

Social Change and Curriculum Futures

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Introduction

Curriculum is, I believe, the most difficult area of educational study—where the theory of knowledge meets the practice of classrooms in complex and turbulent ways. Because of the intellectual difficulty, and the fact that in educational practice curriculum decisions have to be made all the time (literally from minute to minute in the classroom), there is a strong temptation to settle for the status quo as ‘default option’, or to adopt quick fixes under pressure.

I invite you to step back and think more systematically about the forces for change and stability that are at work in the present. The best way to get our bearings on the future is not to ask what scenarios are imaginable, but what futures are now being produced, and thus what directions are substantively possible. We cannot predict which of these futures is going to happen. History is not mechanical, not passively suffered: history is made. If we hope to play a worthwhile part in making it, we must begin by thinking carefully about what material we have to work with, the historical moment we are in.

The present moment

The default option, in current curriculum discussions, is the Competitive Academic Curriculum (CAC) (defined in Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett 1982). This is a curriculum marked by:

- an abstract division of knowledge into ‘subjects’;
- a hierarchy of subjects (with classics, now mathematics, at the top);
- a hierarchical ordering of knowledge within each subject (fine-grained distinction between elementary and advanced material);
- a teacher-centred classroom-based pedagogy;
- an individualised learning process;
- formal competitive assessment (the ‘exam’).

This curriculum, which has deep historical roots in Europe, crystallised in the nineteenth century in secondary schools for middle and upper class boys. It became hegemonic in the mass secondary school systems, and mass universities, created in the twentieth century. The CAC has gained increasing influence over primary education, as primary schooling has lost its position as a free-standing popular education system and has increasingly been understood as preparation for secondary school. The form of the CAC has come to dominate areas of curriculum which used to have a different logic, for example music, art, health, ‘design and technology’. The hegemony of the CAC is well shown by what happened in NSW with the designation of ‘Key Learning Areas’; this became a vehicle for the creation of new academic subjects rather than (as I am sure was intended) a broadening of educational experience.

The competitive academic curriculum became the subject of intense debate in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the ‘new sociology of education’ argued it was a key to the reproduction of social inequalities in education, especially the inequalities of class (Pusey & Young 1979, Wexler 1987). This conclusion has stood up well to the test of time. The difficulties this curriculum creates for working-class students continue. These difficulties

are familiar in teaching practice, their effects are visible in the statistics of retention and outcomes, and from time to time they even get into the media.

Many will recall the furore when Mt Druitt High School was denounced as having the worst results of any NSW school in the HSC (Higher School Certificate)—pupils and principal were interviewed in the media, a special departmental investigation of the school was launched. What staggered me was that anyone would think this was a problem located in a particular school. In a system designed around the educational interests of middle-class children, there always have been, and there always will be, working-class schools at the bottom of the heap. If it were not Mt Druitt High the next year, it would be any one of ten or twenty schools with similar catchments and an equally gross mismatch with the hegemonic curriculum.

The early analyses of the hegemonic curriculum, however, exaggerated its coherence and stability. Organisationally, the competitive academic curriculum has never been more powerful than it is now; yet intellectually it has never been weaker. Three forces have undermined the cultural rationale for the CAC:

1. *The democratisation of culture* has challenged the hierarchies and divisions of knowledge, as well as the top-down pedagogy and assessment, of the CAC. In schools, this challenge has taken several forms: child-centred pedagogy, the re-emergence of social justice agendas (compensatory education, and girls' education), and the rising popular demand for education which has created a socially diverse student body in the heartland of the CAC, the upper secondary school (Connell 1993). The pluralisation of cultural traditions and knowledges in multi-ethnic and post-colonial societies has destroyed forever the taken-for-grantedness of the curriculum.
2. *Logics of dispersal* have undermined the orderly structure of knowledge, teaching and assessment in the CAC. On the one hand, the market agenda has begun to define curriculum as what can be sold to a customer, rather than what is necessary to know for a student. On the other hand, the postmodern 'incredulity towards meta-narratives' has challenged the definition of what is 'necessary to know', making any attempt to define hierarchies of knowledge seem arbitrary.
3. *Alternative authorities* have emerged, to challenge the universities as guarantors of knowledge. Standpoint epistemologies have shown how subordinated groups (women, workers, oppressed races, the colonised) can be authors of knowledge and creators of culture (Harding 1991). More and more, however, the growth of mass media, and the culture industries using mass media, have meant that knowledge in the public realm is determined by the commercial interests of media corporations, and the knowledge-related industries (for example, market research, media hardware, public relations) that surround them.

These destabilising forces have been met with a variety of defensive moves. The 'back-to-basics' push attempts to reinstall top-down pedagogy, competitive assessment and a narrow definition of knowledge. The 'cultural literacy' movement in the United States, and the rather more naked censorship exercises locally, attempt to rein in the pluralisation of knowledges. More sophisticated defences, emerging from education bureaucracies, attempt to modernise the CAC and make it more flexible without opening the floodgates to plurality; the cautious politics of the McGaw report (1996) on the HSC is a striking local example.

The fundamental problem for these defences is that the competitive academic curriculum, having lost cultural authority, is held in place simply by power. Masses of youth study the CAC's subjects, not because everyone believes these subjects define the true, the beautiful and the good, but because they know this is the only way to get qualified. The CAC is supported by a coalition whose interests coincide for the moment: employers, who want a means of stratifying the workforce; teachers, whose professional self-definition is commonly (though not always) bound up with CAC; conservative politicians (in both major parties) concerned to appear responsible and tough; academics, whose own cultural authority is slipping and who fear the loss of much of their clientele. The hegemony of this curriculum is badly damaged. If the interests of the groups supporting it diverge, and the coalition cracks, what might take its place? To answer that, we have to look at the social and cultural forces currently changing the curriculum.

Forces for curriculum change

I will start with the most discussed of current change agents, globalisation. More exactly, globalisation-from-above, the agenda of multinational capital and its most important political allies, the economic rationalists of the new right. Economic globalisation, the replacement of local with transnational markets and the pressure on local economies to be 'internationally competitive', has been the panic factor in educational policy-making in Australia for a decade.

Globalisation from above has multiple effects on curriculum—and to some extent, contradictory effects. The political agenda, as worked out in their different spheres by the World Bank and the Howard government, involves a shrinking of the public sector and especially a shrinking of the welfare state. Culturally this means abandoning a positive concept of the common good as a basis for public policy—which is seen, rather, as the aggregation of a vast number of private interests. Accordingly, in education, any notion of common learnings responding to community needs becomes impossible to maintain. What determines the shape of the curriculum is not social decision-making (working through a publicly-accountable education system) but private decision-making (working through a market).

Since the world does not actually correspond to the economic rationalists' model, the logic of new-right politics is to force the world to comply. That requires governments to reshape institutions to create markets where they do not currently exist, or to crank up competition where it has only been a minor feature of the scene. A common way of doing this is to cut off public funding for a public service, obliging the providers to charge fees. At coursework masters' level, which has in recent history been a key form of professional inservice training, the universities are no longer asking 'what training needs do these professions have?' but 'what courses will attract fee-paying students?' In secondary education there is a push for a national testing program—an exercise of no pedagogical value whatever, but of considerable value in creating the climate of anxiety and competitiveness that the privatisation agenda needs.

At the same time, a national testing program expresses a contradictory curriculum logic in globalisation: the narrowing and standardisation of curriculum under the pressure of international economic competition. In the last ten years we have seen a vast attempt to reshape TAFE along these lines, both privatising TAFE provision and standardising vocational training around a national framework for the classification and grading of skills. This is an example well worth thinking about, because the push came from the labour movement as well as the employees, though the underlying logic was the global markets'

pressure to reduce labour costs in a national economy. Maximising the 'flexibility' of employment means standardising the skills of employees—and thus, standardising their education.

Centralised testing programs and skills-based-training have never sat too well with many of the teachers required to implement them. The teachers are all too conscious of the diversity of their students and the multiplicity of the students' educational needs. Here is the basis of a second force in contemporary curriculum politics: pluralisation-from-below.

Social diversity is unavoidable in modern societies. Despite the conservatives' nostalgia for a Disneyland version of the 1950s, and the Hansonites' nostalgia for the White Australia policy, labour migration continues around the world, and ethnic plurality is a fact. So is class division. Though it is no longer considered polite to utter the C-word in public, we do have a ruling class which is richer than ever before, a working class which is increasingly demoralised and alienated from public life, and a terrifying number of children growing up in poverty. Gender divisions have not been wiped out by the last two decades of liberal feminism. Indeed many feminists accepted a kind of educational segregation and we are now hearing calls from other quarters for targeted programs for boys.

Two key mechanisms have turned social diversity into curriculum agendas: community activism and teacher professionalism. In circumstances allowing local decision-making, such as the Disadvantaged Schools Program, local assessments of needs have produced curricula tailored to (and often using materials from) a local community. At the systemic level, feminist activism has produced assessments of the educational needs of girls, and has both attempted to make curriculum in general less patriarchal and more girl-friendly and has produced targeted units especially in the science-technology area. Ethnic community activism, raising the level of public awareness of our multiple histories and current practices, has similarly had a double effect: introducing new units of study (community languages, Aboriginal Studies, and the like), and having a broad effect, diversifying the content of established fields such as literature and history.

Without teacher professionalism, these demands would have had much more difficulty being met. Teacher professionalism as an occupational ideology includes ideals of practice, a demand to teach well. This means teaching in a way that is appropriate to the students in front of you. This demand can be, and often is, given an individualist twist—'each one is different', 'I don't care what the background is, I treat each one as an individual'. But teachers often recognise that the diversity of students is mainly a social diversity, and that good teaching practice means understanding the social context of learning, and constructing curriculum appropriate to it. Each of the three examples just given—teaching children in poverty, teaching in relation to gender, teaching children of different ethnic background—requires this response and has in fact benefited from a good deal of teacher initiative in curriculum-making.

Curriculum is always a selection from contemporary culture. It may change because the principle of selection changes, as in the shift a couple of decades ago towards school-based curriculum, or in the market agenda now. Alternatively, curriculum may change because the culture from which it is selected is changing.

We can hardly doubt that we live in a period of cultural change: the computer pages of the newspapers tell us so. Indeed, if we take the computer pages seriously, the culture changes every three years or so. Windows 95 is a familiar example of the remaking of culture by corporations in pursuit of profit. The 'culture industry' was much discussed at the mid-century, with a focus on entertainment and advertising. But the process has now gone deeper and wider, reshaping the labour process (through automation and deskilling), the public realm (as PR firms replace party members as the source of policies), as well as

areas of personal life (for example, consumer surveillance through computerised data banks).

Yet corporations are not the only players in the reshaping of culture. Intellectuals are involved in producing these corporate cultural initiatives, yet intellectuals are not easily controlled and many of them are vehement critics of the profit-making agenda. Intellectuals have been key players in new social movements from feminism to environmentalism, which have shifted popular consciousness and the content (and sometimes the form) of the arts. Popular movements have arisen which have both criticised and enriched the culture. The renaissance of Aboriginal communities includes a remarkable Aboriginal arts movement that is among the most creative and influential in recent Australian history. A heritage and conservation movement has revalued neglected parts of Australian traditions and environments and has popularised new ways of relating to the environment—often sharply at odds with corporate agendas of marketing and development. The culture is shifting all the time, though not all in the same direction nor all at the same pace.

Feasible futures

Now, stripping off the Lab-Coat of Perception and donning the Mantle of Prophecy, I will try to characterise the curriculum trends which—given these forces acting simultaneously on a dominant but de-legitimised CAC—might dominate our future.

There is, first, a trend towards *technicisation* of curriculum. Given that the CAC no longer has a persuasive cultural rationale, it offers little resistance to the conversion of teaching and learning into a set of techniques. Should the corporate agenda and globalisation-from-above become the dominant force in education, this is the likely mainstream of change. The logic is a utilitarian conception of education, which accepts the social goals defined by corporate elites and asks how to meet them most efficiently. Criterion-based teaching in VET (Vocational Education and Training) is a simple example, but the logic can be applied very widely. Standardised testing and ‘league tables’ of schools generate a similar logic: schools are free to teach as they will, but those, which do not teach to the test will suffer and may even be liquidated.

I would emphasise that technical rationality can be expanded very widely indeed. Sport, for instance, used to be thought an activity *sui generis*, undertaken for pleasure, interest, and a sense of well-being. It is now, in Australian culture, a highly rationalised commercial enterprise, a branch of mass entertainment controlled by media corporations, sometimes indistinguishable from the competitive promotion of corporate products (for example, ‘motor sport’). Education has responded. We now have ‘Sports High Schools’, and corporate-funded inter-school competitions, as well as elite training institutions such as the AIS (Australian Institute of Sport). For teachers, technicisation means an invitation to expand and intensify their teaching skills, and a dis-invitation to concern themselves with the ultimate goals their skills are used for. So there is a big push now to get teachers trained to use computers in classrooms; much less debate about why anyone would need or want to, or what more computerisation would do to the pupils.

If the efforts to shore up the CAC are successful, we would follow another path which might be called *hierarchisation*. The socially selective effects of the CAC may become, paradoxically, its main rationale—in a society where the concept of the common good is in decline and competition for resources is on the rise.

We already see a number of attempts to re-stratify the education system, after a historic expansion and democratisation from the 1950s to the 1980s. The expanded university system is rapidly being re-stratified with the emergence of the G8, the shift to fee-based

funding, and the federal government's open invitation to universities to try to drive each other to the wall by grabbing the available fees and students. The school system, which took a limited but important move away from stratification with the move to comprehensive high schools, is also being re-stratified by means of de-zoning, greater selectiveness, and a shift of funding to private schools.

In hierarchisation we see curriculum changing not as a result of market pressures but *in order to allow* competition in education to intensify. The emphasis is on testability, on teaching-and-learning which allows competitive measurement and selection. Non-competitive forms of assessment are marginalised, or squeezed out completely. 'Soft options' are denounced, and certification (such as the HSC) is tightened up with more emphasis on the more socially selective areas of knowledge. School-based curricula are rejected precisely because they are locally constructed and don't permit competitive assessment across the system. The fortunes of test-makers are on the rise.

For teachers, hierarchisation means the reinforcement of a traditional source of teacher status at the cost of internal division in the profession. For as educational institutions re-stratify, so the tasks of teachers will—and eventually their pay and conditions. Universities are already moving in this direction, with enterprise agreements and internal differences of teaching load and other conditions. School teaching will move the same way if the push towards privatisation continues. There will be an attempt to buy teachers with exceptional skills in CAC teaching, for elite schools which are given the capacity to do this by fees and subsidies. As for the rest of the teaching workforce—work harder, and do your damndest to get out of mass education into elite schools, if you value your pride or your bank account.

Despite all the bad publicity for education systems, despite political attacks and employer scepticism, popular concern for education, popular interest in education, and popular demand for education remain strong. We may treat this as a demand for a product and attempt to commodify education in response. Or we may treat this as a claim of right and a demand for participation in a vitally important cultural process. In the latter case we are dealing with a process of *democratisation*.

A democratic agenda in current circumstances is likely to emphasise community control, given the recent history of popular movements and the breadth of experience with school-based curriculum. This brings it into conflict with de-zoning, re-stratification, and central testing (unless 'community' is redefined in a way that abandons locality). A democratic agenda is likely to emphasise the plurality of culture, the need to recognise and reconcile different traditions and identities.

The difficulty such an agenda now faces is moving beyond the local to the systemic. The recent history of democratic movements in education has highlighted the inadequacy of CAC for a plural and divided society; but in working to produce plural curricula, there has been a tendency to concede the high ground of systemic policy to defenders of the CAC. If CAC weakens further, this ground can now readily be taken over by proponents of technicisation—given the power of economic-rationalist ideology at the upper levels of the public service and politics. I therefore think it is very important to take note of current attempts to develop a *generalisable* democratic curriculum. Examples from the past include the original 'core curriculum', and from the present include the 'Essential Curriculum' project in Sydney (Ryan & Davy 1990), and the 'authentic pedagogy' movement in the United States. These have their limits, but they are pointing to key ground for the future.

For teachers, democratisation of curriculum involves losses, risks and gains. It certainly means the loss of a historic professional monopoly—although this monopoly in any case is crumbling under the market agenda. It means loss of the cultural authority granted teachers

by the CAC—though that authority in any case is crumbling with the CAC's loss of legitimacy. A democratic agenda involves teachers in all the risks of open decision-making about their own work—including the possibilities of conflict and mistaken decisions, for which teachers will often pay the price.

However a democratic agenda offers teachers their best chance of doing what a genuine professionalism most values: doing the job as well as it can be done, and serving pupils as well as they can be served. It offers teachers their best chance of making education autonomous—neither reproducing the legacy of dead elites nor serving the new corporate bosses. Education can be a process of discovery and creation.

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