

Response to Acara Initial Advice Paper on the National Curriculum for The Arts

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Abstract

This paper responds to The Arts: Initial Advice Paper (ACARA, 2010) in the proposed National Curriculum, concentrating on problems in two major areas. The first part considers the basic assumptions, or philosophical foundation. The second looks at the curriculum's strand organisation. The conceptual foundation is divisive in its approach to how learning occurs and strongly inconsistent with current knowledge. The strand organisation under a general set of verb terms is unsustainable. The terms are generic to any practice and not helpful theoretically or practically for defining a coherent learning experience in visual arts.

Introduction

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has written an initial advice paper shaping the arts in the Australian Curriculum (2010). It proposes the role and method for the teaching and learning, or pedagogy, of the arts in education. There are problems with ACARA's proposal. For all Australian students to achieve knowledge of the arts, ACARA must address these concerns. This response identifies, broadly, two problems: the underlying assumptions, or philosophical foundations; and strand organisation. Conclusions are drawn and commentary made.

PART 1

The world view as basic assumptions or ontology

Inherent dualism

Page 3. Point 5: There is a theoretical and practical division applied to aspects of

mind. The proposal tends to collapse distinctions between aspects of experience and their division into 'worlds.' The paper posits "three dimensions" – perceptual (sensory experience), cognitive (mental activity), and affective (emotional experience). These 'dimensions' function within separate 'worlds,' as contexts of meaning. This is surprising, as dividing the mind in this way is a longstanding object of criticism in arts education.

Elliot Eisner says, "unfortunately, cognition is often narrowly conceived" and "perhaps nowhere does this problem stand out more clearly than when cognition is contrasted with affect" (1996, p. 20). The "cognitive and affective are all too often regarded as distinct and independent states of the human organism" (p. 20). And "if such distinctions were simply theoretical conveniences, they might not cause as much practical mischief," but "the mischief stems from the fact that the distinctions are reified and practically applied" (p. 20). Eisner's view of unity in the mental activity of students is consistent with current studies of how the brain works.

The cognitive and brain sciences have long rejected these divisions, emphasising the interaction between brain areas (Damasio, 1998, 2000; Edelman, 2006, p. 57-60). Specialized neural systems support each function, but there is extensive interaction between brain structures specialized for emotion, and those for cognition and awareness (Phelps, 2004, p. 1013). Researchers conclude, "separation between emotion and cognition seems artificial when one is trying to understand everyday human function in a social environment" (p. 1013).

Problems with anti-realism in education

The most troubling underlying division is represented as "worlds" in a three-world view. *Page 3. Point 5* of the paper promotes three contexts of meaning – the "subjective world of personal experience; the relational world of others and the society we experience; and the objective world of objects, processes and people, which lies beyond our direct experience."

The multiple-world view is an anti-realist position. A multi-world ontology rejects a real world to which we have immediate sensory or cognitive access. This rejection

is evident in “the objective world of objects, processes and people which lies beyond our direct experience”. Denying direct experience of an independent world is unsustainable, theoretically and practically. Seeing things from different points of view is embedded in epistemology, or theories of knowledge, and does not require rejection of the real world to which we have immediate perceptual and cognitive access (Francini, 2009, pp. 164-167).

In *Page 9. Point 26*, the paper divides the sensory, cognitive and affective aspects of mind into the “three worlds of the artwork.” Separating “the personal and relational worlds” (*Page 24. Point 77*), and the “personal and global worlds” (*Page 18. Point 52*), is again inconsistent with contemporary knowledge. The personal *is* relational. Neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese says “the capacity to code the ‘like me’ analogy between self and others constitutes a *basic prerequisite and a starting point for social cognition*” (2003, p. 517, emphasis added).

In *Appendix A, Page 27. Point 88*, art is positioned within “the three distinct worlds of the artist(s).” *Page 28. Point 92* further reifies the separation between “the personal, social and objective worlds” constituting “human culture.” This multi-world ontology (assumptions underlying the existence of things) makes no distinction between the way things exist (their ontology) and how we have knowledge of things, as epistemology, treating “the perspective from which something is regarded... – as somehow part of its ontology” (Searle, 2004, p. 317). Perspectivalism or perspectivism is deeply problematic for epistemology. Perspectivalism and its variants claim that because someone “must have a vocabulary in order to state the facts, or a language in order to identify and describe the facts” that the facts described or identified “have no independent existence” (1999, p. 22). This is a fallacy. “Facts are conditions that make statements true but they are not identical with their linguistic descriptions” (p. 22).

The anti-realist position of multiple worlds and rejection of access to a real world, seen in the now retreating extremes of postmodern theory, is untenable for any curriculum purporting to represent contemporary knowledge. Further, dividing the arts curriculum from other subjects is deeply problematic. An anti-realist curriculum

places arts students at odds, instead of in harmony, with all other teaching and learning in K-12.

The consequences of antirealist assumptions are retrograde. The highly respected UK (‘Robinson’) Report, *All Our Futures*, articulates a “tendency” for debate in education “to be expressed as a series of exclusive alternatives, even dichotomies: for example as a choice between the arts or sciences” and “between academic standards or creativity” (NACCCE, 1999, p. 9). The “dichotomies between arts and sciences have deeply affected our systems of education and helped forge popular stereotypes of artists and scientists” as excluding identities (NACCCE, p. 83). Any National Curriculum should reflect an increasing relation, rather than division, between the arts and sciences.

The different worlds are divided

The paper’s reference to individual/collective production and audience experience is also problematic. Meanings in this view are social, and free-floating: “never fixed” (*Page 4. Point 9*). This extreme poststructural view is a poor negotiation with the concept of practice, because meaning making is unconstrained. Rather, a real notion of practice stabilises the theoretical and experimental conditions of a field of knowledge. Practice, as an organising framework, provides a more coherent approach to enabling meaning since it allows subjective and social agency, as a unity, in the conditions of knowledge. On the paper’s poststructural semiotic approach, the mind has little role in making, understanding and appreciating art. Subjectivity is just another social construct.

PART 2

Teaching and learning with the strands

Generating, realising, responding

The paper recommends three strands for the curriculum structure, as *generating*, *realising* and *responding*, stating in *Page 4* that “understanding in any form that is deep, broad and enabling involves all these three processes... and that is why these terms are used...” This model is “recognisable to any teacher or learner” (*Page 31*).

Point 109) and the Arts are “seen as dynamic activity, to be described by verbs, rather than as objects or concepts described by nouns” (*Page 31. Point 110*). The commitment to art making is commendable, but there is no virtue in rejecting a conceptual foundation to practices in favour of a verb-oriented approach (*Page 31. Point 110*).

The strand terms, as verbs, are true of any human activity, that is, trivially true. They hold no special relation with arts curriculum and, especially for NSW, describe a retrograde approach dismissed as unsustainable from the early 1990s on. In *Page 32. Point 111* the paper recognises that “no terms” in state and territory curricula are “entirely free from ambiguity and multiple or conflicting meanings.” The paper proposes the strand organisation will be “clearly” and “consistently” used “in keeping with their linguistic origins.” In *Page 31. Point 33*, it defines “any terms used as labels or categories in such a way as their distinctiveness is recognisable to any teacher or learner.” But linguistic meanings depend on the backgrounds of teacher and learner and are strongly underdetermined (Francini, 2009, pp. 275-277). An attempt to legislate meanings on these terms will fail, which is apparent as the paper proceeds.

The generic nature of the strand organisation is evident on *Pages 32 and 33*, from *Points 116- 119*, where the increasingly generalised nature of the terms’ behaviours disintegrates any meaningful application. There is an attempted management in having “considerable flow” and “overlap” (*Page 33. Point 118*), but this breaks down in the following and final point, where it is noted for the “Visual Arts there is often limited distinction which can usefully be made between *generating* and *realizing...*” (*Page 33. Point 119*).

Special play

Page 9. Point 24. Claiming for arts “their own special relationship with learning; an approach through engagement, purpose and communication” is unsupportable and inconsistent with the arts as fields of knowledge entailing experience and expertise. Engagement, purpose and communication cannot define a “special relationship,” since all fields of knowledge carry these terms, tacitly or explicitly,

in teaching and learning. The terms “**play** and **art**” (emphasis in original) are not useful in defining the often open-ended activities of art. As thinking about and making art and imagery, the reasoning is practical or goal-directed, even where the values may be non-instrumental. These activities are more helpfully understood as the experimental conditions of the field of practice.

While there are sophisticated uses of the concept of play in all fields, relating these terms in a National Curriculum alongside other subjects risks reducing the arts to a ‘kiddie’ activity. This is of limited value to an arts curriculum, even in early childhood developmental phases, since it marginalises arts activities at the expense of ‘genuine’ learning.

Thinking skills

Page 22. Point 67 struggles to articulate thinking skills in the arts. The Initial Advice Paper rightly claims that practical and theoretical knowledge includes a “broad range of high-level and functional thinking skills,” as does knowledge in the sciences and maths. But in characterising a particular kind of ‘thinking’ engaged in arts practices, the paper claims “the Arts actively and obviously teach aesthetic thinking and understanding, and a range of non-propositional symbolic forms of thinking”. This is a flawed response to a protocolic question. The paper appears hostage to a problem in arts education concerning the role of language and articulating felt experience.

If the term ‘thinking’ means ‘reasoning processes,’ the arts do require students to think. Aesthetic knowledge is one part of teaching and learning in the visual and other arts. Aesthetic knowledge requires thought processes, including thinking about perceptions, sensory experiences and so on; these can be referred to as felt or qualitative experiences. Such kinds of thinking can be grouped under the “range of high-level” thinking skills the paper refers to. They can also be described as metacognitive skills.

Metacognition, which involves “knowing about what you know”(Shinamura, 2000, p. 142) as higher forms of reasoning, supports the “deliberate ‘seeking after meanings

and relationships” in order to reason well (Brown, 1987, p. 67). Recognizing what something is in terms of relations is critical to understanding how the world functions in general. In physics, “a particle’s properties” are “really nothing more than shorthand for the way it interacts with everything around it” (Castelvecchi and Jamieson, 2006, p. 29). Metacognitive concepts “appear mysterious” because they inform more complex patterns of reasoning, but are “central to learning and development” (Brown, 1987, p. 65).

The difficulty of putting words to felt states, or experiences, motivates the student’s search for appropriate extensions of meaning in explanation. Study of aesthetics and art is, among other things, both embodied and a metacognitive activity (noting they are not practically distinct). Study of aesthetics consciously attends on this metacognitive activity in reasoning, from the experience and knowledge of the qualitiveness of states, or ‘how things feel’ (Francini, 2009, p. 298). Achieving this knowledge is a valuable and underestimated inclusion in education generally.

But the claim that the arts “obviously teach” a “range of non-propositional symbolic forms of thinking” is problematic, since its meaning is opaque. There is interest in ‘non-propositional’ forms of thinking in the arts, sciences and philosophy (Blachowicz, 1994; Efland, 2002, p. 146). There is widespread rejection that “thought relies on *propositional representations*” (Galaburda, Christen, and Kosslyn, 2002, p. 3). However, describing arts thinking as both non-propositional and symbolic relegates the arts to a primitive ‘magical’ discourse of thought. If the paper refers to thinking as symbolic, this is extremely disputed territory concerning theories of mind and the brain.

Extended knowledge of the visual arts

Page 21. Point 62. This section of the paper specifically concerns extended learning K-8 for students “with an interest and/or aptitude in the Arts.” But there is no insight into modeling extension activities. Instead, the suggested activities are consistent with acquiring only basic knowledge. That is, *Point 62* makes no knowledgeable provision for gifted and talented learning. Importantly, the paper’s postmodern cultural bias defines art in terms of “codes and conventions.” This

semiotic approach is essentially sociological, providing only one perspective that has been generalised to the preconditions of the proposed curriculum.

The politics and limits of visual art as text

The semiotic foundation is further embedded in the paper in *Page 22. Point 64*, in the statement that “artworks can be critically understood as communicative texts.” This point needs to be clearly understood in Visual Arts education, since there are ramifications. There are two difficulties with an approach to understanding artworks “critically” as “communicative texts.” First, semiotics is a language-based approach to the explanation of art that has come under strong criticism, even among the most sympathetic advocates of visual culture (Elkins, 2003, pp. 125-195; Jay, 1999).

There is concern the “reading of images as if they were texts” risks “concluding that they are nothing but texts with no remainders that make them specifically visual” (Jay, 1999, p. 16). The “study of literature and the study of the visual arts” cannot be understood as “symmetrical activities” (Melville, 1991, p. 74). Semiotics as a textual approach is widely considered insufficient as a model for explanation. This insufficiency leads to the second point.

The textual notion of art has influenced social reconstructivist educators as a political pedagogy in the form of social critique, as ‘critical literacy.’ Critical literacy is defined as “the intentional subversion of meanings in order to critique the underlying ideologies and relations of power that support particular interpretations of a text” (Myers, Hammett, and McKillop, 1998, p. 63). Defining knowledge in the arts in these politicised terms is questionable. It may be more appropriate to encompass semiotics as one approach to art, in the context of alternate explanatory means, for senior students.

Creativity

Page 22. Point 68. Defining ‘creativity’ in terms of “imaginatively exploring ideas that are new or new to the artist(s)” is trivial, since virtually all teaching and learning involves exploring ideas new to the student. In “responding to their own and others’

artwork” by “seeing the familiar in new ways” etc., the student learns that activities such as learning art criticism is in itself ‘creativity.’ This is problematic. First, simple participation in art activities is not in itself creative in any real sense. This would mean all categories of learning are equally creative, even $2 + 2 = 4$. Art cannot be understood in terms of rules, but its non-algorithmic nature does not make learning about the field inherently creative, even when tagged ‘imaginative.’ This leads to another, ethical, problem with the definition.

The sense of art as creative in itself is an old-fashioned defence of art in curriculum. To trivialise the term undermines the acquisition of a real body of knowledge enabling genuine creativity. Some knowledge may be a pre-condition of creativity but it is not sufficient. That is, “it is possible to have a limited creative impact in some fields with little knowledge of them,” but “sustained creative achievement involves (gaining) knowledge of the field in question and skills in the media concerned” (NACCCE, 1999, p. 42, parentheses added).

Links to other learning areas

Page 24. Point 80. There is no attempt to value the role of the Visual Arts linking to the wider curriculum or other subjects. There is a general inclusion of value under “all the Arts” in their cultural relation to history and geography. This reflects an overly socio-anthropological approach. The Visual Arts play a genuine cross-disciplinary role in understanding and explaining art and imagery more broadly. The Visual Arts also provide the source for learning in other areas. This is essential as all forms of cultural activity and learning become oriented towards images and imagery-based modeling. The sciences increasingly demonstrate concepts through visually oriented (as pictorial) imagery, to convey ideas (MacEachren, 2004; Pauwels, 2006), for example, artistic depiction of astronomical events (NASA, 2010).

Conclusion

The paper consists of a poststructural, semiotic foundation for the arts in the proposed National Curriculum. But semiotic approaches characteristically remain ‘outside’ mainstream epistemic frameworks intentionally (Francini, 2009, pp. 45-48). Such an approach is questionable. The poststructuralist “free-floating” view of

meaning making assimilates distinctions. This breaks down the discrete characters of practices, for example, disciplinary variations between Dance and the Visual Arts and collapses the various arts practices under a general set of terms. Individual identities of the fields of practice are not respected and their knowledge is poorly represented. This does not occur in other subjects and is unlikely to find support in the various fields of the arts.

The paper must offer itself towards a globally competitive arts curriculum document. But it fails in this. The rejection of “concepts described by nouns” (Page 31. Point 110) in describing a basis for arts learning is disingenuous. The underlying concepts are not explicit, but are present nevertheless. There is no clear statement of the paper’s antirealist bias and social reconstructionist commitment: this is indefensible.

The ensuing dualism is embedded theoretically and practically in the activities of art. This ensures a schism between the arts and other subjects. The paper promotes a semiotic explanation that is widely criticised as lacking a ‘feel’ for arts’ activities. The visual arts reduce to codes, conventions and texts. Claims for creativity prove rhetorical rather than substantial.

The move from the NSW curriculum’s strong conceptual foundation to a strand organisation of generic verbs is retrograde and reductive of teaching and learning. The NSW syllabus fulfils and exceeds all the criteria in the paper. There would be no advantage for NSW in adopting this less coherent approach, and quite a deal of rigour and reliability lost.

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