FRAMING THE FUTURE OR RE-FRAMING THE PAST: CURRICULUM CHOICES FOR THE NEXT DECADE

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Keynote Address
Biennial Conference of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association
Perth, October 1999

I am delighted to be with you on this occasion. It is a pleasure to be part of this biennial conference of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association. I hope that those of you who are visitors to Western Australia have enjoyed yourselves here and that you have time to see a little more of this wonderful part of Australia.

The Noongar people are the original custodians of this part of the country, and I recognise this original custodianship today. It is our loss that few tangible signs of Noongar culture are clearly visible, but I hope that you might have been able to gain some understanding of the rich history that predates European occupation of this land.

For those of you who are able to stay a little bit longer in these parts, if you are making your way down south to the wine or big timber country, that is the Warren Blackwood education district of which I have the privilege to be the District Director. The Warren Blackwood is a centre for educational excellence in Western Australia. Schools are in recess at the moment, of course, but if you are travelling through the area, you would be welcome to take a walk around some of the school sites. At Vasse primary school, for instance, the original single-roomed school building has been retained and maintained on site. If you are in Margaret River, take a walk around the high school grounds and view the beautiful wrought iron gates that have been incorporated into the new section of the building. If you are in big timber territory, take a moment to stroll around the Pemberton District High School site. This school has been constructed out of rammed earth and is a wonderful learning centre.

Schools in the Warren Blackwood represent a blend of the old and the new, usually on the one site. It is this theme of the blending of old and new, that informs my address today.

Facing the Future

There is no doubt that in our society at this point in history, we are obsessed with the future. Whether at morning tea break, a dinner party, the e-mail chat line or taking coffee in the cappuccino strip, conversations more and more frequently are turning to the question of what you are going to do for New Year’s Eve. (What will you be doing when the clock ticks over from 11.59 on the 31/12/99 to 00.00 on 01/01/00?) Our newspapers and TV stations are counting us down to the Olympics, and ‘visioning’ is being held out as the pre-eminent skill for the manager of successful organisations.

Millennium fever has a lot to do with this obsession with the future. The particular form of ‘future shock’, to borrow Toffler’s ever more apt expression, associated with millennium fever alternately fills us with exhilarating prospects for a future of unimagined possibility or foreboding about
terrors and consequences unimagined. The cutely called ‘Y2K’ computer date problem is the classic instance of the latter. It is close to a sackable offence in our organisation to breathe the incantation ‘Y2K’ and smirk at the same time. Who could have imagined that lurking within those systems that have given us unprecedented access to information and control of processes, was a design fault with the potential to cause aeroplanes to drop out of the sky, electricity supplies to fail, water supplies to dry up and whole transport systems to falter, not to mention home loans to disappear? This problem cannot be solved we are told, not even by the tech-heads who produced the problem for us in the first place. Risk associated with the computer date problem can only be managed and consequences minimised, the problem itself cannot be solved. We have seen the future and it is dreadful. It is so full of menace that perhaps only divine intervention could fully solve the problem.

All of which reminds me of a story I heard recently:

Earlier this year the three most important people on earth were having a talk with God. He explained to them that He is not happy with his creation and therefore he is going to destroy earth at the end of this century.
So Boris Yeltsin went home and told his wife "I have two bad messages. One is that God is existing and the second is that He is going to destroy earth in the year 2000"
Hillary went home and told Bill "I have a good and a bad message. The good one is that God truly exists. The bad thing is that He will destroy earth in the year 2000"
Bill Gates e-mailed his wife. "I have two good messages: the first is that God exists and the second good one is that He is going to solve the millennium problem"

Our dreams of the future are not all nightmares, however. For many the brave new world of the third millennium is full of possibility. We imagine a world of permeable boundaries, in which globalisation transcends nationalism, in which time zones dissolve in the blur of instantaneous communication and in which we can assume multiple identities as we chat on-line, transforming thoughts into words through finger-tips rather than vocal cords.

I recently heard a 'knowledge worker' describing her world of virtual work. Her company exists in cyber-space. They are able to work 24 hours a day by simply passing project work on electronically from one to another around the globe. She related how they had their Christmas party on-line. She drew the short straw and had to wake up at 2.00am to 'attend'. They put on their party hats, opened their champagne and 'chatted' away to each other in their virtual office. Just like at a real party, words became slurred as the festivities progressed, a couple of members of staff popped of to their own private chat-room to talk off-line and one-by-one the party-goers logged off. One of the big advantages of such a party was that no-one got breathalised on the way home.

That story of the virtual office party appears at one level to 'frame the future'. That is, it provides a window through which we can glimpse the world of work as it might be - globalised, digitised, privatised and depersonalised. High levels of productivity are made possible by the dissolution of space and time boundaries. But in another sense it also 'reframes the past'. That is, the need for social contact (the party) remains. 'Chatting' may rely upon manipulation of fingers on keys rather than tongue on teeth, but the concept remains the same. (Well, not entirely. I have to admit that I have found e-chat to be infinitely more trite, tedious and tiresome than even the most banal of party small talk.)
It is this concept of the future holding within it the imprint of the past that I want to explore in relation to the curriculum.

Education is, to some extent, caught up with future fever. More than ever before, the promise of technology beckons brightly to the educator. The vision is of life-long, on-line, outcomes-based, multiple-site-delivered curriculum.

Now, I don't want to belittle the possibilities opened up by information and communication technologies. I want the imaginations of teachers and students to take flight and explore the possibilities of learning in the new millennium. I don't just want learners to 'frame the future', I want them to unframe the present and break set with the future.

Having said that, however, I am cogniscent of the fact that we carry our past with us into the future.

For some, that is a pity. The past merely drags us down. It is from our past that we want to escape. 'Improvement' and 'progress' discourses presuppose that the past is to be left behind.

That is not, however, my message for today. At the end of this millennium (or close to the end of the millennium or four years into the third millennium, depending upon what version of the calendar you follow) I want to celebrate continuity rather than discontinuity, constancy rather than change. This advocacy is not (I hope) a product of creeping, mid-life conservatism. Rather, it is recognition of some enduring educational values that we leave behind to our peril.

Thus, it is my contention that we need to be as diligent in 're-framing the past' as we are in 'framing the future'. I speak here of 're-framing', by which I wish to convey the idea of maintaining an image or idea, but maybe presenting it differently. Retaining the presence of a value or insight, but interpreting it against a different set of conditions. I do not want to suggest 're-framing' in the sense of re-packaging outdated notions in modern words, or creating new boundaries outside of which new approaches cannot be explored.

Indeed, it is my contention that some of the important curriculum choices that we face in the next decade and beyond, are choices that have been with educators for a long time.

So, what are the themes and choices that I believe we need to 're-frame' for the next decade and beyond? I have selected three:

- **outputs or outcomes**
- **delivery or discourse**
- **training or learning**

I have used the devise of binary opposites to express these themes, but in doing so, I am conscious of using an outdated rationalist conceptual device. I am aware of the limitations of such binary constructions, but I use these binaries as a linguistic device to provoke thought, rather than to accurately describe the field of possibilities.

**Outputs or Outcomes**

I use the late 20th Century configuration of this choice set. In doing so, I have already re-framed a set of alternatives that have been with us for at least two-and-a-half millennia. It is a curriculum
choice that I have referred to elsewhere (Grundy, 1986) as Product or Praxis. In using that binary to indicate curriculum choices, I was re-framing a concept made explicit for us by Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics in the fifth century B.C.

Aristotle distinguished between the sort of consequence that is the result of the application of skill (a product that results from the application of what the Greeks called techne) and the sort of consequence that is the result of the application of judgement (actions that result from the application of what the Greeks called phronesis). In modern parlance, I think this is the distinction between ‘outputs’ and ‘outcomes’.

‘Outputs’, in our modern classrooms are the specific pieces of work, which students produce to demonstrate their learning. In the past, certainly when I commenced my teaching career thirty years ago, these were the end points of instruction. We gave them a mark depending upon how closely the product corresponded to the ‘ideal’. Our concern was with how good (accurate, correct, precise, flawless etc.) the piece of work was. Of course we were also concerned with the understanding or meaning represented by the piece of work, but only to the extent that better understanding enabled better (i.e. more accurate, correct etc.) output.

In the modern classroom, however, we hear reference to student work samples. That is, it is not the piece of work itself (the product) that is of most concern. It is the learning that is represented by the sample of work. Any output (i.e. a particular piece of work) needs to be analysed to determine what learning outcomes it represents. Analysing outputs to determine outcomes requires judgement. This is the capacity that Aristotle called phronesis.

Phronesis is not the yes/no-and-by-how-much, sort of judgement that characterises reasoning associated with adjudicating outputs. That is, it is not the sort of judgement that requires us to say, ‘This is correct or incorrect’. It is the sort of judgement that allows someone to interpret a particular work or action to mean that the student has demonstrated this or that knowledge, skill or understanding. Such judgement requires discernment, perceptiveness and wisdom as much as it requires skill.

Such judgement needs to be exercised in conjunction with others, it needs to be tested against the perceptions of others and it needs to be justified through discussion and debate. It is not a skill that can be exercised in isolation or a conclusion that can be justified through reference to rules and procedures alone.

In a recent series of papers published by the Western Australian Primary Principals’ Association (WAPPA), Sue Willis notes:

An outcome-focus cannot succeed unless teachers in schools develop a common understanding of what the outcomes mean and a commitment to focussing upon them. ... We cannot effectively promote common outcomes if each teacher shuts the door and does his or her ‘own thing’. And yet, the view of teaching as relatively isolated work still persists in many places. What is needed for an outcomes focus is an interpretation of teacher autonomy that is rather more collective than individualistic. (Willis, 1998, pp.15-16)
Willis’ references to outcome-focused curriculum and collective judgement reminds us that the concepts that Aristotle was concerned to analyse and delineate for us, so long ago, have just as much relevance to us today. And will continue to have relevance into the future.

One of the curriculum choices that we will continue to face into the next decade will centre on this tension between ‘outputs’ and ‘outcomes’. We are living in an information age. We have the technology that allows us to accumulate, analyse and report sophisticated accounts of the outcomes of student learning. But will parents, employers and Ministers of State value such rich accounts of what students know, understand and can do? Or will they demand that the ‘outputs’ of student learning (particularly in the form of standardised assessment tasks) be assessed and represented primarily as standardised ‘scores’? Will we evaluate the outcomes of learning or will we measure the learning outputs?

I have represented this curriculum choice (between ‘outputs’ and ‘outcomes’) as an either/or choice. But it has not been the case in the past that a focus on one negates the importance of the other. That is, when analysing student work samples for evidence of learning outcomes, we are not uninterested in the quality of the product of the learning. Similarly, when making a summative judgement about the quality of a piece of work, we are never disinterested in what it demonstrates about what the student knows or understands. It is the case, however, that there is a tension between these two concepts and at any one time we have to judge what is more important – the unorthodox setting out of an algorithm that, nevertheless demonstrates perceptive reasoning or the immaculately presented project that was possibly down-loaded from the internet (although we could never be sure).

We will not, however, resolve these issues by reference to past practice, old arguments or stubborn resistance to change. We will need to re-examine the issues, re-frame the arguments, re-create the language of learning to defend and extend worthwhile educational practice. But in doing so, we should not assume that we are facing these issues for the first time. We should draw courage and wisdom from the long history of professional practice that informs the debates we face.

Delivery or Discourse

In many ways this curriculum choice is related to the ‘outputs/outcomes’ dilemma to which I referred above. If it is the product of the learning experience (the ‘outputs’) that are to be valued, then instruction will need to be ‘delivered’, which will ensure that the outputs are produced. However, if ‘outcomes’ are to be the results of learning, then explanation, analysis, justification and debate all become important elements of the teaching/learning situation. This means that pedagogy is a discursive practice, not a system of delivery.

Again, these are curriculum choices that have been with us for a long while. The most telling representation of this curriculum choice was provided by the writing of the late South American educator, Paulo Freire. In the following extract from his 1972 book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, it is the gendered nature of the language that dates the work, not the concepts. ‘Education’, Freire claimed, ‘is suffering with narration sickness’.

Narration … turns [students] into "containers" … to be filled by the teacher. The more completely he (sic) fills the receptacles, the better
The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. (1972, p.45)

Now, I don’t think that there would be many classrooms today where the narration game would be played day-in/day-out, as Freire’s striking metaphor portrays. However, the notion that education is a process of delivery is alive, not only in classrooms, but in policy and planning documents as well. (One of the key strategies in the Western Australian Plan for Government Schools, 1998-2000, relates to the ‘delivery of schooling’.)

The concept of the teacher as the one who discursively constructs the curriculum with her/his students as opposed to the one who delivers the curriculum is just as much a challenge to teachers of the next decade as it was to teachers in the 1970’s.

A teacher in one of the schools in the Warren Blackwood recently wrote a letter to the Principal. It was a very insightful and courageous letter. In the letter this teacher outlined the dilemma that she faced as she moved to an outcomes-focussed pedagogy. What this teacher revealed was that her identity as a teacher was tied into the idea of herself as the transmitter of knowledge to students. What she loved about teaching was the thrill of sharing, conveying and disseminating knowledge and information. What was to happen to all this knowledge if from now on she was merely to be the facilitator of experience, the provider of opportunity or the manager of ‘open ended tasks’?

And can’t we all relate to this dilemma? What can be more satisfying than standing before a group of people and delivering the message? Of course, we could improve our delivery with the assistance of electronic gee-whizzery, but surely delivery is the most efficient process of dissemination? (Otherwise, why do we persist in having keynote addresses at conferences?)

But wherever it is that true knowledge resides (be it in our heart or our head) we know, just as this teacher knows, and just as Paulo Freire knew, that real learning depends upon active engagement, not passive reception. The effective curriculum depends upon discourse, not delivery.

But stepping into the next decade is not going to eliminate this as a curriculum choice for us. Just because the World Wide Web daily reminds us that no one person can know it all, this won’t stop teachers (or District Directors, for that matter) acting as ‘know-alls’. The choice between delivery and discourse remains to be made moment by moment.

If we reach back to Freire’s work for understanding of the curriculum choices that face us in the next decade and beyond, we will find more confronting challenges than simply that of moving beyond delivery. Not only did Freire advocate a curriculum grounded in discourse, but he also reminded us that discourse is not simply a cerebral engagement of debate and discussion. Discourse involves relationship. Crucially, for a worthwhile curriculum, it involves the relationship between teacher and student. But wait, there’s more. The discursive relationship, according to Freire, challenges the fundamental power relationship of teacher and student. He advocated that, not only do teachers need to engage in discourse with their students to construct knowledge (rather than delivering it), teachers need also to learn from their students.
The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but is himself (sic) taught in dialogue with the students, who in their turn, while being taught also teach. (Freire, 1972, 53)

In an increasingly de-personalised world, the importance of relationship to learning is crucial. Authentic relationships rely upon people learning from each other. The centrality of relationship is fundamental, for instance, to the concept and practice of ‘middle schooling’. Increasingly we are realising that what young adolescents want and need is a learning environment in which it is possible to make and sustain relationships – with each other and with their teachers.

Relationship is also a concept that is central to Aboriginal education and culture. Teachers working with Aboriginal students need to recognise the importance of forming relationships with their students, but also with their students’ families and communities. We haven’t recognised the importance of relationship to pedagogy so much in Western culture. We think that we can teach by focusing on knowledge, behaviour and pedagogical processes. If relationship is important at all, it is valued as a means to an end, a mechanism for engaging students’ attention and commitment to schooling and learning. We are, however, suspicious of relationships, warning young teachers of the dangers to good discipline of forming close relationships with their students.

In Aboriginal culture, however, relationship is fundamental. Without relationship there can be no learning. But how can teachers come to know this about Aboriginal culture? And how can they come to know other things they need to know about Aboriginal culture? They need to learn from their students.

Earlier this year I undertook a review of Aboriginal education in WA government schools. One of the stories that Mick Gooda (my co-reviewer) and I heard illustrated this point very pointedly and poignantly.

We were told of a school where there was real concern for two Aboriginal boys. The concerns were familiar. The attendance of the boys was spasmodic and when they were at school, they seemed always to be in trouble. They were capable boys, but were not achieving. A case conference was called at the school and a strategy put in place that involved identifying two teachers who would take special responsibility for the boys.

One of the teachers who began working with one of the boys decided that if she was to establish a relationship with the boy, then she needed to get to know him in his own environment. So she requested a day’s teaching relief and the boy, his grandmother and the teacher went fishing for the day. The teacher knew nothing about fishing, and so became the boy’s student. Not only did they catch a lot of fish and have a very pleasant day, but also a relationship was established that, for a moment, turned around the teacher-student relationship. The teacher became learner and the student the teacher. Of course when they got back to school, the traditional roles reasserted themselves, but there was something different. The boy now had one non-Aboriginal person in the school, and a teacher at that, with whom he had a relationship. His attendance improved and his troublesome behaviour began to moderate. (It didn’t solve all the problems, but created a platform on which to build.)

At the next meeting the teacher (lets call her ‘A’)) discussed her strategies and related the improvements she perceived. When discussion turned to the second ‘troublesome’ boy, it was
suggested to teacher ‘B’ that she might consider a similar strategy in her work with the boy whom she was monitoring. It was reported to us that her response was, ‘If he needs to go fishing, let one of the male teachers take him fishing.’

The point was completely missed. The issue wasn’t about fishing; it was about relationship and learning. But it wasn’t about the boy having a relationship with the teacher; it was about the teacher forming a relationship with the boy. It wasn’t about the boy learning from the teacher; it was about the teacher learning from the boy.

It’s a pretty simple thing for a teacher to go fishing with a boy and his grandmother. It’s a simple thing for a teacher to ask a student to explain to her something that she, the teacher, doesn’t know. It is a simple thing for a teacher to learn from her students. But it is so difficult to do. Yet it is a relationship change that can transform the teaching/learning situation for both teachers and students.

We can choose delivery, or we can choose discourse. But in choosing the latter, let us remember that discourse involves relationship and it involves learning. Moreover the learning relationship is a two-way relationship in which,

The teacher is [herself] … taught in dialogue with the students, who in their turn, while being taught also teach. (Freire, 1972, 53)

Delivery or discourse is one of the choices that continues to confront us.

Training or Learning
The third curriculum choice that I want to consider is, again, one that has been with us for a while. But as the world of work changes dramatically over the next decades, the choice between training students to meet specific industry needs or providing them with the skills of learning, so that they can learn to seize whatever opportunity arises, is one with which Education Departments, schools and teachers will continue to struggle.

The rhetoric of the changed world of work has been with us for a long time now. In 1995 the Schools Council published a report called Charting a Course: Students’ views of their future. Although this study is four years old, the uncertainty expressed by these students in the interviews is consistent with current uncertainties. These sentiments would be very familiar to everyone in this audience, although I wonder if there is now greater enchantment with tourism and computing than was reflected in these interviews.

I think we will all get jobs eventually. We talk about it a lot and most of us are pretty positive - it's an attitude thing mostly.

The term they use is 'MacJob' isn't it - that's what most work will be like.

Most of these jobs they say are going to grow are pretty unattractive ... computers etc - there is not much scope for the individual.
Everyone says that in the future nobody will have the same job for long. How could you buy a home or do anything like that if you didn’t have a steady job? My dad has done the same thing for twenty years since he left school. I reckon I’d be lucky to have the same job for two years the way it’s going.

I want to work with people, and they say tourism is working with people, but it isn’t. It’s really just waitering (sic) and putting on a polite smile.

Everything is going to be computers. We get it all the time at school. If that is your thing, great, but it’s not for me, it’s boring.

I know I will end up working for myself. I can’t stand the idea of always having to depend on somebody else.

(Schools Council, 1995, 18-21)

The aspirations of young people, to have an interesting and secure job, haven’t changed. I suspect that their insistence that work be interesting and their willingness to trade security for challenge (and higher rewards) is greater than it was for my generation. But the dilemma for schools about what sort of a curriculum will best meet the needs of these students remains. And the curriculum choices are not dissimilar to those made by the educators who, in the earlier part of this century, provided separate schools (with different curricula) for students choosing different work or career pathways. In the egalitarian decades following the Second World War, separate schools were not provided, but separate streams within secondary schooling definitely were. With greater retention through to Year 12, it is now in the post-compulsory years that the dilemma of providing a broad curriculum for all students or separate streams for students with different career aspirations is being worked through. The dilemma remains, and we will do our students and ourselves a disservice if we fail to realise that this is an issue with which educators have grappled before. That doesn’t mean that we should accept the conclusions drawn in previous decades, but it will mean that we will have a broader perspective from which to address the issues.

Once again the dichotomy of ‘training’ or ‘learning’ draws too discreet a differentiation. However, again, the duality has heuristic utility in drawing us back to an age-old debate about the purposes of schooling.

It is not only the school curriculum, however, that is subject to the ‘training’/ ‘learning’ dilemma. This is also a challenge facing the professional development curriculum. In a time of rapid and comprehensive curriculum change, teachers and other educators are crying out for training and re-training that will equip them to implement the changes. ‘We haven’t had training in this’ or ‘we haven’t been in-serviced in that’ is a common complaint.

And yet, we have known for quite some time that professional change and improvement is a learning process. But what we also know and need to take with us into the near future, is that professional development and change is not just a matter of individual learning. The notion of the ‘learning community’ is one that has been explored for some time in relation to organisational
change. One of the things that we know about the curriculum change we confront now and will into the future is that it requires organisational as well as individual change.

Sergiovanni (1994) sums up for us the characteristics that schools need to have if they are to fulfil their mission as ‘learning communities’. They need to become:

Reflective communities - within which students (and teachers too) develop insight into their own strengths and weaknesses as learners, and use this information to call upon different strategies for learning

Development communities - within which it is acknowledged that students (and teachers too) develop at different rates, and at any given time are more ready to learn some things than others

Diverse communities - within which different talents and interests of students (and teachers too) are not only recognised, but acknowledged by decisions that are made about curriculum, teaching and assessment

Conversational communities - within which a high priority is given to creating an active discourse that involves the exchange of values and ideas among student, among teachers and between students and teachers as they learn together

Caring communities - within which students (and teachers too) learn not only to be kind to each other and to respect each other, but to help each other to grow as learners and as persons

Responsible communities - within which students (and teachers too) come to view themselves as part of a social web of meanings and responsibilities which they feel a moral obligation to embody in their present behaviour as students, and future behaviour as citizens.

Members of such communities need to learn how to develop each of these characteristics. Such development is not a matter of training it can only be learnt.

Framing the Future through Re-framing the Past
I have argued this morning that, as we venture into the new decade (century or millennium, depending upon what time frame you can reasonably cope with) we need to take with us values, knowledge and understanding about curriculum from the past.

As we face the next decade, we will have curriculum choices to make that are similar to choices that have faced educators in previous decades. It is not appropriate, however, for us to ‘frame the future’ in a way that means we interpret future curriculum choices entirely in terms of the way we have understood and resolved dilemmas in the past. We need to re-think these dilemmas, to re-interpret previous responses. In short, we need to re-frame the past, so that we can move into
a future with confidence. This will not be the confidence that we know the answers or have solved the problems in times past. Rather it is the confidence that comes through a sense of continuity with a professional past that has been able to challenge and change, but retain some fundamental values and commitments about what is worthwhile learning and a worthwhile curriculum.

References


