A Model for Researching Syllabus Development and Curriculum Change


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This model developed from a study of changes in the social education syllabuses in NSW over a 22 year period from 1967 to 1989. The social education or SOSE area was examined from the perspective of how it changed over this period, why it changed and how the changes inform current practice. Although some may argue that the curriculum historian should perhaps be further removed from the study, the main impetus for me with this study was to inform my current practice. As Popkewitz points out:

Our questions about the present require that we recognise that the present is not just our immediate experiences and practices. Part of our historical consciousness is to recognise that the past is a part of our everyday discourse, structuring what can be said and the possibilities and challenges of our times.
I am the HSIE coordinator at the University of Newcastle and I work in the Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary programs. There is a real need for me to have an overriding view removed from the minutiae of day to day SOSE lesson planning in a particular syllabus area.

The model evolved from two directions. Firstly, from reading literature in the policy, curriculum, educational history, social science pedagogy, and sociology areas, and examining primary documents such as committee minutes. Secondly it evolved from talking to syllabus committee members from the period and reading their survey replies, and examining the syllabuses produced. There were nineteen interviews held and 61 surveys collected. The model is not wildly different from anything seen before and in fact is similar to Kenway's, for example, suggestion for categorising theories of policy making. She argued that there were macro-theories encompassing an examination of the broader social and political context in which policy develops and the role of the state in this; middle-range theories which concentrate on the different stages of policy development and implementation; and micro-theories concerning decision making and decision makers within particular institutions. It is also important to examine the text of syllabus documents/policy documents.

Environment

The facets of the environment for syllabus development or syllabus change entail the political, economic, social and cultural factors of the period and the ideology in educational circles that is pre-eminent at the time. These are all inter-related. In the period of my study there was economic plenty followed by economic shortfall, social welfare programs in abundance followed by cuts in social welfare programs, a period of increased diversification of culture in the population of Australia as well as an acknowledgement of the Indigenous contribution to Australian culture and some major shifts in the thinking as to what mass education wanted to achieve. These were all factors shaping school syllabuses. There are a variety of studies that examine this aspect of curriculum development.

Studies such as those of Kliebard offer an explanation based on differing philosophies of education. In his view curriculum development in America was explained by three major reform movements arising at the turn of the twentieth century (the child-study movement, social efficiency educators and the social meliorists) that were aligned against the traditional humanist curriculum. He argued that the humanists wanted to maintain the status quo and were the guardians of a tradition linked to intellectual reasoning and thus to the Western cultural heritage. They exerted much power through their standing in the academic world. One group contesting the supremacy of the humanists in the curriculum was the child-study movement. Advocates promoted a curriculum reformed along the lines of the natural order of development of the child. They felt that the curriculum could be adapted to the natural needs and interests of the child and that the school should encourage but not direct the child. The second reform group, called by Kliebard the social efficiency educators, were strongly influenced by scientific methodology and were intent on creating an efficient, smoothly running society. Techniques of industry were to be applied to schools and the curriculum was to be made more directly functional to adult roles. The third reform group were the social meliorists. They saw the school as a major force for social change and social justice. This group came to the fore at the end of the 1920s and was associated with social educators like George Counts and Harold Rugg in the United States.

In Kliebard=s view, the present curriculum was the result of conflict among the four philosophies of education:
In the end, what became the American curriculum was not the result of any decisive victory by any of the contending parties, but a loose, largely unarticulated, and not very tidy compromise.

Another researcher, Goodson examined the development of geography, biology, ‘rural studies’ and 'environmental studies' as they became established subjects in schools. He postulated that school subjects belonged to one of three traditions — academic, utilitarian or pedagogic, and advocates of these subjects used these traditions at various times to advocate their subjects and to defend them against contenders. As an example, here in Australia the debate between the traditional History teachers and those teachers advocating the New History approach in the 1970s could reflect a debate between academic and the utilitarian philosophies.

In the area of social education specifically, Johnson pointed out that the aim of the field he calls social studies varies between educating for social commitment to educating for social comprehension. Similarly Wheeler argues that curriculum aims may be put into two broad categories — aims concerned with producing a certain type of person, and aims concerned with producing people capable of fulfilling a certain role.

The above studies provide explanation primarily from a philosophical standpoint. There are many studies, particularly those based in the policy field, which provide a close examination of the specific political, cultural and economic forces influencing the school curriculum. Cornbleth and Waugh’s study of the implementation of social studies curriculum in New York and California demonstrated not only the clashing ideologies associated with the portrayal of multicultural America, but also the economic and political background, and the various factions associated with these different views.

Aldrich provides evidence of the political and economic forces involved in developing the National Curriculum as well as its conservative, nation-building citizenship focus. A similar theme is echoed by Phillips’ study of the increased emphasis on a traditional view of national culture in the curriculum. On the other hand, Ball and Bowe criticised the economic, market-led rationale of the National Curriculum. Ball considers implications of both of these facets of curriculum making in his Education Reform: A Critical and Post-Structural Approach.

Closer to home, the Australian national profiling exercise, a homegrown version of a national curriculum, has been examined from the viewpoints of the political, economic and social forces involved.

Kennedy identified economic imperatives as encouraging curriculum initiatives in Great Britain, the United States and Australia in the late 1980s while Green and Beavis argue that nationalism and a concern to build an Australian identity and citizenship is a thread running through Australian syllabuses in English. Reports such as that of the Civics Expert Group promote similar views in history syllabuses.

**Process Explanations**

All change cannot be explained by the environment. Syllabus committees are sometimes sheltered from the economic and social realities by administrative contraints or processes. In the 1970s syllabuses were devised in skeletal form to enable teachers to create relevant school-based programs. In the social science area they often incorporated inquiry approaches and encouraged higher conceptual levels of understanding. These appeared in a period when funds for schools were being cut and there was little professional support for implementation. The documents were out of
sync with the economic, political and social environment and as a consequence some schools floundered.

Ball developed a schema of associated factors needed for any meaningful analysis of change in policy-making in education. He argued that the relations of change in the power struggles between social groups and the differing vested interests, resources and influence; and the structures of change in the institutions, organisations, procedures, roles and formal channels of a policy making were important facets for analysis. Bowe, Ball and Gold argued that syllabuses were the result of struggle and compromise made up of groups of actors working within different sites... in competition for control of the representation of policy. At this level of understanding of curriculum change, Creighton noted a number of limitations of decision-making within committees. These included failure to give systematic coverage to issues, members pushing their predetermined conclusions, proneness to reject innovations, personal feelings of members that they are reluctant to reveal, excessive time taken to make decisions, domination by a few members, and the production of superficial findings and group conformity in order to accommodate all interests.

Various groups are instrumental in promoting change in school subjects. Goodson pointed to the importance of university pressure groups particularly in providing the academic status that seemed to be so important for a subject in establishing school-based esteem, and which in turn encouraged students to take a particular subject. In his examination of the development of modern languages Radford indicated that the lack of academic prestige afforded to modern languages in the nineteenth century, even when offered at Cambridge in 1886, delayed the introduction of such study in schools. Universities also exert indirect influence on school subjects through control of developments in the subject field, through the preparation of teachers, the publication of textbooks in the field, and the establishment of entrance requirements into university courses. For a large part of this century in NSW, the University of Sydney had considerable influence on secondary school syllabuses.

The professional associations also are influential in the development of school subjects. Ball noted the National Association for the Teaching of English in the 1960s and 1970s and its influence on school curricula. McCulloch examined the considerable role of the Association of Heads of Secondary Technical Schools in promoting curriculum for technical education in England. Likewise Goodson recognised the importance of the Association of Teachers of Gardening and Rural Subjects in the promotion of rural studies. Teacher associations were not the only groups involved in negotiating school syllabuses. Whitty recognised lobbying of the Royal Geographical Society against social studies in secondary modern schools in the 1950s.

Cooper, in his study of a new mathematics curriculum in the United Kingdom, found the personal relations between people pursuing the various segments of the subject (with their distinct perspectives and material interests), and their alliances with groups inside and outside the subject as the major factors in explaining change in that area. Similarly, Lybarger found that a number of people on the 1916 Committee on Social Studies in the United States were interested in charity work, partly explaining the reasoning behind that committee's argument that the needs of students should be criterion when devising social studies curriculum.

Administrative structures also influence school curriculum. In a study by Stray, the change from grammar-school to comprehensive school resulted in changes in the administrative hierarchy whereby pastoral concerns as opposed to subject specialist concerns became of major importance. In his study in one school in the 1970s, this administrative change led to the downgrading of classics education.
Australian studies of curriculum find that administrative concerns feature prominently. Young showed that the Board of Studies (BOS), the curriculum committee of the Board, the Key Learning Curriculum Committee for Human Society and Its Environment, the Years 7-10 History syllabus committee, professional historians, historical and professional associations were all instrumental in producing a new junior history syllabus in New South Wales in 1990. However, the Board of Studies had mandated the hours to be devoted to history and had decreed that a Key Learning structure would be established and it was these administrative constraints that were the major forces in developing a syllabus document. Brock, in his study of the development of secondary English curriculum in New South Wales, also noted the importance of the directives from the Secondary Schools Board (SSB) when designing syllabuses, particularly in allocating content for particular levels of study. In an earlier period Graham specified the importance of the Inspector-General and his team of school inspectors in establishing curriculum in Western Australia. Also in Western Australia, but in a different era, Marsh pointed to the influence of the Education Department and the External Examination and Certification Boards, as well as the professional associations, the tertiary institutions, and the textbook publishers and authors on the development of a senior school geography curriculum. The list grows even longer in his later study of groups and influences involved in the National profiling exercise, with Federal agencies, national commissions and councils, and state accreditation and assessment agencies often playing a large part in the process.

What has become most obvious, however, is the increased role of politicians in curriculum development. There was some foretaste of this in the 1970s with the intervention of the Premier of Queensland and the consequent banning of Man: A Course of Study (MACOS) in schools, because of pressure from conservative religious groups. Winder found that in NSW, curriculum was influenced by direct party politics, the electoral platform policies of a political party and policy created by an oligarchy within a party. He also found that interest groups, such as teacher unions and parent organisations, and the bureaucracy, also affect education policies.

Individuals

Archer wrote of the politics of aggregation or the dumb pressure of numbers whereby educational demography is shaped by the sum of unorganised individual actions. There are a number of studies of the individuals involved in curriculum change. Ivor Goodson and Rob Walker edited a collection of studies of curriculum in 1991, exploring the historical changes in curriculum study since the 1970s. Their overall theme was that people play a central role in the educational process and in educational systems. The focus on the personal nature of action and interaction was a point of access into broader social contexts and structures. As an example, Goodson=s study of the school subject rural studies explored the development of a school subject that was, in the 1920s, a utilitarian subject based on gardening, through to its being offered in A and O levels within environmental studies in the 1970s. He collected the life histories of the innovators of change in the subject as well as those who represented the traditions of the subject.

One aspect of the personal side of syllabus construction is the importance that teachers attach to their teaching subject. Teachers= identities can be established by their teaching subjects and their various teaching methods. Changes to these can sometimes be seen as personal threats. David Warren Saxe examined the social construction of social studies in Social Studies in Schools. He examined the documentation of the establishment of 'social studies' as a school subject but also looked at the role of particular personalities and their individual interests. Cooper, in his study of a new mathematics curriculum in the United Kingdom, saw relations among people pursuing the various segments of the subject, and their alliances with groups inside and outside the subject, as the
major explanatory factor for changes in the curriculum. Issues such as perceived career consequences for individuals also affected curriculum change.

The danger with a narrow focus on the people involved in the process is that it can atomise the study and make what is a very complex issue seem too simple. Goodson not only collected the life histories of the innovators of change in the school subject, as well as those who represented the traditions of the subject, but also developed a detailed documentary history of the school subject and of the conflicts over the innovations. He saw the combination of a group of life stories and a subject history as a strategy to triangulate the data and thereby strengthen the findings. As he noted curriculum change comes from 'a story of action within a theory of context'. No doubt we can all name an insightful or enterprising individual who appears to have a major force on curriculum development at some point.

Syllabus Text

The text of syllabus documents can be deconstructed. The term >deconstruction= was first coined by Derrida to indicate the relationship between experience and language. He argued that deconstruction of text lays bare the construction of the text and reveals multitudes of meanings and interpretations. It is not simply understood as ideologically constructed, but is seen as a series of narratives superimposed upon each other with layers of story merged and separated. Wade has categorised studies analysing school texts in these ways as being divided into three major types:

A. There are those studies where the purpose is to describe the attributes of a given topic such as those that attempt to ascertain the extent to which nuclear war is mentioned in texts. In my study this entailed tracking certain concepts and themes through a variety of syllabuses. For example none of the History syllabuses mentioned >poverty= or >wealth=. Nor was >duty=, >morality=, >justice= or >welfare= considered in history syllabuses. It seems that social values were not stressed in history syllabuses of this period whereas in the early 1970s these terms began to emerge at least in junior Geography.

B. Then there are studies whose purpose is to make inferences about the causes of the findings, for example, Gilbert=’s study of school syllabuses and texts to ascertain the underlying ideology of these texts. It is interesting that the term >Modern History= has meant different things at different periods of time. The 1962 junior history course was called modern history and it began in 1450. It claimed that the content had been influenced by the developments in politics, industry and science which affect everyday life;

>It is felt that teachers and students are most interested in the past that affects the present=.

The 1978 senior modern history syllabus began in the 18th century with the French Revolution. Many of the arguments held in the syllabus committee in the early 1980s centred around the issue of when modern history really began. Could >modern= be later than the French Revolution? The 1982 junior syllabus claimed that twentieth century world history was valuable as an aid to >assist students to understand their present world=, seeming to imply that only knowledge of the twentieth century was important to contemporary life. Thus, while attempting to make their study contemporary and relevant to current society, historians were on shifting ground in defining the content of history. This represented changes in the philosophy behind what was being taught.

C. Lastly there are those whose purpose is that of making inferences about the effects of text upon students, for example, Luke=’s study of the influence of the Dick and Jane school texts on social relations and perceptions of what counted as appropriate reading. And what of Geography as an
active study of the local area? In the 1966 junior Geography syllabus teachers were encouraged to promote interest by;

>the use of >active= methods, such as observation outside the classroom, practical work in the construction and interpretation of maps and graphs, and description from photographs and films=.

However terms associated with student activity began to disappear from the syllabus. The 1975 syllabus incorporated the skill of >observation and recognition of phenomena in real and representative form= but it tended to emphasise cognitive skills. Although the words >experience= or >active= are rarely used in the 1984 syllabus the photographs in this syllabus emphasise the active nature of geographic study. By adding a different media to the language a different perception of the intended study can be gained. Without the photographs it appears that the child=s own experiences were not very important in the study of geography. The pictures and the text send out different messages. This is a fascinating example of how either pictures or language can belie intended meaning.