We have the three Rs, now for the three As!
Incredible energies are poured into finding the right curriculum; as a teacher of senior school English I have watched over 25 years as the curriculum ebbs and flows. In Victoria, 2008 sees another change, this time with a grand sense of deja vu as I recognise a return to my own days completing the HSC in the late 70s. Texts in theme-based groups and singular text study. It is easy for me with hindsight to look at that course, and reflect on the influence the broad curriculum, and specifically the English curriculum, had on my interests and pathways as an adult.

So why do I come along to a curriculum conference with a focus on the performing arts and sport?
In truth it would be far easier for me to speak about one of the senior literature texts, or the place of literacy in the curriculum, only because they are areas I have studied quite extensively, and, I would feel comfortable there would be a captive audience. After all, the importance of literacy is widely acknowledged by students, teachers and parents as being worthy of a focus. So what brings me to sport, music and drama. While I still dabble in English, with my one class a hobby farm of sorts, it is the balancing of sport, music and drama with academic pursuits that has been my major task over the past 5 years. Thankfully, I have found that while the media is always quick to pick up on the need to promote literacy, in recent years there has been an increasingly more prominent focus on the need for students to be healthy; suddenly the three Rs are not the only focus. I strongly applaud this balance, finally recognising that there are holistic needs for students, indeed all people, that should include an acknowledgement of Academia, Arts and Activity. Lets call it the three As. In truth, the aspect that attracted me to this particular conference was not the focus on curriculum, but the word ‘Diversity’. I have no idea what individuals hope to gain from the conference, but if an acknowledgement that kids are different and diverse options means a better education, then this is the place for me. A frustration I have with our education system, and is still alive and kicking today is encapsulated in the fact that senior students, when contemplating course selections, tell me  
“I can’t do the hard subjects.” I usually respond with, “what? You can’t do art?” knowing full well they are probably referring to the maths/science courses as the so-called hard subjects. Why is it that people call them the hard subjects? I can’t draw, so I naturally think art is hard! Surely it’s all relative. We often talk of the ideal classroom. There was mention of streaming, a dirty word from the 70s, in the Minister’s opening address to this conference. Most would suggest now that we should not stream, that we need a mixed ability classroom, other debates focus on single-sex versus co-education and catering for boys in the middle years of schooling. All have a broad focus, and certainly pay heed to the concept of diversity. But what if we dared to bring the focus tighter. Rather than the ideal school, or ideal classroom, what do we see as the ideal student?

One of the intriguing aspects of the teaching profession is that we are able to stand back, on occasion, like proud parents, and watch as those we have been privileged to guide are free to run on their own, exploring personal pathways. So who is the one that has made you most proud, the student who you reflect upon and think, I did make a difference. We
could probably spend hours discussing with each other the characters, both public figures and more private individuals we have come across in the classroom. Tales of great students we have taught. Part of our professional legacy.

In my 2nd year of teaching I struck an adventurous Nick Cave, artist extraordinaire and literature student. In truth, he probably taught me more than I taught him. I recently ran into an ex-student at the MTC Othello production, she too was there with a school group and I sensed some pride in the fact that I had not killed off her appreciation of literature. I have an older acquaintance whose claim to fame is that he had Christopher Skase in his economics class, he rarely uses the word “taught”, preferring instead to say that Skase was in his class. I’m not sure if Skase is one to boast about, although he did make headlines in the business section of newspapers. And not surprisingly, in our sports mad Australian society I am usually on solid ground in telling people that Eagles footballer Chris Judd was in my year 12 English class several years ago.

**So who is the most famous, or infamous, you have taught**

**Another question may well be, if you could wave a wand, who would you like to teach? Who is your perfect student?**

It is this hypothetical that forms the basis for me today.

I was recently in a school with a program demanding compulsory involvement in a co-curricular program for all students in the secondary part of the school. You can only imagine the correspondence received from parents of, let’s call them the more precious students, in years 11 and 12. The following is an actual letter, kept by me to be used as part of my case for the compulsory inclusion of sport and the performing arts during the course of a school week for students of all ages. The letter reads

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To Whom It May Concern

My daughter is in year 12 and has been involved in many activities over the course of her 5 years at the school. In younger years she was in the middle school production, and has always enjoyed her tennis and regularly played soccer in winter. However, as she completes her final year she is not managing her time and now needs to have time for her school work. We have discussed this at length at home and have decided that she won’t do soccer through the remaining part of the season, can you inform the coach of this change.

Regards

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It all seems so logical as a parent. As a father of three children at various points in their secondary schooling, I can empathise with the parent who presents such an argument. But the easy solution is not always the best solution. I suspect the easy solution for parents with their own children, and if drawn out further the easy solution for schools and their broad focus, is to grab at sport and the performing arts as the first one to be sacrificed if a quick fix is required. What comeback do we have to the parent who writes, or the student who complains, or the school that claims that the performing arts and sport should be the
first to go? It has been and continues to be a source of frustration for me as I believe it is a fallacy happily perpetuated.

I sought to have 2 questions answered:

1. Is there a correlation between academic performance and involvement in sport and the performing arts?
2. Is there a positive pastoral impact felt by an individual through involvement in sport and the performing arts?

I decided to do my own study, with a core sample group of 265 students. These students were in a secondary school that demanded a compulsory involvement in either sport, the performing arts or both, over a 25 week period, with the expectation that even those students in years 11 and 12 were involved on at least one afternoon per week in such programs. By afternoon I mean from 3.30-5pm. I tracked the course of the 265 students, paying particular attention to the type of activity and commitment to this program. While I accept that the final TER is only one measure of success, and that the more able students are more likely to balance limited time with a breadth of commitments, the final result was not surprising. While not surprising, it was certainly affirming of the complementary impact the performing arts and sport can have on academic achievement. After ranking the 265 students according to their TER, I looked at the top 40 students against the bottom 40 students, almost one third of the cohort, according to the study score rankings. I asked two questions. Did the student complete 25 weeks without any unexplained absences? Did the student participate as a key member in a First sports team or have a significant role in a performing arts group? If answered YES to either question, I placed a tick beside the student’s name. If answered NO to both questions, that is they neither excelled at an activity, nor completed the requisite commitment, then I placed a cross next to their name. Of the top 40 TER scores in the cohort of 265, not one student received a cross. Of the bottom 40 TER scores, 31 students received a cross. As is the case with any statistics they can be read in many ways. Yes, as noted, the top 40 are more likely better time managers and more able to balance numerous tasks. But the lack of balance, the suffocating approach to study and lack of understanding of the worth of the performing arts and sport by the poorer performed students, more often than not supported by parents, is deserving of attention. The three Rs is always forefront in thinking, we should continue to promote the three As. Academia, Arts and Activity.

The 2nd of my questions: Is there a positive pastoral impact felt by an individual through involvement in sport and the performing arts? is a work in progress. I have looked at an extensive survey of school leavers, a sample group of approximately 130 students or half the cohort, where questions about all aspects of their time at school had to be answered. Each area was given a ranking from 1-6(6 being the highest) In the 2006 survey, School leavers rated the sense of worth found through involvement in sport and the performing arts was higher than any other school activity. This included classroom activity and designated pastoral time in the traditional House system. Again, statistics can mislead, but I come back to what I believe is a truism. When kids are asked why they do sport or the performing arts, they generally say it is to have fun. Simply put, when having fun, a more balanced and directed kid can grow.
Let me then come back to my premise, who is the ideal student. I can think of many. Yet the type that remains most attractive for me is the so-called renaissance man, that is, a modern scholar who is in a position to acquire more than superficial knowledge about many different interests. **Consider someone such as Leonardo da Vinci- a person often considered to be the epitome of the ‘renaissance man’-. The question could then be asked, by all of us, as to whether the curriculum can possibly produce such a person.**

Leonardo's interests were so broad, and he was so often compelled by new subjects, that he usually failed to finish what he started. This lack of "stick-to-it-ness" resulted in his completing only about six works in these 17 years, including works such as the much renowned "The Last Supper", and he apparently left dozens of paintings and projects unfinished or unrealized. He spent most of his time studying science, either by going out into nature and observing things or by locking himself away in his workshop cutting up bodies or pondering universal truths. Between 1490 and 1495 he developed his habit of recording his studies in meticulously illustrated notebooks. His work covered four main themes: painting, architecture, the elements of mechanics, and human anatomy. Place him in a school in Australia today and I wonder what course the careers counsellor would encourage the 15 year old Leonardo to pursue.

*Don’t be a fool son, keep up your chemistry, you’ll make a fine doctor. Painting? Forget painting. You do realise the creative arts will be scaled down and Theatre Studies will only be a distraction regardless of what you think you could bring to a stage set. No, Chemistry with a dash of Methods and Physics will suit you well.*

2 questions can be asked.

1. **Is a diverse education a good education for the individual student- do we want to breed Leonarados?**
2. **Does our education system encourage such diversity**

Some may say the Baccalareute program is as close as we come to manifesting a diverse range of skills in our students. Here is a course that does not simply encourage diversity but demands it. A student must complete a Theory of Knowledge essay, a requisite number of community service hours, learn a second language, study science, maths, humanities and of course their first language. Lenoardo would have approved, I think. Certainly there is more diversity demanded than a VCE certificate that seems to encourage specialisation. I have already expressed my concern at the way 14 and 15 year olds are being told that their decision regarding selection of VCE subjects could impact for life. Whatever you do, make sure you keep your options open and study chemistry. There may well be method in the madness, a means to an end if the end is a university course with a high enter score, but I’m left wondering at times whether we are doing students a disservice, and allowing parents to drive the course offerings. Suddenly, parents are the educational experts. My son/daughter must do this or that because……

So as we talk about diversity, I look closely and continue to see many of the same things being said to teenagers today that were said to me. And yes, that does worry me. I may hear diversity in theory, but I’m not convinced the public is always prepared to buy.
Diversity for me includes a breadth of curriculum offerings, but it also includes a diversity of options in music, sport, and drama?

The argument that I present is that the healthy approach to education is the balanced education, something which can still be managed in our current system if we are willing to present a case to parents, and inevitably, justification to the students.

My proposal is simple,

- I believe all students at all levels should have regular involvement in sport, or, as I prefer to call it, activity,
- that all students should be exposed to the performing arts with opportunity to be involved, and that the school day should allow students access to such a breadth of experience.

It may well be idiosyncratic of Australia, but I believe that we embrace sport, while we are still some way from recognising the importance of an involvement in the performing arts. Could I make it compulsory for all year 10-12 students to be involved in a sporting activity for a minimum 2 hours a week? I may gain support- but what about if I tried to do the same in the performing arts? I fear I would struggle.

So what should we do?
I have been fortunate to experience an environment in recent years that does try to present the sport/activity program and the performing arts program as being vital to a students health and well being, for life. And isn’t that the lesson we should be considering on occasions. What will our students be doing with themselves at 25, 35, 45? Will they be interested in attending a Rugby international, attending the Australian Opera and still actively involved in local theatre or sporting clubs? Or more simply, will they have been exposed to enough experiences, diversity, to see them walk into adulthood as more balanced people, able to appreciate, and in many cases have an active involvement in, sport, drama and music. It gets me mad when I read of those like Keith Dunstan who initiate a club, the anti football league, or conversely, the football jock who dares not walk into an art gallery for fear of, in using the vernacular of the 1970s, turning into a poofer. I don’t get it. Schools should not be a place where such attitudes are ever encouraged, albeit implicitly, through a program that does not manifest a diversity of interest.

I am convinced there are ways to achieve this in our current structures, although some massaging is required.
As is the case with anything, sufficient resources, both human and physical, are required to maximise the potential of such a program.

In my experience, the following needs to be accepted by a school
1. **There is a need for all students to be engaged in physical activity.** Regardless of year level. Primary schools have it worked out, junior secondary maintain some ground, but senior secondary often lose the plot altogether. Why? I think there are several reasons. The first is the emphasis on competitive sport, the second is a legacy of the past where we cater for boys rather than girls. Why is it that, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, at age 18 over 90% of boys are involved in sport yet there are only 68% of girls involved? Further statistics tell us that female involvement only drops off marginally, through to the age of 60 where 65% of women are still engaged in sporting activity. What about men?

It steadily declines to the point where under 50% of men at age 65 are actively engaged in a sport. While not blaming schools for this, I think there is enough evidence when looking at the primary and junior secondary student contrasted against the senior secondary student to recognise the pattern. I am in a school where an after school sport/activity is compulsory. There is rarely an issue with attendance through to year 8/9, but come years 11/12 things start to happen. Parents write notes, students write false notes and the activity is often placed at a time that told everyone it was an extra which was not really necessary. Changes had to be made:

i. the first was to **introduce a range of non-competitive programs** to encourage those who were not enthused by the sense of combat. Bike Fitness, a weekly ride on Yarra trails with 30 bikes and helmets provided, and Taekwondo with an outside instructor catering for beginners. These were two activities introduced to cater for the less competitive minded students.

ii. Another was the **deliberate move away from the more traditional sporting activities** that, according to statistics, no longer provided an interest for senior students. Dance was introduced, not ballroom but a funk/jazz class that taught students moves to be used on weekends! Yoga was an initiative from the counselling centre often targeting specific senior students and a general fitness group proved an absolute winner with year 12 girls who took this on as their once a week session. They had no interest in winning, but like most 17 year olds were mindful of body image and eagerly took up the class.

iii. The final one, yet to be completed, and one of the more difficult, is **the focus on the middle band student, not dissimilar to the classroom.** The top end is easy, the elite will often be the centre of our attention but in reality they are self-managed. The bottom end, the refusals, again take our time, and in the case of the activities offered merely needed a change of program, thus the bikes and dance and yoga. But the middle band is not so simple. It is here that I think the manager or coach plays a significant role. **Pastoral care is crucial. Here we have individuals who are not naturally gifted but love their activity. Patience is required.** I believe a skills-based coach is not the primary ingredient at this level. I have done this and made mistakes. The prime ingredient is the close nurturing of the student’s ego in order to retain a life interest. **They need to be taught, but far more importantly, they simply need to be encouraged.**
There was a minor revolt from the purists who felt all students should be playing cricket and/or football against another school. In my mind, they didn’t get it. I wanted a program that developed a pattern for life, the sporting program, like the classroom, had to be diverse, and it had to provide a life pathway.

2. There is a need to be engaged in the performing arts
I then turned my attention to the performing arts with some trepidation, expecting the figures to be damning. However, I was pleasantly surprised. Believe it or not, around 65% more Australians attend cultural venues as go to sporting events. In Victoria, when mapping attendance at the 'Top Ten' arts and sporting events - the five most popular cultural activities and the five most popular sports - arts has a clear lead. Only Australian Rules football makes it into the top five. The remaining sports have attendance rates the equivalent of the less popular arts events such as dance and classical music. Much of this is put down to the healthy excursion program run by schools, exposing students to the performing arts. We are doing a lot right at the school level.

- In the 12 months to April 2006, 30% of children aged 5 to 14 years a performing arts event.

However, attendance at, and involvement in, becomes a different statistic. While an estimated 63% (1,691,100 children) had played a sport or activity organised by a school, club or association, during the same period, only 33% of children were involved in either playing a musical instrument, singing, dancing or drama.

3. A timetable must be created that prioritises activities. If time is not stipulated, inevitably, everyone loses due top clashes.

If we are to build diversity, the 9-3.30pm school day is a nonsense. The timetable must acknowledge sport and performing arts. This may mean the timetable commences at 7.30am and moves through to 5.30pm. Clashes will occur, diversity will be replaced by chaos and in house fighting unless breathing space is found in the timetable.

This was one of the first things embraced in developing a breadth of program.

What do we see as diversity in Education.
For me it is catering for the individual- sounds cliched doesn’t it.
How about we make it specific.
3 students- What do we do for each in order to generate diversity.
1. **What would you do with John?** John is an overseas student whose parents live in Hong Kong. He has no interest in traditional Australian recreations and increasingly finds a peer group beyond school- Develop an overseas students group.

2. **What would you do with Liz?** Liz is a 19 year old completing her final year at school. She spent a year overseas on exchange, is extremely independent, has little respect for parents and a demanding social life. – Develop Fitness Club

3. **What would you do with Clinton?** Clinton has aspergers- struggles with any team games and lacks coordination in mainstream programs. He gets extremely anxious performing with others. – Develop Bike Fitness.

We know kids have been born into a world where they embrace change, expect change. To fail to diversify is a death sentence, part of that diversification should include the performing arts and sport.

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