

State Differences and Australia's Curriculum Dilemmas

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I grew up in Victoria. I went to MacArthur St State School and Ballarat High School, then Melbourne University where I did a Dip Ed. A few years later I went to England and did a Master of Education degree. It was at the point where that country was moving from its 11+ dual track system of grammar schools and secondary modern schools to comprehensive schools. For some time there had been a big political debate about the advantages and disadvantages of comprehensives versus grammar schools in terms of opportunities and inequalities, but what I found among my fellow students were much more practical concerns: how on earth could they teach in a 'mixed ability' classroom? To many of them it seemed impossible. In Victoria I had finished 13 years of school and never experienced any classroom that was not 'mixed ability'.

I guess one of the reasons I went to England was that it still seemed like the country we referred to a lot for our own education directions and thinking, and it was recommended by the lecturers where I did my own initial teacher training, and certainly many of the books I had been reading during that were written by people working in England. But being there made me notice how a lot of things that were my experience, and that I took for granted, were subtly and sometimes not so subtly different. For example the role of inspectors (HMI) was a very live element of the regulation and assessment schools and teachers worked with; in my own state these had long ceased to be part of the scene. Local Education Authorities rather than central authorities decided much of the curriculum. And there seemed to be a different kind of active curriculum debate going on in the state I came from, where the teachers' unions, especially the VSTA, were very active in curriculum discussion and in promoting curriculum reforms. They wanted curriculum to be more relevant, to deal with some of the big issues of the day, through subjects like general studies. They sponsored conferences on curriculum issues, and published articles and books about them. There had even been a proposal that had made the newspapers in Victoria that entry to university should be by ballot, on the grounds that schooling was so unfair to working class kids. On the other hand, one of the nice things I found about being at university in England was that my fellow students and lecturers didn't take an interest in which school I had gone to, a practice that was a bit too prevalent in Melbourne. (They did make assumptions about me based on the fact that I was an Australian, but that's another matter).

It is easy even in relatively similar educational settings and discussions to under-estimate the ways our own particular experiences have formed different expectations not only about what matters, but about what is possible and what is likely to be a problem. Today I'm going to talk about a research project I started a few years ago to look at what had been happening around the different Australian states in terms of their changing curriculum

policies and their general climate of curriculum thinking in the decades prior to the formation of the National Curriculum Board and ACARA.

In doing this project I was trying to get a sense of two things – what had been changing over time, and what kind of persisting differences are there in different parts of the country.

I was not wanting just to do the kind of mapping that compares formal arrangements – starting ages, kinds of schools and school certificates, subjects offered and the like. What I was trying to get at were the values and tacit kinds of thinking that fed into these. When people in different states start thinking about curriculum reform or curriculum policies, what gets priority, what gets seen as a problem, where do they want to start the discussion?

And I was also interested in what had been happening over time - to try to get some birds' eye perspective of the changed thinking about curriculum and about schools there had been in those decades since I'd first come into education in the 1970s. Again I wasn't just trying to see what arrangements for schools and curriculum had changed but also to try to see how the thinking about things had changed. What kinds of things did people in the 70s assume needed to be done in curriculum policies, and how did this change in the 80s and 90s and now. So the point of this isn't just to feed prejudices and stereotypes about the bad old days or the good old days. It is one way of getting a fresh kind of look at where we are now, to try to see with fresh eyes what we take for granted or what our commonsense about curriculum action is that once was not always like that, and what we are not talking about now.

So although later I'm going to make a few comments about state differences etc as I saw these in the project, I'm not offering a definitive account on this, and not trying to ramp up differences compared with similarities – in that in a whole lot of ways, people are genuinely trying to deal with the same kinds of problems. I'm using the focus on state differences and change as a way in to thinking about what are some of the difficult things we need to try to achieve in our current work, including what are its blind spots.

The book from which the title of this talk was taken came from the project (see note 1 and attachment). It was edited and in part written with Cherry Collins and Kate O'Connor who worked with me on the project, and it includes chapters by authors from different states who have had a long involvement with the curriculum of their state. These accounts give some fascinating glimpses into how Australian authorities and systems at different places and different times have attempted to deal with big issues like assessment, inequalities and difference, vocational purposes, political purposes. So we have Alan Reid and Jim Dellit talking about the focus on equity and teacher professionalism in South Australia; Jack Keating and Margaret Vickers talking about vocational purposes and the different arrangements in Victoria and NSW and the effects of the paths they have taken; Rob Gilbert, Graham Maxwell and Joy Cumming talking about the rationale and effects of Queensland's move to moderated school-based assessment rather than external examinations; Penny Anderson, Karin Oerlemans and Jenni Connor discussing just what happened when Tasmania tried to develop an Essential Learnings based curriculum and why it was cut down; Bill Hannan, Bridget Leggett and Robyn White writing about the politics and struggles over assessment at particular points in Victoria and South Australia; and Colin Marsh and Geoff Riordan writing about some of the more direct individual politics involved in curriculum decision-making, in Colin's case talking about the earlier national experiment with profiles

and standards and its demise; in Geoff's case talking about the Metherall period and the setting up of the Board of Studies in NSW. I'm going to come back shortly to some of my own impressions both of state differences and the big issues, but I think the essays these very involved curriculum actors have written about their experiences are fascinating, and they are not cheer-leader type writing – in most cases they have critical reflections as well as appreciation of different paths we've gone down.

In the introduction to the book, we began by talking about the fact that curriculum, the field we all work in, is a 'deceptively' complicated topic. It is deceptive because it seems like something we all know about, it doesn't seem esoteric, it doesn't seem to need specialist knowledge, and yet it's not simple or transparent. Quoting from the opening of the book:

Curriculum is a deceptively complicated topic. It is an everyday topic, often in the newspapers, and a topic about which many have strong views. It is a topic where people may have stronger views about what they don't want, than what they do want. They know they want young people to write grammatically and spell correctly—but beyond basic literacy and numeracy, what else is needed as the best foundation for a world that is changing so very rapidly? And what should young people be learning in science in year 9, as compared with grade 6 or year 12? Curriculum is a topic on which the same people can hold some quite contradictory views and hopes and prejudices. They may want schools to be state of the art places, with a lot of visible new technology, where the new types of knowledge and work of the twenty-first century are taken up; but they may also be quite uncomfortable about any changes or 'watering down' of the kind of curriculum they had encountered themselves as children.

Everyone in this room would be aware of the sometimes very hostile debates we see in the newspapers and press about approaches to curriculum. Some of it is about evidence and *what works* and different views on that, but a lot of it too is about *what matters* – and that is never simply a matter of evidence. The debates and the positions we tend to take up are not just purely rational arguments – they draw on our hopes and dreams and concerns for our children (and they also draw on our views about what we value or regret about our own lives).

Curriculum is also complicated, because it is caught in two different big tasks of schooling that are not always pulling in the same direction. One is about the 'what' (what we might broadly call 'education', to use a word that some people think is a bit old-fashioned – should I be saying 'learning'?). This is about the role of curriculum and schools in developing young people, in giving them foundations for their future life in the world of a kind that are different and bigger than those they can get from their family, introducing them in some systematic way to the bigger world.

The second thing curriculum is caught up in is the competition and selection for good jobs and opportunities – its assessment and certification functions. In the 21st century schooling and school examinations are one of the major ways people get selected and distributed into different opportunities (and not just in western societies – the pressures and results are as strong in China or India or Africa). The selective pressures and competitive anxieties can interfere a lot with the work that schools would like to do.

So first: what has been changing in the late 20th and early 21st century ?

Here are some of the findings of our review of what has happening around the country in relation to curriculum between 1975 and 2005:

Frequent new goes at policy: It's a cliché that the world is changing rapidly, and in many ways trying to devise schooling and curriculum is at the very pointy end of having to try to deal with this. A couple of weeks ago I was at a conference on the future of the book and publishers, librarians, researchers, writers were all confronting some of the big changes in terms of online possibilities and some of the big problems in terms of economics that are now on the agenda. There is currently an Australian enquiry, chaired by Barry Jones, into this issue. And from the 1980s on (and I don't know how much it was influenced by the mythical status of George Orwell's *1984*) the issue of how the world is changing – technically, socially, economically, politically, competitively – has been on everyone's agenda. That was really evident when we did the research project looking at the documents that the states have produced over the last 40 years or so. Leaving aside all the specific inquiries into girls and boys, indigenous students, vocational education, subject specific enquiries in music, maths etc , we found over 100 general state-based curriculum policies were produced in the four decades of our study, and another 15 at Commonwealth level. All around the country authorities have felt some obvious need to keep having new goes at it.

Changing times and the future: There is a lot of pre-occupation with changing times and what that means in terms of foundations that school should now deal with. A lot of the debates about subjects, 'key learning areas', 'essential learnings' and the like are about this – and one of the things they are trying to grapple with is what aspects of the past are relevant and what needs to be done differently to prepare for a world of such rapid technological, communications, and social change.

Worries about work: There is a lot of pre-occupation with the nature of work, and worries about unemployment and Australia's competitiveness, and what kinds of knowledge, skills and abilities young people will need in a world where jobs have been changing quite a lot. There is some consensus that completing secondary school should be an aspiration for all but less consensus about how much specific vocational preparation should be part of that.

Worries about values and citizenship: The issues of citizenship and how we want young people to understand themselves and see others keep being raised, and creates some of the most visible arguments about what the curriculum should be doing. [and the World Yearbook shows that this has been quite an issue around the world in recent times]

Changing structures of managing curriculum: Another very visible development over the period of our study was a change in how curriculum is actually managed these days, and I think that has been having quite an effect on what kinds of discussions we tend to get into about curriculum, and where these discussions take place – in particular the extent they are now highly visible in newspapers and the media. In the 1970s, reports and curriculum frameworks were commonly thin documents, produced by 'Education Departments' of the respective state public service, except for the final phase of schooling designed for a minority as entrance to university studies, which normally was derived from an examination heavily controlled by cognate university academics. The documents were designed more for schools and teachers than for the general public. In the 1980s however, states began to

bring curriculum more directly under the relevant Minister ('the ministerialization of education') and into more direct political debates. They began setting up new authorities to deal with curriculum (Boards of Studies). They began to build more glossy forms of curriculum communication, with documents often intended not just to outline frameworks for teachers but to justify and advertise the quality of the curriculum work of that state government, that is, to directly embed it within the political purposes and cycles of governments.

2. The states and state differences

I'm now going to break for a bit of audience participation, and get you to have a go at the quiz on the handout (attached). If you've had a bit of experience of different states, I want you and your neighbours to look at the handout sheet and see if you can identify which state interviews each quote was taken from. If your experience has mainly been of your own state, have a look at the quotes and see how many of them could apply to your own state, and any you think definitely don't apply. [See note 2.]

Now let me take it state by state and just say a tiny about the differences they are likely to bring to the curriculum agenda – these differences come from their history, their geography, the kinds of jobs people in that state have access to, the traditions that have been influential.

NSW:

"one of the best things we ever did [...] was to introduce what we called distinction courses"

"we were aware what other states were doing – we thought they were wrong" (talking of social education)

NSW tends to pride itself on being 'the largest education system in the western world' and having 'the gold standard (of assessment)'. It is I think clear and unapologetic about the competitive nature of schooling (and politics for that matter): hierarchy is accepted, the textbook is important. (I think Victoria tends to be a bit more ambivalent about being prepared to acknowledge the competitive arena.) NSW stands for a concept of opportunity that comes through offering a centralized provision, and stability and clear rules of the game. And part of that is not wanting to change too quickly from the knowledge or institutions that have been built in the past – such as the value of history. In state comparative terms, in the interviews we noticed that in NSW we heard a lot of pride in what happens at the top end – the opportunities given to the talented and gifted; the high standard of the HSC.

South Australia: 'social justice' and teacher professionalism.

"that was part of the brief we had: we have to make sure that this document actually reflects the constructivist view of knowledge in teaching"

"curriculum [is really about] empowering teachers to do things, to do the work for the kids they are serving really"

In South Australia these themes of having an ongoing pre-occupation with social justice, and an orientation to teacher professionalism come through very strongly in what we saw in reports and heard in interviews from this state, persisting even through changes of political

regime, and are well discussed in the chapters by Alan Reid and Jim Dellit in the book. In South Australia, people who are professionally involved in curriculum tend to have at the front of their thinking students who are the traditional losers from schooling: part-time students, poorer students. They try to develop *mainstream* arrangements that work for these groups. Over the period we studied, South Australia was known for its innovative work on gender and assessment, and for its strong focus on the individual child and their development, and the kind of thinking Garth Boomer represented so prominently. Jean Blackburn was another prominent South Australian who represented a slightly different take on the social justice matters, with a bit more emphasis on gender, the 'sexually inclusive curriculum' and a stronger position on what every child should know.

Queensland: rural and radical?

"most if not all of the senior syllabus have not been designed to be primarily preparation for university, although that is certainly one of their functions"

"what the system is trying to deal with now is to increase participation and retention by increasing the range of options of students"

The question that Rob Gilbert takes up in his chapter in the book is how is it that a state that was historically so rural and conservative, and one that had been sceptical of the value of extended education, ended up with a system which has stood out against the direction of putting more and more emphasis on an externally examined final certificate. In some ways the issue of how to get the population involved in schooling in this very dispersed state and the history of being slower than other states to get a respectable proportion of young people continuing in secondary school is part of the answer – they wanted more local involvement and options. The work involved in developing the system of teacher-based moderation is a strong experience of those in the Queensland system. But so are some of the challenges of the recent debates: the QLSRS and the work of Allan Luke and others which was concerned that the system as a result of its approach now does better on engagement than on depth and ushered in the concept of the need for rich tasks and the like; and the debates about indigenous education and the work of people like Chris Sarra and Noel Pearson.

Western Australia: distance, politicized, controversies – the unit curriculum outcomes based education, the newspaper, politics with Canberra, managing relatively conservative schools and teachers.

"the [] Report was seen to be quite innovatory but then the culture of the schools stopped it from happening" [on the Beasley unit curriculum]

"high schools have in my experience always been if not impervious, then very strongly resistant to any changes that are about fundamentally altering how they operate"

Geography both in the sense of the distance from Canberra and the eastern states, and in the size of the system has been apparent in some of the things that have been notable in WA's role in curriculum reforms and experiments. Two big innovations came to some grief – the unit curriculum and the OBE (outcomes based education). There were media and political lobbies against on a variety of grounds, but to some extent the problems were also

about the difficulties of moving a system and culture – or perhaps taking insufficient account of the on the ground experiences and knowledge and kind of training that teachers bring. A number of the people we interviewed from WA reflect the sense of many involved in curriculum reform that they are up against a very entrenched and conservative school system. And Colin Marsh has written quite a lot about how some of the things that happen here happen as a result of side-plays of politics between WA and Canberra that are not necessarily primarily about curriculum.

Tasmania: ‘values’, consultation, size

“the first thing we had to do was a consultation with lots of different stakeholder groups about what do you think our values and purposes ought to be”

“we were trying to develop a curriculum that would lift the aspirations of all, not just some, and be common throughout the state”

In Tasmania the impact of geography and politics have also been strong but in a different direction to WA or Qld. Here the pragmatics of a small and self-contained state allow a reform to begin with very widespread consultation, as ELs did. They could really try building from the ground up – but of course the community they are building from has a lot of people who did not themselves finish school. So that community can talk more confidently about values or about primary school or general directions than it can about secondary. Historically some of the constraints produced by the size and the self-contained form of the system had encouraged people involved in curriculum reform to look elsewhere for inspiration for new directions, including to Harvard and other states. Talking of the system in the 1970s, one of the people we interviewed talked about how much curriculum was left tacit at that point, for teachers to pass on to each other. And she said,

“most people who trained here, taught here [but] you suffered from the same thing being done to death, so dinosaurs got done year after year” [Tas – prior to ELs]

So when reforms came in they tended to go for the big picture shift.

Victoria: ‘inclusive’ along with strong sense of hierarchy and competitive advantage; devolved but strongly managed; social agendas and innovation

“we had this kind of assessment to assist poorer families which was being ruthlessly exploited by the wealthy” [talking about the introduction of ‘CATs’ – assignment-based common assessment tasks – as part of the new VCE]

“what they learnt from the Tasmania experience and from other states and territories was to get a balance, between discipline based learning, personal development and social goals of schooling... what’s called the trans-disciplinary domain” [talking about ‘VELS’, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards]

Victoria, in some of its history and public aspirations for schools has had a lot in common with South Australia. Over the years it does quite a lot of thinking about those who lose out from schooling – in the earlier technical schools, in the Blackburn report, in the VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning), and it has often had early or strong policies on multiculturalism, gender reform and the like (and in a number of ways the schools systems

of Victoria and NSW mirror the flavour of the political parties in those states (the difference between Vic and NSW versions of their respective labor liberal parties) and the broader political discourse. But it is also a state with a very dominant private school sector. To my mind Victoria often plays out an ongoing tug of war or seesaw between attempts to innovate and fight-backs from below on getting comparative advantage within that. And Victoria has also had an ongoing struggle about how to best marry central steering of the authority's purposes with a more devolved approach.

This is scratching the surface, but does allow you to see some of the differences in the experiences of people in different states when they come to look at proposals and approaches to ACARA's Australian Curriculum. In South Australia, teachers expect to be part of the working party, and they have at the centre of their thinking, how will this work for students not doing full-time study. In Tasmania the ability to consult the whole state, or bring together all the school principals is part of the experience of how reform can and should be done. The states have different histories of thinking about whether fairness is best served by having common provision or different provision. And so on.

And for those of you waiting for the final answer to the quiz. Who said 'we all reckon the NSW curriculum will dominate the new model'? The comment was made by some Tasmanian interviewees, but I gave it 3 points because it's a sentiment that could have come from just about anywhere when we were doing the interviews – including NSW.

Finally, Three Big issues for the Australian Curriculum

I want to conclude by talking about three issues that the different state reforms, and agendas, and outcomes help us see more clearly, and that are relevant to where we go from here.

1. The Knowledge Question (or the purposes of schools today question)

There is a lot of talk today about the knowledge explosion as well as about standards. Over the past few decades states have had different resolutions of this: staying close to traditional subjects but adding in some technology and vocational portfolio work; experimenting with forms of new basics or essential learnings. And between the states there is now quite a bit of experience on the problems of *whichever* path you take. For example, the Tasmanian ELs and other like initiatives could identify clearly the 21st century skills people agreed were important – but left a huge amount of work to be worked out regarding how these map on the work of teachers trained in subject areas, or in assessment. And this isn't just a practical or workload issue – it is an issue about whether sensible development of subjects *can* be worked out by working back from those end-points. Victoria did more working out of its VELs centrally and was able to specify in much more detail what the strands meant at different levels – but got into great matrix like complexity in order to do this.

Curriculum theorists too are concerned about that – if you focus too much on the kind of person you want, are you giving enough attention to the kinds of foundations that school specifically should be responsible for? When the National Curriculum Board first got going, I think it was quite sensitive to that issue, and there was a clear-cut agenda to focus on the

development of the subjects with the help of subject-based teams. As NAPLAN enters the picture, and as cross-curriculum themes are developed we are getting again into this big matrix problem. In a lot of ways it is an accountant's way of thinking about what schools should cover – has every box been ticked rather than what are schools and curriculum building over time.

2. The Equity and Diversity problem

How different and how similar should schooling be for all students? At what points should different paths be possible? How centralized/specified and how devolved should curriculum be? I don't think there is a definitive evidence-based answer on this, and some very different experiences around the country about what they think works.

3. The Management Problem

Curriculum has been brought into the public and political domain, but one of the consequences of doing that is that we are often led in directions that either promise too much or narrow down curriculum to too little. The too much comes from having to speak the language of politicians rather than educators and pretend that if schools only do the right thing, everyone will get a perfect outcome and Australia will be swimming in the highly employable flexible highly socially integrated life-long learners of the 21st century. The too little comes also from the current fashionable management and government beliefs, that the main way to get process is to measure more and more and get educators to spend a lot more of their time accounting for what they do.

So, in conclusion, I think looking around at the things the states have been taking up over recent times, shows us some interesting things about the directions we are going as well as the problems curriculum today is trying to confront. And, as I said earlier, curriculum *is* a deceptively complicated topic – and knowing some of our own recent history helps us to look at where we are, not just where we have been.

Note and acknowledgements:

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1. See Lyn Yates, Cherry Collins and Kate O'Connor (ed), *Australia's Curriculum Dilemmas: state cultures and the big issues*, Melbourne University Press, 2011.

2. The quotes in the quiz were taken from interviews we conducted during the project with people who had longstanding involvements with the curriculum of their state. They are selected because they reflect themes we heard more generally from those we talked to in that state, but this does not mean similar comments might not have been made by some in other states. As we note too in the book, this project was a relatively small beginning in attempting to see where we have been around the country as a whole, and a lot of that time was spent trying to source documents that were no longer readily available. We are very aware that the limited two-year funding meant we did not include ACT and Northern Territory or specific primary curriculum documents in our study. There are many interesting biographies and histories that could be written, and it would be nice to see research students take up some of this work.