New Times Old Questions

Towards a Clearer View on What Students Learn

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Introduction

This paper is an extension of a previous version which was presented at the Australian Curriculum Studies Association Conference in Sydney in July this year. That paper, ‘Using Samples of Students Work to Promote Best Practice’ (Emmett and Kennedy 1997) was somewhat circumspect about learning outcomes, in particular the capacity of a learning outcomes approach to avoid the big question about the specifics of the curriculum.

This was an issue that Barry McGaw acknowledged when suggesting that the development of an outcomes based education focus was at least partly to do with parochial concerns about broaching the big question.

Focusing on outcomes provided a way to avoid seeking detailed agreement about the specifics of the curriculum. (McGaw 1997:11)

As has been seen in the development of testing regimes, benchmarks and the like learning outcomes were a precursor to a greater focus on accountability. In the first instance that accountability was to a common framework for schooling in Australia. More recently it has focused on the progress of students in the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy and as the parochial basis of the general framework becomes clearer, on the crowded nature of the curriculum.

In meeting the requirements for accountability it is inevitable that the specifics of the curriculum are raised. Perhaps an initial focus on outcomes avoids the question in the first instance but as teachers attempt to interpret broadly framed learning outcomes and as the relationship between assessment questions; what did students learn? and curriculum questions, what should students learn? bring teachers to be more vigilant about their programs, the debate focuses on the specifics. Making judgements about levels of attainment requires a clear and common specification of what it is that is to be attained.

Learning outcomes, benchmarks and the like require teachers to develop common understandings of levels of attainment which in turn requires a clear and common specification of what students should learn. The nationally developed curriculum documents, Statements and Profiles for Australian schools, have to some extent facilitated this renewed emphasis on what is relevant in school programs and courses of study. And they provide an opportunity to return to the questions of the specifics in the curriculum and behind that the relevance and purpose of the teaching and learning program.
This paper considers these matters in the context of the nationally developed outcomes based curriculum, considering in the first instance some perspective’s on relevant curriculum and outcomes based education and concluding with some consideration of how samples of students work can provide some insight into the relevance of the curriculum.

Curriculum Relevance

The relevance and purpose of education has been the question at the forefront of educational thinking since the ‘beginning’ and remains as contested as the question of God or the Big Bang. In the heat of economic rationalism it seem sacrilegious to propose that general education could be about contributing to the living of a more intelligent, reflective, critical and responsible life and in that light to the reformation and reconstitution of the culture to more just and equitable ends. In terms of heightened individualism and instrumentalism, vocational utility (of which some of the rhetoric of outcomes based education fits well) and a post modern critique that focuses on intricate deconstruction (Anjon 1994). it is timely to reconsider some old questions about relevant curriculum.

Timely as well in the sense that as Wilson says the post modern period is one in which there are many seers who are able to predict with certainty the de-institutionalised, content free, technologically driven education of the future. And yet, he goes on, traditional education served us well ‘...to put it at its simplest, what was wrong with the education that I had was that too few young people got the benefit of it. I would be delighted if every young Australian had an education as effective and empowering and as rich in specific knowledge and generic skills (as I had)’ (Wilson 1996:18)

Many of the theorists who have advocated for a more relevant curriculum do so from the perspective of a common cultural literacy and the contribution general education makes in that regard. Crittenden provided a valuable summary of the scope of argument for a ‘common curriculum’ in the 60s and 70s, a time when the old elitist positions of an exclusive and stratified curriculum were strongly challenged (Crittenden 1982). Positions such as those held by Eliot who, Crittenden reports, rejected a common pattern of education for all because extensive schooling was only useful for ‘a minority whose culture is of a conscious reflective kind’ (Crittenden 1982:81).

Those who put forward these arguments, for a common curriculum Williams, Hirst, White and Holt, to name a few had general agreement on the content, at least in the sense that the traditional subject disciplines in the humanities (and most certainly history), sciences, the arts and of course English and Mathematics were always included.
Against this position was the growing and powerful evidence of the strong relationship between schooling and social class (Young 1971, Bowles and Gintis 1976). This included an argument that knowledge was relative and consequentially that content ought to give way to an emphasis on process if general education was to be emancipatory for all. Harris (1979)

Others such as Crittenden (1987) and White (1988) argued that the process curriculum was the new vehicle for schooling’s contribution to social and cultural inequity.

They emphasised the importance of subject knowledge and proposed that in the selection of content, knowledge should always be placed in the context of its history and be selected for its relevance in building meaning or interpreting the physical and social world. Relevant also to the extent that it is not subservient to the autonomy of the exploration of the ‘here and now’ and the ‘real’ world of contemporary social relations.

They argued that teachers should examine their practice and the relevance and historical content of the knowledge it values.

Where should teachers start in this worthwhile quest? In a general sense the answer to that question is in the areas which dominate the curriculum space regardless of any common specifications. In terms of literature as Lonsdale (1989) and White (1986) argued there should be ‘a canon of works privileged over others’ (Lonsdale 1989:97) chosen purposefully for its capacity to provoke children’s imagination and build meaning and to gain a sense that society can within limits be changed by human action (White 1986:27).

And in mathematics both its origins and practical applications should be central in the selection of the particular numeracy that is taught and learnt. The skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy, analysis, problem solving, information processing and computing should be subsumed within a content that is selected for its authority to make meaning of the world and its contribution to more responsible human life, the way it is and the way it could be.

Now the positions on common curriculum and content selection, at least in their generality, are not unlike the position taken by Federal, State and Territory Ministers of Education in Hobart in 1988 (The Hobart Declaration) a matter which Crittenden has also acknowledged (Crittenden 1991). The Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling in Australia included

6. To develop in students

   o skills of English literacy, including skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing
7. To develop knowledge, skills, attitudes and values which will enable students to participate as active and informed citizens in our democratic Australian society within an international context.

8. To provide students with an understanding of and respect for our cultural heritage including the particular cultural background of Aboriginal and ethnic groups, and for other cultures.

At the next level, the translation of these general goals into a number of key learning areas; in this case eight, (although the number is arbitrary) was not simple. The skeleton of a common curriculum was formulated but in general terms, a curriculum statement for each learning area and a profile of the area expressed as learning outcomes. In hindsight it seems that the profile for each learning area was also formulated from a range of perspectives on what constituted a learning outcomes approach to education. In terms of defining subject knowledge it was clearly informed by a particular variant of outcomes based education.

In that context it is helpful to briefly consider outcomes based education and its history in Australia.

**Outcomes Based Education**

Outcomes Based Education is an eclectic term that in parts of the world can have meanings as different as mastery learning and minimal competencies. In Australia the most well known proponent of a form of Outcomes Based Education is Bill Spady who was promoted by the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) on a study tour in 1992.

Some key emphasis that he brings to the subject are that the preferred form of Outcomes Based Education *(transformational OBE)*
• is concerned solely with students’ success after they leave school
• is focused on broad role performance capabilities, students’ life long adaptive capacities
• is not time based
• aims for all students to succeed
• is criterion referenced (Spady 1993)

Outcomes based education is fundamentally about being explicit about what students should understand or what qualities they should be able to demonstrate. From that humble beginning advocates such as Spady seemed to have ‘transformed’ it such that it has a life of its own rather than being a result of an important principle of teaching and learning. The most recent ACSA publication on the subject does justice to defining the pervasiveness of the terminology, and acknowledges the critics and supporters from other branches of prospective education reform who, if their comments are dissected, recognise that territory which previously their reforms lay claim to have been infiltrated by a version of outcomes based education. (Willis and Kissane 1997)

Willis and Kissane argue that unlike competency based learning and mastery learning, (which atomise the curriculum and apparently are mistakenly considered by some as akin to outcomes based education), outcomes based education needs to clearly articulate its expectations without atomising the curriculum. (Willis and Kissane 1997:10) Outcomes from their perspective need to be ‘...superordinate to the details of any particular curriculum content, sequence or pedagogy’. (Willis and Kissane 1997:21)

This is no different from an original proposition of Spady’s which apart from some platitudes:

Outcomes of significance require substance of significance applied through processes of significance in settings of significance. (Spady 1993:7)

was vague or non committal on what the substance of outcome based education might be

The content involves knowledge derived from significant problems, challenges and opportunities people are likely to face after leaving school.

The content is what students need to know...

In order to be able to work and survive. (Spady 1993:3)
Additionally the proponents of Outcomes Based Education speak often of the claim that it is 'future oriented' in its preferable form.

Transformational OBE is future oriented. It exists to equip all students with the knowledge competence and orientations needed for them to successfully meet the challenges and opportunities they will face in their career and family lives after graduating. It focuses on students' life long adaptive capacities.’

(Spady 1993:10)

It is little wonder that in this context, the question of what is substantive content 'substance of significance' is raised. More importantly a focus simply on the outcomes and the changing conditions and outcomes based approach bring to schooling is insufficient.

A major controversy focuses on content versus process. OBE systems may de-emphasise specific subject content in favour of broader outcomes, leaving educators with the difficult question of what content should remain in the curriculum. (McNair 1993:3)

During 1995 and 1996 the authors coordinated a DEETYA National Professional Development Program funded project managed by the Curriculum Corporation and culminating in the publication 'Student Work Samples in Health and Physical Education' (Curriculum Corporation 1996). In the work associated with the project it became increasingly obvious that teachers throughout Australia were struggling with the concept of outcomes based education and in particular the relationship between predetermined expectations and the observable behaviour of students who are progressing toward, demonstrating or exceeding those expectations.

At the heart of the problem was assumptions about the teaching and learning program, the vehicle that mediated between the expectations and the student. In many cases the teaching and learning program remained unexamined and represented more a legacy of contemporary practice and internalised assumptions rather than a mechanism for allowing all students to progress against predetermined and agreed expectations. As importantly the relevance of the curriculum and its capacity to meet the common goals the learning outcomes were derived from also remained unexamined.
In Student Work Samples in Health and Physical Education we provided a brief outline of our understanding of Outcomes Based Education in Australia. Outcomes Based Education, as we have defined it, is concerned with a clear statement of the knowledge and skills that teachers and curriculum developers consider to be critical in the learning area. By making explicit what we want students to know and to do students, teachers and parents are provided with a clearer picture of the school’s curriculum and a student’s progress through it. We perhaps should have gone on to say something about how broad brush the picture was and of the need for teachers, schools and parents to have some view about the details of the picture if it was going to best fulfil its promise.

Learning outcomes establish expectations for students and represent the big steps that parents, teachers and student can use both to monitor progress and to review the relevance of the curriculum. The essence of a learning outcomes approach is to ensure that the teaching and learning program is purposefully related to these broad expectations and, in the end result, can be acknowledged as an appropriate vehicle to promote the progress of all students.

An emphasis on this aspect of learning outcomes rather than on their ‘superordinate’ character would greatly assist teachers in making progress towards the Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling.

In the following section some observations are made on how samples of students work can be used to review the effectiveness of teaching and learning programs as well as provide benchmarks of student progress.

**Samples of Students Work and Curriculum Relevance**

Samples of student work provide an opportunity not only to benchmark student progress, (and to reconsider whether learning outcomes are properly levelled and sequenced), but also to consider what is being taught and how effectively it is being taught. Samples can reinforce the veracity of a learning outcomes approach and the extent to which learning outcomes can inform and reformulate the substance of curriculum; teaching and learning programs of enduring relevance for all students.

Our observations which follow need to prefaced by at least two qualifications.

The first that quite a complex paradigm shift from ‘What am I going to teach?’ to ‘What are students going to learn?’ (Schoer 1997:23) was in its preliminary phase in all States and Territories and it could have been expected that the details of the specific content of the curriculum in relation to specified outcomes had not been thoroughly worked through. The
second is that it involved the learning area of Health and Physical Education. This area has assumed less priority in school curriculum than, for example, literacy and numeracy and it could be expected that teachers were addressing the epistemology of a learning area from a more distant standpoint than would be the case for English and Mathematics. As the Director of Education Programs in Tasmania suggests in primary schools the time allocated to teaching in particular learning areas has always been limited.

*If you add up the times in a school day that are not used for learning, then look at the number of days that children are at school in a year; you find that kids have surprisingly little time for ‘learning area’ learning. When you subtract the time teachers are concentrating only on outcomes in literacy and numeracy, you find most of the learning areas are lucky to get 25 hours a year.*

(Doe 1997:43)

On the other hand, even in the context of a renewed focus on student learning, it could have been expected that teachers would have had a command of the content of the range of the learning areas that for some time have been the acknowledged framework of school education. And even in an earlier survey of teacher perception of how well they were prepared to teach components of the Health and Physical Education Learning Area the majority of teachers were quite confident (Kirk (ed.) 1995:13–14).

Another possibility is that teachers have become complacent about the content of the curriculum, which is not surprising given that the mean age of the teaching service in Australia is in the mid forties. This is a matter on which Bronlyn Schoer a Principal of a K–12 school in New South Wales concurs. She goes on to explain how exploring learning outcomes at her school had challenged her long held views about what she was teaching, and as importantly whether students had learnt it (Schoer 1997)

And it is at this level that the relationship between samples of student work and the realisation of curriculum expectations and assumptions they embody and the learning outcomes that set down in advance those curriculum expectations that the strength of the content can often be tested.

In the work associated with the collection of samples of student work we asked teachers to develop a teaching and learning program that included ways of judging progress towards particular learning outcomes.

Inevitably in the first attempt the samples of student work illustrated that student progress was not being demonstrated against a particular learning outcome or learning outcomes, but rather of the outcomes of a program that had hitherto been assumed to make these contributions.
Here is one simple example where the teacher assumed that a number of lessons associated with a sunsmart campaign could allow students to progress towards understanding the ways in which the community promotes the health of individuals and groups. At the end of the series of lessons the students were asked to produce a poster focusing on being sunsmart which illustrated how the community promoted the health of individuals and groups.

All of the students work (of varying quality) focused on sun protection and the health hazards associated with exposure to the sun similar to the copy of the brochure below (Diagram 1: Curriculum Corporation 1997:77).

You may ask so what? because sun protection is an important aspect of student learning? That is true but the curriculum space was allocated to something of a more complex nature; how the community promoted the health of individuals and groups. In the absence of some focus on the product of the teaching learning program, (student work), against the intention, (the learning outcome), this weakness would probably have gone unanalysed.

Consider another simple example, that of developing a teaching learning program which allowed students to progress towards the learning outcome ‘identifies a range of foodstuffs and discusses why and where certain foods are eaten’ and ‘demonstrates making choices from a range of foods’.

In this program, which had been a popular event for some years, students worked in groups over several weeks preparing different foods. The program was clearly exciting and enjoyable and parent involvement was high. But in the final analysis when student work, including an interview and published cookbook, was considered the teacher concluded that student responses ‘did not reflect an understanding of broader issues such as community reasons for people’s food choices rather they reflected personal perspective’s based on sensory perception. The criteria they used for food choice (and learnt from their program) was taste rather than broader or more complex characteristics such as nutrition or social reasons.’ (Curriculum Corporation 1997:30.)

The broader point here is that learning outcomes have been selected to define the most useful teaching and learning program that students could come in contact with during their period of participation in mass schooling. In hindsight they could have been much stronger in their connection with an epistemological framework of historical and cultural relevance and in the same sense there could have been much fewer of them. Nevertheless they have set down some parameters for defining the substance of curriculum and for challenging the solipsism and instrumentalism that is part and parcel of post modern curriculum.
Student work is a means to make judgements on student progress, judgments that would more often than not be made through simple professional observations and brief encounters with students. A more detailed examination however can often reveal weaknesses in the teaching and learning program and the assumptions about those programs that teachers bring to the task.

Teachers when focused on this possibility also recognise how powerful student work can be in strengthening their teaching/learning program. In a follow up activity with teachers this relationship between the learning outcomes and progressive evidence of student understanding was brought more to the foreground. Teachers commented

> It’s made me evaluate what the students are being asked to do. It’s made me look specifically at student understanding and look for progression in learning.

(White E 1997:9)

and

> I’ve been concerned about lack of substance ... and its connection with learning outcomes and thus I’ve evaluated and revamped the unit now and really focused on the learning outcomes and the meeting of learning outcomes.

> I’m more aware of student understanding or lack of, in relation to what (I teaching) – and am aware that some tasks I use to (teach) and assess students really don’t show whether they have or do understand the information...

(White E 1997:10)

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have briefly considered Outcomes Based Education, its lack of detail on the specifics of the content of curriculum in its various (American) forms and the potential it holds in Australian education to provide more focus to the curriculum when used in tandem with samples of student work.

The consideration of those who have previously alluded to the cultural value of a common curriculum underpinned by a selection of knowledge based on its capacity to promote understanding that allows young people to live a more intelligent, critical, reflective and responsible life is also briefly raised. The lack of possibilities for improving curriculum
through post modern analysis is briefly acknowledged as is the instrumental and solipsistic arguments of some proposals for change.

Teachers and those involved in curriculum need to revisit the question of whether the content of their current offerings is of relevance and promotes substantive and worthwhile understanding. To this end learning outcomes can provide a general framework and a means to review teaching and learning programs and their epistemological basis.

References


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