



Contemplating curriculum in an urban world

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Above the desk where I type these words is a painting of an old station in north-western NSW. Surrounding the painting are messages and signatures from students, the community, and the teachers I worked with. I find this memento keeps me focused on what has led me to be in the peculiar position of writing this piece, in this journal, at this time. I cannot help but look at it as I consider my next words.

My career as a high school history and geography teacher began as what was then termed a mobile teacher in north-western New South Wales, Australia. In this role I would be appointed to a school for a period and then moved to a new vacancy in the same region. After three terms across two neighboring high schools 180 km apart, I ended up in a central school (a K-12 school) a further 80 km north for the next 4.5 years. The years in this remote school and the broader region were formative for my understanding of the work still needed in education to better achieve equity (Roberts, 2014b). My students were studying for the same state-wide exams as students in the city, often by candlelight after the generator went off, typically after an hour-plus bus ride home and helping on the property until sundown. In the ensuing competition for results, they were taught by teachers like me in our first years still learning the profession and with reduced time allocation per subject in an attempt to preserve subject breadth.

The reframe of “what’s this got to do with me?” was common, and we worked to keep the relevance to their futures of what we were studying visible in our curriculum enactments. In the junior secondary years the struggle for relevance was more acute. This was where students decided to either “do time” until they could leave and work or stay on for the senior secondary years and the hope of less precarious careers. All the time there was a large gap between what education

was offered through the curriculum and the students lived experiences. To bridge this divide we would employ what, in hindsight, I would classify as strategies and tactics (de Certeau, 1980) of reshaping the mandatory curriculum and creatively accounting for its requirements while we developed a program that better suited our students’ motivations and needs.

A couple of terms prior to relocating to this central school I experienced a pivotal moment. I was teaching year 9 mandatory history at the high school of a nearby town. The student population is nearly exclusively Indigenous, so I assumed I was on to a winner when the scheduled topic was the 1967 referendum on recognizing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution. It was not to be. Instead, a quarter of the way into the lesson, I was willing the floor below me to open up and swallow me, and that the chaos that ensued could somehow be contained in the four walls of the room. I was rattled. I had previously experienced very minimal classroom management concerns. Having escaped with my life but without my pride, I visited a local elder that afternoon, who promptly told me that I was an idiot. I was in a town that played a major role in the 1938 day of mourning movement, the freedom rides, and the 1967 referendum, and consequently, the students I was presuming to teach about the referendum were the children and grandchildren of those leaders, a number of whom still lived with their family. Notably, the material conditions the community lived in were arguably worse than before these events, and the social environment decidedly worse. What is more, the version of events presented in the available text books and Department of Education resources was either wrong, missing major details, or extremely biased.

Admitting my *mea culpa*, in the next lesson with my students, I asked them how we should proceed (not knowing here I was echoing Boomer’s *Negotiating the Curriculum* (1992)). We settled upon an approach where the students would interview their family members and write that up to

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“correct” the wrong/limited interpretations available. There were no more challenges other than trying to get students to stop working and go to their next class. Other subject teachers were astounded with students who typically barely wrote a sentence or spoke at length who were now writing pages and speaking volumes. There was of course a missed opportunity here in that other subject’s teachers did not coordinate their curriculum enactment with this opportunity, though that is something I later addressed as I learned about integrated curriculum models.

Over the subsequent years, I was very fortunate to have been generously taught by local elders in this community through their stories, the place I was living, and the histories of its people. What remains astounding to me is that this was 1998, and I was learning about things that I only had a cursory awareness of from my own schooling and study of history at university. We did have some beginning insights in my initial teacher education and were just about to have the debates about the revised NSW history syllabus and the use of the word “invasion.” Striking was that much of what I was learning from the elders was not in the curriculum. The situation has undoubtedly improved now, though there is still much work to do.

At the same time as I was learning the Indigenous histories of my community and the nation, I was mixing with the settler community. This is a little difficult as I am quite literally descended from the original dispossessors of the land in a region near to this one. This community was concerned that their community and way of life were not recognized and valued. It was after all their children who were struggling to find meaning in what they do at school, and they saw school as “learning to leave” (Corbett, 2007) their community. There were very few representations of the rural in the curriculum and associated resources, something I would later go on to research (Roberts, 2014a).

My time in these communities, followed by two further schools in regional NSW, set me down a path of school-based curriculum projects, advocacy, and ultimately a research career (see Roberts, 2014a, b). Centering these are the experiences outlined above and constant reference to my painting and the implied question of “how is this helping the children I taught back then and their community?” Or to reference back to the classical question often attributed to Spencer (1859) of “what knowledge is of most worth?” reframed by Michael Apple (1993) as “whose knowledge is of most worth?” This and all I experienced and continue to research is a curriculum issue. To reference Pinar’s (2004, P.2) seminal text “what is curriculum theory?” curriculum theory “is the interdisciplinary study of educational experience.” For me, it includes the intersection of questions of knowledge, value, teacher preparation, education policy and resourcing, staffing, community economies, and the sustainability of rural communities.

The concern for relevance and meaning in the curriculum, its appropriateness for rural communities, the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, rural knowledges, and unequal patterns of access, participation, and achievement are ongoing. They are the focus of my research concerns (Roberts, 2021). That such seemingly fundamental concerns are typically overlooked is a constant source of dismay. I suspect it is reflective of the perilous state of curriculum research in Australia. Without reinvigoration, I fear the concerns I experienced will remain unaddressed. Given that we live in a world where over half the planet’s population now lives in urban areas, and has in developed nations since the 1940s (Shucksmith & Brown, 2019), the everyday experience and what is considered normal or taken for granted is inevitably urban, creating further challenges in curriculum research.

There seems to be a perception that we have solved the curriculum question in Australia with the Australian Curriculum, albeit with the occasional skirmish over semantics in history or approaches in reading. There is little discussion about what is included in the curriculum or the structure of the curriculum. There is some discussion about how we certify students at the end of senior secondary schooling—through state-wide exams and ranking—but this still does not go to the structure of the senior secondary curriculum. The assumption seems to be that we have it right and to overcome inequity my rural students just need better teachers to help them get good grades in state-wide literacy and numeracy tests and end-of-school exams. There is no recourse to the knowledge question.

The professional standards that govern the accreditation of initial teacher education programs and teacher registration do not engage in the knowledge question. In these curricula is rendered as “content” to be “taught.” The debates and theorisations about the relationship between curriculum and pedagogy (Green, 2018) are resolved emphatically in favor of practice. This has had the flow-on effect of reshaping initial teacher education to focus on pedagogy and not a curriculum or its curriculum corollary of curriculum enactment. This appears to herald, along with increased professional accountability and reporting, a return to tylerist notions of efficiency and fidelity in the implementation of naturalized and static notions of knowledge (aka content). No longer do we have schools of curriculum studies, and consequently few academics who would associate with curriculum studies, as employment in a university education school or faculty is linked to initial teacher education and its practice orientation. In this environment what or why has little utility and fewer employment openings. The practical outcome here is that education can then only be researched from within teaching-focused dispositions (Biesta, 2011) with the scope of what education is understood to be, and what is then deemed researchable, shaped in particular, and limiting, ways (Biesta, 2015).

Those that still do manage to pursue a critical agenda have moved towards policy sociology as academics fads change. Much work in this new space would once have been in curriculum or more general education journals, and though rarely citing the traditions of the curriculum field, address issues long contemplated by this field. They do so however without reference to this work, given the decline of the field and changing fads, and consequently are not building upon bodies of work with generations of lineage. There is in effect a “rediscovering” of these issues, without a history. Bringing this history back in is now our challenge.

Reprising Pinar (2004, P.2) curriculum research is central to the practice, and study of, education. To quote at length:

“This interdisciplinary structure of the field, and especially the strong influences of the humanities and the arts, makes curriculum theory a distinctive specialization within the broad field of education, a fragmented field broadly modelled after the social and behavioural sciences. As a distinctive interdisciplinary field (rather than subfield of a single academic discipline such as educational psychology or the sociology of education), curriculum studies may be the only academic discipline within the broad field of education. Several of the social sciences – most prominently academic psychology, but sociology as well – have colonized much of the field of education. Only curriculum theory has its origins in and owes its loyalty to the discipline and experience of education.”

The notion of curriculum theory as the only academic discipline within the broad field of education is evocative. It is a perspective that a journal such as curriculum perspectives can use to anchor the importance of the work it facilitates to publication.

There is, however, a loss here for the profession in the decline of curriculum research in faculties of education in Australia. The loss reinforces that teachers are no longer seen as curriculum workers, and as such, their claim to professionalism imperiled. Many of the disciplines included in Pinar’s characterisation above are no longer discrete subjects in initial teacher education, having gone the same way as curriculum studies. Some maintain a foothold thanks to individual academic’s research, and others some presence reshaped to fit the practice agenda such as psychology. There is generally no broad disciplinary preparation, and without that the very basis of professional practice is imperilled. Consequently, we now read in the media discussions about developing centralized lessons for teachers in order to save time and ensure quality. Such innovations (sic) are only possible when we the knowledge question is assumed to be resolved. I harbor great concerns here for my rural, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, students

and how their knowledges and experiences will be included and represented. It again seems to be an assumption that the approach will fill up their presumed empty vessels with the “good” knowledge they lack. This is unjust and unethical and doomed to only reproduce and magnify inequities. Especially as we have already seen that cultural biases in nationwide literacy and numeracy tests create inequality (Dobrescu et al., 2021) and that participation and achievement in the curriculum are unevenly distributed (Dean et al., 2021, 2023).

All the while, the gaps between rural–urban, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the rest of the student population, children of advantaged and less advantaged families, between schools based on resourcing and the average wealth of their community widen (See the recent Australian productivity commission report). Curriculum inquiry has a long history of examining these issues and of reforms that have led to greater equity. The field is an international and multigenerational resource for confronting the present challenges we face and the future challenges. Building upon and promoting work that does this is the role of Curriculum Perspectives and its parent association the Australian Curriculum Studies Association.

Postscript #1: I come to this role having been supervised in his doctoral studies by Emeritus Professor’s Bill Green and Jo-Anne Reid with whom I still collaborate. Bill is one of Australia’s pre-eminent curriculum scholars, a long-standing member of ACSA and a frequent contributor to CP. I have also been informally mentored by Adjunct Professor Marie Brennan. Traces of their influence are evident in my work and acknowledged.

Postscript #2: I am conscious that memory may be playing its trick upon me and shaping a picture in a positive light. The events recounted were all meaningful, and somehow linked to this moment that tell my story in a positive light. This is undoubtedly some trick of selective memory and narrative building—itsself pertinent to considerations of the value and utility of certain knowledges, skills, and dispositions in the study of curriculum. Pondering the construction of this narrative and trying to account for the arrangement of events I am reminded of another seminal moment. I was in the second semester of the first year of my education degree at the University of Sydney lying on the grass by (what was then at least) the Stephen Roberts lecture theater (no relation) reading Dewey’s “Democracy and Education” (1916) for my education studies class and E. H. Carr’s “What is History?” (1961) for my history major. A nuclear explosion occurred in my mind, and I saw the world in an entirely new way, and here we are.

Postscript #3: And of course, this has all been part of Pinar’s “Method of Currere” (1975).

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