The New Basics

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Introduction

Education Queensland, like other education departments throughout the world, has become increasingly concerned with the extent to which school curriculum is aligned with the changing expectations and demands of a post-industrial society. That is, economic globalisation; a shift towards local service based economies; new and rapidly changing technologies; complex and adapting cultural and social relationships; fluid demographics; and a sense of uncertainty about the future. At the same time, pedagogical and assessment demands have been further complicated as classrooms become more diverse. In most instances, social and cultural change has moved at a quicker pace than educational reform and many curriculum documents are either inadequate and out of date or playing catch up. The resulting curriculum reform discourse has largely centred on what we might term “(re)alignment”. That is, re-evaluating and reconstructing synergeous relationships with shifting individual, social and cultural identities. The central question within this discourse is, to what, and with whom, should we be aligning?

In this paper we examine how four states in Australia, particularly Education Queensland, are adapting and reforming their curriculum documents, syllabi, and frameworks. We also examine a number of other common, core educational issues that have begun to inform and drive the curriculum reform agenda across these four states. These include: addressing curriculum overcrowding; defining and clarifying student learning outcomes; identifying essential or core areas of learning; and understanding the interrelationships between pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and reporting. Naturally, state education departments have responded differently in both breadth and complexity in developing new and responsive curricula.

Recent consultations for Education Queensland’s 2010 strategy (Education Queensland, 1999) found that while the operational, social and cultural changes outlined above are acknowledged, teachers and administrators are reporting an overwhelming climate of change fatigue. That is, there is a real sense that imposed changes have impacted adversely on teachers’ work and taken them away from their core business of educating students. In many instances, educational imperatives are perceived to be more closely aligned with governmental cycles than with developing educationally coherent alignments between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

State (Re)alignments

What follows is a brief synopsis and critique of some of the curriculum innovations in South Australia, Western Australia, Victoria and Queensland. We focus on these states because of their attempts to develop futures orientated curricula within overarching and cohesive frameworks.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

In the first instance The South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework, currently being developed, attempts to redefine and redevelop the earlier Foundations Areas of Learning and Statements and Profiles into a cohesive, birth to Year 12 framework. The aim is to provide clear descriptions of the curriculum to be taught, the standards against which learners’ progress will be assessed and the accountability requirements of all schools.
A central organising feature of the framework is a new set of “Essential Learnings” which will be integrated throughout the curriculum and the standards. They describe cross-curriculum values, dispositions, skills and understanding that the writers believe will enable learners to connect with, understand and shape the world. The aim is to use the essential learnings to “uncrowd” the curriculum, provide teachers with tools to integrate key learning areas and identify priorities in each learning area. They are also closely aligned to the National Goals for Schooling (MCEETYA, 1989) and the Key Competencies (Mayer, 1992). They have been organised into five broad domains (Draft as of 13 August 1999):

**Identities**
- A sense of personal and group identity
- The capacity to contribute to, reflect on and shape relationships amongst individuals and groups

**Thinking**
- A sense of creativity, wisdom and enterprise
- The capacity to contribute to and shape ideas and solutions

**Interdependence**
- A sense of being connected with others and their world
- The capacity to contribute to and shape their local and global communities

**Futures**
- A sense of optimism about their ability to shape the future
- The capacity to contribute to and shape possible futures

**Communications**
- A sense of the power and potential of Literacies, Numeracy and Learning Technologies
- The capacity to contribute to and shape their present and future thought through powerful uses of Literacies, Numeracy and Learning Technologies

Rather than stand alone categories, the new essential learnings are interwoven across the eight Key Learning Areas and tied to the (Mayer 1992) Key Competencies. At the same time, outcomes will be assessed using curriculum standards levels at years 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12. Outcomes will also be assessed against the National Literacy and Numeracy benchmarks at years 3, 5 and 7. Reporting to the community and to the government on learners’ achievements against the curriculum standards, will be conducted through common assessments such as Basic Skills Tests and professional judgements. The outcomes in the curriculum standards are described in the same learning areas and strands as the Curriculum. The curriculum standards are aligned with year levels, whilst the outcomes for Essential learnings and learning areas are integrated to form a continuous path from birth to year 12.

There are a number of underlying assumptions embedded within this model that are worth examining. Firstly, the extent to which the framework may result in complex mapping exercise for teachers. The overlay of different learning categories (the essential learnings, the key learning areas and the Key Competencies) may have the undesired effect of further crowding the curriculum as teachers attempt to incorporate aspects of each category. For example, the key learning areas suggest a qualitatively different set of tasks and associated outcomes to the essential learnings. The planning and assessment challenge for the teacher will be to select from a large range of possible learning outcome statements and integrate these across at least three domains. Secondly, there may be a problematic relationship between a set of imported assessment tasks, such as the national literacy and numeracy benchmarks, and a framework with a different set of goals and values. Thirdly, and
perhaps most importantly, the new essential learnings may be the first aspect to be lost in the implementation of the framework. Teachers used to working with the Key learning areas and traditional discipline areas may have little time left in coming to terms with the new KLA outcomes to do justice to the new essential learnings.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The Western Australian Curriculum Framework is outcomes orientated, organised around the eight Key learning areas. They argue that “an outcomes approach means identifying what students should achieve and focusing on ensuring that they do achieve” (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 1998, p.14). It is based on the belief that learning is continuous and, given time and opportunity, all students should progressively achieve the outcomes, regardless of their situation or context. The learning outcomes comprise the mandatory element of the Curriculum Framework which all schools in Western Australia must either implement or obtain an exemption from doing so from the Minister for Education.

The framework consists of an Overarching Statement (which outlines seven key principles which underpin the Framework and describes the Overarching learning outcomes to which all learning areas contribute) and eight Learning Area Statements. Rather than being prescriptive about what is taught, the Framework is intended to be used by schools to develop and implement their teaching and learning programs according to the needs and characteristics of their students, thereby creating school community flexibility and ownership in a dynamic and rapidly changing world environment. Therefore the framework identifies common learning outcomes for all students for both government and non-government schools.

Each learning area has explicit statements as regards assessment. Assessment is based upon multiple kinds and sources of evidence and upon the principles of validity, explicitness, fairness, comprehensiveness and educativeness. Unlike the South Australian model statements about pedagogy are incorporated within the Framework, however these are in the main generally very broad statements attached to the various key learning areas.

Underpinning the framework is the notion that students will achieve broad, process orientated outcomes in each of the learning areas that can be replicated at more complex levels each year. Two possible problems present themselves. Firstly, there is no content specificity in the outcome statements, rather the statements are necessarily broad. Luke (1999) has argued that overly process focused outcome statements have traditionally resulted in a “dumbed down” curriculum for disadvantaged groups. Secondly, there is no formal, assessment directly associated with each of the outcome statement. Clearly there are advantages and disadvantages for students in that the curriculum is outcome, and not assessment driven. However, lack of formal accountability around the outcomes may result in a Laissez Faire system.

VICTORIA

The Curriculum Standards Framework II (Board of Studies, 1999) sees a focus on the essential concepts and content, processes and skills across the eight key learning areas, which has resulted in fewer strands, sub strands and outcomes. Essential learning for each key learning area is defined as the knowledge and skills that students need in order to:
• Operate effectively and competently at each stage of development
• Progress to the next level, and
• Develop the capacity to participate effectively and responsibly in society.

Therefore, it is argued in reducing the number of stands and outcomes, the material in each key learning area has been selected in accordance with this definition. The learning outcomes and indicators do not attempt to describe all the learning students do, or the learning activities they undertake, allowing schools the flexibility in framing the learning experiences students will experience. Positions regarding pedagogy are not included in the Framework.

Achievements in terms of CSF levels are reported upon, and schools will report student achievement across the key learning areas in a variety of ways. CSF II uses the same six levels as the South Australian framework for reporting student achievement over eleven years of schooling. It is assumed that learning outcomes link the knowledge, skills and understanding described in the curriculum focus with standards of achievement. (CSFII p.5).

Having completed a review of the CSF, the CSF II primarily aims to “uncrowd” the curriculum. Feedback obtained from teachers indicated that the notion of “essential learnings” is problematic. They questioned whether what they had previously taught may now be now seen as redundant. The CSF has withdrawn much from the early years by way of strands to enable concentration on Literacy and Numeracy in P-2. This has not impacted on later years with extra strands to compensate.

QUEENSLAND: THE “NEW BASICS”

As we have discussed, other states are either attempting forms of ‘curriculum realignments’ of existing frameworks, syllabi and materials or developing new framework alignments. Education Queensland’s approach is to develop a sustainable longer term model that is: (a) based on the emergent EQ 2010 philosophy and strategies (Education Queensland, 1999); and (b) addresses not only curriculum, but also its systematic linkages with classroom pedagogy and assessment/reporting.

The primary goals of the Framework Project are to begin from the Education Queensland 2010 strategy, to survey the state of the art in national and international attempts to develop ‘futures oriented’ knowledge/practice frameworks, and identify new:

• Essential areas of learning.
• Productive approaches to pedagogy.
• Affiliated modes of assessment and reporting.
• Student knowledge, skill and practice outcomes at key points of schooling.
• A transparent reporting structure for assurances about outcomes to be communicated as part of a ‘school/community compact’.

The second goal of the Framework Project is the development of an implementation plan and schedule that will identify:

• Initial school and district-based strategies, networks and sites for a graduated implementation of the Framework in lighthouse schools during 2000 and 2001.
Early consultations with teachers, principals, administrators, teacher educators and community members have identified three major goals of a futures oriented program that should be embedded in the overall framework. They are to:

* design flexible, adaptable life pathways
* prepare students for sustainable and flexible, knowledge and service-based economies
* live in sustainable, cohesive social communities of a new Queensland

Within the context of these goals there are necessarily a different set of basic educational outcomes than those embedded in the 3Rs, traditional discipline areas or even the Key Learning areas. What has been developed is a set of “New Basics” that will encourage: critical and creative thinking, problem-solving and life-long education across four new areas of interdisciplinary learning

- **LIFE PATHWAYS & SOCIAL FUTURES:**
  Building identity; managing families, peers and collaborative social relations; maintaining health and care of the self; learning about and preparing for new worlds of work; learning initiative and enterprise.

- **COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA:**
  Mastery of languages, literacy and numeracy; interaction with and through traditional and new communications technologies; aesthetics and performance

- **ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP:**
  Understanding and interacting with global and local communities, cultures, economies – past and present.

- **ENVIRONMENTS AND TECHNOLOGIES:**
  Scientific understandings of the world; the design and engineering technologies; building and sustaining environments.

The question of how schools set targets within these new basics will be negotiated through School/community Compacts with schools giving assurances that all students will either have achieved community and state valued outcomes at 3 key reporting junctures. Those students who have not satisfactorily achieved the outcomes to a designated standard will have been identified for further intervention and assistance. The three year gaps between junctures enables sufficient developmental ‘lead time’ for systematic but flexible and locally varied patterns of curriculum development and pedagogy, and for students to progress at varied rates towards targeted outcomes.

- **JUNCTURE 1** (approximately middle-end of year 3)
- **JUNCTURE 2** (approximately middle-end of year 6)
- **JUNCTURE 3** (approximately middle-end of year 9)
YEARS 10-12 will be regarded as senior schooling for enrichment, acceleration; entry into flexible multipathway credentialing

At the moment, a new concept of “task outcome” is being developed to work as a curriculum guarantee around the “New Basics”. It is expected that six to ten tasks will be developed at each juncture that will generate outcomes in each of the four areas. Students will be assessed as having: not achieved the state standard (in which designated intervention must be specified); achieved the standards; or achieved it with excellence. Each outcome task will be a whole, integrated task that meets the following criteria:

- it must represent an educational outcome of demonstrable and substantial intellectual substance and educational value;
- it must be interdisciplinary, engaging knowledge and skill from more than one of the ‘new basics’;
- it must be ‘problem-based’, directed at a task with relevance and power in new worlds of work and everyday life;
- it must have face validity with educators, parents and community stakeholders as being significant and important;
- it must have sufficient intellectual, cognitive and developmental depth and breadth to guide curriculum development;

There are a number of assumption and issues embedded within this draft framework that should be examined. Firstly, schools will prepare school curriculum programs for three-year spans of schooling to detail how students will be assisted to gradually build up the knowledge and skills base necessary to perform the task outcomes identified at each juncture. Secondly, effective pedagogy necessarily incorporates detailed knowledge of and commitment to the approaches identified in the school curriculum program. Effective pedagogy also implies that the range of assessment practices used mirrors the teaching and learning practices proposed in the school curriculum program.

Much assessment, for both formative and summative purposes will occur as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Assessment for summative purposes will be an audit process and consequently teachers will neither be required nor expected to gather masses of data or data relating to every sub-outcome, sub-skill or element of knowledge that is embedded in a task outcome. The pitfalls of massive data collection and slavish attention to accountability have been demonstrated in the past.

The aspects of each task outcome to be audited will be decided at the school level and will be identified in the school curriculum program. The aspects audited might change from time to time by negotiation as teachers come to shared insights about the performance of students. A system of formative assessment and the making of judgments by teachers will only be reliable and will only be valued by the community if there are shared understandings among teachers about acceptable performance and standards. However, shared understanding can only be developed over a considerable time frame and requires both the circulation of a range of exemplars of student performance and time for “moderation style” professional development within clusters of schools. Testing procedures developed and managed by the system can provide data to assist teachers to be confident about their judgments of performance. This is particularly so where testing is done on samples of students and when
instruments and sample results are shared with schools so that they can compare performance with groups in “like schools”.

Issues of practicality, test narrowness and cost imply that system-wide testing procedures can inform, but cannot replace school-based assessment and teacher-based judgment about performance of task outcomes.

Conclusion

It seems to us that the central goal of each of the frameworks we have described is to bring some real sense, linkages, and coordination in developing a futures orientated educational plan. However, the major drawback most of the states are facing is the problem of ‘aligning their curricula’ – mapping existing syllabus documents, against the 8 KLAs, against Mayer Competences, against National Benchmarks. Such an approach, it seems to us, is a panel beaters’ delight: Akin to sticking a 1980s Holden engine in a 1990s Falcon body, with a mid 70s Nissan chassis. That particular approach cannot by definition address new economies, new skills and new cultural contingencies that, according to 2010 (Education Queensland, 1999), are staring educators, parents and systems in the face. We actually need to think 5-10 years out. And we actually need to properly align – from scratch if necessary – curriculum, pedagogy and assessment/reporting, to do the job in a way that will allow teachers, students and communities to get on with the job.

References

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