

Learning from the Past: history and the national curriculum

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As someone who has been closely involved in national initiatives in history education over the past decade, I propose to share with you some of my reflections on my experiences prior to Australia's latest attempt at a national approach to school curriculum.

Before I move on to the main part of this discussion, I'd like to make one thing clear. To me, there is no ambivalence about the centrality and importance of Australian history in schools. To think, as was formerly the case in some states and territories, that some students could leave Year 10 without encountering Australian history as a disciplinary form of study strongly suggests a curriculum failure on the part of education systems that created the kinds of curriculum framework that allowed this to happen.

Quite what form Australian history in schools might take is another matter but I shall come to that later.

First, the single most important obstacle to the construction of a sound and sustainable national history education curriculum is political interference. By that I mean attempts by both sides of the education debate to characterise history education, which is particularly susceptible to political interference, as a form of indoctrination.

On the one side of politics, many conservatives, both small c and large C, at their worst, are suspicious of what they see as (or what they are told is) a radicalised teaching profession led by revolutionary curriculum officials who are keen to influence an intellectually passive and credulous student population. Part of that equation is the belief that there is an immutable historical truth out there that needs to be captured and brought into the classroom.

On the other side of the equation is a progressive left view that sees history, and school history in particular, as a way of righting past and present wrongs, in a latter day version of 1970s social engineering. This view is further complicated by later postmodern perspectives that regard documented explanations as unattainable and undesirable, by an outmoded post structuralist discourse that suggests that history is merely a means of examining cultural concepts and by some of the more strident post colonialists who have replaced grand narratives with their own hegemonic subaltern narratives.

Beyond that, there is an integrationist curriculum ideology that sees history as a narrow, traditional and regressive discipline that is stuck in the 1950s, little realising that, by not keeping up with the latest research in history education, these well-meaning, progressive ideologues are themselves firmly stuck in the 1980s. *In a wonderful irony, it is these curriculum ideologues who themselves now comprise the New Reactionaries.*

To deal with these politicised views of school history, we at the national centre developed in 2003 a systematic, accessible and research-based historical literacy framework, outlined in *Making History: a teacher's guide*. This framework was intended mainly to show history teachers what their job was about, but it was also designed to counter the worst effects of ideological interference. The historical literacies, which are much more complex than just encouraging students to read primary sources, have already been endorsed by the HTAA and the AHA. They slowly and

successfully permeated curriculum culture until October 2007 when the John Howard, the former prime minister, published an Australian history syllabus that modified and seriously weakened the principles outlined in *Making History*. The prime ministerial document was then itself consigned to history

A second major issue and possible obstacle to a sound history education framework is the common journalistic and editorial assumption that history is just a form of general knowledge about famous dead people combined with an explanation of how Australia became great – mainly through battles, it seems.

Marilyn Lake has written critically about the militarisation of Australian history. In that regard, and leaving aside my own interest in military history I, and others, have noticed the wealth of well-intentioned resources generated by the DVA – and we know that many teachers follow the resources.

Allied with that idea that Australian history is about famous dead people, as well as a celebration of military endeavour, there is a repetitive theme in the tabloid, the broadsheet press and in the electronic media – with some honourable exceptions (eg ABC National's *Hindsight* program) that students today don't know enough about these famous dead people. At the National Centre we called this the Edmund Barton Syndrome.

This kind of poor journalism thrives on clichés, stereotyping and conflict, leading to a shallow and ignorantly reductive moral panic approach which has been a consistent modus operandi in the history wars in the US, in the UK, in Canada, in New Zealand in Australia, and now even in pragmatic and sensible Sweden. Apart from the political overtones, this approach characterises historical thinking as simple memorisation, it panders to popular misconceptions that history is about facts and it is a win/lose debate in which the students and the teachers always lose. The upshot? Serial articles on how little students know about former prime ministers and about Gallipoli.

You may be sure that these kinds of reports will be revisited once the national curriculum planning stage is released for public debate. And, there will almost certainly be a careful examination of who is in or out, and whether or not Gallipoli is given enough space.

The third major issue and possible obstacle to the creation of a successful national syllabus is topic repetition in Australian history. I cannot emphasise too strongly the importance of this problem. Students who study Australian history topics in the primary school and find themselves studying the same or similar topics in secondary school are almost irredeemably put off the history of their nation. There are two established approaches to dealing with this problem. First, students are supposed to study Australian history in a reduced form in primary schools and then look at much the same topics in mid secondary school, following Bruner's spiral theory of the curriculum. In reality, many primary teachers, who are technically highly skilled classroom practitioners, are unfamiliar with historical literacy and tend to teach a stripped down version of the secondary program while secondary teachers, many of whom have no history background, teach history in a minimalist way, using the textbook approach: Bruner's spiral theory flies out of the classroom window.

The second approach is to do pre-Federation in primary and post- federation in secondary, which is fine if you don't mind your students leaving school at Year 10 with an 8-year old's understanding of frontier conflict.

The fourth potential issue and possible obstacle is indiscriminate policy-borrowing. Over the past twenty years or so, state and territory governments, in their search for increased efficiency and accountability have borrowed packaged education programs, policies and ideas from overseas without necessarily addressing the question – are these programs directly suited to Australian needs?

My argument here is that the first principle of curriculum construction is situational analysis and we build outwards from there. That being the case, my strong suggestion is that, in constructing an Australian history curriculum we assess our own needs and develop a recognisably Australian program, not a pale imitation of a UK program nor of a US program.

The next and fifth point, following on from creating a recognisable Australian program, is that there needs to be a judicious balance of whose histories without resorting to the ill-advised course of arguing that my history is better, more important or more topical than yours. What this suggests, at first glance, is a strongly topic-based program, combined with manageable narrative and a broad overview, giving space for the various strands of history rather than just a strongly chronological approach. Why the combination? Well, for example, there are 37 countries in Asia and 45 countries in Europe, a total of 82 national histories which, unless handled carefully can easily lead to ahistorical and acultural generalisations of the worst sort and which can also lead to students leaving school with, for example, an 11 year old's understanding of Egypt which is mainly about building a shadouf and drawing dead people's brains out through their nostrils: interesting but not necessarily representative of ancient Egyptian social history. Furthermore, the research tells us that genuine historical thinking at the school level comes from combining narrative with depth and with overview.

The sixth point concerns Australian history and my remarks are based on the findings of the 1999-2000 national inquiry which, amongst other things, surveyed 356 secondary school teachers, the experiences gained in the 2001-2006 Commonwealth History Project, my experience as Director of the National Centre, the results of the Australian Research Council Discovery Grant that supported Anna Clark's research and my more recent experience as travelling salesman for the proposed 2007 root and branch renewal in Australian history.

This is what we know:

- Students think Australian history is important but do not like it.
- Teachers feel that students do not enjoy Australian history.
- Numbers taking Australian history in the senior school have been in rapid decline across the board since the early 1990s.
- Numbers taking Australian history in university are skyrocketing.

Why the contradiction?

Possible because the idea that Australian history is boring and bland is a powerful school level myth. This myth may originally have arisen first, because of a combination of the dreaded topic repetition, second, the generally bland 'not many dead' nature of Australian political history, third, an overemphasis, from the 1990s on at least, on military history, fourth, the damage caused to Australian history by either being lost in an integrated curriculum or being blighted by finding itself mandated in a compulsory curriculum. The situation we now have is a self-fulfilling prophecy of tedium, sustained, as argued earlier, by the popular media. And when students reach university level, because of their own growing sense of personal identity linked to national identity and in

reaction to the damage done to their national story at the school level, they pursue out of their own interest, a newfound curiosity about Australian history.

To confound this myth of tedium, I have a point of view here, as a migrant to Australia, and it is that Australian social history is where the really powerful stories are to be found.

But, for example, the Howard 2007 attempt to draft a curriculum was essentially about the importance of pure politics and economics, eg some of my Coalition interlocutors at that time argued strongly for the inclusion of the Hawke-Keating government on the grounds that it was a triumph of neo-liberalism. When I tried to argue back that, at the school level, the way into political history was through social history, I was met with blank looks.

My suggestion here is that any focus on Australian history should have a strong social emphasis as a lead in to politics and economics, and, on the issue of curriculum design and I would strongly advocate devising a program that clearly differentiates between primary and secondary content and process. There is a possible way around this but I don't have time to elucidate on it today.

Another approach might be to look at Australian history as part of a larger world history rather than isolating it as a linear national story with all the limitations of that approach at this level including accusations of nationalism, Whig progressivism and cultural condescension.

At the same time, there is a serious program design issue which is to do with the geography and the chronology of Australian history where European settlement extends from the bottom right hand corner outwards, leaving students with the impression, for example, that not much was happening in WA or FNQ in the 19th century.

As for indigenous history, that's a serious issue which has yet to be satisfactorily resolved because, as we know from the national inquiry, many teachers are reluctant to take it on for a variety of reasons – awareness or an anxiety about cultural sensitivities, lack of curiosity and/or knowledge, classroom, staffroom and community bigotry and concern about the more controversial aspects of indigenous history – all points that can be overcome by good PD and good resourcing.

One of the key questions here is, when it come to resourcing Australian history, have we made enough use of Australia's museums which are themselves a huge repository of historical artefacts, documentary and pictorial evidence as well as having highly experienced education officers in situ to assist students and teachers. My suggestion here is that any new resourcing project should seriously consider using the museums of Australia as mainstream online PD assets and classroom resourcing centres that would allow students to investigate local Australian history

Which brings me to my sixth point.

Any program will have to take into account the following factors which are to do with the differences that exist between stated or intended curriculum on the one hand and enacted curriculum on the other hand. I'll leave realised curriculum out of the equation for now.

As far as stated vs enacted curriculum is concerned, my guess is that most of the states and territories will be happy to move on the core English/literacy, maths/numeracy and science area but may well drag their feet on history/history – for two reasons.

First, where are they going to find all these additional history teachers? We know that in Victoria for example between 55% and 60% of secondary teachers take classes outside their subject areas and it has traditionally been integrated social education that has suffered badly under this

arrangement. Do I see any difference in the future? Not unless there is a substantial change of heart in the systems, upgrading history from a hobby to a core subject in educational administrators' minds and confining social education to primary schools. One way to deal with the problem of finding new, knowledgeable history teachers, is to offer a low cost highly effective, unit or school-based sustained professional development programs tied in to online resources, including museums, as well as having a sensible national assessment/reporting program.

Lower down the curriculum implementation totem pole, there is still the problem of school level implementation, where some schools will be resource-poor as far as staffing, PD and materials are concerned, leading to a possible concentration on the traditional core areas and bad history being taught by reluctant teachers. Again, the solution there seems to lie in excellent online PD combined with national assessment, and, *having a history coordinator in every school, both primary and secondary. If history is to be a core subject, it must have the same level of curriculum coordination at the school level as have the other core areas of English, mathematics and science.*

Which brings me to my final point. Many of the faculties, schools and departments of education that educate our aspiring teachers and that provide postgraduate opportunities for serving teachers are seriously deficient when it comes to allocating resources to history education. For example, in almost all primary programs, history education comprises, at best, about 1/96th (in contact hours) of a normal four-year degree. Not good enough! Especially for what is now a core primary subject area. When it comes to secondary teacher education, most history education lecturers are either fractional appointees, on contracts or are seconded teachers. Not good enough! Especially for a what is now a core secondary subject area. These faculties, schools and departments are going to have to do some very serious rethinking if they want to meet the needs of the national curriculum. And the way to press for change is to ask the National Curriculum Board to work through, and with, the registration authorities in the states and territories. They are the people who call the shots when it comes to recognising the suitability of teacher education programs.

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