

Nationhood, Literacy and Curriculum: Literate Australia

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Abstract

Literacy is not just an educational issue but one that relates to and is influenced by health, parenting practices, nutrition, communities and cultures of influence, and the larger sphere of government policies. It is more than its associated skills, and more than 'being educated,' although it is this that helps to give its popular symbolic value.

The proposed introduction of a national curriculum provides an invaluable opportunity to think about how a truly 'national' curriculum can contribute at a deep level to a literate nation. Australia has a dual history, geographies of multiple languages and landscapes, and a culture of multiple heritages. A national curriculum invites us to think beyond the emphasis on 'curriculum' to an emphasis on 'national' – and to consider ways and means of making curriculum truly national.

This paper outlines current interdisciplinary challenges to ideas about literacy and explores what a 'literate nation' might look like. It suggests a radical rethinking of some aspects of curriculum organisation, and makes particular reference to two large research projects: *New Ways of Doing School: Mixing story and technology to generate innovative learning, social and cultural communities*; and *New Ways/Old Ways: Converging Roads*, with the Martu communities of the Western Desertlands.

This paper relates to a cell of projects being developed by the UTS Child and Youth Centre: Culture and Wellbeing, an interdisciplinary centre that integrates technology, research, teaching, and practice in all fields pertaining to children and youth – including education, health, family, law, community, and policy.

The paper is influenced by a lifelong commitment to education, literacy and literature, and in particular by the research projects I am currently leading: *New Ways of Doing School: Mixing story and technology to generate innovative learning, social and cultural communities* (an ARC project), and *New Ways/Old Ways: Converging Roads*, with the Martu communities of the Western Desertlands.

This work has led me to believe that literacy is not just an educational issue but one that relates to and is influenced by health, parenting practices, nutrition, communities and cultures of influence, and the larger sphere of government policies. It has also led to ideas about a literate nation – a literate Australia – and to ponder what that idea might mean, and what we as educators can work towards making it mean.

This idea of *thick literacy* (dense, deep, broad) is complex. Rich etymological histories and strong positive and negative connotations of the related adjectives ('literate' and 'illiterate') remind us of roots that pertain to letters of the alphabet, writing, reading, education, schooling; to learnedness, erudition, and culture. Traditional definitions relate to the ability to communicate (and be communicated with) through the use of language – to be able to read and to write, to speak and to listen. The technological revolution of the twentieth century has also revolutionised literacy and proliferated it into a plethora of 'other' literacies – including visual and digital – loosely brought together in a concept of multiliteracies, and subsequently exerting a dramatic effect, which I will discuss a little later, on ideas about language, text and literature.

There are ten important points that are relevant to the idea of a literate nation.

First, literacy is an intensely political concern. It is not the province solely of educators, schools and departments of education, but of a wide range of committed stakeholders, including parents and community (thus voters), media, state and federal governments, even of global organisations such as UNESCO. Literacy carries a freight of significances and has a rich symbolic value.

Second, literacy plays a highly significant role in a nation's economic development and sustainability. The literacy of a population constitutes part of that nation's human and intellectual capital – its resources. Politically-inspired government programs that have specifically focused on developing literacy –in its most elementary sense of teaching all children to read and write – have had amazing success and produced startling economic development. Amartya Sen, referring to the Japanese Fundamental Code of Education (1875) which stated: 'There shall, in the future, be no community with an illiterate family, nor a family with an illiterate person', notes that between 1906 and 1911, money spent on education represented as much as 43% of the budgets of Japanese towns and villages:

By 1906, the recruiting army officers found that, in contrast with the late nineteenth century, there was hardly any new recruit who was not already literate. By 1910, Japan had, it is generally acknowledged, universal attendance in primary schools. By 1913, even though Japan was still economically very poor and

underdeveloped, it had become one of the largest producers of books in the world, publishing more books than Britain and indeed more than twice as many as the United States. (2006, pp. 110-111)

Literacy costs money, but it is an investment which brings huge dividends.

Third, *literacy is personal*. A draft UNESCO paper defines literacy as:

... the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society.

This definition also leads to the fourth point: whilst literacy is clearly personal, because it pertains to communication *it is also communal and social*. It connects individuals to community, gathering a sense of self for the individual as it does so. Borrowing the beautiful words of the *ubuntu* of Africa: 'I am because you are;' 'I am with others, therefore I am.'

Fifth and relating to both the above, *literacy both represents and constitutes power*, personal and communal. At various times in various countries, including nineteenth century USA, the ability to read and write (and sign one's full name) was a prerequisite to the right to vote. Historically in many countries, literacy skills were kept away from the common populace; during the American Civil War period for example it was considered too dangerous to allow black slaves access to learning literate practices.

Sixth, literacy, in providing individuals and community with the power and resources of language, *helps to constitute how we see and organise the world around us*. This pertains as much to the sciences as to the arts: Edward O. Wilson, in his letter to Henry Thoreau in the prologue of *The Future of Life*, writes:

[T]he beginning of every science is the description and naming of phenomena. Human beings seem to have an instinct to master their surroundings that way. We cannot think clearly about a plant or an animal until we have a name for it (p. xvii)

Literacy makes possible the choices of language and ideas that help build community, and to shape the type of community that is built. Shifting the idea of community into this larger idea of nation, words spoken and written help to constitute what that nation is. This relates to performativity theory as espoused

by Austin, Butler, and Derrida, which argues the relationship of speech to act, and of act to identity. How we talk about ourselves, write about ourselves, how we are talked about and are cited by others, iterates and comes to be what we are. Words and images written about us, drawn of us, construct ideas of identity, community and belonging (or not-belonging). It is an interactive symbiotic cycle, and sometimes we even appear willingly to write ourselves into personal and national stereotypes, taking pride in those areas in which we are most distinctively different.

Seventh, and profoundly, *literacy helps to develop thinking*. This capacity to develop thinking is at once the most social and the most intimate aspect of literacy; 'I think therefore I am,' said Descartes; thoughts 'impact and subtly change the self who thinks them,' wrote Eliot. Thinking not only pertains to cognition, and to creativity, but to feeling and emotion: Gallagher writes that 'the inextricability of thought and emotion is one of contemporary psychology's most important discoveries' (2009, p.29).

This relates to my eighth point: *literacy breeds imagination*. Access to layers of words is access to layers of thought, and access to layers of thought goes deep, goes thick, thickens, into fostering, germinating, generating imagination – what I have elsewhere called the literacy of the imagination (2000). Imagination leads to speculation and dreaming, creativity and innovation, cleverness and meaningful action.

Ninth, literacy *inspires mind*, which is more than what we think with, more than the place where we think. Inspired minds think across borders and encourage senses of identity that refuse to be constrained by a single descriptor – race or creed or gender or age or occupation or interest affiliation, and that refuse to label or brand others in this simplistic way. Such minds are more nuanced; they think beyond a 'them' and an 'us'.

The tenth point follows on from all this: literacy and in particular literate imaginations help to *generate civil societies* that recognise, acknowledge and respect their own responsibilities as well as the rights of others. Growing the capacity for imagination grows the capacity for making the leap (Heidegger's 'leap of thought') into the place of the other, into an awareness of other 'I's as authentic as one's own 'I'. It helps to breed subjunctive modes of thinking: 'Were this me, were this my property, were this my loved one, were this happening to me – how would I feel?' Such subjunctive thinking, about the rights and truths of others, in turn breeds and informs a sense of human equity, civility, and social justice; kindness, generosity, and compassion.

I want to suggest that the proposed introduction of a national curriculum provides an invaluable opportunity to think about how a truly 'national' curriculum can contribute at a deep level to a literate nation. Australia has a dual history, geographies of multiple languages and landscapes, and a culture of multiple heritages. A national curriculum invites us to think beyond the emphasis on 'curriculum' to an emphasis on 'national' – and to consider ways and means of making curriculum truly national. This is an amazing, once-in-a-generation opportunity.

Current discussions and debate – very open and with many stakeholders including state departments of education and professional associations – appear in general to be concerned with the *content* of 'curriculum' within these discipline areas. The word 'curriculum' derives from the Latin word for race-course or race-chariot, from the Latin. *currere* = to run [thus *curriculum vitae* = course of life]. So the Australian national curriculum seeks to set the course for all young Australians. The ACARA website states:

The curriculum will outline the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities that all young Australians are entitled to access, regardless of their social or economic background or the school they attend.

But the debate has overlooked, or taken for granted, the adjective 'national' – it is generally assumed that this simply means something like 'for all Australian children in all states'. I suggest we need to consider deeply what 'national' means and most importantly could mean, in the development of a proposed course of study for our children, and how this could lead to a more literate Australia.

'National', as it is currently being used in the debate, simply meaning for all, is obviously relating to ideas of the best for all - the best life preparation for those who will have to meet the challenges of an ever changing, stressed and complex world (challenges that we in 2009 may not even be able to imagine). This best for all is an inclusive objective. But to help full comprehension of the power of this idea, we

have to consider the idea of nation in ‘national’, what our nation is, where it is, how it is. Not everyone has found a comfortable place in our existing educational systems – far from it; we are all too aware of those for whom they are not working/have not worked, despite the best of intentions: too many indigenous children, too many migrant children and too many children from less-advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (as noted in the Bradley Report), as well as too many children from what is generally designated as the mainstream spectrum, and for whom the idea of second-chance education is imperative because the first chance for whatever reason has been lost. It goes without saying, but needs to be said, that we all desire the best education possible for our children, to enable them to fulfil their intellectual and creative potential, to find happiness and to be able to contribute meaningfully, as well as to best equip them for the challenges of life and living.

There is a cost – human, personal, communal, social, national, health, financial and economic – to not taking this opportunity to address these concerns. Beyond the continuation and pain of present difficulties, and arguably the narrowing of creativity and growth, there is a huge cost of educational disenfranchisement in a fragile world – from social welfare to the awful idea of home grown terrorism, such as that recently experienced in England.

This nation is a very specific place, in a globalised and interconnected world but in a very different hemisphere (figuratively and metaphorically) to those countries from which we have inherited most of our ideas about curriculum, school, education, and of course literacy. We have to think much more carefully about this glossed over adjective, ‘national’. What does it mean? What can we make it mean? What is this nation Australia? What opportunities does the introduction of such a curriculum offer for a ‘clever country’?

Embracing the idea of the ‘national’, rather than solely concentrating on the subject matter of a national curriculum, shifts an emphasis to a rethinking of its foundational paradigms and perspectives. This leads to a number of questions that it would be seemly to address; some of these include the following.

In relation to current curriculum organisation – have we got the best disciplines and organisations of disciplines? This pertains to qualitative and subjective ideas about what the Australian child needs to know, and I’m reminded of traditional ideas about the *trivium* (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and *quadrivium* (geometry, astronomy, arithmetic and harmonics). What do we want discipline structures to achieve? How does curriculum (and implications of core knowledge) relate to choice and individual needs? What philosophies of education are we practising about that what fits where and how? Have we taken on board sufficiently the complicated requirement of preparing children for an environment of flexible and fluid patterns of life employment? Are there matches or mismatches of the knowledge and skills taught as part of the curriculum and the needs people will have to be equipped to deal with new and emerging life challenges?

Importantly, have we addressed ideas about the disciplines we offer children as part of this curriculum in relation to current thinking about interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, and the implicated reference of the needs of a connected world? Learning theorists such as Gibbons and others point out two modes of knowledge production: *Mode 1*, which is traditional, disciplinary, homogeneous, organisationally formulated and preserved; and *Mode 2*, which is transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, and organisationally transient (Gibbons et al 1994, p.3). Interdisciplinarity refers to how knowledge in one discipline (say music) can enhance knowledge in another discipline (say Maths), but in the production of transdisciplinary knowledge, ‘the intellectual agenda is not set within a particular discipline ...’ (Gibbons et al, p.27). Literacy is part of serious literature study (Mode 1) as well as part of youth mobile messaging cultures (Mode 2).

Transdisciplinarity is an intellectual dynamic which encourages movement *between, across, beyond and beneath* traditional disciplinary structures. In its final report, the Commonwealth of Virginia's Commission on the University of the Twenty-first Century found that 'the disciplines are no longer adequate to what we know and the problems we must solve.' It called for 'a basic transformation in the way Virginia thinks about higher education, the way colleges and universities think about their responsibilities, and the way faculties think about knowledge and their disciplines' (Klein, Report, p. 235).

Have we incorporated – and do we plan to do so as part of this curriculum – how this might affect ideas about school, its organisation and structures? Have we really considered the twenty-first century school – the traditional places of formal instruction and teaching/learning – in terms of physical space, pedagogical space, virtual space?

This moment in time presents an opportunity to provoke radical but informed thinking, not thinking necessarily constrained by inherited systems from another place and another time. Researchers and educators have an important role to play as we interrogate what has been and dream what is not. I want to briefly outline three areas as examples where we could consider other perspectives and rethink existing paradigms. In doing so, I am sharply reminded of how deeply the Western idea of perspective, and its diminishing or vanishing point, was part of my youthful thinking, and how revelatory it was when I found out about Australian Aboriginal perspective, and looked down at landscapes and artwork that I now read and perceived in totally different and liberated ways.

The first pertains to that core of the curriculum, the discipline of 'English.' Are there advantages in reconceptualising English as something like 'Languages, Literatures and Multimodal Communications',

or 'Languages and Literatures'? This may be a mouthful, but perhaps it would be a taste more suitable for Australia – with its rich indigenous and diverse cultural provenances – as a literate nation. Such a discipline would of course teach and respect and affirm English as the shared Australian language (its grammar and linguistics, its literature) but it would also accommodate ideas about the reading of images and signs (reading the visual) as part of language and literacy. Language can be graphic – even 'wordless'; literature can include texts that have no words, such as graphic novels. This idea harmonises with traditions of indigenous story told through the language of art. Indeed, it would be interesting to begin a discussion about a re-thinking of curriculum organisation that thus included art – and indeed musical language – in a discipline of Multimodal Communication (rather than, say, of Creative Arts, which too often, and unfairly, appear as add-ons).

The second area also pertains to language. Australians need to learn more languages, be expanded to think and ponder in and through different language systems. And there should be, at least in primary and middle school, and notwithstanding difficulties of language selection, a more than superficial study of an appropriate regional Aboriginal language set in its context of history and cosmology.

For indigenous children who speak a mother tongue in their homes and communities, teaching of the subject Languages and Literatures and Multimodal Communications should be bilingual (notwithstanding the former Federal Government's discontinuation of funding for Northern Territory bilingual programs). Lack of respect of one's own language as an Aboriginal Australian is lack of respect for identity, for one's own sense of being. It is immoral, as well as unnecessary, in a well constructed curriculum.

We need to set in place specific resonances between the need to teach standards in English and the need to sustain and in some instances resurrect indigenous languages, as the Federal Government media release of August 9th has acknowledged:

The new National Indigenous Languages Policy is aimed at keeping Indigenous languages alive and supporting Indigenous Australians to connect with their language, culture and country.

Including the study of an appropriate Aboriginal regional language for all Australian children is obviously not language for mainstream communication as such. It represents however a communication beyond language – a cultural communication, like art, like dance. Set alongside the rich traditions of English, it enhances the idea of literacy in the Australian context and demonstrates respect for those whose history stretches furthest into the past of the country we all now share.

The third area is intimated in the above and pertains to the arts. Could such a re-thinking of curriculum organisation include art and musical language in a discipline of Multimodal Communication? In the challenges of the Australian context, there are rich possibilities for making meaningful connections in terms of the centrality of the arts in indigenous learning experience and in Western cultural experience.

The arts – literature in all its forms, theatre and cinema, dance, music, drawing and painting and sculpture – both sustain and create literate nations. The arts are historically and culturally charged ‘habitats’ which emerge from the experience of humankind in history. Discipline-driven Western curricula have tended to separate the arts from mainstream learning. On the other hand, indigenous modes of knowledge and wisdom transmission are arts-based and arts-generated; story and song cycle and dance and visual arts shape and are shaped by social, learning, and spiritual experience.

Whilst Western curricula may not necessarily reflect this, the arts play a vital role in the constitution of national capital and national heritage. It is important to note that they are ‘creative’ not only for those who create them (the artists and writers and composers) but for those who interact with them and imaginatively participate in them, as readers and viewers.

The many creative forms of the arts stimulate and inspire responsive creativity – activating thinking and the engagement of the emotions, inspiring senses of the aesthetic, generating connections between artistic and lived experience. Creativity is contagious, both active and vicarious; it jumps from one thought to another, from one mind to another, from one imagination to another, from one mode of expression to another, from outer worlds to inner worlds, and from inner worlds to outer worlds.

The arts play to and play out the great mystery in human lives and provide a ready forum for the discussion of moral issues, with all their concomitant stresses and ambiguities. Books and drama and art do not necessarily provide pat answers; rather, they peel open the sites of the most challenging of questions. They help to unpick and interpret the density of living, as we do in Australia, in a multicultural and multi-faith society. Readers and viewers peer *through* the arts – as they peer through the arts associated with religious imageries – to test and observe the engagement of others (real and fictional) with the pressures of daily life, as well as with the clouds of unknowing. Indeed, the intersection of arts and religion – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and indigenous religions – provides an insightful and respectful introduction, in a multicultural multi-faith community, to negotiating the sensitivities of the intercultural/interfaith divide.

In considering this idea of a national curriculum in the context of literate Australia, I suggest thinking about two different organisational paradigms. One relates to an idea of *interdisciplinary genealogies* – that is, exploring transforming ways of relating human presents to shared pasts, or shared presents to different pasts (for example, relating in authentic ways algorithms and algebra to the Muslim story of *Al-Jabr wa al-Muqabalah*). The other pertains to an idea of *interdisciplinary ecologies* – different ways of relating humans to external and internal environments, including technology and design; contemplating with wonder (which is more than the questioning ‘I wonder ...?’), and beyond any disciplinary restraint, the

dynamic yet subtle interactions and imbrications of human and species and external and internal ecosystems.

Such paradigms may generate a framework of philosophy that accommodates the ambivalences and ambiguities of difference and encourages empathies in relation to heterogeneity. Such philosophies – leavening around ideas of *same-but-different*, *different-but-same* – may give rise to another shape of national story, tell other knowledge tales. This is not assimilation, where difference is absorbed into the mainstream, and not multiculturalism, where difference too often produces alienation on all sides. Rather, it represents a healthy and dynamic cultural evolution, generous-spirited and subjunctively oriented. We have to plan curricula for the Australia that *is*, not the mono-cultural, more-or-less homogenous Australia that was. We have to plan curricula for the Australia we *want to be*, educationally and economically, socially and morally.

In conclusion, we are all in the right place at the right time. Physical and spiritual connections to lived place have long and deep traditions in many cultures; they reach beyond ideas of power and ownership. A national curriculum celebrates who and what we are, and respects the deep sense of spiritual commitment of all its citizens to land and place – that of Australian aborigines and their profound ideas of the Dreaming, and that of Christians and Jews and others who feel a similarly deep and profound love and attachment to something they can never own but that they see as God’s creation of the natural world.

Australia is a complex and unique country, with complicated needs and an intricate and intriguing cultural fabric. We need to construct our own paradigms, review our perspectives, and create innovative models of curricula – 21st century models that are forward looking, and responsive, ethical and elegant. The enterprise of education is a lovely thing. Cultures and nations are continuously evolving, borrowing, appropriating, changing, and whilst people may live at the same national address there are inevitably

tender and complex differences. We somehow have to use talk-story and listen-story to work with difference and construct curricula that promote a literate, imaginative, creative, sustainable nation and shared visions. Jonathan Lear, in *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, describes how Plenty Coups, the last great chieftain of the Crow nation in the United States, was able to offer the Crow, after the disappearance of the Buffalo and their shift to reservations, ‘a traditional way of going forward’ (2006, p.154). Bearing in mind what tradition might mean in the multi-traditional, multi-faceted nation that is Australia, perhaps this is an idea that could inform our own thinking at this exciting and provocative time.

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