

TRANSITION TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM IN VICTORIA

We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through the garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. A national system of Education is a living thing, the outcome of forgotten struggles and difficulties, and “of battles long ago”. It has in it some of the secret workings of national life (Sadler, 1900, cited in Ochs and Philips, 2004, p. 7).

The educational comparativist, Michael Sadler, was writing at the turn of the last century about efforts in England and Germany to ‘borrow’ aspects of external education systems. He could just as easily have been reflecting on the experience of creating an Australian national curriculum more than a century later. Indeed, if ‘Australia’ is substituted for ‘the world’, and ‘state’ for ‘national’, Sadler’s words would provide an insightful reflection on the complexities of the Australian curriculum project. Reaching agreement about a new curriculum between eight different jurisdictions has been a salutary reminder that curriculum systems and structures are not random ahistorical entities, but instead the product of local responses made over many decades to diverse influences, circumstances and resources.

The process of developing the new curriculum has provided an important opportunity for each State and Territory to reflect on their respective current practices. This was certainly the case in Victoria when in 2009 the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), the Catholic Education Commission Victoria (CECV) and Independent Schools Victoria conducted a statewide series of consultations on the initial set of draft national curriculum documents.

Three key themes emerged from that process:

- (i) a strong commitment to two propositions that are in practice difficult but necessary to reconcile: the concept of a common entitlement of learning for every student and the provision of personalised learning pathways;
- (ii) the importance of assessment for and of learning against a continuum rather than prescribed expected levels of learning in order to provide diagnostic pathways for both students and teachers to inform further learning; and

(iii) the central importance of the curriculum domains categorised in the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) as Physical, Personal and Social Learning and Interdisciplinary Learning.

These responses have been important in shaping the emergent approach to implementation of the Australian Curriculum in Victoria.

An obvious prior question, however, is why a distinctively 'Victorian approach' to implementation of the Australian Curriculum is needed. There are two answers.

The first is a pragmatic one. It will be some years before the Australian Curriculum is completed for all learning areas. In the intervening 'hybrid' period, it is clearly preferable that Victorian teachers and educators have access to a single curriculum framework that brings together the new Australian Curriculum with the areas of the curriculum not yet developed as part of the national curriculum. A situation in which teachers, especially primary teachers, need to go to two different sources to locate the curriculum is far from satisfactory. The development of a Victorian framework for the whole curriculum is designed to avoid this.

The second is the importance of ensuring that Victorian schools and teachers are able to work with a curriculum design that is informed by the consultation responses referred to above. Victorian teachers will clearly expect a curriculum construct that maintains a central, explicit place in the curriculum for personal and social learning and interdisciplinary learning. These components of the curriculum are both articulated in the Melbourne Declaration and widely recognised as central to the concept of a '21st Century' curriculum. Many of these curriculum domains are defined as 'general capabilities' in the Australian curriculum.

In the early stages of implementation of the Australian Curriculum, it appears certain the States and Territories will, while working towards a common endpoint, introduce the new curriculum along different timelines. It also seems increasingly likely that States and Territories will differ in their structural approach to the implementation of the curriculum, especially in relation to the general capabilities.

The view expressed clearly and consistently during the consultation undertaken in Victoria is that these curriculum domains cannot be adequately represented by simply 'embedding' them within the

discipline-based subjects without the risk of substantial repetition and overlap and a diminution of their significance. Strong support was expressed during the consultation for the practice pioneered by the VELs, that is, the representation of the aspects of the curriculum located in the Australian Curriculum under the heading of 'general capabilities' as distinct domains that inform teachers about the knowledge and skills students should acquire and apply and use to assess and report student achievement.

There is, however, room for further consideration to determine how best these areas of learning might be represented in curriculum design as part of the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. At present, the Australian Curriculum refers to seven general capabilities: literacy, numeracy, ICT, critical and creative thinking, personal and social competence, ethical behaviour and intercultural understanding. One view is that literacy, numeracy and ICT are primarily developed in the respective learning areas of English, Mathematics and Technologies. It is crucial in terms of student learning that students are explicitly taught the literacy, numeracy and digital demands of learning areas across the curriculum. It is, however, arguable that sufficient guidance can be provided by drawing on relevant areas of English, Mathematics and Technology rather than writing entirely different constructs of learning.

This reasoning does not apply to the domains of critical and creative thinking, personal and social competence, ethical behaviour and intercultural understanding. These are areas of learning that are not primarily developed in one of the discipline-based subjects or domains. They are more clearly 'interdisciplinary' in nature. Following this line of reasoning, it is then critical that progression in learning for these domains is set out in discrete learning continua. This kind of approach is both reflected in the structure of the VELs and in much current innovative practice in Victorian schools, often involving subject associations, that engages students in learning 'beyond the classroom'. There are a plethora of examples of how students are taught self-management, teamwork, problem-solving, social competence and intercultural understanding as skills and knowledge in their own right, practiced in but not defined by specific contexts.

There is clearly strong support in Victoria for learning achievement in these interdisciplinary areas to continue to be mapped out in learning domains that are distinct from discipline-based domains.

Planning for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in Victoria may well therefore follow a two stage process.

The first stage might involve the maintenance of the current VELs structure and those areas of the curriculum not yet developed as part of the Australian curriculum, with the current VELs learning focus statements and achievement standards for English, Mathematics, Science and History replaced by the agreed Australian Curriculum content descriptors and achievement standards for those learning areas. A working title for this new 'hybrid' construct is *AusVELs*, an expression of both the continuity of this new structure with the previous VELs construct and the implementation in Victoria of the set of nationally-agreed content and skills defined by the Australian Curriculum.

This signifier of both continuity and development is an important one. The continuity with the VELs is found in the continuing explicit and discrete recognition of both discipline-based domains and interdisciplinary domains. For at least the initial period of transition to the Australian Curriculum, the *AusVELs* construct will reflect the existing value and virtue of the VELs structure as one which supports genuinely whole-school approaches to the curriculum and promotes responsiveness and innovation at the school level within overall standards. An example of the development opportunities provided by the implementation of the Australian Curriculum is the more explicit emphasis given to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures across the curriculum.

The second, later stage may be a change in the structure of the VELs. Where the VELs represented the curriculum as a triple-helix model – Subject Based Disciplines, Interdisciplinary Learning and Physical, Social and Personal Learning – consideration could be given to structuring the new curriculum as a double-helix that represents two categories of learning domains, both of equal significance: Subject-based Disciplines and Interdisciplinary Learning. This would reaffirm the fundamental place of discipline-based content and knowledge in the curriculum and extend this to include the domains of Health and Physical Education and Technologies, including Information and Communication Technologies. And it would give equal prominence to those curriculum domains that are central to 21st century learning but do not fit neatly into the learning areas, that is, the domains of critical and creative thinking, personal and social competence, ethical behaviour and intercultural understanding.

There is a debate to continue about whether Ethical Understanding is a more appropriate curriculum term than Ethical Behaviour, but the move to include as a goal of the curriculum the capacity for every student to be able to consider personal and social issues and choices from within an ethical decision-making framework is one that represents an important further curriculum development

opportunity. The inclusion of Ethical Behaviour represents a recognition of and response to an increasing community concern that the school sector should take on the role of providing young people with an understanding of fundamental ethical principles, for example, rights and responsibilities, the public good, personal autonomy, social obligations and the good life, and the capacity to apply those principles. It is an aspect of the development of the Australian Curriculum that should be welcomed and sure to be one that generates considerable debate.

Intercultural Understanding is strongly represented in the VELS, reflecting the powerful commitment to multiculturalism in Victoria. The definition of Intercultural Understanding as a discrete component of the curriculum, however, represents another curriculum development opportunity. The proposition is not that Intercultural Understanding should be taught as a stand-alone domain. Intercultural understanding will always and inevitably be based on the study of histories, languages, civics and the arts. What is being proposed is that the intercultural understanding be recognised as a distinct domain of learning necessary for 21st century citizens.

This discussion of the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in Victoria has been limited to the F–10 Curriculum. The implementation of a national curriculum at the senior secondary level represents another order of complexity, generated both by the high-stakes nature of senior secondary assessment and the current federal arrangements that vest responsibility for the certification of senior secondary schooling with State and Territory authorities. It is likely that considerable more time will be required to resolve these complexities.

This discussion has also not focussed on the cross-curriculum priorities defined in the Australian Curriculum as indigenous perspectives, knowledge about Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and a commitment to sustainable patterns of living. This is not because these are unimportant. On the contrary, they are represented in the VELS and knowledge about each of these areas will be further strengthened as a result of their representation as priorities in the Australian Curriculum. These priorities are, however, best and more naturally represented not as an additional layer of curriculum design but as key components embedded in the learning defined in the discipline-based domains. They are unifying ideas that should be used at the school and classroom level to develop teaching and learning programs that help students make links both between different learning areas and between the learning areas and students lived everyday experience. An important aspect of support for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum will be the development of teacher resources that demonstrate how teachers can engage students in learning through these priorities.

The development and implementation of the Australian Curriculum is timely for Victoria. It enables us to draw on lessons learnt from the implementation of the VELS; to strengthen our existing curriculum; to develop the new domain of learning of Ethical Understanding; and to draw on the best of the new curriculum and assessment resources that will be developed across Australia to support the implementation of the new curriculum.

Reference

Ochs, K., & Phillips, D. (2004). 'Processes of Educational Borrowing in Historical Context' in D. Phillips & K. Ochs (Eds.), *Educational Policy Borrowing: historical perspectives*. Oxford: Symposium Books.

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