



Teachers and students as researchers: rebuilding curriculum inquiry for the future

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Inquiry, investigation, research: in our busy lives, we tend to undertake these activities only when there is a burning question, an ‘ouch’ experience, or occasionally when we need to plan something new. We don’t want to waste time on anything that seems not important. So curriculum inquiries do not tend to focus on ‘What’s in the official curriculum syllabus?’ nor ‘What’s on my timetable for next year?’. Rather, curriculum inquiry is mainly undertaken when there is no neat answer to a question worth spending time on—because addressing it, even if only finding partial ‘answers’, is valuable to our work.

There are, of course, many approaches to curriculum inquiry, depending on the reason and position or context of those asking questions. In this paper, I do not focus on policy-oriented questions nor philosophic interrogations of the field. Without wanting to discourage a wide range of inquiries into curriculum, I want rather to explore inquiry *by teachers and students*, to recover and reimagine curriculum inquiry for our times: where they investigate their social practices of *curriculum as knowledge-in-action*. For teachers and students, ‘curriculuming’ is, as Garth Boomer suggested (in Green, 1999), an ongoing, active project: a verb. Co-curriculum work, central to classrooms, requires all parties to be inquirers: teachers and students, in whatever sector of education they work.

To ‘inquire’ assumes that the focus for inquiry can be changed: practice is not perfect, it is open to investigation and alteration for better purposes and/or outcomes. Yet the top-down, centralised and standardised approach to curriculum, currently dominant in the Anglo-American world, works off the assumption that knowledge is pre-defined and

static: that, primarily, curriculum is knowledge *content*, not knowledge *activity*. So: what kind of inquiry by teachers and/or students is possible and needed for current times, despite it being a time when such questions for inquiry are marginalised? What might ‘curriculum inquiry’ look like and make possible?

I start by addressing the current official ‘curriculum’, since any inquiry work necessarily occurs in particular contexts which encourage certain questions and not others. I argue that the Australian Curriculum (AC) is not an adequate approach to curriculum, based on a static view of knowledge, around which students and teachers are positioned as consumers or implementers rather than as active knowledge workers. I then provide some history of Australian experience of teachers and students as researchers, as a way to remind us all that curriculum can change and there are histories and current practices to build upon. I finish by addressing some of the contemporary challenges to collaborative curriculum inquiry and move to suggest that many current issues are already under exploration, even under less than supportive conditions, and that this can provide hopeful bases to rebuild more widespread curriculum inquiry in education sites with their communities.

The ‘official’ syllabus: a straitjacket to control teacher-student knowledge work

Australian governments adopted a ‘national curriculum’ for implementation from 2011, a form of cooperation between the federal government and the states and territories – the latter, under the constitution, retained responsibility for their own education authorities, including their curriculum. The AC is the official policy text but is more akin to a *syllabus* document than a *curriculum*: it outlines contents, scope and sequence for teaching in separate

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subject or discipline areas, with some General Capabilities and three Cross-Curriculum Priorities. Political guidance on schooling goals and foci for policy priorities is provided each decade by Ministerial ‘Declarations’ (Hobart, 1989; Adelaide, 1999; Melbourne, 2008; and Mpantwe (Alice Springs), 2019). As a kind of culmination of these policy accords, the AC, as a ‘national curriculum’, presents a centre-periphery model of curriculum policy. Its focus is on defining *contents* while, in effect, AC structure and content foreclose many pedagogical options, such as interdisciplinary projects, integrated curriculum, multi-age classes, group work, discovery or problem-based learning, in favour of content coverage in siloed disciplines. It reduces options for both teachers and students—seeming to want to ‘teacher-proof’ and ‘student-proof’ the curriculum work of schools (for a more extended discussion of the AC’s restrictive logic, see Brennan and Zipin (2018); other chapters in Reid & Price (2018)). Under this model, curriculum inquiry might ask whether ‘official’ contents are achievable or whether new foci might be added. However, this model restricts inquiry to audit approaches.

The problem, for knowledge work in classrooms, is that this approach to curriculum assumes knowledge is static, noun-like, where schools/universities are merely to deal with ‘successful’ transmission. Yet, even to ‘pass on’ valued knowledges of a society—what Green (2018) calls an ‘intergenerational’ compact—is an active, dynamic process, best done—and most effective—with pedagogic understanding that knowledge is not a ‘thing’ to be transferred.

The AC’s instrumental/technical approach to curriculum is in keeping with an objectives-orientation that supports standardised and comparative measurements of students (McKernan, 2008; Stenhouse, 1975). Teachers are positioned as syllabus implementers, who thus become objects of governance inquiry: Are they compliant? How well do their students ‘do’ on tests of specified content and skills?

What might other approaches to curriculum look like? Many approaches have developed over the centuries, giving rise to many definitions and metaphors (Hayes et al., 2006; Marsh & Stafford, 1988; McKernan, 2008; Pinar et al., 1995). While I lack space to go into all the definitions and debates, Stenhouse’s (1975) approach to curriculum as a form of *experiment* seems a useful starting point; he argues that a curriculum document should serve as a *proposal* offering:

the means by which the experience of attempting to put an educational proposal into practice is made publicly available. It involves both content and method, and in its wider application takes account of the problem of implementation in the institutions of the educational system.

At a minimum, a curriculum should provide a basis for planning a course, studying it empirically and considering the grounds of its justification. (p. 5)

The AC does not live up to Stenhouse’s purposes for curriculum development. It fails to provide the basis for planning or studying, as Stenhouse finds necessary; it does not leave reasonable room for teachers to develop curricular experiments; nor does it welcome anyone critically to scrutinise its (absent) justifications. A key problem for interrupting this pervasively restrictive logic is that teacher education—which had been a relatively autonomous space to access and consider diverse histories, philosophies and social-cultural bases and practices of curriculum—has become ever more closely tied to the *official* curriculum as the basis for early childhood, school, adult education and university (including teacher-education) curriculum.

A static view of knowledge is highly inadequate, indeed dangerous, in relation to the urgencies of current times in which present and emergent futures are beset by uncertainty, including multiple interlocking crises: planetary instability, economic incapacity, and massive and festering power inequalities—all of which authoritarian governance flounders to address. It is clear that, if structures and systems continue with mainstream precedent, we will not redress accelerating ecosystem degradations and, indeed, potential human-species extinction. While past accumulations of knowledge can contribute to understanding and acting on these crises, we also need, in encountering new emergenc(i)es of crisis, to educate for capacities to ask new questions, produce new knowledge, and make new connections across different kinds of knowledges relevant to problems for social and planetary futures. Curriculum must become re-oriented, and re-purposed, for a present-into-futures focus, rather than tied only to past knowledge.

A crucial challenge for us, as educators, is to identify and *create* spaces for curriculum inquiry as active knowledge practice that, with future-problem focus, builds collaborative engagement with students who are living their present towards futures. Curriculum inquiry, in this context, is a form of practical *resistance* to the official straitjacket of the promoted ‘syllabus’—not necessarily to content but creating room for new and experimental learning-and-teaching relations among students from diverse social positions, and between teachers and students. To engage in such future-oriented inquiry thus refuses static notions of knowledge—undoing damages inherent in the current model of standardised syllabus content—by opening to experiments in knowledge work as collaborative social activity. Teachers and students need to be joint researchers who co-operate not only to rework knowledge in relation to issues of current urgency but also to

investigate conditions of barriers and possibilities for getting needed changes in knowledge work to stick.

A little history on teachers and students as researchers

‘Teachers as researchers’ has a history going back to Dewey’s recommendations that teachers engage in practical inquiry. Action-research into various dimensions of education practice emerged in the 1970s, spurred significantly by Stenhouse and his leadership of the English Humanities Curriculum Project, and other projects in the Centre for Applied Research in Education at East Anglia, UK. Others took different paths emphasising the importance of locating change as close as possible to those responsible for it (Noffke, 1997). Australian authorities—particularly in South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT—took up this path as a way to support teachers as curricular/pedagogic innovators, often as part of the school-based curriculum development movement.

Garth Boomer’s important work on negotiating the curriculum (1978; see also Green, 2021) brought the rationale for teachers-as-researchers into new connection with *students, as co-researchers with teachers*, in curriculum work conceived as shared by both. An underpinning of this correlation was to understand inter-relationships of language and learning: to learn, young people as well as teachers need to explore, ask questions, and explain: all dependent on languaging activities. With Boomer, we apply the question, ‘Under what conditions do we learn?’, as much to students as to teachers—and also to students’ wider communities. Teachers and students thus become researchers of knowledge practices they engage together.

Action research (Kemmis, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014) continues to be a key methodology for Australian (and other) teachers engaged in curriculum inquiry: conducted for a qualification; or as part of whole-school or -faculty initiatives; and/or for professional development associated with a funded project, such as those organised by the Australian National Schools Network. As key to such work, teachers set the agenda of issues/questions to investigate, variously involving: reconnaissance to find out what others have done and learnt about the issue; securing space and support to pursue inquiry; different forms of systematic inquiry; and sharing with others across sites and locations. In recent years, bases and supports for such *progressive* action-research inquiry have waned (Brennan, 2018), with authorities sponsoring *conservative* incentives, such as large-scale funded projects, that co-opt teachers into implementing what others have developed or researched, yet cast it as teacher action research. Of course, many teachers and schools add their own dimensions of evaluation and

inquiry to such projects, relevant to their specific site’s needs and plans.

Over the past 50 or so years, Australia has also seen emergences of momentum for *students-as-researchers*—mainly when students research as part of school program-based curriculum projects. Learning from the International Baccalaureate, a number of Australian authorities have included a research project in senior years certificates. In some cases, this has trickled down into lower years of secondary schools to build student research capacities. Other situations of student engagement in research include projects connected to the ‘student voice’ movement (Bland & Atweh, 2007; Mayes & Holdsworth, 2020), examining priority community needs, critical pedagogy, environmental activism (Brennan et al., 2021), anti-racist work, and more. This journal (*Curriculum Perspectives*) reports on many such efforts (e.g. Lowe & Gaulston, 2020). They are, however, mostly restricted to smaller-scale projects, within a school or school cluster, often associated with funded university research projects.

Roger Holdsworth, in his article ‘Thirty-three curriculum approaches enhancing student participation’ (n.d.), provides examples drawn from the magazine *Connect*¹ and recommends a three-way test of value for any project:

- It has value to students—that students chose or constructed it and see its relevance to their interests;
- It has wider value in the community—that it is meeting real and purposeful community ends;
- It has educational value—it meets or exceeds mandated curriculum objectives and involves learning.

Demonstration of these outcomes is a joint responsibility of the teacher and students before a project can proceed. (https://www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/expert_views/thirty-three_curriculum_approaches_enhancing_effs,9345.html)

The above tests of value are part of pursuing an agenda for students and teachers to find education meaningful and worthwhile through participation. Involving community members in evaluating the second of these value criteria, and perhaps including them directly in student research projects, can help build support for curriculum inquiry. The same tests could also be applied to curriculum inquiry projects in which students and teachers collaborate, possibly along with community members.

¹ *Connect* magazine has been an important place for teachers and students to share their work publicly, documenting student participation in curriculum and governance, supporting reflection and sharing resources. The complete collection from 1979 to 2021 is available free online via ACER (see references).

This history gives rise to cautious hope that past examples of teachers and students as curriculum inquirers and innovators can be learned from and taken up anew. It also points up the importance of attending to conditions shaping inquiry in local sites, the limits and possibilities of what can be imagined and undertaken in them.

The contemporary challenges for curriculum inquiry

To undertake curriculum inquiry in the current conditions is not easy. Of course, it never has been. Still, we need to recognise that there are serious limitations on the power of teachers to control their work in most Australian public schools, and even more serious constraints on young people exercising agency in relation to their education. Those conditions are different now to 70 or even 10 years ago. We cannot shy away from the authoritarian policy shifts that operate to control teachers and young people in and through education, especially curriculum. In new ways, unequal power relations infuse institutions, including relations between school administrators and governments, teachers and school administrators, students and teachers, and within student bodies. At the same time, we must not concede possibilities of building more inclusive and equalising education through collaborative curriculum inquiry.

Stephen Kemmis and colleagues (2014, pp.65–68) have been refining ways to understand and explain practices which can change other practices, highlighting a concept of ‘practice architectures’. Practices typically become habits that solidify into ‘traditions’ of how we do things, how we talk about them, and what sort of relationships are seen as ‘normal’. Practice architectures are the conditions and arrangements of ‘doings’, ‘sayings’ and ‘relating’ that keep habituated practices them in place without conscious inquiry into them. For meaningful change to occur, suggest Kemmis and colleagues, actors in education settings need not only to investigate their practices, but also, in order to change practices, to raise consciousness, through *inquisitive* investigation, into the architectures which keep existing habits of practice in place. Curriculum inquiry thus has to work to understand the structural and systemic dimensions—educational, political, institutional, cultural, discursive and economic—that constitute the context which shapes specific sites of education practice. Otherwise, we do not understand our practices, which are never simply ‘individual’ but are socially shared.

Changes in curriculum do emerge, mostly from ‘below’, and gain shared attention—within the field of practice—despite the weight of historic practice architectures that push schools and universities, early childhood sites and vocational education programs towards compliance. The

point of giving some history in this paper is to recover professional knowledge and reminders: curriculum hasn’t always been this way; it won’t always be this way. Back in the late 1960s, when highly centralised syllabus-style curriculum was thought to be fully entrenched in most states and territories, school-based curriculum became policy in two states, recognising both the changing times and new demographics in schools. While core curriculum with significant room for local decisions was not put in place, as Skilbeck (1984) had hoped, teachers and students were able to build significant curriculum development skills in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s in a number of jurisdictions. Similarly, today, the cross-curriculum priorities (Indigenous, Asia and Environment), the general capabilities, student voice, and civics and citizenship are challenging mainstream agendas.

There are multiple questions and issues which teachers, students, parents and other community groups grapple with regularly. Some of these issues cover perennial problems that take specific forms in a local site, for example, recognition of how colonial legacies continue to operate in our current institutions (Moodie, 2018), how the introduction of refugee students challenges existing practice (Baak et al., 2022) or how lack of access to qualified staff in rural and remote locations deny access to valued subjects (Dean & Roberts, 2021). Sometimes reading research about issues makes us look to our own site with new eyes. Many issues arise from specific critical incidents experienced in the day-to-day. Yet others emerge from community ‘problems that matter’ (Zipin & Brennan, 2019; Zipin, 2020) which need to be connected into curriculum. Struggles to investigate and invent new practices to address these issues become the focus for curriculum inquiry by teachers and their students, in all sectors.

New discourses about curriculum, including pedagogies and assessments, can and do gain traction. Culturally responsive, decolonialising, anti-racist and gender-sensitive curricula and pedagogies are relatively recent interruptions to curriculum-as-usual (see e.g. Adam & Harper, 2021; Harrison et al., 2019). Teachers, individually, in groups or in projects across sites, already engage in curriculum inquiry, building new practices for responding to urgencies of current times. Professional associations could do more to bring people together to work on key issues, sharing knowledge and building political strength. Small-scale, local inquiries can thus link up. For wider-scale changes to occur, that alters the currently entrenched objectives mode, collaborative curriculum inquiry needs to be built in, shared and supported at scale, if education settings are to be oriented to a changed future and social-planetary crises where students as well as teachers can play an active role. This is a challenge we need purposefully to take on.

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