



# Conditions for broad-based curriculum scholarship: reflections on Victorian infrastructure for supporting curriculum workers in the 1970s and 1980s

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## Teachers as curriculum inquirers

As the core practitioners of curriculum, teachers' scholarship must be a central concern for any effort to regenerate curriculum inquiry. Yet the current state of curriculum in Australia tends to position teachers as mere implementers of curriculum decided elsewhere, and as needing to comply with already determined 'standards', responsible for student outcomes against accountability frameworks. There is little official space for most teachers to innovate, or even for whole-school innovation in curriculum, given performance-management criteria and the focus on requirements for improvement on NAPLAN scores, especially in lower-achieving schools. This does not mean that individual teachers haven't stopped analysing their work and that of their students, nor that some schools have built significant professional learning communities to shape curriculum, including assessment and pedagogy. It does mean, however, that these tend now to be exceptions rather than the rule. Teachers need infrastructure to support their scholarship and too few are able to access the necessary resources, including time, to do so systematically and in depth. Nevertheless, as Garth Boomer (1999) always reminds us, teachers are, have been and continue to be key curriculum workers, inventors and theorists, and a (re)source of innovation and evolution of practices. In this paper, curriculum practitioners in all sectors are seen as potential curriculum theorists and

knowledge-producers, alongside other curriculum workers in policy and advisory positions; however, my main focus is on schooling.

Imagining new options for contemporary curriculum scholarship is assisted by historical sensibility, reminding us that practice is both conservative and also open to seemingly spontaneous shifts, only a few of which are incorporated into longer-term practices. Historical work is always a 'history of the present' because it is shaped by current questions, issues and needs to know, rather than a search for origins. It seeks a 'genealogy' to 'account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc ...' (Foucault 1980, p. 117).

Much of the genealogy of teachers' curriculum scholarship can be connected to diverse movements of 'teachers as researchers', both formally developed (e.g. Stenhouse 1975 and informally (see Yates et al. 2011; Green 2003). In Australia, this movement took particular shape from the late 1960s, particularly seen as a central shift in the role of the teacher through a policy emphasis on school-based curriculum development officially established in Victoria and South Australia, and later developed in the ACT and Tasmania in particular.

Here, I say less about the actual curriculum work done under these policies and more about the infrastructure made available for such work. In this short paper, I explore some of the conditions under which teachers' curriculum knowledge-making was constituted, with a particular focus on resources made available in the era of 'school-based curriculum development' to support teachers as curriculum workers. I then consider what resources might be present now and what might be missing in current infrastructure to regenerate the curriculum inquiry of teachers. As 'data', I use my own experience as a teacher in technical schools in the 1970s, and then as a researcher in the Access Skills Project Team (ASPT), located within the Curriculum and Research Branch of the Education

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Department of Victoria, alongside the archive of materials produced during those years.

## A teacher's stories

As a beginning teacher in technical schools, the mismatch of the changing demographics of schools, particularly immigrant and refugees, with what had been the 'official' state-education authority curriculum texts was palpable. It did not fit the English Language capacities of Williamstown Tech, nor the significant population of Aboriginal students at Bairnsdale Tech. Thus, curriculum needed to be not only relevant but also designed for their locally situated communities. This discourse was prevalent at the school level as well as in education policy documents, professional associations' publications and professional-development (PD) opportunities. Such a culture shift from compliance with centralised syllabi and resources was further emphasised by changes in school governance, with expectations of staff representation on school councils, budget control (in the technical schools at least) and investment from both federal and state governments in special projects and PD. Such a culture shift was not everywhere, of course; when I arrived at Bairnsdale Tech, I was provided with a 1956 English grammar textbook and a strap—nothing else was seen to be necessary in this country boys' school. I had expected more from my prior experience of Williamstown Tech which, among other things, utilised the Brunerian curriculum development orientations of MACOS (aka *Man: A Course of Study* [sic] (Bruner 1966).

As a country teacher, I could book resources, including films, posters and slideshows, from the Department's Audio-Visual Branch. Delivered and returned by train, they were very helpful for someone teaching outside her subject areas, with few local resources and double class sizes compared to the technical subjects. In the absence of substantive discussion in staff or faculty meetings, regional consultants provided important networking opportunities—bringing together early career teachers, providing resources, advising of upcoming conferences, and visiting schools. The Humanities consultant in our rural region made the rounds about every six weeks, with a station waggon full of resources and a genuine interest in sitting down for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment discussions. I remember once, towards the end of the long winter term, he drove back to the regional office on a Thursday night and returned next morning—a good three-hour trip away—with resources for my next two weeks' classes and four boxes of materials to help my planning for Term 3. A six-hour drive to support one beginning teacher: I was astounded, and made good use of the materials.

None of the Department's extensive curriculum documents, materials or newsletters reached me at that school. I was lonely, professionally. As a result, I worked with the

Union on setting up infrastructure to support rural teachers and first-year teachers. I also used my membership of a professional association (Victorian Teachers of English [VATE]), reading their newsletter and journal avidly, and attending their annual conference where I met senior English teachers, the Humanities inspector, and multiple other colleagues. In those years, I learned a lot about teaching, about young people, about regional economies and the school system. Mostly, I learned how to survive as a teacher, rather than being a 'curriculum researcher'. From its absence, I learned the need for school-based infrastructure and support, as well as wider networks, if anything substantial was to change.

The next school was back in the city, which made accessing resources much easier. The school, co-ed this time, was also much more organised, with good staff meetings, networking across schools on projects, and using Disadvantaged Schools Program money to support PD, curriculum inquiry, teaching materials and links with community. Northcote Technical School was organised around three 'mini-schools' to ensure closer student-teacher relationships, and development priorities that brought together teachers from across their areas. We had a literacy team, for example, to explore literacy across the curriculum in teaching students from the 52 language groups in this large school. In this, we were further supported by a member of the Access Skills Project Team (ASPT), set up to address teacher research and curriculum innovation, and providing a clearinghouse of materials drawn from teacher-based research, access to summaries of international research on our focal priorities, and organising professional development conferences and seminars to share the knowledge so constructed. We also received materials produced by the subject Standing Committees—teachers seconded to Curriculum and Research Branch for a day a month to develop guidelines, materials and professional development for each subject in each of the three teaching divisions (Primary, Secondary, Technical). A full-time classroom teacher was seconded to follow through and coordinate each Committee. At the school, groups of colleagues supported one another to apply for grants for further innovations, or to put up proposals on how to use money provided through the Disadvantaged Schools Program. This required significant discussion and further research by teachers in order to justify their proposals. We followed up on Stenhouse's (1975) process model of curriculum and pedagogical development and read about it in John Elliott's work (Ford Teaching Project 1974). (I note here that the copyright laws of the time meant that we tended to have access to British publishers, rather than USA or resources from other 'colonies'.)

When I left Northcote Tech, I was seconded to work in the ASPT, to research with teachers in disadvantaged schools, publishing, developing materials and organising conferences for teachers. Curriculum Services Division at the time was around 400 people, providing major infrastructure to assist

schools, including Drama, Music and Physical Education Branches, Special Education, Child and Adult Migrant English and Technical and Further Education services. Major publishing ventures included weekly newsletters, twice-monthly magazines, curriculum materials (such as the Primary Schools Curriculum Manual), multiple newsletters, research projects, and statewide PD activities. There were many days spent printing off major reports and teaching materials on the old Gestetner machine, compiling and stapling clearinghouse documents, all in the days before photocopiers and desktop computers. Conferences were relatively cheap to run, often at old guesthouses, and they occurred in regions, across the state and nationally, with multiple sponsors. Usually there was no charge.

While there had been a lot of reading associated with my curriculum inquiries in previous years, this position required more systematic methodological knowledge and in-depth contextualisation of others' literature to assist schools in deciding on action to change curriculum and pedagogy. To be able to justify teacher research and our team's use of action research alongside teachers, within Curriculum and Research Branch, as well as with teachers and principals, I had to read up on the historical, philosophical and methodological rationales and examples of research (e.g. early drafts of Boomer 1982; Grundy 1987; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). In the ASPT, our summaries of others' research would draw on a wide range of methodologies, pulling together issues to address teachers' questions and issues from classrooms. I was also able to take on further postgraduate study, first in Language and Learning in Curriculum, and then in critical studies in educational administration, taking advantage of tuition-free university studies at Rusden College and Deakin University. We took advantage of the teacher Standing Committees, based in the same building, and the researchers and their materials in the building around the corner, in order to focus attention on issues nominated by the schools in most power-marginalised and high-poverty communities. Teacher-researchers met at regular conferences, sharing their work and analyses, often nominating further phases of inquiry.

In 1982, an incoming Labor Government (after twenty seven years in opposition) announced significant policy shifts, including a set of Ministerial papers, which included Ministerial Paper 6, 'Curriculum Development and Planning in Victoria' (Fordham 1984). This policy document designates curriculum as a shared responsibility between the central education authority and schools, and it provided a framework to guide local school community planning, to be shared by teachers, parents and students, explicitly recognising their diverse expertise. Curriculum is defined not only as the content or knowledge but also as including 'the effects on student learning of such matters as staffing policy, facilities, teaching and learning

styles, school organisation, and assessment and reporting processes' (p. 8). Such policy reflected major shifts that had already happened since the 1960s, and addressed some of the problems that had emerged from the SBCD movement in practice.

## Reflections

This very brief partial history gives some indication of what teachers like me took for granted, as curriculum workers/researchers, in the 1970s and early 1980s. What strikes me now is how hard it is for teachers in schools to imagine that world. Yes, we used to work long hours and there were too many meetings, but we did have more control over what we used that time for, and access to professional development, staffing to support diversity, and participation in cross-school projects on a scale now unimaginable. What questions do such stories help us to ask in the now? What are the things we do not see? What we now see brought into focus is how much the administrative infrastructure of state authorities has been rolled back in the past thirty years or so. Money for contemporary special projects—the 'Digital Revolution' or National Partnerships for low SES, for example—is short term and requires reporting by pre-specified numbers, particularly improvement in NAPLAN scores.

Numbers were not on our radar back then, though we had a much stronger sense of being part of a 'system', with high visibility of 'the Department', and its multiple central and regional services. There was some competition among schools, but not in a marketised sense; schools still looked for the educational achievers and avoided those who were not. With Seddon (2001), we can ask if curriculum is now replaced by accountability for measuring standardised outcomes as the means to control schooling. Does filling out the paperwork replace documentation and analysis of enacted curriculum for many teachers now? What is now 'infrastructured' is largely privatised: online sites for teaching resources, Pearson Publishing for textbooks and tests. Do these adequately fill the needs of teachers and students? How could the web better support teacher curriculum research networks? How can teachers steer production of such works?

Historical snapshots such as these enable us to ask such questions but they are not yet answered fully, despite contemporary stories of teachers' work overload, dissatisfaction with standardisation and testing, and quite different local responsibilities. With little time and opportunity for practice-based curriculum inquiry and theorising, teachers need significantly more infrastructure invested within and across schools to support their intellectual work and necessary changes in practice.

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