project entitled, Discovering Democracy: Searching for Multiple Voices in Civics Education as Neo-Conservative Policy Text. The funding proposal outlined the methods and purpose of this phase of the project:

(it) will involve in depth interviews with teachers in a national sample of schools to elicit their views on the implementation of the new civics education. The purpose of the interviews will be to enable key actors at the school level to explain and demonstrate how they adopted/adapted/transformed Commonwealth and State/Territory policy texts for civics education and turned them into meaningful classroom activities for students.

This phase was informed by the significant range of literature that argued for the centrality of teachers in the policy process:

policymakers ...need to understand that instructional policy will always be mediated through individual teachers’ own conceptions of subject matter. (Grossman and Stodolsky 1995, p.10)

Such a view is supported by the results of major implementation studies conducted in Australia (Kennedy, 1985; Sturman, 1989; Marsh, 1984) and the United States (Berman

1 The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not the Australian Research Council.
Calista (1994, p.132) has indicated that in this particular context, “implementation creates outcomes conforming to the everyday experiences of agencies and agents”. Jimenez (2001) has also shown that teachers of civics develop very distinctive approaches to subject matter knowledge irrespective of the policy contexts in which they implement civics education programmes. Thus teachers are at the heart of Phase 3 of the project and central to its objectives. The purposes of this paper, therefore, are to indicate:

- the relationship of Phase 3 to the earlier phases of the project;
- the progress that has been made on Phase 3

**Discovering Democracy: Searching for Multiple Voices in Civics Education as Neo-Conservative Policy Text: Phases 1 and 2**

**The research issues**

Successive Commonwealth governments in the 1990s committed Australian schools to the reintroduction of civic education after an absence of almost forty years. (Thomas, 1994). The main policy texts to emerge from each government did not reveal any significant differences between the conceptions of civic education being proposed (Office of the Prime Minister, 1995; Kemp, 1997). A recent analysis of both initiatives cast them as neo-conservative policy texts, despite the social reconstructionist influence evident in the Keating government’s effort (Kennedy, 1997).

Yet to cast the new civics as neo-conservative text represents only one level of analysis. Knight, Smith and Sachs have made the point that “a critical and productive educational policy studies has the task of producing new meaning around such policies that expand the multiplicity of voices in it”. They go on:

> Only when the ‘official’ authority of the text as knowledge and its source as guarantor of its truth are transcended, can the construction of really useful knowledge begin (Knight, Smith and Sachs, 1990, p.149).

Official policy texts, therefore, need to be the subject of investigation in order to uncover the “multiplicity of voices” within them. This process seems to be akin to what Foucault had in mind when discussing the relationship between philosophy and power:

> it is these games of power [*jeux de pouvoir*] that one must study in terms of tactics and strategy, in terms of order and of chance, in terms of stakes and objective. (Quoted in Davidson, 1997, p.4)
An uncovering of these “jeux de pouvoir” both within and across successive governments has the potential to reveal the different voices within the policy texts. Given that social policy has been an area where the differences between the two major political parties have been most marked, there is every reason to expect that the voices that created the Keating civics policy text differed considerably from those that created Kemp’s policy. This is despite the similarity between the official texts of the two governments. In the same way, as further texts are created at different levels by different governments, education systems and schools, so the voices in those texts will be multiplied. Thus civics as neo-conservative text is merely the starting point for unmasking the complexity of the policy production process- a complexity that contains the possibility of conflicting and dissentient voices.

An underlying assumption of this project has been that as civic education policy moves from one institutional context to another, it will be influenced by those contexts in multiple and interacting ways. This complexity will be exacerbated by conflicting theoretical perspectives that make civic education a highly contested area (Kennedy, 1995). Much of the contestation resides in conflicting views of the knowledge base that potentially might inform civic education programs. Perspectives from feminists (Foster, 1995), post-structuralists (Singh, 1993, Gilbert, 1993), indigenous peoples (Woods, 1995) and social theorists (Macintyre, 1995; Burchell, 1995) propose quite different approaches to establishing the epistemological foundations of civic education. Such conflicting discourses are significant in light of Hoffmann’s empirical findings that “policy world views... draw on potentially changing stocks of knowledge” (Hoffmann, 1995, p.143). Which discourses, then, most influenced the policy actors who shaped civics education policy texts and how consistent or otherwise were these discourses in different institutional contexts?

The potential rendering of civics education as constructed by competing discourses in multiple contexts is consistent with the results of recent research in policy studies. Blackmore has identified five key findings that have emerged from research in policy studies over the past two decades:

- Policy is a process not just a product;
- Recognition of the action oriented bottom-up perspective which sees those working at the workplace as also informing and making policy;
- Policy changes in the very process of implementation;
- Policy should be seen more as a pattern of actions over a period of time rather than a specific document;
- Policy is as much a study of non-decisions as of decisions.

(Blackmore, 1995, p.294)

What Blackmore has identified is an underlying assumption of post-positivistic approaches to research in policy studies: “meaning is not something that can be taken for granted - that the creation, communication, and understanding of meaning require
attention” (Yanow, 1995, p.111). In terms of policy research, a focus on meaning has important implications:

Policy meanings are important, but understanding those meanings is not simple: it requires deliberate efforts of interpretation. Policy interpretations ask not only what a policy means, but also how a policy means. Interpreters often discover that for both questions, the answer is plural: a policy means more than one thing, and those meanings are conveyed in more than one way. (Yanow, 1995, p.111)

This construction of meaning by policy actors is influenced by discourses that are understood either implicitly or explicitly. Policies will be constructed and interpreted to suit the particular interests and epistemological sets of policy actors at different stages of the policy process.

The key issue for this study, therefore, was to portray the multiple meanings that have been given and will be given to the civic education policy initiative at different stages of the policy process. These meanings will constitute civics as a series of policy texts constructed by different policy actors. The official text may be constructed as neo-conservative but this does not account for voices at all levels that may have sought a different outcome. Identifying “other voices” will provide insights into the policy process for policy makers and practitioners and assist them to understand the role they play as active meaning makers.

The questions addressed in the study were:

How was civics education constructed in Australia in the late 1990s?

What were the competing discourses and which ones became dominant and why?

How are policy texts at different levels of implementation related to one another?

The research plan

Through the use of in-depth qualitative interviews and content analysis, the research plan was designed to enable policy actors at different stages of the policy process and in different institutional contexts to explain the meanings and interpretations they attached to civic education policy. The outcomes of this process were used to make judgments about the discourses that shaped civic education in Australian in the late 1990s.

The first year of the study focused on portraying the views of elite policy actors who contributed to the development of the civic education initiative. The influence of policy elites has been documented in policy areas as diverse as health (Taylor-Goody, 1996),
aged care (Gillin, 1996) and foreign policy (Kalela, 1976) and on policy processes in general (Benveniste, 1987.) Yet relatively little attention has been paid to the role of elites in education policy (Wirt, Mitchell and Marshall, 1985). The reason that such influences are important in this case is that civic education has been, above all, a ‘top-down’ initiative. It has involved two Prime Ministers, a Commonwealth Minister for Schools and Vocational Education and an expert group appointed by one government and expanded by the next. All curriculum materials must be approved by this expert group and by the Minister (Simpson, 1998). Finally, there is a special consultant who appointed Minister Kemp to review the materials development process and to provide advice to the Curriculum Corporation. It has been elites in both governments who exerted considerable influence on the policy development process. It has been necessary “to dig deeply” in order to uncover “les jeux de pouvoir” that shaped the final form of civic education as a public policy text designed for Australian schools.

In the second year of the study State/Territory policy actors responsible for civic education were interviewed and key policy and curriculum documents were content analysed. Of particular interest were the professional development programs in civic education funded by the Commonwealth but designed by State/Territory Committees. The proposed methods enabled an assessment to be made of the inter-governmental influences that shaped civic education at the State/Territory level.

The outcomes of these two phases have provided the backdrop against which Phase 3 will now be conducted. Elite policy actors at the Commonwealth level have revealed either through interviews or secondary sources that for them civic education was part of the ‘big picture’. This is as true for the Keating initiative as it is for Kemp’s version of civic education (Kennedy and Howard, 2000). For Keating the civic education agenda contributed in particular to the republican initiative and the recreation of Australia as a modern nation state in the Asia Pacific region. In one of his first addresses after the 1993 election he wrote in the margins of his speech about his second term agenda: “they must know, they must know, they must know”. He was convinced that if a republic was to be a reality then all Australians, but young people in particular, needed to understand how Australia’s government worked and what it was they were being asked to do in moving from a monarchy to a republic. In retrospect, Keating’s assumption that there was a massive ignorance about these matters proved to be correct.

For Kemp, the impetus for civic education was somewhat different but equally embedded in a broader social and political context. Kemp viewed liberalism as the single most potent force to have shaped Australian institutions both last century and this. It was liberalism that he sought to safeguard with a program of civic and citizenship education. He had articulated these views long before he became the responsible Minister and they were consistent with the Coalition’s approach to government in the post-1996 period. He wanted to protect and safeguard those institutions for the future and he wanted young people to be aware of their importance as they approached a new century.

What Keating and Kemp had in common was a commitment to a somewhat academic rationalist view of the school curriculum to achieve their different objectives. For both of
them it was the subject history that was seen to be the most vital in carrying the nation’s messages about civics and citizenship (Office of the Prime Minister, 1995; Kemp, 1997). If one pushes much further that this commonality, the surface differences soon disappear. Perhaps this can be best understood when the historical dispositions of the two chairs of the respective government’s civics advisory mechanism\(^2\) are considered: Professor Stuart Macintyre under Keating and Associate Professor John Hirst under Kemp. They represented two different views of history and its construction so that for Macintyre history is uncertain, constructed by individuals from their personal experience and lacking any ‘grand narrative’ that can explain events, people and ideas in a single framework. For Hirst, history is just the opposite, deeply embedded in ancient times from which the values of the enlightenment emerged with an explanatory potential that makes sense of Australian social and political institutions and their British heritage. Both Keating and Kemp might have had a commitment to history: but it was not the same history.

Phase 2 of the project examined the views of elites at the State/Territory level. One example will suffice to demonstrate how civic and citizenship operated at this level. In one jurisdiction there was reluctance to recognise any Commonwealth leadership in the area. Already in this particular jurisdiction discussion had started about the role of civics and citizenship in the school curriculum initiated by some questions raised at very high levels in the State government. The Keating initiative simply fuelled this concern and provided Commonwealth funds for it. These local concerns had little to do with the ‘big picture’ of either Keating or Kemp but as the *Discovering Democracy* materials got under way their development started to influence what was happening in this jurisdiction. Thus civics and citizenship was more of a pragmatic political concern at the local level and subsequently was influenced by the Commonwealth initiative.

The third year of the study, which will be outlined in this paper, will build on the first two years by including teachers as policy actors and schools as one further institutional context in which civic education is constructed. It will involve in-depth interviews with selected teachers in a sample of schools to listen to their experiences with and aspirations for the new civic education. The purpose of the interviews will be to provide a context for teachers to share their experiences with a colleague-researcher and to participate in the research process that seeks to understand the school level realities of civic education.

**Conducting and Constructing “Conversations about Civics”**: Redeveloping and Rethinking Phase 3 of the Study

The original research proposal outlined a traditional sample selection process for including teachers in the study:

\(^2\) Civics Expert Group under Keating and Civics Education Group under Kemp)
In the third year of the study a national sample of teachers will be selected from schools in each State/Territory. It is expected that at least six teachers will be selected from each State/Territory giving a sample of at least forty eight. Given the qualitative nature of the research, this should be considered a relatively large teacher sample. It is not possible to specify in advance any characteristics of the sample since experience has shown that State/Territory policies related to the involvement of schools in research often determines the availability of teachers.

Each of these teachers was to be interviewed following the advice of researchers who argued that such a methodology was the most appropriate way to understand what was happening at the school level:

Questionnaires and structured interviews that have traditionally been central to social science research are frequently not useful in the exploration of the kind of practical knowledge that shapes what teachers know about teaching and what they do in classrooms. Researchers find themselves conducting semi structured and open interviews where they, together with their informants, explore the meaning of concepts, categories, and events. (Gudmundsdottir, 1996, p.293).

Hoffman (1995, p.143) also identified in-depth interviewing as being particularly appropriate for policy research. She commented that "qualitative interviews served to uncover and understand as far as possible the specific rationality and the self view of the actors involved".

Despite this commitment to in-depth interviews the study’s resources did not allow for the size or characteristics of the sample that had been proposed. Perhaps more importantly, once the research team met, it was not convinced that such a sample would necessarily yield better data than a more purposive sample from a limited range of jurisdictions. What is more, it felt there were other priorities to be considered when involving teachers in research of this kind:

• the team wanted to recognise the equality of researchers and teachers as together they went about the process of trying to understand better what we happens in schools; and
• it wanted to use unobtrusive methodologies that would respect the life-world of schools and teachers while yielding ideas and issues that help to better understand them, especially in the area of civic education.

Thus in the initial stages of this phase of the project, the research team adopted a conception of teacher involvement that saw teachers as participants in the project actively
constructing knowledge from their experiences and contributing as co-researchers to the process. This was not inconsistent with the original rationale for conducting in-depth interviews but it did expand and enrich the original idea put forward in the research proposal. There is ample warrant in the literature for adopting such an approach.

**Constructing a new sample**
The composition of the research team dictated the jurisdictions from which schools would be selected: Queensland, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria. Within each of those, researchers approached schools, or are in the process of doing so, to seek participation in the project. A project description has been prepared so that there is a common understanding amongst both researchers and schools about the scope and purpose of the project. That description can be found at [http://www.canberra.edu.au/civics/work/bckgrd_info.html](http://www.canberra.edu.au/civics/work/bckgrd_info.html) and has been included in this paper as Attachment A.

To date, sample selection has yielded the following results:

**New South Wales**
Three high schools – one rural government, one rural Catholic and one metropolitan Catholic;

**Australian Capital Territory**

**K-10 Government School**
- A binational, bi-lingual French-Australian school and was established as a result of an international agreement between the governments of France and Australia. It is accountable to both the French education authorities and ACT Dept Ed & Training;
- Conversations involving primary and secondary sectors;
- Conversations involving French and Australian teachers;
- 6 teachers are involved in the project (primary/secondary and French/Australian); and
- Focus on contrasting notions of citizenship between the French and the Australian cultures.

**K-12 Independent Girls’ School**
- An Anglican independent K-12 girls’ school;
- Conversations involving primary and secondary sectors;
- 6 teachers are involved in the project (primary/secondary);
- School undergoing major restructure of curriculum; and
- School preparing to implement a compulsory civics strand for year 9/10 students in 2002.

**Queensland**
Three schools – a rural secondary government, rural primary government, metropolitan secondary government;
The Methodology of “Conversations”

From the beginning, the project has been committed to the use of in depth interviews as a primary research tool. These proved very useful in the earlier phases of the project (Kennedy and Connor, 1999) when it was found that elite policy makers responded well to unstructured interviews since they allowed them to talk at will about the issues and events in which they had played a central role. It was recognised that if teachers were to be recognised as co-researchers in this project that the methodology would have to reflect that important objective. Interviews would still be important but they would need to be approached differently if they were to be inclusive and teachers were not being seen as mere respondents.

It was in this context that “conversations” was seen to be an appropriate tool to use in teacher research. There were many precedents for its use across a wide range of settings. Feldman (1998) used conversations with preservice teacher education students to build a sense of professional community. Jenlink and Carr (1996) saw conversations as being useful devices to promote school level change and to build community. Aspland, Macpherson, Booker, and Elliott (1998) used conversations with teachers to analyse written narratives and help develop a new model of curriculum leadership. Support for the use of conversations as inclusive devices also comes from communication theory where it has been suggested that when public speakers adopt a conversational rather than an oratorical style, they are more likely to convince their audiences that they are all belong to a single community with reciprocal rights and obligations (Branham and Barnett, 1996).

Qualitative researchers have also been advocates of conversational styles of interviewing (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Their focus has been on the ‘art of hearing’ and on the necessity to listen closely to what interviewees is saying so that the real meaning of comments can be grasped and understood. They advocate the ‘building of conversational partnerships’ with interviewees so that there is reciprocal relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer. The interview itself is characterised as a ‘guided conversation’.

Linked closely to the idea of research conversations is the work of Clandinin and Connelly (1996) and Connelly, Clandinin, and He (1997). Central to this work is the idea that teachers are professionals whose stories about their world are powerful reconstructions of their lived experiences. What is highlighted in these stories is not the researcher, or the research questions or a particular approach to methodology. Rather, what are central are the stories that teachers have to tell and the powerful learning that such stories can generate. Such an approach to research highlights the centrality of teachers’ voices in the research process. Hargreaves (1996) has argued that the portrayal
of teachers’ voices through cases and vignettes represents an important way of understanding the work of teachers and helps to avoid romanticising that work.

**Timeline**
Three schools in New South Wales have already participated in the project and two schools in the ACT are actively involved at the moment. It is expected that all schools will have participated by the end of this year.

**Case studies and comparisons**
The project will produce case studies of individual teachers and schools. This will then allow for some comparative work to see whether there are any common issues across schools. Once this is completed, there will be room for further comparisons with the other policy actors who have been interviewed for the project – elite policy makers at Commonwealth and State/Territory levels.

**Conclusion**
“Conversations about Civics” is at a relatively early stage of development. Yet it is recognition that teachers play a crucial role in the policy production process. Understanding that role and recognising the centrality of teachers to it is important at all levels of education and across institutional contexts. Too often elite policy makers take the high ground when it comes to the production of educational policy as though the creation of a new policy is enough to make it successful. Yet a truly sustainable policy process has to both recognise and celebrate the contributions that teachers make for they are the final arbiters of policy and its true success depends on them.
ATTACHMENT A

“Conversations about Civics”

Background Information for Participating Schools

Civics and citizenship education is a relatively new area of the school curriculum. A good deal of attention has been paid to creating new policies for civics and citizenship education and in the construction of curriculum materials to support teachers. What is not yet known is how teachers themselves have responded to these new initiatives, what they think about them and how they think the school curriculum has changed as a result of these initiatives.

The purpose of this project, therefore, is to work with teachers in different parts of Australia so that we might better understand what teachers believe about civics and citizenship education, what is happening in their schools and future possibilities they see for civics and citizenship education in the classroom.

As such, teachers are a central part of this project. In different schools across the country, teachers will be asked to set aside some time to talk with colleagues from universities about civics and citizenship education. These conversations will be relaxed and informal, although the outcomes might be recorded or notes made from them. The formal record of the conversation will be submitted to participants so they can reflect on what has been said and approve its use as part of the research project. If teachers wish to be further involved in the project, there will be opportunities for them to do so.

A team has been brought together to work with schools and teachers in different locations. The members of this team are:

Di Mayer – University of Queensland
Simon Jimenez – University of Sydney
Janet Smith – University of Canberra
Suzanne Mellor – Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne.

The project is being coordinated by Kerry Kennedy, from the University of Canberra who can be contacted at kerryk@adminserver.canberra.edu.au

This is an exciting project that will bring together a diversity of views about civics and citizenship education from teachers around Australia. Further information about this research can also be accessed at http://www.canberra.edu.au/civics/index.html.

If you have any questions about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you would like to make any comments about the project you can use the Bulletin Board.

If you would like to make any comments about the project you can use the Discussion Board at:
http://www.canberra.edu.au/webbbs/civics/webbbs_config.pl
References


