

THE STILL-BIRTH OF A SYLLABUS : CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT UNDER THE NEW BOARD OF STUDIES IN NSW

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to outline how the NSW Board of Studies develops curriculum and writes syllabuses for NSW schools since the introduction of the new Education Reform Bill in 1990 and its related documents such as Excellence and Equity , and to ask what are the most appropriate ways of developing syllabuses for schools?

The Board of Studies was set up early in 1990 and was part of the restructuring that came with Scott, (June,1989), Metherell, (Nov.,1989), and the Education Act, (June,1990). When the Board of Studies was set up, the old Directorate of Studies was abolished. The Directorate of Studies had been one of the many Directorates in the old Department of Education. It had, over the years, gathered an expert staff of consultants – teachers on secondment from schools – who worked collaboratively with schools in developing curricula. The way they went about syllabus development (as opposed to syllabus writing) was a time-consuming process, and perhaps from some perspectives might have been seen as inefficient.

The Education Reform Bill of 1990 split Curriculum, or Studies, from the Department of School Education (as it was now to be called) and gave responsibilities to the statutory Board of the Minister – the Board of Studies. The Director-General of Education is one member of the twenty or so strong Board of Studies. For the first time in NSW, curriculum was enshrined in Government legislation – the key learning areas are actually outlined in the Education Reform Bill (Part 3 Div. 1 No. 7 and Part 3 Div. 2 No.9). The implications of that for flexibility and curriculum change are obvious.

The expertise of the Directorate of Studies in developing curriculum was dispersed. The consultants went back to schools. The Directorate was abolished.

As a teacher, I worked with the Directorate of Studies over a period of 10 years helping to prepare the 7-10 English syllabus and the 2 Unit General English Syllabus so I experienced the processes that were carried out in developing curricula at that time. This paper indicates the great change that has taken place in that process of Curriculum Development since the political changes of 1989.

The course, Studies of Religion, was listed in Excellence and Equity (1989: 39) as being ready for study in Years 11 and 12 in the Key Learning Area of Human Society and Its Environment in 1992. The Studies of Religion syllabus committee was set up in October 1990. I was appointed as a member of that committee as a University representative. Our first meeting was in

October 1990. We were told by a Board officer at that meeting that we had to have the syllabus, the support documents and the specimen examination papers on Principals' desks by October 1991. Therefore we had only one year to prepare the syllabus. I thought back to the development of the 7-10 English syllabus over 4 or 5 years of trialling and consultation. This was obviously to be a very different process. The speed of operation was one difference.

In October, 1991, the Minister for Education put her stamp of approval on the Year 11 and 12 Studies of Religion Syllabus. We achieved the task set us in the year. The syllabus is excellent. It was produced by the work of dedicated people working often under stressful conditions. Especially was this so for the inevitable inner committee that find themselves to be more accessible than others (for example the country members of the committee). The syllabus, I dare to say, really could not be better. In this talk I am in no way criticising the syllabus or the support documents or the committee. It is with the process of curriculum development that the new Board of Studies has adopted that I have a quarrel.

I have called this paper The Still-Birth of a Syllabus. The Studies of Religion syllabus will certainly be on Principals' desks by the date set – but too late for implementation in 1992 except in religious schools that have been watching closely the development of the syllabus. Students in schools choose their electives for the next year long before November, and time-tables for the next year are made up long before November.

The Syllabus Committee itself was composed according to the Board formula. There are four representatives from universities, two from the Teachers' Federation, one each from the Independent Teachers' Association, Parents and Citizens Association, Catholic Education Office, and one primary and one secondary teacher. All of us are from one or other Christian denomination or from no religious affiliation. None is a Jew, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu. One of the first things we did was to draw up a list of consultants. We were told that we had to consult widely, because the Studies of Religion syllabus was a very sensitive one and the Board expected problems with various religious groups. We had about one hundred consultants covering the five religions of the syllabus and the various 'political' groups within the Christian church. This group of consultants proved invaluable as the writing of the syllabus progressed.

The important issue for people interested in curriculum development is the way in which the syllabus was constructed. The Board of Studies asks its syllabus committees to work to a formula. All syllabuses are coming out in the same format, having gone through the same process. There is a document called, Guidelines for Syllabus Development put out by the Board in February in 1991. This must be followed. Each committee's deliberations are facilitated by a Board officer who spends as much time as possible with the committee, ensuring that Board policy and the guidelines are followed.

The new way of developing a syllabus can only be described as behaviourist,

and objectives-driven (no, not even objectives- – but outcomes-driven) with a fixed view of knowledge and a concentration on content. We worked with a straight Rational Planning Model. This makes syllabus writing easy. It is sequential. It is tidy. We could tick off the bits as they were completed.

We were asked to begin with outcomes – what we knew students would learn from the course. After having listed the outcomes, we fitted the content to these outcomes. This posed problems for some of us, as some of the important information, knowledge, skills and material that we deal with in schools (the creative or problem-solving activities) cannot be put into outcome terms – for example, assisting students to think more critically about problem situations or helping students with creative writing. 'Attitude' outcomes deal to a certain extent with this problem – but, then, some of us have problems with our ability to specify these.

There are assumptions of power and control in the way we were told to go about it and in the way we project, in the syllabus, what we expect. The objectives/outcome model assumes that the results of the learning can be pre-specified. If we say there are outcomes we make sure the learning fits them. The prespecification of objectives and outcomes determines the activities in which the learners must engage if they are to achieve their objectives. Specifying the outcomes indicates the learning activities in which learners must engage. The objectives and outcomes also determine the action in which the teacher will engage (see Smith and Lovat: 1990). This is indeed one legitimate way of developing curricula, but it is vastly different from the way the Directorate of Studies did it.

Why did the model of curriculum development change? The Board of Studies is being driven by current political concerns of technical efficiency and economic pressures. Students are seen as economic capital. Schools are looked to to save the economy of the country by producing useful workers. So there is a movement away from the progressive methods and policies that were being developed by the old Directorate of Studies, and that the new Board of Studies saw as inefficient, and a movement back to the tidy and efficient Rational Planning Model.

Students and teachers of curriculum development, will see the implications immediately of this Rational Planning Model of curriculum development. An objectives/outcomes model describes clearly what is to be done – what is to be achieved. There are no loose ends. As Grundy says, (1987;29) 'if the product of the learning experiences measures up to the pre-specified objectives it will be judged as good.' There is an implied Platonic assumption of knowledge as fixed and unchanging.

The model implies certain things about teaching and learning. The objectives in our syllabus are expressed as, 'Students will...', and the outcomes as, 'students should show that they can...'. In order to ensure that 'students do', especially for the examination, teaching becomes a process of telling and imposing. The outcomes have to be achieved.

Teachers have to be the experts. There will be teacher-centred teaching.

There are fixed assessment criteria – these accompany the syllabus, with a specimen examination paper – HSC 1 and 2 unit. This leads to concepts of right and wrong material and to students' reproducing the knowledge that they have been taught.

Behind all this is the notion of control. To quote Grundy again (1987:31), 'When a technical interest informs curriculum design, there is a fundamental interest in controlling the education environment so that an educational product may result which accords with certain pre-specified objectives.' The teacher perceives just by reading the syllabus that a number of decisions have already been made by the syllabus about the teacher's role, the student's role, the sequence of topics, about the length of time to be spent on each topic and about assessment.

The discourse of the syllabus talks the teachers into being the way the Board wants them to be. Even the semiosis of the setting out is powerful. The pages divided into four neat columns lead one inexorably on to the achievement of the outcomes. There is a concentration on content, not process, in this syllabus (see Stenhouse, 1975). The old Directorate of Studies was working through process. The English syllabus 7-10 had no content when we were working on it. It was a process syllabus. The students were to read, write, listen and speak (the stuff that English is made of) using any of the media.

So what are the alternatives to the objectives/outcome model that the Board of Studies has adopted. The 'process' model allows the learners and their needs to be the source of the learning experiences. I do not know where the idea of the syllabus originally came from. The syllabus statement on this claims it was the 1980 Rawlinson Report and the 1989 Carrick Report that asked for a general course on religion to be introduced as an HSC subject. But no one seems to have consulted parents, teachers or students, especially in State Schools as to whether they wanted the course and, if so, what they wanted in it. If we had been working with Stenhouse's 'process' model of curriculum development, we could have begun with a needs analysis in schools. Instead of our first exercise being to list the outcomes that we saw as important for the course, we could have asked the clients what they saw as important outcomes for such a course. We could have, that is, taken part in a collaborative exercise of curriculum building rather than a top-down model.

My research project organised for my Internal Research Grant this year sought, rather belatedly, opinions from teachers, students and parents about having the syllabus in Studies of Religion at all, and what the content should be etc. Some quantitative and qualitative data are recorded below.

We could have focused on teachers and students, as the Directorate of Studies used to do. The consultants – those who were constructing the

syllabus – were teachers, the syllabuses were trialled by teachers in schools before they were printed. For the English 7-10 we piloted the syllabus. We sent out, over three or four years, 3 or 4 drafts to be used in schools and commented on. We had Regional conferences and meetings of teachers. It was a consultation process that far outstripped our present consultative network of individuals – few of whom are teachers. But the old process took time – four or five years. We have a present Government, and Ministry, who are in a hurry.

A dialogic, problem-solving, action research approach leads to ownership by the people who are to use the syllabus. We ‘owned’ the 7-10 English syllabus. Schools feel no ‘ownership’ of the Studies of Religion syllabus. They know nothing about it except that it is mentioned in Excellence and Equity. and many do not even know that as my data show.

MY RESEARCH PROJECT

I carried out a study in May 1991 in seven State secondary schools in the North West Educational Region into the knowledge of, and acceptance of the Studies of Religion Syllabus that they had been informed of through Excellence and Equity.

I went to Inverell High, Moree Technology High School, Courallie High, Tenterfield High, Glen Innes High, Tamworth High and Oxley High. At Tenterfield, Inverell and Courallie I was able to go to P&C meetings and survey the parents’ opinions. At all schools, I surveyed one or two Year 10 and one or two Year 11 classes, depending on the availability and time-tabling restrictions. I also left twenty staff survey forms with the teacher who hosted me. These were distributed and collected and sent on to me. I had a sample of 397 in the end - 269 students, 65 teachers and 63 parents (Table 1).

Table 1

Sex	n	%	
Male	203	51	
Female	194	49	
Age	n	%	
Under 20		269	68
20-29	21	5	
30-39	27	7	
40-49	53	13	
50-59	26	7	
Over 60	1	-	

Role in School

Community	n	%
student	269	68
teacher	65	16
parent	63	16

I did some cross-tabulations for age and sex and position in the school community. For example there was little difference in males and females in answer to the question, 'Do you think Australians in general are religious?' – one third of each said 'Yes' and two-thirds said 'No' (Table 2).

Table 2

	Yes	No
male	33.16%	66.84%
female	36.98%	63.02%

These figures were reversed for the question, 'Do you think it is important for young people to have an awareness of a spiritual dimension to life?' Two-thirds of the males said 'Yes'. 87% of females said 'Yes'. Interestingly, 97% of the teachers said 'Yes' to that question (Table 3).

Table 3

	Yes	No
male	68.32%	31.68%
female	87.5%	12.5%

The sample were fairly evenly divided on the question, 'Do you think the study of religions is an important part of a good education?' (Table 4).

Table 4

	Yes	No
male	41.12%	58.88%
female	54.17%	45.83%

To the question: 'Did you know, before you read the introduction to this survey, that Excellence and Equity requires a syllabus for Studies of Religion to be in all NSW schools for study by Years 11 and 12 as a possible elective in the HSC in 1992?' 81% of males said 'No' and 84% of females said 'No'. 89% of students said

'No' and 78% of teachers did not know about the introduction of the course!
(Table 5)

Table 5

	Yes	No
student	10.9%	89.1%
parent	35.38%	64.62%
teacher	22.22%	77.78%

This is one of the casualties of the separation of curriculum development from the Department of School Education. The officers of the Department of School Education do not actively promote a syllabus that they have had nothing to do with the development of, and probably about which they have not been kept informed. On the other hand the Board of Studies say that they produce the syllabus and it is up to the Department to 'sell' it.

When asked if they thought it was a good idea to have such an elective in Years 11 and 12, two-thirds of the males said 'Yes' and 84% of females said 'Yes'. 73% of the students surveyed said 'Yes' (Table 6). But as we will see, it was not because they thought they themselves would do it. It was because they thought anyone who was silly enough to want to do such a course should have the opportunity.

Table 6

	Yes	No
male	66.16%	33.84%
female	83.7%	16.3%

QUALITATIVE DATA

The open-ended questions yielded some very interesting voiced opinion from all three sections of the sample, parents, students and teachers.

I spoke to each group – students, or parents – for ten minutes explaining to them as well as I could in the limited time that I had, that the syllabus had nothing to do with Special Religious Education or 'scripture'. That it was a multi-faith, non-proselytising course. That it was academic, sociological, philosophical, phenomenological – not using those words – that it was an elective and not compulsory – that it was an 'a' level course and counted for the HSC etc.

But it was interesting to see how the word 'religion' sparked off various personal agendas that respondents had. They actively and constantly

inserted their own agendas into the text as I spoke to them. They had great difficulty in hearing what I intended them to hear. They made sense of the words that I used in terms of their own experience and the discourses available to them. You will see in the following responses discourses of fear, of pressure and force, of unimportance and of the occult.

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The Discourse of Fear

Some people might not choose this because of being accused of being a 'Bible basher'.

Some teachers would attempt to turn this into a scripture lesson

The Discourse of Pressure/Force

Some students could not accommodate the thought that anything to do with religion would not be compulsory:

No one wants to be pushed into doing something

I think that people should not be pushed into doing religion. It should be by your own choice.

A person shouldn't be pushed into a religion because they could end up hating it.

Some teachers can brainwash minds if they are crazy.

Over and over again the words 'force' and 'push' came into their discourse.

It hasn't been an elective for the people who have already done their HSC. It's not fair.

This is one of the discourses that would bear analysing.

The Discourse of Peer Pressure

A lot of my friends would not take it as they think religion is total lies and boring.

Not many people will take it because of the flak they cop from their peers.

I think my friends would do this course if they thought it was a bludge.

There was an interesting discourse of tolerance:

I believe it would be better for students to have a wider knowledge of various religions than to be converted to one.

We should learn about other people's religions.

Young people should know a bit about God and his followers.

There are many students who are oblivious to the fact that there are different cultures and religions to theirs.

I wouldn't be allowed to do it but if others would like to have the choice then it's OK.

It would be a good idea but I wouldn't do it.

At the moment I am in Asian Studies and we study religions such as Shinto, Taoism and Confusion (sic).

There was a strong discourse of the instrumental. Students wanted to know of what use the subject would be to them in their lives and for job opportunities. The classic response was:

Studies of Religion won't help you become a policeman.

Others in the same discourse included:

Because you don't need it unless you want to be a priest or something.

Unless you want to be a priest or something you shouldn't have to do it.

There, in the words 'have to', is the fear of being forced again.

It's not important when you're out in the workforce.

Other subjects like Maths and English are more important because they will help you in later life.

I hate scripture. So we shouldn't have an elective that gives away a subject that you might need later in your career.

You would neglect career electives.

Being religiously aware doesn't get jobs.

Because when you apply for a job your employee (sic) is not really

interested that you have done religion.

There are few payable jobs that require an extensive study of religion.

There was a discourse of having religion unjustly imposed:

It's not a proper school subject. It should be learnt in people's own time.

I myself think that if you want to know about religion you can get a book about it.

If they want to know about religion go to church because if it was an elective it would be a waste of time for the HSC.

There was a small travel discourse where students could see some benefit if they went to foreign countries:

If you travel you would not be surprised by their religion.

One strong discourse in some schools was the occult discourse. When asked for other areas of study that could be included in a Study of Religion course some students replied:

Cults
Sayonses (sic)
Whitches (sic)
Satanism
Black magic

and one humorist wrote:

Who's Who in Today's Holy Society

I have not yet analysed the discourses that I have shown here as coming through in the qualitative data. I would like to do a poststructuralist analysis of the very rich data that I have. One example will suffice. One student wrote:

I would find it very interesting. I mightn't take it though because it isn't very beneficial to my education.

There are contradictory discourses being held in tension here. The student is juggling the opposing discourses through which s/he has been constituted – discursively constituted, 'spoken into being'. That analysis is post-doctoral thesis work for next year.

The interesting thing to notice at this stage of research-in-progress is that in seven State Schools in our North West Education Region there was such a lack of preparation for the Studies of Religion syllabus or even knowledge of its existence. The syllabus in its construction had not only had no input from the schools as I illustrated earlier, but the students had not been told about it, and even the teachers did not know of it, even though its coming was heralded in Excellence and Equity.

This lack of knowledge engendered bewilderment and sometimes hostility and suspicion in the reactions of students, teachers and parents when I first spoke to them about the syllabus. They were so far from owning the syllabus that they felt that there must be something sinister going on in its introduction.

I would think that this would spell disaster for curriculum development in the NSW education system if it continues.

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