ARTICLE 17:

CURRICULUM: MAKING IT WORK

Stephen Crump

Planning an appropriate and relevant lesson, for pre-schoolers, primary or secondary students, is one of the hardest challenges teachers face. Even when there are detailed syllabi and strong centralized control over subject matter, as in all state education systems in Australia, it is the teacher's job to make it all work. The reality, whatever the external context, is that teachers can and do exercise significant influence over the curriculum and have the major say in what happens within their own classrooms. This situation offers great rewards to those teachers who adopt a lesson-planning strategy of research, reflection, and negotiation. The alternative is to 'teach' in classrooms clogged by tedium and mediocrity.

A study of the culture of school teachers will quickly reveal that there are teachers who prefer to adopt passive roles and there are teachers who prefer to innovate. While this appears on the surface to be a matter of personal choice, the professional and occupational responsibilities teachers hold, as a group, suggest that the practices behind the words 'education', 'reform' and 'democracy' should be closely linked in the classroom. Yet few traditional syllabi recognize or acknowledge this as an issue.

To this end, 'curriculum' is defined in this chapter as something "constructed in practice out of the knowledge of all who participate in the educational process" (Walker, 1987a: 20).

This definition views knowledge as something gained by seeking solutions to practical problems. As John Dewey wrote earlier this century, education must give people command over themselves. To this end, part of the learner's knowledge comes from the learner and part from the events to which the learner is exposed (Power, 1969). Education is 'doing' and a curriculum which does not recognize this makes learning mechanical and slavish (Dewey, 1916).

Changing Curriculum

This chapter will present an analysis of a research study into school-centred curriculum decision-making. The research was conducted at a co-educational government school, 'Carpenter', in Western Sydney from 1986-1989. Carpenter was representative, in its socio-economic configuration, of outer-suburban secondary schools. Like many schools across Australia in the 1980s, Carpenter received funding for a number of government policies including the national Transition Education policy, the Disadvantaged Schools Programme and the Participation and Equity Project. At the state-level, the school also received funding for the Western Sydney Schools Project 'Staying On' and support for staff inservice. This additional funding, over $200,000 for the decade, spurred on curriculum reform though, to the teachers' credit, many innovations were in an embryonic stage before any money was forthcoming. Funding clearly assisted in developing resources but more important was the philosophical justification and support the policy directives offered these teachers.

What transpired was classrooms where students took on new perspectives on assessment, discipline, teacher-pupil relations and the nature of learning. Further, the social relations and practices of students and teachers in many classes reflected a new alignment of knowledge and power through changing their function from repression to liberation. These changes built up a negotiated curriculum which incorporated sharing and learning between teachers and students. These new shared perspectives on the purposes of schooling took on more than a pedagogical value, influencing school policies on issues like student welfare and discipline, and altering subject organization of class groups, for example, the introduction of 'mixed ability' classes (Crump, 1990a). All of these developments did not relegate teachers or disenfranchize their rights but, rather, increased teacher satisfaction as they became *more* involved in the activity in their classrooms and freer to broaden those activities now they had the support of their students.

The curriculum changed at Carpenter for a variety of reasons. Foremost was the increase in the number of students who were staying on for the senior school, a phenomenon common across Australia. The 'new' senior student entered the school with varying needs and interests: some wished to follow the traditional pattern of preparation to matriculate to a university; others hoped to broaden their skills in a way which might increase their chances of getting a job either before or after sitting for their final examinations; still others needed courses which would lead them into specific careers through alternative, non-matriculation, subjects. It became increasingly obvious to many of the teachers at Carpenter that it was difficult to meet these diverse needs by offering just the one senior programme of study. As a result, the school organized itself to plan, write and seek Departmental approval for a wide range of school-based courses, eventually for both the senior and junior students.

The process of curriculum change at Carpenter can be assessed through reference to a model of curriculum development which emphasizes the coherence, rather than the divisions, between the players in the curriculum game. Accordingly, it is known as the *Coherence Model* (Walker, 1987b). This model is based on a number of starting points, ones which might challenge a) the way one views students, b) the learning process (for example, your use of textbooks), c) teachers' institutional roles and d) teachers' professional privilege in deciding what counts as knowledge in their classrooms. These premises include:

Figure 1 PREMISES FOR CURRICULUM PLANNING

1) Understanding your students' perspectives on schooling to assess the perceived and real needs of students;

2) Analyzing where your students' perspectives intersect with your own;

3) Determining the genuine formal and informal knowledge your students already have, as individuals and/or as part of a group;

4) Developing curricula and teaching strategies which build on the convergence of teacher and student knowledge;

5) Reducing direct teacher control and power in order to maximize teacher-student understanding, cooperation and communication.

A Coherent Curriculum

Students are not empty jars to be filled from textbooks, videos or by guest speakers. They all bring to the classroom a wealth of experience and explicit formal knowledge, a factor few texts recognize. Schools tend to teach, in the main, what many students already know. Student knowledge is, first, personal and, second, cultural. As Walker (1987a: 20) explains, the trick for developing a coherent curriculum is to discover the common ground where different groups share knowledge. We can term this common ground 'touchstone'. Locating the common ground between the knowledge held by student groups and by the teacher is the starting point for practical teacher-student negotiations which can, through extending those links, effectively solve the problem of appropriateness and relevance. The stress on problem-solving means that teachers and their students share the activity of lesson planning and, thus, constructing curriculum. A sequence to follow could be that outlined in Figure 2:

Figure 2 THE COHERENCE MODEL FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

* Determine what you regard as your *problems* in lesson planning;

* Determine what your students regard as *their* problems;

* Determine whether there are *different* problems for different groups of students [gender, ethnicity, social class and age];

* Determine how your students see the *options* [solutions] for dealing with those problems;

* *Analyze* these options to discover the extent to which the different groups agree [internal coherence];

* Analyze *your own options* [solutions] to discover the extent to which they agree with your students' options [mutual coherence];

* Determine the *effectiveness* of the options you and your students have in common for common problems [touchstone];

* *Negotiate* the implementation of one of the solutions and 'research' its success and then try out another *solution*.

The Coherence Model is not a recipe. You do not have to completely subscribe to the premises to successfully use it. The model works best if you question its foundations and explore its implications within your own context. While that may be a little discomforting if you are looking for instant success, it does mean that when you do succeed you - and your students - will have played a large part in reaching that goal. When this happens, you will feel the deep satisfaction that the application of professional knowledge can bring - a solving of problems, a practical resolution of issues that are of immediate concern.

Changing Classrooms

Traditionally, the subject syllabus has controlled what happens in most classrooms. Employed uncritically, a syllabus assigns unequal status to formal and informal knowledge and, therefore, divides teachers and their students. The way most textbooks are written implies that teachers have the main responsibility for interpreting and applying the knowledge they believe their students need. This is particularly the case when it comes to assessment. As well-intended as many teachers are, this situation triggers divisions which reach deep into classroom interactions. The final section of this chapter will present action research instances of making the curriculum work to improve the learning environment, classroom management and gender interactions.

The Learning Environment

What the syllabus, textbooks and the other paraphernalia of teaching (kits, videos, slides, computer software and so on) say to teachers is, "We have decided what students need to learn". This is *validated knowledge* (Grace, 1978), the knowledge given the nod as acceptable to teach in classrooms by Boards of education, syllabus committees, politicians and school councils. If teachers accept this situation, the message their lessons send to students is loud and clear: there is no room for your ideas, experiences and opinions in planning the operations of this institution. That students have received and understood this message is evident in the detailed studies of student *alienation* (Woods, 1979; Macpherson, 1983). The teaching strategies adopted at Carpenter required teachers to rethink this phenomenon. Through involving students in curriculum development, the school extended the knowledge it "allowed" into its curriculum and, significantly, opened up control of the curriculum to students, parents and members of the local community.

One example should explain this point. The Mathematics staff at Carpenter developed a Year 9/10 course titled "Extensions In Mathematics". Students selecting this course would do an extra four periods of Maths per week for one year. This course was designed to assist in the development of mathematics principles and ideas before students entered the senior school as Carpenter students had a poor record in matriculation Maths. Departmental approval for the course was granted only on the condition that this course did not cover, in advance, any topics in the formal syllabus. This was a highly successful and popular course selected by female and male students. In this course, students not only brought in their own knowledge but were exposed to a broader mathematical picture than that given in lessons based on the syllabus. The students told me about some of these differences, adding:

> *Jillian: Besides, you find out about the people you study [in Extension In Maths]. Like, in our normal Maths class, we do Pythagoras' theorem and just dribble on about the theorem and you don't actually know who the person was or what else he did.*

Another student added a further dimension:

> *Kathy: And, also, Mr. T. shows us what to do but we can sort of argue with him if you think something's wrong.*

Which is a contrast to their experience of textbook learning:

> *Peter: 'Normal' Maths, if you reckon it's wrong you get sent out! This one, you reckon it's wrong you get to explain it.*
>
> *Brian: You get group work and get to discuss the thing.*

The key to this change, as I observed in this classroom, was that Mr. T. led from the rear; that is, he set the students a problem and if they could not solve it, he *first* sent them to the blackboard to brainstorm a solution with their classmates. Only when the whole group was stuck did Mr. T. intervene and even then it was to lend guidance rather than to instruct. The enthusiasm these students felt was not only a consequence of sharing power over their learning but also stemmed from a deeper understanding of the textbook knowledge that was otherwise not called upon.

Classroom Management

A bonus to this whole achievement was that personal relations improved dramatically: first, between classmates and between girls and boys and, second, between the class and teacher:

> *Michelle: Also, he [Mr.T.] communicates what he wants to communicate. Other teachers, they teach us. [In this class] It's more like a friend teaching you than a teacher/student kind of thing, "You do this.. you do that".*

The mutual recognition of teacher and student rights and interests in curriculum decision-making appeared to cross over into a better shared understanding about classroom management. The gap between teachers and students was bridged in a number of places creating a better set of personal relations within the school. Many of the students interviewed made similar comments. One student, talking about another teacher, observed:

> *Frances: I think we can communicate with him. **I think that if all teachers were like that I think the school system would be completely different** [her emphasis].*

This small sample of comments, from a large collection (Crump, 1990b), depicts high quality solutions being arrived at by students and teachers. What we can detect is a shift in formal roles from teacher to friend. This suggests a further convergence of teacher and student perspectives (touchstone) achieved through changing the balance in the control of knowledge *and* changing the power relations within the classroom. Teachers, in these classrooms, did not feel the urge to be authoritarian, uncompromising and judgmental. Correspondingly, their students sensed a new order and responded with enthusiasm, effort and good humour. Fear and antagonism *do* exist in our schools. While many students at Carpenter were reaching out for better personal relations with their teachers, some teachers were afraid to respond:

> *Stella: If we don't like something [with Mr.M] we say 'Hey sir...' and he listens to us. Whereas when I asked Mr. H., I said. 'Hey, you don't like me do you sir?' and he replied 'I'm not paid to like you'... and I felt really low then, really bad.*

Nearly every group interview produced, unprovoked, a similar incident or remark.

That students *prefer* better contact with their teachers can be summarized by this last example from a discussion of the drab architecture and poor resources in Carpenter:

> *Marcel: It doesn't matter where you work in, it's the teachers that make it. You can work in a hovel but, as long as the teachers are all right, it doesn't matter.*

This student understood the lesson the Federal Government learnt from the mistakes of policy based on the Karmel Report in the 1970s through to the successes of the Participation and Equity Project [PEP] in the mid-1980s: you can provide enough money and material resources to swamp a school but, until you change people's attitudes, the basic problems remain.

Gender and Curriculum

Making your curriculum planning work also means making it work for girls. It is sometimes hard for those closely involved in education to acknowledge that the curriculum has generally disadvantaged female students throughout the history of compulsory education and within private or government systems. For example, Spender (1980; 1982) argues that female students learn to lose and are largely 'invisible' in classroom interactions. Throughout the 1980s, schools across the Western world altered structural and organizational features so that girls now have greater access to subjects and electives on the timetable. There have been great leaps forward in creating 'girl friendly schooling' (Whyte, Deem, Kant & Cruickshank, 1985). However, it is still possible that not much has changed in actual classroom processes and in the curriculum planning on which those processes are based. While certain syllabus documents have become sensitive to gender issues, the materials to resource those subject areas often remain profoundly flawed.

The school-centred approach to making curriculum work at Carpenter generated a climate of reform which brought the girls-schooling issue into sharp relief. The interesting feature of the interaction between gender and curriculum was the identification and expansion of shared perspectives between teachers and female students. The increase in understanding and cooperation between teachers and female students potentially empowered female students to construct an effective set of 'ways of achieving' within the school situation. Most female students involved in the study were judged to be more amenable to change than male students as, for example, female students responded better to the teachers' initiatives in broadening the curriculum. Male students were, unquestionably, the most powerful subculture in the school yet female students, by aligning themselves with the academic and social expectations of the staff, were able to exploit this advantage in order to achieve better grades or, at least, to perform at a more satisfactory and satisfying level than the boys (Crump, 1990c: 375-376). Even in computing subjects, where male students tend to outnumber females, curriculum

changes assisted changes in gender perspectives. First, the teacher's point of view:

> *Mr Atari: If anything, I find the girls are the more able students who work well with computers, they're usually more cluey about what's going on. I find that when it comes to peer help within the classroom, it's always the girls who will get up and go over to the other computers - where some of the boys are having trouble with them - they're [girls] usually the ones to help. I find that the girls see themselves as the students in control of the classroom at that time.(...) I think the guys look for guidance from the girls.*

The students, interviewed separately but within a week of the teacher's interview, concurred:

> *SC: What happens when you get in the computer room? Do the boys grab all the machines [as some research suggests]?*
>
> *Vanessa: No. the boys muck around more than the girls. The girls get a lot more work done than the boys do really.*
>
> *SC: 'Muck around with the computer' or 'Muck around..'?*
>
> *Vanessa: Yeah [just muck around]. They sit there and talk. They might get about two lines done in two periods and the girls are all finished their work.*

With a foundation of higher participation and stronger academic background in the junior years, female students adjusted faster and better to the demands of the senior school. Perhaps surprisingly, female students studied in as many academic senior subjects as male students. This altered the distribution of power directed through the curriculum in a way which offered a new and wider range of career options. It is to be hoped that the employers of the 1990s are ready for this phenomenon. Gill (1985) was early to report that female students are the more enduring and successful group in the senior school. The N.S.W. Higher School Certificate results for 1990 confirm this point: in English [2 and 3 Unit], 9 out of the top 10 were girls; in Maths [2 Unit], 7 out of the top 11 were girls; in Science [3 Unit], 7 out of the top 11 were girls; in Biology *and* Geology, 7 out of the top 11 were girls; in History [2 Unit], 8 out of the top 11 were girls, and in Visual Arts girls took out all the top places (Totaro, 1991: 14). At tertiary levels, women are beginning to dominate, in numbers and results, the male bastions of Law, Medicine, Engineering and Architecture. Yet there are still major obstacles for female students and curriculum planning should take full cognisance of these changes in female expectations, dispositions and opinions.

Reflections

The Carpenter study depicts a constructive and mutually beneficial partnership between teachers and students, a partnership which encouraged reforms across a wide band of school policies and structures. Though it is a case study of a specific social context and a particular type of school, the findings suggest that the

practices adopted at Carpenter are transferable to other educational settings - at whatever level of education - because it is the practical orientation of the *process* of curriculum planning which is the driving force behind its success. Of course, there are all sorts of unresolved questions about whose interests were best served throughout this experience. There is no doubt that a central aim was to reduce student misbehaviour and that, by achieving a less disgruntled body of students, teachers had more overall control in the school. Yet, I would stress that this was gained not at the students' expense but through opening up to students new options for classroom participation, for contributing to their formal assessment and, after they left school, better employment options based on the acquisition of new skills and higher self-esteem.

Making curriculum work means starting with the practical experiences of teachers and students, it means understanding the problems they confront in making sense out of schooling, it means negotiating the content and assessment of lessons and it means understanding the practical consequences of teacher and pupil action. One of these consequences is a closer relationship between teachers and students so that 'education' takes on a *whole* rather than divided meaning for its participants. Given the dimension of changes which are occurring in schools and society throughout the 1990s, the more we know about how to fuse teacher and student perspectives into a coherent and concerted attempt to decrease the divisions in our schools, the better we will be able to send today's young people out to face the challenges of the twenty first century.

TASK 18

Read Article 18, *The Knowledge Classroom: Open or Closed?*, and attempt the following items:

1) How are the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'society' linked?

2) Provide examples of ways in which technical rationality has influenced our thinking about education, curriculum and classroom practice;

3) Precisely how has the sociology of knowledge challenged these influences?

4) Is knowledge best understood as a 'power function' in any society?

5) What would be the implications of this for school curricula?

6) Which of the five perspectives on knowledge offered by Allen do you find most helpful?

7) Is your theory of knowledge real or a fallacy?