SOSE curriculum structures: Where to now?

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Introduction

Curriculum structures have changed dramatically over the last few decades. For much of the 20th century curriculum structures were disciplinary but the early 1990s saw the introduction of Key Learning Areas [KLAs] as curriculum organisers across all Australian States and Territories. The traditionally separate disciplines of history, geography and economics were, in all States excepting New South Wales [NSW] subsumed into the Studies of Society and Environment [SOSE] KLA. Teachers who once taught history, geography and economics have found themselves teaching in the SOSE KLA which Taylor (2007) has described as a grab-bag of disparate disciplines. Whilst KLAs were arguably never intended to act as Taylor has described, considerable confusion over the nature and purpose of KLAs (with specific reference to SOSE) exists. Some teachers for example, saw this as the death of their disciplines whilst others saw it as an opportunity to explore multidisciplinary teaching and learning. Regardless of opinion, many SOSE teachers and tertiary education students often ask a familiar question - What am I supposed to teach and how am I supposed to teach it? And it is with this in mind that we examine a range of current and possible SOSE curriculum structures.

This uncertainty has been fuelled by the recent release of Federalist paper 2: The Future of Schooling in Australia (2007). This paper promotes discussion
about the future of SOSE with some interpreting this report as the death of SOSE and the re-establishment of the ‘traditional’ disciplines of History, Geography and Economics (newspaper headlines included Back to Basics: SOSE scrapped in curriculum revamp). Whilst the introduction of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (2005) has pre-empted this move in Victoria, how other Australian States and Territories will respond to The Future of Schooling in Australia is unclear. At this juncture it seems appropriate to explore a range of alternate SOSE curriculum structures – disciplinary, multidisciplinary, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary. These varied curriculum structures position the teaching of and learning of SOSE in very different ways and provide some insight into the perennial SOSE question – what am I supposed to teach and how am I supposed to teach it?

For reader ease, this paper comprises three sections. In the first section we overview recent debate about the purpose and nature of SOSE and examine political attempts toward a national curriculum as an important factor shaping the future of SOSE. In the second section we explore various curriculum frameworks (disciplinary, multidisciplinary, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary) and evaluate their potential as effective SOSE curriculum organisers. In the final section, we draw earlier sections together and tentatively discuss the potential impact/s of these varied curriculum frameworks on the work of SOSE teachers and teacher education students.

**Recent debate about the purpose and nature of SOSE**

Political calls for “back to the basics” curriculum reform are not new although it is fair to say that such calls are generally conservative in nature and argue for the consolidation and/or revival of disciplinary curriculum. Indeed, the recent release of *The Future of Schooling in Australia* has reignited debate about curriculum change with some seeing this report as traditionalist in its conception and others viewing it as progressive. The report was commissioned to evaluate educational standards in Australia and to review The Adelaide Declaration (1999). Part of the impetus for this report was
concerns about the rigour and quality of school curriculum. This concern is widespread with the Australian Prime Minister, Mr John Howard, calling for a “root and branch” curriculum renewal amidst concerns that the school curriculum was being dumbed down (Tomazin, 2007). It appears that State and Territory leaders agree with Mr Howard as *The Future of Schooling in Australia* represents a State-Territory consensus to develop a nationally consistent curriculum. The findings of *The Future of Schooling in Australia* are critical of the SOSE KLA claiming “its focus is not clear from the label” (2007, p14) and suggest an overhaul of the SOSE KLA:

It has become increasingly clear that what should be studied under this label, are the disciplines of history, geography and economics... in the statement about the future of schooling in Australia... these disciplines are made explicit under the umbrella of the social science/humanities (2007, p14).

It is worth noting that there has been contention about the *Future of Schooling in Australia Report*. Taylor claims that report is ‘strange’ in that “it came from nowhere and was written by an anonymous steering committee” and that the report is a timely attempt to raise the national curriculum stakes (2007, p_). He goes on to welcome what he sees as the demise of SOSE which he variously refers to as “a grab-bag of disparate disciplines” and “the social slops”. Tudbull takes a more liberal review of *The Future of Schooling in Australia* and rather than viewing the report as swathed in the rhetoric of ‘back to basics’ she states that:

It highlights the educational goals for all young adults to leave school with the capacity to communicate and learn in an increasingly globalised context, that will require intercultural understanding and new knowledge and skills that are taught through SOSE (2007,p3).

The future of SOSE is therefore open to interpretation. This contention highlights the need to examine a range of alternate curriculum frameworks for the teaching of SOSE as are outlined in the following section.
SOSE: Some alternate curriculum frameworks

Public debate over the future of SOSE tends to focus on the maintenance of KLAs or the return to a disciplinary structure. On the surface therefore, it appears that the two curriculum structures that are on offer are dichotomous – disciplinary versus an attempt at multidisciplinary curriculum; but what do these different curriculum structures mean for the teaching and learning of SOSE? Below we discuss these two curriculum frameworks and explore two alternate frameworks – interdisciplinary and trandisciplinary. Our discussion is based on the following definitions offered by de Leo (2007).

**Disciplinary.** Epistemologies, assumptions, knowledge, skills, methods within the boundaries of one discipline (eg. Physics, History).

**Multidisciplinary.** Using the knowledge/understanding of more than one discipline (eg. Physics and History; Biology and Architecture)

**Interdisciplinary.** Using the epistemologies/methods of one discipline within another (eg. Biochemistry, Ecophilosophy, Astrophysics)

**Transdisciplinary.** Focus on an issue such as pollution or hunger both within and beyond discipline boundaries with the possibility of new perspectives.

We acknowledge that further theorisation of these definitions is needed but assert that they provide an effective base for discussions about SOSE curriculum structures. De Leo (2006) also offers the following figure to diagrammatically represent these varied curriculum structures:
Disciplinary curriculum frameworks: The case for separate disciplines

Traditionally, the humanities encompass a number of disparate disciplines which in Australian school contexts are often seen to comprise history, geography and economics. Elsewhere, we have examined the nature of disciplinary knowledge structures and their relationship to school subjects (see for example, Marsh and Harris, 2007). Certain academic disciplines traditionally have greater status than others and this is reflected in the status attributed to certain school subjects. For example, the introduction of KLAs in the early 1990s allowed certain disciplines to maintain their ‘stand alone’ status such as mathematics and English, whilst other disciplines such as history, geography and economics were subsumed into the conceptually amorphous SOSE KLA. This had implications for the amount of time allocated to the study of the formerly separate disciplines of history, geography and economics as the SOSE KLA (which at the junior secondary level incorporates these three disciplines plus Aboriginal Studies, Asian Social Studies, Studies of Religion, and work education¹) now shared this time. In describing history, geography and economics as both school subjects and disciplines we are acknowledging that history, geography and economics in schools are different to the tertiary academic disciplines of the same name. We are also acknowledging that within the SOSE KLA these school subjects have stronger disciplinary bases than other SOSE areas (such as work education and Aboriginal Studies).

Proponents of a disciplinary approach to SOSE, of whom Tony Taylor is one, are concerned with the generalist nature of the SOSE KLA and the impact that this has had on the status of SOSE and its related disciplines; “scant respect [is] given to SOSE in schools. In primary schools, everybody gets to be a SOSE teacher but not everybody wants to be one” (2007, p_). Whilst subject specialism has been linked to subject/discipline status within schools (Harris, 2005), a bigger issue might be that a disciplinary structure for the teaching of

¹ Variation exists across Australian States and Territories.
history, geography and economics acknowledges the important role that subject matter knowledge (or content knowledge) plays in the teaching and learning process. In a small study of secondary school geography teachers implementation of SOSE, Lam and Lidstone (2001) found that these geography teachers admitted they could not teach the non-geography topics as well as they should. Lam and Lidstone theorise that this is because these geography teachers did not have the necessary subject matter knowledge to teach SOSE in an integrative manner. It may also be that the tertiary preparation of these particular teachers was disciplinary in nature and that these teachers have been socialised into geography teacher identities.

Disciplinary curriculum structures act to maintain disciplinary boundaries and do so through the rhetoric of academic rigour and specialisation. Disciplinary curriculum structures have historically, dominated western schooling but increasingly, a number of varied integrated curriculum structures are emerging.

**The possibilities of integrated curriculum structures**

Integrated curriculum structures are not new; indeed there have been numerous SOSE (or equivalent) attempts at integrated curriculum over the decades. These include the Rugg materials in the 1930’s (Rugg, 1939), the Harvard Social Studies project in the 1960s (Oliver and Newman, 1967) and Man: a course of study (MACOS) in the 1970s (education development Corporation) service.

Recent proponents of integrated curriculum are critical of disciplinary curriculum structures; Lopes and de Macedo (2006) for example, argue that disciplinary curriculum structures control and reduce the range of possible discourses about the social objectives of education. Advocates of integrated curricula contend that the integration of a number of curricular and instructional elements will greatly benefit students because:

- they reduce the fragmentation of knowledge taught in separate
they encourage collaborative planning and problem solving;
they place the emphasis upon skills development rather than the coverage of subject matter;
they encourage students to search for patterns in, and connections between, ideas; and
they are more conducive to involving students in the curriculum development process (Frazer and Rudnitski, 1995).

Despite these positive attributes, integrated curriculum approaches (which tend to be process as opposed to product driven) have historically faced an uphill battle to secure legitimacy (Thornton, 2002). He contends that the current conservative wave and emphasis upon standards will make it very difficult for integrated approaches to get accepted.

Below we explore a range of integrated curriculum structures and the possibilities for SOSE. Whilst we acknowledge that integrated curriculum structures have both epistemological and pedagogical elements, our focus in this paper is an exploration of how varied curriculum structures act as ‘knowledge organisers’ and what these structures might offer SOSE.

**Multi-disciplinary curriculum frameworks: The promise of Key Learning Areas**

Arguably, the implementation of the SOSE KLA was an attempt at an integrated curriculum albeit an under-conceptualised one under-estimated the strong disciplinary cultures of schools. Whether the SOSE KLA was intended as a multidisciplinary curriculum structure, an interdisciplinary curriculum structure or a transdisciplinary curriculum structure is unclear although one might surmise that it was an attempt at a multidisciplinary curriculum structure. Multidisciplinarity as a concept has much to offer teachers and students. Geisler explains that the model of disciplinary teaching and learning...
on which western education is based, resembles the model of the modern industrial organisation. Education, she argues:

Was to prepare workers to participate in ... a rationalized work process, focused on preparing specialists to fulfil their duties in relatively narrow domains in which their specialized knowledge could be brought to bear (Geisler, 2002, p11).

Geisler continues and contends that:

Multidisciplinarity challenges this tenant of autonomous action by suggesting that real social, technical and scientific challenges cannot be met through the sequential application of disciplinary techniques. Instead, disciplines must undertake projects collaboratively (2002, p11).

Conceived of in this sense multidisciplinary curriculum structures have the potential to engage students in deliberative action; students can use specialised disciplinary techniques to generate proposals and then utilise a range of disciplinary values to evaluate them (Geisler, 2002). Geisler's conceptualisation of multidisciplinarity is however, constructed within a tertiary education context and the disciplinary base of school subjects (such as history, geography and economics) are arguably different to the tertiary academic disciplines so this understanding of multidisciplinary teaching and learning needs to be contextualised within a school curricula setting. Having said this, Geisler mandates three essential criteria for multidisciplinary curriculum. These are:

- A multidisciplinary curriculum must be a public curriculum; it must provide students with opportunities to cross disciplinary boundaries.
- A multidisciplinary curriculum must be productive; it must engage students in projects with recognized cultural value, to help them to do, not just to know, appreciate and understand.
- A multidisciplinary curriculum must be concurrent. It cannot sequence students’ interactions with disciplines, placing their disciplinary learning as subsequent to and set apart from education in other disciplines (2002, p13).

Whilst there are undeniably possibilities for the SOSE KLA in terms of multidisciplinarity, these possibilities have gone largely unfulfilled in the teaching and learning of SOSE within Australian schools. This is because the development and implementation of KLAs as curriculum organisers has been
under theorised and whilst the SOSE KLA can be seen as an attempt at integrated curriculum, the practice of SOSE teachers does not match this intention. There are a number of reasons for this, many of which are founded in the strong subject cultures on which schools are based. These include:

- In many States the preparation of teachers has continued to be discipline rather than KLA based and those tertiary institutions that have instituted KLA preparation of SOSE teachers continue to include Faculty of Arts Courses (many of which are disciplinary in nature) as the source of teacher education students content knowledge.
- The up-take of KLAs as curriculum organisers within schools has been differential. Some schools have implemented KLA departments and staffrooms and KLA coordinators whilst others continue to rely on subject departments and single subject Head Teachers (such as the History Head Teacher etc).
- The implementation of the SOSE KLA across many schools has had a negative impact on the status of the disciplines, subjects and issues it encompasses and also on SOSE teachers, as measured by timetabling and student enrolment numbers.
- There has been little to no professional development for teacher educators and teachers in terms of how to teach with a multidisciplinary focus and indeed how to teach in process (as opposed to product) oriented ways.
- There has been little discussion of appropriate multidisciplinary pedagogies (including appropriate assessment practices).
- Teachers have been resistant to multidisciplinary curriculum structures because they often assume that they advocate generalist teaching as opposed to specialist teaching (and to refer to a well-worn metaphor suggest that teachers become a Jack/Jill of all trades but a master of none).

Certainly there is a case for teachers to cross the well-established intellectual divisions (disciplines) and social and institutional boundaries - but this is a
very tall order (Bullough, 2006). Given this we consider the possibilities of two alternate integrated curriculum structures, those of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary frameworks below.

**Interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary curriculum structures**

Interdisciplinary curriculum structures differ from multidisciplinary frameworks in that rather than working from a disciplinary base teachers and students work “at the periphery of their discipline, borrowing the techniques, values or mandates of a nearby discipline in order to address pressing questions (or social issues)” (Geisler, 2002, p10). In this sense the original discipline undergoes a process of renewal as it is through such ‘borrowings’ that disciplines remake themselves. Interdisciplinarity can be seen as a reaction against excessive knowledge specialisation and it aims to “develop a greater understanding of a problem that is too complex or wide ranging (i.e. AIDS pandemic, global warming) to be dealt with using the knowledge and methodology of one discipline” (Wikipedia, 2007).

An interdisciplinary curriculum structure would however need to be founded on the periphery of one discipline and one has to question which discipline (history, geography, economics) would be utilised as the parent discipline in the teaching of these school subjects. It might be that SOSE teachers commit to an interdisciplinary approach to the teaching of SOSE issues and utilise varied disciplinary bases to examine issues from an interdisciplinary angle.

In transdisciplinary curriculum structures boundaries between disciplines are dissolved and teachers and students work across a range of disciplines to address a particular problem or issue. In this sense history, geography and economics would not exist as distinct disciplines or school subjects. Rather, the focus of teaching and learning SOSE would become problematised and students would engage with addressing social issues and problems such as sustainability, globalisation and diversity for example. Whilst a
transdisciplinary approach to the teaching and learning of SOSE is certainly alluring how such an approach might be conceptualised and then operationalised is unclear and sits at odds with teaching practice. There is also a sense that claims of transdisciplinary curricula are based on rhetoric alone and/or are vague and unclear. For example, the Tasmanian Department of Education define transdisciplinary learning as:

Complex, active learning based on significant issues, tasks, questions or problems, each delivering a range of learning outcomes deriving from several key learning areas; ideas that draw on knowledge and methodologies from several disciplines.

(http://www.ltag.education.tas.gov.au/glossary.htm#transdisc)

This definition whilst encouraging in terms of scope, is diffuse and teachers whilst supportive of the concept, may have trouble operationalising transdisciplinary learning. This is a significant issue given that the Tasmanian Essential Learnings Curriculum (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2003) was initially shaped around ‘personal futures’ and ‘social responsibility’ and aimed at transdisciplinary teaching and learning. More recently, as a result of a directive from the Minister of Education, the new Tasmanian curriculum framework retains only some of the integrated elements, such as "thinking", ‘communication’, and ‘world and personal futures’ and there has been a reversion back to KLAs (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2007). This may reflect teachers concerns about transdisciplinary approaches to teaching and it undoubtedly reflects the lack of congruence between the intended and enacted curriculum.

Tasmania is not alone, in advocating an integrated curriculum structure. The New Basics is an attempt at a transdisciplinary curriculum. The focus of the New Basics is on ‘life pathways and social futures’; ‘Multiliteracies and Communications Media’; ‘Active Citizenship’; ‘Environments and Technologies’. Whilst significant support was offered to teachers in terms of pedagogy and assessment the New Basics have been met with some resistance and indeed, calls for greater academic rigour.
What is perhaps most interesting is the case of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards [VELS] which includes overarching curricular strands (Personal and Social Learning, Disciplinary Learning and Interdisciplinary learning). The interdisciplinary strand incorporates ‘communication’, ‘Thinking’ and ‘Information Communication Technology’. Whilst many contend that VELS challenges teachers to rethink how they plan for integrated learning (see for example, Murdoch, 2007), this hybrid curriculum structure has implications for the practice of SOSE teachers. On the one hand it eschews KLAs and advocates a disciplinary focus (history, geography and economics are reinstated). On the other hand, SOSE teachers must also teach across the other strands (Civics and Citizenship is one of the Personal and Social learning domains). This has implications for the ways in which SOSE teachers work. Whilst many schools have retained SOSE classes across years 7-10 and retained SOSE teachers (who teach across the SOSE KLA spectrum), this does not really reflect the intentions of VELS nor does it align with the findings of The Future of Schooling in Australia. Importantly, integrated curriculum structures are not only knowledge organisers, they have philosophical and pedagogical implications some of which we have touched on in this paper.

**Where to now?**

SOSE teachers currently find themselves at a cross-road (or perhaps it is more aptly described as a precipice?). Recent curricular changes in Australia (as detailed above) indicate that state and territory systems are endeavouring to come up with an alternative to the disciplinary-based framework. They have adjusted to local contexts and as a result of extensive consultation with teachers, principals and parents, have produced structures which they consider best suit their needs. However, it would seem that many of the decisions have been based more on pragmatic than theoretical considerations. The long-term impact of various integrated, inter-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches does not look all that promising.
References


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