

Boomer, Garth. (1992). Negotiating the curriculum. In G. Boomer, N. Lester, C. Onore & J. Cook (Eds.), *Negotiating the curriculum: Educating for the 21st century* (pp. 4-13). London: Falmer.

## Chapter 1

# Negotiating the Curriculum

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### Introduction

In the late 1970s in Australia, it had become fashionable for schools in Australia to produce language policies *across the curriculum*. Because I was at that time convinced that such policies would be ineffectual unless they were accompanied by changes to the school's administrative structure, its curriculum and its educational philosophy, I wanted to explore an issue that went behind language to the eternal triangle of education: the *teacher*, the *child* and the *curriculum*.

This exploration owes a considerable debt to Professor James Britton, who offered valuable encouragement and advice in the early years of the work of the various 'language and learning' teams in Australia. Britton supported our growing belief that the more profitable question to put to whole school staffs is not 'How can we develop the child's language?', but '*How do children (and for that matter, we) learn?*'

The first question quite often threatens those teachers who consider themselves unqualified to teach language, and it can also lead to petty bickering about the perennial bogey surface-features of spelling, punctuation and 'proper' presentation. If language across the curriculum is associated with the English faculty, Sampson's 'Every teacher is a teacher of English' (1926) becomes a misleading focus.

But put the second question, and all teachers, lecturers and administrators are, or should be, equal. This is a question to which we all should have personal, articulate and perpetually speculative responses.

Allied to the question of 'How do children learn?' are further teasers, such as '*Under which conditions do children learn most effectively?*', '*What is learning?*', and '*Do we all learn in the same way?*'

### On Learning Theory

Since 1975 the Language Across the Curriculum project team in South Australia, and more recently the Curriculum and Learning Unit that grew out of it, had been asking teachers questions like this, as well as looking into official, departmental curriculum statements to see if any of these address themselves directly to what may loosely be called learning theory. Few departmental statements addressed learning theory. Certainly *teaching* theory abounded, either implicitly or explicitly, and it was possible to argue that, however tenuously, teaching theory must be based on some notion of how people learn. However, our team in South Australia concluded, on the basis of widespread inquiry, that few teachers could articulate what they assumed about learning.

By having a learning theory I do not mean being able to precis Piaget, Skinner and Bruner. I mean being able to state one's own best-educated understanding as to how people come to internalise new information or to perform new operations. It can be argued that we come into the world *theorising*. Certainly Year 1 children can very easily be encouraged to talk about how they learnt to talk. Teachers likewise can examine the learning theory implicit in their classroom practice.

So I come closer to the topic of negotiating the curriculum through classroom practice. Imagine education-department curriculum guides, with no explicit learning theory, being taken by teachers with no explicit learning theory and turned into lessons for children who are not told the learning theory. Some of the best of these children then graduate to become teachers. And so on. Isn't it about time that we all tried to articulate what is surely there behind every curriculum unit, every assignment, every examination?

If we can tell ourselves our present theory, we can also tell it to our students in terms that they can understand, so that they can try it out to see if it works in helping them to learn. From our joint evaluation we can then modify the theory, and try again. So, collaboratively, teachers and students may build learning theories, if by 'theory' we mean a kind of working hypothesis.

But learning theory cannot be disconnected from the criteria used to select what is to be learnt and when (i.e. our theory about the *curriculum content*: the subject offerings and the subject sequencing). These, in turn, are framed by a theory about society or culture.

Professor Basil Bernstein talked about the framing and sequencing of curriculum (at the National Language Development conference in Canberra, January 1978). He spoke of the way in which we often attribute divine universality to what may be simply culture-specific subject offerings and lock-step teaching sequences. When I look back on many years of work in schools, I think that education is an almost self-perpetuating chain of subjections. The education system is subject to the ingrained educational myths of society (deified into theories in the universities); the teachers are subject to the myths of the system (reified into curriculum guides, textbooks, standardized tests and public examinations); and the children are subject to teachers who choreograph all the myths in subjects, each educational genre with its own ritual, language, sequences and decor and each with its own value (e.g. classical physics is worth more than popular art, which is worth more than punk-rock, sex education).

The aim of this chapter is to suggest tentatively how this chain may be broken by articulating the mythologies or theories at all levels and then taking a constructively irreverent stance towards them. I have already suggested that teachers and children may collaboratively build learning theories. I now extend this to include curriculum theories and theories about society—and I mean this quite seriously *from Year 1 to Year 12*.

Summarizing, I have so far questioned language as a *way in* to whole-school teacher development, and I have suggested learning as a more profitable topic. Learning is, or should be, inseparable from curriculum theory, but curriculum theory is shaped by the mythologies of a specific culture and based on teaching, handing down and initiating children into valued ways of looking at the world. Teachers who become their own learning theorists also need to become their own curriculum theorists.

Experiments by the Curriculum and Learning Unit in South Australia have shown interesting consequences when teachers, each having reflected on something recently

learnt, together build up a learning theory, after which they are asked a simple question: *'How would you then fare as a learner in your own class?'* They are generally forced to conclude that schools are institutions of teaching, not of learning.

### On Power

Before focusing specifically on the curriculum, it is necessary to reflect a little on power. It was not the brief of the Language Across the Curriculum project to inquire into the politics of education, but the project officers came to believe that no discussion of language and learning can afford to ignore the structure of systems and schools. We sat for hours reflecting upon teachers' problems, our own problems and data gathered in classrooms. Inevitably, we kept returning to the question of power relationships: inside the classroom, within schools, within the system and in society itself. Perhaps initially we inclined too hastily to apportion blame to teachers; we would now want to question the very bases of our society.

With our interest in learning, we set out to gain insights into how teachers perceive knowledge and how they think wisdom is achieved. With exceptions, of course, we found that a kind of pharmaceutical metaphor is widely applicable. Teachers define the knowledge to be dealt with, prepare the medication, and dispense the knowledge according to the prescribed dosage. Knowledge is perceived as transmittable, and the learner's mind as a passive receptacle. The assumption is that teachers *have* the knowledge and that children *have not*, the 'have nots' being dependent on the 'haves'.

Now, even when teachers profess humanism, democracy, respect for the learner and horror at the mere thought of manipulative behaviour, we have come to have doubts—not about the teachers' sincerity, but about their ability to perceive the power vested in them, simply because they are *adults* and control the dispensation of knowledge. Indeed, we are beginning to wonder whether the outright autocrat is not less dangerous than some self-deluding humanists. At least the former may make the rules of the power game explicit. We looked closely at so-called 'child-centred' progressive teaching techniques, where teachers purport to take a largely facilitative role. Here, teachers who still retain the significant, ultimate powers often pretend to divest themselves of power by giving limited decision-making opportunities to the children. For example, children may be free to choose one of several options without having the option to reject the options. Moreover, many attractive learning packages in schools demand little creative, individual, teacher and learner contributions.

A crucial question arises: *'Are schools dedicated to the promotion of the child's power to learn, and ultimately to learn independently of instruction and guidance?'* I am sure that administrators and teachers throughout Australia would answer with an unequivocal 'Yes'. Why is it, then, that we find dependent learning rather than inquiry and experiment? Why is it that we find so few questions from children? Why is it that *fact* is so often revered above *principle*? What is the reality?

### On Constraints

The teachers with whom we have worked in South Australia have impressed us greatly with their concern to help children to learn and with their self-critical approach to the craft of teaching. Many devote themselves to education with awesome energy, but we are left with the feeling that, in isolation, these teachers have little power to affect the many feudal structures long embedded in both schools and the system. Sadly, we have talked to many good teachers who are frustrated and often plagued with guilt because they are falling short of their ideals, when the real cause often lies not in themselves but in a subtle combination of various manifestations of external control. These may include a fragmented timetable, disguised streaming of children and teachers, external examinations, large classes, or a limited choice of commercially-produced resources all with an implicit, behaviourist learning theory. The more we have speculated about the nature of schools, the more we have come to believe that a massive deep-seated inertia, not of the school's wishing, persists—despite cosmetic changes from closed to open space, from forty minute lessons to hour modules, from English to general studies. It is devilishly difficult to effect change, yet we feel that radical structural changes are needed to produce a school context in which language can flow powerfully between teachers and students in the pursuit of action knowledge.

For example, where individual teachers wish to change the emphasis from teacher as Examiner to teacher as Collaborative Evaluator with the students, they act in a broad context quite inimical to their intentions: students socialised for years into seeing the teacher as judge, a school system geared to external reward for effort, and a society based on competition. Depending on their own personal charisma, teachers may begin to succeed in winning the confidence of some students, who may then feel aggravated by their other teachers; but the more usual result is that such teachers are devalued as soft or even slightly crazy. It is therefore very difficult for teachers to share their power with students, because society and schools are not based on such a philosophy.

It is my belief that *there are some existing strategies that can be improved*. For instance, our reflections on power have led us to question our South Australian team's strategy of working with individual teachers in the hope that good things will ripple out. There may be some rippling, but the steady hands of custom and ritual soon calm the waters.

To summarize again, I accept that there is an inevitable inequality between teacher and child and that teachers have wide powers. In turn, I see individual teachers as relatively powerless themselves within the governing frames of society and the education system, so they are often reduced to the status of intermediaries, translating society's values and initiating children into these values. Where administrators of the system, with respect to teachers, or teachers, with respect to children, purport to hand over powers, I believe that the harmful effects of their power may be increased, because the subjects of this power are likely to be more mystified about the actual sources of control.

### On Demystification

Now, our specific concern in the South Australian team was to promote more open communication, more talk to exchange and seek information, and more questioning to relieve mystification. This follows from one of our basic assumptions: that learning is vitally connected with the language resources that can be brought to serve it. A more equitable distribution of power (or at least a more healthy exercise of power), which we know can be used either benevolently to let in or maliciously to exclude, will not come while those in power monopolise the talking space (i.e. the language), thereby keeping other people in relative ignorance.

So what should be done? I believe that there are three important areas of action:

- Strategies should be applied at *all levels* of the system and society. That is, politicians, parents, administrators, teachers and children all need to be brought into *discussions about how we learn*, if we are to raise the quality of thinking and learning in schools and society.
  - There will always be inequalities of power in both schools and society and the harmful effects of power will be offset only *if those in power make quite explicit* the values, assumptions and criteria on which they base their actions. In this way others will have a better chance to defend themselves, more opportunity to question and more chance of negotiation, at least where the power figure is not totally despotic.
    - Significant change will come only *through collaboration at all levels*. Individual action is usually contained and rendered ineffectual when it begins to threaten the established order.

*This does not mean that individual teachers should delay action until they can find support from their colleagues.* At least, teachers can talk to their students openly about why they do what they do, about how they think people learn and about the societal consequences of various behaviours.

I have found perhaps the most exciting and challenging strategy offered in the book *Language, Truth and Politics* (1975) by Trevor Pateman. Pateman says that we should ourselves be able to do, and then in turn to be able to teach children how to do, the following:

- question an unreasonable assertion
- say that we don't understand if we don't understand
- pause to think
- say that we don't know if we don't know.

This should be accompanied by a good deal of thinking aloud in front of students, so that they can have open access to the teacher's thinking powers.

### On Motivation versus Negotiation

*Motivated learning*

Now, Model A represents the traditional curriculum model in which, after reflecting on past experience and the content to be taught, teacher A, within the practical constraints of school and society, intends to teach a certain program.

Before teaching can proceed the students must be motivated in some way. If the topic is 'Weather and Climate', this may be achieved by a trip to the local weather station, or by a lesson in which the coolers are turned off to draw attention to the topic in hand. The powerful motivator thus *by indirection finds direction out*, and the children, to varying degrees, come to intend roughly in the same direction as the teacher. Throughout the planned curriculum unit there is tension between the teacher's goal and the children's intent, but most students eventually receive marks or grades for written work, which tell them how close they have come to the teacher's intentions. Sometimes the mark is externally decided.

As Model A shows, even at best the children's learnings only approximate to the teacher's goals, so the curriculum may touch only a little of each child's key and associated interests. This leaves a good deal of what has been learnt unexamined and unevaluated, because the teacher, or external examiner, tests only what is set on the curriculum. Of course, the overlapping shown in the model may not occur at all, and the child is failed or subjected to remediation, which requires more intense motivation. In either case the child appears to have learnt much less than is actually the case.

Irrespective of the teaching style of the teacher, there will be great wastage if this model is applied.

*Negotiated learning*

Armed with a Pateman-like outlook on open communication, a personal learning theory and an awareness of the harmful effects of inexplicit power, a teacher may develop strategies for negotiating the curriculum as represented in Model B.

Here, teacher B reflects in the same way as teacher A to find worthwhile curriculum content and strategies based on past experience, coming to fairly non-negotiable conclusions about the basic content of the unit. If the unit is 'Weather and Climate', the teacher finds some core input that should illustrate the key *principles* and *concepts* to be learnt. At this stage the teacher talks openly to children about the topic to be covered, why it is to be included, why it is important and what constraints prevail (e.g. it may be a set topic in the mandated geography curriculum; it may have been made obligatory by the faculty head; it may have to be finished in three weeks). The talk centres on what the children already know, how the teacher thinks the new information may be learnt, how the necessary tasks are to be shared and what constraints the children have (e.g. 'We've got an enormous amount of reading in English this week').

The next step is for teacher and children to plan the unit, the activities, the goals, the assignments and the negotiable options. (Compare with Model A, where this programming takes place *without children present, before* the sequence begins). Collaboratively, a fairly tightly structured unit of work is prepared, in which the class, the groups, each child and the teacher all contract to make contributions. The unit takes into account unforeseen learning related to the

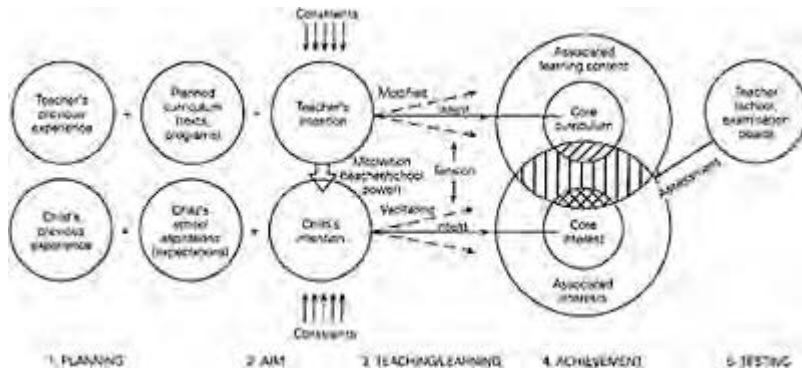


Figure 1: Model A: Motivation

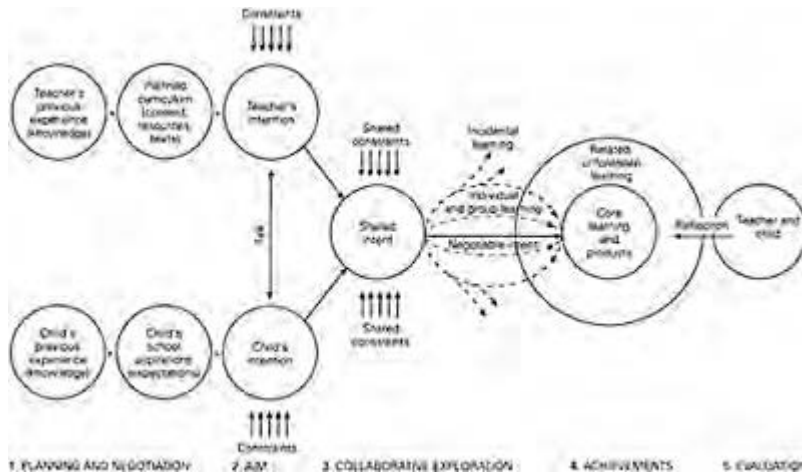


Figure 2: Model B: Negotiation

topic and incidental learning along the way. This unit is, however, tightly constrained but open to negotiation at all points by either the teacher or children. *While the topic and central content are prescribed, specific outcomes cannot be set down in advance.* The broad aim that children will come to deeper understandings of certain key principles and concepts can be set down. Indeed, specific objectives would effectively sterilise such an approach, because they would lead the teacher and children to creep down a narrow, direct path, guide book in hand, rather than to explore boldly the broad territory of the topic. The teacher's main role in a negotiated curriculum is to give information and teach only when it is needed.

When the products of learning have been written, made, modeled, painted or dramatised, the teacher and children carry out the crucial process of *reflection*. This is when the class shares its valuing—when there is comparison, respect for quality and rejection of inferior work by those who did it (class, group or individual).

### On Quality

I think that Model A is a recipe for standards where many will fail; Model B, if adopted, will lead to dynamic exploration and rigorous pursuit of quality by all who contract to be in it. Model A relates to both traditional, whole-class teachers and modern, individualized-transmission teachers; Model B relates to clear-thinking, self-aware teachers willing to make a wager on the learning power and resources of children.

These teachers do exist, and they do not just survive in our schools. They even generate more of their kind, because their philosophy of collaboration is applied to colleagues as well as to children and because what they do is seen to be effective. They are hard-headed, articulate theorizers about practice, not plagued by guilt at what they cannot do, nor defenceless against attackers, armed as they are with both their theory and the obvious quality of their practice. They have learnt the futility of trying to stand alone, and they know how to compromise without capitulating. They are not prey to educational fads (e.g. the latest spate of language exercise texts). Their greatest allies are their students, and the parents of their students who are brought into the collaboration. They even get excellent examination results.

One such teacher is Susan Hyde, who taught science at a South Australian secondary school before becoming a principal. Here is how she has described her approach to one unit of work on 'Respiration'.

*An Example of Negotiated Learning* (by Susan Cosgrove/Hyde, who at the time of writing what follows, taught at a South Australian secondary school): I decided that I would teach by answering questions. The kids would do the learning by puzzling over problems, talking to each other, teaching each other, reading, trying to nut out diagrams and having conversations with me when necessary. So, I mapped out the territory I wanted them to explore and stated the minimum amount of learning that should occur (in a kind of assignment sheet). Then they set out in groups to explore and to work up specific topics to teach others.

My challenge met with responses that convinced me that answering questions beats teaching any day, if you want the kids to learn and understand. But stick to teaching and asking the questions if you, the teacher, want to learn.

I should point out at this stage that these students had been using topic booklets, written by a teacher and produced at the school. They involve a series of activities, with information or references, experiments to do and questions to answer in each activity. The assignment sheet is a condensation of the information in one of these topic booklets.

So, when they got the assignment sheet, they had to decide their own strategy for learning the information. They had to choose their own questions and choose how to search for the answers; and to be able to choose where to start, they had to work out what they already knew about the subject. This is exactly what they did. They formed themselves into groups and began talking:

'Okay, what are we going to do?'



‘I know, blood. Let’s do blood. My mother, she works at the Blood Bank at the Plaza.’

‘Blood Bank? What’s that?’

‘Hey, remember that lung cancer film we saw?’

‘Yuck!’

‘Yeah, we could do the lungs, and get some and cut it up and all that.’

So they began, drawing from their own experience and knowledge of the subject, beginning at an area that interested them.

They appreciated being able to do this. In a letter to me about this experience, Susan and Paul wrote:

‘I learnt this topic reasonably well because we could choose the part we were most interested in and because we could do some research on it, but with the topic booklet, they tell you the answer by putting notes at the beginning of the activity.’

Susan and Paul

But what about the students who couldn’t decide or who didn’t catch on? Well, they came to me for advice. ‘I don’t get what to do, Ms. Hyde’. We sat down and talked about it. I asked them a question or two about what they might be interested in. If they still couldn’t decide, I told them a few things about each area to give them more ideas about where to start. At this stage I asked them to keep a diary of what they did each day. In this way I could keep tabs of where each group was moving, and it also made them aware that they did have a strategy of learning.

At first our lesson time was spent in group activities. They were reading books, making notes, talking to each other and to me:

‘Did you know that...’

‘Where do you think I could find out about this?’

‘Could you explain...’

I spent my time answering questions like these, directing them to sources or to another group that was studying the same area, and just talking about some fact that interested someone.

How did the students learn? By talking, writing, reading and listening to each other, and by being able to choose their own strategy for their learning. Oh, and after all of this, we did have a test. After seeing the test, my senior wrote: ‘In general the results indicate a good grasp of the subject. Pleasing’. But the people most pleased with the test results were the students themselves. They then went full speed ahead into the next challenge (‘Measurement’, ‘Pressure’ and ‘Density’) and did even better.

## Conclusion

If teachers set out to teach according to a planned curriculum, without engaging the interests of the students, the quality of learning will suffer. Student interest involves student investment and personal commitment. Negotiating the curriculum means deliberately planning to invite students to contribute to, and to modify, the educational program, so that they will have a real investment both in the learning journey and in the outcomes. Negotiation also means making explicit, and then confronting, the constraints of the learning context and the non-negotiable requirements that apply.

Once teachers act upon the belief that students should share with them a commitment to the curriculum, negotiation will follow naturally, whether the set curriculum is traditional or progressive, and whether the classroom is architecturally open or closed.

### **Note**

1 This chapter is an adaption of the article, 'Negotiating the curriculum', first published in *English in Australia*, 44, June, 1978.

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